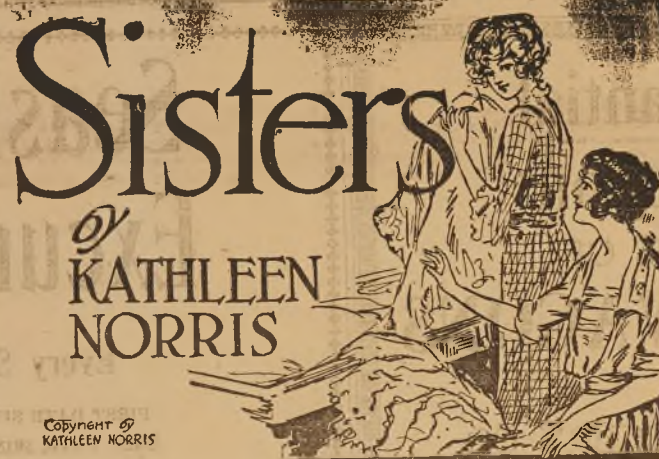


Sisters

By KATHLEEN NORRIS



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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—With his two daughters, Alex and Cherry, the latter just eighteen years old, and his niece, Doctor Strickland, retired, is living at Mill Valley, a short distance from San Francisco. His closest friend is Peter Joyce, something of a recluse. Visiting in the vicinity, Martin Lloyd, a middle-aged man, falls in love with and secretly becomes engaged to Cherry.

CHAPTER II.—While the family is speculating as to Lloyd's intentions, Cherry brings him to supper, practically announcing her engagement to him.

CHAPTER III.—Doctor Strickland feels Cherry is too young to marry and urges her to wait at least a year. But the girls coax him into agreeing to an immediate wedding (and the ceremony takes place, the couple leaving at once for El Nido where Martin is employed).

CHAPTER IV.—The honeymoon days over, Cherry begins to feel a vague dissatisfaction with Martin and the monotony of her daily life.

CHAPTER V.—At Mill Valley, Justin Little, lawyer, becomes engaged to Anne, the wedding being set for September, some months distant. At the same time, at El Nido and the two girls coax Martin into allowing Cherry to go home for Anne's wedding.

CHAPTER VI.—In her father's house Cherry contrasts the peaceful, happy life there with her rather sordid existence at El Nido and realizes that she has never had anything of a future. Doctor Strickland, feeling that Cherry is not fit to be a wife, tells her to wait until she is more mature. She makes preparations for her departure.

CHAPTER VII.—Peter Joyce tells Cherry he has had the "brand" done in his life, but the woman was not for him. He does not retain her name. Cherry rejoins her husband.

CHAPTER VIII.—The young wife's dissatisfaction increases and there is almost open break. Martin has a brief spell of sickness and somewhat of her feelings for him returns to Cherry.

CHAPTER IX.—Doctor Strickland is stricken suddenly with what all perceive is a fatal illness. Alex summons Cherry to her father's deathbed. After the doctor's death it is discovered that years ago he had borrowed money from Anne's father and seemingly the debt was never discharged. With accumulated interest the amount practically consumed all the money the doctor left. Justin Little makes it manifest that he will meet on his wife's claims. It means that the two girls are left with practically nothing.

CHAPTER X.—Peter Joyce, who has been on a trip practically around the world, returns, not without the news of the doctor's death. He hears of Anne's position with regard to the money with deep disgust. Alex has the home and is making a fair living singing. Joyce urges her to marry him. She consents and they have a simple wedding and go to Joyce's home to live, ideally happy.

CHAPTER XI.—Martin and Cherry leave El Nido and change somewhat for the better, but Cherry retains the old feeling of dissatisfaction. She visits Peter and Alex, and while there comes to a realization that she loves Peter. Though she has never known it, Cherry is the woman whom Peter had in mind when he told her of his "brand" operation. He has never ceased to love her, and the situation now becomes tragic.

CHAPTER XII.—Peter confesses his love to Cherry, and she admits a like feeling for him. A situation bordering on hidden guilt is created in the doctor's will. Alex finds a receipt for the money he had borrowed. Anne's claim falls to the ground and Cherry and Alex are financially independent. Heartbroken over their tragic position, Peter vainly seeks a solution which shall make for the mutual happiness of Cherry and himself, but there seems no way.

CHAPTER XIII.—Mrs. North, Martin Lloyd's aunt, has a suspicion concerning Peter and Cherry and the lovers feel the danger of the situation.

CHAPTER XIV.—Joyce urges Cherry to leave Martin and go away with him to some remote part of the world where they can live their lives together. She finally consents, feeling that Alex will give and Peter makes arrangements for their journey.

