

Rowland Helen

The Widow [To Say Nothing of the Man]



Helen Rowland

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The Widow To Say Nothing of the Man

I

The Widow

"WHAT would you say," asked the widow, tucking her skirts cautiously about her patent leather toes and leaning back luxuriously against the variegated pillows, "if I should tell you that I have found the very girl who would make you a model wife?"

The bachelor glanced up indifferently and dipped the paddle lazily into the water.

"What model?" he asked, suspiciously. "Women are like automobiles, you know. There are so many models. And even after you have selected one most carefully you never can tell what it is going to do."

"They are more like horses," declared the widow, "if you know how to handle them, and are gentle and kind –"

"And let them see you're master –"

"And don't jab them with spiteful little spurs –"

"And know when to pull on the curb –"

"And when to coax them with sugar –"

"And when to beat 'em – and even then you can't tell what they're going to shy at or balk at any more than you can tell when an automobile is going to break down or run away or blow up. But this 'model' – is she pretty and fetching and warranted to run smoothly over rough roads and to climb all the matrimonial hills and not puncture a tire in the finances and to be just as good for a long run as for a spurt? Is she smart looking and substantial and –"

The widow sat up so quickly that the canoe swayed unsteadily beneath them.

"She's not a harem, Mr. Travers!" she cried. "Oh, dear!" she sighed hopelessly, leaning back again, "why is it that every man expects to get a harem of virtues combined in one wife? I don't believe any man but Solomon was ever perfectly satisfied with domestic life."

"Solomon," remarked the bachelor, giving the paddle an emphatic shove, "understood the necessity for variety in wives. But if Solomon had lived in the twentieth century he wouldn't have needed so many – er – annexations. He would have got it all in one modern woman. Now, you, for instance –"

"Speaking impersonally," interrupted the widow, trying to look austere and at the same time to blow a chiffon veil out of her mouth, "when a man buys an automobile he selects a runabout or a victoria or a touring car or a racing machine, according to his needs, and is satisfied."

"Not at all," protested the bachelor. "The moment he has one automobile he is sighing for another, and he is never happy until he has a garage full –"

"And it is the same about a coat or a hat," persisted the widow, ignoring the interruption; "he picks out what suits him best; but he doesn't expect his top hat to do him for picnics nor his swallow-tail to serve for lawn tennis nor his yachting cap to look well in church nor –"

"A derby," interrupted the bachelor, "will do almost anywhere."

"They're hideous, Mr. Travers! and stiff and commonplace and uncomfortable and –"

"Are they anything like the model wife you've picked out for me?" inquired the bachelor insinuatingly.

The widow flushed under the corner of her chiffon veil.

"Well," she acquiesced unwillingly, "she isn't particularly pretty nor brilliant and fascinating, and all that; but she's just the kind of a girl a man ought to marry."

"And never does!" finished the bachelor triumphantly, backing water and turning the canoe for mid-stream. "Of all kinds of women a man detests –"

"How many kinds of women are there?" cried the widow suddenly.

"How many women are there?" retorted the bachelor. "The variety is only limited by the number of feminine individuals. But fundamentally they can be divided into two classes, just as automobiles can be divided into gasoline and electric. There is the woman a man wants to marry, the kind that is stamped from birth for wifedom, the even-tempered, steady-going, comfortable kind of girl that you would like to tie to for life and with whom you know you would be perfectly contented – and utterly stupid. Every man has in mind his ideal wife; and nearly every man's ideal is of the calm, domestic, wholly good, wholly sweet sort, the sort that seems like a harbor away from the storm. But so often, just about as he has found this ideal, or before he has found her and before the sun of his summer day dream has risen the storm comes along –"

"The – what?"

"The tumultuous, impossible, adorable, unfathomable woman – the woman who may be good or bad, ugly or beautiful, but is always fascinating, alluring and irresistible. And she wrecks his little summer day dream and turns his snug harbor into a roaring whirlpool and carries him off in a tempest. Sometimes he marries her and sometimes he doesn't; but whether he does or does not, he is always spoiled for the other kind afterward."

