



HEARTS AND MINDS: CANADIAN ROMANCE AT THE DAWN OF THE MODERN ERA, 1900-1930

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Courtship Hardship

Historians have told us much about the hardships of Canadians in the early 1900s. They have told us that for all of its growth and promise, Canada was not a paradise: many workers suffered low wages, dangerous working conditions, recurring unemployment, and uncaring, if not repressive bosses; aboriginals, visible minorities, immigrants, Catholics, and Jews faced discrimination and hostility from the native-born; women of all classes and ethnic backgrounds were treated as second-class citizens before the law; rural depopulation in central and eastern Canada splintered families and eroded communities, while rapid urbanization and industrial growth produced congested, dirty, and unhealthy cities. These hardships were all very real.

Historians have said little, however, about the *romantic* hardships of the time. And yet these, too, were very real.¹ Canadians would have found things like poverty and discrimination easier to endure alongside someone special with whom they could share their troubles. In the spring of 1906, a lonely westerner sent a poem to the *Family Herald* called “The Bachelor’s Complaint.” Two of the verses went as follows:

“When plunged in deep and dire distress,
 When anxious cares my heart oppress,
 Who whispers hope of happiness?
 Nobody

When sickness comes in sorrow's train,
And grief distracts the fevered brain,
Who sympathizes with my pain?
Nobody"²

This bachelor was determined to find a wife, as were many others. And women wanted husbands. But finding and keeping that “special someone” was often difficult. For many Canadians, the road to the altar was strewn with obstacles and painful bumps, and, for some, the journey ended unhappily.

LONELY HEARTS

In the quest for romance, the most hard-pressed individual was, like our lonely poet friend, the western bachelor. As opportunities for making a good living, farming or fishing, declined in Canada's more settled regions in the early 1900s, many men heeded the popular cry “Go west, young man!” and moved to the “Golden West” to take up homesteads; in the two decades before the Great War, over 350,000 Canadians from eastern and central Canada moved to region, most of them men.³ The bachelor-homesteader's goal was to put in a few years of hard work – clearing his land, planting crops, erecting buildings, raising livestock – in order to earn enough money to “afford” a wife, perhaps a girlfriend he had left behind and promised to one day marry. If he wasn't financially secure, she might decline, or her parents might forbid her to marry. For many men it was also a matter of pride: they considered it less than manly to marry before being able to support a wife in comfortable circumstances.⁴

But things didn't always work out as planned. Farming in the West was more difficult than elsewhere – the growing season shorter, the markets more remote, the farm labour more scarce. This meant it took longer for men to get established. Over 40 per cent of homesteaders, in fact, failed to “prove up” – that is, acquire title to their free quarter-section of land by developing thirty acres and establishing a \$300 home within three years. In the infamous Palliser Triangle region of southern Saskatchewan and Alberta, the land was so dry that most of the original homesteaders eventually gave up.⁵ “There are many men who want to make a decent home first,” wrote

a B.C. bachelor, “but hard times come, and they have to struggle along in difficulties.”⁶ By the time they did get established, eight or nine years may have passed, and with them the opportunity of finding a wife: the pool of prospective mates got smaller, men lost touch with women “back home,” and many eastern girlfriends simply got tired of waiting and married someone else.⁷ “Now that we have better surroundings,” lamented an Alberta bachelor in 1920, “the girls we knew at home are nearly all married or gone elsewhere.”⁸ Looking back from the age of fifty, B.C.’s “Dan C.,” who had postponed marriage until he had built a comfortable home, was even more distraught: “It is only now that I see that I then made the biggest mistake of my life.”⁹

Even when a western farmer or rancher was able to establish himself quickly, or didn’t consider it a prerequisite to marriage, he still faced some difficult romantic realities. The most serious was one not seen in Canada since the early days of New France: namely, a severe shortage of women. The massive male migration of the early 1900s created a surplus of single women in central Canada and the Maritimes, and a shortage in the newly opened West and B.C. In 1904, when the West was still called the North-West, the editor of the *Western Home Monthly’s* (*WHM*) soon-to-be-established matrimonial column announced that,

every while the post brings me a semi-confidential letter from a young farmer in the North-West – sometimes from a middle-aged or an old one – setting forth that the writer, though in a position to marry, and in every sense willing, is shut off from the possibility of sharing his heart and home with a suitable partner because there are literally none within a radius of a hundred miles of his lonely ranch or homestead.¹⁰

Over the next ten to fifteen years, the West’s bachelors would send an unending flow of such letters to the magazine’s editor, and to the *Family Herald’s* Prim Rose as well, complaining, not about the region’s harsh climate and terrain, or about freight rates, tariffs, eastern banks, or the West’s political powerlessness, but about the dearth of “marriageable women”; to most bachelors, this was the West’s “greatest drawback and hardship.”¹¹ A frequent observation, this from Alberta’s “Highland Mac,” was that “there are only three girls within a radius of ten miles of my home, and they are redskins, so I haven’t much chance to fall in love, have I?”¹² It may have

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Maurice Ingeveld of Millarville, Alberta, looks a bit forlorn as he sits in his one-room log cabin in 1908. It was spring, after all, and, like other young men, his fancy may have turned to love. He was just one among many lonely western bachelors. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NA-227-8.*

been a cliché, but the phrase “one girl for every ten bachelors” was common currency among the West’s exasperated bachelors.

The reality wasn’t far off. In 1911, men outnumbered women in the rural areas of the West by a substantial 46 per cent; in Alberta, the figure was 64 per cent.¹³ In such circumstances, even the mere *sight* of a woman could arouse intense interest. One day a Saskatchewan farmer noticed a car driving past his farm carrying what appeared to be two “ladies.” Having not seen a female for six months, he hurried down his long driveway towards the road, “but as they passed quickly,” he recalled, “I didn’t have time to get out to the gate to see what they looked like.”¹⁴ A few years earlier “An Eastern Girl Out West” told *Prim Rose* readers of the reception she



Bachelors outnumbered maidens in Canada's rural areas, especially in the West. In part to commiserate, the practice of men doubling-up on the homestead was common, as were "Bachelors Homes" – boarding houses essentially – like this unique "Bachelor's Hall" boat house in Vancouver, ca. 1900. *Library and Archives Canada, Howard Morton Brown Collection, C-000365.*

had received upon her arrival in the region: "I have come to Saskatchewan and I find myself in a settlement where bachelors predominate, who look upon me with the blank amazement comparable only to the young school boy, who visits a city dime museum and sees for the first time a snake-charmer gracefully twining the venomous reptile about her body."¹⁵ The shortage of single women abated as the West filled up – the surplus of men over women in rural areas fell to 26 per cent in the 1920s – but westerners continued to report a noticeable surplus of "Jacks" over "Jills" in these years, particularly outside the cities. "Having resided in some nine different localities," wrote a Saskatchewan woman in 1918, "and having been in touch with hundreds of people in many others, I emphatically deny that

girls are plentiful in country districts.”¹⁶ Two years earlier, after an Alberta woman requested male correspondents from the Prim Rose column, she received “over seventy replies, largely from lonely men seeking wives.”¹⁷ Sometimes the Western Man’s frustrations got the better of him. Claiming to speak for most B.C. bachelors, one man told Prim Rose readers that “we, too, are learning that somewhere in the near future things will be different, that is, when the C.P.R. ships into this country *girls*, instead of Chinks and Hindoos.”¹⁸ More often, lonely bachelors simply lamented the situation and expressed the hope that more families with young girls would soon move into their district.

