SISTERS

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

Author of "Josselyn's Wife"

(Copyright, 1919, by Kathleen Norris)

THIS STARTS THE STORY

Doctor Strickland, his two daughters, Alix and Cherry, and his niece, Anne, live together in the California redwoods, and Peter, their neighbor, comes and goes at will. Martin Lloyd, a visiting engineer, proposes marriage to Cherry. The doctor seems to sense the secret of his youngest daughter. He would see Lloyd in the morning. Anne has more than ordinary interest in the young man. Alix chides the doctor for his carelessness in pruning a vine.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"ANNE aided and abetted me!" said the doctor meekly.

"To the extent of handing you your shears!" Anne said promptly.

"No, but really you know, Dad, you were a pigheaded little creature to do that!" Alix said musically. "You might just as well cut it down at the roots and plant another double banksia."

"I rather thought that Lloyd might have some idea of a tackle—or a derrick or something——" submitted her father vaguely.

"Well, if anybody can——" Anne conceded, laughing. "What did he say about coming over, Cherry?"

But Cherry had not been listening, and the conversation was reviewed for her benefit. She remarked, between two rending yawns, that Mr. Lloyd was coming over tomorrow at 10 o'clock, and Peter, too——

"Peter won't be much good!" Alix commented. Cherry looked at her reproachfully.

"You're awfully mean to Peter, lately!" she protested. Her father gave her a shrewd look, with his good-night kiss, and immediately afterward both the younger girls dragged their way up to bed.

Alix and Cherry shared a bare, woody-smelling room tucked away under brown eaves. The walls were of raw pine, the latticed windows, in bungalow fashion, opened into the fragrant darkness of the night. The beds were really bunks, and above her bunk each girl had an extra berth, for occasional guests. There was scant prettiness in the room, and yet it was full of purity and charm. The girls sat upon their beds while they were undressing, and plunged upon their knees on the bare pine floor and rested their elbows upon the faded patchwork quilts while they said their prayers. Mill Valley was so healthful a little mountain village that among her two thousand residents there was only one doctor, the old man who sat by the fire downstairs, and he had formally retired from general practice. The girls, like all their neighbors, were hardy, bred to cold baths, long walks, simple hours, and simple food. In the soft western climate they left their bedroom windows open the year round; they liked to wake to winter damp and fog, and go downstairs with blue finger-tips and chattering teeth, to warm themselves with breakfast and the fire.

So Alix said nothing when Cherry went to the window tonight, and knelt at it, looking out into the redwoods, and breathing the piny air. In the silence of the little room the girls could hear a swollen creek rushing; rich, loamy odors drifted in from the forest that had been soaked with long April rains. Cherry saw a streak of light under the door of Hong's cabin, a hundred yards away; there was no moon, it was blackness unbroken under the trees.

The season was late, but the girls felt with a rush of delight that summer was with them at last; the air was soft and warm, and there was a general sense of being freed from the winter's wetness and heaviness.

Alix rolled herself in a gray army blanket, and was asleep in some sixty seconds. But Cherry felt that she was floating in seas of new joy and utter delight and that she would never be sleepy again.

Downstairs Anne and the doctor sat staidly on, the man dreaming with a knotted forehead, the girl sewing. Presently she ran a needle through her fine white work with seven tiny stitches, folded it, and put her thimble into a case that hung from her orderly workbag with a long ribbon.

"Wait a minute, Anne," said the doctor, as she straightened herself to rise. "This young Lloyd, now—what do you think of him?"

She widened demure blue eyes.

"Should you be sorry if I—liked him, Uncle Lee?" she smiled.

The old man rumpled his silver hair restlessly.

"No-o," he said, a little ruefully. "I suppose it'll be some man some day, my dear. I've been thinking—even little Cherry seems to be growing up!"

Anne, who modeled her deportment somewhat upon the conduct of Esther in "Bleak House," came to the hassock at his knee, and sat there, looking up at him with bright affection and respect.

