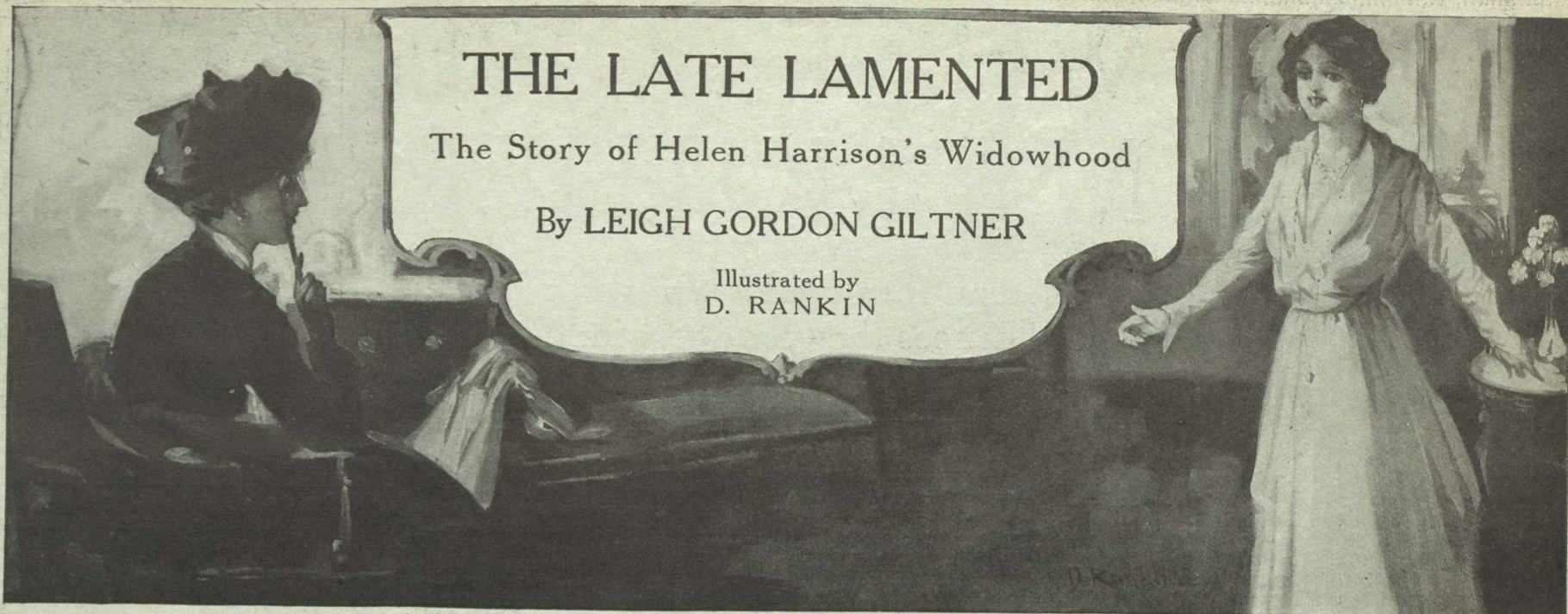


THE LATE LAMENTED

The Story of Helen Harrison's Widowhood

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Mrs. Bellamy Carver surveyed her critically, though she lost no time in propounding the catechism she had mentally formulated.

TWO intrusive numerals, insignificant in themselves but appalling in combination, were beginning to loom up ominously on Helen Harrison's mental horizon. Helen was twenty-nine. Somehow this seemed to her much less ancient than thirty—on the principle that ninety-eight cents will tempt the bargain seeker where a dollar might fail to attract.

No one, however, would have suspected Helen of more than the regulation twenty-four years, beyond which girlhood may not go, had it not been for certain amiable old ladies in her native village who had known her from infancy and who were at pains to inform all comers that she was "thirty if she was a day," adducing as proof irrefutable the relative dates of the various christenings, weddings and burials which mark the epochs of rural life. Some of these statistical tabbies—as Helen irreverently dubbed them—with a generous fancy for round numbers, went so far as to place her age at thirty-five, though her girlish face and figure seemed silently to refute the imputation.

Helen herself had scarcely given the subject a thought until recently, when she had chanced more than once to hear the epithet "old maid" ("bachelor girl" she thought much more euphonious) coupled with her name.

Her associates appeared sincerely proud of her success in her art and genuinely pleased when she sold a picture, but of late they seldom failed to qualify their congratulations with such audible asides as "Odd she's never married!" or "Pity she's an old maid!"

In the course of her career Helen had had a number of lovers, but had never chanced to meet the right man, the incarnation of the ideal every woman secretly cherishes. She had been a good deal taken up with the study of art, and it had always seemed that there was ample time; but she had recently realized that she was beginning to be regarded as a confirmed spinster, and that while it might be no disgrace to be an old maid, it was certainly inconvenient.

If she treated an unmarried man with ordinary civility, the gossips promptly proclaimed that she was "after" him; if she chanced to meet a stranger who showed signs of capitulating to her charms, some kind friend hastened to mention her age—with liberal addenda; if she wished to go anywhere she was dependent upon the kindly offices of a chaperone; and whatever she achieved artistically was conclusively offset by the significant utterance of the two forbidding words by which the spinster is commonly characterised.

