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# Shapely Ankle Preferr'd

Francesca Beauman

SHAPELY ANKLE PREFERR'D

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*A History of the Lonely Hearts Ad*

FRANCESCA BEAUMAN

Chatto & Windus  
LONDON

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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*The Pineapple*  
*The Woman's Book*

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## Introduction

**M**ATRIMONY.—The advertiser is a young Bachelor of 30, of genteel person and address, of liberal sentiments, possessing an agreeable good temper, and an affable cheerful disposition, would be happy to meet with a young Lady or Widow, possessing nearly the same qualities, who is inclined to enter into that happy state, and can command at least 5000 l. all above that sum will be settled upon her for life. As he is a Gentleman of the most strict honour and integrity, the most profound secrecy may be relied on, and any Lady may answer this without fear or intimidation, and an appointment shall be returned immediately.—A line addressed to A. B. at Tom's Coffee-house, Cornhill, shall be punctually attended to.

WEDNESDAY, 4 MARCH 1795. The resignation of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland was imminent according to that morning's *Times*. It did not help matters that the Home Secretary was laid up in bed with gout, for it meant he was unable to attend Prime Minister Pitt's Cabinet meetings. All the while, amid blustery spring showers, preparations for the marriage of George, Prince of Wales, to Caroline of Brunswick continued apace.

At least one London gentleman, however, had matters of a more personal nature on his mind. The same morning, an advertisement from 'A.B.' appeared in *The Times*, announcing his search for a 'young Lady or Widow' who would be 'inclined to enter into that happy state' of marriage. Anyone interested was asked to write to him care of Tom's, a coffee-house in the City of London.

This ad is by no means an anomaly. Rather, it is a typical early example of the Lonely Hearts genre, which dates back much further than most people realise and constitutes an enormously rich body of evidence about the qualities that modern Britons have looked for in a husband or wife over the past three centuries. Each of the thousands of ads of this sort that have appeared in newspapers, magazines and pamphlets offers a glimpse through a window into the life of one ordinary person, a person who in all likelihood had never seen himself or herself in print before and whose voice you rarely hear. These tiny pockets of text are like those double miniature portraits that were once so popular: one side contains a self-portrait, but the other side has yet to be filled in. That is the job of the reader.

Most of those who have placed Lonely Hearts ads over the years have done so with a view to marriage. The only human society that has *not* made marriage in one form or another central to the way it is organised is the Na people, of which there are about 30,000 living in the Yunnan Province of southwest China. They live in sibling-based households, and sexual relations occur in the form of *na sese*, meaning 'to visit furtively': the men walk to the houses of the women at night, but return in the morning. They are, however, the sole exception in recorded history. In western Europe making a 'good' marriage, or for that matter any marriage at all, was for a long time the ultimate goal, especially for women. In a society based around the rituals of the Christian Church, it was the on-

context in which sexual relations were sanctioned. It was also a matter of economic prudence, both for the upper classes who had property to protect and for the working classes who sought to share life's practical burdens. Marriage was a social, economic and political necessity, the foundation upon which polite (and not-so-polite) society was built.

These days, the media is full of the trials and tribulations of those having trouble tracking down Mr or Ms 'Right', or even Mr or Ms 'They'll Do'. But those of us who despair of finding someone to walk down the aisle with might spare a thought for our predecessors 100, 200 or 300 years ago who faced the same predicament. It is, after all, almost entirely a matter of luck. There are some who will bossily counsel you to visualise a mate, or get a new haircut, or never call the other person back, or learn to love yourself. Rubbish. There is no secret trick. As the hero of *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) by Mary Braddon, muses:

As if happiness were not essentially accidental – a bright and wandering bird, utterly irregular in its migration; with us one summer's day, and for ever gone from us the next! Look at matrimony, for instance . . . Who is to say which shall be the one judicious selection out of the nine hundred and ninety-nine mistakes? Who shall decide from the first aspect of the slimy creature, which is to be the one eel out of the colossal bag of snakes?

There are, however, actions one can take to maximise one's luck, and these include placing – or replying to – a Lonely Hearts ad.



# Chapter One

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## *Nine Days Wonder and Laughter*

THE GOLDEN FLEECE pub in the heart of the City of London was an unlikely place for romance blossom. Standing on the corner of Gracechurch Street and Eastcheap Street, it was a dirty, smoky, disreputable establishment, the scene of fist-fights more often than love trysts. Yet it was here, on 1 July 1695, that the world's first Lonely Hearts ad (at least, the first of which there is still evidence) was published. On page three of one of the many weekly pamphlets for sale on the streets of the capital, surrounded by advertisements for a cobbler's apprentice, an Arabian stallion and a second-hand bed, was this brave plea:

A Gentleman about 30 Years of Age, that says he had a Very Good Estate, would willingly Match himself to some Good Young Gentlewoman that has a Fortune of 3000l. or thereabouts, and he will make Settlement to Content.

A few lines further down, a second bachelor in search of a wife revealed himself:

A Young Man about 25 Years of Age, in a very good Trade, and whose Father will make him worth 1000l. would willingly embrace a suitable Match. He has been brought up a Dissenter, with his Parents, and is a sober Man.

Brief and to the point as these ads were, they were still enough to cause the streets of London to echo with excited chatter all the way through the long, hot, smelly summer months.

