SISTERS

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

Author of "Josselyn's Wife"

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CHAPTER I

CHERRY STRICKLAND came in the door of the Strickland house, and shut it behind her, and stood so, with her hands behind her on the knob, and her slender body leaning forward, and her breath rising and falling in deep, ecstatic breaths. It was May, in California, she was just eighteen, and for twenty-one minutes she had been engaged to be married.

She hardly knew why, after that last farewell to Martin, she had run so swiftly up the path, and why she had dashed into the house, and closed the door with such noiseless haste. There was nothing to run for! But it was as if she feared that the joy within her might escape into the moonlight night that was so perfumed with lilacs and the scent of wet woods. In this new happiness of hers a fear was already mingled, a sweet fear, truly and a delicious fear, but she had never feared anything before in her life. She was afraid now that it was all too wonderful to be true, that she would awaken in the morning to find it only a dream, that she would somehow fall short of Martin's ideal—somehow fail him—somehow turn all this magic of moonshine and kisses into ashes and heartbreak.

She was a miser with her treasure, already; she wanted to fly with it, and to hide it away, and to test its reality in secret, alone. She had come running in from the wonderland down by the gate, just for this, just to prove to herself that it would not vanish in the commonplaceness of the shabby hall, would not disappear before the everyday contact of everyday things.

There was moonlight here, too, falling in clear squares on the stairway landing, white and mysterious and bewitching, but on the other side of the hall was wholesome, cheerful lamplight creeping in a warm streak under the sitting-room door.

Dad was in the sitting room, with the girls. The doctor's house was full of girls. Anne, his niece, was twenty-four; Alix, Cherry's sister, three years younger—how staid and unmarried and undesired they seemed tonight to panting and glowing and glorified eighteen! Anne, with Alix's erratic help, kept house for her uncle and was supposed to keep a sharp eye on Cherry too. But she hadn't been sharp enough to keep Martin Lloyd from asking her to marry him, exulted Cherry, as she stood breathless and laughing in the dark hallway.

Cherry had never had any other home than this shabby brown bungalow, and she knew every inch of the hall, even without light to see it. She knew the faded rugs, and the study door that swallowed up her father every day, and the table where Alix had put a great bowl of buttercups, and the glass-paned door at the back through which the doctor's girls had looked out at many a frosty morning, and red sunset, and sun-steeped summer afternoon. But even the old hall had seemed transformed tonight, lighted with a beauty quite new, scented with an immortal sweetness.

Hong came out of the dining room; the varnished buttercups twinkled in a sudden flood of light. He had come to put a folded tablecloth into the old wardrobe that did for a sideboard, under the stairs. Cherry, descending to earth, smiled at him, and crossed the hall to the sitting-room door.

An older woman might have gone upstairs, to dream alone of her new joy, but Cherry thought that it would be "fun" to join the family, and "act as if nothing had happened!" She was only a child, after all.

Consciously or unconsciously, they had all tried to keep her a child, these three who looked up to smile at her as she came in. One of them, rosy, gray-headed, magnificent at sixty, was her father, whose favorite she knew she was. He held out his hand to her without closing the book that was in the other hand, and drew her to the wide arm of his chair, where she settled herself with her soft young body resting against him, her slim ankles crossed, and her cheek dropped against his thick silver hair.

Alix was reading, and dreamily scratching her ankle as she read; she was a tall, awkward girl, younger far at twenty-one than Cherry was at eighteen, pretty in a gipsyish way, untidy as to hair, with round black eyes, high, thin cheek bones marked with scarlet, and a wide, humorous mouth that was somehow droll in its expression even when she was angry or serious. She was rarely angry; she was unexacting, good-humored, preferring animals to people, and unconventional in speech and manner. Her father and Anne sometimes discussed her anxiously; they confessed that they were rather fearful for Alix. For Cherry, neither one had ever had a disquieting thought.

