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SISTERS

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

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CHAPTER XX—Continued.
—20—

"You must never worry about money," he told her. "And if ever you need it—if it is a question of a long trip, or of more operations—if there is any chance—"

"I shall remember that I have a big brother!" she said.

The room was scented by the sweet, damp flowers, and by the good odor of lazily burning logs; yet to Peter there was chill and desolateness in the air. Cherry took up the glass bowl in both careful hands, and went away in the direction of the study, but he stood at the window for a long time staring dully out at the battered chrysanthemums and the swishing branches, and the steadily falling rain.

A few days later, on a day of uncertain sunshine and showers, Peter left them. To Cherry Peter's going was a relief; it burned one more bridge behind her. It confirmed her in the path she had chosen; it was to her spirit like the cap that marks the accepted student nurse, or like the black coif that replaces the postulant's white veil of probation.

He had been in the downstairs bedroom, talking with Martin, for perhaps an hour; he had drawn them a rough sketch of the little addition to the house that Cherry meant some day to build next to the study, and he and Martin had been discussing the details. Cherry was sweeping the wet, dun-colored leaves from the old porch when a sudden step in the doorway behind her made her look up.

Peter had come out of the house, with Buck beside him. He wore his old corduroy clothes and his shabby cap, but there was something in his aspect that made her ask:

"Not going?"

"Yes, I'm going now," he said.

She rested her broom against the thick trunk of the old banksia, and rubbed her two hands together, and came to the top of the steps to say good-by. And standing there, under the rose tree, she linked her arm about it, looking up through the branches, where the shabby foliage of last year lingered.

"How fast it's grown since that terrific pruning we gave it all that long time ago!" she said.

"Little more than six years ago Cherry!" he reminded her.

"Only six years—" She was obviously amazed. "It doesn't seem possible that all this has happened in six years!" she exclaimed.

He did not answer. He had her hand now for farewells, and perhaps, with the thought of those short six years had come also the thought that this slender figure in the housewifely blue linen, this exquisite little head, so trim and demure despite all its rebel tendrils of gold, this lovely face still the face of a child, with a child's trusting, uplifted eyes, might have been his. The old home might have been their home, and perhaps—who knows, there might have been a new Cherry and a new Peter beginning to look eagerly out at life through the screen of the old rose vine!

Too late now! A single instant of those lost years might have brought him all this, but there was no going back. He put his arm about her, and kissed her forehead, and said: "God bless you, Cherry!"

"God bless you, dear!" she answered gravely. She watched the tall figure, with its little limp, and with the dog leaping and circling about it in ecstasy, until the redwoods closed around him. Then she took up the broom again, and slowly and thoughtfully crossed the old porch, and shut the door.

"Yes, I'm Going Now!" He said.

Peter, walking with long strides, and with a furrowed brow and absent eyes, crossed the village, and climbed once more the old trail that led up to the cabin.

It was dusted, orderly complete; he and Alix might have left it yesterday. Kow had seen him coming, he thought, and had had time to light the fire, which was blazing freshly up to the chimney's great throat. He sat down, staring at the flames.

Buck pushed open the swinging door between the pantry and the sitting room, and came in, a question in his bright eyes, his great plumy tail beating the floor as he lay down at Peter's side. Presently the dog laid his nose on Peter's knee and poured forth a faint sound that was not quite a whine, not quite a sigh, and rose restlessly, and went to the closed door of Alix's room, and pawed it, his eager nose to the threshold.

"Not here, old fellow!" Peter said, stroking the silky head under his hand.

He had not been in this room since the day of her death. It struck him as strangely changed, strangely and heartrendingly familiar. The windows were closed; as Alix had never had them closed, winter or summer, rain or sunshine. Her books stood in their old order, her student's Shakespeare, and some of her girlhood's books, "Little Women," and "Uncle Max." In the closet, which exhaled a damp and woody smell, were one or two of the boyish-looking hats he had so often seen her crush carelessly on her dark hair, and the big belted coat that was as plain as his own, and the big boots she wore when she tramped about the poultry yard, still spattered with pale, dry mud. Her father's worn little Bible lay on the table, and beside it another book, "Duck Raising for the Market," with the marks of muddy and mealy hands still lingering on its cover.

