

HARRIET and the PIPER by Kathleen Norris

The Weekly Ledger's New Serial Story

Start It Today

girl saw her lips frame "Merry Christmas!" The door slammed; Bottomley came with stately footsteps up to the hall again. Harriet gave a little laugh of triumph. Now the coast was clear!

Thus it was that Richard Carter found only his mother and his children at the dinner table that night, and no guests under his roof. Miss Field, to be sure, was at the head of the table, but then Miss Field was a member of the family. He interrogated her briefly as they went in.

"Ward's gang? That Eaton and?"

"Oh, they went yesterday!"

"Speak to Bottomley?"

"Yes. He and Pilgrim are quite reconciled to remaining." Harriet buttoned a cuff, to hide a dimple that would come to the corner of her mouth. "And Mrs. Tabor came, and would have stayed," she could not resist the temptation to add, "but I persuaded her that some other time would be better."

"Scene with Nina about it?" Richard had asked, curiously.

"Nina was not here," Harriet answered. "And there was a faint smile in the deep blue eyes that she raised suddenly to his."

"Ah, well, I knew, of course, that you would manage it!" he said, contentedly. "It seems black art to me. I had enough of it!"

She smiled again, and went quietly to her place. But when he summoned Ward and Nina to his mother's room, after dinner, she had disappeared, and the family was quite alone when he broke the news to them.

Harriet, presently needed again, was astonished at the emotion of the old lady, who had been genuinely fond of her daughter-in-law, and had always been loyal to Isabelle, as one of the Carters. Madame Carter was greatly shaken, Nina hysterical, Ward agitated, irritated at his own feeling.

He had not seen his mother for seven months, she had brought nothing but a certain unpleasant notoriety to her children, yet her death struck both the young creatures forcibly, and they felt shocked and shaken.

"We can't be in the Fordyce tableaux," said Nina in an interval between floods of sobs. "Not that I would want to, now! But I don't know; it seems to me that I am the most unfortunate girl in the world!"

"I think both you and Ward should wear black for a certain period," Richard said to her. He had been walking the floor nervously, stopping now and then beside the great chair where his mother sat silent and stricken, to put his arm about her shoulders, and murmur to her consolingly.

"When my mother died," Madame Carter quavered, with her handkerchief pressed to the tip of her nose, "my sisters and I wore black, and refused all social engagements for one year. We then, I remember distinctly, began to wear white and lavender."

Nina broke in pettishly: "I don't see why I have to wear black!"

"Why should you?" Ward said with bitter scorn. "It's only your mother!"

Nina began to cry.

"You and I will go down to Landman's early tomorrow, Nina," Harriet suggested, "and we'll have some one show us what is simple and nice—no craps, you know," Harriet said, with a glance at Richard Carter, "but black, for a few months, anyway."

"I think that would be the best, Richard," his mother approved. "I believe I will go with you," she condescended to Harriet, "after all, Isabelle was my daughter-in-law, and the mother of my grandchildren!"

"And I won't go to California or Bermuda or anywhere else unless Ladybird comes!" Nina burst out, with a broken sob.

"Nonsense!" her father began harshly. Harriet said:

"Bermuda? Is there a plan for Bermuda?"

"I suggested it for a few weeks," Richard said, frowning, "but I don't propose to have Nina invite a group of friends. That isn't exactly the idea."

"We could ask Mrs. Tabor," Harriet said, soothingly; "it is right in the middle of the season, and perhaps she will feel she can hardly spare the time. But I'm sure that if she can—"

"If I ask her, she'll go," Nina said, in a sulky, confident undertone.

Harriet had her doubts, but she did not express them. A month at Nassau, in the undisturbed company of Nina and her grandmother, was enough to appall even Harriet's stout heart.

The event proved her right, for while Isabelle Tabor flew at once to her disconsolate little friend, and assured Richard with tears in her eyes that she would do anything in the world to help him, she weakened when the actual test arrived.

"If just you and I and your dear grandmother were going, dearest girl," she said to Nina, "then it would be perfect. But as long as Miss Field, who is perfectly charming and conscientious and all that, feels that she must accompany us, why—you and I would never be a moment alone, sweetheart, you know that! I don't like to think that it's jealousy."