Who *were* these young men? It is possible to catch a glimpse of them at least. The first offers the rather vague boast that he has 'a Very Good Estate', and is aged about thirty. Since the average age at which men got married in this period was twenty-seven and a half, he was just at the stage when his parents would be beginning to pester him about settling down. His criteria in a prospective wife are that she should be 'good', 'young' and rich. The second advertiser has been raised as a Dissenter (that is, Protestant, but outside the Church of England), and a sober one at that. He also claims that he is due to inherit the by-no-means-shabby sum of £1,000, the equivalent of about £100,000 in today's money.

These ads encapsulate a central tenet of human mate choice: men want a partner who is young. Next most important on the list are looks, domestic prowess and resources, or 'Comeliness, Prudence and 5 or 600l. in Money, Land or Joynture . . .' as an ad in the same publication the following month phrased it. These criteria occur again and again, not only throughout the history of Lonely Hearts ads but throughout the history of human courtship generally, according to contemporary studies of the subject.

Many no doubt bought a copy of the pamphlet solely for the voyeuristic pleasure of trying to work out the identity of the would-be suitors. Was it a friend? A neighbour? Were they in earnest? While some might have pretended to be shocked by the innovation, others probably secretly thought that advertising for a wife was rather a clever idea. The publisher of the pamphlet in which the ad

appeared, *A Collection for Improvement of Husbandry and Trade*, was a popular local figure named John Houghton. After graduating from Cambridge, Houghton had set himself up as an apothecary and also as dealer in tea, coffee and chocolate. He is better remembered, however, for being one of the first people to appreciate the possibilities of the advertising game, and hence the first to make proper money out of it. The pages of his *Collection* advertised all kinds of merchandise; so why not men and women? It was not really such a leap. With all the ads composed in the third person, Houghton, as editor, ensured that he positioned himself as the instigator. Furthermore, following the lapsing of the Licensing Act eight weeks earlier, which in effect established a free press, he no longer had the censor to fear in his decisions over what to print.

By commercialising matchmaking, Houghton brought marriage into line with situations vacant, rooms to rent, the arrival of a consignment of tea from the Indies – it was the provision of just another service that urban dwellers (and Londoners especially) needed. Even so, in a note next to the Lonely Hearts ads, he felt the need to assert that they were ‘honourable’ in every respect, as well as to reassure potential suitors that ‘no body shall know any thing of the matter, but where I shall reasonably believe they are in good earnest’. So unconventional was this method of finding a mate that the stigma that accompanied it was inevitable, and secrecy a top priority. It was the price Houghton paid for publicly positioning himself as the creator of the Lonely Hearts industry.

Houghton was keenly aware of the ads’ novelty value: ‘When it shall appear that I am Candid, and no[t] otherwise concerned than in bringing two Elderly Persons to a Treaty; and the Nine Days Wonder and Laughter (usually attending new things) are over . . . then ’tis probable such Advertisements may prove useful.’ From the start, then, Lonely Hearts ads were a source of entertainment, with many reading them simply to laugh at them. Indeed, the hope that they might boost sales was probably one reason for publishing them in the first place, and the reason they were set in a much larger, bolder font than the other ‘Accounts of News from the little World’ that surrounded them. Houghton, a shrewd businessman, doubtless had an instinct that they were a sure-fire way to attract readers; he may even have made up the ads himself with this very aim in mind. Even though the following fortnight, when the ads appeared once more, he rebuffed the suggestion ‘These Proposals for Matches are real,’ he protested.

By April of the following year, 1696, Houghton’s venture had become such a success that he was able to claim: ‘[t]heir own Parents shall not manage it more to their Satisfaction, and the more com[e] to me the better, I shall be able to serve them.’ Clearly, there was a demand for the service he provided – anything, surely, to ease the agony of the courtship process.

Among the upper echelons of society, a tight-knit network of family, friends and neighbours was crucial to success in the marriage market, as were parties or church services, which were among the select occasions where genteel young men and women were allowed – and even encouraged – to mingle. Lower down the social scale there was the workplace. In rural areas, hiring fairs were a popular place to meet, as were alehouses and marketplaces. Local celebrations throughout the year also provided regular opportunities for the young people of the village to bat their eyelashes at each other: Shrove Tuesday, May Day, harvest festivals in the summer and Christmas in the winter. Life happened primarily outdoors and in a very public fashion, and hence courtship did too – you met in public, courted in public, kissed in public. Particularly during the early stages of courtship, the young tended to be left to their own devices. Outside the upper gentry and aristocracy, the sexes were almost entirely free to mingle, even to be alone together. While official marriage brokers were rare, there were plenty of unofficial matchmakers (neighbours, great-aunts, employers) eager to help. Parents were also involved, of course, though less so than is often assumed; the initiative generally lay with

the young person, and arranged marriages were almost unheard of outside the aristocracy (and even there they were not common).



Frontispiece to a popular seventeenth-century courtship manual, *The Mysterie of Love and Eloquence, Or the Arts of Wooing and Complementing* by Edward Phillips (1658)

What was arguably the world's first Agony Column, the *Athenian Mercury*, was founded in 1693 three years into the reign of William and Mary. The paper gives a vivid sense of the difficulties involved when parents attempted to influence their children's choice of partner. In one instance, 'Gentlewoman about Eighteen Years of Age, and a tolerable Fortune, is Courted by a Person of Fifty eight, who is very well received by her Parents . . .' The 'Gentlewoman' in question, however, 'could not her self for some time be prevailed with, at which her Parents were not a little displeas'd, but she being of a good Disposition, and her Relations using some Arguments with her, as the great Scarcity of good Husbands in these days, and the Hopes of a good Estate, seems to have wrought upon her . . .'

