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. Alix and Peter marry. Cherry gets dissatisfied with married life in spite of money and servants. She visits Alix and Peter. Alix finds a receipt in "Dad's" Bible for repayment of his debt to their uncle Vincent, making Anne's suit against the property null and void. Peter and Cherry have a long talk about their infatuation of each other. "Cherry, tell me that you care for me a little," Peter said. "What shall we do?" she asked. "Peter took a chair three feet away, tossed his head and flung back his hair."

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"THERE is only one thing to do, of course!" he said, decidedly, in a voice almost unrecognizably grim. "We mustn't see each other—we mustn't see each other! Now—now I must think how best to manage that!"

Her eyes, heavy with pain, were raised to meet his, and she saw his mouth weaken with a sudden misgiving, and she saw him try to steady it, and look down.

"I can—I shall tell Alix that this new business needs me in town for two or three nights," he said, forcing himself to quiet speech, but with one fine hand propping his forehead as if it ached. "I'll stay at the club."

"And as soon as I can go," Cherry added, feverishly, "I shall join Martin. I suppose Alix would think it was perfectly idiotic for me to go now, just when the whole thing can be closed up so quickly, and Martin, too——" her voice trailed away vaguely. She fell silent, her eyes absent and full of pain. Suddenly they widened, as if some pang had suddenly shaken her into consciousness again. "Well, I'll go back," she began again, bravely, "I'll leave you power—what do they call it?—power to act for me. I can do that, can't I? I'll wire Martin tomorrow—this is Sunday, and I'll go on Wednesday!"

And as she looked off across the green spaces of fog-wreathed hills and valleys, they seemed to turn suddenly glaring and ugly to her, and she felt a great weariness and heartsickness with life.

Peter sprang over the porch rail, and vanished, walking with swift energy up the trail that led toward the mountain. Cherry knew that he would walk himself tired; she longed to walk, too, to plunge on and on through the foggy depths of the hills, striding, stumbling, getting breathless and weary in body, while somehow—somehow!—this confusion and exhaustion cleared away from mind and soul. And yet beyond the horror and shame and regret she felt something was thrilling, exulting, and singing for joy.

For the rest of that day she lived in a sort of daze of emotion. Sometimes she seemed to be living to lives, side by side. In the one was her old happy reliance upon Alix, and even with Peter, the old joking and talking, and gathering for meals, the old hours in the garden or beside the fire, and in the other was the confused and troubled and ecstatic consciousness of the new relationship between Peter and herself, the knowledge that he did not merely admire her, did not merely feel for her an unusual affection, but that he was consumed by a burning adoration of her slightest motion, the turn of her wrist, the smile she gave Kow at breakfast time, the motion she made when she stooped to tie her shoe, or raised her arm to break an apple from the low, dusty branches. The glory of being so loved enveloped her like a great shining garment, and her cheeks glowed softly rosy, and there was a new and liquid softness, a sort of shining glitter, in her blue eyes.

Peter was quiet that evening, and was gone the next morning when the sisters came out to breakfast. His absence was a real relief to Cherry, who felt curiously tired and spent after a wakeful night, and looked pale. Alix, busy with a new venture in duck raising, noticed nothing, and Cherry could lie idly in the hammock all morning, sometimes drowning, and shutting her eyes at some sudden thought, otherwise smiling and dreaming vaguely, and always hearing Peter's voice, in words so charged with new magic that the mere recollection of them almost suffocated her with emotion.

He had left a message to the effect that he would not be at home that night, and at 4 o'clock teelphoned confirming the message. Alix chanced to answer the telephone, and Cherry, who was in her room, heard Peter's name, and stood still, listening with a shock of disappointment. She did not want him to come home, she was hardly conscious of any desire or dread; her only thought was that he was there—now—at the telephone, and in a moment Alix would have hung up the receiver, and she, Cherry, would not have spoken to him, would not have heard his voice!

But at 8 o'clock that evening, when she and Alix were sitting on the porch, when the last ebbing pink of the sunset had faded, and great spiders had ventured forth into the dusk and the dews, there was a sudden hail at the gate, and Cherry knew that it was he! A flood of utter, irrational happiness rose in her heart; she had been racked with hunger for the sound of that voice; she had been restless and unsatisfied, almost feverish with longing and doubt; now peace came again, and content.

He came up to them, his glance resolutely averted from Cherry, explaining that he was lonesome, assuring them that everything went well, and making them laugh with an account of Justin Little's reception of the new turn of affairs. Alix asked a hundred questions; laughed and rejoiced.

"Tomorrow let's go down and see the old house," suggested Alix. "I guess it's in pretty bad shape, for we couldn't rent it.

