HARRIET and the PIPER

by Kathleen Norris

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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"The next morning I slipped away from the house with my suitcase, and I met Royal Blondin downtown. We motored to Syracuse and took a train there for New York. I had felt sick when I awakened—it was partly excitement, and partly the supper the night before, when we had all eaten and drunk too much. But I was very sick in the train, I thought I was going to die. Royal persuaded me to eat my lunch in the dining car, and that only made me worse. There was a nice woman in the train, with two little girls, and she took care of me. And when she got to New York—I had told her that I was on my wedding journey, and perhaps that made her kind—she took us to her boarding house in West Forty-sixth street. The landlady was a dear, good woman, a Mrs. Harrington, and—I was very sick by this time!—she put me into her own room, because the house was full, and sent for her own doctor.

"It was a time of horror," Harriet said, smiling a little, after a moment of thought. "The strange women and the strange room, and Royal coming in with flowers, and sitting beside me. The doctor said it was a touch of poisoning, and I was ill only a few days. But the homesickness, and the strangeness! Somehow, I didn't feel married, I felt like a lost little girl. I wanted to be back in Linda's kitchen again, safe, and scolding because nothing interesting ever happened.

"Well, I was sick for three or four days. It was the fourth day when I was well enough to go out. Royal thanked them, and paid Mrs. Harrington and the doctor and we went to lunch downtown—it was at Martin's, I remember, and Royal was so excited and interested in everything. But I still felt limp and dull. We shopped and went about seeing things after lunch, and then we went to the hotel where he was staying. We were registered there as Mr. and Mrs. Blondin; it was all quite taken for granted."

Harriet stopped; her face was drawn and white, her words coming with difficulty, the phrases brief and dry. Richard was paying her absolute attention, his eyes fixed upon her face.

"We had dinner upstairs," she said. She paused, her lips tight pressed.

"I can't tell you," she began again, suddenly, "I can't tell you how it was that I came suddenly to know that I was too young for marriage! In Miriam Street's little studio, where they were laughing about the baby and the supper, it seemed different. But here, in a hotel, I suddenly wanted my sister, I wanted to be home again.

"We were talking and planning naturally enough. Royal was coming and going in the two rooms; I had plenty of chance to—to escape. Every time I let one go by my heart beat harder."

He could tell from her voice that her heart was beating hard now with the memory of that old time.

"If I had let them all go by," she recommenced, "my life would have been different. In a few weeks we would have come back to Watertown, as man and wife, and perhaps had a studio near the Streets', and perhaps found a solution. But I couldn't!

"I caught up my coat; left my hat and bag. I went down the stairs, not daring to wait for the elevator. And I went to Mrs. Harrington's. She was very kind and took me in; she said that perhaps it would be better to wait—until I was older. I cried all night, and the next day Mrs. Harrington lent me the money and I went back to Linda.

"Of course, it was terrible, at first. But they were kind to me, in their way. And I was—cured. I went into hysterics at the first mention of the whole hideous thing. They saw Roy, and they told me that I need never see him again. The papers—for it got to the papers!—said that a divorce had been arranged, but there was no need for a divorce. It was all hushed up—Linda and Fred never spoke of it. I—ah, well, I couldn't!

"But when Fred's brother, David, who was in dental college then, began to like me, then they began to make light of it," Harriet remembered. "There had been no marriage, of course, either in law or in fact. They all knew that. And I suppose if I had married David it might have been happier for me. But as it was, I angered them. I didn't want to marry David. And so it was what folly girls got themselves into—what the world thought of a girl who had been 'talked about'—what the least breath of scandal meant!"

"And you went back to Blondin?" Richard suggested.

"I? No, I never saw him again until a year ago in this garden!" Harriet said.

"You never saw him again!" the man ejaculated.

"Not for nine years!"

"But—my God, my dear girl, he spoke of you as his wife!" Richard said.

"He said I had been. Not that I was now!"

The man looked at her, looked away at the river, and shrugged his shoulders as if he were mystified by the ways of women.

"But—you were never his wife?" he said, flatly.