"And if he does marry her," added the widow, trailing her fingers thoughtfully in the water, "he is always sorry and wishing he had married the other kind."

"Well," the bachelor laid his paddle across his knee, "what's the difference? If he had married the other kind he would always have been wishing he hadn't. Now if a man could only be allowed two wives –"

"One for week days and one for – holidays?" inquired the widow sarcastically.

"Yes," acquiesced the bachelor, "one for each side of him, the tame side and the untamed side. One to serve as a harbor and make him a home and fulfill his domestic longings and bring up his children and keep him sane and moral; and the other to amuse him and entertain him and inspire him and put the trimmings on life and the spice and flavor in the matrimonial dish."

"A sedative and a stimulant!" jeered the widow. "One to stir you up and one to calm you down; one to spur you forward and one to pull on the curb – a Hebe and a Minerva! And then you'd be running around demanding a Venus to make you forget the other two. Whatever woman a man marries, he invariably spends his life sighing for something different. If he is tied to a nice, soft sofa pillow, he longs for a backbone. If he marries a parlor ornament, he yearns for a kitchen utensil. If his wife has a Greek nose, he discovers afterward that what he really admires is pugs. If he picks out red hair or black, he will go blocks out of his way to pursue every yellow glint that catches his eye. And if he married a whole harem at once he would discover that what he really wanted was monogamy, and a single wife with a single idea. There aren't enough kinds of women in the world to fulfill any one man's idea of what a wife should be."

"And yet," sighed the bachelor, "I once knew a woman who would have done that – all by herself."

The widow looked unconvinced.

"Was she a model wife?" she inquired, skeptically.

"How do I know?" said the bachelor. "She wasn't my wife."

"Of course not!" cried the widow. "It is always the other man's wife who is our ideal –"

"She wasn't my ideal," protested the bachelor. "She was the storm that shattered my ideal and spoiled me for matrimony. She was a whole garage, a whole stable, a whole harem in one."

The widow looked distinctly disapproving.

"It's lucky," she said coldly, "that you escaped – a woman like – that!"

"But I haven't," protested the bachelor, laying down his paddle and leaning forward so that the ends of the widow's chiffon veil blew in his face. "She was the spice in life's pudding, the flavor, the sauce, the stimulant, the –"

"This canoe is tipping dreadfully," remarked the widow, but the disapproval had disappeared from her eyes.

"She was –"

"Why, I do believe it's growing dark, Mr. Travers."

"It is," agreed the bachelor. "Nobody can see –"

"See – what?" asked the widow, suddenly sitting up straight and fixing the bachelor with her eyes.

"How perfectly adorable and unfathomable and tumultuous –"

"Are you feeding me sugar, Mr. Travers?"

"Perhaps," acknowledged the bachelor, leaning back and picking up the paddle again, "but some day, when I'm ready, I'm going to stop feeding you sugar. I'm going to put on the curb bit."

"Why don't you do it now – Billy?" asked the widow, with a challenging glance from beneath her lashes.

"I can't," grumbled the bachelor, "while you are blowing that chiffon veil."

The widow took the two ends of the offensive thing and tied them deliberately under her chin.

"Some day," continued the bachelor, as he swung the canoe shoreward with a vigorous dip of the paddle, "I'm going to show you who's master. I'm going to marry you and then –"

"Be sorry!" laughed the widow.

"Of course," assented the bachelor, "but I'd be sorrier – if I didn't."

II

The Winning Card?

"THERE," said the bachelor as he bowed to a little man across the room, "sits the eighth wonder of the world – a man with a squint and a cork leg and no income to speak of, who has just married for the third time. What makes us so fascinating?"

The widow laid down her oyster fork and gazed thoughtfully at the beautiful girl in blue chiffon sitting opposite the man with the squint.

