From the Dust Jacket of the Original Edition

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Casting a spotlight on one of those gathering places found in every large city . . . written by a woman who knows her subject from the inside out, GAY BAR tells the humor, the heartbreak, the piercing reality of the lives of people in and about a bar which caters to homosexuals.

But make no mistake about it. The people who are Helen Branson's customers are not the depraved and sinister characters so often presented as typical of the homosexual. Instead they are responsible, well-behaved human beings no different from anyone else except in the direction of their loves.

While GAY BAR is entertaining reading, its purpose is a serious examination of a pressing social problem. Few serious-minded persons will find it possible to disagree with the author's forthright advice when she says that if more parents understood their sons, then perhaps fewer homosexuals would find it necessary to seek companionship in the gay bars across the land. And if that happened, Helen is quick to admit, she wouldn't have so many customers!

Straight from the Shoulder . . .

“You won’t find any statements in parentheses in my book,” said Helen P. Branson as she turned in the final manuscript for publication. “I typed this
myself on a Polish model typewriter. It had no parentheses marks on the keyboard. So I made all of my statements direct—just as if I were talking to you.”

That same directness has characterized Helen’s life throughout her sixty years, with a great deal of variety of living included. She was graduated from high school in 1914, then took voice lessons for two years while she taught school in Nebraska. Not satisfied with her singing, she entered a new field. She became a bank teller during World War I, after which she moved to a ranch in Idaho, and finally settled in California. Today she operates a bar, does all the work herself, and every week visits her aged mother, whom she helps support.

“I’ve had more ups and downs than I care to tell about,” she says. “But all my life I have had an interest in the occult and the unseen, the hard to explain things about me,” she says. “I was a student of astrology and became a palmist years ago. In fact I made my living entertaining in this field for several years.”

Her study of astrology led to an interest in reincarnation, which she says she explored for her own satisfaction.

“All of this led me to a recognition of the biggest word in my vocabulary today,” Helen says. “That word is WHY. Trying to find that answer is the main reason for my interest in people and what they do.”

“My first intentional contact with homosexuals as a group was to determine if there was a pattern in their palms. My gradual integration with such groups has come through mutual affection and respect. I am at home with them.”

Homosexual or not, everyone, it seems, has an immediate reaction to Helen. No in-between regard for this intensely active and perceptive woman is possible; it is a case of love her a lot or not at all. But readers of her book, “Gay Bar,” will see at once what the reaction of the majority is.

“Everybody loves Helen,” say those who know her. It’s a safe prediction that sons and daughters, as well as mothers and fathers, will be infected with the same feeling for her after they read the book, too.

xvii
THE WOMAN WHO WROTE A LITTLE BOOK about her experiences running a Hollywood gay bar in the 1950s was born Helen Pyle in 1896. She graduated from high school in Hastings, Nebraska, where she played basketball and performed in choral and theatrical productions. Accompanying her photo in the senior yearbook: “She’s all right but likes to chatter. If nothing worse, what does this matter?”

While Helen was singing with a band several years after high school, she met Zebulon Branson, a World War army veteran, and they married in 1918. They soon left Nebraska to work on an Idaho ranch owned by Zeb’s father. Their only child, Helen Caroline, was born there in 1920. Among other chores, Helen found herself cooking meals for the seasonal help.

Both ranch life and married life proved to be a trial for the couple, leading Helen to make a break for California, where her brother, Eddie, was working in Hollywood as a camera operator. One day in 1922 Helen set out from the ranch, pushing a milk-can cart loaded with luggage and child. A couple of miles down the road, she and Caroline reached the railroad line and headed for Los Angeles. Helen worked as a bank teller there, putting Caroline in a care home during the workweek and taking her out on weekends. Zeb joined them before long, employed as an engineer in the telephone industry. In the late 1920s Helen’s widowed mother moved from Nebraska to Los Angeles to be near her daughter and son.
Zeb Branson’s income sustained the household comfortably until the early 1930s, when he got involved with another woman and told Helen that he wanted a divorce. “She was so upset about him going off and leaving her, she wouldn’t take any money from him,” Caroline recalled. “And thus we didn’t have any money!” Uncle Eddie came through with gifts of cash and little luxuries that made a big difference for Helen and Caroline. Then a fashion-minded teenager at Hollywood High, Caroline remembers Eddie’s gifts of five-dollar gold pieces and a good-looking sweater. “I’d never had any clothes,” she said. “Times were tough; my mother couldn’t earn a good living—she was always on the edge of something.” In 1937 Caroline dropped out of high school to work as a stock girl in an upscale Hollywood dress shop, the start of her career in the fashion industry.

With her freethinking ways and longstanding interest in the occult, Helen was very much on the edge, even by Hollywood standards. By the late 1930s she found work as a palm-reading nightclub entertainer. In gypsy costume she drifted among tables at Lindy’s on Wilshire Boulevard, taking the hands of late-night diners and explicating their features in the glow of her small flashlight. So began her gradual convergence with gay men. Eventually she was working as house mother and cook in a gay rooming house, then managing several gay bars owned by others. In 1952, a year after the California Supreme Court declared it legal for homosexuals to congregate in bars, Helen took over a small neighborhood tavern at 5124 Melrose Avenue and began operating her own gay bar in her own way.
Gay Bar