

MEN, WOMEN AND PRISONS

Mr. Sinclair Lewis's New Novel

By
Edgar Holt

Ann Vickers.

By Sinclair Lewis. 7s. 6d. (Jonathan Cape.)

The appearance of "Ann Vickers" shows that Mr. Sinclair Lewis has returned to his main literary task—the task of giving a clear and vivid account of contemporary American civilisation. In "Babbitt," "Main Street," "Martin Arrowsmith" and "Elmer Gantry" he depicted



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a number of aspects of that civilisation, but in "Dodsworth" he seemed to have changed his manner. He was content to portray two individual Americans, instead of examining, in his usual comprehensive way, a complete segment of American life. "Dodsworth" was published in 1929, and Mr. Lewis has waited four years before following it up with another novel. In writing "Ann Vickers" he has gone back to his earlier manner, and his story achieves the double result of revealing how Ann Vickers "found herself," and giving a full survey of the life of women prisoners in the United States and the various aspects of prison reform.

It can be seen at once that "Ann Vickers" is not a novel for the idle, unthinking hour. "It is, above all, to make you *see*," said Joseph Conrad, thus defining the aim of one school of novelists. "It is, above all, to make you *think*," Mr. Lewis might retort, and his new novel should inspire some of his fellow-Americans to think more deeply about one part of their national life. But the appeal of the book is not only to his fellow-countrymen, and not only to those who are already interested in prison reform. Mr. Lewis, though undoubtedly a propagandist, is also a brilliant story-teller, who can illustrate his theories by the actions of living and loving human beings; and even those who consider that prison reform is an impossible subject for a novel will be attracted and stirred by the varying fortunes of Ann Vickers, and will thus be forced (perhaps unwillingly) to think about some of the problems with which Ann is confronted. Mr. Lewis's power as a novelist lies in his ability to provoke the reader to reflective thought.

His new novel is the story of a social reformer who tries, to the best of her ability, to "get things done." In the

opening chapters, which are the least satisfactory part of the book, we are shown the early influences which mould the character of Ann Vickers, the daughter of an Illinois school superintendent. When the introductory chapters are over and Ann has graduated at Point Royal College, the story begins to gather speed and momentum, and we follow Ann through the excitements of suffragist work and imprisonment for assaulting the police, social settlement work and an unsatisfactory love-affair, and her first appointment on the staff of a prison.

It is with her appointment as "educational director and chief clerk" at Copperhead Gap Penitentiary, which is described as one of the worst prisons in the United States, that the story enters its more vigorously propagandist phase, and the horrors of Copperhead Gap, where unhealthy conditions, solitary confinement in dark cells, overcrowding and lashing are features of the Women's Division, seem almost incredible in a civilised country. But they must be believed, for Mr. Lewis claims to have given "an entirely accurate account" of the prisons he writes of, and few are likely to question his general conclusions about the effects of such a prison as Copperhead Gap:

"It is not true that every person who came as a first offender to Copperhead Gap, with only amateurish notions of crime, learned in that university of vice about new and slicker crimes, learned the delights of drugs and of prostitution, learned that it was his duty to get even with society by being more vicious next time. Not every one. A few of them were too numbed and frightened to learn anything. But it is true that not one single person failed to go out of Copperhead Gap more sickly of body and more resentful for it, and more capable of spreading disease among the Decent Citizens who had been breeding them to their own ruin."

Ann's efforts to expose Copperhead Gap in the daily press are unsuccessful, for the editors tell her that prison conditions are "not news"; but she is able to further the cause of prison reform by becoming superintendent of the Stuyvesant Industrial Home for Women, "the most modern prison in New York," and there putting into action the theories in which she believes. And in this position she is able to recapture her emotional life, to marry a man and fall in love with another, and finally to undergo the supreme irony of waiting for her lover to be released from prison.

