HARRIET 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 serfously.

CHAPTER II.—Presiding over the teacups 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 unsophisticated girl.

CHAPTER III. — Harriet's agitation over the appearance of Blondin at "Crownlands" is explained by the fact that he had been a disturbing element in her life ten years before, and she fears him. The man is an avowed adventurer, living on the gullibility of the idle rich. He frankly announces to Harriet his intention of marrying Nina, who, as the daughter of the wealthy Richard Carter, is a highly desirable "catch," and urges her aid him. She is in a sense in his power, and after pleading with him to abandon his scheme agrees to follow a policy of neutrality.

CHAPTER IV.—Harriet visits her married sister, Linda Davenport, with whom she had had her home during her unfortunate acquaintance with Blondin, and meets her of his reappearance. The two women, realizing the unscrupulous nature of the man, view the future with apprehension.

CHAPTER V. — Knowing the tender feeling she has inspired in Ward Carter, Harriet is tempted to marry him for the position and wealth he can give her, though realizing she does not love him. Blondin has ingratiated himself with Madame Carter, Richard's mother, and she is wholeheartedly in favor of his marriage with Nina. Ward urges Harriet to marry him at once. She procrastinates.

CHAPTER VI.—Angered at his wife's open flirtation with young Anthony Pope, Richard Carter markedly shows his disapprovement. Isabelle, ardently returning the youthful lover's attachment, elopes with him on his yacht, and pursuit is begun. The news of the sensational affair, exaggerated, of course, by gossip, is kept as much as possible from being made public property.

CHAPTER VII.

That Isabelle's madness would run its full gamut did not occur to Harriet until the next day. Then, as the serene hours moved by, and there was no word and no sign from Richard, the possibilities began to suggest themselves. It seemed to her incredible that any woman would risk all that Isabelle had for the sake of a fiery boy's first love, and yet, on the other hand, there was the memory of Isabelle's suffering two nights ago, and there were the amazing facts to prove it.

It was for few women to enjoy the popularity Isabelle had known. But any woman might run away with a rich admirer. Harriet's admiration for the cleverness with which Isabelle conducted this pretty playing with fire disappeared, and in its place came the sharp conviction that old-fashioned women like Linda had some justification, after all; it was "dangerous," it did "lead to sin," it could indeed "happen once too often."

Harriet felt her own lapsing morality regaining its standard. Just now, when Nina most needed her mother, when Richard was struggling with difficult business conditions, when Ward was engaged—

She interrupted her thoughts here, and tried to make herself feel like a woman engaged to be married. Somehow the fact persisted in baffling her. There was an unreality about it that prevented her from tasting the full benefit. Engaged—to a rich man, and a married man's son. Well, perhaps when he came back, it would seem more possible.

She had been standing at one of the windows, a window deep set in the thick wall, and commanding the lawns and beeches the path to the [illegible]. Hands pressed her [illegible] the pres- [illegible] Ward Carter [illegible] and he [illegible] at her confusion, and the[illegible] on the window seat together [illegible] es, he was going back to the Bellamys', and so was Blondin, but they had both come in just for lunch and the drive.

Instantly he brought reassurance to her. Ward was such a dear! Of course she loved him.

"But you weren't a very good boy last night!" she said. Their hands were locked; but she had shaken a negative when he would have kissed her.

"Rotten!" he confessed, easily. "I played poker, too. No man ought to do that when he's edged. Sorry—sorry—sorry. Listen. When we're married it's all off. No smoking, drinking, gambling, wine, women, or song, what?"

"You may not know it, but you never spoke a truer word!" the girl said. His shout of laughter was pleasant to hear.

"Listen. Does Mother know it? About us, I mean?"

"Oh, Ward—nobody knows it! Hush!" His mention of his mother brought back realization with a rush, and she added uncomfortably, "She's at Great Barrington."

"Oh, darn! I wanted to see her! She wrote me, and told me she loved me, and that she didn't think she had been a very good mother to me!" He laughed, youthfully, with a bewildered widening of his eyes. "I thought she [illegible]. Well, maybe we can stop [illegible] going back."

"Where did you leave Mr. Blondin?"

"He beat it down to the tennis court. Say, listen, is there a chance that he's stuck on Nina? It looks to me like what the watch comes in!"

