SISTERS

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

Author of "Josselyn's Wife"

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HIS heart pressed like a dull pain in his chest. Dully, quietly, he went out to the fire again, and dully and quietly moved through the day. Her books and music might stand as they were, her potted ferns and her scattered small possessions—the sewing basket that she always handled with a boy's awkwardness, and the camera she used so well—should keep their places. But he went to her desk, thinking in this long, solitary evening, to destroy various papers that she might wish destroyed before the cabin was deserted. And here he found her letter.

He found it only after he had somewhat explored the different small drawers and pigeonholes of the desk, drawers and pigeonholes which were, to his surprise, all in astonishing order for Alix. Everything was marked, tied, pocketed; her accounts were balanced, and if she had anywhere left private papers, they were at least nowhere to be found.

Seeing in all this a dread confirmation of his first suspicion of her death, Peter nevertheless experienced a shock when he found her letter. It had been placed in an empty drawer, face up, and was sealed, and addressed simply with his name.

He sat holding it in his hand, and moments passed before he could open it.

So it had been true, then, the fear that he had tried all these weeks to crush? He had been weighing, measuring, remembering, until his very soul was sick with the uncertainty. His mind had been a confused web of memories, of this casual word and that look, of what she had possibly heard, had probably seen, had suspected—known—

Now he would know. He tore open the envelope, and the dozen written lines were before his eyes. The letter was dated, a most unusual thing for Alix to do, and "Saturday, 1 o'clock," was written under the date. It was the day of her death.

He read:

Peter, dear, don't feel too badly if I find a stupid way out. I've been thinking for several days about it. You've done so much for me; and after you, of course, there's no one but Cherry. She could be free now; he couldn't prevent it. When I saw your face a few minutes ago I knew we couldn't fight it out. Remember, this is our secret. And always remember that I want you to be happy because I love you so.

It was unsigned.

Peter sat staring at it awhile without moving, without a stir of a changing expression on his face. Then he folded it up and put it in the pocket of his coat and went out to the backyard, where Kow was feeding the chickens. The wet, dark day was ending brilliantly in a wash of red sunset light that sent long shadows from the young fruit trees and touched every twig with a dull glow.

"Kow," Peter said, after an effort to speak that was unsuccessful. The Chinese boy looked at him solicitously, for Peter's face was ashen and about his mouth were drawn lines. "Kow," he said, "I go now."

"Go now other house?" Kow nodded, glancing down toward the valley.

But Peter jerked his head instead toward the bare ridge.

"No, I go now—not come back," he said, briefly. "Tonight—maybe Bolinas—tomorrow, Inverness. I don't know. By and by the big mountains, Kow—by and by I forget."

Tears glittered in the Chinese boy's eyes, but he smiled with a great air of cheer.

"I keep house," he promised.

The dog came fawning and springing from the stables, and Peter whistled to him.

"Come on, Buck! We're going now."

He opened the farmyard gate where her hand had so often rested, crossed the muddy corral, opened another gate and struck off across the darkening world toward the ridge. The last sunlight lingered on crest and treetop, tangled itself redly in the uppermost branches of a few tall redwoods—and was gone. Twilight—a long twilight that had in it some hint of spring—lay softly over the shadow; the mountain loomed high in the clear shadow.

Gaining the top of the first ridge, he paused and looked back. Lights were beginning to prick forth in the brown houses of the valley, buried in their trees. The busy little mountain train, descending, puffed forth smoke and steam. Far away, the silver ribbons of the canals wound through the marsh, and beyond the bay the Oakland shore lay like a chain of gems in the pale twilight.

Peter looked at the cabin, the little brown house that he had built almost fifteen years ago. He remembered that it was in the beginning a sort of experiment; his mother and he were too much alone in their big city house, and she had suggested, with rare wisdom, that as he did not care for society and as his travels always meant great loneliness for her, he should have a little eyrie of his own, to which he might retreat whenever the fancy touched him.

