Sisters

by KATHLEEN NORRIS

(Contined from last week.)

"Thank you, Fred," Peter answered after a moment. "Thank you. Will you help me take—my—wife—home?"

"You wish it that way?" the other man said anxiously.

"Please," Peter answered simply. And instantly there was moving and clearing in the crowd, a murmuring of whispered directions.

After a while they were at the mountain cabin, and Kow, with tears running down his yellow face, was helping them. Then they went into the old living room, and Alix was lying there, splendid, sweet, untouched, with her brave, brown forehead shadowed softly by her brown hair, and her lashes resting upon her cheeks, and her fingers clasped about the stems of three great, creamy roses.

There were other flowers all about, and there were women in the room. White draperies fell with sweeping lines from the merciful veiling of the crushed figure, and Alix might have been only asleep, and dreaming some heroic dream that lent that secret pride and joy to her mouth and filled those closed eyes with a triumph they had never known in life.

Peter stood and looked down at her, and the men and women drew back. But although the muscles of his mouth twitched, he did not weep. He looked long at her, while an utter silence filled the room and while twilight deepened into dark over the cabin and over the mountain above it.

"So that was your way out, Alix?" Peter said in the depth of his soul. "That was your solution for us all? You would go out of life, away from the sunshine and the trees and the hills that you loved, so that Cherry and I should be saved? I was blind not to see it. I have been blind from the very beginning."

Silence. The room was filling with shadows. On the mantel was a deep bowl of roses that he remembered watching her cut—was it yesterday or centuries ago?

"I was wrong," he said. "But I think you would be sorry to have me face—what I am facing now. You were always so forgiving, Alix; you would be the first to be sorry."

He put his hand over the tigerish pain that was beginning to reach his heart. His throat felt thick and choked, and still he did not cry.

"An hour ago," he said, "if it had been that the least thought of what this meant to you might have reached me an hour ago, it would not have been too late. Alix, one look into your eyes an hour ago might have saved us all! Fred," Peter said aloud, with a bitter groan, clinching tight the hands of the old friend who had crept in to stand beside him, "Fred, she was here, in all her health and joy and strength only today. And now—"

"I know—old man—" the other man muttered. He looked anxiously at Peter's terrible face. In the silence the dog whimpered faintly. But when Peter, after an endless five minutes, turned away, it was to speak to his friend in an almost normal voice.

"I must go down and see Cherry, Fred. She took her husband to the old house; they were living there."

"Helen will stay here," the old man assured him quickly. "I'll drive you down and come back here. We thought perhaps a few of us could come here tomorrow afternoon, Peter," he added timidly, with his reddened eyes filling again, "and talk of her a little, and pray for her a little, and then take her to—to rest beside the old doctor—"

"I hadn't thought about that," Peter answered, still with the air of finding it hard to link words to thought. "But that is the way she would like it. Thank you—and thank Helen for me—"

"Oh, Peter, to do anything—" the woman faltered. "She came to us, you know, when the baby was so ill—day after day—my own sister couldn't have been more to us!"

"Did she?" Peter asked, staring at the speaker steadily. "That was like her."

He went out of the house and got into a waiting car, and they drove down the mountain. Alix had driven him over this road day before yesterday—yesterday—no, it was today, he remembered.

"Thank God I don't feel it yet as I shall feel it, Thompson!" he said quietly. The man who was driving gave him an anxious glance.

"You must take each day as it comes," he answered simply.

Peter nodded, folded his arms across his chest, and stared into the early dark. There was no other way to go than past the very spot where the horror had occurred, but Thompson told his wife later that poor Joyce had not seemed to know it when they passed it. Nor did he give any evidence of emotion when they reached the old Strickland house and entered the old hallway where Cherry had come flying in, a few short years ago, with Martin's first kiss upon her lips.

Two doctors, summoned from San Francisco, were here, and two nurses. Martin had been laid upon a hastily moved bed in the old study, to be spared the narrow stairs. The room was metamorphosed, the whole house moved about it as about a pivot, and there was no thought but for the man who lay, sometimes moaning and sometimes ominously still, waiting for death.

"He cannot live!" whispered Cherry, ghastly of face, and with the utter chaos of her soul and brain expressed by her tumbled frock and the carelessly pushed back and knotted masses of her hair. "His arm is broken, Peter, and his leg crushed—they don't dare touch him! And the surgeon says the spine, too—and you see his head! Oh, God! It is so terrible," she said in agony, through shut teeth, knotting her hands together; "it is too terrible that he is breathing now, that life is there now, and that they cannot hold it!"

She led Peter into the sitting room, where the doctors were waiting.

