Never Kiss a Man in a Canoe

Words of Wisdom from the Golden Age of Agony Aunts

Tanith Carey

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Extract

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PREFACE

These days, anyone writing to an agony aunt to pour out their troubles can generally expect wise counsel and clear, impartial advice. Agony aunts are like therapists; their treatment rooms are the pages of magazines and newspapers. They talk through our problems, discuss the options, and gently point us towards the most desirable solutions.

Advice columns have been around for centuries, yet the sympathetic agony aunt is really a modern phenomenon. Before society got touchy-feely, if you wrote to a problem page, you were just as likely to get a verbal bucket of cold water poured over you as understanding words of wisdom. If you put a foot wrong, your letter would be answered with furious rants, blasted with withering put-downs or dismissed with exasperated sighs. You risked being branded naive, beyond help or, at worst, immoral.

It was a magazine publisher called John Dunton who first hit on the idea that his readers' own dramas were much more interesting than politics or current affairs – as well as a very cost-effective way of filling his pages. The first letters published in the *Athenian Mercury* in 1691 were just as likely to be queries about the mysteries of the world as emotional issues; roughly half were about matters of the heart. There were questions such as: Who is the wisest – a man who marries for love or convenience? Is a husband justified in divorcing a wife who tricked him into marriage by wearing make-up?

Within a few years, Dunton's postbag was so flooded that he needed several people to reply to the letters, and he made the decision to hire a number of women writers to lend a feminine touch. The idea soon caught on. The first ever magazine just for

women, *The Ladies' Mercury*, established in 1693, had a section dedicated to answering queries solely from distressed ladies.

By the 1850s, a publishing revolution was underway. Paper-manufacturing techniques enabled mass production of newspapers and magazines, and Victorian education laws which ruled that every child should be taught to read provided an expanding readership. This was when agony aunts came into their own and the golden age of advice columns began, with men and women turning to them for help with things it was otherwise socially unacceptable to speak about.

This didn't mean, however, that they would always receive the advice they were looking for – or indeed any advice at all. Until well into the twentieth century, agony aunts felt their chief job was to uphold the nation's moral standards, not to soothe a suffering correspondent, even if they had no one else to turn to. For an agony aunt, it was just as important that the answer maintained the decent tone of the publication. Agony aunt columns were as much exercises in telling correspondents what they could NOT do.

Up until the 1920s, exchanges with agony aunts often had the feeling of private conversations, meant for the correspondent only. For reasons of space, instead of the questions being printed in full, they would generally be amusingly retold through the eyes of the agony aunt and the answer wrapped up in the query. Anyone reading pithy entries like 'The marriage was illegal and void. It was lucky for you the real wife pounced upon the villain at the church door' was left to surmise what they could.

At the same time that publications became more widely available, the Victorians developed an obsession with the idea of courtly love. It meant middle-class women cast themselves in the role of noble, beautiful ladies, to be worshipped from afar

by chivalrous suitors. But at a time when sharing an umbrella with a man to whom you were not engaged or returning a greeting from a man in the street to whom you had not been introduced were considered strictly off-limits, it is not surprising that many of the letters were a desperate bid to understand the opposite sex and to decipher the hidden meaning of a furtive glance or a waved handkerchief.

Frustrated yearning jumps out again and again from letters as ladies sit passively waiting for love to come and seek them out, such as the woman who asks what to do when a man dares to try and strike up a conversation in 1859 and is told, 'Contemptuous silence is the best reproof for such impertinence'. Forty years later, in 1901, another agony aunt is still maintaining that unmarried men and women should not be allowed to go out together unless chaperoned. To modern eyes, the dashing efforts of lovers to attract the attention of their beloved now seem comical. There is the young lover in hot water for paying a friend to write a sonnet for his beloved and who risks exposure, and a would-be Romeo who is only just dissuaded from singing below his sweetheart's window to secure her affections.

Members of the opposite sex were such mysteries to one another that there were other sections of magazines dedicated to columns teaching face-reading and dream interpretation to help readers gain another glimmer of insight. Flirting may have helped decipher what a member of the opposite sex was thinking or feeling, but this was considered a delicate art – frowned upon by the strictest agony aunts, but later accepted as a necessary evil by others.

