

By Sidney Smith

SISTERS

By KATHLEEN NORRIS
Author of "Jocelyn's Wife"
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Martin's day was so filled and divided with small pleasures that it was apt to amaze him by passing too quickly. He had special breakfasts, he had his paper; his hair was brushed and his bed remade a dozen times a day. Cherry shared her meals, which were always heavy now, with him; she fitted into the sickroom every few minutes with small messages or gifts. With her bare, bright head, her busy white hands, her voice all motherly amusement and sympathy and sweetness, she had never seemed so much of the world; and she pleased to laugh in the world; and she laughed. The sickroom was kept with exquisite simplicity, with such freshness, bareness and order as made it a place of delight. One day Cherry brought home a great Victory bottle of silvery glass and a dozen drifting goldfish, and Martin never tired of watching them idly while he listened to her reading.

"Cherry," Peter said, on a wet January day, when he came upon her in the dining room, contentedly arranging a fragrant mass of wet violets, "I think Martin's out of the woods now. I believe I'll be moving alone."

"Oh, but we want you always, Peter," she said, innocently regretful.

The ghost of a pained smile flickered across his face.

"Think you," he said, gently. "But I think I will go," he added, mildly. She made no further protest.

"But where?" she asked, sympathetically.

"I don't know. I shall take Buck—start off toward the mountains. I'll write you now and then, of course. I'm going home first."

"Of course," she answered. "But you won't stay in that lonely cabin all alone," she added, almost timidly.

"No, I shall be there long," he assured her, briefly. "Everything's arranged up now. I'm leaving Kow on the course, of course. I'll be back one of these days."

"Just now," Cherry mused, sadly, "perhaps it's best for you to go away! Now that Martin is so much better," she added, in a little burst, "I do feel so sorry for you, Peter. I know how you miss her, but I know you'll miss her, of course," said Cherry, "but I have him."

"I try not to think of her," Peter said, frowning his head.

"When you do," Cherry said, earnestly, "give him more of her attention than had been usual, of late. Here is something to think of, Peter. I know you have so much to be thankful for because she never knew! It was madness, Cherry went on, eagerly, "other mad things—but is clear now. I don't try to explain it, because it's all been washed away by the frightful thing that happened. I'm different now; you're different—I don't know how we ever thought we could forget all that," she went on, after a moment of shamed thought. "I don't let myself think of it any more; I'm so unhappy I was overwrought; there's no explanation for what I felt and said but that! And, Peter, you know that if I was false about Martin, he had been unkind to me, and he had—"

"But men are different, I suppose," she mused. There was a silence during which she looked at him anxiously, but the expression on his face did not alter, and he did not speak.

"And what I think we ought to be thankful for," she said, "is that you would hearbreak if there had been any actual separation between me and Martin, and how much worse that would have been—what we planned, I mean. She was spared, and I was spared—I see it now—what would have ruined both our lives. We were brought to our senses, and the awakening only came a little sooner than it would have come anyway!"

Peter had walked to the window, and was looking out at the shabby winter trees that were dripping rain, and at the beaten garden, when a sudden chrysanthemum had been bowed to the soaked earth. A wet wind swished through the low fanlike branches of the redwoods; the creek was rushing high and hotly.

"Here, in dad's home," Cherry said, coming to stand beside him, "I see how wicked and how mad I was. In another twenty-four hours he would have been too late—you don't know how often I wake up in the night and shiver, thinking that! And as it is, I am in the dear old house; and Martin—well, you see that even Martin's life is going to be far happier than it ever was! Yesterday Mrs. Porter spoke to me about getting him a player-piano when he is stronger. You know how he loves to come in to play cribbage with him—it's amazing how the day fills itself! It's a joy to me," she added, with the radiant look she wears when her husband's comfort was under consideration, "to feel that we need never worry about the money end of things—there's enough for what we need forever!"

"You must never worry about money," he told her. "And if ever you need it—if it is a question of a long trip, or of more operations—if there is any chance—"

"I shall remember that I have a big brother," she said.

