DURING 1961 I had letters from people all over the world asking me how I was getting along without Lizzie, my beloved housekeeper, who died on 1 January 1961. The flow of letters began when Leonard Russell, the former editor of this annual, wrote about my loss in The Sunday Times. I have no family or relations of my own. For thirty years Lizzie loved, protected and kept house for me. She was a treasure. I had had in Lizzie a very wonderful Cockney who had known me all my life and had been born and brought up in the same surroundings as myself.

I knew I would never find a second Lizzie—that was impossible. Then there is a limit to my purse-strings. I have never made more than £100 in any year from my writings. I have lived in my slum district of London all my life. So I knew it wasn't going to be easy to find anyone who could take Lizzie's place.

The first American fan-mail letter I ever got came in 1945 from New York as a result of my article in this annual in volume 5. The lady said she would like to adopt me as her 'Limy' son. She said she would like to be my ever-loving American 'mother'. I have probably received in the passing years nearly two thousand letters from her! Most of them began, 'My loving Son,' and ended 'Your affectionate Mum'.

When Lizzie died I wrote to my American 'mother', begging her to come to London for a month at my expense to look after me until I got my bearings again. I was not only heart-broken but badly crippled with sciatica. I desperately needed a little kindness—who better to ask than the woman who since 1945 had been 'my mum', who had always remembered me at birthdays and Christmas with a little gift and a card.

After three weeks' silence I got a postcard. It said: 'Quite impossible. My home is here and my niece is unwell. Good luck. Mum.' Evidently I had expected too much.

During the three weeks I waited in suspense to hear from America several women called, all willing to become my housekeeper. First there was a millionaire's secretary. She'd read about me and Liz in The Sunday Times. She was 'a lady', in middle life. She said that she was a little bored with mothering a millionaire. She felt that it would be rather fun to look after an author for a change. She had read The Last Bassoon by me, and as it was edited and introduced by Noël Coward she 'just knew I was all right'. (All right for what, she never said!) She was willing to do for me for around £20 per week, which, she said, was less than she was earning, but she was prepared to make some sacrifices.

We had our conversation in the kitchen, where the sink is in full view, and where there is no fridge, no washing machine and no washing-up machine. It is a cosy little room with a nice wide fireplace and comfortable chairs. I've written my article for this annual for eighteen years in this kitchen.

I said: 'You'd better see the toilet.' I took her down into the backyard, turned to the left, and there was the door to the W.C. It was winter and it was pouring with rain.

With that she went. I never saw her again, but she wrote to me a little later asking me to go and see her 'little novel'. I didn't, though I dare say she had a bathroom with all mod. con. and indoor W.C.

The next lady who came to see me said she'd come to try to comfort me, but she hadn't been in my home for three minutes before she herself was in tears. I got in a panic. 'For heaven's sake stop crying,' I said.
‘This is my day for visitors, and if anyone comes in and sees you crying they’ll think I’ve molested you. What’s the trouble, anyway?’

The Sad Lady dried her red-rimmed eyes, refused a glass of sherry, but had some tea, and this is the story she told me:

‘Oh, Freddie,’ she said, ‘my husband and I were listening to some gramophone records when the telephone rang. I lifted it up and a voice told me that my husband’s only brother had dropped down dead in the street. I didn’t know how to tell him, for he was an invalid and had a weak heart. But he could see the shock in my face and I had to tell him. We got a taxi and went to where his brother lay dead. He saw him my husband collapsed. He lasted just a year and then he died too.’

‘When did this happen?’ I asked.

‘Twenty-five years ago,’ said the Sad Lady, weeping again. ‘And you see I am still in mourning. I miss my beloved husband every day of my life.’

‘But surely,’ I said, ‘you don’t burst into tears every time you call on someone?’

‘Well, Freddie,’ she said, ‘I knew somehow that I’d be down this road before. And I was coming up the stairs to the kitchen when I realized it was in this very road that my husband’s brother died and we went to see his dead body in the workhouse just a hundred yards down the road.’

‘Well, after that she realized she wasn’t going to be much of a comfort to me, so we said goodbye, and I thought I’d never see her again.