While today's magazines are filled with celebrities like Victoria Beckham and Cheryl Cole, the role models for the most upmarket of Victorian and Edwardian magazine readers were members of various European royal families and the upper echelons of the English aristocracy. Agony aunts therefore took on

the role of helping their women readers to achieve this level of perceived poise and beauty.

Before the advent of modern beauty products, the most likely queries were how to get rid of excess hair, red noses, sweating, blushing and freckles. If you didn't like the shape of your nose, you were advised to mould it into shape. If your fingers were not of the fashionable tapered variety, the best method was to press them into cone-shaped thimbles. Although the link between what you ate and your weight was understood, agony aunts still had some odd ideas on how to slim down. An overweight reader is advised to try rolling on the ground as if this would miraculously whittle off the pounds. Try a trip to the museum, urges another agony aunt, because intellectual exercise burns as much fat as a walk in the Alps.

As well as the perennial topics of love and beauty, agony aunts were often consulted over much trickier subjects, such as the matter of class. Correspondents who hoped for a flicker of encouragement from an agony aunt because they had fallen in love with a person of a different social status were told more often than not that any chance of a relationship was doomed. And there were many letters about how to conduct oneself in a prim and proper way, such as whether it was socially acceptable to ride a bicycle purely for enjoyment and, if a reader was in fact cycling out of necessity, whether patterned tights were suitable attire.

Boys also wanted guidance on how to be men, and the physical culture movement of the early 1900s spawned a wave of advice, bracing in the extreme. The columnists of the popular boys' papers of the time advised early-morning cold showers, both for physical fitness and to dampen down 'schoolboy vices'. One proclaims that if all the young men of the nation learned to use their muscles, 'we shall still maintain the proud position of being the foremost nation on the face of the earth'.

The more romantic Edwardian age saw a gradual softening of some of society's rules. The Suffragette movement and the First World War – when women were called on to help with the war effort – offered women a chance to show what they could do. Magazines were no longer just for consumption in middle-class drawing rooms; girls working in factories were now able to buy themselves copies of mass-market magazines such as *Polly's Paper* and *Peg's Paper*.

However, agony aunts don't appear to have been quite ready to shake off the Victorian way of doing things. After the First World War, girls were once more expected to return to the home and take up their role as housewives. The highest goal of a woman ought once again to be manager of her smart home, supporter of her husband, and mother to her children. If a correspondent hoped for more, it was rare that she would receive the sisterly solidarity she was hoping for and she would more than likely get a good ticking off instead. A wife's job was to prop up the male ego and pay compliments, and agony aunts considered any wish for deviation from this role as selfish, ungrateful and immoral.

A girl who managed to get her husband to do the washing-up in 1929 had not taken the first step in finding equality between the sexes; instead she was sternly told she was as wicked as a criminal who deserved to be deserted or beaten for tricking the poor man into marriage. Could Phoebe, writing to *Modern Woman* in the same year, really complain that her husband got exasperated if she allowed the housekeeper to interrupt a man's right to silence during dinner? Even in the fifties, if a husband paid no interest in his wife, it was obviously the wife's fault. What did she expect if Peter did not come home to find her looking 'dressed and pretty' and she was instead all 'creams and curlers'?

During the Second World War, matronly-sounding agony aunts caught on to the make-do-and-mend mentality – and

applied it to relationships. The errors of wartime – like extra-marital affairs – were best swept under the carpet. Women in bad marriages where the husbands had been unfaithful were told tartly to make 'the best of a bad job'. And this same attitude was to be applied to all aspects of life. Suffering from depression? Snap out of it and get out for more air was the suggested remedy.

Lots of overriding common sense can, however, be found in the advice from agony aunts during this period from the 1850s to the 1960s. From early on, smokers are told it's bad for their health, and despite the fashions and expectations of the times, a girl with a waist of 15 inches in 1906 was told to let it return to its natural size.