The situation was better for the “hired man,” some of whom worked for farmers with eligible daughters or domestic servants. But we still know too little about the romantic lives of these men – who constituted 20 per cent of the West’s bachelors – to say for sure. Perhaps their poor economic prospects, along with their reputation for shiftlessness, vulgarity, and immorality, offset any romantic advantages they enjoyed over the bachelor farmers and ranchers? When one hired man asked permission to marry his employer’s daughter, the farmer told him to “Get off the farm! ... He said I was no damn good, had no prospects, no money, I was just a drifter off the boat, and there was going to be no marriage to a drifter.” In the public mind, the hired man was often associated with the hordes of rowdy young men from eastern Canada who took the “harvest train” west each fall to help with the annual harvest and sometimes molested or harassed women along the way. All we know for sure is that the hired man was far less likely to marry.¹⁹

The shortage of single women meant, in turn, intense competition among the region’s bachelors. “I do not like baching,” wrote “De Wolfe” from Alberta’s Peace River district. “There is only one girl living near me, but as there are about twenty young men courting her, I am afraid I will have to continue baching.” A fellow Albertan was equally disillusioned. “I have been baching for a couple of years,” he wrote, “but am getting tired of it. I have a nice ... car, but whenever I go to take a girl out for a drive, I have to go ten or fifteen miles, and when I get there, sometimes there are three or four cars ahead of me, so it’s too late.”²⁰ What’s more, families who moved into the region, and had eligible daughters, found themselves besieged with offers of help from nearby bachelors eager to attract the daughters’ attention.²¹

The West's single women did not stay single for long. Sisters who accompanied their brothers to the West, ostensibly to serve as helpmates, were soon married, while migrating eastern teachers and domestic servants quickly found themselves the object of regular male visitors. "Nowhere in the world does a girl queen it more than out here," wrote one B.C. farmer. "She counts her admirers like sand on the seashore, gets engaged about twice a year, and is petted and spoiled till no good for a wife or a mother."²² This, too, caused frustration for the western bachelor. "I am baching on a homestead and have been now for three years," wrote one Manitoban, "not because I am in love with it, but because I am compelled to, as there are no girls at all around here, and if one does come around here the first thing you hear is of her getting married."²³ Another Manitoban complained that "the girls that do condescend to come out here are grabbed so quickly by the city bachelors that we slower farmers have no chance at all."²⁴ Sizing up the grim situation, many men simply resigned themselves to perpetual bachelorhood, others to marrying a "half-breed" or "foreigner."²⁵

The scarcity of women wasn't just a regional problem; it was a problem in rural areas generally. The rapid growth of Canadian cities in the late nineteenth century created many new employment and recreational opportunities that acted as a powerful magnet for rural residents. Between 1890 and 1920, half a million Canadians left the rural areas of central Canada and the Maritimes.²⁶ Most were young women, drawn to places like Toronto, Hamilton, Montreal, and Halifax in search of jobs and eager to sample the cities' commercial amusements. The result was a shortage of eligible women in rural areas and a surplus in urban areas, a situation aggravated during the winter months, when bored young women escaped the countryside temporarily for the more exciting towns and cities nearby.²⁷ By the 1920s, rural men in their twenties outnumbered rural women in the same age group by 9 per cent. In urban areas, the reverse was true.²⁸

To make matters worse, the revival of the resource sector, particularly mining and lumbering, meant that many bachelors were moving in the *opposite* direction – into the bush, where women were even scarcer. "We have a jolly lot of boys in the camp," wrote a timekeeper in a large Ontario lumber camp, but "there are none of the fair sex for miles around to invite to our musical entertainments, or to share in the grand repasts our cook provides." One such cook, in northern B.C., admitted that "it is rather lonely sometimes when we do not see any women for four and five months at a time," and a bachelor from northern Ontario reminded readers that

“like the West, ‘New Ontario’ is newly settled and consequently there are very few girls here.”²⁹

Women, too, were affected by the migratory habits of Canadians in these years. With so many men heading west or into the bush, young women in central and eastern Canada found themselves vying for the attention of relatively fewer bachelors. “If bachelors are in the majority in the West,” wrote a Nova Scotia teacher, “they are very much in the minority in the East.... In the town where I taught last year there were not more than ten or twelve young men ... while there were more than ten times that number of very nice girls, all of whom are well educated, refined and good housekeepers.”³⁰ Twenty-one-year-old “Buddie” was one of many Ontario maidens who lodged a similar complaint. “What a funny world this seems to be,” she mused. “Some parts of it seem to be all bachelors, especially the West. Why don’t they come east where there are too many girls and not enough men to go around?”³¹ “Buddie” was likely familiar with the folk song “The Poor Little Girls of Ontario,” part of which referred to the male exodus she and many others mourned:

One by one they all clear out,
Thinking to better themselves, no doubt,
Caring little how far they go,
From the poor little girls of Ontario.³²

Nevertheless, eastern women did not face nearly the same scarcity of the opposite sex as western men. The West, although it was filling up quickly, was still a frontier region, with comparatively few women spread over its huge expanse; eastern Canada, by comparison, was a smaller, more settled region where large numbers of men could still be found. In other words, marital prospects were far better for eastern women than for western men.

The shortage of women in the West, and in rural areas elsewhere, was made worse by the relatively few opportunities single men in those areas had to *meet* women and to socialize with them. The average western bachelor seems to have liked the West very much but would have agreed with the Saskatchewan farmer who told the *Family Herald* that “one thing is lacking, and that is better social opportunities.” “Once in a while there is a social gathering of some kind,” wrote another, “but even then one is alone 95 per cent of the time.”³³ The western bachelor could not hope to encounter a woman simply by going for a walk or hopping on a streetcar, like he

could if he lived in a large town or city; usually he needed to saddle up a horse or walk a long way to visit a farmer's daughter or domestic servant, or a female teacher who might be boarding nearby.

More serious was the absence of meeting places. Many smaller communities in the West did not yet have churches, for example, and for their religious services they relied on the occasional visits of touring ministers, who set up shop temporarily in a local schoolhouse or parishioner's home.³⁴ Romantically, this was important, since in most communities across Canada religious institutions were the focal point of social life – “the meeting place, the social centre of the community,” one rural resident recalled.³⁵ A popular venue for heterosexual interaction, as it had been for years, was the local church, where young people could get acquainted after Sunday services or at church-sponsored suppers or dances. “The churches were where you met the girls,” recalled a former railroad worker. “That’s where everything started.”³⁶ But for many young westerners, this was simply not an option. As late as 1930, residents of rural Saskatchewan and Alberta had to travel at least seven kilometres to the nearest church.³⁷

The only regular social gatherings available to many western bachelors were dances. These were usually held in a town hall or one-room school house, as often as once a week or as infrequently as every few months. Even when they were held regularly, however, the number of bachelors in attendance greatly outnumbered the number of maids. Writing from B.C. in 1907, “The Similkameen Bachelor” told *Prim Rose* readers that there were few marriageable women for the fruit farmers, miners, and ranchers of his district. “In winter many dances are given and quite a few stag dances à la gramophone style,” he admitted, “but ... one rarely sees more than six young ladies to about thirty bachelors.”³⁸ Facing a similar situation, an Alberta bachelor reported that “there are lots of dances around here, but a man must either dance with an old lady or else a child.” Another complained that “the only pleasure we have here is a few dances and box socials. We go to the dances and take turns with the young married men, holding their babies and dancing with their wives and little daughters.” At many dances across the West in these years men were forced to dance with *each other*.³⁹

Men of the rural West had other opportunities, besides dances, to meet and court women: garden parties, picnics, agricultural fairs, baseball games, and church “socials” in summer and fall; skating, sledding, and card parties during the winter months; and year-round music, singing, and discussion

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Dances were a popular venue in which to meet and begin courting a potential mate, but in less-populated areas they were infrequently held. Perhaps for this reason, the 1911 “Quadrille Party Ball” in St. John’s, Alberta, seems to have drawn a large and well-attired crowd. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NA-4182-4.*

groups organized by young people themselves. But such opportunities were necessarily limited in any pioneering region. “We all agree that for young people to get acquainted is a real problem,” wrote a Quebec woman,

Young people’s clubs, debating societies, etc., are excellent, and serve the purpose admirably, in general, where they exist. But in remote and new districts such as abound in the West these institutions rarely exist, or do not meet the case, so that the problem for many of our young men to find a life partner is a serious one.⁴⁰

Both the intense popularity of the personal columns and the mass migration of young people to urban centres speak, at least in part, to the lack of romantic venues in turn-of-the-century rural Canada, particularly the West.

