SISTERS

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

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CHAPTER XIX—Continued.
—19—

He got back into the motor car, the man who drove them quickly toward the valley, talked easily and sensibly to Peter, attempting to interest him in the affairs of some water company in San Francisco. When they got to the valley a city train was arriving, and Peter saw people looking at him furtively and sorrowfully. He remembered the many, many times Alix had waited for him at the trains; he glanced toward the big mission arch under which she always parked her car. She was usually deep in a book as he crossed from the train, but she would fling it into the back seat and make room for him beside her. The dog would bound into the tonneau, Alix would hand her husband the mail, the car would start with a great plunge toward the mountain toward the cool garden high up on the ridges.

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Cherry looked small and pathetic in her fresh black, and her face was marked by several incessant weepings. But the nurses and doctors could not say enough for her self-control; she was always composed, always quietly helpful and calm when they saw her, and she was always busy. From early morning, when she slipped into the sick-room, to stand looking at the unconscious Martin with a troubled, intent expression that the nurses came to know well, until night, she moved untiringly about the quiet, shaded house. She supervised the Chinese boy, saw that the nurses had their hours for rest and exercise, telephoned, dusted and arranged the rooms, saw callers sweetly and patiently, filled vases with flowers.

Every day she had several visits in the sick-room, and every day at least one long talk with the doctors. Every afternoon and evening had its callers; she and Peter were rarely alone.

Martin was utterly unconscious of the life that flowed on about him; sometimes he seemed to recognize Cherry, and would stare with painful intentness into her face, but after a few seconds his gaze would wander to the strange nurses, and the room that he had never known, and with a puzzled sigh he would close his eyes again, and drift back into his own strange world of pain, fever and unconsciousness.

Almost every day there was the sudden summons and panic in the old house. Peter going toward the sick-room with a thick beating at his heart, Cherry entering, white-faced and with terrified eyes, doctors and nurses gathering noiselessly near for the last scene in the drama of Martin's suffering. But the release did not come.

There would be murmurings among the doctors and nurses: the pulse was gaining, not losing, the apparently fatal, final symptoms were proving neither fatal nor final. The tension would relax; a doctor would go; a nurse slip from the room; Cherry, looking anxiously from one face to another, would breathe more easily. It was inevitable, she knew that now—but it was not to be this minute; it was not to be this hour!

"My dear—my dear!" Peter said to her one day, when spent and shaken she came stumbling from Martin's bedside and stood dazedly looking from the window into the soaking October forest, like a person stunned from a blow. "My poor little Cherry! If I could spare you this!"

"Nobody can, spare me now!" she whispered. And very simply and quietly she added: "If I have been a fool—if I have been a selfish, spoiled girl all my life, I am punished!"

"Cherry!" he protested, horrified to see her so.

"It is wrong for us to love each other now?" she asked in a low tone. "I suppose it was! I suppose it was! But it never seemed so if—" she shut her eyes and shivered—"as if—this would come of it!" she whispered.

"This!" he echoed aghast.

"Oh, I think this is punishment," Cherry continued, in the same lifeless, weary tone.

There was a silence. The rain dripped and dripped from the red woods, the room in which they stood was in twilight, even at noon. Peter could think of nothing to say.

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About two weeks after the accident there was a change in the tone of the physicians who had been giving almost all their time to Martin's case. There was no visible change in Martin, but that fact in itself was so surprising that it was construed into a definite hope that he would live.

Not as he had lived, they warned his wife. It would be but a restricted life; tied to his couch, or permitted, at best, to move about within a small boundary on crutches.

"Martin?" his wife exclaimed piously, when this was first discussed. "He has always been so strong—so independent! He would rather—he would infinitely rather be dead!" But her mind was busy grasping the possibilities, too. "He won't suffer too much?" she asked fearfully.

They hastened to assure her that the chance of his even partial recovery was still slight, but that in case of his convalescence Martin need not necessarily suffer.

Another day or two went by in the silent, rain-wrapped house under the trees; days of quiet footsteps and whispering, and the lighting of wood fires. Then Martin suddenly was conscious, knew his life, languidly smiled all her, thanked the doctors for occasional ease from pain.

"Peter—I'm sorry. It's terrible for you—terrible!" he said in his new, hoarse, gentle voice, when he first saw Peter. They marveled among themselves that he knew that Alix was gone. But to Cherry, in one of the long hours that she spent sitting beside him and holding his big, weak, strangely white hand, he explained one day. "I knew she was killed," he said, out of a silence. "I thought we both were."