But there was also an innocent belief that sleeping with your legs straight would make you taller, or that wearing a chin strap to bed would get rid of a double chin. And these days, some of the concoctions recommended by the agony aunts would require a chemical hazard suit to make.

Looking through them now, the letters are refreshingly free from the health and safety advice which constrains today's world. A man who wants to learn how to swim in 1859, for example, is cheerfully advised to test for himself whether he would sink or swim – by throwing an egg into some deep water and launching himself after it.

What seems odd, however, is that the correspondents should put so much trust in the advisers in their favourite publications, yet they rarely knew anything about them. Unlike now when agony aunts such as Claire Rayner, Virginia Ironside and Irma Kurtz are household names whose faces we recognize, the names used then were often pseudonyms, and the pen and ink illustration at the top of a column was an idealized portrait.

In the factory girl publications, agony aunts were made to sound like one of the readers. There was 'Joyce' in the *Every Girl's Paper* or 'Margaret' in *Up-To-Date* magazine. There are no records to say who really wrote these words of wisdom.

Cosy Corner, part of the *Ladies' Home Paper,* unusually claimed to have a man penning the advice – its own 'Dr Sphinx Love Consultant' – while the answers in *The Family Friend* were credited to the editress.

But their words sometimes spilled over to give brief glimpses of who they were. An agony aunt in *Betty's Weekly* counsels a girl in 1923 who wants to know whether to bob her hair: 'There is just one thing I'd like to tell you – I have a bobbed head!' summoning up an image of a fashionable young flapper. And the agony aunt at *Home Mirror* in 1925 could barely contain her own taste in men as she told a correspondent, 'I too think that there is something so clean and attractive about a boy with fair, curly hair, clear complexion and twinkling blue eyes!'

Later, more homely, matronly names were used like 'Evelyn Home', who was in reality Peggy Makins, and 'Mary Marryat', a name that continued to be used in *Woman's Weekly* for several decades. Really it didn't make any difference who wrote the advice, as long as the editor felt they were upholding the moral tone of the publication.

Looking back, the advice is also notable as much for what it left out as for what it included. Answers on the most intimate and difficult subjects like contraception and menstruation were non-existent until the thirties, despite the anxiety such issues must have caused.

While today's columns are filled with vivid sexual details, sex was a subject rarely even alluded to – except in the most censorious way. Correspondents were curtly told that such subjects were not fit for public discussion, or to expect a pamphlet through the post in a brown paper envelope with

more information. A wife who was repulsed by her husband's advances in 1936 is told to submit to 'something natural and necessary'. After the Second World War, the possibility that couples had sex before marriage was at least acknowledged – but it came accompanied by dire warnings. Women who dared to broach the subject were warned on no uncertain terms that they would end up as social outcasts, and any young man who tried to persuade them otherwise was considered 'not a very nice boy'. Couples were simply lectured on the virtues of 'control' or advised to see less of each other. As the agony aunt in *Home Chat* counselled one young engaged couple who wanted to stay the night at a charity ball in 1957, 'you must see that if you want to keep your love sacred, going off on your own like this might put a strain on your emotions.' Addressing the subject was made all the harder by the fact that quite often the necessary words were not at their disposal. In fact, in her autobiography, Peggy Makins revealed that she was so constrained when she wrote for *Woman* in the 1950s that the word 'bottom' was forbidden on any page in the magazine, even if it referred to the 'bottom of the garden'.

Until the sixties, sex before marriage was seen as an evil that could potentially risk a woman everything. But with the introduction of the pill, women gained unprecedented control over their fertility and their lives. The cat was out of the bag. The contraceptive pill succeeded where two world wars and the emancipation of women had so far failed. This time, no hectoring agony aunt in the world was able to repress the sort of sexual freedom women were now enjoying. Agony aunts like Marje Proops led the way by talking with a newfound directness about sex. It is at this point that agony aunts' replies become roughly recognisable as the advice we have today – and lose their curiosity value for the modern reader.

