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 seriously.

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 to 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 tells 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 whole-heartedly in favor of his marriage with Nina. Ward urges Harriet to marry him at once. She procrastinates.

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

CHAPTER VII. — Ward Carter again urges Harriet to marry him, but she cannot bring herself to an alliance with him merely for the sake of self-advancement, and refuses. The fact of Mrs. Carter's elopement becomes public. Harriet's capable managing hand is more than ever needed at "Crownlands," and despite the complications she foresees as inevitable she decides to remain.

CHAPTER VIII.—Blondin puts pressure on Harriet to forward his marriage with Nina, but she makes up her mind to defy him. Richard Carter questions her concerning her knowledge of Blondin's intentions, and she counsels active opposition to the match. The family, with Harriet, move to a summer establishment on Long Island.

CHAPTER IX.—In the new home Harriet, with Madame Carter and Nina, settle down for a vacation. In a frank talk with Nina Harriet endeavors to show her Blondin's unworthiness, but it has little effect on the infatuated girl. On Richard Carter's insistence, Harriet is installed as mistress of the household, but finding her position untenable, declares her intention of leaving. Richard makes an offer of marriage, as a way out of the situation, but Harriet, considering such a thing impossible while Mrs. Carter (though divorced) is still alive, refuses, and leaves the house. To her old-fashioned ideas, the fact that Richard Carter has been granted a divorce from his erring wife does not free him from his marital ties, and marriage with him is impossible.

CHAPTER X.

There was trouble at Linda's house; trouble so terrible that Harriet's unexpected arrival caused no comment, caused no more than a weary flicker of Linda's heavy eyes. Pip, the adored first-born son, lay dangerously ill, and the whole household moved on tiptoe, heartsick with dread. It was diphtheria, very bad, Fred stated lifelessly. Linda hardly left the room; they were afraid for her, too, "if anything happened." "If anything happened!" Harriet thought she had heard the phrase a hundred times before the dreadful night came.

She had taken Linda's place for an hour, but before it was up the mother came back, and they kept their vigil together. Fred answered the strange, untimely ringing of the doorbell, brought in packages, conferred in the halls with the doctors. Midnight came, two o'clock, four o'clock.

Suddenly there was panic. Harriet, by chance in the hall, saw Linda and Fred and the doctors together, heard Linda's quick, anguished "Yes!" and Fred's "Anything!" Her heart pounded; the nurse ran upstairs. Harriet fell upon her knees with a sobbing whisper, "No—no—no!" and Linda clung to her husband with a cry torn from the deeps of her heart, "Oh, Pip—my own boy!"

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Dawn came slowly and reluctantly at seven; the village lay bleak and closed under a sky of unbroken gray. Here and there smoke streamed upward from a chimney, or a window-pane showed an oblong of pale light.

Harriet put out the light that was becoming unnecessary. But her heart was singing for joy, and the house was brimful of an inner light and cheer that no winter bleakness could touch. The girl had been crying until she was almost blind, but it was a crying mixed with laughter and prayers of utter thankfulness.

She met Linda at the door, a weary Linda, ghastly as to face, grayer as to straggling hair, but with such radiance in her eyes that Harriet, clasped in her arms, began to cry again.

"Oh, Harriet—if I can ever thank God enough!" Pip's mother said, beginning on her breakfast with one long sigh. "Oh, my dear—! He's sleeping like a baby, God bless him, and dear old Fred is sleeping, too. Oh, Harriet, to go about the house, as I just have, covering Nammy and the girls, and feeling that we're all going to be happy together again, in a few days—my dear, I don't know what I've done to be so blessed! My boy, who has never given anyone a moment's care or trouble since he was born—my darling, who looked up at me yesterday with his beautiful eyes—"

The floodgates were loosed, and Linda laughed and cried, while she enjoyed her breakfast with the appetite of a normal woman released from cruel strain, whose whole brood lies safely sleeping under her roof. Nammy's light illness, Pip's wet feet, Linda's unwillingness to believe that it was anything but a cold, every hour of the four awful days of danger, she reviewed them all. And oh, the goodness of people, the solicitude of nurse and doctor, the generosity of God!

