

SISTERS

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

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MARTIN LLOYD.

Synopsis—Doctor Strickland, retired, is living with his family at Mill Valley, just out of San Francisco. Anne, the doctor's niece, is twenty-four. Alix, the doctor's daughter, is twenty-one. Cherry, the other daughter, is eighteen. Their closest friend is Peter Joyce, an odd, lovable sort of recluse. He is secretly in love with beautiful Cherry. Martin Lloyd, a visiting mining engineer, pays court to Cherry and wins her promise to marry him.

(CHAPTER I—Continued.)

"Peter is a dear fellow," the doctor mused. "But Cherry—why, she's barely eighteen! He—I don't suppose he really ever kissed her—" The old man hesitated, began again: "Just fancy," he assured her, "just an old father's fear that she is growing up too fast!"

"Because we all, and you especially, spoil her," Anne reminded him, smiling. "Peter," she added thoughtfully, "has kissed us all, now and then!" She stooped for a dainty good-night kiss, and was gone.

Downstairs, the doctor sat on, thinking, and his face was grave. He was thinking of little Cherry's good-night kiss, half an hour ago. She had rested against his arm, and he had held her there, but what had been the thoughts behind the blue eyes so near his own?

He realized with a great rush of fear that some man had kissed Cherry to-night, had held her against a tobacco-scented coat, and that the girl was a woman, and an awakened woman at that. Cherry—kissed a man! Her father's heart winced away from the thought.

Young Lloyd and Peter had walked home with her. But if Anne was right in her maidenly suspicions of Lloyd's intentions, then it must have been Peter who surprised little Cherry with a sudden embrace.

And as he came to his conclusions a certain relief crept into the old man's heart. Peter was an odd fellow; he was ten years too old for the child. But Peter was a lover of books and gardens and woods and music, after all, and Peter's father and this old man musing by the fire had been "Lee" and "Paul" to each other since boyhood. Peter might give Cherry a kiss as innocently as a brother; in any case, Peter would wait for her, would be all consideration and tenderness when he did win her.

Cherry, he reflected fearfully, was as pretty as her mother had been at eighteen, with the same rounded chin and apricot cheeks, and the same shadowed innocent blue eyes with a film of corn-colored hair blown across them. She had the strange, the indefinable quality that without words, almost without glances, draws youth toward youth, draws admiration and passion, draws life and all its pain. Her father for the first time tonight formulated in his heart the thought that she might be happily married—

Married—nonsense! Why, what did she know of life, of submission and courage and sacrifice? It would be years, many years, before the snowy tresses, and the pale gold head, and the firm, brown little hand would be ready for that!

Not many hours after he went slowly up to bed morning began to creep into the little valley. Alix, at her early bath, heard quail calling, and looked out to see the last of the fog vanishing at eight o'clock, and to get a wet rush of fragrance from the Persian lilac, blooming this year for the first time. At half-past eight she came out into the garden, to find her father somewhat ruefully studying the tumbled ruins of the yellow banked rose. The garden was still wet, but warming fast; she picked a plume of dark and perfumed heliotrope, and began to fasten it in his coat lapel while she kissed him.

"We'll never get that back on the roof, my dear boy," Alix said maternally.

Her father pursed his lips, shook his head dubiously. The rose, a short week ago, had been spreading fanlike branches well toward the ridge-pole, a story and a half above their heads. But the great wind of yesterday that had ended the spring and brought in the summer had dragged it from its place and flung it, a jumble of emerald leaves and sweet clusters of creamy blossoms, across the path and the steps of the porch. Alix tentatively tugged at a loose spray, and stood biting her thumb.

Her attention was distracted by the setter puppy who came clumsily gambling toward her. "Hello, old Bumpy-doodles!" she said with rich affection, kissing the dog's silky head, and burying both hands in his feathered collar. "Hello, old Buck!"

"Aleandra, for heaven's sake stop handling that brute!" said Peter Joyce disgustedly, coming up the path. "I dare say you've not had your breakfast, either. Go wash your hands! Morning, Doctor!"

Father and daughter turned to smile upon him, a tall, lean man, with a young face and a finely groomed head and with touches of premature silver at his temples.