"Cherry's only a child," she assured him, "and Alix will not be ready to give her heart to any man for years to come! But I'm twenty-four, uncle. And sometimes I feel ready to—to try my own wings!"

He smiled at her absently; he was thinking of her mother, an articulate, academic resolute woman, of whom he had never been fond.

"That's the way the wind blows, eh?" he asked kindly.

Anne widened her pretty eyes.

"Well—you see how much he's here! You see the flowers and books and notes. I'm not the sort of girl to wear my heart on my sleeve," Anne, who was fond of small conversational tags, assured him merrily. "But there must be some fire where there's so much smoke!" she ended.

"You're not sure, my dear?" he asked, after some thought.

"Oh, no!" she answered. "It's just a fancy that persists in coming and going. You know, Uncle Lee," Anne pursued, confidentially, "I've always had rather a high ideal of marriage. I've always said that the man I would marry must be a big man—oh, I don't mean only physically! I mean morally, mentally—a man among men!"

"And you think young Lloyd—answers that description, eh?"

"I think he does, Uncle Lee," she answered seriously. And immediately afterward she got to her feet, saying brightly, "Well! we mustn't take this too gravely—yet. It was only that I wanted to be open and aboveboard with you, uncle, from the beginning. That's the only honest way."

"That's wise and right!" her uncle answered, in the kindly, absent tone he had used to them as children, a tone he was apt to use to Anne when she was in her highest mood, and one she rather resented.

"Cherry, now——" he asked, detaining her for a moment.

"She—you don't think that perhaps Peter admires her?"

"Peter!" Anne echoed amazedly, and stood thinking.

Peter was more than thirty years old, thin, scholarly, something of a solitary, the sweet, dreamy, affectionate neighbor who had shared the girls' lives for the last ten years. Cherry had bullied Peter since her babyhood, ruined his piano with sticky fingers, trampled his rose-beds, coaxed him into asking her father to let her sit up for dinner. For some reason she could not, or would not, define, Anne liked the idea of Cherry and Peter falling in love—

"Somehow one doesn't think of Peter as marrying any one—" she said slowly, still trying to grasp the thought. "He's so—self-sufficient," she added, shaking her head. "You—you wouldn't like that, Uncle?"

"Peter is a dear fellow," the doctor mused. "But Cherry—why, she's barely eighteen! He—" The old man hesitated, began again: "I suppose there's no reason why Peter shouldn't kiss her, in a—brotherly sort of way?" he submitted doubtfully.

"Did he kiss her?" Anne exclaimed.

"I don't know that he did," Cherry's father said hastily.

"But what made you think he did?" the girl persisted.

"Just a fancy," he assured her. "Just an old father's fear that she is growing up too fast!"

"Because we all, and you especially, spoil her," Anne reminded him, smiling. "Peter," she added thoughtfully, "has kissed us all, now and then!" She stooped for a dutiful good-night kiss, and was gone. And as she went, lightly and swiftly across the hall, up the stairway with her shoulders erect, and methodically and prettily moved about her brushing and folding and disrobing, she saw herself engaged to be married, saw herself veiled and mystical in white, on her uncle's arm, heard the old neighbors and friends saying that little Anne Strickland had gone to her own home, and had won the love of a fine man.

Downstairs, the doctor sat on, thinking, and his face was grave. He was thinking of little Cherry's good-night kiss, half an hour ago. She had rested against his arm, and he had held her there, but what had been the thoughts behind the blue eyes so near his own? Perhaps Anne was right—perhaps Anne was right. But he realized with a great rush of fear that some man had kissed Cherry tonight, had held her against a tobacco-scented coat, and that the girl was a woman, and an awakened woman at that. Cherry—kissed a man! Her father's heart winced away from the thought.

Young Lloyd and Peter had walked home with her. But if Anne was right in her maidenly suspicions of Lloyd's intentions, then it must have been Peter who surprised little Cherry with a sudden embrace. Lloyd had been hurrying for a train, too; the case looked clear for Peter.