Anne, smiling demurely over her white sewing, was a small, prettily made little woman, with silky hair trimly braided, and a rather pale, small face with charming and regular features. She was not considered exactly pretty; perhaps the contrast with Cherry's unusual beauty was rather hard on both the older girls, but she was so perfectly capable in her little groove, so busy, contented, and necessary in the doctor's household, that it was rather a habit with all their friends to praise Anne. Anne had "admirers," too, Cherry reflected, looking at her tonight, but neither she nor Alix had ever been engaged—engaged—engaged!

"Aren't you home early?" said Doctor Strickland, rubbing his cheek against his youngest daughter's cheek in sleepy content. He was never quite happy unless all three girls were in his sight, but for this girl he had always felt an especial protecting fondness. It seemed only yesterday that Cherry, a rosy-cheeked, sturdy little girl in a checked gingham apron, had been trotting off to school; to him it was yesterday that she had been a squarely built baby, digging in the garden paths, and sniffing at the border pinks. He had followed her exquisite childhood with more than a father's usual devotion, perhaps because she really had been an exceptionally endearing child, perhaps because she had been given him, a tiny crying thing in a blanket, to fill the great gap her mother's going had left in his heart. He had sympathized with her microscopic cut fingers, he had smiled into her glowing, damp little face when she stuttered to him long tales of bad dogs and big 'ticks'; he had brought her 'jacks' and paper dolls and hair ribbons; he loved the diminutive femininity of the creature; she was all a woman, even at three.

Alix he proudly called his "boy"; Alix asked hair ribbons to tie up her dogs, and demanded hip boots and an air rifle and got them, too, and used them, but when he took Alix in his arms she was apt to bump his nose violently with her hard young head, to break his glasses, or at best to wriggle herself free. Little Cherry, however, was 'fraid of dogs, she told her father, and of guns, and she would curl up in his arms for happy half-hours, with her gold curls sprayed against his shoulder, and her soft little hand tucked into his own.

"Mr. Lloyd had to take the 9 o'clock train," Cherry answered her father dreamily, "and he and Peter walked home with me!" She did not add that Peter had left them at his own turning, a quarter of a mile away.

"I thought he wasn't going to be at Mrs. North's for dinner," Anne observed quietly, in the silence. She had been informally asked to the Norths' for dinner that evening herself, and she had declined for no other reason than that attractive Martin Lloyd was presumably not to be there.

"He wasn't," Cherry said. "He thought he had to go to town at 6. I just stopped in to give them dad's message, and they teased me to stay. You knew where I was, didn't you, dad?" she murmured.

Mrs. North telephoned about 6, and said you were there, but she didn't say that Mr. Lloyd was," Anne said, with a faint hint of discontent in her tone.

Alix fixed his bright, mischievous eyes upon the two, and suspended her reading for a moment. Alix's attitude toward the opposite sex was one of calm contempt, outwardly. But she had made rather an exception of Martin Lloyd, and had recently had a conversation with him on the subject of sensible, placid friendships between men and women. At the mention of his name she looked up, remembering this talk with a little thrill.

His name had thrilled Anne, too, although she betrayed no sign of it as she sat quietly matching silks. In fact, all three of the girls were quite ready to fall in love with young Lloyd, if two of them had not actually done so.

He was a newcomer in the little town, a tall, presentable fellow, ready with laughter, ready with words, and always more than ready for flirtation. He admitted that he liked to flirt; his gay, daring had quite carried Anne's citadel, and had even gained Alix's grudging response. Cherry had not been at home when Martin first appeared in Mill Valley, and the older girls had written her, visiting friends in Napa, that she must come and meet the new man.