One afternoon Helen had been making calls, and no fewer than three of her friends had taken occasion to hint more or less delicately that it was "high time she thought of getting married." One of her former schoolmates, a careworn little creature whose husband was a toper and who still wore pathetic survivals of a trousseau purchased eight years before, had openly condoled with Helen on her state of spinsterhood and mentioned meaningfully that the new minister—a meek little man with a chronic bronchial affection—had asked to meet her; while another, whose domestic broils were notorious, had treated her to a dissertation on wedded bliss, concluding with the cheering information that old Deacon Parmenter (a widower with numerous progeny) had expressed his intention of paying his addresses to Helen Harrison. Helen congratulated herself that she got out of the house without speaking her mind to her officious friends.

"That's the limit!" she told herself as, half angry, half amused, she hurried homeward. "When I'm reduced to consumptive clergymen and superannuated relicts with bald heads and six hopefuls, it's time to 'Stop! Look! Listen!' Being a bachelor maid isn't quite the lark I expected.

A husband's a necessary adjunct it seems. I wish I could order one exactly as I would a new bonnet—to be used at will and discarded at pleasure. It's pretty hard that a woman who makes her own way can't have her freedom and live her life to suit herself. But the traditions and conventions must be considered, and I suppose I must sit in a corner and cry 'heigho' for a husband indefinitely—unless—why not?" She stopped still in the middle of the street, quite oblivious to the glances of the passer-by.

"I'll do it!" she said at last, half aloud—and her face was radiant.

With Helen, to think was to act, and ten minutes later she was announcing to her landlady—fortunately she was accountable to no one else—that she had decided to join some distant relatives in Montreal and spend a year or two in study. And on the following Sunday the meek little minister and the disconsolate deacon watched the church door for her coming—in vain. Helen had quietly dropped out of the life of her native village and gone to seek fresh fields and pastures new.

IN a charming little house on a fashionable street of a city not so large as to cause one to feel one's self an insignificant atom, nor yet so small as to render its inhabitants embarrassingly conversant with each other's private affairs, two women, the one young and pretty, the other distinctly otherwise, one day took up their abode.

The elder of these, a prim, sharp-featured, flat-chested woman, with spinster written all over her, seemed to possess in perfection the "gift of silence." Certainly no one could have termed her garrulous, for at the end of a month the grocer's man and the butcher's boy could only

report to their patrons on the square that the new tenant of No. 192 was a Mrs. Harris, presumably a widow; that Hannah, the sour-visaged spinster, served in the dual capacity of maid and duenna; that they paid their bills promptly and ordered the best of everything.

THEY lived very quietly, but Mrs. Harris was far too striking in appearance and distinguished in manner to remain long an unknown quantity. She attended the most fashionable church in the city, and, though she made no advances, half the smart set called upon her before another month had passed. Even the exclusive Mrs. Bellamy Carver took her up—rather gingerly—with the mental reservation that she could drop her again if, upon investigation, the newcomer seemed unworthy the social autocrat's distinguished interest.

Mrs. Carver was a stately, imposing, white-haired dame, who critically surveyed the world at large through a gold lorgnon and who, like *Hamlet*, felt that "the time was out of joint" and that it devolved upon her distinguished self to "set it right." It may be added that she was harassed with no doubts whatever as to her fitness for the undertaking. As State Regent of the local D. A. R., President of The Fairfield Woman's Club, and Secretary of the local chapter of The Daughters of the Empire, Mrs. Carver had been very busy since Mrs. Harris' advent, but she had not lost sight of her duty regarding her. She felt it incumbent to pass judgment on the newcomer's title to a place among the social elect and to decide once for all whether she should be received at the Bellamy Carver "Thursdays" or cast into the outer darkness to which a cut from that august personage must inevitably relegate her. Accordingly she called upon Mrs. Harris with a view to inquiring into her antecedents and intentions, quite undeterred by any consideration of delicacy or fine reserve.

During the interval before her hostess' entrance, she took stock of the drawing room furnishings, nodding unqualified approval of their quality, style and arrangement. When Mrs. Harris entered, she surveyed her quite as critically and no less approvingly, though she lost no time in propounding the catechism she had mentally formulated.

"May I ask, Mrs. Harris," she began, after a brief interchange of civilities, "where you made your home before coming to Fairfield?"

Mrs. Harris had anticipated the question and readily mentioned Montreal as being sufficiently large to obviate embarrassing complications. But she had reckoned without her guest, who was nothing if not cosmopolitan.

"Then of course you know my friends the Rossiter-Lemars? They have lived in Montreal always; indeed one of the older branches of the family helped to found the city."

Mrs. Harris mistakenly denied the honour of the Rossiter-Lemars' acquaintance.

"But," persisted Mrs. Carver, as one who reasons with an obdurate child, "surely you must know them. Every one knows the Rossiter-Lemars!"

The widow temporised.

"We were only in Montreal two years," she said with downcast eyes, "the two years of my brief marriage, and Paul—my husband—was such an invalid that we went nowhere and saw almost no one. I was practically a recluse during my stay in Montreal."

"Ah!" pursued Mrs. Carver with the air of a lawyer who has wrested a damaging admission from a witness, "so your late husband was an invalid? May I ask the nature of his complaint?"

"Bronchitis," answered the widow at random—and then remembered that to Jessica Fenton she had ascribed his demise to typhoid.

"Bronchitis? Ah, indeed! Do you know, Mrs. Harris," she went on judicially, (Continued on page 38.)



She stopped still in the middle of the street, quite oblivious to the glances of the passer-by. "I'll do it!" she exclaimed at last, and her face was radiant.