

Rob Wagner's
Script

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Personals

by DUANE W. RAINBOLT



WHEN Dorothy Parker was married in Colorado a year or so ago her only comment to the press was, "This is personal." Whether she knew it or not she was warbling the theme song for one of the strangest departments that can be found in the columns of any newspaper.

It was Alexander Woollcott, I think, in "While Rome Burns," who mentioned a "personal" inserted by Kathleen Norris in the personal columns of a New York newspaper one time, shortly after her arrival in Gotham.

EDNA F.—Am at the hotel and terrible worried, Charlie is on the drink again. Please call me up. Katie.

The purpose of the notice, Mr. Woollcott writes, was to tell Edna Ferber, whose new address Mrs. Norris did not know, that she was in town, and he continues, Mrs. Norris was swamped with calls by noon of the same day. For everybody reads the personals.

And quite rightly for that strange column edited by that impersonal fellow, Personal, contains day in and day out more pure drama than O'Neill, Garbo and Cornell combined. Behind each of those two and three-line paragraphs is a story and before the reader is the bare plot only, from which he can draw his own deductions and supply his own details.

Most people of literary aspirations, whether realized or not, read them, and more than one mystery plot in real life and in novels has centered around the personal columns. Probably the most famous personals of all time were those placed in the New York *American* by Dr. John Condon, the Bronx educator and go-between in the Lindbergh kidnaping case during the spring of 1932. On March 10, when Lindbergh was reported to be dickering with the kidnapers there appeared in the personal columns of the paper the line,

I ACCEPT, Money is ready, Jafsie.

And the morning after the night of April 2, when Colonel Lindbergh waited outside the cemetery, his son's body even then lying cold in the woods of Sourland—

WHAT is wrong?—Jafsie.

And what as a general rule is a personal column used for? To communicate, to sell, to plot, to advertise, to complain, to hope, to invite, to reject, to pray, to love, to hate, to ex-

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press appreciation, in fact, anything. The column is as Harold Bell Wright would say, "The human heart laid bare." And don't you believe it isn't. Do you want to buy a farm in South Africa, or attend a mannequin academy, or rehabilitate a confirmed drunkard, or take a tour through Egypt, or regain a lost lover, or plan a murder, or buy a sable coat or a Capuchin monkey? Read and use the personals.

Take, for instance, a three-line bit in the London *Times* this spring.

PEGGY, I have looked at Headland, Newquay, for Easter. You will like their black and silver ball room.—Rex.

It reeks of Noel Coward. At first glance the reader would say, Peggy is interested in finding a hotel in which to spend an Easter holiday, and that Rex, in hunting one up for her, has seen in the black and silver ballroom the distinctive touch that will suit the particular tastes of his amorata. There is something in that ballroom that will set off Peggy—an ash blonde perhaps. But why tell her through the personal columns of a newspaper? A letter would allow him to say so much more so much less expensively. Somebody is dodging somebody's husband or wife or relative or guardian or something. You sense a clandestine affair with a cuckold in the background. But if you are an expert at deciphering codes you may boil this down into something that is beyond the law. Rex, one of the gang, has been sent down to look over the prospects of purloining the silver from a large country estate, which the gang with whom he is communicating as Peggy is interested in robbing over Easter when there will be guests, entertainment and jewels. The name Headland, Newquay, is a blind previously agreed upon to cover the real geographical location and the mention of the ballroom may mean that through this room the thieves can get in or out of the house easily.

Or ponder a moment the notice in a fall number of the London *Times*—

LADY going abroad wishes to dispose of a sable cape in the latest mode and in perfect condition for £150.

The going abroad is probably a fake for a sable coat is hardly a handicap in the middle of winter in Europe, unless the owner is heading for Algiers. Impoverished nobility then? An actress in her declining years with fame and fortune gone forced to sell the gifts of her former admirers? A recent theft put up for hurried disposal? One can't dismiss personals with a glance. There are too many possibilities.

