

Matrimonial Adventures

Marriage for One

BY

Theodore Dreiser

Author of "Sister Carrie," "Jennie Gerhardt," "The Financier," "A Traveler at Forty," "The Titan," "The Genius," "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.

There is perhaps no author in the United States about whom such curiosity is expressed as Theodore Dreiser. His first book, "Sister Carrie," begun when he was reporting on a western newspaper, brought forth the kind of success and discussion that have become continuous with his succeeding novels.

It dealt with life in arresting terms. It pictured people in a never-to-be-forgotten manner, and this is the quality you find in his later work. For work it is, Mr. Dreiser says: "I'm not a hermit. Nor mysterious. But you know there are a lot of people that regard writing as a sort of picnic. They flock. Want to know how you do it. Want to see you at it. It all takes up time. It leads nowhere. Let people get wind of you and it means invitations. Society is a business in itself. I can't manage it and do my work, too."

With all his transcriptions from the terrible things of life, Theodore Dreiser is an idealist. His insight is amazing. His vision far-reaching. The story which follows, written for the Star Author Series of Matrimonial Adventures, gives a new and appealing picture of "Marriage-for One."

MARY STEWART CUTTING, JR.

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. He was connected with one of those commercial agencies which inquire into the standing of business men and report their findings, for a price, to other business men. He was interested in his work and seemed satisfied that in time he was certain to achieve what was perhaps a fair enough ambition: management of some branch of the great concern he was connected with and which might have paid him so much as five or six thousand a year. The thing about him that interested me, apart from a genial and pleasing disposition, was that with all this wealth of opportunity before him for studying the human mind, its resources and resourcefulness, its inhibitions and liberations, its humor, tragedy and general shiftiness and changefulness, he concerned himself chiefly with the bare facts of the different enterprises whose character he was supposed to investigate. Were they solvent? Could and did they pay their bills? What was their capital stock? How much cash did they have on hand? . . . Such was the nature of the data he needed, and to this, largely, he confined himself.

Nevertheless, he was at times amused or astonished or made angry or self-righteous by the tricks, the secretiveness, the errors and downright meanness of spirit of so many he came in contact with. As for himself, he had the feeling that he was a person of no little character, that he was honest, straightforward, not as limited or worthless as some of these others. On this score, as on some others, he was convinced that he would succeed. If a man did as he should do, if he were industrious and honest and courteous and a few more of those many things we all know we ought to be, he was bound to get along better than those who did not. What! an honest, industrious, careful, courteous man not do better than those who are none of those things? What nonsense. It must be so. Of course there were accidents and sickness, and men here and there stole from one another, as he saw well illustrated in his own labors; and banks failed. And there were trusts and combinations being formed even then which did not seem to be entirely in tune with the interests of the average man. But even so—all things considered—if the average man followed the above rules he was sure to fare better than the other fellow. There was such a thing as approximate justice. Good did prevail, in the main, and the wicked were punished.

As for love and marriage, he held definite views about these also. Not that he was unduly narrow or inclined to censure 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 outlined above led, or should lead, to success in matters more material or practical. One had to understand a little

something about women. One had to be sure that when one went a-courting 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. For instance, she was opposed to the theater, dancing, night dining or visiting in the city, as well as anything that in her religious world might be construed as desecration of the Sabbath. I recall him describing her narrow "as yet" but he hoped to make her more liberal in time. He told me that he had been unable to win her to so simple an outing on the Sabbath as rowing on the little river near her home, that never would she stay downtown to dinner. As for the theater—it could not even be mentioned. She could not and would not dance, and looked upon such inclinations in him as not only worldly but loose and sinful. Although he prided himself on being a liberal and even a radical, to her he pretended a profound indifference to such departures from conventions. He thought her too fine and intelligent a girl to stick to such notions, and was doing his best to influence and enlighten her. By slow degrees (he was about the business of courting her two or three years) he was able to bring her to the place where she would stay downtown for dinner on a weekday, and occasionally would attend a sacred or musical concert on a Sunday night. Also, which he considered a great triumph, he induced her to read certain books, especially bits of history and philosophy which he thought liberal and which no doubt generated some thin wisps of doubt in her own mind.

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—Mrs. Drake and Mrs. Munshaw, both of whom he insisted could be of no value to anyone. But Bessie liked them and spent a great deal of time with them. I visited them at their small apartment about this time, and found that she was proving a very apt pupil in the realm to which he had introduced her. It was plain that she had been emancipated from her old notions as to the sinfulness of the stage, as well as reading and living in general. Wray had proved to be the Prince Charming who had entered the secret garden and waked the sleeping princess to a world such as she had never dreamed of.