Women were more abundant in the towns and cities, of course, along with places to find them: restaurants, theatres, nickelodeons, dance halls, skating rinks, stores, streetcars. But most rural bachelors could not take advantage of this. Men who lived and worked in isolated settings, whether on the farm, in the bush, or on water could not easily leave their jobs to visit the nearest town.⁴¹ Even rural businessmen had trouble finding the time to court. “The trouble with us bachelors,” wrote the owner of a B.C. lumber company, “is that we are out looking after our business most of the time and when we come to town we only stay from a week to a month and therefore don’t get acquainted with the girls.”⁴²

Again, the situation was worse for the western bachelor. Western farmers and ranchers were extremely busy, especially during the spring and summer months. Farmers had ploughing, seeding, and harvesting to do, as well as repairing farm equipment, and feeding and butchering livestock; and homesteaders, as mentioned, had only three years in which to “prove up.” Ranchers, meanwhile, were constantly moving livestock around in search of better water and pasture, maintaining the health of their herds, repairing fences, and keeping a vigilante eye out for cattle rustlers. Both were year-round occupations that left the region’s “sod-busters” and cowboys – who also had to cook their own meals and maintain their primitive shacks – little free time.⁴³ As a result, explained one bachelor, they “don’t have time to go a-courting”; or by the time their day’s work was done, said another, they were too tired “to go chasing the girls.”⁴⁴

The typical western bachelor also lived far from a town or city. Speaking for a group of recent British immigrants living on a string of farms he dubbed “Bachelor Avenue,” one Manitoban explained their predicament:

We are twenty miles from the nearest town and there is not a girl within that mileage ... that came of age, so we haven’t much chance to fall in with the Canadian girl so far... It’s not that we are shy, or backward; no, not at all. It’s the distance that lies between us and the fair sex, and our stock, which is increasing daily, that robs us of the opportunity.⁴⁵

Owning a car made things easier, but before the 1920s not many bachelors could afford one. Rural roads were not the best in any case – snow-covered in winter and muddy in spring or after a rainfall. During the winter months, in particular, many bachelors became virtual prisoners of the

prairie, stranded in their snow-bound shacks for months on end.⁴⁶ Only when the railroad came to their area were they able to visit urban areas more often. “Things look a little brighter now for the single fellows,” announced one Saskatchewan bachelor gleefully, in 1914, “as the railroad will be finished this coming summer, and a person will be able to go out and come in a little quicker than by oxen.”⁴⁷ But the railroads were slow in coming, almost always lagging behind the rapidly expanding settlement. Until 1916, most residents of Saskatchewan and Alberta lived more than sixteen kilometres from the nearest railroad. Nor could most settlers afford the cost of railway transportation in the early years.⁴⁸

Even when the Western Man made it to town, however, he might not meet many eligible women. Rural depopulation and female scarcity across the region meant that many western towns simply had few of them.⁴⁹ Describing a Christmas dinner he shared with fifty other bachelors in a town 250 kilometres west of Edmonton, “Handy Andy” remarked ruefully that “of course, none of the fair sex were present except the two waitresses.... The dinner was all that could be desired and the company in good humour, but oh, the longing for a weel kent [i.e., familiar] face!”⁵⁰ Recalling the situation in Regina in the 1910s, another bachelor said,

There were no girls. They were just starting to work in offices, they operated the telephones, worked in cafés and in some of the stores. But they disappeared out of circulation at 6 o'clock and you never saw them again until the next day. Talk about a man's world! Regina was certainly it.⁵¹

The Western Man faced the added difficulty of obtaining “introductions” to women. How was he to secure these when he was a virtual stranger to the townspeople?⁵²

Snobbery was a problem too. The West contained many sons of upper-class British families – the infamous remittance men – and some of these bachelors complained that the women they met were not of the sort their upbringing had led them to desire. The typical Canadian bachelor wanted an educated and refined mate, but some bachelors demanded more. “There must be many Englishmen, like myself,” wrote an English-born “gentleman,”

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Here, members of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police detachment in Coutts, Alberta, spend another Christmas dinner in their barracks without female companionship. Their facial expressions tell the story well enough. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NA-2436-4.*

dotted over the country, on the shady side of thirty, of good family and education, bred and accustomed to constant social intercourse with highly educated women.... Such [men] ... never lose the desire for intercourse with women of their own ways of thought. That is too much a part of their intimate selves by heritage and the usage of years.⁵³

Of course snobbery cut both ways. Many western men complained that the women in their region looked down upon the typical farmer or rancher and, instead, favoured the well-dressed, well-groomed city man – the “snap” or “dude.” “I do not mingle much with ... girls,” wrote a “Lonely Cow Rancher” from Saskatchewan. “The girls around here are not the kind I like. They are generally too stuck-up; won’t speak to you unless you are dressed up to kill.”⁵⁴ Others put their laments to verse:

My farm's a section big and something more,
yet each fair maid my humble suit disdaineth,
to favour those who 'clerk' within the store...
I can't compete against their silly chatter,
Nor match their wondrous collars nor their cuffs,
And painfully I wonder what's the matter,
That I get all cold shoulders and rebuffs.⁵⁵

Even if the average western bachelor could have spent more time in town, in other words, his chances of finding a partner were slim.

He did, however, have another option. The Western Man could always make a trip back east, to his former home, to find a wife. A popular prairie tune of the day reminded him of this option:

So farewell to Alberta, farewell to the West,
It's backwards I'll go to the girl I love best.
I'll go back to the east and get me a wife,
And never eat cornbread the rest of my life.⁵⁶

And some men *did* make visits back home, usually during the less hectic fall and winter months. Or they attended one of the week-long summertime ("At Home") gatherings some eastern towns organized to unite western bachelors and eastern maidens.⁵⁷ But such excursions were problematic. Not many farmers or ranchers, for example, could afford to leave their businesses for long. Who would care for their livestock or land while they were gone? Responding to the frequent criticism that the Western Man was simply too *lazy* to find a wife, a "Lonely Bachelor" from Saskatchewan defended his bachelor brethren: the average farmer, he wrote, "cannot get anyone to look after his stock in summer. He must work. In winter he must care for them, thus he is tied down from year to year. Not one of them lives alone from choice." Another bachelor, from Alberta, was more blunt: "A man intent on making a good comfortable home and a little money has no time to go gadding about the country to look for a young woman."⁵⁸

And could the young westerner, struggling to establish himself financially, even *afford* extended visits back home?: the train fare, boarding houses, meals, entertainments. "One lady friend has been wondering why the bachelors don't come down East and find the girls," wrote an Alberta bachelor. "Does our friend realize what the expenses of such an undertaking

would be and the uncertainty of it?”⁵⁹ Most western bachelors could not afford such extravagances; money was tight in the pre-war years, which is why many prairie farmers spent the winter months chopping down trees or mining or worked part-time in the summer on threshing or railroad construction crews – they needed the extra money.⁶⁰ It was often years before the western bachelor could take a “holiday” back East, and, by then, as mentioned, his chances of finding a partner were slim, especially if his old circle of friends had disappeared.⁶¹

A more realistic option for western bachelors was to “meet” a woman through the personal columns. And for thousands of lonely westerners, this was the preferred method. In fact, it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of these columns to Canada’s rural bachelors generally. For many it was their only way of “meeting” women and, through follow-up correspondence, getting to know them better. “The correspondence page is their only salvation,” wrote one bachelor of such men; another called it “a Godsend.”⁶² But western bachelors were especially grateful. “Through your valuable assistance,” an Alberta man told the editor of the *WHM*,

I have already got several lady correspondents with a view to matrimony. Your help is much needed indeed sir by many of us lonely bachelors who have not the necessary time to leave our homes and stock on a wife hunting expedition. I thank you for your kindness in offering me space in your excellent magazine to advertise for a wife.⁶³

So popular were the personal columns in the West that female correspondents regularly reported being swamped by letters from the region’s eager bachelors.⁶⁴ And many a paper courtship was begun in this way, in which correspondents exchanged letters and photographs of themselves, and sometimes even locks of hair. Couples usually met face-to-face before committing themselves to marriage, but some men even *proposed* by mail. More bashful western bachelors, too embarrassed to openly solicit wives, used the columns to advertise for a “housekeeper.” The columns were also popular with men from other regions, and with single women in the central and eastern provinces.⁶⁵

But the mail-order approach to finding a life partner presented a problem: many Canadians criticized those who used it on the grounds that it constituted a serious breach of convention. The critics had two main

objections. One was that marriage-minded women who corresponded with men they had never been personally introduced to were acting “un- maidenly” and that men would think less of them for it. “I don’t think any man would respect a girl who commenced a correspondence with him in hopes he would invite her to marry him,” declared “Greta” from New Brunswick. “Let us have all the fun possible, but let us not forget the dignity of Canadian womanhood in the pursuit of it.”⁶⁶ The other, more common objection was that couples could not possibly get to know each other well enough by mail. Some critics conceded that the columns might be used without much harm to “introduce” men and women to each other, but anything more intimate, especially a marriage proposal, was risky and would likely result in an unhappy union. Even worse, writers might try to deceive one another, by embellishing or lying about their attributes. Some felt this risk could be lessened by exchanging reference letters, or hiring a detective to investigate the other person. But the skeptics remained skeptical: “You certainly run an awful risk if you think it is sufficient to become acquainted through these correspondence columns,” warned one. “No, no, be sure to get a personal acquaintance first, my friends. This life is too short for lottery.”⁶⁷