Martin was a mining engineer; he had been employed in a Nevada mine, but was visiting his cousin in the valley now before going to a new position in June. In its informal fashion, Mill Valley had entertained him; he had tramped to the big forest five miles away with the Stricklands, and there had been a picnic to the mountain-top, everybody making the hard climb except Peter Joyce, who was a trifle lame, and perhaps a little lazy as well, and who usually rode an old horse, with the lunch in saddle-bags at each side. Alix formulated her theories of platonic friendships on these walks; Anne dreamed a foolish, happy dream. Girls did marry, men did take wives to themselves, dreamed Anne; it would be unspeakably sweet, but it would be no miracle!

And Anne, always busy and happy and helpful, was more so than ever unpacking the delicious lunch, capably arranging for everybody's comfort and pleasure, looking up with innocent surprise when Martin bent over her as she fussed and rearranged baskets.

"I thought you were gathering wood!"

"Did you, indeed? Let the other fellows do that. I shan't be here forever, and I'm privileged."

"Would you like me to give you something else to do?"

"No, ma'am, I'm quite happy, thank you!"

Not much in the words to remember, truly, but the tone and the look went straight to Anne's close-guarded heart. Every time she looked up at the mountain, rearing its dark crest above the little valley, they had come back to her.

That was all several weeks ago, now. It was just after that mountain picnic that Cherry had come home; on a Sunday, as it chanced, that was her eighteenth birthday, and on which Martin and his aunt were coming to dinner. Alix had marked the occasion by wearing a loose velvet gown in which she fancied herself; Anne had conscientiously decorated the table, had seen to it that there was ice-cream, and chicken, and all the accessories that make a Sunday dinner in the country a national institution. Cherry had done nothing helpful.

On the contrary, she had disgraced herself and infuriated Hong by deciding to make fudge the last minute. Hong had finally relegated her to the laundry, and it was from this limbo that Martin, laughing joyously, extricated her, when, sticky and repentant, she had called for help. It was Martin who untied the checked brown apron, disentangling from the strings the silky gold tendrils that were blowing over Cherry's white neck, and Martin who opened the door for her sugary fingers, and Martin who watched the flying little figure out of sight with a prolonged "Whew-w-w!" of utter astonishment. The child was a beauty.

But if she was beautiful when flushed and cross and sticky, there was no word for her when she presently came demurely downstairs, her exquisite little red mouth still pouting, her bright head still drooping sulkily, but her wonderful eyes glinting mischief, and the dark, tumbled apron replaced by thin white ruffles that began at Cherry's shoulders and ended above her ankles. Soft, firm round chin, straight little nose, blue eyes ringed with babyish shadows; Martin found them all adorable, as was every inch of the slender, beautifully made little body, the brown warm hand, the clear childish forehead, the square little foot in a shining slipper.

Her eighteenth birthday! He learned that she had just put up her hair; indeed, after dinner, her father made her tumble it down in a golden mop again. "Can't lose my last girl, you know," he said to Mrs. North, Martin's aunt seriously. Martin had been shown her birthday gifts; books and a silver belt buckle and a gold pen and stationery and handkerchiefs. A day or two later she had had another gift; had opened the tiny Shreve box with a sudden hammering at her heart, with a presage of delight. She had found a silver-topped candy jar, and the card of Mr. John Martin Lloyd, and under the name, in tiny letters, the words "O fudge!" The girls laughed over this nonsense appreciatively, but there was more than laughter in Cherry's heart.

From that moment the world was changed. Her father, her sisters, her cousin had second place, now. Cherry had put out her innocent little hand, and had opened the gate, and had passed through it into the world. That hour was the beginning, and it had led her surely, steadily, to the other hour tonight when she had been kissed, and had kissed in return.

Nobody dreamed it, she told herself with innocent exultation, looking at Alix, sunk into her chair ungracefully, and at Anne, peacefully sewing. They thought of her as a child—she, who was engaged to be married!

"So—we walk home with young men?" mused the doctor, smiling. "Look here, girls, this little Miss Muffet will be cutting you both out with that young man, if you're not careful!"

