

**Annie Wood (1847-1933) and Frank Besant  
(1840-1917), married 1867, legally separated 1873**



Annie Wood Besant

The story of the engagement and marriage of Annie Wood and Frank Besant resembles that of Dorothea Brooke and Mr. Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, but has a much more satisfying ending. Dorothea had to be rescued from her horrible marriage by the well-timed death of her husband, and ended up living a life in which “her full nature ... spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth . . . liv[ing] faithfully a hidden life, and rest[ing] in an unvisited tomb.” Annie Besant, by contrast, after six years of unsuccessful marriage, got a legal separation from her husband and embarked on a single life, described below, which was quite successful, extraordinary, and extremely visible.<sup>1</sup>

When Annie Wood met Frank Besant, in Easter 1866, she was nineteen, well educated, rather poor, and intensely religious (Protestant).<sup>2</sup> Her father died when she was five and she was extremely close to her mother. Frank Besant had graduated Cambridge and had been ordained a priest. He had no living at the time and was working as a schoolmaster.

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<sup>1</sup>The Besants’ separation occurred a year after the publication of *Middlemarch*. However the novel is set forty years earlier, and, in fairness to Dorothea, it seems safe to say that it would have been difficult or impossible for her, in 1832, to embark on a career at all comparable to the one that Annie Besant pursued after 1873.

<sup>2</sup>She was educated during her teens, and effectively adopted, by Ellen Marryat, a wealthy sister of the novelist Captain Marryat, apparently for free, because Miss Marryat took a liking to her when they met. Miss Marryat’s education included a trip to Europe. Her father left no money when he died, so her mother ran a boarding house to support the family.

Their courtship is described in the passage below. They had two children, but the marriage was difficult, partly because of incompatibility of character, but primarily because Annie lost her faith. She started to write to make money. In 1873 the two were legally separated. I have not made any attempt to find out what happened to Frank afterward.

Annie soon became deeply engaged in a variety of progressive causes: atheism, socialism, freedom of expression, feminism, birth control and home rule for Ireland and India. She gave public lectures and wrote and published articles and books. In 1877 she and her colleague were arrested and tried for publishing a book advocating birth control; they were found guilty but the verdict was overturned on a technicality. She was a member of the Fabian Society from 1885 to 1890. In 1888 she got elected to the London School Board, one of the very few governmental offices then open to women. She involved herself in a docker's strike. She worked with Irish Home Rule activists.

In 1889 she converted to Theosophy and soon became one of the leader of the movement. (Her Wikipedia biography is, perhaps unfairly, categorized under "Theosophy".) She also became involved in Freemasonry.

She moved to India and became very active in the Indian Home Rule movement. She joined the Indian National Congress. In 1916 she and a colleague launched the All India Home Rule League. In June 1917 the British government arrested her for her political activities. In September 1917 she was released, welcomed by crowds all over India. She became President of the Indian National Congress for a year. Gandhi and Nehru spoke in praise of her activities. She died in 1933.

From *Annie Besant: An Autobiography*.

My grandfather's house was near at hand, in Albert Square, and a favorite aunt and myself devoted ourselves a good deal to this little church, as enthusiastic girls and women will. At Easter we decorated it with spring flowers, with dewy princesses and fragrant violets, and with the yellow bells of the wild daffodil, to the huge delight of the poor who crowded in, and of the little London children who had, many of them, never seen a flower. Here I met the Rev. Frank Besant, a young Cambridge man, who had just taken orders, and was serving the little mission church as deacon; strange that at the same time I should meet the man I was to marry, and the doubts which were to break the marriage tie.

Besant goes on to describe how, as a devotional exercise for Holy Week, she assembled a table (which she reproduces in full in her autobiography) of the accounts of the Passion of Christ in the four Gospels, and was shocked to discover that there were significant discrepancies between them. The discovery very seriously disturbed her, and it took a major mental effort on her part to, temporarily, recover her previous faith in the inerrancy of Scripture.

It can then be imagined with what a stab of pain this first doubt struck me, and with what haste I smothered it up, buried it, and smoothed the turf over its grave. *But it had been there*, and it left its mark.