Proponents of correspondence courtship responded with a valiant defence. Women insisted that as long as their letters were not “too personal” they were not acting unwomanly, and that correspondence forced men to judge them on their *non*-physical attributes. Both sexes, meanwhile, praised correspondence as a boon to the many bashful, tongue-tied individuals among them. They argued, as well, that it was just as easy, perhaps easier, to determine a person’s character from a letter than from face-to-face conversation. Many also reported having met their spouses through the columns and assured readers they could not be happier. Their main point, however, was that they really had no choice – that given their circumstances, courtship by correspondence was their only viable option. “About corresponding with a view to matrimony,” wrote an “English Widow” from Winnipeg, no “right-minded person need be ashamed of having met husband or wife in that way. In a country such as this, with its enormous distances and its many hard-working and lonely men living so far from civilization and home comforts, it is next to impossible for everyone to find a mate in the ordinary and usually recognized way.”⁶⁸ That such arguments had to be made at all shows the pressures single people faced to conform to more traditional methods of courtship. Those who refused paid a price, not only

in social disapprobation, but also in shame, for there was clearly a stigma attached to using anything resembling a matrimonial bureau to find a partner; men felt less like true men, women less like true women.⁶⁹

The Western Man's already impressive romantic difficulties were made even worse by his legendary bashfulness. And, once again, he had company. The affliction was common to bachelors across the country – and to women as well. Writing under the pseudonym, “Bashful,” an Ontario woman thinking of going west to help her bachelor brother informed *Prim Rose* readers that “all that deters me is the thought of bread-baking, and the fear of the prairie wolves, though I'm not quite sure which would frighten me the most to meet on the prairie, a wolf, or a Western bachelor. I'm mortally afraid of boys.” More common was the phrase, uttered by many a bachelor, that “I'm rather afraid of Canadian girls.”⁷⁰ This shyness prevented men and women from attending social gatherings. And it was another reason so many men and women chose correspondence as their preferred method of courtship – although some were even shy about this: in their letters to the columns, they often asked the opposite sex to “write first,” and one bachelor was so shy he asked his friend's wife to write to the column *for him!*⁷¹

Although bashfulness transcended time, place, and gender, it was especially strong among *rural* bachelors. Unlike their urban counterparts, these men were more isolated – on their farms and ranches, in their tiny fishing villages, on their ships at sea, or in their mining and logging camps. This, and the solitariness of their work, meant less frequent contact with other people, particularly women, and therefore a greater degree of shyness or awkwardness when among others. One B.C. logger's experience was typical: “the only time I see the girls,” he wrote, “is when I don my glad rags and make my semi-annual trip to town, and then I feel like blushing when a girl waits on me at the hotel table.”⁷² The situation was worse for the western bachelor-homesteader, because of his greater isolation. “I know a great many bachelors,” a Manitoban farmer told the *Family Herald's* readers, “and most of them stay in their shacks and don't go out any place for fear they would meet a girl, they are so shy.” “The bachelors 'round here are very shy,” wrote another Manitoban. “When they see a petticoat flying in the breeze, they hardly know what to do, whether to run or not.”⁷³ At summertime “garden parties” such men could be found behind the house, smoking and talking to each other about wheat, livestock, and the weather “instead of playing croquet with the pretty girls present.”⁷⁴ And the longer

they went without seeing or speaking to a woman, the more bashful they became.⁷⁵

Some men also said that the years of baching in the West had rendered them incapable of wooing the opposite sex, especially the more “cultured” woman from back home. Lacking female company, they had become more withdrawn, could no longer carry on a proper conversation with women, and even *feared* them. One desperate Alberta bachelor asked the *Family Herald’s* readers for help:

Admitting that our slow minds now have little conception of this ‘lost home’ element; that the subtle mental prize so essential to social success is to us like the dim remembrance of a forgotten dream; that the weeks of time have nearly smothered the flower of chivalry, planted by the environment of our eastern homes, how and by what means may these dormant faculties be brought to life? Methinks if we are privileged to meet in their own homes the cultured, accomplished girls, fresh from their eastern environment, that some of us may awaken ... and see life as God and nature would have us see them.⁷⁶

Less lyrically, a fellow recluse from neighbouring Saskatchewan reported a similar phenomenon. “I often wonder what prank Fate wished to play on me,” he wrote,

by setting me down on the prairie far from the ‘madding crowd.’ One certainly gets dull with not having the companionship of the fair sex which is obtainable in the large towns. The monotony of the life, I think has a deteriorating effect on one’s mind. One loses all the art of conversation when in such monotony.⁷⁷

Some bachelors also asked Prim Rose for help, including any books she knew of that might improve their conversational skills.

Even worse, many western men felt their isolation and rough jobs had made them coarse in manners and intemperate in habits, traits not conducive to winning over the “fair sex.” They were probably right. Lumbermen, who worked up to one hundred kilometres from the nearest town, in primitive conditions, and sometimes went six months without seeing a

woman, were especially prone to this. “Whatever may have been his training previously,” reported an “Ex-Lumberman” from Saskatchewan, “his language and manners become gradually coarsened. It is inevitable.” When the lumber worker eventually did visit a town, he tried hard to befriend the opposite sex:

I have seen him go into the book store to buy magazines or trinkets for the sake of feasting his eyes on the girl who sold them. Or to the post office to buy stamps, which he did not need, for the sake of getting a few words with the fair one who waited there as to the time when mails were made up, etc. Or see him on the hotel plaza watching the ladies ... passing up and down the street. He looks on joyfully, hopefully, with the best instincts of his being awakened, looking forward to the time when he shall have a house of his own and a fair damsel to make it home.⁷⁸

But the lumberman could not easily shed his coarse ways: he eventually joined his fellow lumberjacks in a bar, and any refinement left in him completely disappeared; this happened to 90 per cent of his former colleagues, said “Ex-Lumberman.” For bachelors lucky enough to work and live close to town, on the other hand, “their vices are not so prominent, nor their orgies so wild.” This put them at less of a disadvantage, romantically. What’s more, the disadvantage was self-perpetuating, for the longer a man went without the “softening and elevating influence of the fair sex,” said another bachelor, the coarser he became.⁷⁹

RULES OF THE GAME

If isolation, time constraints, bashfulness, and the scarcity of potential partners were serious obstacles for many lovesick Canadians, social convention was another. As discussed in chapter 3, young men and women had to follow an elaborate set of rules prior to and during courtship. Although these rules *facilitated* romance in some ways – not least by providing guidelines for novice romantics – they were also limiting. Among other things, men and women had to be at least eighteen (or nearly so) before dating;⁸⁰ they had to secure their parents’ permission to date a particular person; and unless

engaged, they could not be alone together, touch each other in affectionate ways, or even *write* to each other. They also faced the unwritten rule that kept men and women from getting romantically involved with individuals outside their social class or ethnic group. These rules applied to almost everyone but were more strictly enforced for children of the upper classes and particular ethnic groups.⁸¹

Rules also existed for each sex. A man had to seek an introduction to a woman and, if he wanted to court her, had to furnish proof of his good character and job prospects, and also secure her parents' approval. Above all, he was expected to take the initiative, whether this meant finding a girlfriend, asking her out, initiating correspondence, giving gifts, or proposing marriage. What's more, one wrong move by the man at any point in this process could send the wrong signal about his intentions or leave a poor impression of his character. A woman, meanwhile, had to behave a certain way in a man's company – from giving the proper gestures of appreciation to lending a sympathetic ear to her suitor's discursive ramblings. Most important, she was to make no romantic overtures but had to let herself be wooed and won over. To do otherwise was unladylike.

From a contemporary perspective, such rules seem impossibly restrictive. But did Canadians think so at the time? Did aspiring romantics consider them a hardship? Presumably they did, but it's hard to know for sure because Canadians of that era did not usually complain about their problems and had no patience for those who did. About the only thing they complained about consistently – in the *WHM* and *Family Herald*, at least – was their loneliness. Even then, readers often told such individuals to stop whining and “buck up.” The approach to life was definitely more stoic than today.