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It was the afternoon of the next day when Harriet could first speak of her own affairs. Linda listened, over her mending, nodded, pursed her lips, or raised her eyebrows.

If Linda might ever have been worldly minded, she had had her lesson now, and the viewpoint she gave Harriet was the lofty one of a woman who has faced a supreme sacrifice without shrinking and with unwavering faith.

"You did right, dear," she assured her sister. "You could not stay there, under the circumstances. Whatever their code is, yours is different, yours has not been vitiated by luxury and idleness. As for Mr. Carter's talk of marriage, that, of course, is simply an insult!"

"No, I don't think it was that," Harriet said, feeling herself revolt inwardly at this plain speaking.

"I don't see what else it could be," Linda pursued, serenely. "A married man—you would be no better than his—well, it's not a nice word—but his mistress!"

"Not at all," Harriet said, trying hard to hide the irritation that rose rebellious within her, "he is legally free, or will be soon, and so am I!"

"I am speaking of God's law, not man's," Linda said, gently but awfully, and Harriet was silent. "Fred says that such men regard these matters far too lightly," Linda finished. Fred's name, thus introduced, always had the effect of angering Harriet. She had shared the family exaltation over Pip's recovery, and had thought more than once in that fearful night of his illness that even poverty, gray hairs and the agony of parenthood, shared with the man she loved, would have been ecstasy to her. But in the slow days and weeks that followed, her spirit became exhausted with the struggle that never ended within her. Her bridges were burned behind her; it was all over. Whatever her emotions had been in leaving Crownlands, the Carters' feelings had been quite obvious and simple. Old Madame Carter had wished her well; Ward had written from college that he thought it was "rotten," and that she had been a corker to get Dad to raise his allowance for him; Nina had felt her own wings the stronger for the change; and Richard had interrupted his little speech of regret to answer the telephone, and had given her a check that placed, it seemed to Harriet, the obligation permanently with her. The utter desolation of spirit with which she had left them was evidently unshared; the only word she had had from that old life had been from Mary Putnam, and even this cordial note jarred Harriet with its frank revelation of the change in her position.

"I can't keep this up!" she told herself, playing games with little convalescent Pip, walking over frozen roads with the girls, reading under the evening lamp. "I can't keep this up! Twenty-seven, and a governess, and in love with a married man who does not know I am alive!" summarized Harriet, bitterly. "I will simply have to forget it, and begin again, that's all!"

And she meditated upon David, the excellent, steady, devoted David, who was Fred's brother and a dentist in Brooklyn, and who gave the children wonderful holidays at Asbury Park. It would make Linda and Fred very happy to have her change toward him: they were a little hurt and silent about David. He always went with them to the crowded beach where they spent July and August, had had a car this year, Linda told her sister, and had been "so popular."

David was there, Christmas day, and there was a fire and a tree, happy children everywhere, rosy little neighbors coming in to see the toys, snowy wet garments spread on the porch after church. David took Harriet walking in the fresh cold air, a Harriet so beautiful in her furry hat and long coat, with her brilliant cheeks and her blue eyes shining under a blown film of golden hair, that Linda, as she basted the turkey in the hot kitchen, couldn't help a little prayer that that would all come out "right."

"But, Davy dear!" Harriet and David had stopped short in the exquisite, silent woods. "There is a feeling—a something that makes marriage right! And I haven't it, that's all!"

"How do you know you haven't?" he said, smiling. "Harriet, if once you said you would, it would come. Harriet," his arm was about her now, his voice close to her ear, "don't let those years with rich people spoil you for the real thing, dear!"

"Harriet, His Arm Was About Her Now, His Voice Close to Her Ear, "Don't Let Those Years With Rich People Spoil You for the Real Thing, Dear."

She looked up at him, with something wistful in her blue eyes. Instantly she saw leap to his face the look he had hidden so many years; she heard a new ring in his voice.

"Ah—you darling! You will? You'll let me tell them—?"

"No, no, no!" Half-angry, half-sorry, she put away his embrace. "I'll—Davy, I hate to spoil your Christmas day—I don't know what to say! I'll think about it!"

She turned to go home. Her heart was lead within her.

"I suppose there's no help for it," she thought, in a panic. "Linda'll see—it'll all be out in five seconds!"