The room was scented by the sweet, damp flowers and by the good odor of freshly burning logs, yet to Peter, there was a certain gloom, and he felt that Cherry took up the glass bowl in both hands and went toward the window in the direction of the study, but he stood at the window for a long time, staring dully out at the battered chrysanthemum and the swishing branches and the steadily falling rain.

A few days later, on a day of uncertain sunshine and showers, Peter left Martin. Martin was the sorrier of the two to let him go, for it seemed to Martin that the tragedy had united Cherry and him in a peculiar manner, but he rounded and secured the relationship and had made for them a new life that had no place for Peter.

Cherry had a sort of affectionate pity for the older man, who would have been glad to have him stay longer, to play with him in the old garden and share their talks of Alix and of all the old days. But to Cherry, Peter's going was a relief; it burned one more bridge behind her, it confirmed her in the path she had chosen; it was to her perhaps the coup that marks the accepted student nurse, or the black coat that replaces the postulant's white veil of probation.

He had been in the downstairs bedroom, talking with Martin, for perhaps an hour; he had drawn them a rough sketch of the little addition to the house that Cherry must some day build next to the study, and he and Martin had been discussing the details. Cherry had left them there and was sweeping the wet, dun-colored leaves from the old porch, in a pale shaft of sunshine, and thinking that there must be a wide railing here next summer for Martin's ruffled and Martin's fancied, when a sudden step in the doorway behind her made her look up.

Peter had come out of the house, with Buck curving beside him. He wore his old corduroy clothes and his shabby cap, but there was something in his aspect that made her ask:

"Not going?"

"Yes, I'm going now!" he said. She rested her broom against the thick trunk of the old banked, and rubbed her two hands together and came to the top of the steps to say good-by. And standing there, under the rose tree, she linked her arm about it, looking up through the branches, where the shabby foliage of last year lingered.

"How fast it's gone since that terrific pruning we gave it all that long time ago!" she said.

"Little more than six years ago, Cherry," he reminded her.

"Six years?" she was obviously amazed. "It doesn't seem possible that all this has happened in six years!" she exclaimed. "Those were wonderful old days, with Anne and Alix scolding you, and dad here, looking out for us all," she mused, tenderly. "We'll never be so happy again."

He did not answer. He had her hand now for farewell, and perhaps with the thought of those short six years had come also the thought that this slender figure in the housewife's blue linen, this exquisite little head, so trim and so pure despite all its rebel tendrils of gold, this lovely face, still the face of a

child, with a child's trusting, uplifted eyes, might have been his. The old home might have been their home, and perhaps—who knows, there might have been a new Cherry and a new Peter beginning to look eagerly out at life through the screen of the old porch. Too late now.

The instant of those last years might have bought him all this, but there was no going back. He put his arm about her neck and kissed her forehead, and said: "God bless you, Cherry."

"God bless you, dear!" she answered gravely. She watched the tall figure, with its little limp, and with the dog leaping and circling about it in ecstasy until the redwoods closed around him. Then she took up the broom again, and slowly and thoughtfully crossed the old porch, and shut the door.

Peter, walking with long strides, and with a hand on the absent eye, crossed the village, and climbed once more the old trail that led up to the cabin, whose sooty walls were the simple work of the muddy roads, his hands were thrust deep into the pockets of his shabby old coat, and his cap was pulled low. The rain had stopped, but every branch that hung down over his path, or stretched an arm, to stop him, was charged with water; the creeks were swollen and yellow, and raced along between the great rocks with a steady rushing sound that mingled with the creaking of wet boughs and the wild spring chant of the wind high up in the tops of the redwoods.

Coming out of the forest, on the ridge, where the dim road ran under the scattered oaks, he saw the last of the dying storm raging over the hills below. Great masses of cloud were in travail; when a sun appeared, the world was wrapped in shade and chill; when it burst forth, every wet tree and spear glistened and twinkled in the floor of warmth and light, the dried brown grass sparkled with jewels, and the great roadside rain pools flashed back the azure of the sky. The mountain was partly obscured by rapidly shifting masses of mist; the air was pungent and seemed to hum with a thousand tiny, electric voices.