Harriet glanced at her wrist before she answered him. Her heart was sick within her. Close upon her radiant dream had come this shadow, far [illegible] a shadow now, when her response [illegible] had infinitely increased, and when she had had proof of the love and respect in which they held her here.

"I don't think so!" she said, briefly. "I'll find Bottomley, and have lunch put ahead."

"You don't like him!" Ward said, watching her closely.

"I don't like him for Nina!" she amended.

The boy followed her while she gave her order. Then they went out into the blazing day together.

"Nina isn't going to have more than a scalp a day," said her brother, fraternally.

"Nina has a fortune!" the girl remarked, dryly, opening her wide white parasol.

"Lord, he could marry a girl with ten times that! Look here, you don't think a man like Blondin would consider that!" he protested.

"I would rather see Nina dead and buried!" The words burst from Harriet against her will, against her promise to Royal. There was no help for it, her essential honesty would have its way.

"Talk to him!" Ward, fortunately, was not inclined to take her too seriously. "You'll like him! Gosh, he certainly has a good effect on me," added the youth, modestly. "He doesn't drink, and he talks to me—you ought to hear him!—about character being fate, and all that! Say, listen, before we get out of the woods—?"

His sudden sense of her nearness and beauty belied the careless words. Harriet found his arms tight about her, her face tipped up to the young, handsome face that was stirred now with trembling excitement. The quick movement of his breast she could feel against her own, and the passion of his kisses almost frightened her; she was held, bound, half-lifted off her feet.

"Ward!" she gasped, freed at last, and with one hand to her disordered hair, while the other held him at arm's-length. "Dear! Please!"

It was no use. Soul and senses were enveloped again, and close to her ear she heard him whisper: "I'm mad about you! Do you know that? I'm mad about you!"

"I think you are!" she stammered, breathless and laughing. "You mustn't do that! You mustn't do that! Why, we might be seen!"

Breathless, too, he flung back his hair, and stooped to pick up her parasol.

"Do you think I care!" he panted, indifferently. "I wouldn't care if the whole world saw!"

"Sh—sh!" By the magic only known to youth and womanhood Harriet had gathered herself into trimness and calm again. She took her parasol composedly. Her eyes told him the whole story. Nina and Royal Blondin were two hundred feet away, coming up from the tennis court.

"You fool—fool—fool!" she said to herself. What had they seen? What new twist to the situation would Nina's suspicions afford? Richard Carter trusted her; this was no time to tell him that she loved his son. Did she love Ward?—or with his keen and kindly eyes would Ward's father see exactly what she saw in the marriage? Caught kissing in the woods—like Rosa or Germaine; it was unthinkable! How she had weakened her position here! How she had risked—her heart contracted with pain—severing of her association with Crownlands.

Luncheon, under its veneer of gaiety and foolishness, offered fresh terrors. For old Madame Carter had come down, and it occurred to Harriet that if Nina had seen anything in the wood, she might naturally interest her grandmother with an account of it. The old lady would go instantly to her son. And Richard—Harriet could imagine him, tired, harassed, heartsick over the recent inexplicable weakness of his wife, having to face another woman's treachery, having to listen to the demure announcement of the little secretary's engagement to his son.

He was experiencing the most overwhelming shock of all his life now; he must shortly be exposed to all the whirl of scandal: the silenced gossip, the averted eyes of his world, the weeklies with their muddy insinuations, the staring fact headlined above his breakfast bacon. This was her time to efface herself and the household, to help him to lift the load.

"I'm afraid I wasn't listening, Mr. Blondin?"

"Miss Nina and I want to know what day we may have our party?" Royal repeated.

"The studio party?"

"The roof-garden party. We're going to have it from half-past six to half-past seven only, because then it won't be too hot."

"Why not have it at night, with lanterns?" Harriet said, quite involuntarily. And again a pang of self-contempt swept over her. It was hateful, it was incredible, but she was playing his game as calmly as if doubts and reluctance had never entered her heart.

At four o'clock Richard came home, and the instant Harriet saw his face she realized, with a shock even sharper than the original moment of incredulity, that he had had no success in his search. He was alone. His face was drawn and gray, he looked hot and rumpled and utterly weary; more, he who had always been the pink of well-groomed perfection looked old. He asked Bottomley briefly if Madame Carter was in her room, and, being informed that she was, went hastily upstairs.