The next lady to visit me was one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen. (And in my time I’ve known some very beautiful women, from Betty Blythe to Madeleine Carroll.) This dark-eyed, raven-haired beauty said: ‘I’ve heard of your great loss and I’m truly sorry. I believe I am kind and warm-hearted and I’m prepared to become your housekeeper and anything else you like.’

I blinked, I don’t mind telling you. ‘I have a reason for making this offer,’ she continued. ‘I’ve two favourite writers, Somerset Maugham and you. Now for the past twelve years I’ve been trying to become an author as well. I’ve spent over £20 in correspondence courses in journalism and authorship, and I’ve even been to evening classes. I’ve written three novels and countless short stories, but everything I’ve written has been rejected. Everything! Not even a letter to the editor has been printed!’

‘Now,’ she went on, ‘I want to learn the art of writing. In exchange for lessons I will look after you. I am a very good cook. I am able to do housekeeping. And if you want anything else you’ve only to ask. I can manage on very little. I could easily keep house on a fiver, and I am ready to move in with you next week. I have only a large suitcase.’

‘Did I want her? I hadn’t felt in such a state for years! In a month only three people had shown a scrap of kindness to me—two Rotarians and a vicar. I was weak and ill. This time it was me who burst into tears. I don’t feel ashamed of making this confession. I cried. The beautiful woman got up and came to my side, and bending over me she gave me a kiss. Then she pulled me up from my chair, put her arm round me, and said: ‘It’s all right—it’s all right, my dear. I am here now. Your troubles are over.’

‘I went to the sink and bathed my eyes. Then we both had a big glass of sherry. The gods had heard my prayers. Here was a woman twenty years younger than me, and beautiful. She did not volunteer much information about her past life, and I didn’t ask her for any references. Her open and frank face, her lovely eyes and the condition of her fingernails were all I needed. I would take a chance on the cooking.

We had a nice tea together, and then, without me asking, she washed up. She had chain-smoked the whole time she’d been with me—very expensive-looking cigarettes of an American brand. I did wonder whether I was expected to pay the cigarette bill. Not to worry. All things would sort themselves out.

She was preparing to leave when there came a knock at the front door. I went to see who it was. I came the Sad Lady. I introduced the Sad Lady to the brunette, and vice versa, and said: ‘Aren’t I a lucky man? This beautiful lady is coming on Monday to become my housekeeper. Isn’t she lovely?’

The Sad Lady looked at my new housekeeper and asked. The brunette took her leave. I saw her downstairs and at the door she gave me a goodbye kiss. She promised to arrive about noon the following Monday.

I went back upstairs to the kitchen where I had left the Sad Lady. She had put on the kettle. After the emotional strain of the past two hours I was ready for more tea. Again I said to the Sad Lady: ‘Aren’t I lucky? Isn’t she beautiful?’

‘You must get rid of her at once,’ said the Sad Lady.

I was thunderstruck. She must be either mad or jealous. ‘What on earth do you mean? She is the answer to my prayers!’

The Sad Lady sat down opposite me and spoke in that sad low voice of hers: ‘Freddie, someone has got to help you. I know you are a lonely man and are needing a woman. But any woman won’t do. I am no use to you, but that lovely brunette is even less use to you.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Just look at yourself,’ she said. ‘You are suffering from depression and sciatica. There’s barely seven stone of you, and you are over fifty years old. The woman who has just gone out is about thirty and she’s full of sex-appeal. She needs a heavy-weight champion, not a fly-weight like you. All that woman has got is looks. I bet she is as hard as nails when you dig the surface.’

I told her about the brunette’s keenness to learn to become a writer.

‘There you are,’ said the Sad Lady.

‘She’ll learn all she can and then walk out on you. Get rid of her at once, Freddie. What you want is a nice quiet elderly lady to mother you. Don’t chew off more than you can eat. You know very well you can’t live on sex at your age. Now, Freddie, I’ve warned you. Sleep on it.’

I promised the Sad Lady that I would. Then from a large shopping bag she brought out a big steak, three potatoes that she had made into chips, and an apple pie with superb light pastry. She cooked me a lovely supper and sat down and watched me eat it.

Next day I wrote to the would-be novelist and told her not to come on the Monday. I asked her to be generous enough to forget the whole thing for reasons that were far too involved to put down on paper. I suggested that when next she had completed a novel or an article she should send it to me and I would try to bang it into saleable shape and find a home for it—even if I had to rewrite it.