More important, most Canadians *approved* of the rules. In particular, they felt it was a man's role to seek out a woman and to request her company; men who felt otherwise were deemed “lazy” and “backward.” “Men want good wives and they will get them if they deserve them,” wrote one Albertan, but

they must remember that ‘no man e’er gained a happy life by chance or yawned it into being with a wish’ [paraphrased from a poem, “Night Seven,” by E. Young]. A good wife is a prize and must be won. One bachelor correspondent writes that he cannot spend the time from the farm to look for a wife. Did

he get his farm without spending both time and money? Did he ever get anything worth having without spending time and money? How much more important is the getting of a good wife? ... It's their duty to get out and look for them if wanted.⁸²

Canadians felt the same about other aspects of romance. When Alberta's "Bashful Kid" boldly suggested that perhaps girls should ask *boys* out to dances, he received two curt responses: eighteen-year-old "Dimples" reminded him that "it is the boys' place to ask the girls," and sixteen-year-old "Cutie Curls" told him that "if the boys have not got the 'spunk' to ask the girls, they don't deserve to have the girls."⁸³ Some writers were even less bashful. "I really think some men want the girls to make the advances," wrote a Saskatchewan woman, "and that is why they remain bachelors. But these are not true men. They are slackers in life's duty."⁸⁴ And about young women (under 20) who solicited male correspondents in the personal columns, one man felt that "the mother of a girl who does so, should give her a good spanking, and keep her more occupied learning what a young girl ought to know."⁸⁵

Nevertheless, some Canadians disliked the rules. Bachelors sometimes complained, for example, about the "introduction" requirement. It was usually easy for a man to secure an introduction to a woman by befriending someone she knew, perhaps a brother or her father, or a fellow bachelor. But what if he found himself in a situation where he wanted to meet a woman but had no such intermediary, like at a public dance or on a city street? Most men were afraid to approach a woman on their own in such instances for fear, as one man put it, of being "set down as a 'bounder' or even a 'masher'" (i.e., a molester), or without knowing in advance whether the woman was of proper moral character.⁸⁶ Nor did all men agree with the proscription of physical intimacy before marriage. This is clear from the number of women who asked Prim Rose how to deal with their boyfriends' advances, and from writers (mostly women) who denounced such "flirtatious" tendencies in men, and from poems like this, by an anonymous Prim Rose contributor:

One stormy morn I chanced to meet,
A lassie in the town;
Her locks were like the ripened wheat,
Her laughing eyes were brown,

I watched her, as she tripped along,
till madness filled my brain,
and then – and then – I know 'twas wrong,
I kissed her in the rain.⁸⁷

Some bachelors were also upset that society expected them to finance the courtship process – to pay for their outings with women – even if it meant going into debt. Too many women were taking advantage of the situation, they argued.⁸⁸

More common, however, was their complaint about always having to take the initiative; quite a few would have been happy to let the women do this. Many western bachelors, for instance, encouraged eastern women to come West in search of husbands rather than wait for men to go East, as the “womanly woman” was supposed to do. Just as many men, hoping to correspond with certain women whose letters to the personal columns had caught their eye, asked the women to “write first.”⁸⁹ In May 1913, Prim Rose told readers of a letter she had received from a Saskatchewan man who “begs correspondence of the fair sex ... and wishes to make it understood that he considers that there is far too much regard for outward form and convention.”⁹⁰ Another Saskatchewan bachelor told *WHM* readers, with stark ambivalence, that “some girls think it is the man’s place to write first. Well, it really is, but I think it is just as much theirs.”⁹¹

Some bachelors favoured even bolder female moves. “I think if the girls ask the boys to come and take them to picnics and dances, etc.,” suggested one, “there wouldn’t be so many lonely girls and boys in the West. But they won’t do that; they expect the boys to have all the ‘spunk.’ In my opinion they will have to wait a long time for boys of my set to come around.”⁹² A few even wanted women to propose marriage. In 1905, B.C.’s “Intruder” informed Prim Rose readers that “a great many bachelors in this country want the girls to ask them” to marry, while “George” from Manitoba felt that “in these modern days of feminine advancement ... custom should not step in and prohibit woman from assuming the initiative” in such matters.⁹³ It’s no wonder, then, that many bachelors eagerly anticipated Leap Years, when women had the customary right to propose marriage and make other, less brazen advances. Whether many women actually did so, except in jest, is doubtful – conventional etiquette’s hold was too strong. Yet the fact that so many men *mentioned* Leap Year in their letters, even half-jokingly, suggests a strong desire for a bit of role reversal.

Such unconventional ideas raised the ire of a few readers. P.E.I.'s "Little Phil," in response to the suggestion that eastern women head West in search of a husband, for example, was a little indignant – and no doubt a little worried. "Marriage ... is a good deal of a chance game," he wrote, "but for Melinda May to pack her trunk to go West in response to numerous unceremonious invitations to hunt out a life partner among the thrifty tillers of a virgin soil, it becomes a veritable lottery. What a sorry figure the poor girl must cut as she marches miles upon miles in black mud to her ankles in search of her groom!" In "Little Phil's" part of Canada, by contrast, "a man with an eye open to matrimony secures an introduction to his intended 'better half,' pays her his regards, and waits for some encouragement before making further advances along his chosen line of operation. His is no blank invitation amounting almost to a beckoning."⁹⁴ The Western Man's response was non-apologetic: he and his fellow soil tillers were simply too busy to search for a wife. What's more, they were shy. This exchange amounted to little – a minor scuffle, really – but it did show how the hardships and socially challenged personalities of Canada's country bachelors (particularly out West) made them more critical than their city cousins of the romance rules.

The Canadian bachelorette had reason to complain, too. Society expected her to be modest, reserved, and dignified in a bachelor's presence, but at the same time show enough interest to encourage his advances. This put her in a quandary. If she kept her feelings in check, she risked sending out a message of indifference, or worse; this could drive away a potential suitor. If, on the other hand, she was *too* friendly, or sentimental, or fawning, people might accuse her of either "flirting" (leading men on), or "setting her cap" for a man (trying to ensnare him), which was unwomanly; what's more, the man might misconstrue her friendliness as romantic interest when none existed.⁹⁵ It was a fine balancing act, and some women found it frustrating. "What are we girls to do?," asked one woman, in response to "Lonesome Ernie's" accusation that convivial women were leading men on. "If we speak civilly to a man, or pretend to see him, he thinks he is sought after. If we do otherwise, we are called conceited. When you look at it that way, Ernie, you will see what we are up against."⁹⁶

Nor did the modest, reserved woman take any romantic initiative; for her to actively seek romance was unfeminine. "A truly 'nice' girl has a horror of doing anything forward or unmaidenly," wrote a "Young Mother" from Ontario. "Her very soul may yearn for the love of a home of her

own, but even her longing will not conquer her sense of self-respect.”⁹⁷ And so, with few exceptions, a single woman was not supposed to approach men, ask for dates, initiate correspondence (or correspond *at all* with strange men), propose marriage, or try to win them over, except through the subtle presentation of her charm, grace, good sense, and other “feminine” qualities; at most, she could advertise her availability by pinning up the back of her hair.⁹⁸

For a woman to even *place* herself in a situation that might improve her chances of catching a man’s eye was problematic. In these years, a “respectable” middle- or upper-class woman did not usually go out alone to commercial amusements or entertainments, for example, lest she appear to be trolling for men; the only women who did were working-class women and prostitutes, whom Canadians often saw as one and the same. Yes, the working girl had more chances to meet men – at movie theatres, dance halls, and other amusements – but with opportunity came risk. In some cities, police arrested her for vagrancy if they found her unchaperoned after dark, whether in a tavern or dance hall, or just strolling in a park. And if she indulged too enthusiastically in the city’s “immoral” amusements, day or night, the courts might incarcerate her for “sexual delinquency.”⁹⁹ Even for working in a factory or office, or for simply sending letters to the personal columns, she had to defend herself against charges of “cap setting,” of working or writing just to meet men. This is why women correspondents often prefaced their letters to the personal columns with assurances that they were only “writing for fun” and were not “matrimonially inclined,” even when it was obvious that they were advertising for a husband.¹⁰⁰ Nor was a woman supposed to relocate in search of a husband – to go West, for instance – as this was tantamount to “hunting” for a partner, a distinctly male prerogative. “Let the man come, ‘woo and win’ his fair bride in her own house and neighbourhood,” declared another young mother.¹⁰¹ Men were to be the hunters, women the prey.

