SISTERS

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

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THIS STARTS THE STORY

Doctor Strickland, his two daughters, Alix and Cherry, and his niece, Anne, live together in the California redwoods, and Peter Joyce, their neighbor, comes and goes at will. Martin Lloyd, a visiting engineer, proposes to Cherry. Peter, who loves Cherry, has a stab of pain when he realizes the situation. Cherry arrives home in time to be with her father a few hours before he expires. Peter asks Alix to marry him, though he still loves Cherry.

"Cherry must love him," Peter remarks to Alix.

"Why not? I suppose when you've had ups and downs with a man, and lived in half a dozen different places, you rather take him for granted!"

"Oh, you think it works that way?" Peter asked.

"Well, don't you think so? Aren't lots of marriages like that?"

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"YOU false alarm. You quitter!", he answered. Alix laughed, a trifle guiltily. Also she flushed, with a great wave of splendid young color that made her face look seventeen again. "Your father left you—something, Alix? Peter asked presently, with some hesitation.

"That," she answered frankly, "is where Anne comes in!"

"Anne?"

"Anne and Justin came straight over," Alix went on, "and they were really lovely. And they asked me to come to them for a visit—but I couldn't very well; they live with his mother, you know. Amanda Price Little, who writes the letters to the Chronicle about educating children and all that. Doctor Younger and George Sewall were here every day; you and George were named as executors. I was so mixed up in policies and deeds and overdue taxes and interest and bonds——"

"Poor old Alix, if I had only been here to help you!" the man said. And for a moment they looked a little consciously at each other.

"Well, anyway," the girl resumed hastily, "when it came to reading the will, Anne and Justin sprung a mine under us! It seems that ten years ago, when the Strickland Patent Fire Extinguisher was put upon the market, my adorable father didn't have much money—he never did have, somehow. So Anne's father, my Uncle Vincent, went into it with him to the extent of about $3000——"

"Three thousand!" Peter, who had been leaning forward, earnestly attentive, echoed in relief.

"That was all. Dad had about $300. They had to have a laboratory and some expensive retorts and things, it seems. Dad did all the work, and put in his $300, and Uncle Vincent put in $3000—and the funny thing is," Alix broke off to say, musingly, "Uncle Vincent was perfectly splendid about it; I myself remember him saying, 'Don't worry, Lee. I'm speculating on my own responsibility, not yours.'"

"Well?" Peter prompted, as she hesitated.

"Well. They had a written agreement then, giving Uncle Vincent a third interest in the patent, should it be sold or put on the market——"

"Ha!" Peter ejaculated, struck.

"Which, of course, was only a little while before Uncle Vincent died," Alix went on, with a grave nod. "The agreement lay in dad's desk all these years—fancy how easily he might have burned it many's the time! But he didn't. George Sewall says that Anne is right."

"But wasn't Anne third heiress anyway, under his will? I know I've heard——"

"Certainly she was. But a third interest now, in a diminished estate that began at something less than $150,000, is quite different from a third of it ten years ago, plus compound interest," Alix said, bringing her clear brows together with a quizzical smile. "They've broken the will."

Peter, in the silence, whistled expressively.

"Gee—rusalem!" he exclaimed. "What does it come to?"

At this Alix looked very sober, gazed down at the fire, and shook her head.

"All he had!" she answered, briefly.

Peter was silent, looking at her in stupefaction.

"Almost, that is," Alix amended more cheerfully. "As it was—we should have had more than thirty thousand apiece. As it is, Anne gets it all, or if not quite all, nearly all."

"Gets!" he echoed, hotly. "How do you mean?"

"It seems to be perfectly just," the girl answered, rather lifelessly. But immediately she laughed. "Don't look so awful, Peter. In the first place, Cherry and I still have the house. In the second place, I am singing at St. Raphael's for $500 a year, and singing other places now and then."

"Alix, aren't you corking!" he said, with his pleasantest smile.

"Am I?" she asked, smiling. But immediately the smile melted, and her lips shook. "Anyway, I'm glad you're home again, Peter!" she added.

"Home again," he answered, half-angrily. "I should hope I am—and high time, too! Has this—this money been turned over to Anne?"

"Not yet. Nobody gets anything until the estate is cleared—a year or more from now."

"And do you tell me that she will have the effrontery to take it?"

"Rather! She said to me, 'Isn't it wonderful that Justin saw it at once, and I never would have seen it!' She was quite sweet and merry over it——"

"Great Lord! Does she know that it's practically all your father had?"

Alix hesitated.