And so, in response to the question 'How far the Duty of a Child does oblige her to comply with her Parents . . .?', the *Athenian Mercury* advised that 'She must not obstinately refuse the Advice of her Parents, tho' on the other side they have no Power to force her contrary to her Inclinations.' In other words, it was fair to expect a bit of give and take. High mortality rates meant that many young people had already lost one or both parents by the time they reached marriageable age, with the result that they were essentially free to marry whomever they chose. For women, there was the additional fear of 'the great Scarcity of good Husbands in these days', a fear that seems to have afflicted almost

every generation in some way.

The 1690s were a transformative decade for the institution of marriage. Having a married couple on the English throne meant that heterosexual monogamy was now more than ever perceived as the 'normal' mode of living. Furthermore, William and Mary had not inherited the throne in the way their predecessors had, but rather had been contracted to it by a Whig government anxious for change. John Locke argued in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) that this shift in the source of social, political and moral authority would and should have significant implications for the future of the family too: the dominant patriarchal relationship would and should no longer be inherited (that is, with one's father) but should instead be contracted 'between two free, equal, consenting adults'. Thus, Locke advocated a distinctly more modern interpretation of marriage, with the result that the issue of marriage in general became very much part of the public discourse, whether on Fleet Street or Drury Lane. The plot of the Restoration play *Love for Love* by William Congreve (1695), for instance, centres upon a tyrannical parent, Sir Sampson, who tries to arrange his son Valentine's marriage purely for financial gain, but whose authority is challenged ('mayn't I do what I please?' asks Valentine) by a more consultative approach to the matter.

At the same time, the rise of economic individualism, where the husband *and* the wife both earned their own wage rather than just contributing to the family kitty, meant that this was a period of significant change for the family. The patriarchal family unit, where everyone lived together (grandparents, cousins, servants) was gradually being replaced by the conjugal family unit, or what we would nowadays call the nuclear family. This made one's choice of a partner more important than ever before. It determined not only who one lived with, but also one's social and economic circumstances: it was just you, your husband or wife and your children staring at each other across the breakfast table, for ever and ever until death did you part.

In London, however, tracking down a husband or wife was not always easy. About 8,000 rural migrants arrived in the city every year in search of work, wages and in many cases a wife, as a consequence of which by 1690 the population topped half a million. New survival strategies were required to keep one's head above water in this huge, frantic, anonymous pool of people. In particular, it was no longer possible for tradesmen to rely upon word-of-mouth to publicise products and share information – hence the rise of advertising.

The first advertisement to appear in an English newspaper was published in 1625. It informed Londoners of the publication of a pamphlet about the marriage of the Prince of Wales to Henrietta Maria, the daughter of the late King of France. Ads of a more personal nature were soon a regular feature of newspapers and periodicals – horses for sale, houses for rent, servants wanted – and before long became subject to parody. On the same day (16 May 1660) that Charles II, while in The Hague, received a delegation from both Houses of Parliament asking him to return to England as King, an obscure London periodical known as *Mercurius Fumigosus* offered up an ad purporting to be from a 'worthy, plump, fresh, free and willing Widdow liveth near the Carpenrer in Flowre and Dean stre[n]e near Spittle-fields' who was in search of 'any man that is Able to labour in her Corporation'. 'If any man want a wife and come to this pure piece of iniquity,' the ad went on, 'let him present the true picture of his Tool there's no question but he may find favour . . .' Whether it was also a parody of some very early Lonely Hearts ads that have since been lost to us is impossible to know. What is not in doubt, however, is that it was a response to decades of Puritan repression. Austere prudishness was out; sexual innuendo was in. The nation was eager for a little light relief, which *Mercurius Fumigosus* was pleased to provide. There was much bawdy humour to be had, after all, in aligning a sexual voracious widow with all the other commodities on offer in the pages of the London press.

A worthy plump, fresh, free and willing Widdow liveth near the Carpenter in Flowre and Dean street near Spittle-fields, she is in great distresse for want of a Lancktaradiddledino, and would accept of any man that is Able to labour in her Corporation, but in the first place she desires to make tryal of *ABEL* nigh Rosemary Lane who is now turn'd Witch, and tels fortunes, and craveth the assistance of her Brother a pretended *As-trologer*, who when he wants employment, handles his sheettle and Loom to replenish his hungry Maw. If any man want a wife and come to this pure piece of iniquity, let him present the true picture of his Tool there's no question but he may find favour, and commit Poultry without Matrimony.

*Mercurius Fumigosus*, 16 May 1660

A few weeks later, the small ads were afforded a royal seal of approval when the King himself placed a 'Lost' ad in *Mercurius Publicus* for 'a smooth black dog, less than a grey-hound', which, found, should be returned to 'His Majesties Back Stairs'. After a further few days the request was repeated, but this time in a rather more desperate tone:

We must call upon you again for a Black Dog between the greyhound and a spaniel, no white about him only a streak on his breast, and tayl a little bobbed. It is His Majesties own dog, and doubtless was stolen. Whoever finds him may acquaint any at Whitehall for the dog was better known at Court than those who stole him. Will they never leave robbing His Majestie? Must he not keep a dog?

