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 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. Peter goes to town and asks Alix and Cherry to lunch with him at the St. Francis, but at the station they meet Anne on her way to discuss with them the altered condition the finding of the receipt had brought about. Alix stays behind with Anne, and Cherry proceeds to keep her appointment with the dentist. After the treatment she asks Miss Maloney, the assistant, to lunch with her, but she declines and Cherry went out into the blazing street."

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

She was carrying a parasol and she opened it now and walked slowly toward Geary street. She could go and have a cup of tea and a salad at the Pheasant—she could go to the Pheasant—

But she made not the slightest effort to go there. Beyond saying the words, she had no intention of doing so. She could not even frame in her thoughts the utter blankness of the feeling that swept over her at missing an opportunity to see Peter. She turned and went slowly up past the big shop windows that reflected the burning Plaza, and so came to the cool, great doorway of the St. Francis. Inside was tempered light and much noiseless coming and going, meeting and parting. Chinese boys in plum color and pale blue went about with dustpans gathering fallen cigar and cigarette ashes; a pleasant traffic in magazines and cigarettes and candy and flowers was incessant, back in the dim wide passageways.

Cherry drifted into the big, deep-carpeted waiting room; there were other women there, sunk into the big leather chairs, watching the doors, and glancing at the clock. The high windows gave directly upon Powell street, where cablecars were grating to and fro, and where motor-horns honked, but all noises were filtered here to a sort of monotone, and the effect of the room was of silence. When a man came hastily in the door, one woman rose, there was a significant smile, a murmured greeting, before the two vanished.

In a luxurious chair Cherry waited. Peter certainly would not come in until 12:20, perhaps not then. Long before that time she might decide to go away; meanwhile, this was a pleasant and restful place to be. It was cool in here, and the murmuring and waiting women left in the air the delicate scents of perfumes and of the flowers they wore.

Suddenly, with a spring of her heart against her ribs, she saw Peter's dark head with its touches of iron gray. Groomed and brushed scrupulously as always, with the little limp yet as always dignified and erect, he came to stand before her, and she stood up, and their hands met. Flushed and a little confused, she followed him to an inconspicuous table in a corner of the dining room. Then the dreamlike unreality and beauty of their hours together began again. Cherry felt adjusted, untrammeled, at ease; she felt that all the uncomfortable sensations of the last two hours were absurd, forgotten.

"Did you expect me to meet you?" she smiled. For answer he looked at her thoughtfully a minute before his own face lighted with a bright smile.

"I don't think I thought of your not being there," he confessed. "I was simply moving all morning toward the instant of meeting. I had a mental picture of you, always before my eyes, and when you stood up there, it was just my picture come real!"

"If this is real!" she said, musingly. "Sometimes my thoughts get so—so mixed," she added, "that I feel as if Alix and the valley—and Martin especially—were all a dream, and this the true thing."

"I know how you feel!" Peter answered. He watched her, almost with anxiety, for a moment, then turned his attention to the bill of fare. But Cherry was not hungry, and she paid small attention to the order, or to the food when it came.

Presently they were talking again, in that hunger for self-analysis that is a part of new love. They thrilled at every word, Cherry raising her eyes, shining with eagerness, to his, or Peter watching the little down-dropped face in an agony of adoration. An hour passed, two hours, after a while they were walking still with that strange sense of oneness and of solitude, and still as easily as if they had been floating, to the ferry.

Alix met them in Mill valley with vivid accounts of the day; she had been pondering the brief talk with Anne, and was anxious to have Peter's view of it. Peter was of the opinion that Anne's conduct indicated very clearly that she and Justin realized that their case was lost.

"Then you're fixed for life, Cherry," was Alix's first remark. "Oh, say!" she added, in a burst. "Let's go down to the old house tomorrow, will you? Let's see what it needs, and how much would have to be done to make it fit to live in!"

Cherry flushed, staring steadily at her sister, and Peter, too, was confused, but Alix saw nothing. The next day she carried her point, and took them with her down to the old house. It had stood empty since her marriage, for winter storms had gone hard with it, and the small rent it would have brought them through the summer months was not enough to warrant the expense of putting it in order. It looked neglected and shabby; it was almost buried in the dry overgrowth of the untended garden. There was a drift of colorless leaves on the porch, the steps were deep in the dropped needles of the redwoods, the paths were quite lost to sight under a the wash of winter mud, and the roses and lilacs were grown woody and wild.