"Well, you see there had been mismanagement, Peter. Dad speculated, and lost some. And we were a pretty heavy expense for a good many years. I hated to expose the whole thing, and George—he's been splendid—said that they probably had a perfectly valid claim, anyway. There are some things to be thankful for," Alix added, dashing the sudden tears from her eyes, "and one is that dad never knew it!"

"I can't tell you how surprised I am at Anne," Peter said.

"Well, we all were!" Alix confessed. "But it's just Anne's odd little self-centered way," she added. "It was here, and she wanted it. She belongs heart and soul to the Little family now, and she is quite triumphant over being of so much help to Justin. They're to build a house in Berkeley. Anne has it all worked out!" Alix said, with amused distaste. "Well—I let Hong go, and as soon as I can rent this house, I'm going to New York."

"Why New York, my dear girl?"

"Because I believe I can make a living there, singing and teaching and generally struggling with life!" she answered, cheerfully. "Cherry gets most of the money—they are always somewhat in debt, and I imagine that the reason she is able to have a nice apartment and a maid now is because she knows it is coming—and I get the house, and enough money to keep me going—say, a year, in New York."

"Do you want to go, Alix?" he said, affectionately.

"Yes, I think I do," she answered. But her eyes watered. "I do—in a way," she added. "That is, I love my singing, and the thought of making a success is delightful to me. But of course it means that I give up everything else. I can't have home life, and—and the valley—for years, four or five anyway, I'll have to give all that up.

"And I'm twenty-seven, Peter. And I'd always rather hoped that my music was going to be a domestic variety——" She stopped, smiling, but he saw the pain in her eyes. "George Sewall most kindly asked me to mother his small son——" she resumed, casually. "But although he is the dearest——"

"Sewall did!" Peter exclaimed, rather struck. "Great Scott! his father is one of the richest men in San Francisco."

"I know it," Alix agreed. "And he is one of the nicest men," she added. "But of course he'll never really love any one but Ursula. And I felt—oh, I felt too tired and alone and depressed to enter upon congratulations and clothes and family dinners with the Sewalls," she ended, a little drearily. "I wanted—I wanted things in the old way—as they were——" she said, her voice thickening.

"I know—I know!" Peter said, sympathetically. And for a while there was silence in the little house, while the rain fell steadily upon the dark forest without, and soaked branches swished about eaves and windows. "Can you put me up tonight?" he asked, suddenly. He liked her frank pleasure.

"Rather! I think Cherry's room was made up fresh last Monday," she told him. "And tomorrow," she added, with a brightening face, "we'll walk up to your house and see what six months of Kow's uninterrupted sway have done to it!"

"That's just what we'll do!" he agreed, enthusiastically. "And we'll have some music——"

She had risen, as if for good-nights, and was now beside the old square piano, where she had placed the lamp.

"I haven't touched it—since——" she said, sadly, sitting on the stool, and with her eyes still smiling on him, putting back the hinged cover. And a moment later her hands, with the assurance and ease of the adept, drifted into one of the songs of the old days.

"Do you remember the day we put the rose tree back, Peter?" she asked. "When Martin was almost a stranger? And do you remember the day Cherry and I fell into the Three Wells and you and dad had to disappear while we dried our clothing on branches of trees? And do you remember the day we made biscuits, over by the ocean?"

"I remember all the days," he answered, deeply stirred.

"We didn't see all this, then," Alix mused, still playing softly. "Anne claiming everything for her husband, you and I here talking of dad's death, and Cherry married——" She sighed.

"She's not happy?" he questioned quickly.

Alix shrugged, pursing her lips doubtfully.

"She's not unhappy," she told him, with a troubled smile. "It's just one of those marriages that don't ever get anywhere, and don't ever stop," she added. "Martin has faults, he's unreasonable, and he makes enemies. But those aren't the faults for which a woman can leave her husband. Oh, Peter," she added, laying a smooth warm hand on his, and looking straight into his eyes with her honest eyes, "don't go away again! Stay here in the valley for a week or two, and help me get everything worked out and thought out—I've been so much alone!"

"Dear old Alix!" he said, sitting down on the bench beside her and putting his arm about her.

She dropped her head on his shoulder, and so they sat, very still, for a long minute. Alix's hand went to her own shoulder, and her fingers tightened on his, and she breathed deep, contented breaths, like a child.

"Somebody ought to wire Mrs. Grundy, collect," she said, after a while.

"We will defy Mrs. Grundy, my dear," Peter said, kissing the top of a soft brown braid, "by trotting off hand in hand tomorrow and getting ourselves married. Why, Alix, he gave us his consent years ago—don't you remember?"

"He did wish it!" she said, and burst into tears.