It is perhaps inevitable that any review of "Ann Vickers" should dwell on the sociological aspect more than on the individual characters of the story, but it should not be imagined that Mr. Lewis has allowed his enthusiasm for prison reform to overshadow his interest in human character. Ann Vickers is one of those ideal Americans whom he loves to depict—keen, eager and humanitarian, but still possessing a sense of humour and many of the frailties of ordinary men and women; and such characters as the tedious Russell Spaulding, Ann's first husband; Malvina Wormser, the brilliant woman doctor; the repellent Belle Herringdean and the overwhelming Judge Barney Dolphin are only a few of those who will take their place in Mr. Lewis's gallery of contemporary American portraits. They are drawn as Mr. Lewis sees them, and if some of the portraits are too frank for everyone's liking, he would doubtless reply that he is only concerned with giving a true picture of what he sees in the world about him.

The book is not flawless, for the opening chapters move too slowly, and say nothing which Mr. Lewis and other writers have not already said; but the conventional nature of the opening is fully atoned for by the rest of the novel. It is his skill in blending such ardent propaganda for prison reform with a series of penetrating studies of men and women that makes "Ann Vickers" one of the most important and fascinating novels that Mr. Lewis has written.

PALACES, PARABLES AND POLITICS

Diversions of an Indian Political.

By Lieut.-Colonel R. L. Kennion, C.I.E. 10s. 6d.
(Blackwood.)

The Palace of Intrigue.

By A. E. R. Craig. 7s. 6d. (Harmsworth.)

The Golden Boat.

By Rabindranath Tagore. Translated by Bhabani
Bhattacharya. 4s. 6d. (Allen & Unwin.)

Lieut.-Colonel Kennion, from his own admission, is one of the old brigade waiting for "the halcyon days that began with the Queen's proclamation" and "ended when Mr. Montagu became Secretary of State for India." Equally mournful is his prognostication—"ahead lies troubled water." He explains that "these sketches, with one exception, do not touch on such grave issues," but repeatedly he returns to the subject of his profession, and in that rôle he betrays such familiar opinions as that he "believes in the increasing participation of Indians in the Government. But Home Rule even as distant goal? Not till changes have taken place, of which at present there are no signs." He is more original in the description of his diversions, though an outsider may not quite share the gusto with which he discusses "the question of Indian and British snipe-shooting." And in his descriptions of the Lehs he is pleasantly reminiscent of Sir Hugh Clifford: "Though the face of Nature is forbidding, no one who has travelled in Ladak but has a good word to say for the people, for who does not like kindly, smiling faces, even if the owners be small and ugly, wear pigtailed and have never seen a bath."

It is good to be wafted from "troubled waters" to Mrs. Craig's "Palace of Intrigue," though on the opening page we are far from the Palace and far from any intrigues. It is in Villa Villefranche, in the South of France, that we are introduced to Begum Firooze—"no bud from a pruned rose tree in the garden of dull respectability, but a petal from the free blooming flower of love." She meets us calmly stitching "seed pearls on to a satin jacket." But we are presently to know that she is carrying within her the seed of intrigues to follow. The son and heir to the Rajah she desired so much was born "stone-deaf, epileptic and mentally deficient," but fortunately the Rajah, who was holidaying in Russia at the time, knew not of these punishments of Allah nor of the death of the baby a few weeks after birth. How Begum Firooze steals the Hon. Patrick Malise Tregavin Straithaig—from his perambulator of course—to be substituted for her own dead child, how she succeeds in her *coup*, and how the Hon. Patrick grows up in an Indian court as Iqbal, but puts an end to Begum Firooze's intrigues by marrying the Celtic Fiona—all this makes an exciting novel.

If the name of the translator of "The Golden Boat" had been anything but Indian, irrespective of whether the translation had been from Eskimo or Ukrainian, I would have called "The Golden Boat" an unseaworthy craft. But on second thought Mr. Bhattacharya aroused my sympathy. Here, I said to myself, is a young Bengali evidently striving to be a writer in English. He has the defects of the beginner and the foreigner handling English which he can shed only as he is accepted on his own worth. But he has been persuaded to hoist the name of Tagore and sail under his flag. Further Mr. Bhattacharya has been imprudent enough to translate a parable that Tagore himself translated and published under the title, "The Child." I would suggest that Mr. Bhattacharya should, rather than seek the dubious distinction of an august company in a golden boat, ply his own craft.

J. VIJAYA-TUNGA.

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