Alix was suddenly silent, and Cherry was pale and fighting tears, as they crossed the porch, and fitted the key in the door. Inside the house the air was close and stale, odorous of dry pine walls and of unaired rooms. Peter flung up a window, the girls walked aimlessly about, through the familiar yet shockingly strange chairs and tables that were all coated thickly with dust.

Somehow this dust gave Cherry a desolate sensation, it covered everything alike; the spectacle case and the newspaper that still lay on her father's desk; the cups and glasses that remained, face downward at the sink, from some last meal. Her hands and Alix's were speedily coated with it, too; they felt sad and unnatural here, in the house where they had spent so many years.

"It needs everything!" Alix said, after a first quick tour of inspection, eyeing a great weather streak on the raw plaster of the dining room wall. "It needs air, cleaning, straightening, flowers—— Gosh, how it does need people!"

"I can't bear it!" Cherry said softly, in a sick undertone.

Alix, who was rapidly recovering her equilibrium, sprang upstairs without hearing her, but Cherry did not follow. She went to the open front doorway and stood there, leaning against the sill, and gazing sadly out at the shabby, tangled garden that had sheltered all the safety and joy and innocence of her little girl days.

"Peter," she said, as he came to stand beside her, "I'm so unhappy!"

"I'm sorry!" he said, simply.

"I can't—I can't ever be here!" Cherry half-whispered. "At least I can't until some day—years from now—years from now!—when you and I have forgotten——"

"I never shall forget," he said. And after a while he added, "Shall you?"

"No," she whispered, her eyes burning until the dry and dusty green of the garden swam before her.

"Cherry, will you end it?" he asked her, huskily.

She gave him a startled look.

"End it?" she faltered.

"Will you—do you think you are brave enough to give everything else up for me?" he asked.

"Peter!" said Cherry, hardly above a breath.

"Will you go away with me?" Peter went on, feverishly. "That's the only way, now. That's the only way—now. Will you go away?"

"Go away!" Cherry's face was ashen as she moved her tragic and beautiful eyes to his. "Go away where?"

"Anywhere!" Peter answered, confusedly. "Anywhere!" He did not meet her look, his own went furtively about the garden. Immediately he seemed to regain self-control. "I'm talking like a fool!" he said, quickly. "I don't know what I'm saying half the time; I'm sorry—I'm sorry, Cherry. Don't mind me. Say that you'll forgive me for what I said!"

He had taken her hands, and they were looking distressedly and soberly at each other when an unexpected noise made them step quickly apart. Cherry's heart beat madly with terror, and Peter flushed deeply.

It was Martin Lloyd's aunt, Mrs. North, their old neighbor, who came about the corner of the house, and approached them smilingly. How much had she seen? Cherry asked herself, in a panic. What were they doing?—what were they saying as she appeared?—how much had their attitude betrayed them?

Mrs. North was the same loud-laughing, cheerful woman as of old. She had moved to Portland to be near Martin's mother, some years before, and was delighted with the chance that had brought her back to the valley on the very day that brought the Strickland girls back to the old house.

She kissed Cherry, and was full of queries for Martin.

"Durango? Belle told me something about his going there," she said. "Isn't he the wandering Arab? And ain't you the good-natured little wife to follow him about everywhere? How long you been here, Cherry?"

"I've been with Alix and Peter for—for several weeks," Cherry said, uneasily. Her eyes met Peter's, and he conveyed reassurance to her with a look.

"When you going back, dear?" Mrs. North asked, with so shrewd a glance from Cherry's exquisite rosy face to Peter's that he felt a fresh pang of suspicion. She had seen something——

"Why, I've been rather—rather kept here by the—the lawsuit, haven't I, Peter?" Cherry explained. "But I expect to go as soon as it's all settled! Here's Alix," she said, gladly, as Alix came downstairs with an old kodak album in her hands.

"Look, Cherry—I'd forgotten this!" Alix said, in deep amusement, holding out the book. But she immediately put it aside to greet the old friend.

"I'll bet you three are having real good times!" Mrs. North said, with a curious look from one to the other.