And as he came to his conclusions, a certain relief crept into the old man's heart. Peter was an odd fellow; he was ten years too old for the child. But Peter was a lover of books and gardens and woods and music, after all, and Peter's father and this old man musing by the fire had been "Lee" and "Paul" to each other since boyhood. Peter might give Cherry a kiss as innocently as a brother; in any case, Peter would wait for her, would be all consideration and tenderness when he did win her.

"But I think perhaps she might go down to the San Jose school for half a term," her father reflected. "Six months there did wonders for Alix. No use precipitating things—the next few years are pretty important for all the girls. We musn't let her fancy that the first man who turns her head with compliments is the right partner for life! Alix, now—somehow she wasn't like Cherry, at eighteen."

He smiled at a sudden memory of Alix, who was chicken-farming at that age, and generally unpleasantly redolent of incubators, chopped feed and mire. He seemed to remember Alix shouting that if Peter Joyce was going to live in their house, she would move somewhere else! Cherry was different.

Cherry, he reflected fearfully, was as pretty as her mother had been at eighteen, with the same rounded chin and apricot cheeks and the same shadowed innocent blue eyes with a film of corn-colored hair blown across them. She had the strange, the indefinable quality that without words, almost without glances, draws youth toward youth, draws admiration and passion, draws life and all its pain. Her father for the first time tonight formulated in his heart the thought that she might be happily married—

Married—nonsense! Why, what did she know of life, of submission and courage and sacrifice? At the first strain, at the first real test, she would want to run home to her daddy again, to "stop playing"——! It would be years, many years, before the snowy frills, and the pale gold head, and the firm, brown little hand would be ready for that!

Not many hours after he went slowly up to bed morning began to creep into the little valley. The redwoods turned gray, and then dark green, the fog stirred, and a first shaft of bright sunlight struck across a shoulder of the hills, and pierced the shadows about the brown bungalow. Alix, at her early bath, heard quail calling, and looked out to see the last of the fog vanishing at 8 o'clock and to get a wet rush of fragrance from the Persian lilac, blooming this year for the first time. At 8:30 she came out into the garden, to find her father somewhat ruefully studying the tumbled ruins of the yellow banksia rose. The garden was still wet, but warming fast; she picked a plume of dark and perfumed heliotrope, and began to fasten it in his coat lapel while she kissed him.

(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

THE GUMPS—Oh! Those Men!

By Sidney Smith

PETEY—Another of the Evils

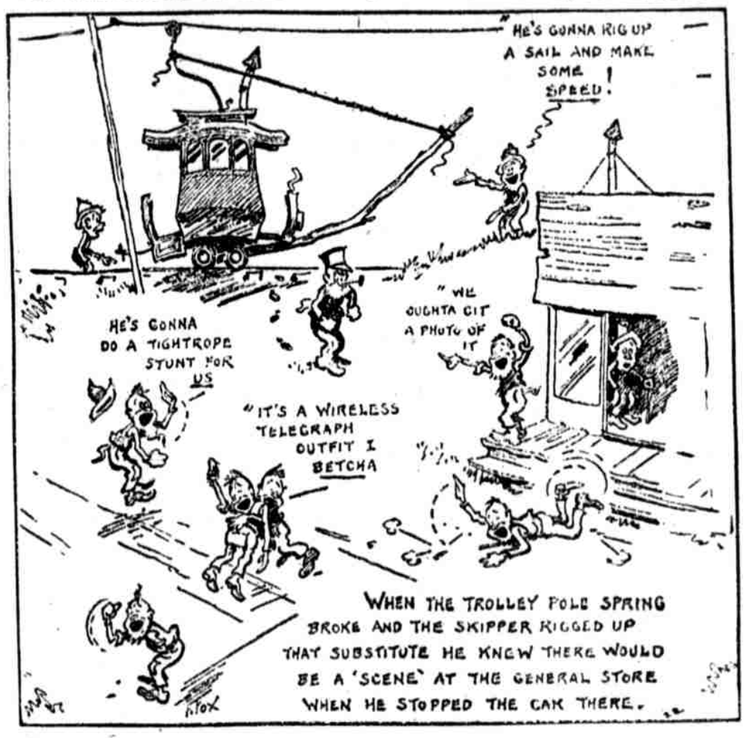
By C. A. Voight

The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says she should think the men who must drink would learn to leave wood alcohol alone and stick to the bottled goods.

