

Sweet-And-Twenty

BY FLOYD DELL
A COMEDY

TO EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

"Sweet-and-Twenty" was first produced by the Provincetown Players, New York City, in 1918, with the following cast:

The Young Woman Edna St. Vincent Millay The Young Man ...
Ordway Tead The Agent Otto Liveright The Guard
Louis Ell

The cherry-orchard scene was effectively produced on a small stage by a blue-green back-drop with a single conventionalized cherry-branch painted across it, and two three-leaved screens masking the wings, painted in blue-green with a spray of cherry blossoms.

A corner of the cherry orchard on the country place of the late Mr. Boggley, now on sale and open for inspection to prospective buyers. The cherry orchard, now in full bloom, is a very pleasant place. There is a green-painted rustic bench beside the path. . . .

A young woman, dressed in a light summer frock and carrying a parasol, drifts in from the back. She sees the bench, comes over to it and sits down with an air of petulant weariness.

A handsome young man enters from the right. He stops short in surprise on seeing the charming stranger who lolls upon the bench. He takes off his hat.

HE. Oh, I beg your pardon!

SHE. Oh, you needn't! I've no right to be here, either.

HE. (*coming over to her*) Now what do you mean by that?

SHE. I thought perhaps you were playing truant, as I am.

HE. Playing truant?

SHE. I was looking at the house, you know. And I got tired and ran away.

HE. Well, to tell the truth, so did I. It's dull work, isn't it?

SHE. I've been upstairs and down for two hours. That family portrait gallery finished me. It was so old and gloomy and dead that I felt as if I were dead myself. I just had to do something. I wanted to jab my parasol through the window-pane. I understood just how the suffragettes felt. But I was afraid of shocking the agent. He is such a meek little man, and he seemed to think so well of me. If I had broken the window I would have shattered his ideals of womanhood, too, I'm afraid. So I just slipped away quietly and came here.

HE. I've only been there half an hour and we--I've only been in the basement. That's why our tours of inspection didn't bring us together sooner. I've been cross-examining the furnace. Do you understand furnaces? (*He sits down beside her*) I don't.

SHE. Do you like family portraits? I hate 'em!

HE. What! Do the family portraits go with the house?

SHE. No, thank heaven. They've been bequeathed to some museum, I am told. They're valuable historically--early colonial governors and all that sort of stuff. But there is some one with me who--who takes a deep interest in such things.

HE. (*frowning at a sudden memory*) Hm. Didn't I see you at that real estate office in New York yesterday?

SHE. Yes. *He* was with me then.

HE. (*compassionately*) I--I thought I remembered seeing you with--with him.

SHE. (*cheerfully*) Isn't he *just* the sort of man who would be interested in family portraits?

HE. (*confused*) Well--since you ask me--

SHE. Oh, that's all right. Tubby's a dear, in spite of his funny old ideas. I like him very much.

HE. (*gulping the pill*) Yes....

SHE. He's so anxious to please me in buying this house. I suppose it's all right to have a house, but I'd like to become acquainted with it gradually. I'd like to feel that there was always some corner left to explore--some mystery saved up for a rainy day. Tubby can't understand that. He drags me everywhere, explaining how we'll keep this and change that--dormer windows here and perhaps a new wing there.... I suppose you've been rebuilding the house, too?

HE. No. Merely decided to turn that sunny south room into a study. It would make a very pleasant place to work. But if you really want the place, I'd hate to take it away from you.

SHE. I was just going to say that if *you* really wanted it, *I'd* withdraw. It was Tubby's idea to buy it, you know--not mine. You *do* want it, don't you?

HE. I can't say that I do. It's so infernally big. But Maria thinks I ought to have it. (*Explanatorily*)--Maria is--

SHE. (*gently*) She's--the one who is interested in furnaces. I understand. I saw her with you at the real-estate office yesterday. Well--furnaces are necessary, I suppose. (*There is a pause, which she breaks suddenly.*) Do you see that bee?

HE. A bee?

He follows her gaze up to a cluster of blossoms.

SHE. Yes--there! (*Affectionately*)--The rascal! There he goes.

Their eyes follow the flight of the bee across the orchard. There is a silence. Alone together beneath the blossoms, a spell seems to have

fallen upon them. She tries to think of something to say--and at last succeeds.