"Is there any hope?" he asked, when Cherry had gone away on one of the restless, unnecessary journeys with which she was filling the endless hours. One man shook his head, and in the silence they heard Martin groan.

"It is possible he may weather it, of course," the older man said doubtfully. "He is coming out of that first stupor, and we may be able to tell better in a short time. The fact that he is living at all indicates a tremendous vitality."

Cherry came to the door to say "Doctor!" on a burst of tears. The physicians departed at once to the study, and Peter was immediately summoned to assist them in handling the big frame of the patient. Martin was thoroughly conscious now; his face chalk white. Cherry, agonized, knelt beside the bed, her frightened eyes moving from face to face.

There was a brief consultation, then Cherry and Peter were banished.

Peter watched her with a confused sense that the whole frightful day had been a dream. Once she looked up and met his eyes.

"He can't live," she said in a whisper.

"Perhaps not," Peter answered very low. Cherry returned to her somber musing.

"We didn't see this end to it, did we?" she said with a pitiful smile after a long while.

"Oh, no—no!" Peter said, shutting his eyes and with a faint, negative movement of his head.

"Poor Cherry—if I could spare you all this!" knotting his fingers and feeling for the first time the prick of bitter tears against his eyelids.

"Oh, there is nothing you can do," she said faintly and wearily after a while. And she whispered, as if to herself, "Nothing—nothing—nothing!"

CHAPTER XIX.

It was all strange and bewildering, thought Peter. It was not like anything he had ever connected in his thoughts with Alix, yet it was all for her.

The day was warm and still, and the little church was packed with flowers and packed with people. Women were crying, and men were crying, too, rather to his dazed surprise. The organ was straining through the warm, fragrant air, and the old clergyman, whose venerable, leonine head, in its crown of snowy hair, Peter could see clearly, spoke in a voice that was thickened with tears. Strangers, or almost strangers, had been touching Peter's hand respectfully, timidly, had been praising Alix. She had been "good" to this one, "good" to that one, they told him; she had always been so "interested" and so "happy."

Her coffin was buried in flowers, many of them the plain flowers she loved, the gillies and stock and verbena, and even the sweet, sober wallflowers that were somehow like herself. But it was the roses that scented the whole world for Alix today, and fresh creamy buds had been placed between the waxen fingers. And still that radiant look of triumphant love lingered on her quiet face, and still the faint ghost of a smile touched the once kindly and merry mouth.

They said good-by to her at the church, the villagers and old friends who had loved her, and Peter and two or three men alone followed her down along the winding road that led to the old cemetery. Cherry was hanging over the bedside of her husband, who still miraculously lingered through hours of pain, but as Peter, responsive to a touch on his arm, crossed the church porch to blindly enter the waiting motor car, he saw, erect and grave, on the front seat, in his decent holiday black, and with his felt hat held in his hands, Kow, claiming his right to stand beside the grave of the mistress he had loved and served so faithfully. The sight of him, in his clumsy black, instead of the usual crisp white, and with a sad and tear-stained face shook Peter strangely, but he did not show a sign of pain.

The twisted low branches of oak trees threw shadows on the grave when they finally reached it, and sheep were cropping the watered grass of the graveyard. The soft autumn sky, the drift of snowy clouds across the blue, the clear shadows on brown grass under the oaks, all these were familiar. But Peter still looked dazedly at his black cuff and at the turned earth next to the doctor's headstone, telling himself again that this was for Alix. How often he had seen her sitting there, with her bright face sobered and sweet, as she talked lovingly, eagerly of her father! They had often come here, Peter the more willingly because she was so sensible and happy about it; she would pack lunch, button herself into one of the crisp blue ginghams, chatter on the road in her usual fashion. And if, for a few moments, the train of memory fired by the sight of the old doctor's grave became too poignant and tears came, she always scolded herself with that mixture of childish and maternal impatience that was so characteristic of her, and that Peter had seen her use to this very father years ago!

He remembered her, a tall, awkward girl, with a volume of Dickens slipping from her lap as she sat on a hassock by the fire, teasing her father, scolding and reproaching him. Blazing red on her high cheekbones, untidy black hair, quick tongue and ready laugh; that was the Alix of the old days, when he had criticized and patronized her, and told her that she should be more like Anne and little Cherry!

He remembered being delegated, one day, to take her into town to the dentist, and that upon discovering that the dentist was not in his office, he had taken her to the circus instead. She had been about thirteen, and had eaten too many peanuts, he thought, and had lost a petticoat in full sight of the grandstand. But how grateful and happy she had been!

"Dear little old blue petticoat!" he said. "Dear little old madcap Alix—!"