One might have thought Charles II would have had more pressing matters to attend to: he had been back in London and on the throne for less than a month when he placed the ad. On the other hand perhaps this was precisely why he missed his trusty canine companion so much.

The reign of Charles II proved to be a significant moral departure from England's Puritan past, and this was reflected in the rise of humorous journals such as *Poor Robin's Intelligence*, which focused exclusively on matters of marriage and sex ('Poor Robin' was slang for penis). A typical entry is a newsflash about an outbreak of horn plague in Cuckoldshire and, short-lived as the journal was (it lasted only eighteen months), it is a fascinating reflection of the state of sexual politics in London at the time, in particular because it was aimed at the city's increasingly literate shopkeepers and tradesmen. In 1676, it featured an ad from a 'Worcestershire Gentlewoman' with £300 a year and 'face just of the complexion of a Garden-walk new gravel'd', who wanted to marry 'any thriving Gentleman, professing the Ingenious mystery of Chimney-scouring'. The joke was that the reason she needed to resort to an ad to find a husband was that she was so extraordinarily ugly that otherwise there was no way any man would agree to the arrangement, despite the lure of money. It also mocked the essentially practical basis of many marriages. In doing so, however, it helped establish the linguistic conventions of the genuine Lonely Hearts ads that were to appear in Houghton's *Collection* some years later.

**A Worcester-shire Gentlewoman, born under the malevolent aspect of a Tar e-penny Planet, but by continual industry over-ruling her stars arrived to the vast fortune of three hundred pound, *per annum*, during the date of Elbow-grease; whose person without Pattins is muth about the height of a short Long-Lane-petticoat; and her face just of the complexion of a Garden-walk new gravel'd, is desirous to enter into the honourable state of Matrimony; if any thriving Gentleman, professing the Ingenious mystery of Chimney-scowring, have a mind to considerable a fortune, let him speedily enter his name at the Match-Brokers office, and he shall be further satisfied,**

*Poor Robin's Intelligence*, 17 October 1676

*Poor Robin's Intelligence* also pioneered another notable new form of text, the satirical catalogue that advertised husbands and wives for sale. These were at their most popular in 1691; in that year *Mercurius Matrimonialis*, for example, featured ads for 'A lusty, stout proportion'd Man, had a good estate before the Fire [of London], and is still fit for Womans Service' and 'A Commission Officer full of Courage, brim full of Honour, a well proportion'd Man, and very beautiful, and yet wants Money'. In a similar pamphlet in August, women supposedly for sale included 'A tobacconist's daughter in Watling Street, very pretty but wild. If taken with all her faults her father gives £400'; 'a quack's widow in Thames Street, worth when all legacies paid, besides a vast stock of pills and elixirs £1000'; and 'A coffeeman's daughter about the Temple. Her only fault she squints a little. £100'. These women are uniformly described in relation to the men who controlled them; they are always somebody's daughter, somebody's wife or somebody's widow. They could be viewed in Lincoln's Inn Gardens between 5 p.m. and 9 p.m. that Sunday: 'All gentleman will be accepted who have clear limbs and members entire upon examination.' It is easy to picture a group of friends sitting around in a coffee-house composing the catalogues, coming up with ever more outrageous descriptions, laughing raucously as they did so, wine goblet in hand. Yet so convincing were these catalogues that a flurry of letters appeared in the London press demanding to know whether or not they were genuine.

A society jokes about whatever makes it anxious, and in England in the 1690s it was the state of the marriage market. Even the theatres of Drury Lane were dominated by the topic. Joining Congreve's *Love for Love* (1695) were *The Old Bachelor* (1693) and *The Mourning Bride* (1697), as well as *The Provoked Wife* (1697) by John Vanbrugh and *Love and a Bottle* (1698) by George Farquhar. The titles alone make it clear that the central themes were consistently love and marriage and peopling these productions were the stock characters of late Restoration comedy – wealthy widows, innocent maidens, cuckolded husbands – who also featured in the various other forms of contemporary literature that poked fun at the subject. Taken together, they offer a fundamental, cynical examination of the follies and foibles of late Restoration society.

It is not impossible that it was as a result of going to the theatre, browsing the latest journals

flicking through a just-published catalogue that John Houghton conceived the idea of using his *Collection* to offer some genuine assistance to those who found themselves floundering in the quagmire of the late seventeenth-century marriage market. With William and Mary firmly in power, England was experiencing a measure of political stability for the first time in many years. Urban culture was also increasingly dominant; the establishment of the Bank of England in 1694, which resulted in the rise of the City of London as a social and economic force, further accelerated the pace of change, not only in the capital, but across the nation. The 1690s were arguably the first decade of what we now call modern Britain, and the appearance of the first Lonely Hearts ads was one manifestation of this.

# Chapter Two

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## *A Want of Acquaintance*

A gentleman who, on the twentieth instant, had the honour to conduct a lady out of a boat at Whitehall Stairs, desires to know where he may wait on her to disclose a matter of concern. A letter directed to Mr Samuel Reeves, to be left with Mr May, at the Golden Head, the upper end of New Southampton Street, Covent Garden.