It was to the old lady's beautiful sitting room that Harriet was summoned a few minutes later. She knew at once that he had told his mother all he knew and feared.

Madame Carter was shockingly agitated. She had a deep sense of the dramatic, but she was not entirely acting now. Her face was pale under its rouge, and the painful tears of age stood in her eyes.

"Miss Field!" said Madame Carter, "we have just had a most terrible—a most unexpected—blow!"

Harriet simulated expectancy.

"There is every reason to believe," pursued Madame Carter, majestically, "that my unfortunate daughter-in-law, Mr. Carter's wife, Isabelle, has yielded to the passion of her lover! No, let me talk, Richard," she interrupted herself, as the man raised haggard eyes to watch her impersonally, "far better to face the facts, my dear! My son tells me, Miss Field the—the well-nigh incredible statement that—forgetting the honor of womanhood, and the tender claims of maternity—"

"Miss Field," Richard did not have the manner of interruption, but his quiet voice dominated the other voice none the less. Madame Carter fell silent, and watched him with mournful pride. "Miss Field," he said, "we want your help. The facts are these: Williams had all the roads watched; they did not go by motor. Mrs. Carter reached New London at five o'clock yesterday; Pope's boat, the Geisha, pulled out at half-past six. From what Williams' men picked up, at the dock, Pope did not expect her, was to have sailed this morning. She arrived, and evidently he thought it wise to hurry their start. The pier had a dozen boxes for the Geisha on it, groceries and what not, that they left behind! They will probably skirt the coast for a few days, and put in somewhere for supplies. But that"—he passed his hand wearily across his forehead—"that doesn't concern us now. We got there at ten last night—hours too late, of course." His voice fell, he mused, with a knitted brow. "Well!" he said, suddenly recalling himself. "Now, Miss Field, I want you to get hold of Ward. I want the boy home at once! He must know. But there is of course a chance that Mrs. Carter is—is planning to return. There may be a woman friend with her—it's not probable, but it's possible. I don't want any one in the house, or out of it, to suspect, and if you think it is possible, I should like Nina protected!"

"I understand," Harriet said, quietly. She crossed the hall, and for the first time in four years entered Isabelle's suite unannounced. It was in exquisite order; streams of late afternoon light were falling on the gay walls and the bright chintzes. The novels Isabelle had been skimming, the gold service of her dressing table, the great four-poster with its deeps of transparent white embroideries over white, all spoke of the beautiful woman who had spent so many hours here. On the dressing table, with its splendid length doubled in the mirror, was the great fan that her hand had idly wielded, only a few days ago, in an hour of domestic felicity and happiness.

"The Geisha, Pulled Out at Half Past Six."

What to tell Nina?—she wondered, going downstairs. But Nina proved pleasantly indifferent to the maternal absence when she and Amy came up from the tennis court for tea. To the guest or two who came calling Harriet, installed quite naturally now behind the cups and saucers, explained that Mrs. Carter was visiting with friends—having a beautiful time, too, apparently.

Perhaps Nina suspected that something was unusual. She looked from her father to Harriet, and after a moment's silence asked abruptly:

"When is Mother coming back?"

"I don't know!" her father answered, quickly.

"Say, listen; are we going to dress?" asked Amy. Nina, instantly diverted, suggested that they go in. Nina's awkward bigness and Amy's mousy neutral tones were as well displayed in one garment as another, but both girls debated over pinks and blues, crepes and mulls, every evening, as if the world was watching them alone. Harriet lingered for only a word.

"Mr. Carter, it occurred to me that old Mrs. Singleton is going to California, in her own car, tomorrow. I was wondering if we might confide in Mrs. Singleton—she was always very fond of Mrs. Carter—and give out the impression that Mrs. Carter had suddenly decided to make the trip with her."

"That's an idea," Richard said, thoughtfully. "I could see Mrs. Singleton tonight—and—and talk it over."

"It might serve for only a few days," Harriet submitted.

"Yes, I see," he agreed, slowly.

"Well, I can give Nina a hint now!" Harriet said, going.