I posted the letter on the morning of the Saturday. The following Wednesday I had this letter: Dear Freddie, I expect you are not only right but wise. Anyhow I am going to get married in ten weeks’ time. I’ve given up the idea of becoming a novelist. I will try to become a mother instead.

The next woman to enter my life was a real battle-axe.

‘You want a housekeeper?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Well, you’ll do,’ she said. ‘Hi, Harry, bring it along here!’ A lorry pulled up outside my door.

‘What the heck is this?’ I asked.

‘That’s me furniture—three rooms full of it!’

‘But I have a nicely furnished home. I’ve got a houseful of furniature!’

‘Can’t be helped. Have me, have me home. Ain’t getting rid of it.’

‘Supposing you don’t suit me?’

‘Then I’ll go! And I shall want me home. If you ain’t got room for it
then it can be stored at your expense. It ain’t coming out of my wages and that’s a sure thing."

I told her it was a sure thing she wouldn’t suit me.

Then I travelled to the North of England to see a lady I’d known for some years by post. She was a very sweet lady. She would love to house-keep for me—but there was a fly in the ointment. Her son, aged twenty-four, was not quite certain he was in love with the girl he’d courted for four years. She couldn’t leave her one and only son alone. If only he’d make up his mind then she could come to me. I gave her five days to make up her mind. But it was no use. The son couldn’t make up his.

Then I called on the friendly editor of a magazine I’ve frequently written for, and I told him how after six months I was still alone. He said he’d help me. A week later a lady of seventy-nine came and looked after me for a little while. By chance I met the editor three or four days after the old lady had moved in. I said to him: ‘I’ve got someone. She’s seventy-nine, but doing her best.’

‘Seventy-nine!’ the editor exclaimed.

‘So she says, and I believe her.’

‘Heavens!’ said the editor. ‘Hope springs eternal . . .’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Well, my dear chap, I couldn’t think of any other way to help you so I paid £5 and had your name and full particulars put down at a matrimonial agency. If you can’t find a housekeeper then you’ll have to find a wife. But I hadn’t imagined the candidate would be seventy-nine.’

Then there was the widow living in Royal Crescent who must have thought I was royalty, as she wrote to say she would like to get fixed up, and would gladly ‘supervise my staff’.

And the lady who wrote that she had been a runner-up in ‘Miss England’ twenty years ago and still had a figure. (What figure?) And was ever so willing. (Willing for what?) And the lady in Ascot who invited me to go and be looked over with no obligation on either side. Did she think I was a horse?

And the lady who couldn’t cook, couldn’t sew, and was unable to scrub for physical reasons. I asked what was she good at, and she said: ‘Conversation’!

Life without Lizzie wasn’t easy. As with so many other lonely people, I neglected myself over food. It became too much trouble to go out and get a joint of meat and vegetables, come home and cook them—and eat a real meal. I lived many days wholly on bread-and-jam, tea, and pep pills. In four months I lost a stone in weight, and the pain of sciatica increased.

Then I recorded a talk for the B.B.C. on ‘Love’! I mentioned towards the end of the talk that I myself was lonely. As always, I got mail via the B.B.C. One letter struck me as being particularly genuine and sincere. It came from a lonely widow in the country. She was sixty-three. She suggested that we might meet and have a chat.

We met at Paddington Station. She had snow-white hair, rosy cheeks, a lovely smile, a merry laugh, and a keen sense of humour. Within five minutes I knew I’d found a real treasure. For a while life was rosy. I got regular meals, put on weight, and began writing my fifth diary (which Naomi Jacob had kindly offered to edit). But alas! problems arose in the lady’s private life and she had to return to her home, far from London. I received her goodbye letter on 13 June—of all days! So now I’m searching again.

* * *

There are, it is said, 250,000 lonely widows in Great Britain. 750,000 people in England live alone. I have spent £17 on advertisements without getting any answer. Fourteen organizations have tried to find me an honest and reliable lady and failed. Eleven vicars have been asked to help and all have failed. Forty-seven readers of The Saturday Book have promised to keep their eyes open for a likely lady—and failed to find one.

Find the lady! Tricky, isn’t it!