BRITAIN'S FIRST 'ONCE SEEN' ad, as they are now known, appeared in *The Tatler* in 1709, the year the magazine was founded. Such ads played a vital role in a world before telephones or even telegrams when a brief glimpse of a pretty face across a busy street might be all one got before she disappeared into the crowd. In the above instance it is one Samuel Reeves who regrets the missed opportunity. There is no way of knowing, of course, whether this was his real name. Records show that there was a Samuel Reeves who was born in Derby in 1689. His mother Susannah died when he was just eleven, and perhaps it was then that he travelled south. By 1709 he would have been twenty, and just beginning to think seriously about his marriage prospects. Indeed, he might even be the same Samuel Reeves who married in Hexham in Northumberland in 1710. One can only speculate.

Neither 'Once Seen' ads nor more conventional Lonely Hearts ads were by any means common yet, but they did exist; you just had to know where to look. *The Tatler* was one of an unprecedented number of magazines and newspapers founded in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Within four days of the lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695, the newspaper the *Flying Post* hit the streets of London, followed a month later by the *Post Boy*, as well as Houghton's *Collection* and many others. The nation's first successful daily newspaper, the *Daily Courant*, was established in 1702, and it was swiftly followed by a flurry of others. With the press no longer forced to operate underground, a cacophony of new voices emerged. Such democratisation meant that it was possible for almost anyone and everyone with means to see themselves in print, whether in the news section, on the letters page or even in Monday morning's personal column. (It has always been the case that most ads are placed over the weekend, the result presumably of a long, lonely weekend spent in the company of just a dog and a bottle of cheap red wine.)

By 1710 England boasted fifty-three newspapers, with a total circulation of approximately two million, and all carried ads of one sort or another. The voyeuristic pleasure they gave was highlighted by Joseph Addison in an essay he wrote that year for *The Tatler*: 'I must confess, I have a certain Weakness in my Temper, that is often very much affected by these little Domestick Occurrences, and I have frequently been caught with Tears in my Eyes over a melancholy Advertisement.' A couple of weeks later, a letter appeared in the magazine offering assistance to those seeking to place a Lonely Hearts ad. It included a sample ad written for a friend, featuring a thirty-year-old gentleman 'with dark-coloured Hair, bright Eye, and a long Nose' who was rich enough to offer his prospective bride a Coach and Horses, and a proportionable Settlement' and was in search of 'a good-humoured, tall, fair young Woman, of about 3000l. Fortune'. In other words, here was a dark, handsome, wealthy man in search of a young, blonde, wealthy woman – a standard trope that would manifest itself again and



again.

In 1712 the nascent newspaper trade was nearly destroyed by the Stamp Act, which placed a tax of one shilling on every ad accepted for publication. This difficulty was overcome, however, by the likes of the *Daily Advertiser*, the *Public Advertiser* and the *General Advertiser*, which from the beginning consisted entirely of ads. The intention was that it would be these ‘pieces of domestic intelligence’ themselves that would lure readers, which indeed they did, being ‘much more interesting than the paragraphs which our daily historians generally give us, under the title of home news . . . the ads are filled with matters of great importance, both to the great, vulgar and the small.’ This did not go unnoticed by the conventional press, where the classifieds almost always appeared on the front page. The result was that a web of interconnected stories stared out at the reader; it was the story of the metropolis, related in forty-word bursts. This was noted by, among others, Samuel Johnson, who found that, when reading the news, ‘. . . his attention is diverted to other thoughts, by finding that Mirza will not cover this season, or that a spaniel has been lost or stolen, that answers to the name of Roger’.

‘Promise, large promise, is the soul of an advertisement,’ Johnson went on, and most of those who advertised in this period were clearly in accord. The majority were in their mid-twenties, and mentioned money and all were men; ‘an agreeable young gentleman in trade’ was a typical description. Others were more loquacious, like the ‘Native of North Britain, (but with very little of the Brogue) of a genteel Profession, tall in Stature, finely shaped and well proportioned, has a delicate Head of Hair, white Hand, a large Calf, strong Back, broad Shoulders, and is what the World generally terms of a good-natured Disposition’, who sought ‘an agreeable young Lady, not exceeding Thirty-four, of some Fortune, who has no Objection to the Scotch Method of Courtship’. It was also common to trumpet one’s health: this was an era in which many died young, and what was the point in going through the whole rigmarole of a wedding only to have one’s other half pop their clogs on the first night of the honeymoon? It was perhaps this very night that the ‘gentleman of 2000l. a year, fifty two years of age next July, but of a vigorous, strong, and amorous constitution’ alluded to in his ad in the *Daily Advertiser* in 1750.

The Lonely Hearts ad was an entirely new form of text to emerge in this period. Not only did it differ from conventional forms of textual courtship, such as love poetry, in that it tended to be the man’s virtues that were the focus, rather than the woman’s, but it was also a new paradigm for fiction. Rich? Handsome? Thirty-something? Don’t believe a word of it. Lonely Hearts ads have always been laced with lies and white lies and half-truths. The art of advertising is, by its nature, about creating a fantasy world: life as we want it to be, rather than as it really is.

Lonely Hearts ads established themselves in the mainstream press just as the first novels appeared in bookshops, and the two share a number of characteristics. *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe, *Pamela* (1740) by Samuel Richardson and *Joseph Andrews* (1742) by Henry Fielding all demonstrate a new-found focus on the individual. Following a mini-sketch of the title character, the reader is then allowed to peer into their private lives to find out what it is they want, need, crave. And these novels, again like Lonely Hearts ads, provided communities with a shared interest to discuss over the garden fence or in the coffee-house: ‘Have you reached the brilliant bit in Chapter Six yet where . . . ?’ ‘Do you see that ad in the *Gazetteer* today?’