"Don't generalize," she said, turning rebukingly to the bachelor. "You mean what makes the little man so fascinating?"

The bachelor jabbed an oyster viciously.

"Well," he grumbled, "what does make him so fascinating? Is it the squint or the cork – "

The widow looked at him reproachfully.

"Don't be envious," she said. "He might have two squints and yet be successful with women. Haven't you ever seen a runty, plain little man before, with nothing on earth, apparently, to recommend him except his sex, who could draw the women as a magnet does needles?"

The bachelor dropped his oyster and stared at the widow.

"It's hypnotism!" he declared with solemn conviction.

The widow laughed.

"It's nothing of the sort," she contradicted. "It's because he holds man's winning card and knows how to play it. Just observe the tender solicitude with which he consults her about that fish."

"You mean," inquired the bachelor suspiciously, "that he has a fascinating way?"

"That's all he needs," responded the widow promptly, "to make him irresistible."

"Then, how do you account," argued the bachelor, indicating a Gibsonesque young man eating his dinner alone under a palm at the corner table, "for the popularity of that Greek god over there? He's a perfect boor, yet the women in this hotel pet him and coax him and cuddle him as if he were a prize lion cub."

"Oh," remarked the widow, "if you were all Greek gods – that would be different. But, unfortunately, the average man is just an ungainly looking thing in a derby hat and hideous clothes, with knuckle hands and padded shoulders and a rough chin."

"Thank you," said the bachelor sweetly. "I see – as in a looking glass. Evidently our countenances – "

"Pooh!" jeered the widow, "your countenances just don't count. That's all. What profiteth it a man though he have the face of an Apollo if he have the legs of a Caliban? A woman never bothers about a man's face. It's his figure that attracts her. She will forgive weak eyes and a cut-off chin twice as quickly as weak shoulders and cut-off legs."

"That's why we pad them – the shoulders," explained the bachelor.

"You wouldn't need to," retorted the widow, "if you knew how to play the winning card."

"What IS the winning card?" implored the bachelor, leaning across the table anxiously.

The widow laid down her soup spoon and bent to arrange the violets in her belt meditatively.

"Well," she said, "Sir Walter Raleigh played it and it won him a title; and Mr. Mantellini played it and it kept him in spending money and fancy waistcoats for years without his doing a stroke of work; and Louis XIV. – but oh, pshaw! You know all about that. Briefly speaking, a man's winning card is his knowledge of how to treat a woman. Specifically, it is a tender, solicitous, protecting manner. A woman just loves to be 'protected,' whether there is anything to be protected from or not. She loves to know that you are anxious for her safety and comfort, even when there is no cause in the world for your anxiety. She loves to have you wait on her, even when there is a room full of hired waiters

about. She loves to be treated like an adorable, cunning, helpless child, even when she is five feet ten and weighs a cool two hundred. She delights in having a mental cloak laid down for her to walk over and every time you do it she secretly knights you."

"It sounds awfully easy," said the bachelor.

"But it isn't," retorted the widow, "if it were all men would try it – and all men would be perfectly irresistible."

"Well, aren't they?" asked the bachelor, innocently. "I thought they –"

"The winning way, the irresistible masculine manner," pursued the widow, ignoring the interruption, "is something subtle and inborn. It can't be put on or varnished over. It is neither a pose nor a patent. It is the gift of one of the good fairies at birth. If it is going to be trained into a man he must be caught and schooled very early – say, before he is ten years old. It's his ingrain attitude toward women and he begins by practicing it on his mother. If he is not to the manner born and tries to cultivate it late in life, he must watch very carefully to see that he does not overdo it like a lackey or a dancing master or the villain in a melodrama. Of course, it can be cultivated to a certain extent, like music or Christian Science, but it's hard for a man to learn that a woman is a fragile creature and needs a bodyguard, after he has been twenty years letting his sisters pack their own trunks and lug their own satchels and golf clubs. Besides, most men are too busy or too self-absorbed to cultivate it, if they could."