There was silence, the silence of inanition, about him. He came to himself with a start. He was up on the hills, in the cemetery—this was Alix's grave, newly covered with wilting masses of flowers, and he was keeping everybody waiting. He murmured an apology; the waiting men were all kindness and sympathy.

He got back into the motor car; the man who drove them quickly toward the valley talked easily and steadily to Peter, attempting to interest him in the affairs of some water company in San Francisco. When they got to the valley a city train was arriving, and Peter saw people looking at him furtively and sorrowfully. He remembered the many, many times Alix had waited for him at the trains; he glanced toward the big madrone under which she always parked her car. She was usually deep in a book as he crossed from the train, but she would fling it into the back seat and make room for him beside her. The dog would bound into the tonneau, Alix would hand her husband his mail, the car would start with a great plunge toward the mountain—toward the cool garden high up on the ridge—

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Cherry looked small and pathetic in her fresh black, and her face was marked by secret incessant weeping. But the nurses and doctors could not say enough for her self-control; she was always composed, always quietly helpful and calm when they saw her, and she was always busy. From early morning, when she slipped into the sick-room, to stand looking at the unconscious Martin with a troubled, intent expression that the nurses came to know well, until night, she moved untiringly about the quiet, shaded house. She supervised the Chinese boy, saw that the nurses had their hours for rest and exercise, telephoned, dusted and arranged the rooms, saw callers sweetly and patiently, filled vases with flowers.

Every day she had several vigils in the sick-room, and every day at least one long talk with the doctors. Every afternoon and evening had its callers; she and Peter were rarely alone.

Martin was utterly unconscious of the life that flowed on about him; sometimes he seemed to recognize Cherry, and would stare with painful intentness into her face, but after a few seconds his gaze would wander to the strange nurses, and the room that he had never known, and with a puzzled sigh he would close his eyes again, and drift back into his own strange world of pain, fever and unconsciousness.

Almost every day there was the sudden summons and panic in the old house, Peter going toward the sick-room with a thick beating at his heart, Cherry entering, white-faced and with terrified eyes, doctors and nurses gathering noiselessly near for the last scene in the drama of Martin's suffering. But the release did not come.

There would be murmuring among the doctors and nurses; the pulse was gaining, not losing, the apparently fatal, final symptoms were proving neither fatal nor final. The tension would relax; a doctor would go, a nurse slip from the room; Cherry, looking anxiously from one face to another, would breathe more easily. It was inevitable, she knew that now—but it was not to be this minute; it was not to be this hour!

"My dear—my dear!" Peter said to her one day, when spent and shaken she came stumbling from Martin's bedside and stood dazedly looking from the window into the soaking October forest, like a person stunned from a blow. "My poor little Cherry! If I could spare you this!"

This Was Alix's Grave, Newly Covered With Flowers.

"Nobody can spare me now!" she whispered. And very simply and quietly she added: "If I have been a fool—if I have been a selfish, wicked girl all my life, I am punished!

"Cherry!" he protested, heartsick to see her so.

"Was it wrong for us to love each other, Peter?" she asked in a low tone. "I suppose it was! I suppose it was! But it never seemed as if—" she shut her eyes and shivered—"as if—this—would come of it!" she whispered.

"This!" he echoed aghast.

"Oh, I think this is punishment," Cherry continued, in the same lifeless, weary tone.

There was a silence. The rain dripped and dripped from the redwoods, the room in which they stood was in twilight, even at noon. Peter could think of nothing to say.

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About two weeks after the accident there was a change in the tone of the physicians who had been giving almost all their time to Martin's case. There was no visible change in Martin, but that fact in itself was so surprising that it was construed into a definite hope that he would live.

Not as he had lived, they warned his wife. It would be but a restricted life; tied to his couch, or permitted, at best, to move about within a small boundary on crutches.

"Martin!" his wife exclaimed piteously, when this was first discussed. "He has always been so strong—so independent! He would rather—he would infinitely rather be dead!" But her mind was busy grasping the possibilities, too. "He won't suffer too much?" she asked fearfully.

They hastened to assure her that the chance of his even partial recovery was still slight, but that in case of his convalescence Martin need not necessarily suffer.

Another day or two went by in the silent, rain-wrapped house under the trees; days of quiet footsteps and whispering, and the lisping of wood fires. Then Martin suddenly was conscious, knew his life, languidly smiled at her, thanked the doctors for occasional ease from pain.

"Peter—I'm sorry. It's terrible for you—terrible!" he said in his new, hoarse, gentle voice, when he first saw Peter. They marveled among themselves that he knew that Alix was gone. But to Cherry, in one of the long hours that she spent sitting beside him and holding his big, weak, strangely white hand, he explained one day. "I knew she was killed," he said, out of a silence. "I thought we both were!"