Indeed, of all the conventions Canada’s single women had to contend with, this maiden-as-passive-prey rule was no doubt the most frustrating. Men could travel far and wide in search of a partner, and, in fact, were *expected* to do so. Most women, however, could only wait and hope they would be noticed and pursued. They could do little else to advance their romantic prospects without seeming unwomanly, risking arrest, or having to contrive “chance” encounters; and Leap Year, as mentioned, was not a serious option. “Some of us poor women cannot help being old maids,”



Women of the middle and upper classes could not move about as freely as men in search of a spouse. The etiquette of the day decreed as much. Like Kingston's Miss Kemp, they spent much time simply waiting in their parlours for men to call. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, C 130-4-0-0-1.*

wrote "Jean" from Ontario in 1914, "but ... when a man takes it into his head he wants to marry, he can ... go forth and declare his wants, and find out for himself what Dame Fortune has in store for him, whereas women – well, you know what we have to do, just wait!"¹⁰² Another frustrated bachelorette echoed the sentiment: "If I were a man I would be so persistent in my wooing that the lassie would just have to love me," she wrote, "but as I am the lassie, and not the laddie, I will have to calmly sit, and await the day when my Prince Charming will come riding by."¹⁰³ And even if he did come riding by, a woman was at her boyfriend's mercy. She had to wait patiently, sometimes for years, for his marriage proposal – a proposal that did not always come.¹⁰⁴

The situation was especially grim for women without older brothers, since brothers played a key role, unwittingly or not, in introducing their sisters to their male acquaintances. “The brotherless girl often has comparatively few chances of meeting eligibles,” explained Prim Rose. “She cannot ignore the formalities that with the aid of a brother are swept aside as though they did not exist.... It is the girl with a brother or two who is unhandicapped. She does not have to do any planning. Everything is done for her, and all without connivance or even knowledge that it is being done.” A single girl’s *mother*, on the other hand, was a poor match-maker, “for the eye of discernment decries in her the scheming mother-in-law of the future.”¹⁰⁵ In an age when the difference between the eligible maiden and the much-dreaded “old maid” was only a few years, many women resented their lack of control over their romantic fate.

Not all women, however, accepted these restrictions. Urged on by desperate western bachelors and driven by the fear of becoming spinsters, a number of equally desperate bachelorettes found ways to bend or skirt the rules. Many flouted convention in the personal columns, for example, by openly soliciting male correspondents for romantic purposes, by initiating correspondence, and by writing to men they had never met.¹⁰⁶ Consider the blunt advertisement of one B.C. woman:

Here is one woman, of good education, not displeasing appearance, thoroughly domesticated, capable, energetic, used to and fond of a country life, companionable and amiable, who would gladly correspond with a view to matrimony. This seems very crude, does it not, Prim Rose, but at any rate it is very much to the point.¹⁰⁷

In another instance, a young Ontario “businesswoman” told Prim Rose readers that “I agree with ‘Northern Pearl’ when she says she likes to get away from the conventionalities of society and shock people by writing to someone she doesn’t know and never expects to see.”¹⁰⁸ Some writers found such behaviour scandalous. “I am surprised to see how many children ... are reading these columns and asking for correspondence,” wrote an Alberta man, “and some of these little girls go so far as to ask certain boys to correspond with them.”¹⁰⁹

But most women were more subtle and disingenuous. Using pen-names, they solicited male correspondence under the guise of seeking

merely pen pals, or information about a particular region, or to simply “cheer up” lonely bachelors. A 1908 letter from an Ontario stenographer was typical. After flaunting her qualities as a potential wife, she reassured readers that,

I do not wish to get married; in fact, I intend to be an old maid, but I would like to correspond with some of the lonely bachelors.... [I] do not object to dancing but would not like a man who drinks, chews tobacco or takes sugar in his tea. I do not live on a farm but think I could learn to milk the cows. I ... want to come out West and would like to be acquainted with some of the people, especially the boys, before I come.¹¹⁰

Many women also kept their activities hidden from friends and family. “I was thinking of the time when I secretly sent a request to your columns for bachelor correspondents,” wrote one such woman,

I say secretly, for I did not let any one in the house know, not even The Boy and The Girl [i.e., her younger siblings]. I received a few letters, I think four, some I answered. How surreptitiously I carried those letters with me ... hidden in my dress, for fear The Boy and The Girl might see them and what would they think of their ‘Big Sister’ if they knew she was sending letters to forlorn bachelors, strangers to her?¹¹¹

Evidently many single women valued the personal columns as one of the few forums in which they could actively seek romance.

This suggests that the columns helped expand what historian Peter Ward has called the “courtship space” or “territory” of women. Ward argues that for much of the nineteenth century men’s opportunities for meeting potential spouses were greater than for women. Whereas women were confined principally to their homes, to which they had to *attract* potential suitors, and also had less freedom to create romantic encounters, men could “roam at will” in search of single women and also had more power to initiate courtship, such as through “calling” on women in their homes.¹¹² This is not an altogether convincing argument. Not only does it seem to apply almost exclusively to the urban upper class, but it also understates the courtship territory that single women carved out for themselves, by inviting men to

private parties and, through their mothers, to their homes for tea, meals, or strolls. In short, nineteenth-century women could “roam by invitation” as extensively as men could roam on foot or horse-and-buggy. And they expanded their courtship space even further by attending church and community events with relatives and by visiting the homes of men they wished to court on the pretext of visiting the men’s sisters.

Ward is on more solid ground, however, when he argues that by the late 1800s women’s courtship space – even among the more confined Anglo-Saxon elite – came to resemble more closely that of men. As young women moved in large numbers from rural to urban areas, and then into the workplaces, universities, and social reform clubs of Canada’s burgeoning cities, their opportunities to meet men, outside their own homes or boarding houses and beyond the strict supervisory gaze of family and community, expanded tremendously. The appearance of personal columns like *Prim Rose at Home* had a similar effect: they provided an additional space in which women seeking suitors could be “seen” and heard. What’s more, because they allowed women to effectively *solicit* male correspondents, either openly or disingenuously, the columns were another way that single women defied courtship convention in these years.

Women also challenged convention in more brazen ways. Many of them, for example, *did* go hunting for husbands (apart from perusing the personal columns). Exact numbers are hard to come by, but many took to the road in search of mates: they accompanied their homestead-bound brothers to the West, left home to take up jobs, and spent time with relatives in other parts of Canada. A New Brunswick woman recalled going West to find a husband because single men were scarce in her home town. “I know just sitting there on the train ... there were three other girls like me going out the West to visit or cook for their brothers and I know they had marriage in mind. I mean, you don’t fish in a pond with no fish in it, do you?”¹¹³ At other times they went as visitors, perhaps in response to advertisements by “respectable ladies” in distant communities who promised to provide accommodations, chaperone services, and introductions to bachelors in their area. Even when other motives played a role – such as the quest for adventure or to earn a living – romance was usually a key consideration. Many rural and small-town women, meanwhile, took to the road closest at hand, strolling alone along country lanes or the main street of their town in the hopes of being “picked up.”¹¹⁴

A handful of women also chaffed at the restrictions on physical intimacy. In the personal columns they did so by requesting “affectionate” boyfriends and by regretting that they had “never been kissed.”¹¹⁵ Urban working girls did so by doing close-contact dances with strange men at dance halls, skating arm-in-arm with them at ice and roller rinks, and letting such men – and male co-workers, too – take physical liberties.¹¹⁶ Even *rural* women sometimes crossed the line, frolicking with men in a park bush or empty schoolhouse at night. “In rural Ontario,” writes one historian, “the berry patch could provide the same opportunity for sexual danger or sexual pleasure as the most raucous urban dance hall.”¹¹⁷

Women broke other rules, too. A few admitted to “dropping in” on men unexpectedly, wooing them through shameless flattery, and sharing the cost of outings. Nor did a courted woman necessarily have to wait forever for a marriage proposal. If she was bold and crafty enough, she could divine her boyfriend’s intentions by carefully revealing her feelings about marriage and gauging his response. If it was encouraging, she would wait; if not, she would move on to a more serious suitor.¹¹⁸ Sometimes the methods women used to circumvent society’s strict conventions were highly inventive. Women who worked in egg-packing plants, for example, often wrote their names and addresses on the eggs in pencil, while women in matchbox factories slipped pieces of paper into matchboxes, hoping some distant bachelor would write to them. Sometimes this unusual marketing ploy – which brought new meaning to egg cartons labelled “strictly fresh” – resulted in marriage.¹¹⁹