"Oh, no! You didn't think," Harriet said, hurt, "that I would have married you, or anyone else, if I had been!"

"You let him blackmail you for that?" Richard further marveled.

"I knew—in my own mind, of course, that I was not to blame," the girl said, anxiously. "But it sounded—horrible."

Richard bit his lower lip, looked critically at his racket, slowly shook his head.

"I didn't mind what any one thought," Harriet said, reading his thought. "But they did!"

"They?" Richard repeated, patiently.

"Everyone," she supplied, promptly. "Your wife, your mother, Mary Putnam! Even Mrs. Tabor."

"I suppose so!" he conceded, after a pause. And beneath his breath he added, "Isabelle—Ida Tabor!"

His tone was all she asked of exquisite reassurance.

"I hoped you wouldn't!" she said, standing up with clasped hands and a sudden brightening of her tired and colorless face. "That's what I tried to make myself believe you would feel! I wanted so to leave all behind. I thought he had gone, that it was all over, that what it was mattered more than what it sounded like! I thought I could save Nina better, with what I knew, than any one else! But last night," Harriet added, "proved to me that I had been all wrong. I've been so worried," she added, with utter faith in his decision, "I don't know what you think we had better do."

For a full minute Richard watched her in silence. Then he said, mildly:

"About Nina, you mean?"

"About everything!" Harriet suddenly laughed gaily, like a child. Life seemed once more straight and pleasant in this exquisite June morning; she felt puzzled, but somehow no longer afraid. The menacing horrors of all the years, the vague uneasiness that she had never quite dared to face, were fluttering about her awakening spirit like Alice's pack of cards.

"Nina will come into line," her father said, thoughtfully; "she doesn't know what she wants. I wish—I wish he loved her!" he added, with a faint frown. "I'll see him about it again. We'll take her to Rio. She'll get over it."

"And—" Harriet stopped, and began again: "And do you want things to go on just as they are?" she asked.

For answer Richard smiled at her in silence.

"No," he said, finally. "I can't say that I do. I want you to worry less, and to buy yourself some new gowns, and to begin to enjoy life! Shakespeare had you down fine when he talked about conscience making cowards of us all. What did you do it for? A young, capable, good-looking girl scared by a lot of old women! Now, we'll take up this Nina question, later on. You'd better go up and get yourself some coffee, and go to bed for awhile. Better plan to be in town for a day or two, for you'll both need clothes for the steamer—"

"You're very kind," the girl said, eyes averted, voice almost inaudible. They were both standing now, Harriet's head turned aside, so that he could not see her face, but her soft fingers resting in his.

"I'm not kind at all!" Richard said, with a rather confused laugh. He patted her hand encouragingly. "The sea trip will shake both you and Nina up, and do you a world of good!" he said.

"You think—" Harriet raised the soft, dark lashes, and her splendid, weary eyes met his. "You really aren't worried about Nina?"

And she tried by a very faint stirring of her fingers to free them and, finding them held, dropped her eyes again.

"I think I have Blondin's number," Richard said, with more force than eloquence. Then, with a little laugh that was partly amused and partly embarrassed, he let her go.

He watched the young, slender figure and the shining, bare head until they disappeared among the great trees about the house.

CHAPTER XV.

The summer Sunday ran its usual course. Ward and his sister went to luncheon at the club; Madame Carter drove majestically to a late service in the pretty, vine-covered village church. Harriet, at last able to relax in soul

And She Tried by a Very Faint Stirring of Her Fingers to Free Them, and Finding Them Held, Dropped Her Eyes Again.

and body, slept hour after glorious hour. Richard, returning from golf for a late luncheon, asked for her. Mrs. Carter was still asleep, Bottomley assured him, and received orders not to disturb her. But when Mr. Blondin called, Richard told the butler, he was to be shown to the terrace at once.

"I had your message," Royal said, as an opening.

"You've not seen Nina today?" Nina's father asked.

"I broke an engagement with her at the club," the other man assured him. "We will probably meet at the Bellamys', at dinner this evening."

