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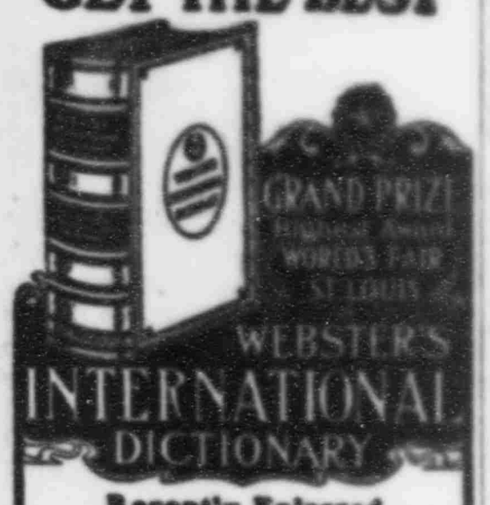

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Three Old Maids and a Widow

By C. B. LEWIS

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There are few towns of 1500 population that can boast of three old maids and a widow living on the same street, but that was the case with Clifton. Miss Vinton was an old maid because she never had met with a man good enough for her. Miss Hopkins was an old maid because the young man she would have married at eighteen was sawed in two in a sawmill and she had vowed to be true to his memory. Miss Warner was an old maid because she was determined to marry none but a minister, and all the ministers who came were already provided for. The Widow Carter was a widow because part of a house had fallen on her husband.

The old maids and the widow were on visiting terms—in fact, they rather liked each other. Where there are no male candidates for matrimony concerned old maids and widows can sit down together on the same veranda without quarreling. After the widow had solemnly assured the old maids that nothing on the face of this earth could induce her to be false to the memory of her crushed, the quartet loved each other even more.

One day one of the merchants in the town sold out and a stranger came to take his place. If he had been a married man the dove of peace would have continued to hover over Rose street, but as he was single, only thirty and a "catch" the dove saw a hot time ahead.

The widow let no grass grow under her feet in calling at the store and incidentally mentioning her name and ordering four pounds of sugar all at once. She was one of the Four Hundred of the town, and on the part of the other 399 she bade Mr. Strong welcome to their midst. When he had thanked her she ordered two nutmegs and a paper of starch, in addition to the sugar, to let him understand that she wasn't obliged to pinch pennies, and then departed.

An hour later her reprehensible conduct was known to the three old maids, and up went three pairs of hands; six eyes were turned upward in horror and three mouths opened to exclaim in chorus, "How shocking!"

Then, during the next two days, each of the old maids made an excuse to call at the store and follow the programme carried out by the widow. Each thought she was sly and slick, but they found each other out, and from that moment the bond of friendship snapped asunder like an old clothesline left out in the storms of a year.

When women make war on each other they don't use fence rails to pound each other on the head. In most cases they go right on treating each other as nicely as they can to their faces, but using daggers and the darkness to assassinate. The three old maids and the widow gathered together as of yore, but the dagger was used whenever there was the least show.

Mr. Strong proved a social success. The widow gave a little dinner and brought him out, but the old maids really monopolized him for the evening. Then Miss Warner gave an exhibition of her own paintings, which consisted of a cow apparently thirty-six feet long and of a river running up stream instead of down, and the widow held Mr. Strong's attention for an hour while she talked about her crushed and departed.

At the end of six weeks the man who run the sawmill and had a mortgage on the mill dam figured it out to his wife:

"There are three old maids to one widow, but if the widow gets left she'll be the first one I ever heard of."

Even the small boys around town noticed how girly the old maids were becoming. They giggled, they uttered cute little screams when they turned a corner and found themselves face to face with a cow, they tittered when they asked for gum drops at the grocery. As for the widow, she set her jaw and walked into the store two or three times a week to ask the merchant if he thought the Seventy-seventh National bank of Boston was perfectly sound and to sigh with relief when he assured her of his confidence in the institution. Sly reports were soon afloat that Mr. Strong was paying his attentions to this or that one of the four. Then the other three would reply as one:

"Well, may be he is, but what on earth he can see in her is more than I can make out. She grows more homely and dowdified every day. Of course I'm telling you this in confidence, and, of course, it won't go further."

One fatal evening tragedy after tragedy happened, and the light went out of several happy households. Mr. Strong boarded with a family living half a mile from the store. He wanted the walk. He had to cross the bridge over the river and ascend a hill covered with woods, and there wasn't a house between his boarding place and the town.

The three old maids and the widow had had their eyes on this road from the first. They had soon begun walking for exercise. They didn't walk at the hours the merchant might be expected, and if they encountered each other they made all manner of excuses, but each one understood what the other was at and determined to baffle her in the end.

Mr. Strong had been given three months in which to declare his attentions, and he hadn't declared. Time was too valuable to be wasted. His habit was to return to his store after a 6 o'clock supper and remain there until 8. Just before 8 o'clock, then, on this awful night four human figures might have been seen stealing out of the town and over the bridge.

Each and every one of them would have paused on the bridge to listen to the musical plash of the river if they hadn't seen each other. The first, second and third were ordered right on to avoid the last one. She was the widow. She knew the value of a bridge and a river and a musical plash, and she determined to stick.

One old tramp and a dog were responsible for most of what followed. The tramp came humping along through the town, bent on finding a country strawstack as soon as possible, and as the widow on the bridge heard his footsteps she began to look artless and coy.

It was labor thrown away. The tramp was near-sighted and bumped up against her, and in her fright she went over the low railing and down into the water. If she couldn't swim like a duck she could at least scramble like a cat, and she managed to get ashore. Her condition was dripping, also drooping, also indignant. She realized that no dripping, drooping woman stood the slightest show in that contest, and she dragged herself homeward and was not improved in looks or temper by having to wade through a couple of mud puddles.

Miss Vinton came next. She was sauntering up the hill wondering how "that widow" dared be so bold and brassy when the tramp, who was now on the run for his life, overtook her. In his nearsightedness he took her for a horse and wagon and tried to slip out. She shied to the right at the same time and was sent sprawling by the collision. She got out of the roadside ditch to run into a patch of briers and scream for help, but there was no help. She had to extricate herself and follow the bedraggled widow.

The dog alone was responsible for what happened to the other two old maids. Miss Warner had discovered one woman ahead and two behind her, and, suspecting their fiendish intentions, she had almost made up her mind to abandon her object when the dog, who had been calling on his brother out in the country, came along and set up a barking and growling. Tragedy was the result. The old maid never had encountered a big bobtailed dog at night on a hill, and she at once scrambled over the fence into the weeds and ran for her life. She fell down and rolled over, and she rose up again and struggled on, and when she reached home two hours later she immediately went into hysterics, and Dr. Seaton got his first night call for fourteen years.

The dog had met with such success that he was encouraged to persevere. He came upon Miss Hopkins out of the shadows like a frisking haystack, and as she screamed out and spread her wings to fly she tripped and went down. The fall might have injured her but for the fact that she fell upon soft mud. She couldn't go back to town looking like the mortar mixer for a skyscraper, and she continued on to the merchant's boarding house to get the use of hose and scrapers. They were furnished, but while she was using them she heard the ten-year-old daughter whispering to her mother that she'd bet a cent that Miss Hopkins had come out there to giggle for Mr. Strong.

That was an awful night in Clifton, though only four feminine hearts knew just how awful it was. Morning dawned with a murky sky overhead. It seemed to give old maids and a widow as if something more was still to happen. They were right. When the butcher boy called for his orders he repeated the same words at every house on his route:

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