SHE. Have you heard the story of the people who used to live here?

HE. No; why?

SHE. The agent was telling us. It's quite romantic--and rather sad. You see, the man that built this house was in love with a girl. He was building it for her--as a surprise. But he had neglected to mention to her that he was in love with her. And so, in pique, she married another man, though she was really in love with him. The news came just when he had finished the house. He shut it up for a year or two, but eventually married some one else, and they lived I here for ten years--most unhappily. Then they went abroad, and the house was sold. It was bought, curiously enough, by the husband of the girl he had been in love with. They lived here till they died-hating each other to the end, the agent says.

HE. It gives me the shivers. To think of that house, haunted by the memories of wasted love! Which of us, I wonder, will have to live in it? I don't want to.

SHE. (*prosaically*) Oh, don't take it so seriously as all that. If one can't live in a house where there's been an unhappy marriage, why, good heavens, where is one going to live? Most marriages, I fancy, are unhappy.

HE. A bitter philosophy for one so young and--

SHE. Nonsense! But listen to the rest of the story. The most interesting part is about this very orchard.

HE. Really!

SHE. Yes. This orchard, it seems, was here before the house was. It was part of an old farm where he and she--the unhappy lovers, you know-- stopped one day, while they were out driving, and asked for something to eat. The farmer's wife was busy, but she gave them each a glass of milk, and told them they could eat all the cherries they

wanted. So they picked a hatful of cherries, and ate them, sitting on a bench like this one. And then he fell in love with her. . . .

HE. And . . . didn't tell her so. . . .

She glances at him in alarm. His self-possession has vanished. He is pale and frightened, but there is a desperate look in his eyes, as if some unknown power were forcing him to do something very rash. In short, he seems like a young man who has just fallen in love.

SHE. (*hastily*) So you see this orchard is haunted, too!

HE. I feel it. I seem to hear the ghost of that old-time lover whispering to me. . . .

SHE. (*provocatively*) Indeed! What does he say?

HE. He says: "I was a coward; you must be bold. I was silent; you must speak out."

SHE. (*mischievously*) That's very curious--because that old lover isn't dead at all. He's a Congressman or Senator or something, the Agent says.

HE. (*earnestly*) It's all the same. His youth is dead; and it is his youth that speaks to me.

SHE. (*quickly*) You mustn't believe all that ghosts tell you.

HE. Oh, but I must. For they know the folly of silence--the bitterness of cowardice.

SHE. The circumstances were--slightly--different, weren't they?

HE. (*stubbornly*) I don't care!

SHE. (*soberly*) You know perfectly well it's no use.

HE. I can't help that!

SHE. Please! You simply mustn't! It's disgraceful!

HE. What's disgraceful?

SHE. (*confused*) What you are going to say.

HE. (*simply*) Only that I love you. What is there disgraceful about that? It's beautiful!

SHE. It's wrong.

HE. It's inevitable.

SHE. Why inevitable? Can't you talk with a girl in an orchard for half an hour without falling in love with her?

HE. Not if the girl is you.

SHE. But why especially *me*?

HE. I don't know. Love--is a mystery. I only know that I was destined to love you.

SHE. How can you be so sure?

HE. Because you have changed the world for me. It's as though I had been groping about in the dark, and then--sunrise! And there's a queer feeling here. (*He puts his hand on his heart.*) To tell the honest truth, there's a still queerer feeling in the pit of my stomach. It's a gone feeling, if you must know. And my knees are weak. I know now why men used to fall on their knees when they told a girl they loved her; it was because they couldn't stand up. And there's a feeling in my feet as though I were walking on air. And--

SHE. (*faintly*) That's enough!

HE. And I could die for you and be glad of the chance. It's perfectly absurd, but it's absolutely true. I've never spoken to you before, and heaven knows I may never get a chance to speak to you again, but I'd never forgive myself if I didn't say this to you now. I love you! love

you! love you! Now tell me I'm a fool. Tell me to go. Anything--I've said my say. . . . Why don't you speak?

SHE. I--I've nothing to say--except--except that I--well--(*almost inaudibly*) I feel some of those symptoms myself.

ME. (*triumphantly*) You love me!