But Linda met them at the door, full of an announcement.

"Harriet, Mr. Carter is here!"

"Mr.—who?"

Back came the tide with a great rush, nothing else mattered. For a moment Harriet was turned to stone. Then in a dream of radiance and delight she went into the little parlor, and Richard Carter stood up to greet her, and there was nobody else in the world. Linda had introduced herself; David was introduced. Harriet glanced about helplessly; he had not come here to say "Merry Christmas," surely.

"I suggested that Hansen take the little people for a five-minutes' drive," he explained, "and then I shall have to hurry back. I wanted to speak to you on a matter of business, Miss Field. I wonder—since you're well wrapped—if we might walk to the corner and meet them; I'll only steal you from your family for five minutes."

"Certainly!" Harriet's heart was singing. She was hardly conscious of what he said; it was enough that he had sought her out, that she was to have one more word with him.

"I came here to discuss my own plans, Miss Field," he said at the gate, "but a hint from your sister has made me fear that perhaps I am too late. She tells me that you may be making plans of your own."

"David?" Harriet said, resentfully. "I have no plans with David!" she said, simply.

"I didn't know," Richard answered. "I came to ask you to come back. Things are in an absolute mess with us. We have not had a serene moment since you left us—three weeks ago."

To go back—back to Crownlands! Harriet's spirit soared. She knew she must go back! She had only despaired of their ever needing her again. Every fiber of her being strained toward the old life.

"Linda, my sister, thinks it would be unwise," she began. The man interrupted her.

"There has been a new turn of events, Miss Field. I had some information last night which may make a difference," he said, gravely. "I received a wire from Pope, in France. My wife—Isabelle—died on an operating table yesterday afternoon, in Paris."

Harriet, stupefied, could only look at him fixedly for a long minute. Her lips parted, but she did not speak.

"Died?" she whispered sharply. The man nodded without speaking. "But—but what was it?" Harriet said.

For answer he gave her the crumpled cable, with the bare statement of fact. She read it dazedly, looked at his somber face, and read it again.

"I can't believe it!" she said.

"Well, now," Richard began presently in a different tone, "we are, as I said, Miss Field, in a mess. I haven't told the children this; they have a lot of young people there over Christmas. My mother and Nina are planning some entertainment for New Year's night, and I suppose this will end all that; I should suppose that Nina and her brother must have a period of mourning. I am deeply involved in a big project in Brazil, committee meetings all through January—I can't swing it, that's all.

"Now, when we last talked of the subject together," Richard pursued in a businesslike way, "you objected to the suggestion of a marriage, because my wife was then still alive. Am I correct?"

"Yes, that's correct!" Harriet said, voicelessly. She felt herself beginning to tremble.

"My purpose in coming today was to suggest that, if that was your sole objection," the man continued, painstakingly, "you might feel the situation changed now. I need you. We all do. If it is my mother who makes it impossible, or some other thing that I cannot change—why, I must get along as best I can. But my proposition is that you and I are quietly married tomorrow; you come back tomorrow night and announce it whenever you see fit. I may seem a little matter-of-fact about this, Miss Field, but I am hoping you understand. I am making you an unsentimental business offer. I need you in my life and I offer you certain advantages which it would be silly and schoolboyish for me to deny I possess. I have a certain standing in the community which even Mrs. Carter's madness has not seemed to impair seriously. The boy and the girl both love you, and you have my warmest friendship. Your position in my household will be as free and independent as was Isabelle's. I do not know whether you will consider this a fair return for what I ask, for after all you are giving your services for life to the Carter household—

"Now, this is of course entirely subject to what pleases you in the matter," he broke off, to say, emphatically, "I merely throw it out as a suggestion. It would please me very much. I would draw a long breath of relief to have it settled. Mrs. Tabor is there—stays there; takes the head of my table. I spent last night at the club; I had cabled Pope—and expected an answer, but my mother telephoned me at three o'clock this morning to say that Ward and some of his friends had gone out ice-skating. Ward's been dropped from his university. I can't have that sort of thing, you know!"

"When—did you want me?" Harriet brought her beautiful eyes back from some far vista.