She liked Del Monte and Tahoe herself, but she had come to Mill Valley now and then in the days of his first wild delight in its freedom and beauty, silk-gowned and white-gloved and very much disliking dust. She had sent him plants, roses and fruit trees, and she had told him one day that he had a neighbor in the valley who was an old friend of hers, a Doctor Strickland, a widower, with children.

He remembered sauntering up the opposite canyon to duly call upon this inventor-physician one day, and his delight upon finding a well-read, music-loving, philosophic, erratic man, who had at once recognized a kindred spirit and who had made the younger man warmly welcome.

Presently, on the first call, an enchanting little girl in a shabby smock had come in, a little girl all dimples, demureness and untouched babyish beauty. She had said that "Anne wath mad wiv her, and that Alix——" she managed to lisp the name, "wath up in the madrone."

A somewhat older child, named Alix, a freckled, leggy little person with enormous front teeth, had, proved the claim by falling out of the madrone, and had received no sympathy for a bump, but a—to him—rather surprising censure. He had yet to realize that nothing ever hurt Alix, but that she always ruined her clothes, and frequently hurt other persons and other things. He had found her a spirited, enthusiastic little person, extremely articulate and quite unselfconscious; and she had entertained him with an excited account of a sex feud that was being pushed with some violence at her school, and had used expressions that rather shocked Peter. A quiet third girl—a niece, he gathered—had joined the group, a girl with braids and clean hands, who elucidated:

"Alix and I don't like our teacher."

"She's a sneak and a skunk," Alix had frankly contributed. Cherry, now quietly established in her father's lap, had smiled with mischievous enjoyment; nobody else, to Peter's surprise, had paid this extraordinary remark the slightest attention. He remembered that he had fancied only the smallest of these children and had been glad when they all went out of the room.

But after that Alix used often to amuse him, and he always felt more at home with her than with the other two. She had only been a gawky and thin fifteen or sixteen when she began to assert herself in his kitchen, dictate to Kow, and waste good butter and eggs on experiments. He had secretly rather admired her quick tongue and her daring, he liked her to ride his horses, and was amazed at the speed with which she grasped the controlling principles of the motorcar. He had seen her move plants, treat sick chickens, sew up the gashed head of a horse with her own fingers, while Cherry, lovely, round-eyed, immaculate in white ruffles, watched her with fear and admiration.

Looking down at the cabin, the years slipped past him like a flying film, and it was the present again, and Alix—Alix was gone.

He roused himself, spoke to the dog, and they went on their way again. Mud squelched beneath Peter's boots in the roadway; the dog sprang lightly from clump to clump of dried grass. But when they left the road and cut straight across the rise of the hillside, the ground was firmer, and the two figures moved swiftly through the dark night. The early stars came out and showed them, silhouetted against the sky above Alix's beloved Tamalpais, the man's erect form with its slight limp, the dog following faithfully, his plumy tail and feathered feet showing a dull luster in the starlight.

Cherry, with her violet eyes and corn-colored hair, Cherry, with her little hands gathered in his and her heart beating against his heart, and Alix, his chum, his companion, his comrade on so many night walks under the stars—he had lost them both. But it was Alix who was closest to his thoughts tonight, Alix, the thought of whom was gradually gripping his heart and soul with a new pain.

Alix was his own; Cherry had never been his own. It was for him to comfort Cherry; it had always been his mission to comfort Cherry since the days of her broken dolls and cut fingers. But Alix was his own comforter; and Alix might have been laughing and stumbling and chattering beside him here in the dark, wet woods, full of a child's happy satisfaction in the moment and confidence in the morrow.

"Alix, my wife," he said, softly, aloud. "I loved Cherry—always. But you were mine—you were mine. We belonged to each other—for better and for worse—and I have let you go."