"I seem to be doing things in a slightly irregular manner," she said to him the next day, when they had gotten breakfast together, and were basking in the sunlight of the upper deck of the ferryboat, on their way to the city. "I spend the night before my marriage alone—alone in a small country house hidden in the woods—with my betrothed, and propose to buy my trousseau immediately after the ceremony!"

"I feel like saying to you what the dear old French archbishop said to the small child," Peter smiled, marveling a little nonetheless at her untouched serenity. "He was speaking to all the children in some institution, and came to this little one: 'Et tu etes negre? Ah, bien—bien, continuez—continuez!' It's what makes you yourself, Alix, doing everything just a little differently."

"Marrying you, far from seeming a radical or momentous thing to do," she assured him, "seems to me like getting back into key—getting out of this bad dream of loneliness and change—securing something that I thought was lost!"

Her voice fell to a dreamy note, and she watched the gulls, wheeling in the sunshine, with thoughtful, smiling eyes. The man glanced at her once or twice, in the silence that followed, with something like hesitation, or compunction, in his look.

"Look here, Alix—let's talk. I want to tell you something—or, rather——"

"Continuez—continuez!" she said, laughing, as he hesitated.

"There's never been anything—anything to tell you—or your father, if he was here," Peter said, flushed and a trifle awkward, "I'm not that kind of a man. I was a crippled kid, as you know, all for books and music and walks and older people. But there has been that one thing—that one woman——"

Flushed, too, she was looking at him with bright, intelligent eyes.

"But I thought she never even knew——"

"No, she never did!"

Alix looked back at the gulls.

"Oh, well, then——" she said, indifferently.

"Alix, would you like to know about her?" Peter said bravely. "Her name—any, everything?"

"Oh, no please. I'd much rather not!" she intercepted him hastily, and after a pause she added, "Our marriage isn't the usual marriage, in that way. I mean I'm not jealous, and I'm not going to cry my eyes out because there was another woman—is another woman, who meant more to you, or might have! I'm going into it with my eyes wide open, Peter. I know you love me, and I love you, and we both like the same things, and that's enough."

Three weeks later he remembered the moment, and asked her again. They were in the valley house now, and a bitter storm was whirling over the mountain. Peter's little cabin rocked to the gale, but they were warm and comfortable beside the fire; the room was lamp-lighted, scented by Alix's sweet single violets, white and purple, spilling themselves from a glass bowl, and by Peter's pipe, and by the good scent of green bay burning. The Joyces had had a happy day, had climbed the hills under a lowering sky, had come home to dry clothes and to cooking, for Kow was away, and had finally shared an epicurean meal beside the fire.

Peter was wrapped in deep content; the companionship of this normal, pretty woman, her quick words and quick laugh, her music, her glancing, bright interest in anything and everything, was the richest experience of his life. She had said that she would change nothing in his home, but her clever white fingers had changed everything. There was order now, there was charming fussing and dusting, there were flowers in bowls, and books set straight, and there was just the different little angle to piano and desk and chairs and tables that made the cabin a home at last. She wanted bricks for a path; he had laughed at her fervent, "Do give me a whole carload of bricks for Christmas, Peter!" She wanted bulbs to pot. He had lazily suggested that they open the town house while carpenters and painters remade the cabin, but she had protested hotly, "Oh, do let's keep it just as it always was!"

Smiling, he gave her her way. She amused him day after day. He watched her, marveling at the miracle that was woman. He heard her in the kitchen, interrogating the Chinese: "You show me picture your little boy!" He heard her inveigling Antone, the old Italian laborer, into confidences.

