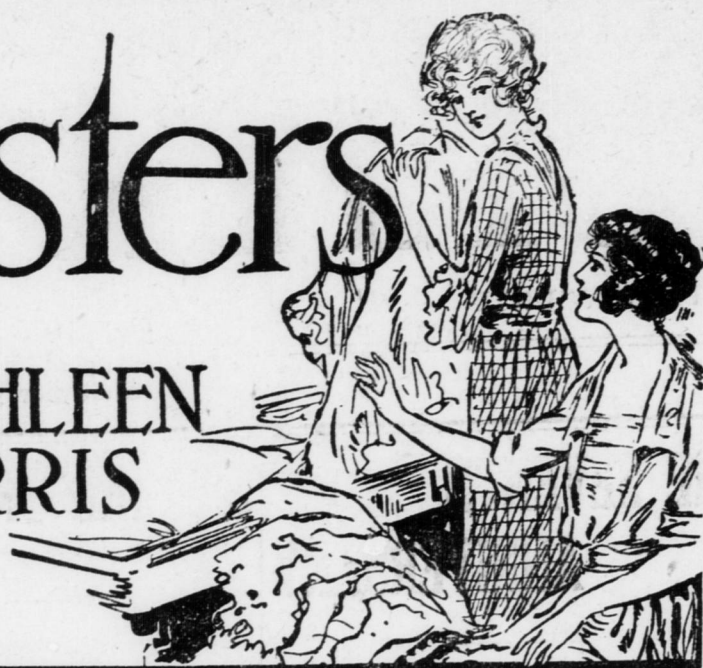


Sisters

by
KATHLEEN NORRIS

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"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 played and plinked all her life—"

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 scat-

tered 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, one 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. Remember, this is our secret. And always remember that I want you to be happy because I love you so!"

It was unassigned. Peter sat staring at it for a while without moving, without the 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 back yard, 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 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 tree-top, 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 valley; the mountain loomed high in the clear shadow.

Gaining the top of the first ridge, he paused and looked back 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 boyish beauty. She had said that "Anne wath mad wiv her, and that Alix—" she managed to lisp the name, "wath up; in the madrone!"

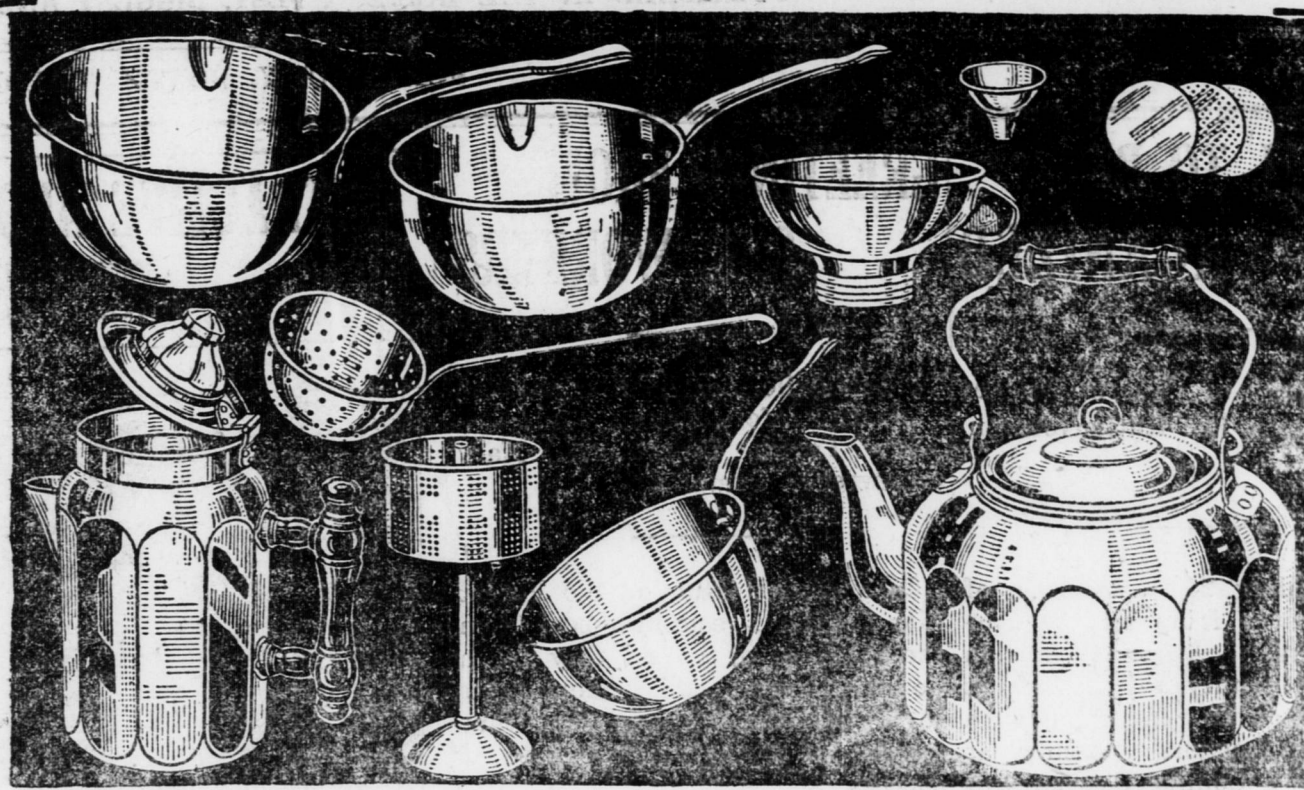
(Continued next week)

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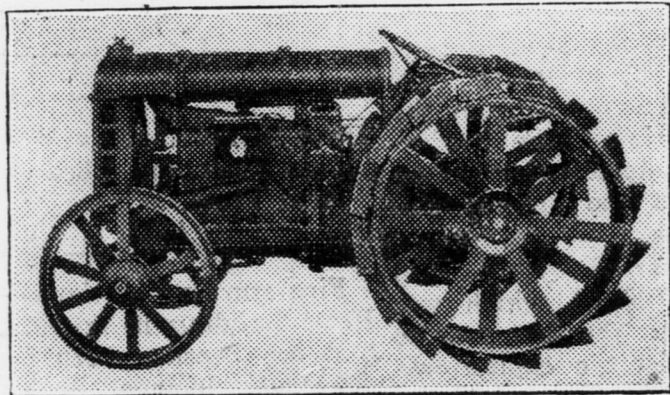


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