ARRIET and the PIPER

by Kathleen Norris

Illustrations by Irwin Myers



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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Harriet Field, twenty-eight years old and beautiful, is the social secretary of the flirtatious Mrs. Isabelle Carter, at "Crownlands," Richard Carter's home, and governess of 17-year-old Nina Carter. Ward, twenty-four years old and impressionable, fancies himself in love with his mother's attractive secretary. Mrs. Carter's latest "affair" is with young Anthony Pope, and the youth is taking it very seriously.

CHAPTER II.—Presiding over the tea-cups this summer afternoon, Harriet is profoundly disturbed by the arrival of a visitor, Royal Blondin. Next day, at a tea party in the city, Blondin makes himself agreeable to Nina, and leaves a deep impression on the [illegible] dicated girl.

CHAP[illegible]

[illegible]

"She's almost [illegible] she?"

The girl walk[illegible] for a full minute.

"You weren't [illegible] child at eighteen," he ret[illegible]

The color flo[illegible] ransparent dusky skin.

"That's—exacti[illegible] was!" she said dryly. "But [illegible] to Nina, if you don't believe me! Everything that is



"A Rich Widow?" Harriet Suggested, Simply.

school-girly and romantic and undeveloped, is Nina. She is absolutely inexperienced; she's what I called her, a child! It's—preposterous!"

"I suppose," the man drawled, "that that is a question for the young lady, and her parents, and myself to decide."

Harriet bit her lip. This was utterly unexpected. Into her calculations, up to this point, she had taken only Royal Blondin and herself. If his words covered any truth, then the matter did not stop there. Nina was involved, and with Nina, Ward and Nina's father and Isabelle—

The complications were endless; her heart sickened before them. And yet, the conviction that Royal dared not betray her had been flooding Harriet's heart with exquisite reassurance during this past half hour. She was safe; her life at Crownlands took on a new and wonderful beauty with that knowledge. And if she was fit to continue there, Nina's companion, Isabelle's confidante, guide and judge for the whole household, could she, with any logic warn them against this man?

He had her trapped, and she saw it. To threaten his standing was to wreck her own.

Her eyes looked beyond him darkly; the girl was young and innocent, greedy for flattery, eager to live. What chance had little Nina Carter against charm like his—experience like his?

"I may never be asked to the house after tomorrow night," said Blondin. "She won't be here tomorrow night. This may be the beginning and end of it. All I ask is that if I am made welcome here, on my own merits, you won't interfere! The mere fact that you're living here doesn't mean that you have the moral responsibility of the family on your shoulders, does it?"

"No-o," Harriet admitted, in a troubled tone.

"Of course not! You live your life, and I mine. Is there anything wrong about that?"

"You know you would never look at that girl except for her money, Roy!" she burst out.

"Nor would anyone else!" he amended, suavely.

Harriet gave a distressed laugh.

"Come! You and I never saw each other until this week," Blondin urged. "That's the whole story."

Before she answered, the girl looked beyond him at the splendid stables and lawns of Crownlands. It never lost its charm for her, her castle of dreams; she had longed to be part of just such a household all her life! Now she actually was part of it, and—if what Mary Putnam had hinted was true, if her own fleeting suspicion only a few evenings ago was true; then she might some day really belong to Crownlands, in good earnest!

Harriet made her choice.

"Very well," she said, briefly. "I understand you. I turn in here. Good-night."

"One second!" he said, detaining her. "You won't hurt me with any of your people, or the girl, or the father?" His lips curled with distaste.

"No," she said tonelessly.

In a second she was gone. He saw her figure, in its green [illegible] at a turning of the [illegible] paused for no backward look. Then he swell. But Royal

IV.

[illegible] ugh the quiet furies, and with white art. Nina [illegible] e window, putter away there, per-ent, for an hour," she told "And at ten you'll see him "They're

desk.

"For me?" the g[illegible] ling in answer, and with so[illegible] Rosa nodded, and went he[illegible] Harriet went to the bo[illegible] not large, a florist's box [illegible] green cardboard; Harriet un[illegible] raffia string, and investigated [illegible] ss of silky tissue paper. Insi[illegible] n orchid. She opened the [illegible] nying envelope, and found War[illegible] card. On the back he had written, "Just a little worried because he's afraid you're cross at him!"

Harriet stood perfectly still, the orchid in one hand, the card crushed in the other. Ward Carter had sent orchids, no doubt, to other girls. But Harriet Carter had never had an orchid before from a man.

She put the card into her little desk, and the orchid into a slender crystal vase. Then she went back to advise Amy and Nina as to gold beads and the arrangement of hair. But a little later, when she was in the big housekeeper's pantry, where several maids were busy with last-minute manipulations of olives and ice and grapefruit, Ward came out and found her, soberly busy in her old checked silk.

"Why didn't you wear it?"

"Wear it—you bad, extravagant child! I'll wear it to town tomorrow."

"No; but—" he sank his tone to one of enjoyable confidences—"but were you mad at me? You looked so glum at breakfast."

"Well, you had nothing to do with it!" she assured him, in her big-sisterly voice. "And it was the first orchid I ever had, and I loved you for it!"

It was with something like pain and impatience in his tone that Ward said gruffly:

"Yes, you do! You like me about as much as you like Nina or Granny!"