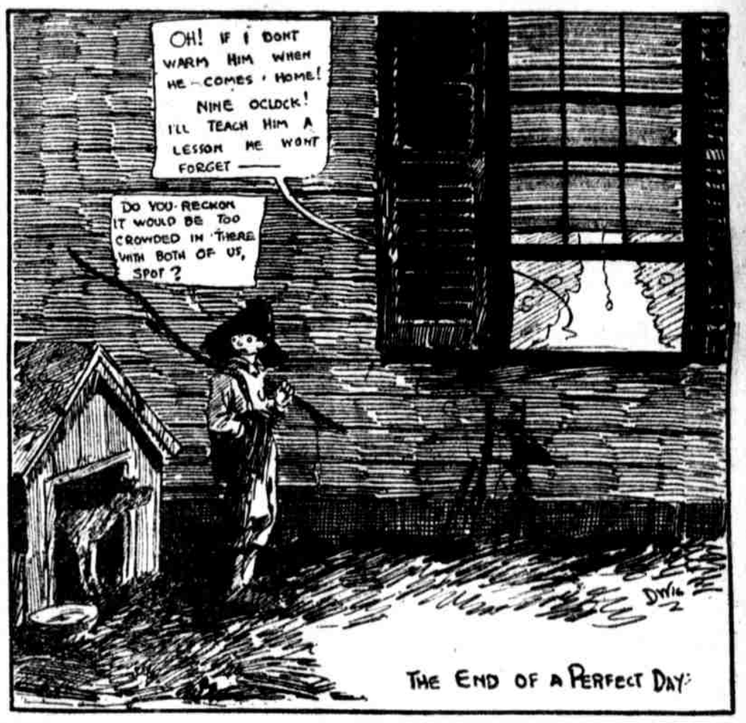
THE TOONERVILLE TROLLEY

By FONTAINE FOX



SCHOOL DAYS

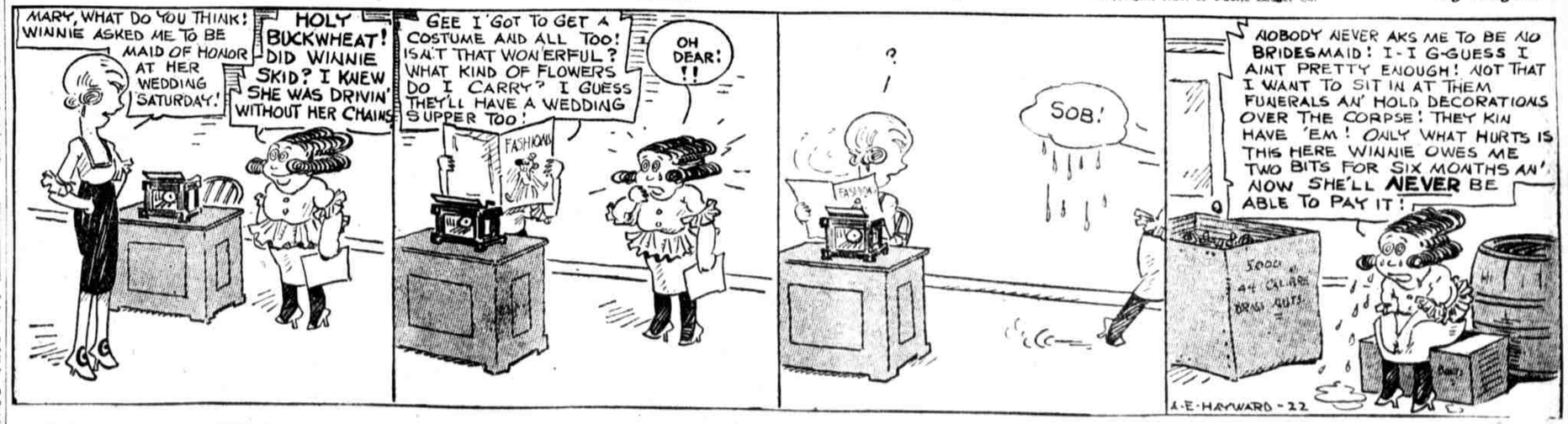
By DWIG



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Mary Doodle Is Sad Over Winnie's Wedding

Copyright, 1920, by Public Ledger Co.

