

Matrimonial Adventures

Marriage for One

BY

Theodore Dreiser

Author of "Sister Carrie," "Jennie Gerhardt," "The Financier," "A Tramp in Paris," "The Titan," "The Gentian," "A Hoosier Holiday," "Twelve Men," etc.

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THEODORE DREISER

Our English neighbor, the celebrated novelist Arnold Bennett, considers Theodore Dreiser a leading representative American novelist. Mr. Dreiser's work is known in other countries; his books have been translated into both French and German.

Whenever I think of love and marriage I think of Wray. That clerical figure, that clerical mind. He was among those I met during my first years in New York. Like so many of the millions seeking to make their way, he was busy about his affairs, and, fortunately, with the limitations of the average man he had the ambitions of the average man.

With their marriage came a new form of life for both of them, but more especially for her. They took a small apartment in New York, and it was not long before she joined a literary club that was being formed in their vicinity, where she met two restless, pushing, seeking women for whom he did not care—a Mrs. Drake and a Mrs. Munshaw, both of whom he insisted could be of no value to anyone.

Whenever he met me after this he would confide the growing nature of his doubts and perplexities. Bessie was no more like the girl he had met in his office than he was like the boy he had been at ten years of age. She was becoming more aggressive, more inquisitive, more self-centered, more argumentative all the time, more that she did not like the same plays he liked; he wanted a play that was light and amusing, and she wanted one with some serious moral or intellectual twist to it.

As for love and marriage, he held definite views about these also. Not that he was unduly narrow or inclined to ensure those whose lives had not worked out as well as he hoped his own would but there was a fine line of tact somewhere in this matter of marriage which led to success also, quite as the qualities mentioned above led, or should lead, to success in matters more material or practical.

One selected a woman of sense as well as charm, one who came of good stock and hence would be possessed of good taste and good principles. She need not be rich; she might even be poor. So many women were designing, or at least light and flighty; they could not help a serious man to succeed if they would. Everywhere, of course, was the worthy girl whom it was an honor to marry, and it was one of these he was going to choose. But even with one such it was necessary to exercise care; she might be too narrow and conventional.

In the course of time, having become secretary to a certain somebody, he encountered in his own office a girl who seemed to embody nearly all of the virtues and qualities which he thought necessary. She was the daughter of very modestly circumstanced parents who dwelt in the nearby suburb of —, and a very capable stenographer. She was really pretty but not very well informed, a girl who appeared to be practical and sensible, but still in leash to the tenets and instructions of her home, her church and her family circle, three worlds which were as fixed and definite and worthy as the most enthusiastic of those who seek to maintain the order and virtue of the world could have wished.

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first met her, how much she respected her parents' wishes, and now see, "I wish to God," he suddenly exclaimed, "that I hadn't been in such a hurry to change her. She was all right then, if I had only known it. She wasn't interested in these d-d now-fangled things, and I wasn't satisfied until she was. And now see! She leaves me and says I'm narrow and trying to hold her back intellectually."

I shook my head. Of what value was advice in the face of such a situation as this, especially from one who was satisfied that the mysteries of temperament were not to be unraveled or adjusted save by nature? Nevertheless, being appealed to, I ventured a silly suggestion, borrowed from another. He had said that if he could only win her back he would be willing to modify the pointless opposition and contention that had driven her away. She might go her intellectual way as she chose, if she would only come back.

The thought interested him at once. It satisfied his practical and clerical soul. He left me hopefully and I saw nothing more of him for several months, when he came to report that all was well with him once more. In order to seal the new pact he had taken a larger apartment in a more engaging part of the city. Bessie was going on with her club life, and he was not opposing her. And then within the year came a child, and for the next two years all those simple, homey and seemingly binding and restraining things which, go with the rearing and protection of a young life.

But, as I was soon to learn, even during that period all was not as smooth as might be. One day in Wray's absence Bessie remarked that, delightful as it was to have a child of her own, she could see herself as little more than a milk-maid with a calf, bound to its service until it should be able to look after itself. She spoke of what a chain and a weight a child was to one who had ambitions beyond those of motherhood.

They were prospering now and could engage a nursemaid, so Mrs. Wray resumed her intellectual pursuits. It was easy to see that, respect Wray as she might as an affectionate and methodical man, she could not love him, and that because of the gap that lies between those who think or dream a little and those who aspire and dream much.

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they had taken. Apart from a solemnity and a reserve which sprang from a wounded and disgruntled spirit, he pretended an indifference and a satisfaction with his present state which did not square with his past love for her. She had gone, yes, and with another man. He was sure of that, although he did not know who the man was. It was all due to one of those two women about whom he had told me before, that Mrs. Drake. She had interested Bessie in things which did not and could not interest him. They were all alike, those people—crazy and notional and insincere.

There was no other word from him for much over a year, during which time he continued to live in the apartment they had occupied together. He had retained his position with the agency and was now manager of a department. One rainy November night he came to see me, and seated himself before my fire. He looked well enough, quite the careful person who takes care of his clothes, but thinner, more tense and restless. He said he was doing very well and was thinking of taking a long vacation to visit some friends in the West. (He had heard that Bessie had gone to California.) Then of a sudden, noting that I studied him and wondered, he grew restless and finally got up to look at a shelf of books. Suddenly he wheeled and faced me, exclaiming: "I can't stand it. That's what's the matter. I've tried and tried. I thought that the child would make things work out all right, but it didn't. She didn't want children and never forgave me for persuading her to have Marie. And that literary craze—but that was my fault. I was the one that encouraged her to read and go to the theaters. I used to tell her she wasn't up-to-date, that she ought to wake up and find out what was going on in the world, that she ought to get out with intelligent people."

"Now, Wray," I interposed, "how useless to say that. Which of us is as he ought to be? Why will you talk so?" "But let me tell you what she did," he went on fiercely. "You haven't an idea of what I've been through, not an idea. She tried to poison me once— and here followed a sad recital of the twists and turns and desperation of one who wished to be free. "And she was in love with another man, only I could never find out who he was. And he gave me details of certain mysterious goings to and fro, of secret pursuits on his part, of actions and evidences and moods and quarrels which pointed all too plainly to a breach that could never be healed. "And what is more, she tortured me. You'll never know—you couldn't. But I loved her. And I love her now."

"Yes," I said, "but the folly of it all. The uselessness, the hopelessness." "Oh, I know, but I couldn't help it. I was crazy about her. The more she disliked me, the more I loved her. I have walked the streets for hours, whole days at a time, because I couldn't eat or sleep. And all I could do was think, think, think. And that is about all I do now, really. I have never been myself since she left. It's almost as bad right now as it was two years ago. I live in the old apartment, yes. But why? Because I think she might come back to me. I wait and wait. I know it's foolish, but still I wait. Why? God only knows. Oh," he sighed, "it's three years now—three years."

He paused and gazed at me, and I at him, shaken by a fact that was without solution by anyone. I wondered where she was, whether she ever thought of him even, whether she was happy in her new freedom. And then, without more ado, he slipped on his raincoat, took his umbrella and marched out into the rain again, to walk and think, I presume. And I, closing the door, studied the walls, wondering. The despair, the passion, the rage, the hopelessness, the love, "Truly," I thought, "this is love—for one at least. And this is marriage—for one at least. He is spiritually wedded to that woman, who despises him. And she may be spiritually wedded to another, who may despise her. But love and marriage, for one at least, I have seen here in this room, and with mine own eyes."

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