

Enigma

BY FLOYD DELL A DOMESTIC CONVERSATION

To THEODORE DREISER

"Enigma" was first presented at the Liberal Club, New York City, in 1915.

A man and woman are sitting at a table, talking in bitter tones.

SHE. So that is what you think.

HE. Yes. For us to live together any longer would be an obscene joke. Let's end it while we still have some sanity and decency left.

SHE. Is that the best you can do in the way of sanity and decency--to talk like that?

HE. You'd like to cover it up with pretty words, wouldn't you? Well, we've had enough of that. I feel as though my face were covered with spider webs. I want to brush them off and get clean again.

SHE. It's not my fault you've got weak nerves. Why don't you try to behave like a gentleman, instead of a hysterical minor poet?

HE. A gentleman, Helen, would have strangled you years ago. It takes a man with crazy notions of freedom and generosity to be the fool that I've been.

SHE. I suppose you blame me for your ideas!

HE. I'm past blaming anybody, even myself. Helen, don't you realize that this has got to stop? We are cutting each other to pieces with knives.

SHE. You want me to go. . . .

HE. Or I'll go--it makes no difference. Only we've got to separate, definitely and for ever.

SHE. You really think there is no possibility--of our finding some way?... We might be able--to find some way.

HE. We found some way, Helen--twice before. And this is what it comes to. . . . There are limits to my capacity for self-delusion. This is the end.

SHE. Yes. Only--

HE. Only what?

SHE. It--it seems . . . such a pity. . . .

HE. Pity! The pity is this--that we should sit here and haggle about our hatred. That's all there's left between us.

SHE. (*standing up*) I won't haggle, Paul. If you think we should part, we shall this very night. But I don't want to part this way, Paul. I know I've hurt you. I want to be forgiven before I go.

HE. (*standing up to face her*) Can't we finish without another sentimental lie? I'm in no mood to act out a pretty scene with you.

SHE. That was unjust, Paul. You know I don't mean that. What I want is to make you understand, so you won't hate me.

HE. More explanations. I thought we had both got tired of them. I used to think it possible to heal a wound by words. But we ought to know better. They're like acid in it.

SHE. Please don't, Paul--This is the last time we shall ever hurt each other. Won't you listen to me?

HE. Go on.

He sits down wearily.

SHE. I know you hate me. You have a right to. Not just because I was faithless--but because I was cruel. I don't want to excuse myself--but I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't realize I was hurting you.

HE. We've gone over that a thousand times.

SHE. Yes. I've said that before. And you've answered me that that excuse might hold for the first time, but not for the second and the third. You've convicted me of deliberate cruelty on that. And I've never had anything to say. I couldn't say anything, because the truth was; too preposterous. It wasn't any use telling it before. But now I want you to know the real reason.

HE. A new reason, eh?

SHE. Something I've never confessed to you. Yes. It is true that I was cruel to you--deliberately. I did want to hurt you. And do you know why? I wanted to shatter that Olympian serenity of yours. You were too strong, too self-confident. You had the air of a being that nothing could hurt. You were like a god.

HE. That was a long time ago. Was I ever Olympian? I had forgotten it. You succeeded very well--you shattered it in me.

SHE. You are still Olympian. And I still hate you for it. I wish I could make you suffer now. But I have lost my power to do that.

HE. Aren't you contented with what you have done? It seems to me that I have suffered enough recently to satisfy even your ambitions.

SHE. No--or you couldn't talk like that. You sit there--making phrases. Oh, I have hurt you a little; but you will recover. You always recovered quickly. You are not human. If you were human, you would remember that we once were happy, and be a little sorry that all that is over. But you can't be sorry. You have made up your mind, and can think of nothing but that.

HE. That's an interesting--and novel--explanation.

SHE. I wonder if I can't make you understand. Paul--do you remember when we fell in love?

HE. Something of that sort must have happened to us.

SHE. No--it happened to me. It didn't happen to you. You made up your mind and walked in, with the air of a god on a holiday. It was I who fell--headlong, dizzy, blind. I didn't want to love you. It was a force too strong for me. It swept me into your arms. I prayed against it. I had to give myself to you, even though I knew you hardly cared. I had to--for my heart was no longer in my own breast. It was in your hands, to do what you liked with. You could have thrown it in the dust.

HE. This is all very romantic and exciting, but tell me--did I throw it in the dust?

SHE. It pleased you not to. You put it in your pocket. But don't you realize what it is to feel that another person has absolute power over you? No, for you have never felt that way. You have never been utterly dependent on another person for happiness. I was utterly dependent on you. It humiliated me, angered me. I rebelled against it, but it was no use. You see, my dear, I was in love with you. And you were free, and your heart was your own, and nobody could hurt you.

HE. Very fine--only it wasn't true, as you soon found out.

SHE. When I found it out, I could hardly believe it. It wasn't possible. Why, you had said a thousand times that you would not be jealous if I were in love with some one else, too. It was you who put the idea in my head. It seemed a part of your super-humanness.

HE. I did talk that way. But I wasn't a superman. I was only a damned fool.

SHE. And Paul, when I first realized that it might be hurting you--that you were human after all--I stopped. You know I stopped.

HE. Yes--that time.