SHE. I--don't know. Yes. Perhaps.

HE. Then kiss me!

SHE. (*doubtfully*) No. . . .

HE. Kiss me!

SHE. (*tormentedly*) Oh, what's the use?

HE. I don't know. I don't care. I only know that we love each other.

SHE. (*after a moment's hesitation, desperately*) I don't care, either! I do want to kiss you.

She does. . . . He is the first to awake from the ecstasy.

HE. It is wrong--

SHE. (*absently*) Is it?

HE. But, oh heaven! kiss me again! (*She does.*)

SHE. Darling!

HE. Do you suppose any one is likely to come this way?

SHE. No.

HE. (*speculatively*) Your husband is probably still in the portrait gallery....

SHE. My husband! (*Drawing away*) What do you mean? (*Thoroughly awake now*) You didn't think--? (*She jumps up and laughs convulsively.*) You thought poor old Tubby was my husband?

HE. (*staring up at her bewildered*) Why, isn't he your husband?

SHE. (*scornfully*) No!! He's my uncle!

HE. Your unc--

SHE. Yes, of course! (*Indignantly*) Do you suppose I would be married to a man that's fat and bald and forty years old?

HE. (*distressed*) I--I beg your pardon. I did think so.

SHE. Just because you saw me with him? How ridiculous!

HE. It was a silly mistake. But--the things you said! You spoke so--realistically--about marriage.

SHE. It was your marriage I was speaking about. (*With hasty compunction*) Oh, I beg your--

HE. My marriage! (*He rises.*) Good heavens! And to whom, pray, did you think I was married? (*A light dawning*) To Maria? Why, Maria is my aunt!

SHE. Yes--of course. How stupid of me.

HE. Let's get this straight. Are you married to *anybody*?

SHE. Certainly not. As if I would let myself be made love to, if I were a married woman!

HE. Now don't put on airs. You did something quite as improper. You made love to a married man.

SHE. I didn't.

HE. It's the same thing. You thought I was married.

SHE. But you aren't.

HE. No. I'm not married. And--and--*you're* not married. (*The logic of the situation striking him all of a sudden*) In fact--! *He pauses, rather alarmed.*

SHE. Yes?

HE. In fact--well--there's no reason in the world why we *shouldn't* make love to each other!

SHE. (*equally startled*) Why--that's so!

HE. Then--then--shall we?

SHE. (*sitting down and looking demurely at her toes*) Oh, not if you don't want to!

HE. (*adjusting himself to the situation*) Well--under the circumstances--I suppose I ought to begin by asking you to marry me.

.

SHE. (*languidly, with a provoking glance*) You don't seem very anxious to.

HE. (*feeling at a disadvantage*) It isn't that--but--well--

SHE. (*lightly*) Well what?

HE. Dash it all, I don't know your name!

SHE. (*looking at him with mild curiosity*) That didn't seem to stop you a while ago....

HE. (*doggedly*) Well, then--will you marry me?

SHE. (*promptly*) No.

HE. (*surprised*) No! Why do you say that?

SHE. (*coolly*) Why should I marry you? I know nothing about you. I've known you for less than an hour.

HE. (*sardonically*) That fact didn't seem to keep you from kissing me.

SHE. Besides--I don't like the way you go about it. If you'd propose the same way you made love to me, maybe I'd accept you.

HE. All right. (*Dropping on one knee before her*) Beloved! (*An awkward pause*) No, I can't do it. (*He gets up and distractedly dusts off his knees with his handkerchief.*) I'm very sorry.

SHE. (*with calm inquiry*) Perhaps it's because you don't love me any more?

HE. (*fretfully*) Of course I love you!

SHE. (*coldly*) But you don't want to marry me.... I see.

HE. Not at all! I do want to marry you. But--

SHE. Well?

HE. Marriage is a serious matter. Now don't take offense! I only meant that--well--(*He starts again.*) We *are* in love with each other, and that's the important thing. But, as you said, we don't know each other. I've no doubt that when we get acquainted we will like each other better still. But we've got to get acquainted first.

SHE. (*rising*) You're just like Tubby buying a house. You want to know all about it. Well! I warn you that you'll never know all about me. So you needn't try.

HE. (*apologetically*) It was *your* suggestion.