"I thought that if you could meet me at my office tomorrow I would have all the arrangements made. Nina is to be at the Hawkes'; I send the car for her at three. I thought that you and she could go home together to Crownlands. I'll have to be in town that night."

"Home—to Crownlands!" Suddenly Harriet's lip quivered and her eyes brimmed with tears. "I'll be very glad to go back," she said in a low voice.

"Good!" he said. "I needn't tell you how I feel about it; it helps me out tremendously. Now, about tomorrow, how would you like that to be?"

"Well," she laughed desperately through her tears. "We're Church of England!" She laughed again when he took out his notebook and wrote the words down.

"Once it's done," he said, reassuringly, "you'll see my mother and all the rest of them come into line! It puts you in a definite position, and although I may seem to be rushing and confusing you now, there is a more peaceful time to come—we'll hope!" he added grimly. "Here's Hansen now. Lovely children," he added, of the young Davenports and some intimates who were tumbling out of the car, "lovely mother."

"You'll not speak of this yet?" Harriet said, suddenly thinking of David and Linda. "My sister might think it lacked deliberation—so close upon Mrs. Carter's death. I'd rather have a little time, get things straightened out—"

"Oh, certainly—certainly!" She could see he was relieved, was indeed in cheerful spirits, as he gave his furred hand to the children's mittened ones. They thanked him shrilly and Hansen smiled warmly upon Harriet as he touched his cap. Then they were gone. Linda, watching from the window, thought that the chauffeur's obvious respect for Harriet was rather impressive. She came to the porch, and Richard waved his farewell to them en masse.

"He's very nice," said Linda. "Poor fellow, he probably would have had an entirely different moral code, if his life had been different!" Harriet inwardly writhed, but she did not stir in the sisterly embrace of Linda's arm.

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At three o'clock the next afternoon Nina Carter, leaving the Hawkes' mansion in New York city, with a great many laughing farewells, descended to her father's waiting car and discovered, sitting therein, an extremely handsome young woman, furred and trimly veiled, and deep in pleasant conversation with Hansen.

"Miss Harriet!" Nina ejaculated in a tone that betrayed a vague resentment as well as a definite surprise.

"Nina, dear!" Harriet accepted Nina's kiss warmly. "Are you glad to see me?" And as Nina stumbled in and established herself, Harriet continued easily: "Your father and I had a talk, my dear, and he suggested that I come back for a while. So Hansen picked me up at the office and here I am! He tried to telephone you, I know, but you were out. And now," said Harriet, glancing at her wrist watch, "I think we will go right home, please, Hansen!"

Nina had been her own mistress for several delicious weeks, and to have any sort of restriction again was very unpalatable to her. She sulked all the way home and Madame Carter, meeting them at Crownlands, gazed rather stonily at the newcomer, granting her only the briefest greeting. But, oh, how homelike and welcoming the beautiful place, mantled in snow, looked to Harriet's eyes. The snapping fires, the warmth and fragrance of the big rooms and the very obvious welcome of the maids, all were enchanting to her. Her first duty was to make a brief tour below stairs, after which she went up to her own room.

When they returned from Huntington in the fall, she and Nina, at Richard's suggestion, had taken Isabelle's handsome rooms, turning both into bedrooms and sharing the dressing rooms and bath that joined them. It was here that Harriet found Nina awaiting her, still with her hat on and loitering with obvious discomfiture.

"Miss Harriet!" Nina said with a rush. "You are so sweet about things like this, I wonder if you will mind taking the yellow guest room—it's really much larger—and leaving this room? You see, when I have friends—"

Harriet, at the dressing table, had raised her hands to remove her hat. Like any general, she realized the crisis of the apparently unimportant moment and met it by instinct.

"But you have an extra bed, besides the couch, in your room, Nina!"

Nina cleared her throat, threw back her head, regarded Harriet between half-closed eyelids in a manner Harriet realized was new, and drawled:

"I know. But if you would be so very kind—?"

"Do you know, I'm afraid I shan't be so very kind!" Harriet said, briskly.