"How did she—ever happen to do it?" Cherry said. "She was always so sure of herself, even when she drove fast!"

"I don't know," he answered. "It was just like a flash, of course! I never watched her drive. I had such confidence in her!"

His interest dropped; she saw that the tide of pain was slowly rising again, and glanced at the clock. It was two; he might not have relief until four. In his own eyes she saw reflected the apprehension of her own.

"You might ask Peter to play some of that—that crabby stuff he who playing yesterday," he suggested. Cherry, only too happy to have him want anything, to have him helped by anything, flew to find Peter. Busy with one of the trays that were really beginning to interest and please the invalid now, she told herself that the house was a different place, now that one nurse was gone, the doctors coming only for brief calls, and the clear, familiar sound of the old piano echoing through the rooms.

Martin came from the fiery furnace changed in soul and body. It was a thin, gentle, strangely patient man who was helped back for Thanksgiving dinner, and whose pain-worn face turned with an appreciative smile to the decorations and the gifts that made his room cheerful.

The heavy cloud lightened slowly but steadily; Martin had a long talk, crowded by Cherry from the first hours of the accident, with his physicians. He bore the ultimatum with unexpected fortitude.

"Let me get this straight," he said slowly. "The arm is O. K. and the leg—but the back—"

Cherry, kneeling beside him, laid hands on his, drew a wheezing breath. Martin reassured her with an intelligent nod.

"I've known it right along," he told her. He looked at the doctors. "It's no go?"

"I don't see why I should deceive you, my dear boy," said the younger doctor, who had grown very fond of him. "You can still beat me at bridge."

O, Mart! I Mind Only for You!" She Said.

You know, you can read and write, and come to the table, after awhile, and have your devoted wife to keep finding new things for you to do! Next summer into a chair out in the garden."

Cherry was tearfully watching her husband's face.

"Well all do what we can to make it easy, Mart," she whispered, in tears.

He looked at her with a whimsical smile.

"Mind very much taking care of a helpless man all your life?" he asked with a hint of his old confident manner.

"Oh, Mart, I mind only for you," she said. Peter, standing behind the doctors, slipped from the room unnoticed.

Late that evening, when Martin was asleep, Cherry came noiselessly from the sick-room to find Peter alone in the dimly lighted sitting room. He glanced at her, feeling rather than hearing her presence, and called her.

"Come over here, will you, Cherry? I want to speak to you."

She came, with an inquiring and yet not wholly unconscious look, to the fireside, and he stood up to greet her.

"Tired?" he asked, in an unnatural voice.

"I—I was just going to bed," she answered, hesitatingly. But she sat down, nevertheless; sank comfortably into the chair opposite his own, and stretched her little feet, crossed at the ankle, before her, as if she were indeed tired.

He knelt down beside her chair, and gathered her cold hands into one of his own. "What are you and I going to do?" he asked.

She looked at him in terror.

"But all that is changed!" she said, quickly, fearfully.

"Why is it changed?" he countered. "I love you—I have always loved you, since the days long ago, in this very house! I can't stop it now. And you love me, Cherry?"

"Yes, I shall always love you," she answered, agitatedly, after a pause in which she looked at him with troubled eyes. "But—but—you must see that we cannot—cannot think of all that now," she added with difficulty. "I couldn't fail Martin now, when he needs me so!"

"He needs you now," Peter conceded, "and I don't ask you to do anything that must distress him now. But in a few months, when his mother comes down for a visit you must tell them honestly that you care for me," he said.

Cherry was trembling violently.

"But how could I?" she protested. "Tell him that I am going away, deserting him when he most needs me?"

Peter had grown very pale.

"But—" he stammered, his face close to hers. "But you cannot mean that this is the end?"

She moved her lips as if she was about to speak; looked at him blankly. Then suddenly tears came, and she wrenched her hands free from his, and hid her arms about his neck. Her wet cheek was pressed to his own, and he put his arms tightly about the little figure.

"Peter," she whispered, desolately. And after a time, when the violence of her sobs was lessened, and she was breathing more quietly, she said again: "Peter! We can never dream that dream again."

"We shall dream it again," he corrected her.

Cherry did not answer for a long while. Then she gently disengaged herself from his arms, and sat erect. Her tears were ended now, and her voice firmer and surer.