But it was too late for any soothing deception of Nina. A scene was in full progress in Nina's bedroom, and Harriet's eye had only to go from the prone form on the bed to the crushed newspaper that had drifted to the floor, to know that the secret was out. Isabelle's face, radiant and happy, looked out from the page. It was flanked by two smaller pictures, Richard's and Anthony Pope's. Harriet could see the big letters: "Young Millionaire—Wife of Richard Carter." The deluge was upon them.

"Oh—it's a lie—it's a lie! My beautiful little mother!" Nina was sobbing. "Oh, no, it's not true! It's a lie! Oh, how shall I ever hold up my head again—to be disgraced—now just when I'm so young—and ha-happy!"

"Nina, my child, control yourself!" Harriet, ignoring the staring and pale-faced Amy, sat down on the edge of the bed, and shook the girl slightly. "You mustn't give way! Come now, my dear, you must face this like a woman. Think how your father and Ward will look to you—"

Acting, all of it, said Harriet in her soul. But despite the youthful appetite for heroics, there were real tears in Nina's eyes, as there had been in her grandmother's a few hours ago.

"Yes, that's true!" she said, wiping a swollen face on the handkerchief Harriet supplied. "But oh—I don't believe it, and my father will sue them for libel, you see if he doesn't! My mother's the purest and sweetest and best woman alive—and I'll kill any one who says any different!"

"Oo-oo, to see it in the paper there, right on the bed," said Amy, in her reedy, colorless little voice, as Nina stopped suddenly. "Oo-oo, I thought Nina would die!" Nina began to cry again, but more quietly. "I guess I had better go—" Amy finished, plaintively.

"Oh, no!" said Nina, in a choked voice, as she clung to her frined. "No, darling! you stay with me. Oh, I must go see my father, and my poor grandmother! Oh, Amy, perhaps you had better go, for my family will need me tonight. My mother—" said Nina, crying again.

She and Amy parted solemnly, with many kisses.

"It's a thing that might happen to me, or to any girl," said Amy gravely. Harriet had an upsetting vision of stout, high-busted Mrs. Hawkes, panting as she discussed the details of the Red Cross drive, but she was very sympathetic with the young girls, and

"Oh—It's a Lie— It's a Lie! My Beautiful Little Mother!" Nina Was Sobbing.

even agreed with Nina, when Amy was gone, that it would be much more sensible to take her bath, and put on her white organdie, and then go find her father.

They dined almost silently, and were about to disperse quietly for the night, after an hour of half-hearted conversation in the drawing room, obviously endured by Richard simply for his mother's sake, when Ward burst in. He had traveled almost four hundred miles by motor that day, his face was streaked with dirt and oil, and ghastly with fatigue. He went straight to his father.

"Say, what's all this!" he said, in a voice hardly recognizable. Harriet saw that he had been drinking. "I got your wire, and we started. I thought the Mater was sick, perhaps. My God—that worried me!" he broke off bitterly. "Blondin came with me; we stopped on the road for dinner, and the man had a paper there. Is that what you wanted me for—I don't believe it! It's a dirty lie, and the bounder that put that in the paper—"

"I'm glad you came home, my boy," Richard said. "I've been waiting for you—"

Harriet heard no more; she slipped from the room. There were genuine tears in her own eyes now; for the boy had flung himself face downward against a great chair, and was crying. All the household knew it; Harriet could read it in Bottomley's carefully usual manner and quiet speech. In the little music room across the hall Royal Blondin was waiting.

"This is a terrible thing!" he said, seriously.

"Oh, frightful!" Harriet agreed. A rather flat silence ensued. She seemed to have nothing to say to Royal now.

But she was not surprised when, a moment later, Nina came softly in, the picture of girlish distress, with her wet eyes and fresh white gown.

"I thought it best to leave Ward with Granny and Father," Nina said, in vague explanation, going straight to Blondin, who rose, dusty and weary, but with a solicitous manner that was infinitely soothing.

His manner, Harriet had grudgingly to admit, was perfection. When Richard and Ward joined them a few moments later, he expressed himself with manly brevity to the older man. He realized, said Blondin, simply, that he was absolutely de trop; he had merely imagined, as "the lad" had imagined, that the [illegible] summons from camp meant il[illegible] ordinary emergency, or he w[illegible] we intruded at this time. I [illegible] not express a sympathy t[illegible] und extremely airy to the [illegible] family. And now, if they [illegible] Jim Hansen, he would go [illegible] club—

"[illegible] Ward said. "You're all dirty [illegible] and hungry, and so am I. We [illegible] up, and then we'll have something to eat. Miss Harriet will look out for us."