"Ah, it was about that I wished to speak." Richard paused, and Blondin watched him with polite interest. "You have held your knowledge of Mrs. Carter as a sort of weapon for some months," Richard said, presently, "to use it when you saw fit. I have always been in my wife's confidence—"

He paused, but for no reason that Blondin could divine. As a matter of fact, it gave Richard a sudden and unexpected pleasure to speak of her so, to realize that he really might give the most wonderful title in the world to this beautiful and spirited woman.

"And I have also talked with Nina this morning," he went on. "I regret to say that her intentions have not altered."

"A loyal little heart!" Blondin said, gravely and contentedly. "I knew I could depend upon her!"

"I said I wanted to see you on business, Mr. Blondin," Richard continued, trying to keep impatience and contempt out of his voice, "and we'll keep to business. I don't know what your circumstances are, of course—"

He hesitated, and Blondin looked at him with a faint interest.

"I live simply," he said. "Nina's money will be all her own."

"Nina will have no money, not one five-cent piece, for exactly three years!" Richard said.

Blondin shrugged.

"She is quite willing to try it!" he reminded her father.

"I know she is! But how about you?" Richard asked. "You are not a boy, you have some idea of what marriage means. For three years you must take care of her, dress her, amuse her, satisfy her that she has not made a mistake. Then she does come into her money—yes. But three years is a long time in which to keep her certain that the wisest thing she can do is turn it over to you."

He paused; Blondin smoked imperturbably.

"The marriage must be a notorious one, in any case," Richard pursued. "For I intend to make my stand too clear ever to permit of a retraction. I shall forbid it—let the world know that I forbid it. I shall forbid my daughter the house, and her wedding gift will be simply the clothes she happens to have. From Tuesday—her eighteenth birthday—she will turn to you for her actual pocket money, for her theater tickets and cab fares."

"I understand that perfectly!" Royal said, serenely. But underneath, while not moved from his intention, he felt his customary assurance shaken.

"She is extravagant, naturally," her father said. "She will want new gowns, want to display her new importance a little. Those bills will come to you, Mr. Blondin. All the world will know as well as you do that I have washed my hands of the whole affair."

Blondin had no money, and lived with an extravagance that kept him perpetually worried for money. His credit would receive an immediate assistance from a marriage with Richard Carter's daughter, to be sure, but to sustain a credit for three years upon that shadowy footing would be extremely trying.

He liked Nina; despite his contempt for the girl, there was a certain pitying affection for her stubborn loyalty and simplicity. But he knew exactly what hideous scenes must follow upon his marriage with her. What could he do with her, even suppose him to have borrowed money enough to make their honeymoon a success? He imagined her dawdling about his studio, imagined his social standing as necessarily affected, imagined Mr. and Mrs. Royal Blondin attempting to reach an agreement as to which invitations would be accepted and which rejected. Railway fares, luncheons downtown, all these cost money—lots of money. Nina would want to entertain "the girls." And Royal had at present several serious debts.

This was not a cheerful outlook with which to begin three years of penniless matrimony. Royal, suavely smiling, and smoking on the terrace, wondered suddenly if old Madame Carter, who had always been his champion, would help out.

But Richard seemed to read his thought.

"Nina has appealed to her grandmother," he said, "and I know my mother sympathizes, and would be glad to help you. But her affairs are in my hands. She preferred it so, when I offered her some securities years ago, and it has always been so. Her bank account receives a monthly check; she sends all her household bills to my secretary, Fox. He O. K.'s and pays them. Consequently, she is not able to act in this matter, and I think she is glad of it! I believe she would regret the—the inevitable estrangement as much as I."

Richard had taken a small slip of tan paper from his pocket, and was studying it thoughtfully. Royal saw it, and his eyes narrowed.

"Now, Mr. Blondin," Nina's father said, simply, "I'm a business man. I can't beat about the bush, and call things by pretty names. I want a favor of you, and I'm willing to pay for it. I telephoned you this morning that I wanted to see you on a matter of business. This is my proposition."

He leaned forward, and Royal saw the paper. He boasted to women of his indifference to money, it was true, but as with all adventurers, it held first place in his thoughts. No man who was in debt could look upon that check unmoved. Royal might win at cards tonight, to be sure; Carter might weaken tomorrow, it was true. But this check bore his name, and it was sure.