"How did she ever happen to do it?" Cherry said. "She was always so sure of herself—even when she drove fast!"

"I don't know," he answered. "It was all like a flash, of course! I never watched her drive—I had such confidence in her!"

His interest dropped; she saw that the tide of pain was slowly rising again, and glanced at the clock. It was two; he might not have relief until four. In his own eyes she saw reflected the apprehension of her own.

"You might ask Peter to play some of that—that rambly stuff he was playing yesterday?" he suggested. Cherry, only too happy to have him want anything, to have him helped by anything, flew to find Peter. Busy with one of the trays that were really beginning to interest and please the invalid now, she told herself that the house was a different place, now that one nurse was gone, the doctors coming only for brief calls, and the dear, familiar sound of the old piano echoing through the rooms.

Martin came from the fiery furnace changed in soul and body. It was a thin, gentle, strangely patient man who was propped in bed for his Thanksgiving dinner, and whose pain-worn face turned with an appreciative smile to the decorations and the gifts that made his room cheerful.

The heavy cloud lightened slowly but steadily; Martin had a long talk, dreaded by Cherry from the first hours of the accident, with his physicians. He bore the ultimatum with unexfortitude.

(Continued next week.)

He—Why are you women always going to bargain sales in the hope of getting something for nothing?

She—For the same reason you men are always going to poker clubs. —Washington Post.

USE HOT WATER TO KILL GERMS

Harmful Molds or Fungi Should Be Destroyed Before Seeds Are Planted.

MOST SOILS ARE UNSUITED

If Disease Spores are Not Eliminated Plants Will Become Diseased and Die or Remain Stunted.

To be sure of obtaining healthy young plants for transplanting to the home garden or elsewhere, treat the soil in the seed box with boiling water a few days before planting. Most all soils commonly used for seed beds contain one or more kinds of harmful molds or fungi and in addition, in the South, a destructive eelworm which causes a disease of many garden crops commonly called rootknot.

Recently it has been learned by the United States Department of Agriculture that seed-bed soil can be made reasonably free from these plant enemies by this simple hot-water treatment. If disease spores are not killed, plants grown in such soil will usually become diseased and die, or else will remain stunted and sickly. It is because of the transplanting of such diseased seedlings that many of the poor crops or failures in the home garden occur. Every gardener should therefore learn how to recognize troubles of young plants and become familiar with the method here described for preventing them.

Before treating the soil it should be placed in the box ready for seeding. Make a few holes in the bottom of the box for drainage. Pour on the boiling water very slowly at the rate of two gallons to a box of soil one foot square

The Hot Water Treatment.

and four inches deep and at once cover with a newspaper to help hold the heat for a longer time. After a few days or whenever the soil has dried out enough the seed may be planted.

Young plants grown in this treated soil not only have white, sound roots, but also have a healthy, vigorous appearance above ground. Besides this, seeds sprout better and the plants grow much faster than those planted in untreated soil.

Ordinarily diseased seedlings are a lighter green color and are somewhat smaller than healthy plants and have a sickly appearance. These signs of disease on the young plants, however, may not be noticed and still the trouble may be present on the roots and develop after the plants are set in the garden.

To find out if diseases are present, always examine the roots of young plants before setting them out. If affected by molds or fungi, dark dead patches may be seen on the roots and sometimes on the lower part of the stems.

PRUNING WILL GET RESULTS

Fruit Trees, Vines and Bushes, as Well as Flowering Shrubbery, Require Trimming.

Fruit trees, fruit vines and bushes, as well as flowering bushes, require careful pruning to get the best results—fruit and flowers.

There is some difference of opinion as to whether the pruning should be done in the fall or in the early spring. Despite the argument as to the time, the pruning is absolutely necessary if crops are to be the best possible under weather, soil or other conditions that may prevail in any particular locality.

In pruning fruit or flowering trees and vines it is well for the one who wields the pruning knife to know just how to do the work. One not acquainted with the operation would best post up on the task before one seriously wounds the trees or vines. It is not a difficult task, but one that is as necessary each year as cultivation for crops cannot be expected unless the proper attention is given.

"HOE" THE PLANTS IN FLATS

The small spikelike plants that have just come through the soil in the flats in the basement require a little "hoeing" occasionally. Gentle loosening of the ground—not close enough to injure the tender roots—will do the plants good.

Before thou enquire, blame no man; and when thou hast enquired, reprove justly.—Ecclesiasticus.

Secrets of GOOD ADVERTISING

INTRODUCTION.

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