"No; never again," she told him. "I've been thinking about it, all these days, and I've come to see what is right, as I never did before. Alix never knew about us, Peter—and that's been the one thing for which I could be thankful in all this time! But Alix had only one hope for me, and that was that somehow Martin and I would come to be—well, to be nearer to each other, and that somehow he and I would make a success of our marriage, would spare—well, let's say the family name from all the disgrace and publicity of a divorce—"

"But, Cherry, my child—" Peter expostulated. "You cannot sacrifice all your life to the fancy that no one else can take your place with him—"

"That," she said, steadily, "is just what I must do!"

Peter looked at her for a few seconds without speaking.

"You don't love him," he said.

"No," she admitted, gravely. "I don't love him—but in the way you mean."

"He is nothing to you," Peter argued. "As a matter of fact, it never was what a marriage should be. It was always—always—a mistake."

"Yes," she conceded, sadly, "it was always a mistake."

"Then there is nothing to bind you to him?" Peter added.

"No—and there isn't Alix to distress now," she agreed, thoughtfully. "And yet," she went on, suddenly, "I do this more for Alix than for any one."

Peter looked at her in silence, looked back at the last flicker of the fire.

"You will change your mind after awhile?" he said.

Cherry rose from the chair, and stood with dropped head and troubled eyes, looking down at the flame.

"No, I shall never change my mind!" she said, in a low tone that was still strangely firm and final for her. "For five or ten or twenty or thirty years I shall always be where Martin is, caring for him, amusing him, trying to live for him." And Cherry raised her glorious blue eyes in which there was a pure and an uplifted look that Peter had never seen there before. "It is what Dad and Alix would have wished," she finished, solemnly, "and I do it for them."

Peter did not answer; and after a few seconds she suddenly and quickly left the room, with the new air of quiet responsibility that she had worn ever since the accident.

CHAPTER XX.

Peter saw, with a sort of stupefaction, that life was satisfying her now as life had never satisfied restless, expecting little Cherry before.

She spent much of her free time by her husband's side, amusing him as skillfully as a teacher. He was getting so popular that she had to be ready for callers every day. Would he like her to keep George Sewall for dinner, when they could play dominoes again? Would he like the table with the picture puzzle? He would like just to talk? Very well; they would talk.

Martin's day was so filled and divided with small pleasures that it was apt to amaze him by passing too quickly. He had special breakfasts, he had his supper, his hair was brushed and his cigarette a dozen times a day. Cherry shared her mail, which was always heavy now, with him; she flitted into the sick-room every few minutes with small messages or gifts. With her bare, bright head, her bare white hands, her voice all motherly amusement and sympathy and sweetness, she had never seemed so much a wife. She had the pleasantest laugh in the world, and she often coughed. Theseick-room was kept with exquisite simplicity, with such freshness, tareness, and order as made it a piece of delight. One day Cherry brought home a great Vikory bowl of silvery glass, and a dozen drifting goldfish, and Martin never tired of watching them idly while he listened to her reading.

"Cherry," Peter said, on a wet January day, when he came upon her in the dining room, contentedly arranging a fragrant mass of wet violets, "I think Martin's out of the woods now. I believe I'll be moving along!"

"Oh, but we want you always, Peter!" she said, innocently regretful.

The ghost of a pained smile flitted across his face.

"Thank you," he said, gently. "But I think I will go!" he added, mildly. She made no further protest.

"But where?" she asked, sympathetically.

"I don't know. I shall take Buck—start off toward the big mountains. I'll write you now and then, of course! I'm going home first?"

"Just now," Cherry mused, sadly, "perhaps it is best—for you—to get away! Now that Martin is so much better." she added, in a little burst. "I do feel so sorry for you, Peter! I know how you feel. I shall miss her always, of course!" said Cherry, "but I have him."

"I try not to think of her," Peter said, flicking up his head.

"When you do," Cherry said, earnestly, giving him more of her attention than had been usual of late, "there's something to think, Peter. It's since we have so much to be thankful for because she never was! It was madness," Cherry went on, eagerly, "sheer madness that is clear now. I don't try to explain it, because it's all been washed away by the frightful thing that happened. I'm different now; you're different. I don't know how we ever thought we could—"

There was a silence during which she looked at him anxiously, but the expression on his face did not alter and he did not speak.