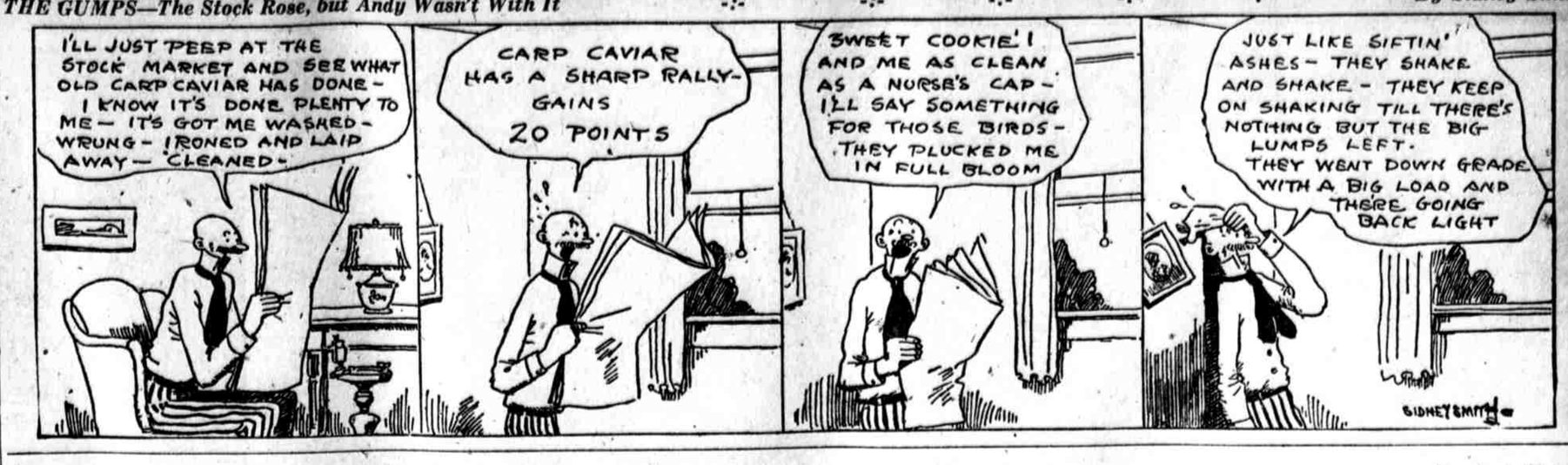
Tonight he watched her in great satisfaction; he liked to have her here in his home, one of the pretty Stricklands, Peter Joyce's wife. Nobody else was here, nobody else belonged here, they were master of their own lives. She quite captivated him by her simplicity and frankness; she washed her masses of brown hair and shook it loose in the sunshine, and she came in wet more than once, and changed her shoes before the fire—just as she had years ago, when she was a madcap little girl running wild through the woods.

They had been talking of Cherry, as they often did. Alix's favorite topic was her little sister; she had almost a maternal pride and fondness where Cherry was concerned. Today she had been housecleaning, and had brought some treasures downstairs. She had showed Peter Cherry's old exercise books: "Look, Peter, how she put faces in the naughts and turned the sevens into little sailboats! And see the straggling letters—'Charity Strickland!' I've always hated to destroy them. She was such a lazy, cunning little scholar!"

Peter, smiling at the old books, had remembered her, a small, square Cherry, with a film of gold falling over a blazing cheek, and mutinous blue eyes. Ah—the wonderful eyes were wonderful even then——

(CONTINUED MONDAY)

THE GUMPS—The Stock Rose, but Andy Wasn't With It — By Sidney Smith

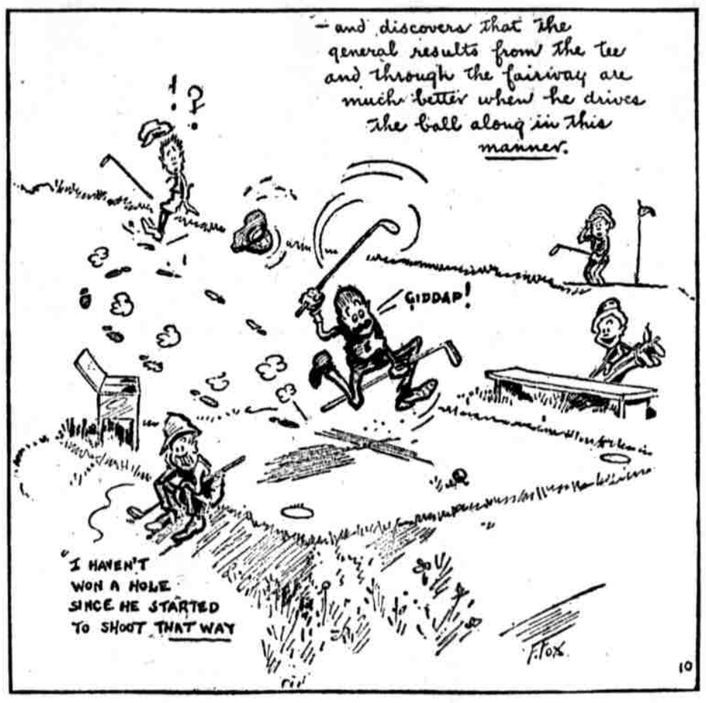


PETEY—Of Course, Silly — By C. A. Voight

The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says this has been a very hard year for the bees and no wonder maple sirup's so high.

THE EXPERT POLO PLAYER TAKES UP GOLF — By Fontaine Fox



SCHOOL DAYS — By DWIG

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Her First Week Is Over — Copyright, 1920, by Public Ledger Co. — By Hayward

"CAP" STUBBS—Tippie Saved Cap the Trouble — By Edwina