"Of course it's jealousy," Nina was pleased to decide, gloomily. "Granny says that we don't need her, but Father just sticks to it that she must manage everything!"

Ida Tabor smiled automatically. "I don't suppose your father sees anything in Miss Field?" she submitted, lightly.

"Oh, heavens, no!" Nina said, striding herself in a handbag. There was a rather steely look in the eyes of her friend Ladybird, but she did not see it. Her smile of pleasure gradually gave place to a pout. "I'm going to ask Father if we need Miss Harriet!" she said.

And that evening she did indeed attack Richard on the subject, although not as decidedly as she had planned.

He listened to her interestedly enough, with his evening paper held ready for his next glance.

"You look as if you needed it," Harriet observed.

"You look wonderful," Richard returned, simply. "Wonderful! Is that a new gown?"

"Well, I had it made last November just before I went away. Mrs. Carter gave me the material a year ago," Harriet glanced down at herself and smiled.

"You might wear pearls—or something—with it," Richard said. "Do you like pearls?"

It was astonishing to see the color come up in her dusky skin; her eyes met his almost pleadingly.

"Why—I never thought!" she said, in some confusion.

"I suppose a man may ask his wife if she likes pearls?" Richard said, impelled by some feeling he did not define. He had leaned back in his chair, and half-closed his eyes, as he studied her.

"Oh—please!" Harriet said in an agony. She gave a horrified glance about, but the library was closed and silent. "Some one might hear you!" she whispered. And a moment later she closed her eyes and murmured, "Some one might hear you!"

She had been watching him, with all June in her face. But as he went on the color slowly drained away, and about her beautiful eyes a look of strain and even of something like shame gradually deepened. When she spoke, it was as if the muscles of her throat were constricted.

"Yes, I see. Certainly, I see. We will have to let them talk. This is simply the best arrangement possible under the circumstances!"

"It is an arrangement that a man perhaps has no right to ask of a woman," Richard said. "Love means a great deal in a girl's life, and I suppose there is nothing else that makes up for the lack of it. But you are not an ordinary woman, and I assure you that in every way that I can I mean to prove to you how deeply I appreciate what you are doing for us all."

"Thank you!" Harriet said, almost inaudibly.

"Simply change your name on your cheeks," Richard said, thoughtfully. "I shall have Fox step into the bank with the authenticated signature. And if there is anything else, use your own judgment. Perhaps, if I tell my mother, you would like to write to certain friends—? You can continue to draw on the Corn Exchange, that's simplest, and I hope you'll remember that we have a large personal credit there," he added, with a smile. "It occurred to me tonight that you—you mustn't let your sister worry about that new house. If you want your own car—"

"Oh, good heavens, Mr. Carter!" Harriet said, suffocating.

"Ask me anything that puzzles you," the man said. And with a brief good-night he dropped back into his chair, sat absently motionless for a long, long time. Her eyes were fixed on space; she hardly breathed; it almost seemed as if her heart was stopped.

Richard went downstairs, surprised to feel still vaguely unsatisfied. He had had his word with Harriet, had said indeed much that he had not expected to say. However, it was much better to let the world know their relationship; he was perfectly satisfied to have it so. But still, as he settled himself to an hour's reading, the plaguing little impulse persisted. He would like to go upstairs again; he missed her companionship.

There was something very appealing about this woman, thought Richard, suddenly closing his book. Her beauty, her silences, her complete subjugation of her own interests to his, he found strangely fascinating.

"By George, she has made a most interesting woman of herself!" Richard decided, opening his book again. "She ought to be right in the middle of things, that girl!"

A day or two later Madame Carter came out to the terrace at eleven o'clock, beautifully groomed and gowned, and with an imperative hand arrested Harriet, who was tumbled and sunburned from the tennis court and was going toward the house.

"Just a moment, Miss Field," said she, magnificently. Harriet obediently stood still, and watched Madame Carter's magnificence settle itself

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Harriet waited, amused, annoyed, impatient.

"I understand," Madame Carter said, "that you and my son—for some reason best known to yourselves—have entered into a secret marriage?"