"You're one of my duties here, you know, little girl, and I think Daddy would prefer to have me near you. Now, if you like to ask him, perhaps he'll not agree with me; in which case I shall move immediately! But meanwhile—"

Nina's face was scarlet; she left the room abruptly. A moment or two later Harriet sauntered into the adjoining room, and found her again. The younger girl was assuming a ruffled and beribboned negligee, and tossing her wraps and street dress about carelessly. Harriet noted this with disapproving eyes, but said nothing. There was an immense picture of Mrs. Tabor on the dressing table, and she found in that a sudden solution of the strange change in Nina.

"I Know—But If You Would Be So Very Kind—?"

"'With Ladybird's unending devotion, to Ninette,'" read Harriet, from the inky scrawl across the picture. "Do you call her Ladybird, Nina? You and she have formed a pretty strong friendship, haven't you?"

"Oh, something more than that!" Nina drawled in her new manner. "She's the best sort!"

"Does she have my room when she is here?" Harriet presently suggested, sympathetically. "Now, my dear," she added, as Nina's quick self-conscious and hostile look gave consent, "Mrs. Tabor is too thoroughly acquainted with convention to blame you if your father keeps you under a governess' eye for a little while longer. You're the most precious thing your father has, Nina, and as I used to remind you years ago, you don't begin to have the restrictions that the European princesses have to bear!"

This view of the case was always pleasing to Nina's vanity; she was quite clever enough to see that a friend protected and confined, watched and valued, would lose no prestige with the charming "Ladybird." She pouted; and Harriet saw that for the moment the battle was hers.

"Darling gown!" said Harriet of the picture.

"Oh, she has the most wonderful clothes!" It was the old Nina's voice.

"Has she been here very much?" Harriet said, after a moment.

"Oh, lots! She loves to be here, and I can't think why," Nina said, "because people are all crazy to get her, and she could go to the most wonderful dinners and things. But she really is just like a girl, herself; sometimes we burst right out laughing, because we think exactly the same about things! And she just loves picnics, and to let her hair down—and she's so funny! You'll just love her when you know her—"

Nina, Harriet reflected, had had a thorough dose of poison. It would take, like many diseases, more poison to cure her, a counter dose. Going to her room to change to one of the new gowns, Harriet had a moment of contempt for the new-found intimate, who could so unscrupulously play upon the girl's hungry soul. But with this situation it was possible to cope; there was definite comfort in the fact that Nina had not mentioned Royal Blondin.

Brave in the new gown, whose lusterless black velvet made even more brilliant her matchless skin, Harriet went to find Ward. She met, instead, one of his house-guests, Corey Eaton, a man some years older than Ward, a big, rawboned, unscrupulous youth, with a wild and indiscriminate laugh.

"Mr. Eaton," Harriet said, in an undertone, making another strategic decision, "come in here to the library, will you? I want to speak to you."

"When you speak to me thus," said Corey Eaton, passionately. "I can refuse you naught!"

But he sobered instantly into tremendous gravity at Harriet's first confidence. She told him simply of Isabelle's death.

"Well, that surely is rotten—the poor old boy!" said Corey, affectionately. "Ward's mad about his mother, too! Well, say, what do you know about that? We'll beat it, Miss Field, Nixon and I. We came in my car, and we'll go to the Jays' for dinner. Say, that is tough, though, isn't it?"

It was not eloquent, but it was sincere, and Harriet made her thanks so personal and so flattering that the young man could only fervently push his plans for departure, swearing secrecy, and evidently touched by being taken into her confidence. The fastnesses were yielding one after another; Harriet could have laughed as she left him at the foot of the stairs. Bottomley, the butler, respectfully addressed her as she turned back into the hall:

"Miss Field, I wonder if you'd be so good—?"

She nodded, and accompanied him instantly into the pantry, where they could be alone.

"It's Madame," said Bottomley, bitterly, "she's just 'ad me up there agine, it's really tryin'—that's what it is. It's tryin'!"

"Now, just wait one moment, Bottomley," Harriet said, soothingly. "I want to talk to you and Pilgrim. Is she in her room? Suppose we go there?"

Pleased with the consideration in her manner, the outraged Bottomley led the way. The housekeeper was enjoying a solitary cup of tea; she bustled hospitably for more cups.