Suddenly, evoked by these silent witnesses to her busy and happy life, the whole woman seemed to stand beside Peter, the tall, eager, vital woman who had been at home here, who had ruled the cabin with a splendid and vital personality. He seemed to feel her near him again, to see the interested eyes, the high cheek-bones touched with scarlet, the wisp of hair that would fall across her face sometimes when she was deep in baking, or preserving, or poultry-farming, and that she would brush away with the back of an impatient hand, only to have it slip loose again.

One of her kitchen aprons, caught in the current of air from the opened door, blew about on its hook. He remembered her, on many a wintry day, buttoned into just such a crisp apron, radiantly busy and brisk in her kitchen, stirring and chopping, moving constantly between stove and table. With strong hands still showing traces of flour she would come to sit beside him at the piano, to play a duet with her characteristic dash and finish, only to jump up in sudden compunction, with an exclamation: "Oh, my ducks—I'd forgotten them! Oh, the poor little wretches!"

And she would be gone, leaving a streak of wet, fresh air through the warm house from the open door, and he would perhaps glance from a window to see her, roughly coated and booted, ploughing about her duck yard, delving into barrels of grain, turning on faucets, wielding a stubby old broom.

She loved her life, he mused, with a bitter heartache, as he stood here in her empty room. Sometimes he had marveled at the complete and unquestioning joy she had brought to it. Peter reminded himself that never in their years together had he heard her complain about anything, or seem to feel bored or at a loss.

"We've always thought of Cherry as the child!" he thought. "But it was she, Alix, who was the real child. She never grew up. She never outgrew the time of moods and self-analysis and jealousies and desires! She would have played and picnicked all her life—"

His heart pressed like a dull pain in his chest. Dully, quietly, he went out to the fire again, and dully and quietly moved through the day. Her books and music might stand as they were, her potted ferns and her scattered small possessions—the sewing-basket that she always handled with a boy's awkwardness, and the camera she used so well—should keep their places. But he went to her desk, finding in this long, solitary evening, to destroy various papers that she might wish destroyed before the cabin was deserted. And here he found her letter.

He found it only after he had somewhat explored the different small drawers and pigeonholes of the desk, drawers and pigeonholes which were, to his surprise, all in astonishing order for Alix. Everything was marked, pocketed, her accounts were balanced, and if she had anywhere left private papers, they were at least nowhere to be found.

Seeing in all this a dread confirmation of his first suspicion of her death, Peter nevertheless experienced a shock when he found her letter.

It had been placed in an empty drawer, face up, and was sealed, and addressed simply with his name.

He sat holding it in his hand, and moments passed before he could open it.

So it had been true, then, the fear that he had tried all these weeks to crush? He had been weighing, measuring, remembering, until his very soul was sick with the uncertainty. His mind had been a confused web of memories of this casual word and that look, of what she had possibly heard, had probably seen, had suspected—known—

Now he would know. He tore open the envelope, and the dozen written lines were before his eyes. The letter was dated, a most unusual thing for Alix to do, and "Saturday, one o'clock," was written under the date. It was the day of her death.

He read:

"Peter, Dear—Don't feel too badly if I find a stupid way out. I've been thinking for several days about it. You've done so much for me, and after you, of course, there's no one but Cherry. She could be free now, he couldn't prevent it. When I saw your face a few minutes ago I knew we couldn't fight it. Remember, this is our secret. And always remember that I want you to be happy because I love you so!"

It was unsigned.

Peter sat staring at it for a while without moving, without the stir of a changing expression on his face. Then he folded it up, and put it in the pocket of his coat, and went out to the back yard, where Kow was feeding the chickens. The wet, dark day was ending brilliantly in a wash of red sunset light that sent long shadows from the young fruit trees, and touched every twig with a dull glow.

"Kow," Peter said, after an effort to speak that was unsuccessful. The Chinese boy looked at him solicitously; for Peter's face was ashen, and about his mouth were drawn lines. "Kow," he said, "I go now!"