"At least Pete and I didn't think it was worth while to do all the plastering and painting they wanted! But we'll do it now, Cherry; we'll fix it all up, and then every summer, and perhaps some winters—at least if Mart isn't too far away—you can live there. Did you see Anne, Peter?" she asked, suddenly.

"No, just Justin. He seemed absolutely dumfounded," Peter said. "He looked at the paper, read it, laughed, and said—in that little nervous, smiling way of his—that he felt it to be by no means conclusive——"

"I can hear him!" giggled Alix.

"And I guess both you girls will have to come in in a day or two," Peter continued.

"Cherry's going in to the dentist tomorrow," said Alix.

"Oh, so I am!" Cherry said, in a rather strained voice.

She did not look at Peter, nor did he at her, but they felt each other's thoughts like a spoken word.

"Had you forgotten?" Alix asked. "I may go with you," she added, carelessly.

"Oh, do come!" Cherry said, eagerly. "I—I hate so going alone!"

"I've not a thing in the world to do in town, but I'll browse along those old book stores in Third street," Alix mused.

But in the morning she had changed her mind. She was a trifle late to breakfast, and Cherry and Peter had a chance minute or two alone.

"Cherry," he said then, "I'm going to lunch at the St. Francis. Will you meet me there?"

"No, I can't!" Cherry whispered, unhappily.

"Well, I'll be there," Peter said, in a dull, steady voice. They did not look at each other as Cherry began, with trembling white fingers, to strip the black fine skin from a fig.

A moment later Alix joined them. She had come in from her ducks, and ate but a hasty and indifferent breakfast so that she might the sooner begin to prepare their meal. The ducks had been regaled of late on the minced remains of all the family meals, Alix spending an additional half-hour at the table while she cut fruit-rinds, cold pieces, for her gluttonous pensioners.

"Wait for the 10 o'clock train, Pete, and go in with Cherry!" said Alix, holding a small piece of omelet close to the beak of the importunate Buck. "Go on, be a sport!—Don't you dare," she added, to the dog, who rolled restless eyes at the floor, and allowed a faint, disconsolate whimper to escape him. "I don't think I'll go in," she explained, "for I have about a week's work here to do. Those Italian boys are coming up to thin the lettuce, and Kow is going to put up the peaches, and if you both are gone I can have a regular orgy of housekeeping—really, I'd rather. There, take it—the dear old Buckboy—well, did he get so mad he couldn't see out of his eyes!" she added, affectionately, to Buck, as the omelet disappeared with one snap of his jaws. She folded his two fringed ears into his eyes, and laid her face against his shining head. "Well, this isn't feeding the ducks!" she finished, jumping up. "Come see them, Pietro, they're too darling!"

"They're extremely dirty and messy," Peter complained, following with Cherry, nevertheless, to see her scatter her chopped food carelessly on the surface of the little pond, the struggling bodies of the ducklings, and the bobbing downy heads alike. With quacking and wriggling and dabbling, the meal was eaten, and Alix, scraping the bowls for last fragments, and blinking in a flood of sunlight, laughed exultantly at the exhibition.

Peter left them there, without one word or look for Cherry, who went back to the house with her sister in a most agitated and wretched state of mind. She had the telephone in her hand, to cancel the engagement with her dentist, when Alix suddenly consented to accompany her into town; "and at lunch-time, we'll take a chance on the St. Francis, Sis," Alix said, innocently, "for Peter almost always lunches there!"

Feeling that the question was settled, yet restless and unsatisfied still, Cherry dressed for town; they climbed into the car; Alix's firm hands, in yellow chamois gloves, snatched at the wheel; the die was cast.

Yet at the station another change of plan occurred, for as Alix brought the car to the platform Anne came toward them from the arriving train, a gloved and demure and smiling Anne, anxious, she explained, to talk over this newest development, and "whether it proved to be of any value or not," to try to find out what Uncle Lee had really wanted for them all, and then agree to do that in a friendly manner, out of court. Alix turned from the wheel, to face Cherry in the back seat, and Anne leaned on the door of the tonneau.

"My first feeling, when Frenny told me," said Anne, chatting pleasantly in the shade "was one of such relief! For I hadn't wanted all that money one bit," she confessed, gaily. "I only wanted to do what was fair. Only two or three nights ago I said to Frenny that it really belonged to us all, and last night we talked and talked about it, and the result was that I said that I must see the girls—we three are the only ones concerned, after all, and"—Anne's old half-merry and half-pouting manner was unchanged—"what we decide is what really matters!" she finished.

"Why, there is no question that it's daddy's handwriting," Cherry said, with what, for her, was sharpness, "and it seems to me—it seems to me, Anne——" she added, hesitatingly.