Alix, deep in her story, did not hear him, but Anne smiled faintly, and faintly frowned as she shook her head. She considered Cherry sufficiently precocious without Uncle Lee's ill-considered tolerance. Anne had often told him that Cherry was the "pink-and-white type" that would attract "boys" soon enough without any encouragement from him. But he persisted in regarding her as nothing more than a captivating baby!

He would have had them always children, this tender, simple, innocent Doctor Strickland. He was in many ways a child himself. He had never made money in his profession; he and his wife and the two tiny girls had had a hard enough struggle sometimes. Anne and her own father had joined the family eight years ago, in the same year that the Strickland Patent Fire Extinguisher, over which the doctor had been puttering for years, had been sold. It did not sell, as his neighbors believed, for a million dollars, but for perhaps one-tenth of that sum. It was enough, and more than enough, whatever it was. After Anne's father died it meant that the doctor could live on in the brown house under the redwoods, with his girls, reading, fussing with a new invention, walking, consulting with Anne, laughing at Alix, and spoiling his youngest-born.

The house was shingled, low, framed in wide porches, smelling within and without of the sweet woods about it. Here the Stricklands weathered the cold damp winters, when the trees dripped and the creeks swelled, and here they watched the first emerald of spring breaking through the loam of a thousand autumns; here they hunted for iris and wild lilac in April, and hung Japanese lanterns through the long, warm summers. It was a perfect life for the old man; it was only lately that he began uneasily to suspect that they would some day want something more, that they would some day tire of empty forest and blowing mountain ridge, and go away from the shadow of Mt. Tamalpais, and into the world.

Anne, now—was she beginning to fancy this young Lloyd? Doctor Strickland was surprised with the fervor with which he repudiated the thought. Anne had been admired, she must go to her own home some day. But her uncle hoped that it would be a neighboring home; this young engineer, who had drifted already into a dozen different and distant places, was not the man for staid little Anne. He was twenty-eight years old, but it was not the discrepancy in years that mattered. The doctor had himself been twelve years older than his wife. No, it was something less tangible—

"What did you want to see Mr. Lloyd about tomorrow, dad?" Cherry interrupted his thoughts to ask.

"The rose vine!" her father reminded her.

"You'll never get that back on the roof!" Alix looked up to assure him discouragingly. "I told you, when you were pruning it," she added vivaciously, "that you were cutting too deep. No—you knew it all! Now the first wind brings it down all over the place, and you get exactly what you deserve!"

Her tone was less harsh than her words; indeed, it was the tone he loved from her, that of a devoted but long-suffering mother. She came to Cherry's hassock, and dropped on it, and rested her untidy head against his knee.

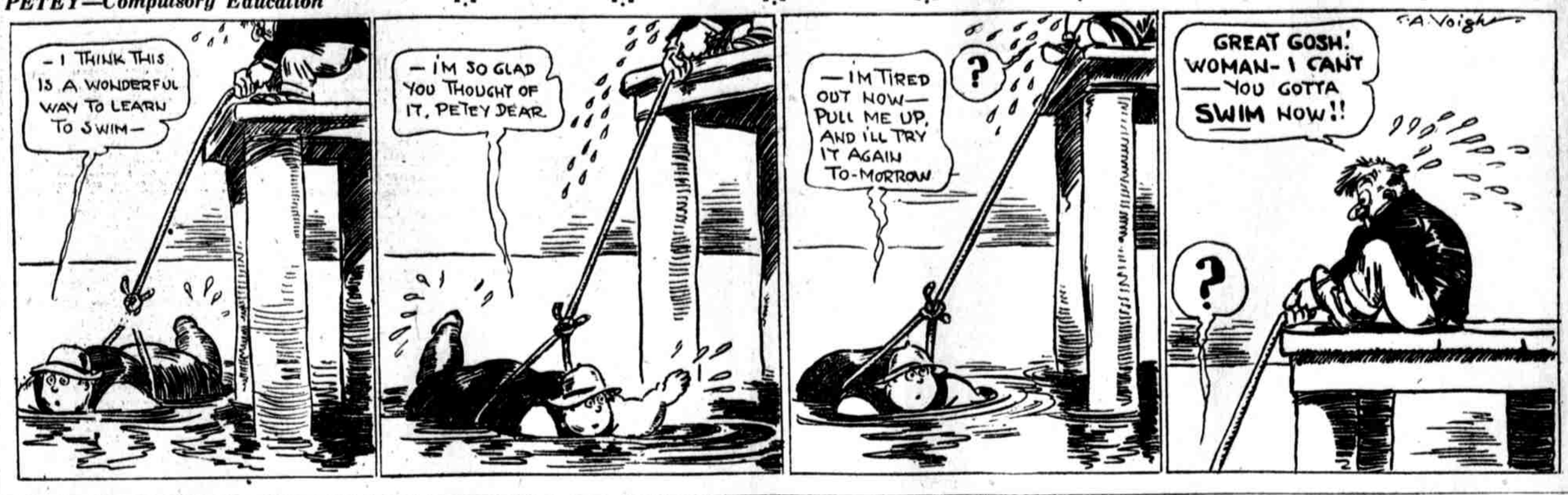
(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

