

# The Drama Of Marriage

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dren, and as long as they give each other evidence of their earnestness by registering the union with the State, marriage will endure, for this is marriage.

And once married, it is not easy to get unmarried. Society sees to that also. We are always contemptuous or cynical or despairing about the things from which we can't escape, even the good ones. Hence a good deal of this adverse comment about marriage.

## The Essence of Drama

When we consider imaginative writing, there is another reason for the appearance of so much marital tumult, of marriage in general being a failure, or at any rate an agony.

One of the paradoxes of good literature is that it interprets and reflects life and yet must inevitably give an exaggerated or heightened picture of life.

A French author made this comment: "Society requires women to have husbands, but in novels it is found necessary that they should have lovers."

The essence of drama is conflict. Hence practically all of the plays about marriage one can think of are full of fights—often due to lovers, but not always.

I know at the moment of only a couple of plays devoted to the story of a marriage, in which the married pair do not rasp each other some time or other, either in humorous or hostile fashion.

One is A. A. Milne's *Michael and Mary*. The other is Monckton Hoffe's *Many Waters*.

## Plenty of Variations

It is interesting that though dramatists have been writing about married people since drama began, it is only in the last half-century that nine-tenths of the multifarious problems of marriage have had treatment in plays. That is, since the drama became socially realistic.

Shakespeare, of course, gave us many slants on marriage. In *Othello* he gave us the tragedy of married jealousy on a sublime scale, while in *The Taming of the Shrew* he told us how to bring to heel a reluctant, cross-grained, though good-looking wife. "Treat her rough," says Shakespeare.

For a variant on this aspect, and for a nice distinction in wife-treatment, we might go to modern Russia. In his play, *Inga*, Anatole Glebov has shown us an old tyrant tried by a committee of women for tormenting his wife.

"Torment her," declares Boltikov. "What nonsense. Beat her, yes, but torment her, never."

*Inga* is a play of the emancipation of Russian women to an equality with men.

We find many plays on the subject of mutual adaptation in marriage. There

is *The Dominant Sex* of Michael Egan, which is about two people who marry on terms of equality, but spend their whole life in attempting not equality but domination of each other, with alternate success. Pinero in his *Mid-channel* told us how and why the middle-aged drift apart in marriage.

There have been many plays of marital incompatibility, the young wife and the old husband, the sensitive husband and stolid wife, the woman with a past married to a man who hadn't known of it, plays of people who marry again, plays of wives whose husbands neglect them for work, plays of divorce, plays of husbands who slam the door and go because they are not sufficiently appreciated, plays of wives who are really at the back of their husbands' success, problem plays of children.

In 1879, Henrik Ibsen wrote a play called *A Doll's House*, and was howled down



"Candida says she is up for auction"

for it.

In this play, a wife who has been treated as a mere doll, suddenly finds that she knows nothing of the world as it really is, and walks out of her home, leaving her children and telling her husband that she cannot live with him any more until she has educated herself in individual responsibility.

Maybe Bernard Shaw was getting near the inner core of truth when he wrote his *Candida* more than 40 years ago.

In this play, a wife has to choose between a parson-husband and a young poet, both of whom want her. Candida says she is up for auction and asks each what he has to offer.

The husband says oratorically: "I have nothing to offer you but my strength for your defence, my honesty of purpose for your surety, my ability and industry for your livelihood, and my authority and position for your dignity. That is all it becomes a man to offer a woman."

Candida says: "And you, Eugene? What do you offer?"

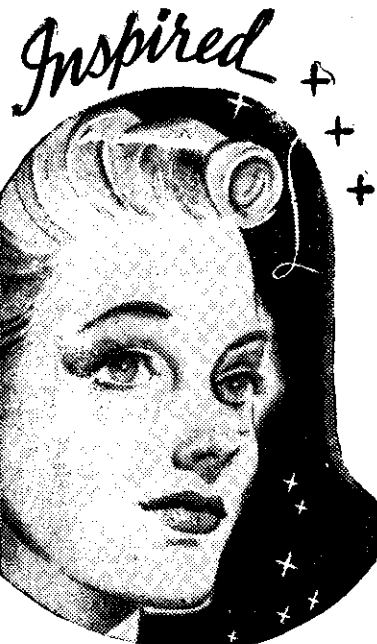
"My weakness, my desolation, my heart's need," answers the poet.

But Candida stays with her husband, the man who most needs her.

Am I making too idealistic an estimate of womanhood if I suggest that this is why wives stay home—not because they are entirely satisfied, not because they haven't wayward impulses toward fresh fields and pastures new, not because they aren't fed up to the teeth with household chores, but because at home there is a job to do? And a job they alone can do.

But don't let us ever again be guilty of confusing this job (as the Nazis do), with the idea of inferior mental and social status.

If we do that, Ibsen's lesson in *A Doll's House* may have to be learned all over again. And this time our wives may never come back.

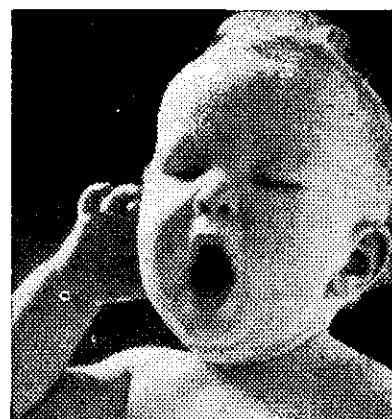


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