"And I'd like to see you for a moment in the library, Miss Field," Richard said, rather wearily. "I want something sent to the papers," he explained in an undertone.

Ah—they all wanted her, and needed her! How quick, and how efficient, and how self-effacing Harriet was as she went about the business of making them all comfortable!

They talked deep into the night, Harriet knew, for she herself was sleepless, and she could see from the upper balcony that a stream of golden light was pouring across the brilliant flowers beneath the library windows.

She reviewed the incredible events of the past few days, and the actors drifted before her vision fitfully: Isabelle, white-bosomed and beautiful, in her prime; Tony Pope, passionate and wretched; Royal, low-voiced, dreamy, poetic, with his eloquent black eyes; Nina, newly awakened; Ward, weak, boyish, ardent; Madame Carter, full of theatrical dignity and well-rounded phrases, and lastly—simple, strong, anxious to protect them all, even from their own follies—Richard.

"Not one word of blame, not one ugly insinuation," she mused, "yet she has shamed him, and he is so honorable; and she has made him conspicuous, when he is so modest!"

She thought of Isabelle, fresh from Germaine's careful hands, lying in her exquisite white against the cushions of a deck chair, smiling, in the rosy flattering light under the green awning, at the infatuated man beside her.

"Ugh!" said Harriet, with a healthy uprush of utter disgust. These few months would not be cloudless for Isabelle, by any means. And after them, what? Was it conceivable that those fatal sixteen years would fail to identify Tony and Isabelle wherever they went, even though the press was not eagerly assisting them? Supposing that Isabelle never thought of Crownlands, of her handsome son and her young daughter, of the man whose patience and cleverness had lifted her to all this luxury from an apartment in a small town, would no memory of the place she had held, and the friendships she had commanded, haunt her? Truly there was always society for the Isabelles, but to Harriet's clean sense it seemed but the society of a jail.

"I wouldn't change places with her!" Harriet decided, in the soft silence and darkness of the summer night.

From Isabelle's problem her thoughts went to her own, to Royal Blondin. She was wakeful and restless tonight simply because she could not decide just how much she need fear him. Firstly, was there any reason for antagonizing him, and secondly, would he hurt her if she did? For Royal could not punish her without punishing himself, and could not banish her from Crownlands if he ever hoped to show his own face there again. But Nina!

Was Blondin so bad? She tried to ask herself the question honestly, and an honest shudder answered it before it was fairly framed. She tried to picture Nina's marriage, their early days together, the breakfast table, where the crude little girl blundered and floundered in conversation, her helpless devotion, that would annoy and exasperate him. She saw Nina's near-sighted eyes welling with hurt tears; Nina's check book eagerly surrendered to win from her lord a few delicious hours of the old flattery, the old attention.

"It would take a clever woman to hold him," Harriet thought, "and it wouldn't be worth a clever woman's while."

Nina—Ward—Royal—Richard. The wearying procession began again. Royal might treat her with honesty and honor. He was not small in everything, and she had never done him harm. But—there might come the terrible moment when she had to face Richard with the confession. Yes, she had known him before. Yes, they had entered into a tacit compact. Yes, she had kept from Nina's father a secret that, while it might be unimportant, certainly should have been told him.

Impossible to think the thing to any conclusion! Too many possibilities might alter the entire situation. If she were married safely to Ward, for example—? But then she dared not marry Ward until Royal's attitude was finally defined. For if her position were dangerous now, what would it be if she had committed herself irrevocably to deception by marriage? Ward's young, crude intolerance sitting in judgment upon his wife!—Harriet shivered.

Suddenly she fell upon her knees, and dropped her bright head against the wide balustrade. For a long time Harriet had not prayed. But now, in a few words, and quite without premeditation, there burst from her the most sincere prayer of her life. She looked up at the stars.

"God!" she said, softly, aloud, "help me! Make me do what is right, however hard it is. Father, don't let me make another mistake!"

(To be continued.)

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