

THE PIED PIPER

BY IRENE McDERMOTT

Illustrated by Lucia

IT WAS exactly ten minutes after four on a Saturday afternoon when Ginny knew she couldn't take another minute of it. She was going to explode all over Hugh Larson's Desert Restaurant. She was going up in front and yank a handful of hair out of that hussy's red head. And she was going to tell Clary exactly what she thought of him. She would make a scene that would outscene them all! In short, she, Virginia Harbison Nord, was through with Clary Nord, melody pianist, forever.

Then she sank back limply against the smooth white leather of the booth, forced her clenched fingers to straighten out, relax. She knew she would do nothing of the kind. She loathed people who made scenes. So did Clary. He often said, "I hate to see women wearing their emotions on their sleeve."

Clary was like that himself, never a feather out of place. Sometimes she wished he *would* get mad, especially about those women. She'd feel as if he were more human somehow.

But he wouldn't. Furthermore, he expected her to be as placid as a bowl of cream, no matter what. He said, "I like your cool-headed look, and the way you do your hair with those queenly brown coils, Ginny. I like your regal walk and the quiet way you wear your clothes."

And she didn't dare let Clary know she had cultivated that calm, dignified exterior to hide the volcanoes that were always erupting within her. She had had to live with two vivacious, blond, curly-haired sisters while she, perversely, had taken after her father, grown tall and large boned with a mop of straight brown hair that invariably came out of a permanent with a kinky frizz. She was a "plain clothes" woman and she knew it. But she had a mind with ruffles around the edge and a tornado in the middle.

But no, she would not make a scene. She would just go on seething inside, boiling, until Clary was through at six. Then, across a white, candle-lit dinner table, she would tell him quietly and finally that she was through. Then she would walk out, composed and collected, she hoped—and that insufferable red-head could have him!

This had been building up ever since the moment four months ago when the minister had said benevolently, "I now pronounce you husband and wife." Ginny knew it had probably been building up before they were married. But she had not known about the spell of his music then. Clary had not wanted her to hear him play before they were married. He



She stared into his furious blue eyes. "Shut up," he commanded, and he shook her.

Women followed pianist Clary Nord up and down the coast—and what kind of life was that for a wife who never made a scene?

said, rather shyly, "I—I don't want to disillusion you."

She smiled tenderly and said, "All right, if that's the way you want it." But she thought, "I don't care how badly he plays, I'll love him. It won't make a bit of difference."

Play badly indeed! He played like a demon. He bewitched everybody who heard him. Angrily she looked around the softly lighted restaurant. Women! Women overflowing into the aisles. Women at every table, in every booth. Silken girls in their twenties and furred, bejeweled young marrieds. Attractive girls, even beautiful girls. Ginny gritted her teeth. "But he married ME," she thought for the hundredth time. And this had never ceased to be a wonder to Ginny.

And Ginny loved her husband. She was so much in love with him (both of him) that she was miserable. For there were two Clary Nordes. There was the polished, fascinating Clary Nord, whose music put women into a trance, and,

when he dropped the mask, the little boy Clary Nord who had a cowlick in the mornings and who called her "Gin Honey" and who would talk for hours on end about a chicken ranch in the valley.

Ginny had tried to stay away from the places where Clary was playing. She had knitted, read, and gone to picture shows, only to leave in the middle of a picture and find herself heading for the restaurant where Clary was currently weaving his magic.

She had come into this small, luxurious place on Sunset Strip this afternoon with her chin firmly set at a determined angle. She was going to conquer this unreasonable jealousy for once and all time. She was going to sit down and sanely enjoy Clary's music, and accept the women who admired him as a part of his job. That was the secret—accept them, and not give them another thought.

She stood for a

moment in the back of the restaurant, steeling herself against the intimate threads of music that floated between the crowded tables and were already winding their spell about her.

The last tender notes of "Always" slipped off the keys and Clary swung into "San Fernando Valley." Ginny smiled a little bitterly. Did he play that *all* the time? He had been playing it yesterday when she came in—and the day before, too. San Fernando Valley. Clary's dream. "Some day," he said, "I'm going to quit the tune business and buy a chicken ranch in the valley—and then, just the two of us, Gin Honey!" But that someday was still several thousand dollars away. In the meantime, there were blondes, brunettes, and red-heads breaking Ginny up into little bits. But she was going to change that. Beginning now!

"Hello, Gin Honey." It was Hugh Larson's warm voice in her ear and his warm hand on her arm. "I saved a table for you."

Involuntarily, she pulled away from Hugh. She resented his "Gin Honey."

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