CHAPTER XV.—The day of their departure arrives. Peter has gone into San Francisco where Cherry was to meet him on the steamer. Actually on her way to the boat, Cherry meets Alex, who has left his situation at Red Creek and is on his way to her. Terror-stricken, she asks to get word to Peter and goes back to Alex's home with Martin. On the way she meets Cherry and tells her the truth about her feelings for him. Martin professes himself unable to understand her grievances.

CHAPTER XVI.—Apprising Alex of the situation between himself and Cherry, Martin intimates that someone has been making love to Cherry. Alex indignantly repudiates the idea, and Martin has no conception of the real truth. Later, some observations made by Martin, and her own intuition, force Alex to a realization of the love existing between Peter and Cherry. Heartbroken, he passes the night wandering in the woods, unable to make up her mind as to the course she will pursue.

CHAPTER XVII.—Cherry gets an anonymous letter from Red Creek coupling Martin's name with that of a woman named Hatty Woods. She shows the letter to Alex, and the latter, questioning Martin, he practically admits the truth of the accusation. Divorce is now openly talked of. Peter and Cherry arrange to go away together Sunday, two days distant.

CHAPTER XVIII.—Saturday morning Peter realizes from Alex's manner and ambiguous remarks that she is aware of the situation. He does not tell Cherry and Martin depart for Peter's cabin in the automobile, leaving Peter and Cherry to follow them on foot. On the way they are met by a woman who is the "Hatty" of hysterics. Informs them that she is Alex and Martin, has come over a precipice, they find Alex dead and Martin so badly injured that it is felt there would be a happy release.

CHAPTER XIX.—Although hopelessly crippled the doctors announce that Martin will live. Cherry feels Peter and she must devote her life to caring for her husband, and she and Peter part.

CHAPTER XX.—In his cabin Peter finds a note written to him by Alex, in which he tells him of her intention to commit suicide and that Martin will be hanged. That her life is ended. Peter, with Alex's dog, Buck, her constant companion, sets out on a journey with her. Finding Cherry and Cherry takes up her freedom with her crippled husband.

CHAPTER I.

Cherry Strickland came in the door of the Strickland home, and found it behind her, and stood so, with her hands behind her back, and her feet apart, standing, body leaning forward, and her bosom rising, and falling, as a deep, ecstatic breath. It was May in this form, she was just eighteen, and her twenty-five minutes she had been engaged to be married.

She hardly knew why, after that last moment when she had run

the door with such noiseless haste. There was nothing to run for! But it was as if she feared that the joy within her might escape into the moonlight night that was so perfumed with lilacs and the scent of wet woods. She was afraid that it was all too wonderful to be true, that she would awaken in the morning to find it all short as to Martin's ideal—somehow fall him—somehow turn all this magic of moonshine and kisses into ashes and heartbreak.

She was a miser with her treasure, already; she wanted to fly with it, and to hide it away, and to test its reality in secret, alone. She had come running in from the wonderful down by the gate, just for this, just to prove to herself that it would not vanish in the incomprehensibility of the shabby hall, would not disappear before the everyday contact of everyday days.

Dad was in the sitting room, with the girls. The doctor's house was full of girls. Anne, his niece, was twenty-four; Alex, Cherry's sister, three years younger—how staid and unmarriageable undesired they seemed tonight to panting and glowing and glorified girls! And with Alex's erratic help, kept house for her uncle, and was supposed to keep a sharp eye on Cherry, too. But she hadn't been sharp enough to keep Martin Lloyd from asking her to marry him, exulted Cherry, as she stood breathless and laughing in the dark hallway.

An older woman might have gone upstairs, to dream alone of her new joy, but Cherry thought that it would be "fun" to join the family, and "act" as if nothing had happened! She was only a child, after all.

Consciously or unconsciously, they had all tried to keep her a child, these three who looked up to smile at her as she came in. One of them, rosy, gray-headed, magnificent at sixty, was her father, whose favorite she knew she was. He held out his hand to her without closing the book that was in the other hand, and drew her to the wide arm of his chair, where she settled herself with her soft young body resting against him, her slim ankles crossed, and her cheek dropped against his thick silver hair.

Alix was reading, and dreamily scratching her ankle as she read; she was a tall, awkward girl, younger far at twenty-one than Cherry was at eighteen, pretty in a girlish way, neatly set to hair with round black eyes, high, thin cheekbones marked with scarlet, and a wide, humorous mouth that was somehow droll in its expression even when she was angry or serious.

Anne, smiling demurely over her white sewing, was a small, pretty made little woman, with silky hair trimly braided, and a rather pale, small face with charming and regular features. Anne had "redmatters," too, Cherry reflected, looking at her tonight, but neither she nor Alex had ever been engaged—engaged—engaged!