SHE. (*impatiently*) Oh, all right! Go ahead and cross-examine me if you like. I'll tell you to begin with that I'm perfectly healthy, and that there's no T. B., insanity, or Socialism in my family. What else do you want to know?

HE. (*hesitantly*) Why did you put in Socialism, along with insanity and T. B.?

SHE. Oh, just for fun. You aren't a Socialist, are you?

HE. Yes. (*Earnestly*) Do you know what Socialism is?

SHE. (*innocently*) It's the same thing as Anarchy, isn't it?

HE. (*gently*) No. At least not my kind. I believe in municipal ownership of street cars, and all that sort of thing. I'll give you some books to read.

SHE. Well, I never ride in street cars, so I don't care whether they're municipally owned or not. By the way, do you dance?

HE. No.

SHE. You must learn right away. I can't bother to teach you myself, but I know where you can get private lessons and become really good in a month. It is stupid not to be able to dance.

HE. (*as if he had tasted quinine*) I can see myself doing the tango! Grr!

SHE. The tango went out long ago, my dear.

HE. (*with great decision*) Well--I *won't* learn to dance. You might as well know that to begin with.

SHE. And I won't read your old books on Socialism. You might as well know that to begin with!

HE. Come, come! This will never do. You see, my dear, it's simply that I *can't* dance, and there's no use for me to try to learn.

SHE. Anybody can learn. I've made expert dancers out of the awkwardest men!

HE. But, you see, I've no inclination toward dancing. It's out of my world.

SHE. And I've no inclination toward municipal ownership. *It's out of my world!*

HE. It ought not to be out of the world of any intelligent person.

SHE. (*turning her back on him*) All right--if you want to call me stupid!

HE. (*turning and looking away meditatively*) It appears that we have very few tastes in common.

SHE. (*tapping her foot*) So it seems.

HE. If we married we might be happy for a month--

SHE. Perhaps.

They remain with their backs to each other.

HE. And then--the old story. Quarrels. . . .

SHE. I never could bear quarrels. . . .

HE. An unhappy marriage. . . .

SHE. (*realizing it*) Oh!

HE. (*hopelessly turning toward her*) I can't marry you.

SHE. (*recovering quickly and facing him with a smile*) Nobody asked you, sir!

HE. (*with a gesture of finality*) Well--there seems to be no more to say.

SHE. (*sweetly*) Except good-bye.

HE. (*firmly*) Good-by, then.

He holds out his hand.

SHE. (*taking it*) Good-bye!

HE. (*taking her other hand--after a pause, helplessly*) Good-bye!

SHE. (*drowning in his eyes*) Good-bye!

They cling to each other, and are presently lost in a passionate embrace. He breaks loose and stamps away, then turns to her.

HE. Damn it all, we *do* love each other!

SHE. (*wiping her eyes*) What a pity that is the only taste we have in common!

HE. Do you suppose that is enough?

SHE. I wish it were!

HE. A month of happiness--

SHE. Yes!

HE. And then--wretchedness,

SHE. No--never!

HE. We mustn't do it.

SHE. I suppose not.

HE. Come, let us control ourselves.

SHE. Yes, let's (*They take hands again.*)

HE. (*with an effort*) I wish you happiness. I--I'll go to Europe for a year. Try to forget me.

SHE. I shall be married when you get back--perhaps.

HE. I hope it's somebody that's not bald and fat and forty. Otherwise--
!

SHE. And you--for goodness sake! marry a girl that's very young and very, very pretty. That will help.

HE. We mustn't prolong this. If we stay together another minute--

SHE. Then go!

HE. I can't go!

SHE. You must, darling! You must!

HE. Oh, if somebody would only come along!

They are leaning toward each other, dizzy upon the brink of another kiss, when somebody does come--a short, mild-looking man in a derby hat. There is an odd gleam in his eyes.

THE INTRUDER. *(startled)* Excuse me!

They turn and stare at him, but their hands cling fast to each other.

SHE. *(faintly)* The Agent!

THE AGENT. *(in despairing accents)* Too late! Too late!

THE YOUNG MAN. No! Just in time!

THE AGENT. Too late, I say! I will go.

He turns away.

THE YOUNG MAN. No! Stay!