"You know what I hope," Alix told her, "is that Cherry and Martin will always keep the old place open now. They could get a Chinese boy for very little to keep it in order, and then, you see, with all Martin's moving about, she'd always have headquarters here. And I don't believe Cherry'll ever love another place as she does the valley—will you, sis?" Alix ended, eagerly. Cherry met the arm her sister linked around her, halfway, and gave her a troubled smile.

And yet a few moments later, when some quest took Peter suddenly from the group, she watched the shabby corduroy suit, the laced high boots, and the black head touched with gray, disappear in the direction of the kitchen with a tearing pain at her heart, and the words the other women were saying hummed without meaning in her ears.

"When you three girls got started, you all went off together!" Mrs. North commented. "I used to say I thought you girls never would marry—you never seemed to take much interest in the men!"

"I never thought we'd marry!" Alix agreed, pleasantly. "Did you, Kirschwasser?"

"I don't think I ever thought about it—much," Cherry said, rousing herself from a musing mood.

"According to age," Alix pursued, in one of her absurdly argumentative moments, "Anne should have married Peter, Cherry, Justin, and I, Martin. But the truth is, we didn't seem to give the matter sufficient thought!"

"Girls never do; it isn't expected!" Mrs. North said, with her indulgent laugh, as they followed Peter into the empty kitchen which smelled of dry woods and drains. Dust was thick on Hong's range, and one of his old white aprons was flung limply across a chair. Cherry's eyes were thoughtful, filled with a look of pain. It was true; girls didn't think anything about it. It wasn't expected of them. And yet, in these very rooms, her father had urged her to consider; consideration simply wasn't in that feather-brained little head of hers in those days.

Words seemed to have no meaning, or were transmuted into different meanings by Martin Lloyd's voice. Her father had asked her to wait, wait until she was 19! Nineteen had seemed old then. She had felt that at 19 she would have merely delayed the great joy of life for nothing; at 19 she would be only so much older, so much more desperately bent upon this marriage.

And Peter was there then, was coming and going, advising and teasing her—so near, so accessible, loving her even then, had she but known it! The engagement might as easily—and how much more wisely!—have been with Peter as the presents, the gowns, the wedding would have been the same, to her childish egotism; the rest how different! The rest would have been light instead of darkness, joy instead of pain, dignity and development and increasing content instead of all the months of restless criticism and doubt and disillusionment. The very scene here, with Mrs. North and Alix, might easily have been, with Cherry as the wife of Peter, Cherry as her sister's hostess, in the mountain cabin——

At the thought her heart suffocated her. She stood dazedly looking out of the old kitchen window, and her senses swam in a sudden spasm of pain.

And Alix? Well, Alix might have been Mrs. Lloyd. Martin had told her more than once that he had "a crush on Alix, right off the bat!" And Alix had liked him, too—any girl would like any man under the same circumstances of age and environment. Alix would have made Martin a better wife; she would have loved the mining towns, the muddy railroad stations, and the odd women. She would have had her dogs, perhaps a child or two now. Anyway, ran Cherry's thoughts, she would have had the old home now, and that, to Alix would have meant a very triumph of joy. She would have to come to stay with Peter and Cherry while it was put in order; she would have reveled in cows and ducks and dogs here——

"Cherry, child, come and lend us a hand!" Peter said. They were trying to push aside the icebox that blocked the unlocked kitchen door. Cherry went to them at once; the little word "child" danced in her heart all day, and warmed it when she was lying wakeful and restless deep into the summer night.

"You and I must go away!" said Peter. "I can't stand it. I love you. I love you so dearly, Cherry. I can't think of anything else any more. It's like a fever—it's like a sickness. I'm never happy, any more, unless my arms are about you. Will you let me take you somewhere, where we can be happy together?"

Cherry turned her confident, childish face toward him; her lashes glittered, but she smiled.