He went on and on and on. They were plunging downhill now, under the trees. He would see a light after a while and sleep for a few hours and have a hunter's breakfast and be gone again. And he knew that for weeks—for months—perhaps for years—he would wander so through the great mountains, with their snow and their forests, over the seas, in strange cities and stranger solitudes. Always alone, always moving, always remembering. That would be his life. And some day—some day perhaps he would come back to the valley she had loved—

But even now he recoiled in distaste from that hour. To see the familiar faces, to come up to the cabin again, to touch the music and the books——

Worse, to find Cherry a little older, happy and busy in her life of sacrifice, not needing him, not very much wanting the reminder of the old tragic time——

An owl cried in the woods; the mournful sound floated and drifted away into utter silence. Some small animal, meeting the death its brief life had evaded a hundred times, screamed shrilly—and was silent. Great branches, stirred by the night wind, moved high above his head; and when there was utter silence, Peter could hear the steady, soft rush of the ocean, dulled here to the sound of gigantic, quiet breathing.

Suddenly she seemed again to be beside him. He seemed to see the dark, animated face, the slender, tall girl wrapped in his big, rough coat. He seemed to hear her vibrating voice, with that new, tender note in it that he had noticed when she last spoke to him.

"I'll go home ahead of you, Peter, and wait for you there."

Tears suddenly flooded his eyes, and he put his hand over them and pressed it there, standing still, while the wave of tender and poignant and exquisite memories broke over him.

"We'll go on, Buck," he whispered, looking up through the trees at a strip of dark sky spangled with cold stars. "We'll go on. She's—she's waiting for us somewhere, old fellow."

THE END

Mystery Tomorrow!

A story whose author delights President Wilson will begin on this page tomorrow.

J. S. Fletcher, author of "The Middle Temple Murder," will proceed to hold your interest in thrall tomorrow.

"Paradise Mystery" is the name of the thrilling serial which begins tomorrow.

Did we mention the fact that the big thing that is to happen is to happen tomorrow?

Start It Tomorrow

THE GUMPS—They Just Dropped in on Mother

By Sidney Smith

PETEY—He's Not a Searfaring Guy

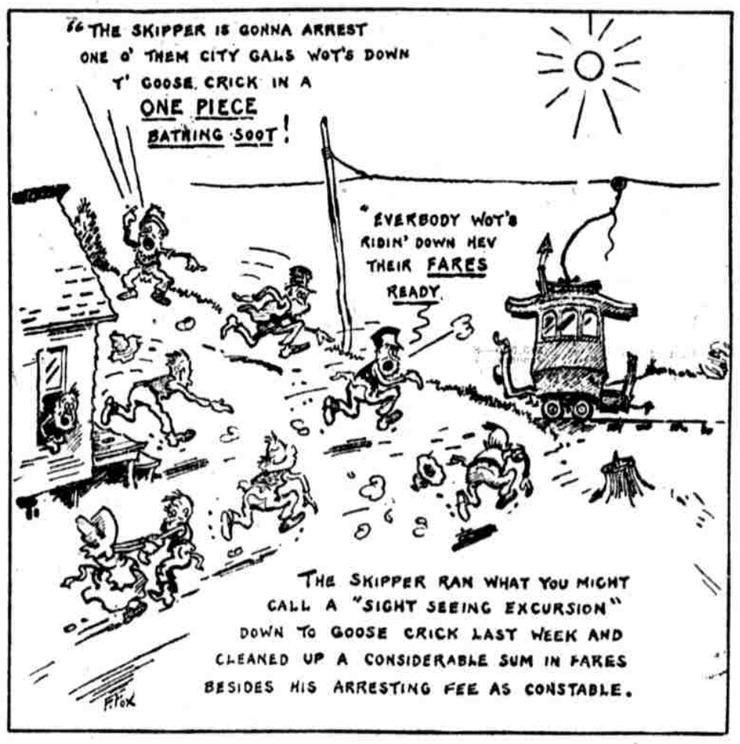
By C. A. Voight

The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says whatever the result of the election, there's no danger of having a minority president, as Senator Harding will be fifty-five on November 2 and Governor Cox is fifty.