"I want to tell you that your comin' has taken a load off my soul," said Pilgrim, a gray, round-visaged woman who had a sentimental heart, "and so I said to Mr. Carter not three days since! It's been very bad, indeed, Miss, since you went, as we was tellin' you a bit back. Impudence, orders this way and that, confusion and what not, and Mr. Ward very wild, really very wild, and so at last Bottomley said he couldn't stand it."

"I'm hoping he will reconsider that," Harriet said, pleasantly, with a glance at the face Bottomley tried to make inflexible. "For I'm going to tell you two old friends some news." With no further preamble Harriet announced Isabelle's death.

The servants were naturally shocked. There were a few moments of ejaculatory and sorrowful surprise. When this had died away, Harriet had more news.

"I'm going to tell you two something," she began. "You are the very first to know, and I know you'll be glad. Before I left the house last October, Mr. Carter did me the—the great honor to ask me to—to marry him."

It gave her inward delight even to voice it; it made the miracle seem more real. Bottomley and Pilgrim exchanged stupefied glances in a dead silence.

"I met him at eleven o'clock today," Harriet finished, simply, "and we drove to Greenwich in Connecticut, and we were married at one o'clock."

Bottomley and Pilgrim glanced again at each other, glanced at Harriet, opened their mouths slowly.

"To think of you bein' Mrs. Carter!" Pilgrim marveled in a whisper.

"Oh, sh-sh-sh! You mustn't say it even!" Harriet caught both their hands. "No one must know. I only told you so that you would help me, so that you would understand! There will be no change, anywhere—"

Bottomley shook a dazed head; but Pilgrim looked at the other woman with kindly eyes, and presently said:

"You'd have been a very silly girl not to take him, and—as I always tell the girls—love'll come fast enough afterward!"

The words came back to Harriet, hours later, when the house was quiet, and when, comfortably wrapped in a loose silk robe, she was musing beside her fire. Nina was asleep; to Ward, who was headachy and feverish, she had paid a late visit. Madame Carter had not come down to dinner, and when Harriet had sent in a message, had asked to be excused from any calls, even from Nina and Miss Field, this evening.

Nina had chattered constantly during the meal. Granny had had a terrible time with them all. And Ward and Nina and "Royal"—the name suddenly leaped between them again—had been arrested for speeding. And Daddy had threatened Nina with a boarding school, and Granny had cried.

"Where is Mr. Blondin now, Nina?" Harriet had asked.

"Oh, he's round!" Nina had said, airily. "I suppose you put Daddy up to saying that I wasn't to see so much of him!" she had added, with her worldly wise drawl.

"Not at all," Harriet had said.

"Ladybird and I are planning a trip," Nina had further confided. "I shall be eighteen in February, you know, and we want to go round the world. Wouldn't it be wonderful to go with her, for she's been about fifty times!"

"Wonderful!" Harriet had been obliged to concede.

"But, dearest child, what does your father think?"

"Father—" Nina had shrugged regretfully. "But I shall be of age!" she had reminded her companion.

"Yes, I know, dear, but Father's ward for another three years, you know!"

"Why, Ladybird says"—the girl had been ready, and had spoken with flushed cheeks—"Ladybird says that in that case we'll go anyway, and she'll pay all expenses! That's the kind of friend she is!"

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"Love'll come fast enough afterward!" Pilgrim had said, and Harriet thought Pilgrim was rather a wise woman, in her homely way. The girl stirred the fire and settled herself to watch it.

After what? Well, certainly not after anything so short, simple and unconvincing as that three minutes with the clergyman today. The utter unreality of that had seemed to blend with the silent, snowy day, and with the dulled and dreamy condition of her own brain. Snow was falling softly when she had met Richard Carter at the office; at half-past ten, and snow lisped against the windows of the limousine as they two, with Irving Fox, Richard's kindly, middle-aged, confidential clerk, were whirled out of the city, and on and on through the bare little wintry towns. Fox had had some papers to which they occasionally referred; the old clerk was the only person to congratulate Harriet warmly when the brief and bewildering business was over and she had her wedding ring. It was alone with Fox that she made the return trip. Richard came back by train, saving an hour, and was at the office when they got there. Harriet did not see him again; he was in conference; and presently she quietly got back into the motorcar, and on her way to meet Nina she slipped the plain circle of gold into her handbag.