The last year of my girlish freedom was drawing to its close; how shall I hope to make commonsense readers understand how I became betrothed maiden ere yet nineteen, girl-wife when twenty years had struck. Looking back over twenty-five years, I feel a profound pity for the girl standing at that critical point of life, so utterly, hopelessly ignorant of all that marriage meant, so filled with impossible dreams, so unfitted for the *rôle* of wife. As I have said, my day-dreams held little place for love partly from the absence of love novels from my reading, partly from the mystic fancies that twined themselves round the figure of the Christ. Catholic books of devotion — English or Roman, it matters not, for to a large extent they are translations of the same hymns and prayers — are exceedingly glowing in their language, and the dawning feelings of womanhood unconsciously lend to them a passionate fervour. I longed to spend my time in worshipping Jesus, and was, as far as my inner life was concerned, absorbed in that passionate love of “the Saviour” which, among emotional Catholics, really is the human passion of love transferred to an ideal — for women to Jesus, for men to the Virgin Mary. In order to show that I am not here exaggerating, I subjoin a few of the prayers in which I found daily delight, and I do this in order to show how an emotional girl may be attracted by these so-called devotional exercises:

“O crucified love, raise in me fresh ardours of love and consolation, that it may henceforth be the greatest torment I can endure ever to offend Thee; that it may be my greatest delight to please Thee.”

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All girls have in them the germ of passion, and the line of its development depends on the character brought into the world, and the surrounding influences of education. I had but two ideals in my childhood and youth, round whom twined these budding tendrils of passion; they were my mother and the Christ. I know that this may seem strange, but I am trying to state things as they were in this life-story, and not give mere conventionalisms, and so it was. I had men friends, but no lovers — at least, to my knowledge, for I have since heard that my mother received two or three offers of marriage for me but declined them on account of my youth and my childishness — friends with whom I liked to talk, because they knew more than I did; but they had no place in my day-dreams. These were more and more filled with the one Ideal Man, and my hopes turned towards the life of the Sister of Mercy, who ever worships the Christ, and devotes her life to the service of His poor. I knew my dear mother would set herself against this idea, but it nestled warm at my heart, for ever that idea of escaping from the humdrum of ordinary life by some complete sacrifice lured me onwards with its overmastering fascination.

Now one unlucky result of this view of religion is the idealisation of the clergyman,

the special messenger and chosen servant of the Lord. Far more lofty than any title bestowed by earthly monarch is that patent of nobility straight from the hand of the “King of kings” that seems to give to the mortal something of the authority of the immortal . . . Viewed in this way, the position of the priest’s wife seems second only to that of the nun, and has, therefore a wonderful attractiveness . . .

That summer of 1866 saw me engaged to the young clergyman I had met at the mission church in the spring, our knowledge of each other being an almost negligible quantity. We were thrown together for a week, the only two young ones in a small party of holiday makers, and in our walks, rides, and drives we were naturally companions; an hour or two before he left he asked me to marry him, taking my consent for granted as I had allowed him full companionship — a perfectly fair assumption with girls accustomed to look on all men as possible husbands, but wholly mistaken as regarded myself, whose thoughts were in quite other directions. Startled, and my sensitive pride touched by what seemed to my strict views an assumption that I had been flirting, I hesitated, did not follow my first impulse of refusal, but took refuge in silence; my suitor had to catch his train, and bound me over to silence till he could himself speak to my mother, urging authoritatively that it would be dishonorable of me to break his confidence, and left me — the most upset and distressed little person on the Sussex coast. The fortnight that followed was the first unhappy one of my life, for I had a secret from my mother, a secret which I passionately longed to tell her, but dared not speak at the risk of doing a dishonorable thing. On meeting my suitor on our return to town I positively refused to keep silence any longer, and then out of sheer weakness and fear of inflicting pain I drifted into an engagement with a man I did not pretend to love. “Drifted” is the right word, for two or three months passed, on the ground that I was so much of a child, before my mother would consent to a definite engagement; my dislike of the thought of marriage faded before the idea of becoming the wife of a priest, working ever in the Church and among the poor. I had no outlet for my growing desire for usefulness in my happy and peaceful home-life where all religious enthusiasm was regarded as unbalanced and unbecoming; all that was deepest and truest in my nature chafed against my easy, useless days, longed for work, yearned to devote itself, as I had read women saints had done, to the service of the Church and of the poor, to the battling against sin and misery — what empty names sin and misery then were to me! “You will have more opportunities for doing good as a clergyman’s wife than as anything else,” was one of the pleas urged on my reluctance.

In the autumn I was definitely betrothed, and I married fourteen months later. Once, in the interval, I tried to break the engagement, but on my broaching the subject to my mother, all her pride rose up in revolt. Would I, her daughter, break my word, would I dishonour myself by jilting a man I had pledged myself to marry? She could be stern where honour was involved, that sweet mother of mine, and I yielded to her wish as I had been ever wont to do, for a look or a word from her had ever been my law, save where religion was concerned. So I married in the winter of

1867 with no more idea of the marriage relation than if I had been four years old instead of twenty.