"And what I think we ought to be thankful for," she resumed, "is that Alix would rather—she would rather have it this way. She told me that she would be heart-broken if there had been any actual separation between me and Martin, and how much worse that would have been—what we planned, I mean. She was spared that, after all, and we're spared—I see it now—what would have ruined both our lives. We were brought to our senses and the awakening only came a little sooner than it would have come anyway."

Peter had walked to the window, and was looking out at the shabby, rather forlorn rain-dripping garden and at the beach garden, where the drenched chrysanthemums had been bowed to the soaked earth.

"Here, in Dad's home," Cherry said, coming to stand beside him, "I see how wicked and how mad I was. In another twenty-four hours it would have been too late—you didn't know how often I woke up in the night and shiver, thinking that! And as it is, I am here in the dear old house; and Martin—well, you can see that even Martin's life is going to be far happier than it ever was! It's such a joy to me," she added, with the ruthless look she often wore when her husband's comfort was under consideration, "to feel that we need never worry about the money end of things—there's enough for what we need forever!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

GROUSE LIVES LIKE ESKIMO

In Cold Weather the Bird Finds Safe and Warm Retreat in Snow House.

In the temperate months the grouse has an excellent choice of food consisting of a great variety of berries, small fruit, seeds, buds, clover, beech nuts, grasshoppers and a multitude of young, tender leaves. In the winter one wonders at their survival; for now the fall fruits of the robins completely exhausts the berries, which were wont to linger and ripen well into winter, compelling the grouse to depend largely upon yellow birch buds with many a forced meal on arbor-vitæ.

Fortunately, whenever the temperature is far below zero the sky is usually clear and the grouse are active the unconcerned, but if the days and nights are dark and cold or the air filled with merciless pellets they have the habit of plunging into deep snowdrifts, where, protected by the surface the heat and weight of the body form a globular retreat in which they remain comfortably until the storm clears or hunger forces an exit.

Sometimes in winter or the early spring there may come a rain or a warm day that forms a crust on the surface, followed by severe weather, and then thousands of grouse are imprisoned and the heretofore safe retreat becomes their tomb, should weeks pass by before the seal is broken.—National Geographic Magazine.

Many Years Ago.

White-haired Uncle Peleg Perkins, known as the oldest person in his community, was standing by his gate when a touring car stopped close behind him. Several of the ladies in it asked numerous patronizing questions concerning the locality. Then one of them remarked:

"You must have been around here quite a long time."

Uncle Peleg slowly raised his stick and pointed toward a not distant mountain.

"Yes, marm," he said gravely. "I have so. You see that there big, high mounting over acrosst? Wal, the time I fust come here that there mountting wa'n't but just about the bigness of an ant hill."—Harper's Magazine.

The "Sage of Monticello."

The "Sage of Monticello" was a sobriquet bestowed upon Thomas Jefferson, in allusion to the wisdom displayed by him in political affairs during his residence at Monticello, Va., after his retirement from the presidency.

Truth and Inquiry.

Truth never lost ground by inquiry, because she is, most of all, reasonable.—William Penn.

It is sometimes easier to gain the daughter's hand than the father's ear.

His Forte.

Sense of humor in a profiteer is a redeeming feature. A particularly snobbish young man was talking to a self-made, war-made man the other day. "Of course, he said, "you, in your busy life, have no time for culture. Now I can speak Italian, Spanish, French, German and many other languages. I wonder what can you speak."

"Billingsgate and golf," said the profiteer.

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Line Was Busy.

He was newly arrived in this country and was none too familiar with the use of the telephone. So he took down the receiver and demanded:

"Aye vant to talk to me wife."

Central's voice came back sweetly: "Neither, please?"

"Oh," he replied meekly, willing to help out, "she have no second vun."

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Reading, Pa.—"I was a nervous wreck and could hardly do my housework. I always had to have help or I would never have got it done. Through the advice of friends I have been taking Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound for my nerves and Lydia E. Pinkham's Blood Medicine for my blood and I am feeling fine and doing my work all alone. I can recommend these medicines to any one, for they certainly helped me. I suffered for five years and Lydia E. Pinkham's medicines pulled me through."—Mrs. WALTER U. STOYER, 1218 Mulberry St., Reading, Pa.

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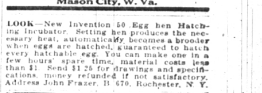

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