

7 BEST SHORT STORIES BY KATHLEEN NORRIS

EDITED BY AUGUST NEMO



TACET BOOKS

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The Author

The second of six children, Kathleen Thompson Norris grew up in rural Mill Valley, where her father, a San Francisco bank manager, commuted daily by ferry. In 1899 both parents died within a month, leaving the children to fend for themselves. Norris worked as clerk, bookkeeper, librarian, and newspaper reporter to help support the family. While covering a skating party, she met her future husband, a writer. She followed him to New York City when he became arts editor for American magazine.

Norris published fiction in the New York Telegram, winning \$50 for the best story of the week. Her husband encouraged her to send out others, and Atlantic accepted "The Tide-Marsh" and "What Happened to Alanna" in 1910. Norris began *Mother* (1911) for another story contest, but it grew too long; it was enlarged to become a popular novel. For the next half century, despite crippling arthritis, Norris wrote 90 books, numerous stories and magazine serials, a newspaper column, and a radio soap opera. A pacifist, she campaigned vigorously against capital punishment and foreign involvement.

Much of Norris' writing is rooted in her own life and California background. Typical is *Little Ships* (1921), centering on a large nouveau riche Irish Catholic family and its less fortunate relatives, including a fine old peasant grandmother. Although the book is marred by sentimentality and prejudice, Norris creates deft characterization and effective dramatic tension in her family scenes. One of the author's strengths is its precise attention to forgotten detail—fashions, furnishings, eating habits, and amusements.

Norris also published two sometimes conflicting autobiographies, *Noon* (1925) and *Family Gathering* (1959). Many of her books remain in print, but most of these are frothy romances with pink-and-gold heroines and contrived endings. These characters seem suspended in an eternal 1910, regardless of the real year. Her best writing shows more depth: family warmth, sincerity, and pettiness; condemnation of the self-centered rich; and vivid accounts of early California. She portrays men and women of another generation, almost another world, meeting life however they can—with love, with humor, with desperation.

Poor, Dear Margaret Kirby

I

"You and I have been married nearly seven years," Margaret Kirby reflected bitterly, "and I suppose we are as near hating each other as two civilized people ever were!"

She did not say it aloud. The Kirbys had long ago given up any discussion of their attitude to each other. But as the thought came into her mind she eyed her husband—lounging moodily in her motor-car, as they swept home through the winter twilight—with hopeless, mutinous irritation.

What was the matter, she wondered, with John and Margaret Kirby—young, handsome, rich, and popular? What had been wrong with their marriage, that brilliantly heralded and widely advertised event? Whose fault was it that they two could not seem to understand each other, could not seem to live out their lives together in honorable and dignified companionship, as generations of their forebears had done?

"Perhaps everyone's marriage is more or less like ours," Margaret mused miserably. "Perhaps there's no such thing as a happy marriage."

Almost all the women that she knew admitted unhappiness of one sort or another, and discussed their domestic troubles freely. Margaret had never sunk to that; it would not even have been a relief to a nature as self-sufficient and as cold as hers. But for years she had felt that her marriage tie was an irksome and distasteful bond, and only that afternoon she had been stung by the bitter fact that the

state of affairs between her husband and herself was no secret from their world. A certain audacious newspaper had boldly hinted that there would soon be a sensational separation in the Kirby household, whose beautiful mistress would undoubtedly follow her first unhappy marital experience with another—and, it was to be hoped, a more fortunate—marriage.

Margaret had laughed when the article was shown her, with the easy flippancy that is the stock in trade of her type of society woman; but the arrow had reached her very soul, nevertheless.

So it had come to that, had it? She and John had failed! They were to be dragged through the publicity, the humiliations, that precede the sundering of what God has joined together. They had drifted, as so many hundreds and thousands of men and women drift, from the warm, glorious companionship of the honeymoon, to quarrels, to truces, to discussion, to a recognition of their utter difference in point of view, and to this final independent, cool adjustment, that left their lives as utterly separated as if they had never met.

Yet she had done only what all the women she knew had done, Margaret reminded herself in self-justification. She had done it a little more brilliantly, perhaps; she had spent more money, worn handsomer jewels and gowns; she had succeeded in idling away her life in that utter leisure that was the ideal of them all, whether they were quite able to achieve it or not. Some women had to order their dinners, had occasionally to go about in hired vehicles, had to consider the cost of hats and gowns; but Margaret, the envied, had her own carriage and motor-car, her capable housekeeper, her yearly trip to Paris for uncounted frocks and hats.