Another restriction on the romantic freedom of Canadians, without question, was parental power. Although parents in some ways *encouraged* romance, by debuting their daughters, inviting potential suitors or debutantes to their home, or playing the match-making role, they could also be a hindrance and a hardship to young people. After all, it was up to parents to decide *when* they would debut their daughter, whether they would agree to introduce a particular man to her, whether he would be allowed to call on her or escort her somewhere, whether she would be allowed to write to him, and – if she was under twenty-one – whether she could accept his marriage proposal. Even after a son or daughter reached the age of majority, however, parents continued to have considerable influence over their children’s romantic lives, particularly when the children lived at home. Years later, an English-Protestant man from Winnipeg recalled the unwelcome intervention of his girlfriend’s French-Catholic parents when they found

out he planned to marry her: “She told me they were sending her to the convent at St. Norbert. I couldn’t believe it.... I told her I loved her and I knew she loved me and we’d get married right away.... She cried a lot but she said no, she had to become a nun.... I was very bitter about that.”¹²⁰ Parents also monitored courtship: they watched over the young couple in their home, screened the man’s letters to their daughter, and reserved the right to end the relationship if they felt him to be unsuitable.¹²¹ The adult supervisory gaze was particularly intense in rural areas, where commercial amusements were limited and where courtship, as a result, consisted mainly of male visits to female homes. Rural communities were also in the habit of watching the activities of young couples and reporting any transgressions to parents.¹²²

Few young people complained about any of this. Most believed they should respect and obey their parents’ wishes, not least because their parents were presumably wiser, more experienced in the ways of romance, and, in general, knew “what was best” for them. There were, however, dissenting voices – mostly female. “It is no uncommon thing,” reported one prairie bachelor, “to hear the young women in my district complain of the seemingly harsh discipline of their mother, when she says they can’t have all they want, but they never seem to realize that their mother is the best one fitted to know what will be most beneficial to them.”¹²³ Perhaps one of these women was “A Young Sufferer,” who begged the *WHM*’s readers for help in dealing with her mother’s strict rules:

I am a young girl, twenty years of age. I have a good mother, but I believe she is far too strict.... I am never allowed to accept any invitations from any gentleman friend, no matter how good their character may be. I am never allowed to accept any invitations to a dance or to the theatre. If I do, I must deceive my mother by telling her evil untruths – which I very much dislike to do. If I wish to meet any gentlemen it must be at some hour when ‘good people’ should be asleep in their beds. Now don’t you think it is hard on any moral young girl, who cannot enjoy enough freedom in her home, that she can bring a young man in to meet her parents honestly and openly, but has to meet him herself at an hour when her parents believe her asleep in her bed – this is deceiving too.... Surely going to a theatre, or occasionally a dance, cannot be the cause of

many girls and men leading immoral lives! Our parents were all young once, but seem to forget it. Now, I love my parents and try to obey them. I do not deserve to be kept tight.¹²⁴

Few women (or men) of this era had the courage to admit they had deceived a parent, and even those who sympathized with “A Young Sufferer” decried her deceit. That she did so was proof of the hardship she had endured at the hands of her parents, and which most women suffered more quietly.

Parental intervention was typically less draconian. It usually involved dictating the timing of rituals, like the “coming out” party or wedding day, or disapproving of suitors they felt had poor financial prospects, even when the couple had great affection for one another. Still, interventions of this sort sometimes caused bachelors to break their engagements and led at least one to vow he would never marry. “In early life I loved a woman and a man loves only once,” he told *Prim Rose* readers. “We were entirely suited to each other, and I think could have gone through life in double harness without a jar or a jolt, but through no fault of either, we were never permitted to marry.”¹²⁵

Unfortunately, the options for these aggrieved romantics were limited. They could succumb to their parents’ wishes – as most invariably did – or wait until they were old enough to live on their own, when they could defy their parents by seeing or marrying someone their parents had disapproved of; this happened, too, and more frequently as opportunities for women to live on their own (in a city or town) grew.¹²⁶ The price of such defiance, however, was usually steep. It meant alienating family, and sometimes friends as well. When a friend asked him to be the “best man” at his wedding, Montreal’s Robert Hale refused. “The girl is only 20 years old,” he explained to his girlfriend, “and her father has refused to give his consent, but the fellow says they have decided to go ahead. I told him I was sorry but I would have nothing to do with it.”¹²⁷

Or, a couple could defy their parents by doing things on the sly. They might date secretly, for example, like “A Young Sufferer.” But the risk of exposure was high, especially in small communities, and the potential consequences – in the way of public shame and even harsher parental discipline – unpleasant; fathers sometimes beat their defiant daughters.¹²⁸ A more common form of deceit was courting by correspondence. The personal columns, in particular, provided a useful method of avoiding parental

supervision and interference, and a number of young Canadians preferred correspondence courtship for this reason. “Dare Devil Jack,” for one, came to favour this method after being chased down the road one day by the father of a girl he was seeing behind her parents’ back.¹²⁹

LOVE HURTS

Lovesick Canadians may have been able to skirt the *rules* of romance to some degree, but they could not always avoid its pain; this was another, and more timeless, hardship. Actually, we are lucky to have any evidence of this at all. Canadians of this era did not like to burden others with their troubles, and most men were reluctant to criticize the “nobler sex” for fear of appearing unchivalrous; others kept their sad tales to themselves out of embarrassment, or to not discourage the pursuit of marriage by the young. Nevertheless, a number of Canadians *did* share their sad tales, or those of others, and their stories – sometimes brief and cryptic, other times woefully detailed – reveal the meaning of heartache for this generation.

The most common source of heartache was flirting. This was the practice of being friendly or “amorous” with a member of the opposite sex to the point where romantic intentions were implied, but not intended; essentially it meant “leading someone on.” So, for example, a man or woman in an advanced stage of courtship – maybe even engaged – who sought or accepted the romantic attentions of another was a flirt. So was the person who moved effortlessly from one partner to the next, caring little for the feelings he or she may have bruised along the way, and the man who repeatedly requested a woman’s company without stating his intentions up front. Canadians deplored such behaviour. They felt that any relationship (even by correspondence) that did not have marriage as its ultimate goal – that was pursued for self-gratification or “just for fun,” in other words – was cruel, unfair to serious-minded individuals, and perhaps even immoral. Flirting not only had the potential to break hearts and, where men were the culprits, keep more earnest suitors at bay, but even worse, it smacked of promiscuity.¹³⁰ Ontario’s “Cousin Mike” summed up the prevailing view:

For no other object than the choice of a life companion should any intercourse having the appearance of courtship be permitted or indulged in. The affections are too tender and sacred

to be trifled with. Those who do it should be ranked among thieves, robbers, and murderers. He who steals affections without a return of similar affections, steals that which is dearer than life and more precious than wealth. Flirting is an outrage upon the most holy and exalted feeling of the human soul and the most sacred and important relation of life. It is demoralizing in its tendency and base in its character.¹³¹

This was easily the harshest indictment of flirting in the personal columns, but Canadians wrote many more. And although most spoke in general terms about the pitfalls of flirting, the bitter tone of some letters suggests they were also speaking from personal experience. “Some of the girls out here are a little cruel sometimes,” wrote a Saskatchewan bachelor. “They flirt with too many of the young bachelors and do not give it up before they have done real harm.”¹³²

These comments further suggest that women did more flirting than men. This is possible. Men certainly *complained* more about flirtatious women. But why would a woman have done more flirting? Perhaps she felt she had more to gain from it. Yes, she risked being labelled unwomanly, or worse (as mentioned, middle-class reformers called women who provided men with physical “favours” in exchange for gifts or a good time “occasional prostitutes”).¹³³ But maybe this was outweighed by the presents (chocolates, jewellery, clothing) and amusements (dances, dinners, shows, automobile rides) that men offered her in return for her company and that she could not otherwise afford. No woman admitted to being so mercenary, although some undoubtedly were. More likely, she used flirtation to better her chances of gaining a suitor; being overly friendly with many men did have this effect, and some “old maids” even regretted *not* having flirted for this reason.¹³⁴ And where a woman already *had* a suitor, perhaps flirting with other men was a form of insurance, in case her suitor failed to propose or took too long to do so. In short, maybe flirting was a way for women to improve the romantic odds stacked against them.