Looking back over the sweep of history, it's easy to see the big picture – how wars, revolutions and social changes started and ended. But it's also easy to forget what the past was really like for those who lived it. The changes reflected in these pages are often subtle. Entries for each subject are listed in date order to chart those shifting developments. This is more of an emotional history, a secret history of the heart. Each problem contains the seed of real-life human drama. The voices are real, honest – sometimes desperate. Now, 150 years on, reading even the oldest entry makes a problem feel as fresh and immediate as the day it was written.

While society and customs have changed dramatically during the period spanned by this book, the letters and advice themselves show that human nature hasn't changed – only the rules which govern it have. Spouses still quarrel and cheat, young girls still mistake flirtation for love, and men still worry about their bald patches.

So let's salute the brave readers who bared their souls in front of millions of strangers – and often got slapped down for their efforts. No matter how unsympathetic or, at times, plain wrong the advice was, it's hard not to admire the gloriously highhanded way strict agony aunts dealt with their readers' problems, and their total belief in sticking to rules and upholding moral values.

At times, these extracts are an icy-cold, dare I say it, even refreshing, counterblast to some of today's pussy-footing politically correct advice. They are a tribute to a bygone era when if you did or said something considered completely silly, you got a brisk telling-off – not hand-holding and a referral for counselling.

TANITH CAREY, SEPTEMBER 2009

CHAPTER ONE

LOVE, COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE

'DEAR BROKEN-HEARTED'

Advice on lovers' quarrels and lost love

'Cordelia' – When a gentleman slights a lady, it is not for the latter to be the first to seek a reconciliation. It would be better to treat him with cool indifference. That from a lady generally makes a man feel excessively humiliated.

THE LONDON JOURNAL, 1855

'Ada Hesse' – You have foolishly lent yourself to a clandestine courtship, and must withdraw from it promptly. The serpent found his way into Eden, and why not into the park adjoining your father's house?

Do not add guilty weakness to your folly.

THE LONDON JOURNAL, 1857

'Corinna' is a bride and poetess. She says her husband grumbles now at her devotion to the Muses, which as a lover he admired. She says she only just let the fire out while writing an 'Ode to the Sun' and just forgot to order dinner while she finished a sonnet on 'Wedded Love', and that a first quarrel was the result.

Corinna asks our advice. Here it is: Beware of a second. Your first duty *now* is to your husband. No wife should have a soul above buttons [which means above sewing them on] nor should she ignore the fact that man's heart lies very near his stomach, and that cold mutton dampens the flame of wedded love.

THE WEEKLY MAGAZINE, 1859

'A Young Husband' complains that his wife, who during courtship declared she liked the smell of a cigar, that it was very refreshing, now shrieks and faints at the sight of one; that a cigar case she worked for him with hearts and darts in white beads she has now seized and thrown into the fire, and declared that if he perseveres in smoking in her drawing room, she will appeal to her own dear mamma for advice.

We advise A Young Husband if he cannot at once give up this expensive habit, at least not to indulge in it in his wife's drawing room. There is generally in every house some small apartment where an inveterate smoker can enjoy that weed 'whose scent the fair annoys'. We strongly disapprove of all ladies who, in order to secure the smoker, pretend to like the cigar. But man should be lenient in a case where love prompted the deception; besides, how can he tell what interesting solution there may be to the young wife's present disgust of the cigar? Above all, let him avoid this first appeal of his bride to her 'poor, dear mamma'!

THE WEEKLY MAGAZINE, 1859

'Martha G.' – Do not be impetuous. He will see the folly of his conduct, and doubtlessly make ample atonement. A nice, new bonnet, perhaps, might be acceptable in the shape of a peace offering.

THE WEEKLY MAGAZINE, 1859

'Clarissa' says she has had a quarrel with her lover, a first quarrel, and after giving us the following particulars, asks us *Who is to blame?* She begs us, if we think she is in the wrong, to advise her how to act so as to regain her Roland's affection and esteem. It seems that he strongly objects to all those

arts which, professing to heighten beauty, often destroy it. Clarissa says that solely with a view to shining in his eyes, and not to be eclipsed in his presence by her friend Aurelia, she followed that lady's example and advice, purchased some additional clustering ringlets, a packet of *poudre impératrice*, a bottle of Pear's Liquid Bloom of Roses and a dye which has converted her eyebrows into a jetty arch.

