

Sisters

KATHLEEN NORRIS

(Continued from last week.)

"Let me get this straight," he said slowly. "The arm is O. K. and the leg, but the back—"

Cherry, kneeling beside him, her hands on his, drew a winning breath. Martin reassured her with an indulgent nod.

"I've known it right along!" he told her. He looked at the doctors. "It's no go."

"I don't see why I should deceive you, my dear boy," said the younger doctor, who had grown very fond of him. "You can still beat me at bridge, you know, you can read and write, and come to the table, after awhile; you have your devoted wife to keep finding new things for you to do! Next summer now—a chair out in the garden—"

Cherry was fearfully watching her husband's face.

"We'll all do what we can to make it easy, Mart!" she whispered, in tears.

He looked at her with a whimsical smile.

"Mind very much taking care of a helpless man all your life?" he asked, with a hint of his old confident manner.

"Oh, Mart, I mind only for you!" she said. Peter, standing behind the doctors, slipped from the room unnoticed.

Late that evening, when Martin was asleep, Cherry came noiselessly from



"O, Mart! I Mind Only for You!" She Said.

the sick-room, to find Peter alone in the dimly lighted sitting room. He glanced at her, feeling rather than hearing her presence, and called her. "Come over here, will you, Cherry? I want to speak to you."

She came, with an inquiring and yet not wholly unconscious look, to the fireside, and he stood up to greet her. "Tired?" he asked, in an unnatural voice.

"I—I was just going to bed," she answered, hesitatingly. But she sat down, nevertheless; sank comfortably into the chair opposite his own, and stretched her little feet, crossed at the ankle, before her, as if she were indeed tired.

He knelt down beside her chair, and gathered her cold hands into one of his own. "What are you and I going to do?" he asked.

She looked at him in terror.

"But all that is changed!" she said, quickly, fearfully.

"Why is it changed?" he countered. "I love you—I have always loved you since the days long ago, in this very house! I can't stop it now. And you love me, Cherry?"

"Yes, I shall always love you," she answered, eagerly, after a pause in which she looked at him with troubled eyes. "But—but—you must see that we cannot—cannot think of all that now," she added with difficulty. "I couldn't fall Martin now, when he needs me so!"

"He needs you now," Peter conceded, "and I don't ask you to do anything that must distress him now. But in a few months, when his mother comes down for a visit you must tell them honestly that you care for me," he said.

Cherry was trembling violently.

"But how could I?" she protested. "Tell him that I am going away, deserting him when he most needs me?"

Peter had grown very pale.

"But—" he stammered, his face close to hers—"but you cannot mean that this is the end?"

She moved her lips as if she was about to speak; looked at him blankly. Then suddenly tears came, and she wrenched her hands free from his, and laid her arms about his neck. Her wet cheek was pressed to his own, and he put his arms tightly about the little shaken figure.

"Peter!" she whispered, desolately. And after a time, when the violence of her sobs was lessened, and she was

breathing more quietly, she said again: "Peter! We can never dream that dream again."

"We shall dream it again," he corrected her.

Cherry did not answer for a long while. Then she gently disengaged herself from his arms, and sat erect. Her tears were ended now, and her voice firmer and surer.

"No; never again!" she told him. "I've been thinking about it, all these days, and I've come to see what is right, as I never did before. All I ever knew about us, Peter—and that's been the one thing for which I could be thankful in all this time! But Allx had only one hope for me, and that was that somehow Martin and I would come to be—well, to be nearer to each other, and that somehow he and I would make a success of our marriage, would spare—well, let's say the family name, from all the disgrace and publicity of a divorce—"

"But, Cherry, my child—" Peter expostulated. "You cannot sacrifice all your life to the fancy that no one else can take your place with him—"

"That," she said, steadily, "is just what I must do!"

Peter looked at her for a few seconds without speaking.

"You don't love him," he said.

"No," she admitted, gravely. "I don't love him—not in the way you mean."

"He is nothing to you," Peter argued.

"As a matter of fact, it never was what a marriage should be. It was always—always—a mistake."

"Yes," she conceded, sadly, "it was always a mistake!"

"Then there is nothing to bind you to him!" Peter added.

"No—and there isn't Allx to distress now!" she agreed, thoughtfully. "And yet, she went on, suddenly, 'I do this more for Allx than for any one!'"

Peter looked at her in silence, looked back at the last flicker of the fire.

"You will change your mind after awhile!" he said.

Cherry rose from the chair, and stood with dropped head and troubled eyes, looking down at the flame.