"I like you—sh! just a little better than I do Granny!" Harriet confided. "Don't spoil your dinner with olives, Ward! Don't muss that—there's a dear! Dinner's announced, by the way. It's quarter past eight."

"I'm going!" he grumbled, discontentedly.

"At any rate, I love the orchid!" Harriet said, soothingly. He was laughing, too, as he disappeared, but something in his face was vaguely troubling to her none the less, and she remembered it now and then with a little compunction during her quiet evening of reading. Well, she would see Linda on Saturday, and have Sunday with her and the children, and that meant always a complete change and a shifted viewpoint, even when, as frequently happened, Linda took the older-sisterly privilege of scolding.

* * * * * * *

When Harriet had chaperoned Nina and Amy to the Friday afternoon matinee, and had duly deposited Amy afterward in the Hawkes mansion, and had escorted Nina to her grandmother's apartment, she was free to direct Hansen to drive her to the Jersey tube, and to spend a hot, uncomfortable hour in a stream of homegoing commuters, on the way to Linda's house.

She mounted the three cement steps from the sidewalk level, and the four shabby and peeling wooden ones that rose to the porch. On this hot summer afternoon the front door was open, and Harriet stepped into the odorous gloom of the hall, and let the screen door bang lightly behind her.

Immediately, in the open archway into the parlor, a girl of fifteen appeared, a pretty girl with blue eyes and brown hair, a shabby but fresh little shirtwaist belted by a shabby but clean white skirt, and a napkin dangling from her hand.

"Oh, Mother—it's Aunt Harriet! Oh, you darling—!"

Harriet, laughing, went from the child's wild embrace into the arms of Linda herself, a tall, broadly built, pleasant-faced woman with none of Harriet's own unusual beauty, but with a family resemblance to her younger sister nevertheless.

"Well, you sweet good child!" she said warmly. "Fred—here's Harriet! Well, my dear, isn't it fortunate that we were late! We'd hardly commenced!"

The remaining members of the family now streamed forth: Fred Davenport, a thin, rather gray man of fifty, with an intelligent face, a worried forehead, and kindly eyes; Julia, a blonde beauty of twelve; Nammy, a fat, sweet boy of five, with a bib on; and Pip, a serious ten-year-old, with black hair and faded blue overalls.

Fred was a newspaper man, one of the submerged many, underpaid, overworked, unheard, yet vaguely gratified through all the long years by the feeling that his groove was not quite the groove of the office, the teller's desk, or the traveling salesman's "beat." Here in the little suburban town his opinions gained some little weight from the fact that he had been ten years with a New York evening paper. Mrs. Davenport was interested in everything her sister had to say; knew the Carters, and even some of their closest friends, by name, and asked all sorts of questions about them.

Later in the evening Fred was at the piano. It was a poor piano, and he was a poor player who smoked his pipe while he painstakingly [illegible] Mendelssohn's "Songs With-[illegible]" or the score of "The [illegible] But Linda loved him.

like terror in her tone.

"Royal Blondin! He's in England!"

"He was," Harriet said, dryly. "He's been in New York for two years now."

Linda shuddered.

"I know—I remember!" she said in a whisper. And she added fervently, "I hoped he was dead!"

"So did I!" Harriet said, simply. "Our meeting was entirely accidental. He had no idea of finding me; was as surprised as I was." She stopped abruptly, musing on some unpalatable thought. "You wouldn't know him, Linda. He is a perfect freak. New thought, and poetry, and the occult, and Tagore and the Russian novelists, and the Russian music; he lectures about them and he has been extremely successful! He wears pongee coats and red ties, and has his hair long, and—well, you never saw women act so about anything or anybody! He's having dinner with the Carters tonight." To this Linda could only ejaculate an amazed:

"Royal Blondin!" And as Harriet merely nodded, in the gloom, she added, vigorously, "Why, he hadn't a penny! He was always an idiot—he didn't have enough to eat ten years ago!"

"Well, he has enough to eat now! Ward told me that he gets three hundred dollars for his drawing-room talks—his 'interpretive musings,' he called them."

"Well, that—" Mrs. Davenport was still dazed with astonishment and indignation. "That really—" she began, and stopped, shaking her head.



And Suddenly the Bright Head Was in Linda's Lap and She Was Sobbing Bitterly.

"Tell me everything you said!" she commanded.

"I will!" Harriet's voice fell flatly. "I came home to talk it over with you." But it was fully five minutes later that she began the inevitable confidences. "We talked—Roy and I—" she said, briefly. "He doesn't belong in my life, now, any more than I do in his! We simply agreed to a sort of mutual minding of our own business."

"Thank God!" Mrs. Davenport said, fervently. "He—he doesn't want to—he doesn't still feel—he won't worry you, then?" she asked somewhat diffidently. Harriet's laugh had an unpleasant edge.

"He is after bigger game than I am, now!" she said.

"The brute!" her sister commented in a whisper. "It—it is all right, then?" she asked, a little timidly.

"All right!" Harriet echoed, bitterly. "I haven't drawn a happy breath since I saw him! All that time came up again, as fresh as if it were yesterday—except that I have climbed a little way, Linda; I was happy—I was busy and useful—and I had—I had my self-respect!"

And suddenly the bright head was in Linda's lap, and she was sobbing bitterly. Linda, with a great ache in her heart, circled her arms, mother-fashion, as she had circled them a hundred times, about her little sister.

(To be continued.)

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