"Most men," remarked the bachelor, stirring his coffee and lighting his cigarette, "aren't anxious to become the sort of 'mother's darling' you describe."

"Nonsense," retorted the widow. "Richard the Third was a perfectly adorable ladies' man and he couldn't be called exactly – a 'mother's darling.' Yet the things he said to poor Lady Anne and the way he said them would have turned any feminine brain. It isn't milk and water that women admire; it's the milk of human interest. It's the feeling that a man is gazing at you instead of through you at his own reflection – or some other woman."

"But if it means giving up all the easy chairs," protested the bachelor, "and packing all the family trunks and putting out your pipe every time a female member of the family approaches and eating dishes you don't want and running round doing household errands, a man hasn't got time –"

"It doesn't!" declared the widow. "It has nothing to do with morals or with selfishness. Some of the most selfish men in the world are those whom a poor little woman will work her fingers to the bone to support, simply because when she comes home at night after her labors her husband puts his arms around her and tells her how sad it makes him feel to see her struggle so, and how young and beautiful she keeps in spite of it all and orders her to lie down and let him run out and fetch her some ice cream and read to her. A man with that sort of way with him can get anything on earth out of a woman and then make her eternally grateful to him. Look at the husbands who slave all day earning money for their wives to spend and go home tired out and grouchy and never get a word of thanks. Yet, a man can stay out six nights in the week, and if he will come home on the seventh with a kiss and a compliment and a box of candy and any old lie and a speech about sympathy and all that, a nice sensible wife will forgive and forget – and adore him."

"But are there any nice sensible wives?" asked the bachelor plaintively.

"Have you finished your cigarette, Mr. Travers?" inquired the widow coolly.

"Because if there are, that is just what I am looking –"

"If you have," pursued the widow, "I think we had better go."

The bachelor rose with alacrity. "I think so, too," he acquiesced, pleasantly. "That Greek god over yonder under the palm has been staring at me as if he contemplated murder for the last half hour."

The widow blushed.

"Perhaps," she said with a one-cornered smile, "he is envying you –"

"Undoubtedly!" agreed the bachelor.

"Envy you," pursued the widow, "your fascinating ways."

"Oh," cried the bachelor, "then I have got it."

"What?" said the widow.

"The winning card. The charm!"

"Well," said the widow, putting her head on the side and gazing at him speculatively, "you wear a derby hat."

"I take it off in the house and in the presence of ladies," protested the bachelor.

"And your shoulders –" began the widow.

"They are my own!" declared the bachelor.

"And your –"

"They also are mine," broke in the bachelor quickly.

"And besides all that," added the widow, "you have that little bald spot in the middle of your head. And yet –"

"Go on," said the bachelor, "you have said the worst."

"I broke an engagement with a nice boy to dine with you to-night."

"That doesn't prove anything," said the bachelor scornfully. "Maybe he hasn't played the winning card."

"No, it proves you have," declared the widow.

"I can't see it!" protested the bachelor.

"Well, just look at the Greek god over under the palm and then look in the glass at yourself and – work it out."

"But why look at the Greek god?"

"Because," said the widow, turning to the mirror and carefully tilting her hat, "he is the nice boy with whom I broke the engagement."

III

Why?

"WHY is a woman?" snapped the bachelor, flinging himself into the big armchair opposite the widow with a challenging glance.

"Why – why, because," stammered the widow; startled at his sudden appearance.

"I knew it!" said the bachelor with conviction.

"And there are lots of other reasons, Mr. Travers."

"But they aren't reasonable," declared the bachelor doggedly.

The widow closed her book with a sigh and laid it on the table beside her.

"Who said they were?" she asked witheringly. "Neither is a woman. Being reasonable is so stupid. It's worse than being suitable or sensible, or – or proper."

The bachelor lifted his eyebrows in mild astonishment.

"I thought those were virtues," he protested.