THE GUMPS—Carp Caviar Down Again

By Sidney Smith

PETEY—Compulsory Education

By C. A. Voight



The Young Lady Across the Way

We remarked to the young lady across the way that the Democratic race also seems to be a free-for-all this year and she said it might look that way by comparison but she supposed some of 'em had spent some money.

THE ABSENT-MINDED PROFESSOR

By FONTAINE FOX

SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Breakfast

By Hayward

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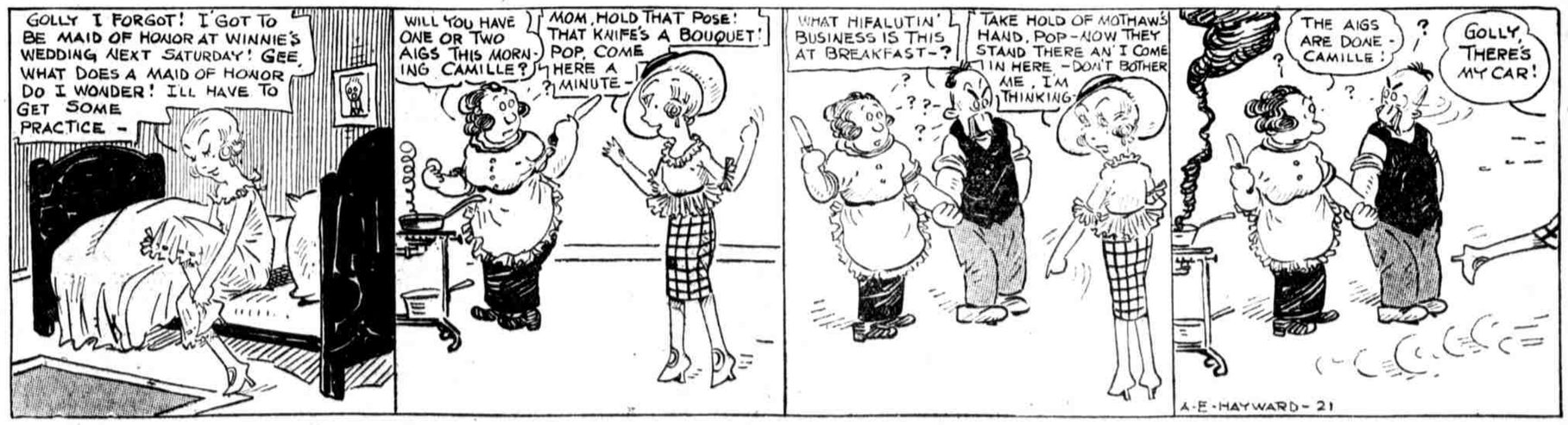

"CAP" STUBBS—Tippie Did as He Was Told

By Edwina