All the women she knew were useless, boasting rather of what they did not have to do than of what they did, and Margaret was more successfully useless than the others. But wasn't that the lot of a woman who is rich, and marries a richer man? Wasn't it what married life should be?

"I don't know what makes me nervous to-night," Margaret said to herself finally, settling back comfortably in her furs. "Perhaps I only imagine John is going to make one of his favorite scenes when we get home. Probably he hasn't seen the article at all. I don't care, anyway! If it *should* come to a divorce, why, we know plenty of people who are happier that way. Thank Heaven, there isn't a child to complicate things!"

Five feet away from her, as the motor-car waited before crossing the park entrance, a tall man and a laughing girl were standing, waiting to cross the street.

"But aren't we too late for gallery seats?" Margaret heard the girl say, evidently deep in an important choice.

"Oh, no!" the man assured her eagerly.

"Then I choose the fifty-cent dinner and 'Hoffman' by all means," she decided joyously.

Margaret looked after them, a sudden pain at her heart. She did not know what the pain was. She thought she was pitying that young husband and wife; but her thoughts went back to them as she entered her own warm, luxurious rooms a few moments later.

"Fifty-cent dinner!" she murmured. "It must be awful!"

To her surprise, her husband followed her into her room, without knocking, and paid no attention to the very cold stare with which she greeted him.

"Sit down a minute, Margaret, will you?" he said, "and let your woman go. I want to speak to you."

Angry to feel herself a little at loss, Margaret nodded to the maid, and said in a carefully controlled tone:

"I am dining at the Kelseys', John. Perhaps some other time —"

Her husband, a thin, tall man, prematurely gray, was pacing the floor nervously, his hands plunged deep in his coat pockets. He cleared his throat several times before he spoke. His voice was sharp, and his words were delivered quickly:

"It's come to this, Margaret—I'm very sorry to have to tell you, but things have finally reached the point where it's—it's got to come out! Bannister and I have been nursing it along; we've done all that we could. I went down to Washington and saw Peterson, but it's no use! We turn it all over—the whole thing—to the creditors to-morrow!" His voice rose suddenly; it was shocking to see the control suddenly fail. "I tell you it's all up, Margaret! It's the end of me! I won't face it!"

He dropped into a chair, but suddenly sprang up again, and began to walk about the room.

"Now, you can do just what you think wise," he resumed presently, in the advisory, quiet tones he usually used to her. "You can always have the income of your Park Avenue house; your Aunt Paul will be glad enough to go abroad with you, and there are personal things—the house silver and the books—that you can claim. I've lain awake nights planning —" His voice shook again, but he gained his calm after a moment. "I want to ask you not to work yourself up over it," he added.

There was a silence. Margaret regarded him in stony fury. She was deadly white.

"Do you mean that Throckmorton, Kirby, & Son have—has failed?" she asked. "Do you mean that my money—the money that my father left me—is *gone*? Does Mr. Bannister say so? Why—why has it never occurred to you to warn me?"

"I did warn you. I did try to tell you, in July—why, all the world knew how things were going!"

If, on the last word, there crept into his voice the plea that even a strong man makes to his women for sympathy, for solace, Margaret's eyes killed it. John, turning to go, gave her what consolation he could.

"Margaret, I can only say I'm sorry. I tried—Bannister knows how I tried to hold my own. But I was pretty young when your father died, and there was no one to help me learn. I'm glad it doesn't mean actual suffering for you. Some day, perhaps, we'll get some of it back. God knows I hope so. I've not meant much to you. Your marriage has cost you pretty dear. But I'm going to do the only thing I can for you."

Silence followed. Margaret presently roused herself.

"I suppose this can be kept from the papers? We needn't be discussed and pointed at in the streets?" she asked heavily, her face a mask of distaste.

"That's impossible," said John, briefly.

"To some people nothing is impossible," Margaret said.

Her husband turned again without a word, and left her. Afterward she remembered the sick misery in his eyes, the whiteness of his face.

What did she do then? She didn't know. Did she go at once to the dressing-table? Did she ring for Louise, or was she alone as she slowly got herself into a loose wrapper and unpinned her hair?

How long was it before she heard that horrible cry in the hall? What was it—that, or the voices and the flying footsteps, that brought her, shaken and gasping, to her feet?