THE AGENT. What's the use? It has already begun. What good can I do now?

THE YOUNG MAN. I'll show you what good you can do now. Come here! (*The Agent approaches.*) Can you unloose my hands from those of this young woman?

THE YOUNG WOMAN. (*haughtily, releasing herself and walking away*) You needn't trouble! I can do it myself.

THE YOUNG MAN. Thank you. It was utterly beyond my power. (*To the Agent*)--Will you kindly take hold of me and move me over there? (*The Agent propels him away from the girl.*) Thank you. At this distance I can perhaps say farewell in a seemly and innocuous manner.

THE AGENT. Young man, you will not say farewell to that young lady for ten days--and perhaps never!

THE YOUNG WOMAN. What!

THE AGENT. They have arranged it all.

THE YOUNG MAN. *Who* have arranged *what*?

THE AGENT. Your aunt, Miss Brooke--and (*to the young woman*) your uncle, Mr. Egerton--

The young people turn and stare at each other in amazement.

THE YOUNG MAN. Egerton! Are you Helen Egerton?

HELEN. And are you George Brooke?

THE AGENT. Your aunt and uncle have just discovered each other up at the house, and they have arranged for you all to take dinner together tonight, and then go to a ten-day house-party at Mr. Egerton's place on Long Island. (*Grimly*) The reason of all this will be plain to you. They want you two to get married.

GEORGE. Then we're done for! We'll have to get married now whether we want to or not!

HELEN. What! Just to please *them*? I shan't do it!

GEORGE. (*gloomily*) You don't know my Aunt Maria.

HELEN. And Tubby will try to bully me, I suppose. But I won't do it--no matter what he says!

THE AGENT. Pardon what may seem an impertinence, Miss; but is it really true that you don't want to marry this young man?

HELEN. (*flaming*) I suppose because you saw me in his arms--! Oh, I want to, all right, but--

THE AGENT. (*mildly*) Then what seems to be the trouble?

HELEN. I--oh, you explain to him, George.

She goes to the bench and sits down.

GEORGE. Well, it's this way. As you may have deduced from what you saw, we are madly in love with each other--

HELEN. (*from the bench*) But I'm not madly in love with municipal ownership. That's the chief difficulty.

GEORGE. No, the chief difficulty is that I refuse to entertain even a platonic affection for the tango.

HELEN. (*irritably*) I told you the tango had gone out long ago!

GEORGE. Well, then, the maxixe.

HELEN. Stupid!

GEORGE. And there you have it! No doubt it seems ridiculous to you.

THE AGENT. (*gravely*) Not at all, my boy. I've known marriage to go to smash on far less than that. When you come to think of it, a taste for dancing and a taste for municipal ownership stand at the two ends of the earth away from each other. They represent two different ways of taking life. And if two people who live in the same house can't agree on those two things, they'd disagree on a hundred things that came up every day. And what's the use for two different kinds of beings to try to live together? It doesn't work, no matter how much, love there is between them.

GEORGE. (*rushing up to him in surprise and gratification, and shaking his hand warmly*) Then you're on our side! You'll help us not to get married!

THE AGENT. Your aunt is very set on it--and your uncle, too, Miss!

HELEN. We must find some way to get out of it, or they'll have us cooped up together in that house before we know it. (*Rising and coming over to the Agent*) Can't you think up some scheme?

THE AGENT. Perhaps I can, and perhaps I can't. I'm a bachelor myself, Miss, and that means that I've thought up many a scheme to get out of marriage myself.

HELEN. (*outraged*) You old scoundrel!

THE AGENT. Oh, it's not so bad as you may think, Miss. I've always gone through the marriage ceremony to please them. But that's not what I call marriage.

GEORGE. Then what *do* you call marriage?

HELEN. Yes, I'd like to know!

THE AGENT. Marriage, my young friends, is an iniquitous arrangement devised by the Devil himself for driving all the love out of the hearts of lovers. They start out as much in love with each other as you two are today, and they end by being as sick of the sight of each other as you two will be five years hence if I don't find a way of saving you alive out of the Devil's own trap. It's not lack of love that's

the trouble with marriage--it's marriage itself. And when I say marriage, I don't mean promising to love, honour, and obey, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health till death do you part--that's only human nature to wish and to attempt. And it might be done if it weren't for the iniquitous arrangement of marriage.