"Go now other house?" Kow nodded, gianching toward the valley.

But Peter jerked his head instead toward the bare ridge.

"No, I go now—not come back!" he said, briefly. "Tonight—maybe Bolinas—tomorrow, Inverness. I don't know. By and by the big mountains, Kow—by and by I forget!"

Tears glittered in the Chinese boy's eyes, but he smiled with a great air of cheer.

"I keep house!" he promised.

The dog came fawning and springing from the stables, and Peter whistled to him.

"Come on Buck! We're going now!"

He opened the farmyard gate where her hand had so often rested, crossed the muddy corral, opened another gate, and struck off across the darkening world toward the ridge. The last sunlight lingered on crest and tree-top, tangled itself redly in the uppermost branches of a few tall redwoods, and was gone. Twilight—a long twilight that had in it some hint of spring—lay softly over the valley; the mountain loomed high in the clear shadow.

Gaining the top of the first ridge, he paused and looked back at the cabin, the little brown house that he had built almost fifteen years ago. He remembered that it was in the beginning a sort of experiment; his mother and he were too much alone in their big city house, and she had suggested, with more wisdom than he did not care for society, and as his travels always meant great loneliness for her, he should have a little cyrie of his own, to which he might retreat whenever the fancy touched him.

She liked Del Monte and Tahoe, herself, but she had come to Mill Valley now and then in the days of his first wild delight in its freedom and beauty, silk-gowned and white-gloved and very much disliking dust. She had sent him plants, roses, and fruit trees, and she had told him one day that he had a neighbor in the valley who was an old friend of hers, a Doctor Strick-land, a widower, with children.

He remembered sauntering up the opposite canyon to duly call upon this inventor-physician one day, and his delight upon finding a well-read, music-loving, philosophic, erratic man, lonely, like himself, but not bored by loneliness. She had said that "Anne Warwick will like her, and that Alix—" she managed to lisp the name, "warm up in the madrone!"

A somewhat older child, named Alix, a freckled, leggy little person with enormous front teeth, had proved the claim by falling out of the madrone, and had received no sympathy for a lump, but a—to him—rather surprising censure. He had yet to realize that nothing ever hurt Alix, but that she always ruined her clothes, and frequently hurt other persons and other things. He found her a spirited, enthusiastic little person, extremely articulate, and quite unself-conscious, and she had entertained him with an excited account of a sex feud that was being pushed with some violence at her school, and had used expressions that rather shocked Peter. A quiet third girl—a niece, he gathered—had joined the group, a girl with braids and clean hands, who elucidated:

"Alix and I don't like our teacher!"

"She's a sneak and a skunk," Alix had frankly contributed. Cherry, now quietly established in her father's lap, had smiled with mischievous enjoyment; nobody else, to Peter's surprise, had paid this extraordinary remark the slightest attention. He remembered that he had smiled only the smallest of these children, and had been glad when they all went out of the room.

Looking down at the cabin, the years slipped past him like a flying film, and it was the present again, and Alix—Alix was gone.

He roused himself, spoke to the dog, and they went on their way again. Mud spiele hed beneath Peter's boots in the roadway; the dog sprang lightly from clump to clump of dried grass. But when they left the road, and cut straight across the rise of the hillside, the ground was firmer, and the two figures moved swiftly through the dark night. The early stars came out, and showed them, silhouetted against the sky above Alix's beloved Tamalpais, the man's erect form with its slight limp, the dog following faithfully, his plump tail and feathered ruff showing a dull luster in the starlight.

Cherry, with her violet eyes and corn-colored hair, Cherry, with her little hands gathered in his, and her heart beating against his heart, and Alix, his chum, his companion, his comrade on so many night walks under the stars—he had lost them both. But it was Alix who was closest to his thoughts tonight. Alix, the thought of whom was gradually gripping his heart and soul with a new pain.

Alix was his own; Cherry had never been his own. It was for him to comfort Cherry, it had always been his mission to comfort Cherry, since the days of her broken dolls and cut fingers. But Alix was his own comforter, and Alix might have been laughing and stumbling and chattering beside him here, in the dark, wet woods, for of a child's happy satisfaction in the moment and confidence in the hour.