She had it out tonight, and put it on her bare, pretty hand, and held it to the fire, and slowly the events of the bewildering and tiring day wheeled before her, and only the reality of the ring assured her that it was not all a confused dream. Married! And all alone before the glowing coals, weary from hostile encounters, on her marriage night!

She had intended to write to Linda tonight; Linda was vexed with her, and small wonder! For Harriet had left the little New Jersey house almost without farewells, had come down to an earlier breakfast even than Fred's, and had said briefly that she was returning to the Carters, and would see them all soon.

Why hadn't she told Linda? Well, for one reason, she had hardly believed her own memory of the talk on Christmas day with Richard. Then she had feared opposition, feared Linda's shocked references to decent intervals of mourning; Linda's frank belief that there was no strong personal feeling involved on Richard's part; Linda's advice to a bride.

Harriet's face burned at the mere thought of it. No, she couldn't tell Linda yet; she was too tired to write tonight, anyway. Linda and Fred had not been at all approving, Christmas night. David had reproached her, had disappeared earlier than was expected or necessary; they had not failed of their suspicions.

"Well! I must go to bed," she said aloud, suddenly. She stood, one elbow on the mantel, her beautiful eyes fixed on the dying fire. It was midnight, the room and the house very still. "It isn't exactly what I expected marriage to be," she mused. "But after all," she said to herself, beginning to move about with last preparations for bed," "I'm married to the man I love—nothing can change that. And if he doesn't love me, he likes me. I've done nothing wrong, and if my life is just a little different from most women's, why, I shall have to make the best of it! And I did tell him—I did tell him—"

"It Isn't Exactly What I Expected Marriage to Be."

And her thoughts went back to the first few minutes she had spent in Richard's office that day. They had been alone, discussing the last details of their astonishing plan, when she had suddenly taken the plunge.

"Mr. Carter, there is just one thing! Of course," Harriet's cheeks had flamed, "of course, this marriage of ours is not the usual marriage, and yet, there is just one thing of which I would like to speak to you before we—we go up to Greenwich." And finding his gray eyes pleasantly fixed upon her she had gone on, confused but determined: "I'm twenty-seven now—and perhaps I might have married some other man before this—except that—when I was seventeen—I did fall in love with a man! And we were to be married—!" She had stopped short; it was incredibly hard. "He had—or I thought he had, brought something tremendously big and wonderful into my life," Harriet had continued, "and I was a stupid little girl, just taking care of my sister's babies and reading my father's books—"

"You are under no obligation to tell me anything of this," Richard had said, kindly, far more concerned for her distress than interested in what she was saying. "I must have known that there were admirers! I assure you that—"

"No, but just a moment!" Harriet had interrupted him. "I was infatuated—I knew that at once, God knows I've known it ever since! I went away with him, little fool that I was!"

A gleam of genuine surprise had come into Richard Carter's eyes, and he looked at her without speaking.

"I was taken ill the day I left with him. While I was getting well I had time to think it over. I knew then I was too young and too ignorant to be any man's wife. I was frightened and I—well, I ran away; I went back to my sister. Both she and her husband regarded me after that as in some way marked, unprincipled, unworthy—"

"Poor child!" Richard had said. "They naturally would. You were no more than Nina's age!"

"So that's my history," Harriet had finished, simply. "I thought I had done with men. And there have been men, men like Ward, for instance, to whom I could have been married without feeling that I need make any mention of that old time. But I wanted to tell you."

"Thank you very much," Richard had said, gravely. "If the protection of my name and my house seems welcome to you, after some battling with the world, it will be an additional satisfaction to me."

And then before another word was spoken Fox had come in, announcing the car, and they had begun the long, strange drive.

She got into the luxurious bed, put out the bedside light, and lay with her hands clasped behind her head, thinking. The clock struck one; snow was still falling steadily outside, but in here the last pink glow of firelight flickered and sank—flickered and sank lazily.

Some sudden thought made Harriet smile ruefully. She indicated that it was unwelcome by turning over to bury her bright head in the pillow, and resolutely composing herself for sleep.

(To be continued.)

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