GEORGE. (*puzzled*) But what is the iniquitous arrangement?

THE AGENT. Ah, that's the trouble! If I tell you, you won't believe me. You'll go ahead and try it out, and find out what all the unhappy ones have found out before you. Listen to me, my children. Did you ever go on a picnic? (*He looks from one to the other--they stand astonished and silent.*) Of course you have. Every one has. There is an instinct in us which makes us go back to the ways of our savage ancestors--to gather about a fire in the forest, to cook meat on a pointed stick, and eat it with our fingers. But how many books would you write, young man, if you had to go back to the campfire every day for your lunch? And how many new dances would *you* invent if you lived eternally in the picnic stage of civilization? No! the picnic is incompatible with everyday living. As incompatible as marriage.

GEORGE. But--

HELEN. But--

THE AGENT. Marriage is the nest-building instinct, turned by the Devil himself into an institution to hold the human soul in chains. The whole story of marriage is told in the old riddle: "Why do birds in their nests agree? Because if they don't, they'll fall out." That's it. Marriage is a nest so small that there is no room in it for disagreement. Now it may be all right for birds to agree, but human beings are not built that way. They disagree, and home becomes a little hell. Or else they do agree, at the expense of the soul's freedom stifled in one or both.

HELEN. Yes, but tell me--

GEORGE. Ssh!

THE AGENT. Yet there *is* the nest-building instinct. You feel it, both of you. If you don't now, you will as soon as you are married. If you are fools, you will try to live all your lives in a love-nest; and you will imprison your souls within it, and the Devil will laugh.

HELEN. (*to George*) I am beginning to be afraid of him.

GEORGE. So am I.

THE AGENT. If you are wise, you will build yourselves a little nest secretly in the woods, away from civilization, and you will run away together to that nest whenever you are in the mood. A nest so small that it will hold only two beings and one thought--the thought of love. And then you will come back refreshed to civilization, where every soul is different from every other soul--you will let each other alone, forget each other, and do your own work in peace. Do you understand?

HELEN. He means we should occupy separate sides of the house, I think. Or else that we should live apart and only see each other on week-ends. I'm not sure which.

THE AGENT. (*passionately*) I mean that you should not stifle love with civilization, nor encumber civilization with love. What have they to do with each other? You think you want a fellow student of economics. You are wrong. *You* think you want a dancing partner. You are mistaken. You want a revelation of the glory of the universe.

HELEN. (*to George, confidentially*) It's blithering nonsense, of course. But it *was* something like that--a while ago.

GEORGE. (*bewilderedly*) Yes; when we knew it was our first kiss and thought it was to be our last.

THE AGENT. (*fiercely*) A kiss is always the first kiss and the last--or it is nothing.

HELEN. (*conclusively*) He's quite mad.

GEORGE. Absolutely.

THE AGENT. Mad? Of course I am mad. But--

He turns suddenly, and subsides as a man in a guard's uniform enters.

THE GUARD. Ah, here you are! Thought you'd given us the slip, did you? (*To the others*) Escaped from the Asylum, he did, a week ago, and got a job here. We've been huntin' him high and low. Come along now!

GEORGE. (*recovering with difficulty the power of speech*) What-- what's the matter with him?

THE GUARD. Matter with him? He went crazy, he did, readin' the works of Bernard Shaw. And if he wasn't in the insane asylum he'd be in jail. He's a bigamist, he is. He married fourteen women. But none of 'em would go on the witness stand against him. Said he was an ideal husband, they did. Fourteen of 'em! But otherwise he's perfectly harmless.

THE AGENT. (*pleasantly*) Perfectly harmless! Yes, perfectly harmless!

He is led out.

HELEN. That explains it all!

GEORGE. Yes--and yet I feel there was something in what he was saying.

HELEN. Well--are we going to get married or not? We've got to decide that before we face my uncle and your aunt.

GEORGE. Of course we'll get married. You have your work and I mine, and--

HELEN. Well, if we do, then you can't have that sunny south room for a study. I want it for the nursery.

GEORGE. The nursery!

HELEN. Yes; babies, you know!

GEORGE. Good heavens!