Already tiny, electric voices showing a timid film of emerald under the brown growth of last year. While Peter climbed the cool earth giving freely under his feet, and grasses tangling in the clings of his walking shoes, the sunlight conquered, the sky was cleared, and the last of the storm drifted and blue and vanished in a bath of dazzling light. Birds began to circle in brief flights; cloud shadows fell clear-cut on the wet, dark flank of the mountain; and in the nature of the marshy spots, where a scummy green growth already was spreading over the crystal pools of the little hillside springs, frogs were exultant.

The roof of the little cabin and the outbuildings smoked up into the pure warm air; the Jersey, placidly awaiting her hour, looked at him with soft, great eyes; and Alix's chickens picked and the stable. Kow was hanging out the blue glass-towels, everything—everything—as he had found it a hundred, a thousand, happy times!

Peter spoke to the Chinese and went into the cabin. It was dusted, orderly, complete; he and Alix might have left it yesterday. Kow had seen him coming, he thought, and had had time to light the fire, which was blazing freely up to the chimney's great throat. He sat down, staring at the flames.

Buck nudged open the swinging door between the pantry and the sitting room, and came in, a question in his bright eyes, his great tail held high, and his floor as he lay down at Peter's side. Presently the dog laid his nose on Peter's knee and whined a little, and then he sighed, and rose restlessly, and went to the closed door of Alix's room, and pawed it, his eager nose to the threshold.

"Not here, old fellow!" Peter said, stroking the silky head under his hand. He had not been in this room since the day of her death. It struck him as strange, almost, at home here, and heartily familiar. The windows were closed, as Alix had never had them closed in winter or summer, rain or sunshine. Her books stood in their old order, her student's Shakespeare, and some of her school's books in "Little Women," and "Uncle Max." In the closet, which exhaled a damp and woody smell, were two or three of the boyish-looking hats he had so often seen her crush carelessly over her dark hair, and the big belted coat that was as plain as his own, and the big boots she wore when she was tramped about the poultry yard, still spattered with pale, dry mud. Her father's worn little Bible lay on the table, and beside it another book, "Duck Raising for the Market," with the marks of muddy and meaty hands still lingering on its cover.

Suddenly, evoked by these silent witnesses to her busy and happy life, the whole woman seemed to stand beside Peter, the tall, eager, vital woman who had been at home here, who had ruled the cabin with a splendid and vital personality. He seemed to feel her nearness, and he felt that the high cheekbones touched with scarlet, the wisp of hair that would fall over her forehead, the dark eyes, and the deep in baking, or preserving, or poultry farming, and that she would brush away with the back of an impatient hand, only to have it slip loose again.

One of her kitchen aprons caught in the current of air from the opened door, blew about on its hook.

He remembered her, on many a wintry day, buttoned into just such a crisp apron, rapidly busy and brisk in her kitchen, stirring and chopping, moving constantly between stove and table, and when she came to sit beside him at the piano, to play a duet with her characteristic dash and ease; and then to jump up in sudden conjunction, with an exclamation: "Oh, my ducks—I'd forgotten them!" Oh, the poor little wretches!

And she would be gone, leaving a streak of wet, fresh air through the open door, and he would perhaps glance from a window to see her roughly coated and hooded, following about her duck yard, delving into barrels of grain, turning on faucets, wielding a stubby old broom. She loved her life, he mused, with a bitter heartache, as he stood here in her empty room. Sometimes he had marveled at the complete and unquestioning joy she had brought to it. Books, puzzles, music, and fires sufficed her in the few hours that she ever spent in her own drawing room. For the rest she had the kitchen and the farmyard, and the world out of doors, the oaks and the grass, the great stretches of dim forest, the muddy trails, the blowing air on the crest of the ridge that made her about and stagger in their wild onslaught. Peter reminded himself that never in their years together had he heard her complain about anything, or seem to feel bored or at a loss.

"We've always thought of Cherry as the child," he thought. "But it was she, Alix, who was the real child. She never grew up. She never entered into the time of moods and self-analysis and jealousies and desires! She would have stepped in the doorway behind her made her look up."

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