She never knew. She only knew that she was in John's dressing-room, and that the servants were clustered, a sobbing, terrified group, in the doorway. John's head, heavy, with shut eyes, was on her shoulder; John's limp body was in her arms. They were telling her that this was the bottle he had emptied, and that he was dead.

II

It was a miracle that they had got her husband to the hospital alive, the doctors told Margaret, late that night. His life could be only a question of moments. It was extraordinary that he should live through the night, they told her the next morning; but it could not last more than a few hours now. It was impossible for John Kirby to live, they said; but John Kirby lived.

He lived, to struggle through agonies undreamed of, back to days of new pain. There were days and weeks and months when he lay, merely breathing, now lightly, now just a shade more deeply.

There came a day when great doctors gathered about him to exult that he undoubtedly, indisputably winced when the hypodermic needle hurt him. There was a great day, in late

summer, when he muttered something. Then came relapses, discouragements, the bitter retracing of steps.

On Christmas Day he opened his eyes, and said to the grave, thin woman who sat with her hand in his:

"Margaret!"

He slipped off again too quickly to know that she had broken into tears and fallen on her knees beside him.

After a while he sat up, and was read to, and finally wept because the nurses told him that some day he would want to get up and walk about again. His wife came every day, and he clung to her like a child. Sometimes, watching her, a troubled thought would darken his eyes; but on a day when they first spoke of the terrible past, she smiled at him the motherly smile that he was beginning so to love, and told him that all business affairs could wait. And he believed her.

One glorious spring afternoon, when the park looked deliriously fresh and green from the hospital windows, John received permission to extend his little daily walk beyond the narrow garden. With an invalid's impatience, he bemoaned the fact that his wife would not be there that day to accompany him on his first trip into the world.

His nurse laughed at him.

"Don't you think you're well enough to go and make a little call on Mrs. Kirby?" she suggested brightly. "She's only two blocks away, you know. She's right here on Madison Avenue. Keep in the sunlight and walk slowly, and be sure to come back before it's cold, or I'll send the police after you."

Thus warned, John started off, delighted at the independence that he was gaining day after day. He walked the two short blocks with the care that only convalescents

know; a little confused by the gay, jarring street noises, the wide light and air about him.

He found the address, but somehow the big, gloomy double house didn't look like Margaret. There was a Mrs. Kirby there, the maid assured him, however, and John sat down in a hopelessly ugly drawing-room to wait for her. Instead, there came in a cheerful little woman who introduced herself as Mrs. Kippam. She was of the chattering, confidential type so often found in her position.

"Now, you wanted Mrs. Kirby, didn't you?" she said regretfully. "She's out. I'm the housekeeper here, and I thought if it was just a question of rooms, maybe I'd do as well?"

"There's some mistake," said John; and he was still weak enough to feel himself choke at the disappointment. "I want Mrs. John Kirby—a very beautiful Mrs. Kirby, who is quite prominent in—"

"Oh, yes, indeed!" said Mrs. Kippam, lowering her voice and growing confidential. "That's the same one. Her husband failed, and all but killed himself, you know—you've read about it in the papers? She sold everything she had, you know, to help out the firm, and then she came here—"

"Bought out an interest in this?" said John, very quietly, in his winning voice.

"Well, she just came here as a regular guest at first," said Mrs. Kippam, with a cautious glance at the door. "I was running it then; but I'd got into awful debt, and my little boy was sick, and I got to telling her my worries. Well, she was looking for something to do—a companion or private secretary position—but she didn't find it, and she had so many good ideas about this house, and helped me out so, just talking things over, that finally I asked her if she

wouldn't be my partner. And she was glad to; she was just about worried to death by that time."

"I thought Mrs. Kirby had property—investments in her own name?" John said.

"Oh, she did, but she put everything right back into the firm," said Mrs. Kippam. "Lots of her old friends went back on her for doing it," the little woman went on, in a burst of loyal anger. "However," she added, very much enjoying her listener's close attention, "I declare my luck seemed to change the day she took hold! First thing was that her friends, and a lot that weren't her friends, came here out of curiosity, and that advertised the place. Then she slaves day and night, goes right into the kitchen herself and watches things; and she has such a way with the help—she knows how to manage them. And the result is that we've got the house packed for next winter, and we'll have as many as thirty people here all summer long. I feel like another person, "the tears suddenly brimmed her weak, kind eyes, and she fumbled with her handkerchief. "You'll think I'm crazy running on this way!" said little Mrs. Kippam, "but everything has gone so good. My Lesty is much better, and as things are now I can get him into the country next year; and I feel like I owed it all to Margaret Kirby!"