To enter the bank, with Richard Carter's check for so substantial an amount, to deposit it, exchange a careless word with the cashier, to write his check for the overdue rent, with a casual apology; to play bridge again, this evening, with young Bellamy, and this time win back the accursed check of his own, as he knew he would win it. . . .

"Just one moment, Mr. Carter. You say that you and I know what marriage is. How do you reconcile it with your knowledge of Nina, your knowledge of her upbringing, to plan deliberately what would make our marriage—or any marriage—foredoomed to failure from the start? I didn't spoil Nina, I didn't form her tastes. She has thought of herself as an heiress, she has spent money, lived luxuriously. I only ask a fair chance. Make it an allowance, if you like. Keep the matter in the family; don't blaze to the world that you disapprove! Many a less-promising marriage has turned out a brilliant success. She loves me. I—I am devoted to her. I see tremendous possibilities in her!"

"She loves you as a child does, and because she doesn't know you," Richard said, inflexibly. "But you haven't heard what I propose, Blondin. Hear me out. I give you this now, today, on condition that before tonight you talk to Nina. Represent anything you wish to her. Tell her what you please. But convince her that she must wait for two years—with no letters, no meetings, no engagement—that's all.

"On my part, I promise that nobody in the world, not Mrs. Carter, not anybody, will hear of this for two years from today, at least. Meanwhile, we'll amuse Nina. Her grandmother wants to take her to Santa Barbara next fall—Gardiner wants both the youngsters on his ranch this summer, or she may go with me to Brazil. She'll have enough to think about. We'll not hurt you with her, you may take my word for it. And I tell you frankly that I shall be deeply grateful. I'm not paying you for giving her up. I'm paying you for two years' delay. Young Hopper will be at the Gardiners' this summer—she likes him, and he likes her! Well, that's speculation." Richard dismissed it with a movement of his fine hands. "But we'll distract her!" he promised. "Hopper may buy a ranch out there—that sort of thing might suit Nina down to the ground!"

"Buy it with Nina's money," Royal could not help sneering.

Richard eyed him in surprise.

"When Joe Hopper died he left that boy's mother something in the millions," he said. "There's an immense estate." And then, with a reversion to business: "Come, now, Mr. Blondin. We understand each other. Nina's dining at the Bellamys tonight; you're staying there. Will you see her?"

The check fluttered to the table between them. There was a long silence. Then Blondin ground out his cigarette in a stone saucer, rose, in all the easy beauty of his white summer clothes, his flowing scarf, his dark, romantic locks. He lifted his straw hat, put it on, picked up his stick, and laid it on the table. Then he took the check and read it thoughtfully.

"Thank you!" he said. Yet the shameful thing struck him, an adept now in evading and lying, as surprisingly easy, and as he sauntered away in the June warmth and silence, it was not of Nina, or her father, or even of himself that he was thinking.

He had met the widow of Joe Hopper a few nights ago: a faded little pleasant woman of fifty, pathetically grateful for his casual politeness in her strangeness and shyness. He had chanced, quite idly and accidentally, to make an impression on her. She had promised to come to the studio and look at his rugs.

Royal wondered why she dressed so badly; she needed simple materials and flowing lines. He heard himself telling her so.

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Richard sat on, on the terrace, thinking, and presently his mother came out and joined him. Wasn't he, the old lady asked elaborately, going

Then He Took the Check and Read It Thoughtfully.

to the club? It was almost five o'clock, her son reminded her. Two or three of his business associates were coming to dinner; Hansen was to drive them all into the city later. Now, he just felt lazy.

"No tea today?" he asked, presently. People usually went to the club on Sunday, said his mother. She added, irrelevantly, that Harriet was asleep. Richard said that she had looked tired this morning; sleep was the best thing for her.

But suddenly life became significant and thrilling again; he heard her voice, her laugh. She came swiftly and quietly out to them, smiling at him, settling herself in the chair beside his mother. She wore white, transparent, simple; there were coral beads about her firm young throat. The dew of her deep sleep made her blue eyes wonderful; her cheeks were as pink as a baby's.