"That you have nerve!" Alix finished, not with any particular venom. "That document throws the case out of court," she said, flatly. "Peter is confident of that!"

Anne's pale face flushed a trifle, and her eyes narrowed.

"Yes, but it doesn't throw the will out of court," she said quickly.

"You proposed to break the will!" Alix reminded her, getting angry.

"I know I did, but it might be valid, after all, and under that will I inherit only a fifth less than you and Cherry!" Anne answered, also with feeling. "That's just what I came over to talk about" she added, still smiling. "Isn't it better," and all friendliness and appeal were in her voice, "isn't it better to do it all in a kindly manner, than to fight about it? Why, we can easily settle it among ourselves," she assured them, sensibly.

Alix shrugged, and looked down at the wheel of her car with a doubtful shake of her head. Cherry, now standing beside it on the platform, was flushed and uncomfortable. There was an awkward pause.

"Board?" shouted a trainman, with a rising inflection. The sisters looked at each other in a panic of haste.

"I can't leave this car here." Alix exclaimed. "I've got to park her and lock her and everything! Run get on board, Cherry, I don't have to go in anyway—you've got a date!"

Cherry's heart leaped, sank coldly, and leaped again, as with a swift nod of parting she hurried for her train. The other two women watched her with forced interest as she climbed on board, and as the train slipped noiselessly out of sight. It curved among the redwoods, and was gone before either spoke again. Then, as her eyes met Anne's friendly, questioning smile, Alix said awkwardly:

"I think the only thing to do is for you and Justin to take this up with Peter, Anne. I mean—I mean that you were the ones who proposed to bring it into court in the first place, and—I don't understand much about it!"

"Alix, don't let's talk in a cold, hard, legal way," Anne pleaded. She had gotten into the back seat, and was leaning on the front seat in an informal sort of way. "Let's just try to get each other's point of view!" she suggested. "The idea is that Uncle Lee wanted all his girls to inherit alike——"

"That idea didn't seem to impress you much a week ago!" Alix said, glad to feel herself getting angry.

"My dear, I was going to divide it to the last penny!" Anne assured her, widening her eyes.

Alix was silent, but the silence shouted her unbelief.

"Truly, I was," Anne went on. "This—this discovery only complicates matters. Why, the last thing in the world that dear Uncle Lee would wish would be to have us drag the family name into a lawsuit——"

"You and Justin began it!" Alix reminded her, goaded into reluctant speech.

"I beg your pardon!" It was a favorite phrase of Anne's. "But it was Peter who said he would fight!"

"Well, because you made the claim!" Alix, hating herself for being betrayed into argument, said hotly. "But I won't talk about it, Anne," she added, firmly, "and as far as coming to any agreement with me is concerned, you might just as well have gone back on the train with Cherry. I hate to talk this way—but we all think you acted very—well, very meanly!" Alix finished rather flatly.

"Perhaps it's just as well to understand each other!" Anne said, with hot cheeks. They exchanged a few more sentences, wasted words and angry ones, and then Anne walked over to a seat in the shade, to wait for another train, and Alix, with her heart beating hard and her color high, drove at mad speed back to the mountain cabin.

"I didn't ask her to lunch—I don't care!" Alix said to herself, in agitation. "She and Justin know they're beaten—they're just trying to patch it up before it's too late—I don't care—I won't have her think she can get away with any such scheme——"

And so muttering and scolding, Alix got back to her dog and her barnyard, and soothed herself with great hosing and cleaning of the duck pond, and much skimming and tasting of Kow's preserves. After all, she had grudged this perfect summer day to the city, and she was always happiest here, in the solitude of the high mountain.

Meanwhile, Cherry, in the sick flutter of spirits that had become familiar to her of late, kept her dentist appointment, and at noon looked at a flushed and lovely vision of herself in the dentist's mirror.

"Doctor has given me red lips!" said Cherry, trembling, and trying to smile to the nurse in attendance.

"I guess the good Lord gave you your looks," Miss Maloney said generously. "You're the youngest-looking—to be married!" she added. "I said to my sister last week, 'That lady has been married nearly six years!' 'What'! she said, 'That little girl—of eighteen——'"

"Why—why don't you come and have lunch with me, at the 'Pheasant'?" Cherry said, suddenly, pushing up the golden hair under her hat.

"I'd love it," Miss Maloney said, appreciatively. "but Doctor has a 1 o'clock appointment after this one, and I shan't get a bite until nearly 3. I've got crackers here——"

Cherry went out into the blazing street; it was one of the hot noontides of the year. At 2 o'clock a wild wind would spring up and send papers and dust flying, but just now the heat was dry and clear and still.