"Alix, my wife!" he said softly, aloud. "I loved Cherry—always. But you were mine—you were mine. We belonged to each other—for better and for worse—and I have let you go!"

He went on and on and on. They were plunging down hill now, under the trees. He would see a light after a while, and sleep for a few hours, and have a hunter's breakfast, and be gone again. And he knew that for weeks—for months—perhaps for years, he would wander so, through the great mountains, with their snow and their forests, over the seas, in strange cities and stranger solitudes. Always alone, always moving, always remembering. That would be his life. And some day—some day perhaps he would come back to the valley she had loved—

But even now he recoiled in distaste from that hour. To see the familiar faces, to come up to the cabin again, to touch the music and the books—

Worse, to find Cherry a little older, happy and busy in her life of sacrifice, not needing him, not very much wanting the reminder of the old tragic times—

An owl cried in the woods; the mournful sound floated and drifted away into utter silence. Some small animal, meeting the death its brief life had evaded a hundred times, screamed shrilly, and was silent. Great branches, stirred by the night wind, moved high above his head, and when there was utter silence, Peter could hear the steady, soft rush of the ocean, dulled here to the sound of a gigantic, quiet breathing.

* * * * * * * *

Suddenly she seemed again to be beside him. He semed to see the dark, animated face, the slender, tall girl wrapped in her big, rough coat. He

Suddenly She Seemed Again to Be Beside Him.

seemed to hear her vibrating voice, with that new, tender note in it that he had noticed when she last spoke to him.

"I'll go home ahead of you, Peter, and wait for you there."

Tears suddenly flooded his eyes, and he put his hand over them and pressed it there, standing still, while the wave of tender and poignant and exquisite memories broke over him.

"We'll go on, Buck," he whispered, looking up through the trees at a strip of dark sky studded with cold stars. "We'll go on. She's—she's waiting for us somewhere, old fellow!"

[THE END.]

WORKED BENEATH THE EARTH

Discovery in Jerusalem Solves Much of Mystery Connected With King Solomon's Temple.

How often great discoveries spring from trifling incidents! The trite reflection comes to mind naturally before hearing how the quarries of King Solomon were found. Dr. Allen Moore for 17 years a resident of Palestine tells the curious tale.

For many many years, says Doctor Moore, travelers and archeologists were puzzled to know where the enormous blocks of stone still stadding in the ruins of Solomon's temple at Jerusalem were quarried. One day a little dog chased a lizard down a hole among the debris. The next instant the dog also disappeared.

His master, coming to the opening peered down in vain. He called, and to his amazement the yelps came back as from great depths. He summoned assistance, and a passage was opened into immense subterranean quarries. There were found huge masses of stone almost ready to be hoisted above ground.

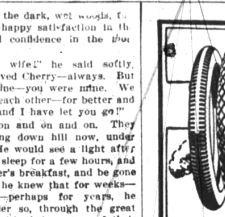
"And don't you remember," asks Doctor Moore, "that we are told in our Bibles that the temple was built without sound of saw or of hammer? The fact that the quarryman worked underground partly explains that."

Upon some of the stones were found inscriptions that perplexed the explorers until one scholar pronounced them Phoenician. The stones were wrought by some of that army of workmen sent by King Hiram of Tyre to aid King Solomon in his task.—Youth's Companion.

Plants That Mimic Stones.

In South Africa a plant of the genus Mesembryanthemum, growing on stony ground, so closely resembles a pebble that it has been picked up in mistake for a stone. Another species of the same plant, growing on the hills around the Karru, produces two leaves about as large as ducks' eggs having a surface resembling weathered stone, of a brownish-gray color tinged with green. These plants look like stones, but for a short time they put forth bright yellow flowers. Still another species of the same plant resembles the quartz pebbles among which it grows.

Fools who butt in where angels fear to tread usually get what they go after.



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Sweet Simplicity.

He (lovingly)—What would you do now if I should kiss you?

She (timidly)—I—I don't know. I have never had to answer such a question before.—Barcelona L'Esquella de la Torratxa.