He was a bachelor, just entering his thirties, a fastidious, critical, exacting man by reputation, but showing his best side to the Stricklands. They had a vague idea that he was rich, according to their modest standard, but he apparently had no extravagant tastes, and lived as quietly, or more quietly, than they did. He liked solitude, books, music, dogs, and his fire-side. The old doctor's one social enjoyment was in visiting Peter, and the younger man went to no other place so steadily as he came to the old house under the redwoods.

"Morning, Peter!" said Doctor Strickland now, smiling at him. "Have you had yours?"

"My house," said Mr. Joyce, fastidiously, "is a well-managed place. Say," he added, pursing his lips to whistle, as he looked at the rose tree, "did Tuesday's wind do that?"

"Tuesday's wind and Dad," Alix answered. "Will it go back, Peter?"

"I—I don't know!" he mused, walking slowly about the wreck. "If we had a lever down here, and some fellow on the roof with a rope, maybe."

"Mr. Lloyd is coming over!" Alix announced. Peter nodded absently, but the mention of Martin Lloyd reminded him that they had all dined at his house on the very evening when the mysterious gale had commenced, and with interest he asked:

"Cherry catch cold coming home Tuesday night?"

"No; she squeezed in between Dad and me, and was as warm as toast!" Alix answered casually. "How'd you like Mr. Lloyd?" she added.

"Nice fellow!" Peter answered.

"He's awfully nice," Alix agreed.

"Who is he?" Peter asked curiously.

"Where are his people and all that?"

"His people live in Portland," the girl answered. "He's a mining engineer, and he's waiting now to be called to El Nido; he's to be at a mine there. He's lots of fun—when you know him, really!"

"Talking of the new Prince Charming, of course," Anne said, joining them, and linking an arm in her uncle's and in Alix's arm. "Don't bring that puppy in, Alix, please! Breakfast, Uncle Lee. Come and have another cup of coffee, Peter!"

"Prince Charming, eh?" Peter echoed thoughtfully, as they all turned toward a delicious drift of the odor of bacon and coffee, and crossed the porch to the dining room. "I was going down for the mail, but now I'll have to stay and see this rose matter through! Thanks, Anne, but I'll watch you. Where's Cherry?" he added, glancing about.

Cherry answered the question herself by trailing in in a Japanese wrapper, and beginning to drink her coffee with bare, slender arms resting on the table. Nobody protested, the adored youngest was usually given her way.

"I heard you all laughing under the window and it—woke-me-up!" Cherry said dreamily.

"It seems to me," Anne, who had been eyeing her uneasily, said lightly, "that some one I know is getting pretty old to come downstairs in that rig when strangers are here!"

"It seems to me this is just as decent as lots of things—bathing suits, for instance!" Cherry returned in-
stantly, gathering the robe about her, and giving Anne a resentful glance over her blue cup.

"I have a rope somewhere—" the doctor ruminated. "Where did I put that long rope—what did I have it for, in the first place?"

"You had it to guy the apple tree," Alix reminded him. "The tree that died after all—"

"Ah, yes!" said her father, his attentive face brightening. "Ah, yes! Now where is that rope?" But even as Alix observed that she had seen it somewhere, and advanced a tentative guess as to the cellar, his eyes fell upon Cherry, and went from Cherry's

absorbed face—for she was dreaming over her breakfast—to Peter, and he wondered if Peter had kissed her.

"Come on, let's get at it!" Alix exclaimed with relish. "Come on, Sweetums," she added, to the dog. She caught his forepaws, and he whipped his beautiful tail between his legs, and looked about with agonized eyes while she dragged him through a clumsy dance. "He's the darlingest pup we ever had!" Alix stated to Cherry, who was departing for the upper regions and a complete costume.

"Bring your cigarette out here, Peter," the old doctor said, crossing the garden to look in the abandoned greenhouse for his rope. "It's not here," he stated. Then he began again, "You brought Cherry home last night?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact, I didn't," Peter answered, in his quick, precise tones. "I came with Lloyd and Cherry as far as the bridge, then I cut up the hill. Why?" he added sharply.

"What's up?"

"Nothing's up," Doctor Strickland said slowly. "But I think Lloyd admires—or is beginning to admire—her," he said.