THE TOONERVILLE TROLLEY

By Fontaine Fox



SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Sadie Had to Stoop to Conquer

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By Hayward

"CAP" STUBBS—Somebody Must 'Uve Swiped 'Em!

By Edwina

DREAMLAND ADVENTURES

"CHUMS IN THE WOODS"

By DADDY

CHAPTER II

The Tiny Tigers

TODDIE PUPKINS was howling, Billy was yelling and Peggy was shrieking. All three of them were dancing about on the little hillock where they had sat down to rest and all three were making such a fuss and a racket that Lonesome Bear rushing to their aid expected to see them being gobbled alive by some wild beasts.

Lonesome Bear quit worrying about their safety the minute he saw the hillock on which they were dancing and his anxious look was changed to a grin.

"Er-ugh! You have found the good little hunting I told you about; why are you making so much noise?" he growled.

"Ouch! Oh! Woof! Woof!" replied Billy, Peggy and Toddie Pupkins. "We haven't found any good hunting. We are being stung to death. We are being eaten up! Ouch! Oh! Woof! Woof! Woof! Woof!"

Lonesome Bear's grin grew into a chuckle and the chuckle bubbled into a big laugh. "Waw! Waw! Waw! The good little hunting has found you and you don't know it! Waw! Waw! Waw!"

Billy, Peggy and Toddie Pupkins were so busy slapping themselves and dancing on one foot and then on the other they didn't have time to wonder what he meant.

"Waw! Waw! Waw! If you don't like the good hunting, let me at it," growled Lonesome Bear, sweeping them off the hillock with one wave of his big paw. Then as they kept on with their dancing and slapping, Lonsome Bear dug into the hillock with his claws, tearing great holes in its top and sides. These holes showed that the hillock wasn't a real hill at all; it was a city—an ant city, filled to the brim with busy, bustling ants, all hurrying about this way and that. The ant city must have thought an earthquake had struck it when Lonesome Bear's claws tore through the roof, smashing streets, alleys and apartments into one big jumble.

Billy, Peggy and Toddie Pupkins were astonished when they saw the ants. Now they knew what was stinging them. They had been attacked by an army of ant soldiers who were guarding the ant city. And my, how those ant soldiers did bite!

Toddie Pupkins was quickest to find a way to fight the ant soldiers. He plunged into a little brook that ran through the valley and snuggled down under the water. That made the ants quit biting in a hurry, and besides it soothed the hot stings with which they had covered the puppy's hide.

Billy and Peggy were dressed and couldn't jump into the brook, so they began to roll over and over, crushing the ants by the dozens.

While this was going on, Lonesome Bear was scooping the ants up in his big paws, eating them as a boy eats cake crumbs on baking day. He was having a fine meal and enjoying it hugely. He didn't seem to mind in the least the attacks of the ant soldiers who tried in vain to get through his thick hair.

"Yum-yum, this small game tastes fine," Lonesome Beaar smacked his lips happily as he turned to Peggy and Billy. "Hurry up and get your share."

But Peggy and Billy were too busy picking the ants off themselves to answer. Toddie Pupkins with just his head sticking out of the water, growled and snuffed. "If that's the small game you are hunting, you can have my share," he said.

Lonesome Bear looked up in surprise at this. He was having a delicious feast and he couldn't understand why Toddie Pupkins and Peggy and Billy didn't join him. But the ants were scurrying into hiding deep amid the ruins of their wrecked city, so Lonesome Bear went on gobbling as many as he could gather up. When the last batch was gone he turned to the children and the puppy.

"Well if you don't like this kind of hunting, I'll show you another kind," he snuffled contentedly, as he licked his chops. "Come with me." And he led the way farther into the valley.

The other kind of hunting Lonesome Bear showed them will be described tomorrow.