Sometimes, too, one finds the most amazing coincidences in the placing of notices; that is, if you care to read meanings into your coincidences. At the opening of the Mayfair season there appeared these two notices in the London *Times*.

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MRS. HORACE FARQUHARSON advises on debutantes, social affairs, dances. (Address and telephone number.)

And immediately below Mrs. Farquharson's notice that the marital hunting season was on.

JU-JITSU (self-defense) taught by a world expert. One week's course covers every attack. (Address and telephone number.)

And there is tragedy, too, plain and drab without much to relieve it. In a recent issue of the *New York Times* readers saw this bit:

MOTHER OLGI, Don't ruin Dad. Baby waiting. Guarantee all O.K. (Son)

Somewhere in a Park Avenue apartment or a house in the Bronx, a man and a woman quarreled and the woman ran away. Perhaps a silken gigolo caught the wife's smothered imagination and fed her autumnal love fires with theatrical clothes and manners. An imagination dormant for years under a load of respectability and the duties of being a wife and mother. So she went and the son, accepting the responsibility that his parents refused, is trying to patch up a home.

With the depression many have found it necessary to apply for work who were strangers to it before, but if you look over the relief rolls you'll find that Jerusalem has taken care of its own. There are few Hebrews begging. Thus interest was aroused all the more the other day by this notice in the *New York Times*.

GENTLEMAN, Jewish, in need of work. Anything decent, anywhere. (Address)

That has an air of proud humility about it that gives the reader pause. You notice the word that comes first, "Gentleman," then the race, and then humbly, "in need of work." The next phrase is pitiful. "Anything decent, anywhere." Still a gentleman, he wants work, but work that can still be done by a gentleman.

And perhaps two of the most puzzling items that a reader ever chanced to lay eyes on. Puzzling because they are so logical and respectable up to the last sentence or so and then, poof! You feel the reverberations from the blow that is shattering the ties of respectability and sobriety forged throughout the years. Both come from the *N.Y. Times*.

The first runs as follows:

AMERICAN WOMAN, Protestant, 40, college, university; 15 years diversified secretarial accounting experience, legal banking, school, commercial, excellent business, financial, social references, now employed; will accept well-paid office position (or any work for which qualified) Central-South America, Mexico, South Africa, Western U.S. Z 2186 Times Annex.

For the first four lines she recites the fruits of forty years of impeccable correctness as a capable business woman. She even has social references and probably some position. And then that last line, "will accept well-paid office position or any work

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for which qualified, in"—and here follows a list of practically *all the spots in the world that are still explorers' meat and which are figuring largely in the romantic literature and conversations of today*—Central South America, a land of half-castes, strange customs, Brazil nuts, and tales of lost tribes and people; Mexico whose romantic lure is being flaunted in the face of everyone who purchases a railroad or steamship ticket; South Africa, resort of big-game hunters and still alive in anyone's imagination; and last Western United States. Who could ever have linked Western United States with those other spots save a died-in-the-wool Easterner with a suppressed yen for cowboys? An easterner who had been brought up to know Europe as she knew her own front yard, and now was turning elsewhere for a final thrill.

And the following:

A GENTLEMAN, executive (age 40) of large N.Y. institution would like something to do evenings on a remunerative or strictly social basis; good personality and appearance, dances and plays contract well, expert accountant, excellent background and breeding; references. (Address)

A man who is an executive in a large N.Y. institution—he didn't say firm—and he has no friends! Could it be Sing-Sing? And he is willing to make money on the side, you see, and he also has references which if excellent imply connections of some sort. All very confusing and not at all consistent.

There are enough stories here to occupy anyone for a week after one reading. In fact, I know of a Los Angeles hostess who used to clip out personals and ask each of her guests to scribble a 100-word story around it. It was an interesting game. If I were rich I would do nothing but answer personals in person and ferret out the tales involved.

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IF YOU WANT to know what's going to happen tomorrow, read "The Conduct of Life," by Ralph Waldo Emerson. It was written more than sixty-five years ago.

—George Lees.