"Who—Cherry?" Peter exclaimed, with distaste and incredulity in his tone.

"You don't think so?" the doctor, looking at him wistfully, asked eagerly.

"Why, certainly not!" Peter said, his face very red. "She's much younger than Anne and Alix—"

"It doesn't always go by that," the doctor suggested.

"No, I know it doesn't," Peter answered in his quick, annoyed fashion.

"I should be sorry," Cherry's father admitted.

"Sorry!" Peter echoed impatiently.

"But it's quite out of the question, of course! It's quite out of the question. She—she wouldn't consider him for an instant," he suddenly decided in great satisfaction. "You mustn't forget that she has something to do with it! Very fastidious, Cherry. She's not like other girls!"

"That's true—that's true!" Doctor Strickland agreed, in great relief. They turned back toward the garden, in time to meet Alix and several dogs streaming across the clearing. Over the girl's shoulder was coiled the great rope; she leaped various logs and small bushes as she came, and the dogs barked madly and leaped with her. Breathless, she stumbled and fell into her father's arms, and both men had the same thoughts, one that made them smile upon her tomboyishness indulgently: "If this is twenty-one—eighteen is three long years younger and less responsible!"

CHAPTER II.

Immediately they gathered by the fallen rose vine, all talking and disputing at once. A light rope was tied; an experimental tug broke it like a string, jangling Alix violently in a sitting position, and precipitating her father into a loamy bed. Anne, who was bargaining with a Chinese fruit vendor frankly interested in their undertaking, had called that she would help them in a second, when behind Alix, who was still sitting on the ground, another voice offered help.

A young man had come into the doctor's garden; work was stopped for a few minutes while they welcomed Martin Lloyd.

He was tall and fair, broad, but with not an ounce of extra weight, with brown eyes always laughing, and a ready friendliness always in evidence. Anne's heart gave a throb of approval as she studied him; Alix flushed furiously, scowled a certain boyish approval; Cherry had not come down.

"Can you help us?" The doctor echoed his question doubtfully. "I don't know that it can be done!" he admitted.

"What's that you're eating—an apricot?" Martin said to Anne, in his laughing way. "I was going to say that if it was a peach, you are a cannibal!"

"Oh, help!" Alix ejaculated, with a look of elaborate scorn.

"No, but where were you last night?" Martin added in a lower tone when he and Anne could speak unnoticed. The happy color flooded her face.

"I have to take care of my family sometimes!" she reminded him demurely. "Wasn't Cherry a good substitute?"

"Cherry's adorable!" he agreed. "Isn't she sweet?" Anne asked enthusiastically. "She's only a little girl, really, but she's a little girl who is going to have a lot of attention some day!" she added, in her most matronly manner.

Martin did not answer, but turning briskly toward the doctor, he devoted himself to the business in hand.

Years afterward Alix remembered her so, as Martin Lloyd helped her to spring free of the branches, and she stood laughing at their surprise and still clinging to his hand. "The day we raised the rose tree" had a place of its own in Alix's memory, as a time of carefree fun and content, a time of perfume and sunshine—perhaps the last time of its kind that any one of them was to know.

Cherry looked at Martin daringly as she joined the laborers; her whole being was thrilling to the excitement of his glance; she was hardly conscious of what she was doing or saying. Martin came close to her, in the general confusion.

"How's my little sweetheart this morning?"

Cherry looked up, her throat contracted, she looked down again, unable to speak. She had been waiting for his first word; now that it had come it seemed so far richer and sweeter than her wildest dream.

"How can I see you a minute?" Martin murmured, snapping his big knife shut.

"I have to walk down for the mail—" stammered Cherry, conscious only of Martin and herself.

Both Peter and her father were watching her with an uneasiness and

den path, but crept from the study window into a veritable tunnel of green bloom, and came crawling down it, as sweet and fragrant, as lovely and as fresh, as the roses themselves. Her bright head was hidden by a blue sunbonnet, assumed, she explained later, because the thorns tangled her hair; but as, laughing and smothered with roses, she crept into view, the sunbonnet slipped back, and the lovely, flushed little face, with tendrils of gold straying across the white forehead, and mischief gleaming in the blue, blue eyes was framed only in loosened pale gold hair.

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