As much as Canadians hated flirtation, however, they considered it a *mild* form of deception. Their hearts were more likely to be broken by less common, but more egregious acts of deception. Most often this took the form of a broken commitment. Many members of the personal columns spoke of a boyfriend or girlfriend who had professed love for them, for example, or had asked (or agreed) to marry them, but who had then run

off with another, or were already committed to another; they said, in short, that their partners had been unfaithful or “faithless.” A “Heart-Broken” Ontario woman told readers about a friend who was wooed by a suitor with books and flowers until she fell in love with him, only to one day find that he had disappeared. A year later she found out he had married someone else and left town. “Heart-Broken” had had a similar courting disaster:

Could I only tell you the blissful days spent in Harry’s company, how his loving words thrilled me, after he had asked me to be his wife. We were to be married in two weeks, when alas! he married another girl very quietly, who lived not two miles from my home.... I shall never love a man again.... After a year’s time I was able to take my own place in life, but not before. Can you blame me if I do not trust any man now?¹³⁵

In a few cases, individuals were left “standing at the altar,” or nearly so. “When I was about 22,” recalled a Manitoba bachelor,

I became engaged to a young lady of whom I certainly thought a great deal, and she professed to return my love. Well, the wedding day was set, and when it came I started for her father’s house, where the ceremony was to be performed. I had about twenty miles to cover, and when I arrived there I found that the bird had flown the previous evening with a former sweetheart.¹³⁶

Such betrayals caused much heartache. But sometimes the consequences were direr. “Heart-Broken” told readers that her girlfriend “was never the same happy girl again. Her interest in life was gone; she grew weaker and weaker and in a month’s time died in my arms, just as the summer sun was sinking slowly out of sight.” Another writer told of a friend who had committed suicide after learning his girlfriend had been unfaithful.¹³⁷ And when they didn’t actually die of a broken heart, some jilted lovers at least *considered* suicide, or took to drinking, or became seriously depressed.¹³⁸

Another deception was misrepresentation. Several correspondents told of someone they knew who was led to believe that a prospective spouse was something he or she was not. Prim Rose cited the example of an Ontario woman she knew who had corresponded with a western widower. The

couple eventually exchanged photographs, but the gentleman “sent her the photograph of a younger and better-looking man as his own. The girl went out west to marry him and was rather amazed to find that her ‘young man’ was a widower of 40, with half a dozen half-breed children.”¹³⁹ A British Columbian reported a similar deception:

I stood on a [railway] station platform some years ago and saw a farmer, a small man about sixty, with ‘Ginger’ whiskers, meet his ‘correspondence’ bride, a comely widow of 35. I shall never forget the look of disappointment and disgust on that poor woman’s face. I heard the story of their married life several years later and it was pitiful.¹⁴⁰

Some individuals also lied about their character. “I know instances of young men in Ontario,” wrote one woman, “whose characters were so well known that no girl would have them, so they, by mail, decoyed some strange girls to marry them.”¹⁴¹ In addition, Prim Rose told readers that “for one man who is frank enough to state all his faults in a letter for publication, I have no doubt there are nine or ten hardly less faulty who do not mind disguising the fact until after marriage,” and that “more than one poor little wife has confided to me that she would have died rather than marry the man whom she had ignorantly chosen.”¹⁴² Such cases lent weight to the arguments against courtship by correspondence, but they also illustrated one of the pitfalls of courtship itself.¹⁴³

Of course not all, or even most, heartbreak stemmed from deception. Much of it resulted from the unpredictability of romance. A relationship usually ended, for example, because one side no longer wanted to continue it, either because the person was unhappy or had met someone else. Couples who had courted by correspondence sometimes broke up when they finally met face-to-face because one person didn’t like how the other person looked (one can only imagine the pain *this* must have caused).¹⁴⁴ Often changing circumstances were to blame. It was common for men who went west, for example, to leave behind girlfriends they had promised to one day marry. Unfortunately, time, distance, and second thoughts took their toll on some of these relationships; often girlfriends just got tired of waiting.¹⁴⁵ And sometimes relationships ended because parents said they should. In one issue of the *Family Herald*, Prim Rose noted that “Simon” of Ontario “writes of two unfortunate affairs of the heart; in the first, she

gave up her lover at her parents' wish [and] in the second, the 'young man was persuaded away by his parents'."¹⁴⁶

Other romantics suffered the pain of missed opportunity. Saskatchewan's "Downhearted" was one of them. In the pages of the Prim Rose column he spoke tenderly of a woman he had cared little for at first,

but after a few months ... [I] found that life seemed dull and empty when she was not near me. After a year had passed I found my love for her was very deep. I did not know how deep till I asked her to marry me and she said 'No.' She admitted that she loved me a little at first, but after a time it died away... I have got a pain that no doctor can cure.¹⁴⁷

Several individuals regretted the time they had spent learning a trade or getting an advanced education instead of marrying. "I am forty three," wrote B.C.'s "Queenslander," a recent British immigrant,

and twenty years ago I thought I should marry quite young. But I have never married. I had the absolutely useless English public school and university 'education'... And with it all I was absolutely cut apart from girls, and then at twenty I went to the colonies where I met no girls. Then when romance did not come naturally, I searched again and again for a certain fair type of beauty, not often seen in England... When I was young, one pretty, fair, laughing girl chum would have been worth more to me than all the boys and masters at Harrow School – all the men and dons at Cambridge. Now I go on alone.¹⁴⁸

Western bachelors found themselves in a similar predicament when they chose to spend years preparing a home and livelihood before proposing marriage. In other cases, smitten men were unable to muster the courage to approach or seek an introduction to the "apple of their eye." Such men spent years wondering "what might have been," and at least one devoted his life to travelling about in search of the woman he had let slip through his fingers.¹⁴⁹ Others felt they had missed their chance by simply *neglecting* romance, so that when they were finally ready for it, they were too old.¹⁵⁰

These individuals felt their loss deeply, and some carried the heartache and regret with them for years.

It's clear, therefore, that romance often came with hardship. This was especially true for Canadians in rural areas – the West in particular – whose chances of finding a life partner were slimmer because of their peculiar circumstances: isolation, a scarcity of the opposite sex, and limited opportunities for heterosexual interaction. In addition, aspiring romantics had many *rules* to follow. These rules were restrictive, especially for women, and the penalties for non-compliance could be harsh. And even when romance did occur, it might not go well; deception and misjudgment, as we've seen, could bring heartache and sometimes lifelong regret.

We need not be unduly negative, however, about romance in these years, courtship in particular. After all, most young people accepted the courtship process without complaint. And those who did not found ways around it: rural bachelors encouraged greater female initiative; women used the personal columns (and other methods) to find and court men they had never met; couples met secretly, without their parents' knowledge; and they sometimes indulged in more physical intimacy than the rules allowed.

These rebels were, in fact, *changing* the rules. Through their defiance they were transforming courtship into “dating,” a more casual, less rule-bound, less structured stage on the road to marriage. They were making romance “modern,” easier. By the 1910s, members of the personal columns noted that it was increasingly common to see men and women spending time together “just for fun” – that is, without the obligation of marriage. In 1911, as if heralding a new era for romance, the aptly named “Platonic” served notice to the *WHM's* female readers: “Every girl should bear this in mind,” he said, “that a man may desire friendship [with a woman] without in the least having any serious intentions of marrying her” and that “exactly the same thing applies to man. He must not interpret a girl's friendship for anything deeper than is shown.”¹⁵¹ “A Young Farmer's Wife” from Manitoba opposed the trend but had to concede that “modern courtship” involved women accepting the attentions of men “for pure love of pleasure and of being admired,” without taking these attentions too seriously. “Much less do they care the least bit for the man, otherwise than as a friend.”¹⁵²

Restrictive attitudes towards women began to ease as well. “Are not the views of the writer ... who said it was unmaidenly for girls to correspond with men they have not met, rather narrow?”, asked a male correspondent in 1913. “The restrictions and conventions of fifty years ago are

surely out of place in the present practical and intensely material age.”¹⁵³ The First World War accelerated the modernization of romance. Its impact on Canadian romance would also make the courtship hardships of the pre-war years seem trifling.