"Your first object, my dear, is not to antagonize his mother!" Harriet retorted herself. Aloud she said mildly: "You have no reason to disbelieve it, have you?"

"No reason to disbelieve my son!" his mother echoed, scandalized. "Why should I have! Mr. Carter is the soul of honor—absolutely the soul. Upon my word, I don't understand you!"

"I said you have no reason to disbelieve him," Harriet repeated. "You said that you understood that we had been married. It is true!"

And she looked off toward the river with an expression as composed as that of Madame Carter herself.

"I suppose you know that old saying: 'A secret bride has a secret to hide!'" the old woman pursued, pleasantly.

"I never heard it. I did not play much with the children of the neighborhood when I was a child," Harriet answered. "My father was very anxious to protect us from picking up expressions of that sort!"

There was a silence. Harriet, beginning to be ashamed of herself, did not look at her companion.

"A girl of your age has a great deal of confidence when she marries into a family like mine," the old lady said, presently, in a tone that trembled a little. "My son is a rich man—he is a prominent man. He has used his own judgment, of course. But I confess that in your place I should not carry myself with quite so much an air of triumph! It seems to me—"

Harriet determinedly regained her calm, and taking the chair next to the enraged old lady, quietly interrupted the flow of her angry words.

"I hope I have shown no air of triumph, Madame Carter," Harriet said. "You yourself—and most wisely—pointed out to us a few months ago that the arrangement here was unconventional!"

"Every one was talking, if you mind that!" the old lady snapped. But she was slightly mollified, none-the-less.

"But upon my word, you'd think marrying into the family was something to be done every day—!" she was beginning again, when Harriet interrupted again.

"No—no," she said, soothingly, conceding the last words an amused smile that itself rather helped to placate her companion. "It is, of course, the most serious step of my life! But the secrecy—as of course you will appreciate—was because there has been so much terrible notoriety this year! Why, Mr. Carter tells me that never in the history of all the Carters—"

This fortunate lead was enough. Madame Carter launched forth superbly upon a description of the usual Carter weddings, the ceremony, the state. In perhaps twenty minutes she was blandly patronizing Harriet, giving her encouraging little taps with her eyelashes, warning her of mistakes that Isabelle had made with Richard. Harriet knew that before three days were over her terrible mother-in-law would be telling the world just how wise, under the trying circumstances, the whole thing was, and just how clearly she had foreseen it. She was still listening respectfully, if a trifle confusedly, when Ward bounded from the house, and gave her an effusive embrace.

"Hello, mamma!" Ward said. Harriet laughed, as she pushed away the filial arm. Hardly knowing what she said or did she made her way to the house, and up to her own room.

But here, in Nina's room, were Nina and Mrs. Tabor, and from their eyes, as she came in, she knew that they knew. Nina got up, and came forward with a sort of sulky graciousness.

"I hope you'll be very happy, Miss Harriet—I suppose I oughtn't to call you Miss Harriet any more," Nina said, with an effort to smile that Harriet thought quite ghastly. She gave Harriet one of her big hands, and hesitated over a kiss. But they did not kiss each other.

At luncheon everything was exactly as usual; Richard had gone to the city, not to return for a night or two, and several social engagements distracted the young people from the contemplation of their father's affairs.

Harriet had not dared to hope that they would accept the situation so quietly, or that the world would. There were callers on the terrace every afternoon, there were pleasant congratulations and good wishes, there were a few paragraphs in the social weeklies. Richard had for years been too busy for mere entertaining, and the dinner parties and luncheons to the new Mrs. Carter, it was generally felt, must wait until next season.

To glance at the gold ring on her finger made Harriet feel as if a happiness almost shameful was bared to view. Her new position, modestly as she filled it, was yet a high position. She saw Richard's growing affection and trust, if he did not. She could afford to wait.

"But when are you and Dick Carter going to dine with us?" Mary Putnam said, one afternoon, at tea. Madame Carter, whose Victorian ideal of romance was not at all dissatisfied with the idea of the employer marrying his daughter's beautiful governess, smiled significantly.

"They're very odd lovers, my dear," she said to Mary with an eloquent glance. Mary laughed, and looked at Harriet, whose face was suddenly

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