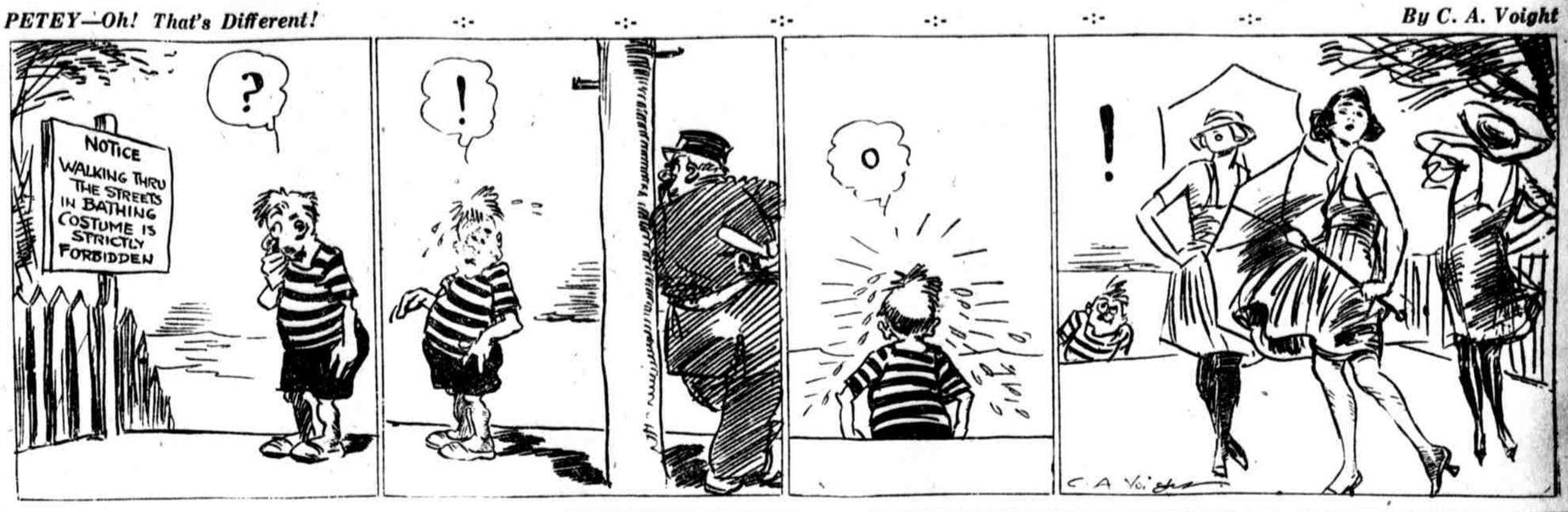
"I love you, Peter!" she said. And the words, sounding softly through the silence of the garden, died away on the warm night air like music.

It was night, the third night of the harvest moon. Through the branches of the oak tree under which they were sitting blots of silver were failing; between them the shadows were inky black. The grass was a sheen of pearly light, the little cabin was like an enchanted dwelling, wreathed with flowers, and steeped in moonshine. Toward the ocean, over the moon-flooded ridge, a great fold of creamy fog was silently pushing, and Cherry had a scarf of creamy lace caught about her shoulders. Her coil of corn-colored hair was loosened; she and Peter had been moving geranium slips all afternoon, and at supper time, when a telephone message from Alix had advised them that she was obliged to stay in town to dine with an exacting old family friend, they had parried only to bathe and change, before sitting down for dinner in the sunset beauty of the porch.