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 this, 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. She read only serious books now and was interested in lectures, whereas he, as he now confessed, was more or less bored by serious books. She liked music, or was pretending that she did, grand opera, recitals and that sort of thing, whereas grand opera bored him. And yet if he would not accompany her she would go with one or both of those women he was beginning to detest. They seemed to have no household duties and could come and go as they chose. It was they who were aiding and abetting her in all these things and stirring her up to go and do and be. What was he to do? No good could come if things went on as they were now going. They were beginning to quarrel, and more than once lately she had threatened to leave him and do for herself, as he well knew she could.

In about two months after this Wray came to see me, and in a very distraught state of mind. After vainly attempting to discuss casual things casually he confessed that Bessie had left him. She had taken a room somewhere, had gone back to work, and would not accept any money from him. Although he met her occasionally in the subway she would have nothing to do with him. And would I believe it? She was accusing him of being narrow and ignorant and stubborn! And only three or four years before she had thought he was all wrong because he wanted to go rowing on Sunday! Could such things be? And

still he loved her; he couldn't help it. He recalled how sweet and innocent and strange she had been when he 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 new-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. . . . Seeing him so tractable and so very wishful, I suggested a thing another had done in a related situation. He was to win her back by offering her such terms as she would accept, and then, in order to bind her to him, he was to induce her to have a child. That would capture her sympathy and at the same time insinuate an image of himself into her affectionate consideration. Those who had children rarely separated—or so I said.

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 milk-cow 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. But Wray, clerical soul that he was, was all but lost in rapture. There was a small park nearby, and here he was to be found trundling this infant in a handsome baby carriage whenever his duties would permit. He liked to speculate on the charm and innocence of babyhood and was amused by a hundred things he had never noticed in the children of others. Already he was planning for little Marie's future. It was hard for children to be cooped up in the city. If he could win Bessie to the idea, they would move to some suburban town.

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. They were two differing rates of motion, flowing side by side for the time being only, he the slower, she the quicker. Observing them together one could see how proud he was of her and his relationship to her, how he felt that he had captured a prize regardless of the conditions by which it was retained, while she held him rather lightly in her thoughts or her moods. Having won her back he now sought to bind her to him in any way that he might, while she wished only to be free. For surcease she plunged into those old activities which had so troubled him, and now in addition to herself the child was being neglected, or so he thought. The arrival of Marie had not influenced her in that respect. And what was more and worse, she had now taken to reading Freud and Kraft-Ebbing and allied thinkers and authorities, men and works he considered shameful even though scarcely grasped by him. Once he said to me: "Do you know of a writer of the name of Pierre Loti?"

"Yes," I replied. "I know his works. What about it?"

"What do you think of him?"

"Why, I respect him very much. What about him?"

"Oh, I know, from an intellectual point of view, as a fine writer, maybe. But what do you think of his views of life—of his books as books to be read by the mother of a little girl?"

"Wray," I said, "I can't enter upon a discussion of any man's works upon purely moral grounds. He might be good for some mothers and evil for others. That is as you will. Those who are to be injured by a picture of life must be injured, and those who are to be benefited will be benefited. I can't discuss either books or life in that way. I see books as truthful representations of life in some form, nothing more. And it would be unfair to anyone who stood in intellectual need to be restrained from that which might prove of advantage to him. I speak only for myself, however."

It was not long after that, six months or less, that I heard there had been a new quarrel which resulted in Bessie's leaving him once more, and with her, which perhaps was illegal or unfair, she had taken the child of

which he was so fond. Not hearing directly from him as to this, I called upon him after a time and found him living in the same large apartment 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. After a time he added that he had been to see her parents. I could not guess why, unless it was because he was lonely and still very much in love and thought they might help him to understand the troublesome problem that was before him.

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. It 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. . . . But it wasn't that, either. If she had been the right sort of woman she couldn't have done as she has done." He paused and clenched his hands nervously, as though he were denouncing her to her face instead of to me.

"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." Once more the tensely gripped fingers, the white face, the flash of haunted eyes. "Once I followed her to a restaurant when she said she was going to visit a friend, and she met a man. I followed them when they came out, and when they were getting into a cab I told them both what I thought of them. I threatened to kill them, and then he went away when she told him to go. When we got home I couldn't do anything with her. All she would say was that if I didn't like the way she was doing I could let her go. She wanted me to give her a divorce. And I couldn't let her go, even if I had wanted to. I loved her too much. Why, she would sit and read and ignore me for days—days, without ever a word."

"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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