The novels may even have influenced contemporary perceptions of what constituted the ideal woman. In the preface to *Clarissa* (1747–8), Richardson lauds the ‘delicacy of sentiments, particularly with regard to the other sex’ that his title character demonstrates; and, indeed, ‘delicacy’ is a quality that recurs with increasing frequency in Lonely Hearts ads of the period. For example, a gentleman

the *Daily Advertiser* in 1750 hoped for a wife with:

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good teeth, soft lips, sweet breath, with eyes no matter what colour, so they are but expressive; of a healthy complexion, rather inclin'd to fair than brown; neat in her person, her bosom full, plump, firm and white; a good understanding, without being a wit, but cheerful and lively in conversation, polite and delicate of speech, her temper humane and tender, and to look as if she could feel delight where she wishes to give it.

Should such a perfect specimen exist, she was asked to write to 'A.B.' at the Smyrna, a popular coffee-house on the north side of Pall Mall (which, a few years later, achieved notoriety for having regularly hosted the French spy Florence Hensey. Clearly there were all sorts of intrigues going on there other than just drinking coffee).

There were some men, though, for whom money eclipsed all else. They were clear that marriage was a business transaction:

. . . if any Widow having no Children, and keeps a Grocer's Shop, is inclinable to alter her Condition in the Way of Marriage, to a Widower of the same Business (and one of considerable Fortune) is desired to direct to Mrs Susan Palmer, living in Cage-Lane, Stroud, Rochester, where they may hear further . . .

(Mrs Palmer was presumably a respectable local, older woman who lived nearby, for it was common to channel Lonely Hearts enquiries through her kind.)

There were some ads – such as the one that appeared in a London newspaper in 1756 from 'Gentleman of twenty-five Years of Age [who] has a great Dependence upon the Death of a Relation that is not young', who sought a woman with £60–70 a year who was 'agreeable', under thirty and ideally, spoke another language – that made it clear there were money troubles to be dealt with. As a result, it was common to mention the marriage contract early on: something along the lines of 'would make a handsome Settlement according to her Fortune' was standard.

Some sought to explain why they had decided to approach the courtship process in such an unconventional fashion. '[T]he real Foundation of applying in this public Way, is a Want of Acquaintance in London sufficient to introduce me in a private one,' lamented one lonely gentleman in 1750. Others imagined that an ad might help them find a wife in a hurry, like the forty-year-old with £600 a year who 'is inclinable to marry, (but not willing to have a long Courtship)'. Sometimes the impetus to marry was more practical: in a rare example in this period of a Lonely Hearts ad outside London, in 1746 a 'Bachelor not above 60 with a clear Estate of 5000l. per Annum' advertised in the *Cambridge Journal*, which had been founded two years earlier, for a woman who could provide him with an heir. Not surprisingly, this caused quite a kerfuffle in the area, with one wag writing in the newspaper to let the advertiser know that she could provide him with an heir in just four months if he was really that desperate.

But were any of these ads successful? If they were, the participants would have kept it secret, and hence no records survive. It is only occasionally that one is allowed a glimpse of what happened next. 'A young man wants a wife with two or three hundred pounds; or the money will do without the wife – whoever will advance it shall have five per Cent' was an ad that appeared in the *Daily Advertiser* in 1759. It piqued the 'unconquerable curiosity' of one woman who (as she explained on the letters page of the *Lady's Magazine* later that year) felt able to reply only because she saw no risk to her

reputation: 'My years protected me, for I own more than forty,' the implication being that no man would seek to take advantage of someone so incredibly *old*. It turned out that the ad had been placed by a young German man by the name of Gerand, 'his dress and aspect plain; his countenance honest; a ruddy circle bloomed upon his cheeks; and his eyes spoke plain integrity'. They arranged to meet, and it transpired that he wanted the money in order to establish himself in trade, though what sort of trade he did not mind. After some discussion, the woman agreed to invest in him (it was purely a business arrangement, though, with no mention of marriage) and a few weeks later the doors opened on Gerand's, a high-class haberdashery shop on the Strand.

'The Taste of the Times is wholly turned to Joking,' wrote Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and indeed by 1740 Lonely Hearts ads had become a common enough feature of London life to be satirised in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, now in its ninth year of existence. A letter appeared allegedly from a sixty-three-year-old bachelor, 'Somewhat infirm'd of Body, but perfectly Sound of Mind', by the name of Solomon Single. 'Sir, I am very bashful' was how he explained his need to advertise, continuing that 'I know if I have a very fine, beautiful, accomplish'd young Lady, (and such a one only will I have) my Money must buy her; therefore I endeavour to get such a Purchase with as little Trouble as possible, and that is my Occasion of writing this Letter to you.' In this way, the piece highlighted the increasingly commercial nature of the courtship process.

The next issue of the magazine printed a selection of supposed replies to the oh-so-romantic Mr Single's plea. Every archetype of mid-eighteenth-century womanhood is represented: an actress named Lucy Flirt, a chambermaid seeking to elude engagement to the local chaplain, a Herefordshire lady who boasts of her ability to 'make Jellies, and Soups', another who the morning before had read in her coffee granules that a husband would soon present himself, and finally Rachel Downright, who told it like it was: 'Thou art an old Fool. Grow wiser, and die a Batchelor.'