By Hayward



"CAP" STUBBS—Yes! Mary Margaret's Some Artist

By Edwina

DREAMLAND ADVENTURES

THE FLOWER GARDEN BALL

By DADDY

(Peggy, reading in the garden, hears the flowers speak of the Flower Garden Ball. When she wishes that she could go, a hollyhock leaf, bearing an invitation, flutters into her lap.)

CHAPTER II

Through the Golden Ring

"OH, IT'S an invitation to the ball!" cried Peggy happily. "Bumble Bee Buzz must have heard me say I'd love to go. But what can he mean by a golden ring of light?" Peggy's curious eyes searched the garden. In the farthest corner she spied a ring of tall sunflowers, their faces turned toward the setting sun and reflecting its beauty. These, she thought, might form the "ring of golden light," spoken of by Bumble Bee Buzz in his invitation.

It was growing too dark to read so Peggy lay idly swinging, wondering dreamily about the romances of the flowers, and growing sleepier, sleepier, sleepier until her eyes closed in a sound nap. A shrill, ear-splitting whistle close by her head aroused her in a jiffy, and it was a very wide-awake young person who sat up in the swing to scold the grinning Billy Belgium for giving her such a scare. But Billy's smile was catching and soon Peggy's frown vanished, and she laughed merrily.

"Sleepy head," teased Billy. "You'd have slept right through a party in your own garden, if I hadn't come along."

"Oh, the ball!" cried Peggy, jumping to her feet. Looking up she saw the moon high in the heavens, and seizing Billy by the hand she ran to where, in the afternoon, she had seen the golden sunflower ring.

"Oh," cried Peggy in dismay, stopping so short she tripped Billy and sent him sprawling on the ground. "They're gone!"

"Gone," answered Billy crossly as he picked himself up, "what's gone?"

"The sunflowers—the golden circle of sunflowers! They made the ring of golden light that Bumble Bee Buzz spoke of in his note," Peggy wailed, very close to tears. "And now there's not one left and we can't go to the ball."

True enough, not a sunflower was in sight. The stalks were there, but the flowers and several inches of stem had disappeared. There wasn't even the tiniest speck of gold to be seen.

"Why," cried Billy, who had been looking around the garden. "There are not any flowers at all here excepting a couple of faded bachelor buttons. The others must be at the ball and——"

"Yes," interrupted Peggy. "And we can't go to the ball. Our ring of light is gone."

"But the moon isn't shining over the apple tree like it said in the note," said Billy, hopefully. "The sunflowers may return."

So Peggy and Billy sat down in the swing to wait for the time when the moon would shine over the apple tree. As they waited they wondered what the ball would be like, and how it happened that Bumble Bee Buzz had invited them. Billy told Peggy how his invitation had been written on a maple leaf which had blown right into his hand. Before they knew it the moon was over the apple tree and lo and behold—in the very center of the garden was a ring of golden light cast by the moon, and all around was shadow.

"We must hurry," cried Billy. "The moon moves so swiftly that circle will not be there long." Jumping up, he and Peggy ran to the center of the garden and stepped into the golden ring.

"My, what a funny feeling," cried Peggy, as they set foot into the magic circle.

"We're shrinking," answered Billy in astonishment. And sure enough, they were rapidly growing smaller. The trees and bushes seemed to shoot up into the sky, the earth rushed up toward them, the circle seemed to grow to a huge size, and then—they themselves were little doll-sized creatures about eight inches high—and before them stretched a moonbeam path, sprinkled here and there with rose leaves.