"No, I shall never change my mind!" she said, in a low tone that was still strangely firm and final for her. "For five or ten or twenty or thirty years I shall always be where Martin is, caring for him, amusing him, making a life for him." And Cherry raised her glorious blue eyes in which there was a pure and an uplifted look that Peter had never seen there before. "It is what Dad and Allx would have wished," she finished, solemnly, "and I do it for them!"

Peter did not answer; and after a moment she went quietly and quickly from the room, with the new air of quiet responsibility that she had worn ever since the accident.

CHAPTER XX.

Peter saw, with a sort of stupefaction, that life was satisfying her now as life had never satisfied restless, exacting little Cherry before.

She spent much of her free time by her husband's side, amusing him as skillfully as a mother. He was getting so popular that she had to be ready for callers every day. Would he like her to keep George Sewall for dinner, when they could play dominoes again? Would he like the table with the picture puzzle? He would like just to talk? Very well; they would talk.

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 feet remoted a dozen times a day. Cherry shared her mail, which was always heavy now, with him; she flitted into the sick-room 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 a wife. She had the pleasant laugh in the world, and she often laughed. The sick-room 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 Viking bowl of silver 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 along!"

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

The ghost of a pained smile flitted across his face.

"Thank 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 big mountains. I'll write you now and then, of course!"

"I'm going home, first!"

"Just now," Cherry mused, sadly, "perhaps it is best—for you—to get 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 feel. I shall miss her always, of course," said Cherry, "but I have him."

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

"When you do," Cherry said, earnestly, giving him more of her attention than had been usual, of late, "Here is something to think, Peter. It's this: we have so much to be thankful for, because she never—knew! It was madness," Cherry went on, eagerly, "sheer madness—that 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—"

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 resumed, "is that Allx would rather—she would rather have it this way. She told me that she would be heart-broken 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 that, and we were 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, where the drenched chrysanthemums had been bowed to the soaked earth.

"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 it 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 here in the dear old house; and Martin—well, you can see that even Martin's life is going to be far happier than it ever was! It's such a joy to me," she added, with the radiant look she often wore 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 lazily burning logs; yet to Peter there was chill and desolation in the air. Cherry took up the glass bowl in both careful hands, and went away in the direction of the study, but he stood at the window for a long time staring dully out at the battered chrysanthemums and the swishing branches, and the steadily falling rain.

A few days later, on a day of uncertain sunshine and showers, Peter left them. 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 spirit like the cap that marks the accepted student nurse, or like 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 meant some day to build next to the study, and he and Martin had been discussing the details. Cherry was sweeping the wet, dun-colored leaves from the doorway when a sudden step in the doorway behind her made her look up.

Peter had come out of the house, with Buck 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 bankia, and



"Yes, I'm Going Now!" He said.

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 grown since that terrific pruning we gave it all that long time ago!" she said.

"Little more than six years ago."

Cherry!" he reminded her.

"Only six years—" She was obviously amazed. "It doesn't seem possible that all this has happened in six years!" she exclaimed.

He did not answer. He had her hand now for farewells, and perhaps, with the thought of those short six years had come also the thought that this slender figure in the housewife blue linen, this exquisite little head, so trim and demure 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 rose vine!

Too late now. A single instant of those lost years might have brought him all this, but there was no going back. He put his arm about her, 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 furrowed brow and absent eyes, crossed the village, and climbed once more the old trail that led up to the cabin.

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

Buck pushed open the swinging door between the pantry and the sitting room, and came in, a question in his bright eyes, his great plumed tail beating the floor as he lay down at Peter's side. Presently the dog laid his nose on Peter's knee and poured forth a faint sound that was not quite a whine, not quite a sigh, and rose restlessly, and went to the closed door of Allx'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 strangely changed, strangely and heartbreakingly familiar. The windows were closed, as Allx had never had them closed, winter or summer, rain or sunshine. Her books stood in their old order, her student's Shakespeare, and some of her girlhood's books, "Little Women," and "Uncle Max." In the closet, which exhaled a damp and woody smell, were one or two of the boyish-looking hats he had so often seen her crush carelessly on her dark hair, and the big belted coat that was as plain as his own; and the big boots she wore when she 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 near him again, to see the interested eyes, the high cheekbones touched with scarlet, the wisp of hair that would fall across her face sometimes when she was 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, radiantly busy and brisk in her kitchen, stirring and chopping, moving constantly between stove and table. With strong hands still showing traces of flour she would come to sit beside him at the piano, to play a duet with her characteristic dash and finish, only to jump up in sudden compunction, 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 warm house from the open door, and he would perhaps glance from a window to see her, roughly coated and booted, ploughing 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. 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, Allx, 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 played and picknicked all her life."

(Continued next week.)

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