Another ad of 1740, however, was a little less transparent about the fact that it was undoubtedly inserted in jest.

If any Lady, not yet past her grand Climacterick, of a comfortable Fortune in her own Disposal, is desirous of spending the Remainder of her Life with a tolerably handsome young Fellow, of great Parts, about five Feet six Inches, may hear of such a one to her Mind, by enquiring at the Theatre Coffee-House for Mr F, a Sophister of —— College Cambridge.

Note. He is short-sighted.

Here is one of the first instances of the soon oft-repeated joke that the advertiser was 'short-sighted' – in other words, that the ad was designed to appeal solely to the ugly – who on earth else would turn to the personal columns to find a husband?

Yet it remains impossible to know whether the advertiser who, in 1750, claimed that such ads 'are often inserted by Gentleman for their Diversion' was accurate in his assessment. Certainly, this was the perception (fraud, quackery and scams like the South Sea Bubble fiasco were a feature of the age) which is why many advertisers sought to reassure potential respondents that 'She may depend on a Behaviour that can be expected from a Man of Honour, however the Event of such Meeting may prove . . . I do therefore declare myself in earnest.' It was worth emphasising, for the description 'Man of Honour' was certainly not one that could be applied to all those who placed ads. Take the 'single gentleman of character and fortune' who the same year placed an appeal in the *Daily Advertiser* for a woman who was willing to live with him 'first as an house-keeper, afterwards, lik'd, as a companion for life'.

In the years since *The Tatler* had first introduced 'Once Seen' ads to the nation, they too had flourished, largely in response to the huge growth in the number of publications keen to carry them. In 1748 the *General Advertiser* printed a plea to 'a lady, genteelly dressed, [who] was seen to lead a string of beautiful stone-horses through Edmonton, Tottenham, and Newington', from a gentleman 'smitten with her behavior'. He proposed a deal: if, on meeting, she decided she did not want to marry him, he would buy all her horses from her instead. Ten years later, an appeal appeared in the *London Chronicle* for 'A Young Lady who was at Vauxhall on Thursday night last, in company with two Gentlemen', who had been spotted by:

a young Gentleman in blue and a gold-laced hat, who, being near her by the Orchestra during the performance, especially the last song, gazed upon her with the utmost attention . . . He earnestly hopes (if unmarried) she will favour him with a line directed to A.D. at the bar of the Temple Exchange Coffee-house, Temple-bar, to inform him whether Fortune, Family, and Character, may not entitle him, upon a further knowledge, to hope an interest in her Heart.

It often seems to be the case that women are most attractive to men when they are with other men.

An anthology of these ads published in 1750 also suggests that they were one of the few literary contexts of the period in which women's voices were heard, among them a cry for the 'young Gentleman who appeared last Monday at the Ball at Vintners Hall, dress'd in a French-grey Frock, laced with Silker, a plain yellow Sattin Waistcoat, white Stockings, and a plain Hat', who had 'greatly enamour'd a Lady then present', which was placed in the paper by 'the Lady's Friends'. The website [www.mysinglefriend.com](http://www.mysinglefriend.com) may be a brilliant idea, but it is by no means a new one.

By 1760 London was the home to four daily newspapers and five tri-weekly newspapers, while those in the provinces numbered more than thirty-five; the rapid expansion of the press meant that there was no shortage of places to insert 'Once Seen' ads. In London at least, with its rapidly increasing population, there was a significant need for this sort of service. As the newspaper proprietor Nathaniel Mist put it, 'it is certain that in a great and populous City like this, where the Inhabitants of one End of the Town are Strangers to the Trade and Way of Living of those of the other many Things which prove to be of singular Use and Benefit could never be known to the World by any other Means but this of advertising . . .' From the 'Gentleman in a Spencer Wig . . . at the Lord Mayor's Ball' to the 'lady who had on a pink coloured capuchin, edged with ermine . . . at Drury Lane Playhouse', not only do 'Once Seen' ads offer up a potted history of fashion in their detailed descriptions of what the mysterious person wore, but they also give a wonderfully vivid sense of what London was like in the first half of the eighteenth century: everyone toing and froing, bustling around off to a ball or to the theatre. Catch her eye through a crowd, try frantically to weave one's way across a cobbled street, dodging the horses and carriages and manure, but just at that moment – oh no! – with a twitch of her dress and a flash of her bonnet, she's gone. For ever? Let's hope not.



*The Laughing Audience* by William Hogarth (1733). The theatre was a frequent site of romantic intrigue.

# Chapter Three

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## *A Feeling Heart*

LATE ONE AFTERNOON in 1776, a carriage clattered to a halt outside the Cocoa Tree Coffee House on Pall Mall. The side door swung open, and on to the muddy cobbles stepped a gentleman who walked strangely muffled up, considering that the weather was relatively warm for that time of year. He glanced one way down the street, then the other, and strode determinedly through the Cocoa Tree's front entrance, his manservant scuttling behind him. It was time for him to collect the replies to the Lonely Hearts ad he had placed in a London daily newspaper a few days prior. 'M.L.' described himself as a 'Gentleman of genteel Address, and easy circumstances, who has tasted sufficiently of life, to be thoroughly convinced that real enjoyment consists alone in domestic retirements, could be happy to renounce that phantom, which the generality of mankind pursues under the idea of pleasure'. He was after a woman of 'genteel education, and possessed of accomplishments sufficient to adorn the middle sphere of life'. Today's visit to the Cocoa Tree was one of considerable import. Would the woman of his dreams reveal herself to him? Or, indeed, any woman at all?