(CONTINUED MONDAY)

THE GUMPS—A Peep Into the Future -:- -:- -:- -:- -:- -:- *By Sidney Smith*

PETEY—Must Be Old Man Neptune Himself -:- -:- -:- -:- -:- -:- *By C. A. Voight*

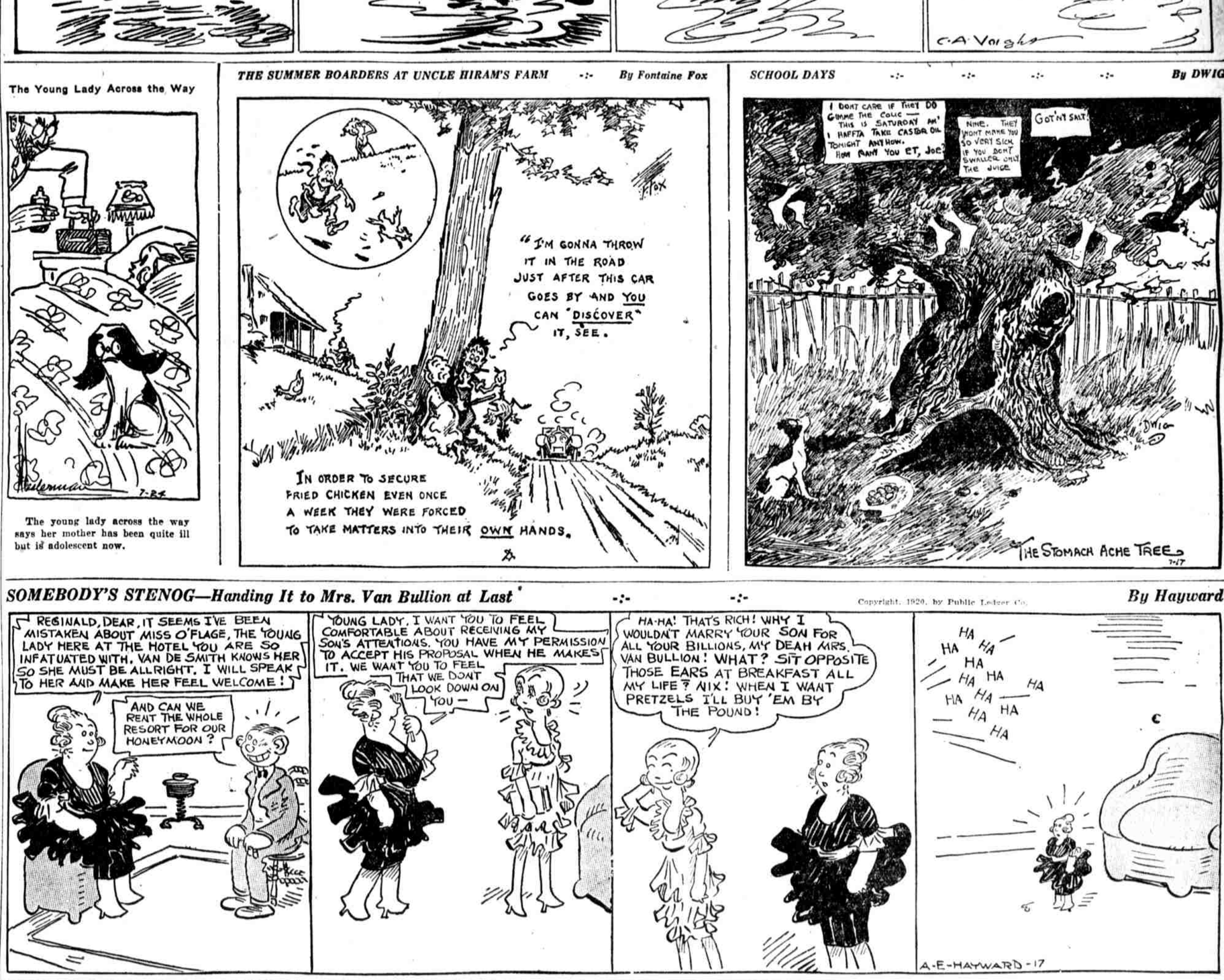
The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says her mother has been quite ill but is adolescent now.

THE SUMMER BOARDERS AT UNCLE HIRAM'S FARM -:- *By Fontaine Fox*

SCHOOL DAYS -:- -:- -:- -:- -:- *By DWIG*

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Handing It to Mrs. Van Bullion at Last -:- -:- Copyright, 1920, by Public Ledger Co. *By Hayward*



"CAP" STUBBS—Cap Showed the Circus a Thing or Two -:- -:- -:- -:- -:- *By Edwina*