"They are, Mr. Travers," returned the widow crushingly, "and that's why they're so uninteresting. You might as well ask why is music, or painting, or pâté de foie gras, or champagne, or ice cream, or anything else charming and delicious – "

"And utterly useless."

"Of course," agreed the widow, leaning back and thoughtfully twisting the bit of lace she called a handkerchief. "It's the utterly useless things that make the world attractive and pleasant to live in – like flowers and bonbons and politics and love – "

"And tobacco," added the bachelor reflectively.

"Woman is the dessert to the feast," went on the widow, "the trimmings on the garment of life, the spice in the pudding. Of course, a man can eat his dinner without dessert or champagne and live his life without kisses or a woman – but somehow he never does."

"And that's just where he gets into trouble," retorted the bachelor promptly. "If you could only tell," he went on pathetically, "what any one of them was going to do or why she was going to do it, or – "

"Then it isn't 'Why *is* a woman?' but 'Why *does* a woman?' that you wanted to know," interrupted the widow helpfully.

"That's it!" cried the bachelor, "why does she get off a car backward? Why does she wear a skirt four yards long and then get furious if you step on it? Why does she make a solemn and important engagement without the slightest intention of keeping it? Why does she put on open-work stockings and gaudy shoes and hold her frock as high as she dares – and then annihilate you if you stare at her? Why does she use everything as it was not intended to be used – a hairpin to pick a lock, a buttonhook to open a can, a hairbrush to hammer a nail, a hatpin to rob a letter box, a razor to sharpen a pencil and a cup and saucer to decorate the mantelpiece? Why does she gush over the woman she hates worst and snub the man she is dying to marry? Why does she lick all the glue off a postage stamp and then try to make it stick? Why does she cry at a wedding and act frivolous at a funeral? Why does she put a new feather on her hat and a new kink in her hair, and expect a man to notice it as quickly and be as astonished as he would if she had shaved her head or lost a limb? Why does she seem offended if you don't make love to her, and then get angry if you do? Why does she act kittenish when she's big and dignified, when she's little and old, when she's young and silly, when she's old? And why, oh, why, did you inveigle me into coming down to this miserable pink-and-white house party with the hope of being near you and then utterly ignore me and spend your time flirting with Bobby Taylor, while I sulk about like a lost sheep or run errands – "

"For Miss Manners?" suggested the widow cuttingly.

"Miss Manners!" exclaimed the bachelor scornfully.

"You once thought her very beautiful, Mr. Travers."

"That's just it!" retorted the bachelor. "Why didn't you let me go on thinking her beautiful – "

"'As delicate as a sea shell,' wasn't it?"

"Yes," snapped the bachelor, "and as – hollow!"

The widow smiled enigmatically.

"Tell me," she said sympathetically, "what she has done to you."

"Well, for one thing," complained the bachelor, "she coaxed me out on the piazza last night in the moonlight, and then, when she had talked sentiment for half an hour and lured me to a dark spot and simply goaded me into taking her hand – "

The widow sat up straight.

"But you didn't do it, Billy Travers!"

"Of course I did. It seemed almost an insult not to. And what did she do? She jerked it away, flung herself from me, rose like an outraged queen, turned on me with that 'I-thought-you-were-a-gentleman' air and said – "

The widow lay back in her chair and laughed.

"Oh, mercy!" she said, wiping the tears from her eyes when she was able. "Excuse me but – but – how did she look when she did it?"

"Well," confessed the bachelor, "she did look rather stunning."

"That's why she did it," explained the widow between laughs. "A woman's reason for doing most things is because she thinks she will look well doing them."

"Or because she thinks you will look surprised if she does them."

"Or because she wants to attract your attention."

"Or to make you feel uncomfortable."

"Or to astonish you or amuse you or – "

"Work on your sensibilities, or get on your nerves, or play on your sympathies. But," he went on growing wroth at the recollection, "the idea of a little chit like that – and that isn't the worst. This morning she dragged me out of bed at half-past five to go fishing. Fishing! At this season! I never saw a girl so crazy for fish in my life; and when we had walked four miles to find the right spot and she had been silent long enough for me to feel a nibble at the bait and had helped me with all her might and main to haul in that blessed little fish, do you know what she did?"