"Aren't you home early?" said Dr. Strickland, rubbing his cheek against his youngest daughter's cheek in sleepy content. He was never quite happy unless all three girls were in his sight, but for this girl he had always felt an especial protecting fondness. He had followed her exquisite childhood with more than a father's usual devotion, perhaps because she really had been an exceptionally endearing child, perhaps because she had been given him, a tiny crying thing in a basket, to fill the great gap her mother's going had left in his heart.

"Mr. Lloyd had to take the nine o'clock train," Cherry answered her father dreamily, "and he and Peter walked home with me." She did not add that Peter had left them at his own turning a quarter of a mile away.

"I thought he wasn't going to be at Mrs. North's for dinner," Anne observed quietly, in the silence. She had been informally asked to the Norths for dinner that evening herself, and had declined for no other reason than that attractive Martin Lloyd was presumably not to be there.

"He wasn't," Cherry said. "He thought he had to go to town at six, I just stopped in to give them Dad's message, and they teased me to stay, you know where I was, didn't you, Dad?" she murmured.

Mrs. North telephoned about six, and said you were there, but she didn't say that Mr. Lloyd was," Anne said, with a faint hint of discontent in her tone.

Alix fixed her bright, mischievous eyes upon the two, and suspended her reading for a moment. Alex's attitude toward the opposite sex was one of calm contempt, outwardly. But she had made rather an exception of Martin Lloyd, and had recently had a conversation with him on the subject of sensible, platonic friendships between men and women. At the mention of his name she looked up, remembering this talk with a little thrill.

His name had thrilled Anne, too, although she betrayed no sign of it as she sat quietly watching them. In fact, all three of the girls were quite ready to fall in love with young Lloyd, if one of them had not actually done so. Cherry had been so when she was sixteen, and she had written her visiting friends in Napa, that she must come and meet the new man.

It was a perfect life for the old man; it was only lately that he began uneasily to suspect that they would some day want something more, that they would some day tire of empty forest and blowing mountain ridge, and go away from the shadow of Mt. Tamalpais, and into the world.

What did you want to see Mr. Lloyd about tomorrow, Dad?" Cherry interrupted his thoughts to ask.

"Cherry remarked, between two yawns, that Mr. Lloyd was coming over tomorrow at ten o'clock, and Peter, too—

"Peter won't be much good!" Alex commented. Cherry looked at her reproachfully.

"You're awfully mean to Peter, lately!" she protested. Her father gave her a shrewd look, with his good-night kiss, and immediately afterward both the younger girls dragged their way up to bed.

Alix and Cherry shared a bare, woody-smelling room tucked away under brown eaves. The walls were of raw pine, the latticed windows, in bungalow fashion, opened into the fragrant darkness of the night. The beds were really bunks, and above her bunk each girl had an extra berth, for occasional guests. There was scant prettiness in the room, and yet it was full of purity and charm. The girls, like all their neighbors, were hardy, bred to cold baths, long walks, simple hours, and simple food. In the soft western climate they left their bedroom windows open the year round; they liked to wake to winter damp and fog, and go downstairs with blue flannel and chattering teeth, to warm themselves with breakfast and the fire.

Alix rolled herself in a gray army blanket, and was asleep in some sixty seconds. But Cherry felt that she was floating in seas of new joy and utter delight, and that she would never be sleepy again.

Downstairs Anne and the doctor sat staidly on, the man dreaming with a knitted forehead, the girl sewing. Presently she put a needle through her fine white work with seven tiny stitches, folded it, and put her thumb into a case that hung from her orderly working with a long ribbon.

"Wait a minute, Anne," said the doctor, as she straightened herself to rise. "This young Lloyd, now—how do you think of him?"

She widened demure blue eyes. "Should you be sorry if I—liked him, Uncle Lee?" she smiled.

The old man rumbled his silver hair restlessly. "That's the way the wind blows, eh?" he asked kindly.

"Well—you see how much he's here! You see the flowers and books and notes. I'm not the sort of girl to wear my heart on my sleeve," Anne, who was fond of small, conversational tags, assured him merrily. "But there must be some fire there, too, much smoke!" she said.

"You're not sure, my dear?" he asked, after some thought.

"Oh, no," she answered. "It's just a fancy that persists in coming and going." She got to her feet, saying brightly, "Well! we mustn't take this too gravely—yet. It was only that I wanted to be open and above-board with you, uncle, from the beginning. That's the only honest way."

"That's wise and right!" her uncle answered, in the kindly, absent tone he had used to them as children, a tone he was apt to use to Anne when she was in her highest mood, and one she rather resented.

"Cherry, now—" he asked, detaching her for a moment. "She—you don't think that perhaps Peter admires her?"

"Peter?" Anne echoed amazedly, and stood thinking.

Peter was more than thirty years old, thin, scholarly, something of a solitary, the sweet, dreamy, affectionate neighbor who had shared the girls' lives for the past ten years. For some reason she could not, or would not, define, Anne liked the idea of Cherry and Peter falling in love—

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