Thus 'improved' and arrayed in the newest fashion and most expensive crinoline, she met Roland at a ball and he cut her. He pretended not to know her. But she heard from Aurelia it was only a pretence. Clarissa said she bore it as long as she could, and then went off, in spite of herself, into strong hysterics.

Roland remained obdurate, and the next day wrote to say he loved nature in women and flowers, and the artificial had no charms for him. He said that such as she was when he first knew her, she was his *belle idéale*. Such as she appeared at the ball, she was his aversion.

We advise Clarissa to promise her lover to sacrifice art, cosmetics and crinoline to true love and true taste.

THE LADIES' TREASURY, 1859

'Love Me, Love My Dog' – We could never perceive the absolute necessity for a gentleman to fall head and ears in love with an obese poodle, or a wheezing, waddling spaniel, because his heart was conveyed as the undivided property of a sweet, young girl. He might, without any imputation upon his good taste, entertain a natural repugnance to an obese poodle, or a wheezing, waddling spaniel; and in such a case, it would be exceedingly arbitrary and unjust to insist on his coupling his warm affections with either.

'Laura' must not be too exacting.

THE WEEKLY MAGAZINE, 1859

'Broken-hearted' – We really cannot undertake to advise you as to what is your best course. Yours is a peculiar case. It is rare for any one person to be simultaneously threatened with epilepsy, deserted by her affianced lover after the banns have been already published, bitten by a dog, which has been rendered insane through being led about by a string, expelled from her lodgings for non-payment of rent, and thrown out of an active volcano. These events do not often happen together.

Do not, at any rate, return the presents your lover gave you. If we were in your place, we should convert them into cash. Then you might take out a County Court Summons against the owner of the dog, also of the volcano, and have something over for the Breach of Promise action.

PUNCH, 1897

'Florence "Why?"' writes:
He does not love me any longer. And yet I cannot tell how it is or explain to you my reasons. He does little things now which hurt me most deeply, and neglects other so-called details which are of capital importance to a woman. It is all over. Does a man's love only last a year? I feel I have lost him already.

Don't allow him, Mrs 'Why', to see you suffer from his little sins of neglect. Do not make a scene under any circumstances. If your happiness, your love, your life, is really in danger some day, then, and *only* then, will it be time to make a straightforward statement to him, to tell him your grievances. Love, in order to last, must gradually transform itself and adapt itself to circumstances. He expects something other than kisses from you now. You must take an interest in his work, in his ambitions, in all his plans. You may be his sweetheart at

times, but at all times you must be his *friend*, his *companion*, his *partner*.

Above all, keep your temper – and don't cry.

COSY CORNER, 1908

You didn't repent your faithlessness, 'Winnie', until the man who stole you from your husband had proved unfaithful to you, and departed to marry another girl who was free to take your place and join her life to his on a more respectable footing. Had you left the man first, I should have believed you had repented of the wrong, and stood a better chance of finding for you that excuse I have been looking for in vain.

Your husband did not desert you, Winnie. He was compelled to go away as he did to earn money for you and your baby boy. Ought not that fact to have kept you true? You are a coward, Winnie. Knowing the wrong you have done, you squeal at the punishment that follows. You don't seem to have the sense to know that you have got off lightly. You have never thought, I suppose, what you might have gone through had your perfidy been discovered and your husband had brought you to the Divorce Court for your sins. The baby you say you love so dearly would have been taken from you then. And in spite of all you have escaped you are not the least bit thankful. You only have the effrontery to write and ask me how you can obtain revenge. You can't obtain it. You have no right to wish you may.

I began to feel sorry for you on account of the years of remorse you are likely to suffer. I have altered my mind. I am not sorry. I realize that is your only road of atonement. I want my other girls to remember that marriage is a solemn, sacred compact and no amount of love you may have in your heart for some man other than your husband can make an excuse for breaking marriage vows.

EVERY GIRL'S PAPER, 1923