(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

THE GUMPS—Hip! Hip! Hip! Hip! -:- -:- -:- -:- -:- -:- *By Sidney Smith*

PETEY—Oh! That's Different! -:- -:- -:- -:- -:- *By C. A. Voight*



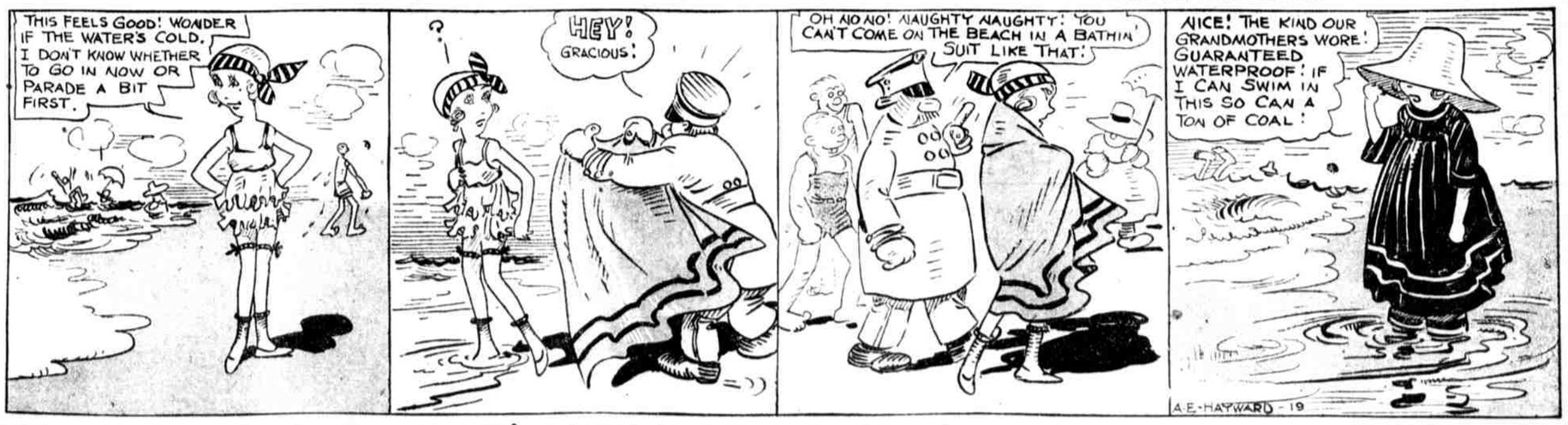
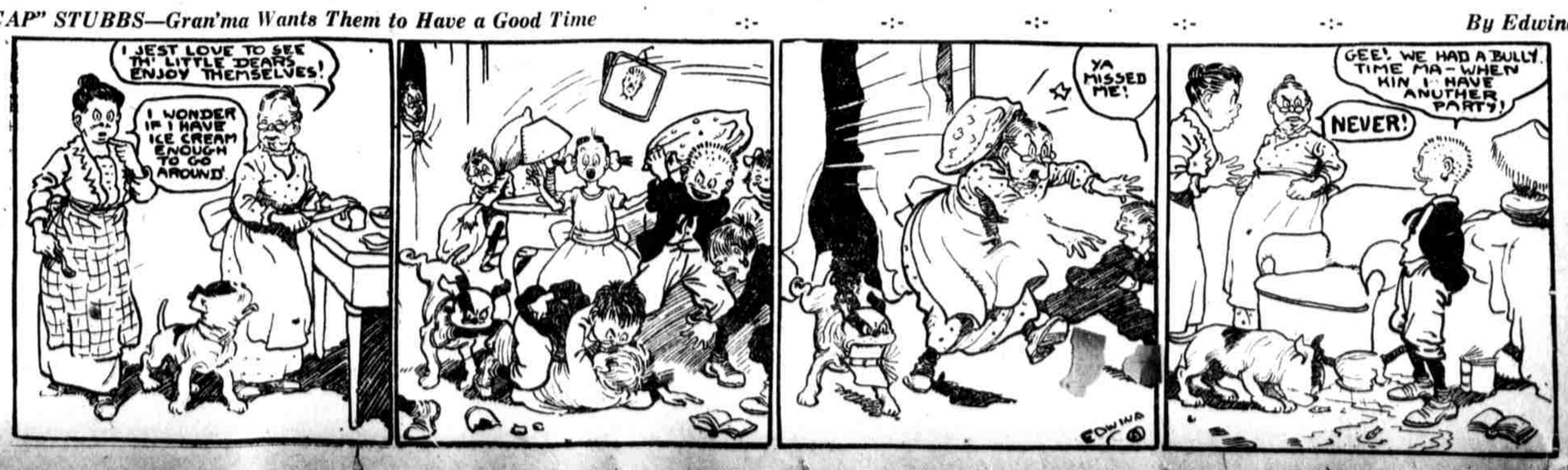
No One Has Ever Yet Got the Best of Any Junk Dealer -:- *By Fontaine Fox*

The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says the male doe has antlers.

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

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Cam's First Day at the Shore -:- -:- -:- Copyright, 1920, by Public Ledger Co. *By Hayward*



"CAP" STUBBS—Gran'ma Wants Them to Have a Good Time -:- -:- -:- -:- -:- *By Edwina*