John tried to speak, but the room was wheeling about him. As he raised his trembling hand to his eyes, a shadow fell across the doorway, and Margaret came in. Tired, shabby, laden with bundles, she stood blinking at him a moment; and then, with a sudden cry of tenderness and pity, she was on her knees by his side.

"Margaret! Margaret!" he whispered. "What have you done?"

She did not answer, but gathered him close in her strong arms, and they kissed each other with wet eyes.

III

A few weeks later John came to the boarding-house, nervous, discouraged, still weak. Despite Margaret's bravery, they both felt the position a strained and uncomfortable one. As day after day proved his utter unfitness for a fresh business start in the cruel, jarring competition of the big city, John's spirits nagged pitifully. He hated the boarding-house.

"It's only the bridge that takes us over the river," his wife reminded him.

But when a little factory in a little town, half a day's journey away, offered John a manager's position, at a salary that made them both smile, she let him accept it without a murmur.

Her courage lasted until he was on the train, travelling toward the new town and the new position. But as she walked back to her own business, a sort of nausea seized her. The big, heroic fight was over; John's life was saved, and the debt reduced to a reasonable burden. But the deadly monotony was ahead, the drudgery of days and days of hateful labor, the struggle—for what? When could they ever take their place again in the world that they knew? Who could ever work up again from debts like these? Would John always be the weak, helpless convalescent, or would he go back to the old type, the bored, silent man of clubs and business?

Margaret turned a grimy corner, and was joined by one of her boarders, a cheerful little army wife.

"Well, we'll miss Mr. Kirby, I'm sure," said little Mrs. Camp, as they mounted the steps. "And by the way, Mrs. Kirby, you won't mind if I ask if we mayn't just now and then have some of the new towels on our floor—will you? We never get anything but the old, thin towels. Of course, it's Alma's fault; but I think every one ought to take a turn at the new towels as well as the old, don't you?"

"I'll speak to Alma," said Margaret, turning her key.

A lonely, busy autumn followed, and a winter of hard and thankless work.

"I feel like a plumber's wife," smiled Margaret to Mrs. Kippam, when in November John wrote her of a "raise."

But when he came down for two days at Christmastime, she noticed that he was brown, cheerful, and amazingly strong. They were as shy as lovers on this little holiday, Margaret finding that her old maternal, half-patronizing attitude toward her husband did not fit the case at all, and John almost as much at a loss.

In April she went up to Applebridge, and they spent a whole day roaming about in the fresh spring fields together.

"It's really a delicious little place," she confided to Mrs. Kippam when she returned. "The sort of place where kiddies carry their lunches to school, and their mothers put up preserves, and everybody has a surrey and an old horse. John's quite a big man up there."

After the April visit came a long break, for John went to Chicago in the July fortnight they had planned to spend together; and when he at last came to New York for another

Christmas, Margaret was in bed with a bad throat, and could only whisper her questions. So another winter struggled by, and another spring, and when summer came Margaret found that it was almost impossible to break away from her increasing responsibilities.

But on a fragrant, soft October day she found herself getting off the early train in the little station; and as a big man waved his hat to her, and they turned to walk down the road together, they smiled into each other's eyes like two children.

"Were you surprised at the letter?" said John.

"Not so much surprised as glad," said Margaret, coloring like a girl.

They presently turned off the main road, and entered a certain gate. Beyond the gate was an old, overgrown garden, and beyond that a house—a broad, shabby house; and beyond that again an orchard, and barns and outhouses.

John took a key from his pocket, and they opened the front door. Roses, looking in the back door, across a bare, wide stretch of hall, smiled at them. The sunlight fell everywhere in clear squares on the bare floors. It brightened the big kitchen, and glinted in the pantry, still faintly redolent of apples stored on shelves. It crept into the attic, and touched the scored casement where years ago a dozen children had recorded their heights and ages.

Margaret and John came out on the porch again, and she turned to him with brimming eyes. It suddenly swept over her, with a thankfulness too deep for realization, that this would be her world. She would sit on this wide porch, waiting for him in the summer afternoons; she would go about from room to room on the happy, commonplace