"Aren't the June days delicious?" she said. Richard studied her, smilingly, without answering. What would she say next, where would she move her eyes, or lay her white hand, he wondered. When she murmured to his mother in an undertone, he tried to catch the words.

"Did you have a good sleep?" Richard asked. She flashed him an eloquent look.

"Oh—the most delightful of my whole life! Eight hours without stirring!"

The Hoyts arrived; a handsome mother and two equally handsome daughters. Harriet went to them gracefully; Richard saw that she was accepting good wishes. She took the callers to his mother, and filled their cups herself.

"She certainly is wonderful!" Richard said. He perfectly realized his own suddenly deepening feeling for her, but he dared not analyze it yet. When Mrs. Hoyt hinted at a dinner, he took part in the conversation. "Thursday? Why not, Harriet? We have no engagement for Thursday?"

She flushed brightly, signaling to him that she had already indicated an excuse. They had never dined together away from home. He need not think, said Harriet's anxious manner, that he need carry the appearance of marriage so far.

"But—but aren't Nina and I to be in town Thursday?" she ventured.

"Shopping. You can make that next week!" Richard said. He loved her confusion.

"Then we surely will! Thank you," she said to Mrs. Hoyt.

"Thursday, then, at eight!" the caller said, departing. Richard sauntered with them to their car, and returned to find Harriet half-scandalized, half-laughing.

"But do you want to dine with them?" she asked.

"Why not?" His smile challenged her, and she laughed hardily.

"I suppose there is no reason why not, Mr. Carter!"

"You can wear"—he gestured—"the black and goldy thing. They'll all be watching you!"

"Oh," she said, considering earnestly, "I have a much handsomer one than that. Blue and silver. You've not seen it."

"Blue and silver, then." Richard felt a distinct regret when the men he expected appeared. There was but one figure of any interest to him on the shady, flower-scented terrace, and that was a woman's figure in a white gown.

For two or three days he was conscious of a constant interest in her appearances and disappearances, a constant desire to please her. He was conscious of one mastering curiosity: he wanted to know just how Harriet regarded him. It seemed suddenly of supreme importance. He thought of it in his office, and smiled to himself during important business conferences, wondering about it. It seemed incredible to him, now, that his experiences of the past year had been so largely concerned with Harriet. His wife's companion, his daughter's governess, his own capable and dignified housekeeper, the woman he had so hastily married, all seemed a different person, a quite visionary person, with whom just such business-like arrangements had been possible.

But Harriet was beginning to seem to him a stranger who possessed at once the most mysterious and childlike, the most beautiful and the most baffling personality that he had ever known. He made excuses to go home early, just to catch glimpses of this wife who was not his wife. That he had ever taken a fatherly, advisory tone with this woman was unbelievable; her mere approach made him catch his breath and lose his coherency. He had walked into her room—he had patronized her—he had asked her casually to marry him as if she had been fifty, and as plain as she was lovely!

Richard shuddered as he thought of it. He made constant efforts to engage her in personalities, but she evaded him. There was a real thrill for him in the quiet dinner at the Hoyts'. Mrs. Carter, said slow old bewhiskered John Hoyt, was an extremely pretty woman. "My wife"—Richard in answering called her that—"looks particularly well in an evening gown." Indeed she looked exquisite in the blue and silver dress, laughing—still with that adorable mist of strangeness and shyness about her—with her neighbors at the table, and afterward in the drawing room, waving her silver fan slowly while Freda Hoyt, who quite obviously adored her, whispered her long confidences.

Coming home in the limousine they had neighbors with them, old Doctor and Mrs. Carmichael, so he might not have the word alone with her for which he had been longing all evening. But he stopped her in the wide, dim hallway when they reached Crownlands.

"Tired?" he said, at the foot of the stairs.

"Not a bit!" There was an enchanting vitality about her. She had slipped the thin wrap from her shoulders, and she turned to him her lovely, happy face. "Did you want me?"

