

Dreiser

BY W. A. SWANBERG

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS · *New York*

police, he knew, were on his trail. Possibly it was this reflection that made him repent the theft, return all but \$800 in a letter to his late employers and beg them not to prosecute him. They did not, but the scandal made headlines in the Chicago papers, in which the Dreisers escaped mention only because Emma had taken another name. Fearful of returning to Chicago, she cast her lot with the absconder and the couple went to New York, where they supported themselves by renting rooms to women of easy virtue.⁹

A few months later, Sylvia, still in Warsaw, tearfully admitted to Sarah that she was pregnant and that her lover, the son of a wealthy family in town, now refused to marry her. Luckily, Dreiser was again working in Terre Haute. Sarah made a forlorn effort to take legal action against the young man, then sent Sylvia off to have her baby at her sister's in New York.

For weeks the back-fence talk in Warsaw centered around the Dreiser girl who had run off to have an illegitimate child.

II. THE DREISER SCANDAL

Convention, that mass judgment which Theodore later would publicly defy, found him defenseless in Warsaw. Boys made wisecracks about his sister. Girls eyed him askance. He was no longer invited to parties. His sister Claire, though entirely virtuous, was reduced to a single girl companion. Local opinion had ostracized the Dreisers as trash, and Theodore, who needed few friends, nevertheless was badly hurt by his exclusion. Even a visit by Paul, that infallible joy-dispenser, failed to give the usual lift although Paul had recently written "The Letter That Never Came," a ballad so popular that it was being sung in Warsaw.

But high school, where he was a freshman, became a refuge because of one of his teachers, a tall, gentle spinster in her thirties named Mildred Fielding. Kindly and attentive, Miss Fielding helped him after school with his algebra and told him that he had latent abilities which he should develop. "You must study and go on," she said, "for your mind will find its way. I know it!"

He went on solitary walks, contemplating the flight of blackbirds and the instinct that sent them southward in armies. He read, deriving a wicked thrill from the sexual exploits of Tom Jones and Moll Flanders. At Morris' bookstore on the square he found pamphlets that went into astonishing detail about sex. At the opera house one night he was thrown into ecstasies by his first view of an actress in tights. "About this time," he later recalled, "I fell into the ridiculous and unsatisfactory practice of masturbation. . . ." ¹⁰

This brought new fears, for he had read that total collapse often followed such indulgence. When his face broke out in a temporary rash of pimples, he was certain that this advertised his vice to the world and that he was nearing dissolution. His nervousness increased. He began walking in his sleep, one night falling out of a second-floor window and luckily suffering only bruises. He noticed a ringing in his ears, had occasional dizzy spells and felt himself

evil. Although convinced that he would die, he was unable to stop his erotic stimulation. Later he took a less drastic view, believing that he would only ruin himself sexually for life but feeling that he must confide in someone. He went to the priest and confessed some of his mental lewdness. He received only a stern warning to desist which increased his dread because he could not desist and felt that he would certainly roast in hell.

One evening Theodore passed a bakery opposite the courthouse where he had often bought bread and was greeted by the stocky fifteen-year-old girl who worked there. She pushed him archly, said, "I'll bet you can't catch me," and raced down the alley with him following. She turned into a high-fenced yard, where he seized her playfully and, to his bewilderment, discovered that she was not resisting but tempting him. They fell down together. As he put it, "I found her . . . suddenly and swiftly assisting me in a relationship which, while I had contemplated the same in many ways with so many others in my imagination in the past, I had never so much as dreamed of in connection with her."¹¹ He left in a daze, excited and yet unnerved. The experience he had envisioned had not, in reality, come up to his expectations and, instead of feeling relief at this proof that he was not yet sexually crippled, he yearned for other girls he really admired and worried about contracting a disease.

After Sylvia had her baby in New York, the inevitable happened. She found a job and left the infant with Sarah Dreiser in Warsaw, the mother who could never refuse an appeal. No longer could the secret be kept from Dreiser, who was out of work and back in Warsaw again, and he was bitter about the sin of it, blaming Sarah. Theodore sometimes had to mind the tot—the living symbol of the Dreiser disgrace—and now people were gossiping more than ever.

In his misery, Miss Fielding was a comfort. Reared in a small town herself, she knew the Warsaw talk about the Dreiser scandal and pitied Theodore's inner hurt.

"You mustn't mind my saying this, Theodore," she said, "because I am fond of you and want you to succeed in life. . . . I know how small people can be and how they talk. But please don't let it affect you. You will soon grow up and go away and then all that has happened here will seem as nothing to you. . . ." ¹²

He nearly wept with gratitude, unaware that Miss Fielding later would have a profound effect on his life. Inspired, he worked at his lessons and did well. But when summer came, his two best friends, the Misses Fielding and Calvert, were away on vacation, and he suffered humiliation at a nearby farm where he found a job weeding onions. Within an hour his muscles ached, the sun seared him and he fell into non-productive meditations about the repulsiveness of farm labor until his boss growled, "My God, this will never do," paid him fifty cents and fired him.

His mother exclaimed over the half-dollar. "You really earned all that?" she cried.