

Will Boris Johnson marry Carrie Symonds?

As friends report that Boris Johnson is planning to marry his 30-year-old girlfriend, William Cash on why a third marriage can work when others failed

After the announcement last September of Boris Johnson's divorce from Marina Wheeler, his long-suffering wife of 25 years, the Daily Mail splashed a front-page photograph of him looking crumpled and dejected on the steps of his garden in Oxfordshire. Inside, the paper devoted a colourful spread to details about his latest affair with 30-year-old Carrie Symonds, the vivacious and fun-loving former head of Tory party communications.

Seeing him wearing a pair of Indian leather slippers, his hands in his tousled hair, Falstaff-like, I couldn't help but empathise with Boris — as a fellow double divorcé and writer on the rack. He looked broken and exhausted. I felt for him.

The news, less than six months later, is that Boris is now living with Carrie and, according to The Sunday Times, he wants to marry her. "He's lucky to have Carrie," one of Symonds's friends told the paper. "They wouldn't have gone through all this if it weren't serious. It's not seedy — these are two people who fell in love and want to be together."

These words may surprise some of his former mistresses (who include Petronella Wyatt and the art dealer Helen Macintyre), as well as his wife and family. As Sonia Purnell wrote in her 2011 biography *Just Boris*, part of the *raison d'être* of the Johnson-

Wheeler union was that, while far from perfect, it was “Boris and Marina against the rest of the world”, with the publicity being worse than any affair itself. According to close friends she took the “upper-class view” that the family should come first (they have four children). Boris may have been thrown out of the family home in north London like a tomcat more than once, but he was never going to leave Marina. Or not until he met Carrie, who is 24 years younger.

So what makes Carrie different? And why does she — or Boris — think that he might become a changed man if he becomes a member of the Third Wives Club? According to reports, he grooved to Abba at her 30th birthday party and when the pair hosted a party for close friends before Christmas, Boris was described as acting like a loved-up “puppy”.

I wish him only the best. Like Boris, I am a very happy member of the Third Wives Club now that I am married to the society milliner Laura Cathcart, who is nearly 17 years younger than me. The age gap — as Boris will find — will provide plenty of humour. When I gave her a kiss as we walked around our Shropshire garden before my 50th birthday, two years ago, our gardener looked visibly shocked. For three months he had thought Laura was my daughter. The same thing happened when we went skiing. After I looked at our ski passes halfway up the mountain, I noticed Laura (who was wearing a kid’s-style rabbit bobble hat) had been charged only a teenager rate.

When I read the “puppy” comment, I had a sense of déjà vu because I can recall a banker friend leaving a message on my o_cce voicemail when I was seen out with a girl after my second divorce. She was a beautiful novelist called Selin Tamtekin, whom I briefly dated after she had to go into hiding when her risqué novel about a Turkish diplomat’s daughter enjoying the decadent London nightlife scene was published. “You

were following some beautiful girl around the club like a puppy on heat and were well out of your depth,” he said. “You need to get out before you get hurt.”

He was right, of course. We had little in common. She hated the country and told me she “preferred cats to men”. She later married a hedgie. The reason I am so happily married third time around is because Laura and I have similar backgrounds and enjoy the same things. Which is why I think Boris is doing the right thing by thinking of joining the Third Wives Club, especially if he is serious about becoming Tory leader one day (a task with which Carrie reportedly is determined to help him). There is little dignity in being a boulevardier politician in one’s fifties. Carrie appears to be a serious political ally, as well as a savvy PR operator and an arch-Brexiteer. Friends say they have plenty in common. Carrie, who is the daughter of Matthew Symonds, a founder of The Independent, and Josephine McAfee, one of the paper’s lawyers, was educated at the highly academic Godolphin & Latymer School. She took a first at university (Boris managed only a 2:1).

As a divorcé-around-town, even without police protection, it is all too easy to let your dating life slide into the pages of a louche Jay McInerney novel. Divorce is bruising, painful and expensive. In one’s fifties, especially if you are a former foreign secretary, you don’t want to be seen chasing girls around nightclubs.

I dated Helen Macintyre for a while after her liaison with Boris and can fully identify with the type of girl that Boris seems to like. Bright, super-smart, sexy and witty; and above all — at least in Helen’s case — very much a man’s woman. Helen was an enigma, wrapped in mink, and belonged in a Thackeray novel.

She was much more comfortable around men and Boris seems to like masculine alpha females. As somebody who has been flattened, Big Daddy-style, by the emotional carnage Boris creates around him, I can offer only my personal view of his character. Had it not been for the Sunday Mirror decorating their issue in July 2010 with a photo of Helen, when I was very much in love with her — and the headline “Boris Johnson affair girl: he is the dad of my tot” — it is very possible that I might have remained with Helen and the public would never have known about Boris’s affair.

Although I often felt angry and envious when I was with Helen, and his face kept popping up on Newsnight or jumping out of a newspaper, I found it hard to judge him. That he is such a good and entertaining writer — to me at least — redeems his many other flaws. I believe Boris suffers from some form of reckless behavioural compulsion born of a deep need to rule-break and for love and attention. Oddly, most of the women in his life, including Helen, have felt unable to condemn him too harshly.

While at a kitchen supper recently with the wife of a cabinet minister who knows Carrie, I heard that Carrie was “great fun”. She was given a glowing character and talent report card. But others around Westminster — including some female journalists — haven’t always been so keen.

Until I met Laura, the last thing on my mind, having just escaped from one marriage — left homeless, sleeping on Elizabeth Hurley’s nanny’s bunk bed and financially scarred — was to start looking for another wife to repeat the pain. “It can take a long time,” my Belgian private-equity friend Frederic Hufkens (also divorced) advised me. “And then you find somebody and you can start your life again.”

But it is a testament to Boris's optimistic and bold nature, and hopefully reformed character, that he is thinking of joining the Third Wives Club before his divorce is even through. After my second divorce to Dr Vanessa Neumann ("the Cracker from Caracas") I had dinner in New York with my pal Jay McInerney and told him that my marriage was over after less than a year. "Don't worry," Jay said. "It gets progressively better. I'm on my fourth."

But will, or can, Boris change? I do hope he already has. Many of my friends seem to be almost astounded by the way my life and behaviour has changed since marrying Laura (as am I). I don't have a password on my computer or phone. I regularly commute to London from Shropshire, catching the 5.19am train and getting back after a day of meetings to put our two children to bed. My nightclub days are over. Like Boris I could do with losing some weight, but it is a testament to Carrie, again, that he is said to have shed 12lb under her health regimen.

But then I always felt grateful that I had parents (my father is an old Oxford friend of Stanley Johnson, Boris's father) who have had a very happy marriage of more than 50 years. I can't speak for Boris other than to note that Stanley and his mother were divorced, and I suspect Stanley (whose travel articles I enjoy publishing and whom I consider a good family friend) was a rather different role model. Sometimes, the key to redemption is just being happy with somebody you love. Boris's affairs may well have been rooted in simple human unhappiness.

The thing about the Third Wives Club is you know you are on probation from day one. This is your last chance. You are meant to have learnt from your mistakes. I think that Boris will prove his critics wrong and will reform himself in the name of love. As he will know from his forthcoming biography of Shakespeare, personal suffering is the key to self-knowledge. Whether he will

learn this, or will continue to think, hubristically, that men are “the masters of their fates” will decide whether he ever makes it to Downing Street. Third wives are just as important.