"I wanted to say something to you," Richard said, feeling awkward as a boy.

"In there?" She nodded, suddenly alert, toward the library.

"Why in there?" he asked, with a little husky laugh. His one impulse was to put his arms about her.

"I thought—bills, perhaps?" Harriet said, innocently. It was the third day of the month; he had often consulted her as to expenses before this.

"No," Richard said, with another unsteady little laugh. "It wasn't bills. I was just wondering—if I had been very stupid," he said, taking one of her hands, and looking up from the fingers that lay in his to the face that now wore an expression a little frightened, despite the smile.

"Never with me!" Harriet said, in a low tone.

"Never so blind," Richard said, "never so matter-of-fact that I hurt your feelings? Nothing of—that sort?"

"Always the kindest friend I ever had!" the girl answered, unsteadily and with suddenly wet eyes. "The—the most generous!"

He looked at her hand again, looked up at her as if he would speak. But instead, she felt her fingers pressed, and felt her heart thump with a delicious terror.

Bottomley came noiselessly, discreetly, across the hall. Instantly the woman in blue and silver was all the mistress.

"Is Mr. Ward in, Bottomley?"

"He dined at 'ome, Mrs. Carter."

"Oh, thank you! You may lock up, then. Good-night, Mr. Carter! Good-night, Bottomley!"

She was gone. The blue-and-silver gown and the bunched folds of the furred coat vanished on the stairway landing. The tall clock that she passed struck eleven. And Richard, going into his library, realized that he was deeply and passionately in love.

He could think of nothing else—he did not wish to think of anything else. Her face came between him and his book, her voice loitered in his ears, her precise, pretty phrasing, the

"I Wanted to Say Something to You," Richard Said, Feeling Awkward as a Boy.

laughter that sometimes lurked beneath her tones.

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They were at the country club; Harriet chaperoning Nina, who was down at the tennis court with a group of young persons; Richard breathless and happy from a hard game of eighteen holes. He had encountered her on the porch, on his way to the showers, experiencing, as he did so, the thrill that belongs only to the unexpected encounter. Now they loitered at the railing, in the shade of the green awnings, as entirely oblivious of watching eyes as if the clubhouse were the library at home.

"Mrs. Carter," said a woman in bright yellow, coming up to them suddenly, "will you be a darling and come and talk to my French officer? The girls have all been practicing their Berlitz on him, and he's almost losing his mind! Dick," added this matron, who had linked her arm about Harriet's waist, "for heaven's sake go clean up! Can't you find time to talk to your wife at home? I've been watching you for five minutes, getting my arms burned simply black—will you come, Mrs. Carter? That's the poor soul, over there with Sarah. I don't know why I've had a French governess for that girl for seven years!"

"To save the life of a fellow creature—" Harriet said in her liquid French. She went off, laughingly, in the other woman's custody; Richard looked after them a moment.

He saw them join the group of smiling girls and the harassed Frenchman; saw the alien's face brighten as Harriet was introduced. A moment later a boy with a tennis racket dashed up to them, and there was a scattering in the direction of the courts. The girls surrounded the boy, and streamed away chattering. The matron in yellow came back to her card table. And Harriet, unfurling her parasol, deep in conversation with the captured soldier, sauntered slowly after the tennis players. The afternoon sunshine sent clean shadows across the clipped grass; the stretched blue silk of Harriet's parasol threw a mellow orange light upon her tawny hair and saffron-colored gown.

Richard had a child's desperate wish that he was dressed, and might run after them.

But it was not at the tennis that he looked, twenty minutes later, when he reached the courts; although a brilliant play was being made, and there was a spattering of applause. His eyes instantly found Harriet's figure; she was still talking to the Frenchman, whose olive face was glowing with interest and admiration, and not more than eight inches, Richard thought, from her own. Harriet's own face wore the shadow of a smile, her lashes were dropped, and she was gently pushing the point of her closed parasol into the green turf. The chairs in which they sat had been slightly turned from the court.

Richard engaged himself in conversation with two or three men and women who were watching the youngsters' game, and presently found himself applauding his son for a brilliant ace. But after perhaps five minutes he walked quite without volition, straight to Harriet's neighborhood, and she rose at once, introduced her new friend, and with a glance at her wrist, announced that she must go.