SHE. Can't you understand? I stopped because I thought you were a person like myself, suffering like myself. It wasn't easy to stop. It tore me to pieces. But I suffered rather than let you suffer. But when I saw you recover your serenity in a day while the love that I had struck down in my heart for your sake cried out in a death agony for months, I felt again that you were superior, inhuman--and I hated you for it.

HE. Did I deceive you so well as that?

SHE. And when the next time came, I wanted to see if it was real, this godlike serenity of yours. I wanted to tear off the mask. I wanted to see you suffer as I had suffered. And that is why I was cruel to you the second time.

HE. And the third time--what about that?

She bursts into tears, and sinks to the floor, with her head on the chair, sheltered by her arms. Then she looks up.

SHE. Oh, I can't talk about that--I can't. It's too near.

HE. I beg your pardon. I don't wish to show an unseemly curiosity about your private affairs.

SHE. If you were human, you would know that there is a difference between one's last love and all that have gone before. I can talk about the others--but this one still hurts.

HE. I see. Should we chance to meet next year, you will tell me about it then. The joys of new love will have healed the pains of the old.

SHE. There will be no more joy or pain of love for me. You do not believe that. But that part of me which loves is dead. Do you think I have come through all this unhurt? No. I cannot hope any more, I cannot believe. There is nothing left for me. All I have left is regret for the happiness that you and I have spoiled between us. . . . Oh, Paul, why did you ever teach me your Olympian philosophy? Why did you make me think that we were gods and could do whatever we chose? If we had realized that we were only weak human beings, we might have saved our happiness!

HE. (*shaken*) We tried to reckon with facts--I cannot blame myself for that. The facts of human nature: people do have love affairs within love affairs. I was not faithful to you. . . .

SHE. (*rising to her feet*) But you had the decency to be dishonest about it. You did not tell me the truth, in spite of all your theories. I might never have found out. You knew better than to shake my belief in our love. But I trusted your philosophy, and flaunted my lovers before you. I never realized--

HE. Be careful, my dear. You are contradicting yourself!

SHE. I know I am. I don't care. I no longer know what the truth is. I only know that I am filled with remorse for what has happened. Why did it happen? Why did we let it happen? Why didn't you stop me? . . . I want it back!

HE. But, Helen!

SHE. Yes--our old happiness.... Don't you remember, Paul, how beautiful everything was--? (*She covers her face with her hands, and then looks up again.*) Give it back to me, Paul!

HE. (*torn with conflicting wishes*) Do you really believe, Helen...?

SHE. I know we can be happy again. It was all ours, and we must have it once more, just as it was. (*She holds out her hands.*) Paul! Paul!

HE. (*desperately*) Let me think!

SHE. (*scornfully*) Oh, your thinking! I know! Think, then--think of all the times I've been cruel to you. Think of my wantonness--my wickedness--not of my poor, tormented attempts at happiness. My lovers, yes! Think hard, and save yourself from any more discomfort. . . . But no--you're in no danger. . . .

HE. What do you mean?

SHE. (*laughing hysterically*) You haven't believed what I've been saying all this while, have you?

HE. Almost.

SHE. Then don't. I've been lying.

HE. Again?

SHE. Again, yes.

HE. I suspected it.

SHE. (*mockingly*) Wise man!

HE. You don't love me, then?

SHE. Why should I? Do you want me to?

HE. I make no demands upon you. You know that.

SHE. You can get along without me?

HE. (*coldly*) Why not?

SHE. Good. Then I'll tell you the truth!

HE. That *would* be interesting!

SHE. I was afraid you *did* want me! And--I was sorry for you, Paul--I thought if you did, I would try to make things up to you, by starting over again--if you wanted to.

HE. So that was it. . . .

SHE. Yes, that was it. And so--

HE. (*harshly*) You needn't say any more. Will you go, or shall I?

SHE. (*lightly*) I'm going, Paul. But I think--since we may not meet this time next year--that I'd better tell you the secret of that third time. When you asked me a while ago, I cried, and said I couldn't talk about it. But I can now.

HE. You mean--

SHE. Yes. My last cruelty. I had a special reason for being cruel to you. Shan't I tell you?

HE. Just as you please.

SHE. My reason was this: I had learned what it is to love--and I knew that I had never loved you--never. I wanted to hurt you so much that you would leave me. I wanted to hurt you in such a way as to keep you from ever coming near me again. I was afraid that if you did forgive me and take me in your arms, you would feel me shudder, and see the terror and loathing in my eyes. I wanted--for even then I cared for you a little--to spare you that.

HE. (*speaking with difficulty*) Are you going?

SHE. (*lifting from the table a desk calendar, and tearing a leaf from it, which she holds in front of him. Her voice is tender with an inexplicable regret.*) Did you notice the date? It is the eighth of June. Do you remember what day that is? We used to celebrate it once a year. It is the day--(*the leaf flutters to the table in front of him*)--the day of our first kiss. . . .

He sits looking at her. For a moment it seems clear to him that they still love each other, and that a single word from him, a mere gesture, the holding out of his arms to her, will reunite them. And then he doubts. . . . She is watching him; she turns at last toward the door, hesitates, and then walks slowly out. When she has gone he takes up the torn leaf from the calendar, and holds it in his hands, looking at it with the air of a man confronted by an unsolvable enigma.