Inside, the Cocoa Tree bustled with activity. It was a well-respected club frequented predominantly by government figures and civil servants; perhaps M.L. was one of their number. Some were there to discuss the recent fighting in the American colonies, others to read the papers in peace, and – unlikely as it might seem – one or perhaps two were there to find a wife.



*The Coffee House* by H. Bunbury, engraved by W. Dickinson (1794). Were one or two of these gentlemen secretly in search of a wife?

M.L. approached the bar and asked the barmaid – one of the few women present – whether there was any post for him. With a knowing wink, she slid a pile of letters across the shiny bar. M.L.'s heart skipped a beat. He even felt a little faint; the suspense was just too much. 'Come hither you,' M.L. said to his manservant (or, at least, this is how the Irish playwright Isaac Bickerstaffe dramatised such a moment in his 1767 play, *Love in the City*):

hold this parcel of letters for me – it is what my advertisement brought me in three hours – Let me see – here is one sealed with a thimble – That should be from some superannuated temptress; at all events, I will put it into the left hand pocket – Two doves billing – that should be something pretty – I am a gentlewoman come to misfortunes, if I had any thing to say to you – in with the other – Here's one seal'd with the pipe of a key; another with a piece of smoaky sealing-wax, and a wet thumb . . .

M.L. claimed in his ad that, 'Fortune is by no means an inducement to the Advertiser'. Assuming this statement is to be taken at face value, it reflects an important shift in priorities in the search for wedded bliss. Decreasing emphasis was being placed on economic considerations; instead, romantic love had, for many, become the most important factor. Academics have long debated the extent to which marriage evolved in the eighteenth century, but recent scholarship has concluded that 'By the

end of the 1700s personal choice of partners had replaced arranged marriage as a social ideal, and individuals were encouraged to marry for love. For the first time in five thousand years, marriage came to be seen as a private relationship between two individuals rather than one link in a large system of political and economic alliances.' Underscored by Enlightenment thinking, which promoted the pursuit of happiness as a valid goal, many men increasingly sought a wife whose primary role was to be not (just) an economic asset, but someone with whom they could genuinely share and enjoy the life.

In 1769, one would-be suitor pondered the qualities he hoped for in a wife: 'good-tempered, sensible, and can sit by a genteel fire-side, and converse with gentlemen of understanding and liberal education'. His vision of married life – sitting by a warm hearth while his wife pours tea and chats amusingly to his admiring friends – is a wonderfully romantic one. Perhaps he had spent years, ever since he was a boy, picturing himself married to a beautiful, kind, gentle lady, maybe from a neighbouring village; and yet, unfortunately, the right woman (or in fact any woman at all) never came along, and so he finally gave in and advertised, and then – well, finish the story yourself. This is the joy of Lonely Hearts ads: they allow one to project upon a few short sentences a whole world of broken dreams and romance, intrigue and possibility. The image of the married couple who spend their evenings sitting blissfully together by the fireside was a potent and popular one, no doubt partly inspired by the contemporary rumour that Queen Charlotte fried sprats for her husband George III while he made toast on the fire.

Domestic virtues were increasingly revered. Many advertisers expressed a yearning to 'live in a retired domestic manner', as one put it. As the celebrated hostess and writer Mrs Elizabeth Montagu commented, 'I often think that those people are happiest who know nothing at all of the world sitting in the little empire of the fireside, where there is no contention or cabal, think we are in a golden age of existence.' Others, however, were not quite so tactful about their need for someone to cook and clean, like the gentleman who in 1770 decided to look for a wife because he 'finds it inconvenient to leave his house to servants'.

Easily the top priority among almost all the men who advertised was that the successful candidate be aged between twenty and thirty. Being 'respectable' and 'agreeable' were also qualities that recurred frequently. Studies of human courtship have found that social skills (being 'agreeable') have always been of paramount importance in mate choice, perhaps because they suggest the ability to sustain a relationship even in the face of significant challenges. Some men were impressively modest in their demands: 'It is requested none will answer this, but who can think and act for herself' (1782). Others rated being 'accomplished' a top priority, such as the gentleman in 1776 who 'has been through France, and some part of Italy. If Fortune is so kind to join him to one that speaks another Language besides her own, it will be more agreeable; but it will be no Objection if she does not; I will improve her.' Some, though, seemed to view being 'accomplished' as a threat to their manhood, demanding 'that the Lady be respectable rather than young and handsome, agreeable in Person than in form perfect, of good Sense than distinguished Wit, a great Mind rather than a high Spirit, and of a good Heart than accomplished' (1791). Goodness, what a dullard! It is worth bearing in mind, however, that none of these men were entirely typical of their sex, otherwise they would not be approaching the courtship process in this way in the first place.

What was new was the number of men who prized 'delicacy' or, as one gentleman put it in an ad in the *Norwich Mercury* in 1769, 'the more susceptible to the soft passions, the better; but this seems to be the characteristic of the ladies here, as he was happily eye-witness of at the theatre on a late occasion; where he observed one in particular whose very soul seemed wholly melted into tenderness



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