The widow looked up questioningly.

"She cried because I wanted to bring it home and made me throw it back into the water. That's what she did!"

The widow sat up straight, with horrified eyes.

"Well, of course she did!" she exclaimed heatedly. "She only asked you to *catch* the fish didn't she – not to *kill* it?"

The bachelor stared at her for a moment without speaking. Then he got up silently and walked over to the window.

"I suppose," he remarked after a long pause, apparently addressing the front lawn or the blue heavens, "that it's that same sort of logic that incites a woman to play for a man until she catches him – and then throw him overboard. O Lord," he continued, glancing at the sky devoutly, "why couldn't you have made them nice and sensible?"

The widow took up her book with disdain.

"'Nice and sensible'" she repeated witheringly. "Just think how it would feel to be called 'nice and sensible!' I wish," she added, turning to her novel with an air of boredom, "that you would go and – talk to Ethel Manners."

The bachelor eyed her narrowly.

"I guess I will," he said finally. "She seems more interesting – now that you've explained her."

The widow stopped in the middle of a paragraph and looked up.

"And by Jove!" went on the bachelor reminiscently, turning to the window again, "she did look dreamy in a sunbonnet and that little short skirt this morning. She has adorable feet, you know."

The widow closed her book with a sharp snap, keeping her fingers between the pages.

"I know, Mr. Travers; but how did *you* know?"

"I looked at them," confessed the bachelor frankly, "and her ankles – "

The widow's mouth closed in a straight line.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Travers," she remarked frigidly, "that you are not a fit companion for a young girl like Ethel."

"I'm not equal to her," grinned the bachelor.

"No, you're not. She's a nice, sensible girl and – "

"Do you hate her very much?"

"Hate her?" The widow's eyes opened with astonishment.

"You called her 'nice and sensible.'"

"Bobby Taylor's looking for you, Marion," called Miss Manners, glancing in at the door suddenly.

"Well, goodbye. I'm off," said the bachelor, following the swish of Miss Manners's skirts with his eyes, as she hurried away down the hall.

"Sit down, Mr. Travers!" commanded the widow in an awful tone.

At that moment a buoyant young man poked his head in at the door.

"Go way, Bobby," said the widow. "Mr. Travers and I are discussing – er – psychology."

"Ugh!" remarked Bobby, dutifully withdrawing, "why do you do it, if it hurts?"

The bachelor looked up at the widow under the tail of his eyelid.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

But the widow's underlip was curled into a distinct pout and her eyes met his reproachfully. She dabbed them effectively with the end of her lace handkerchief.

"Of c-course it does," she said with a little choke in her voice, "when you have been here three whole days and have never noticed me and have spent every minute of your time trailing around after that – that – little – "

"But wasn't that what you invited me for?" exclaimed the bachelor helplessly.

"Of course it was," acknowledged the widow, "but – but I didn't think you'd do it."

The bachelor gazed at her a moment in blank amazement. Then a gleam of enlightenment came into his eyes and he leaned over and caught her fingers.

"Look here, Marion," he said gently, "you invited me down here to fling that girl at my head. If you didn't want me to fall in love with her, what did you want?"

"I wanted you to get enough of her!" explained the widow, smiling through her lace handkerchief.

"Well – I have. I've got too much!" vowed the bachelor fervently.

The widow laughed softly and complacently.

"That's just what I knew would happen," she said, closing her novel and flinging it onto the couch.

Then she added, looking up quizzically:

"A woman always has a reason – if you can only find out what it is."

IV

The Widow's Rival

"WHY," said the widow, gazing thoughtfully at the ruby-faced woman with the gigantic waistline, who sat beside the meek little man on the bench opposite, "do men marry – those?"

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