"Ward said he would drive me home the instant it was over," said Harriet, clapping heartily for the triumphant finish of the set.

"I'll drive you home!" Richard said, instantly. "I've the small car."

"Friday night!" Harriet smiled. For Friday night was the night for a men's dinner and poker game at the country club, and Richard usually liked to be there.

"I can come back!" he persisted, suddenly caring more for this concession than anything else in the world. Without another word she agreed, bade her Frenchman what seemed to Richard a voluble good-by, and when the bowing officer disappeared turned with a reminiscent smile.

"And now what?"

"Where did you learn to chatter French that way?" Richard said, leading the way to the line of parked motors.

"Oh, we lived in Paris—old Mrs. Rogers and I," Harriet reminded him carelessly. And reaching the little rise of ground that lay between the clubhouse and the parking field, she stood still, looking off across the exquisite spread of fields and valleys, banded by great strips of woods, and flooded now by the streaming shadows and golden lights of the late afternoon. "What a day!" she said, filling her lungs with great breaths of the sweet air. "What an hour!"

"What I meant to say to you up there on the porch," Richard said, "when that—that woman interrupted—"

Harriet herself interrupted with a laugh.

"You say 'that woman' as if it was a bitter, deadly curse!" she said.

"Well—" They had reached the car now, and Richard was investigating the oil gauge and spark plugs under the hood. "Well, a woman like that breaks in—nothing to her!" he said with scorn, strightening up.

"Yes, but at a country club?" Harriet offered, placatingly, as she got into the front seat, and tucked the pongee robe snugly about the saffron-colored gown.

"I suppose so!" He got in beside her; there was a moment of backing and wrenching before they glided out smoothly on the white driveway. "What I meant to say was this," he added, suddenly, with a sidewise glance from his wheel. "I—I want you to realize that I appreciate the injustice—the crudeness of my rushing to you in New Jersey that Christmas day. I realize that we all have imposed on you—we've taken you too much for granted! I was in trouble, and I couldn't think of any other way out of it. But for any man to put a proposition like that to any woman—"

They were driving very slowly. He looked at her again, and met a wondering look in her beautiful eyes that still further confused him. He had been uncomfortably conscious of an odd confusion in touching upon this subject at all. Yet his mind had been full of it all day.

"I never felt it so, I assure you!" Harriet said with her lucid, friendly look. Richard felt that there was more to say, but realized that he had selected an unfortunate time for these confidences.

"I'm afraid I've been extremely stupid in the matter," he said, feeling for his words. "I've gone about it clumsily. To tell you the truth—What does that boy want?"

It was Ward who was coming toward them across the green, with great springs and leaps, like some mountain animal.

"Give us a lift!" shrieked Ward, flinging himself upon the car as its speed decreased. "Something is the matter with my engine—engine pectoris is what I call it! Father, Mr. Tom Grant expects you to dine at his table tonight, he said to remind you. And, Harriet, angel of angels, we will be about six or seven about the groaning board; is that all right?"

"I told Bottomley six or seven," Harriet said, serenely. "Ward, get in or get out," she added, maternally, "don't hang over the door in that blood-curdling way!"

She had put her arm about the boy to steady him; they began to discuss tennis scores with enthusiasm. Richard drove the rest of the way home almost without speaking.

He planned to see Harriet again that evening, and left the club at eleven o'clock, after an incredibly dull game, with the definite hope that the youngsters would dance, or in some other way prolong the summer evening at least until midnight. His heart sank when he reached Crownlands; the lower floor showed only the tempered lights that burned until the latest member of the family came in, and Bottomley reported that the young persons had gone upstairs at about half-past ten, sir. It was now half-past eleven.

Richard debated sending Harriet a message to the effect that he would like to see her for a moment. The flaw in this plan was that he could think of nothing about which there was the slightest necessity of seeing her. He felt restless and anything but sleepy, and glanced irresolutely at the library door, and at the stairway.

(To be continued.)

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