

Fighting Success

ARROWSMITH. By SINCLAIR LEWIS. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1925. \$2.

Reviewed by HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

WITH "Arrowsmith" Sinclair Lewis justifies and achieves his ambition to become a national novelist. Manifest destiny has been the watchword of this nation, and Success the chief objective of its inhabitants. In two remarkable stories, "Main Street" and "Babbitt," Mr. Lewis has satirically pursued in the characters of his heroes common ideals of American success and proved them failure. Main Street, as Lewis sees it, is failure, and so is Carol Kennicott; Zenith is failure—spiritually and emotionally failure—and so is the rather pathetic Babbitt. And now Lewis drives home his moral by choosing for protagonist a very human scientist congenitally opposed to success as America sees success, a scientist meshed and intermeshed in a social organization made to achieve success, fighting it, fought by it, triumphing by seizing in the midst of an American success his ideal, which the community calls failure.

"Arrowsmith" is by no means the moral document which this outline suggests. It is a "hard-boiled" story of a "hard-boiled" youth, whose tough idealism is a thousand miles and a century away from the transcendental philosophy of Emerson's "Goodbye, proud world, I'm going home." Arrowsmith is rough, and rather unmoral, and almost illiterate except in his own science, and excessively bad-mannered, and entirely unsympathetic, so that the reader shares the surprise of her friends when a sophisticated and very rich widow marries him toward the end of the story. He differs from the other rough-necks in the medical school and the slovenly "docs" of the country towns where he practises only in this, that an old German scientist, Gottlieb, as cranky as Arrowsmith, has ignited in him the spark of research, and kindled a pilot flame which burns irrepressibly and flares up again and again when the "bunk" of easy money, of charlatan medical politics, of publicity, seems to have overlaid the essential Arrowsmith. He wants to find what things are, to get at the truth about "phages," epidemics, immunizations; even the sacrifice of "controls" on his experiment in order to save the population of a West Indian island from bubonic plague seems a sin against his destiny. The human race interests him only mildly; the truth is more important than their immediate welfare, more important perhaps than the race.



I give an impression of a philosophical book, which is not my intention, for in truth there are few depths of philosophy in a Lewis novel. "Arrowsmith" is a simon pure example of the realistic, biographical novel, crowded with portraits, brilliantly photographed, of types fresh in American fiction. It is, furthermore, satire, and biting satire of the medical profession, the better satire because there is evident mastery of what modern medicine has accomplished and may do. As with "Main Street," which this book resembles much more closely than it does "Babbitt," a state of mind is the center of the storm area. In "Main Street," it was the miasma of the small town; in "Arrowsmith" it is the stifling of science and all search for truth everywhere in a country mad for success. Another man might have worked out the theme of this story with religion as its heart and Christ returned as the protagonist.

The realism of "Arrowsmith" is a return to the realism of "Main Street." In the character of Babbitt, Sinclair Lewis, as it is now clear in perspective, transcended his own limitations and created one of the great type figures of modern literature, a man as human as any fellow mortal and yet significant for American social history. There is no such figure in "Arrowsmith" but instead a gallery of studies of the period, touched with caricature, almost brutal in their naturalism: "Clif," the loud-mouthed salesman, Dr. Gottlieb, the single-minded scholar, Pickenbaugh, who makes politics out of public health, Sondelius, the romanticist of science, Capitola, who founds research laboratories for the same reason that she buys pearl necklaces, Holabird, the Social scientist. It is a remarkable selection from the American scene, and need not be sniffed at by the æsthetic because of its Hogarthian exaggeration, and literal reality of detail. This may not be great art, but it is an invaluable contribution to our knowledge of ourselves and our times; and

whatever may be the future of "Arrowsmith" in *belles lettres*, its place in quotation and reference in all histories of our epoch is clearly secure. Furthermore, among these etched caricatures done with such clear and final lines, is one portrait that is much more than satiric caricature. Leora, the first wife of Martin Arrowsmith, who trots along with him like a wise little dog, tactful and plucky and adaptable and humorous even over her own failure ever to be smart or brilliant, Leora is the realist's version of what the American sentimentalist means by "a good pal." Unlike every other person in the crowded story, she lifts above its satire as not being in it for any necessary satiric reason except that she exists so vividly in the imagination of the novelist that he must give her life and place. She is possessive without being predatory, she convinces absolutely like one of Jane Austen's characters without any apparent effort on the part of the novelist to make her convincing. If "Arrowsmith" were not armored and munitioned and speeded for a battleship of satire she would seem more important than all the rest of the crew. Leora, and Babbitt in his later chapters, indicate that when Mr. Lewis grows weary of exposing the world he may, if he will, turn from brilliant social science imaginatively portrayed to pure fiction.

It makes very little difference to me as a reader whether he does or not, and most of the criticisms of Lewis's untempered realism seem to me irrelevant. He is doing a good job where he is. "Arrowsmith" is a better book than "Main Street," better written and much better conducted. If it is not so good a novel as "Babbitt," its satire is at least as important and perhaps better documented. Browning was perhaps rash in asserting that all service ranks the same with God, but it is certainly true that Lewis as a social satirist is eminently serviceable, and that we can well afford to let the future take care of his permanent literary values.



His defects are not literary defects so much as qualities of his particular service. It is true that "nice" people (and there are "nice" people who are neither smug nor stupid nor obscurantist) do not get into his stories. He does not register "nice" people; they do not interest him; and if he were mirroring society instead of satirizing it this would be a prime error. It prevents him obviously from being a Shakespeare, or even a Thackeray, but why should he be either? Stendhal, also, was insensitive to "nice" people. Swift was not, which made him a *rara avis* among satirists. It is time to stop prating of the limitations of Lewis, and on the basis of three of the most remarkable books of our generation give him credit for what with all his faults of narrow vision, insensitiveness to much but not all beauty, obsession with detail, lack of spirituality, and negative philosophy, he undoubtedly is, one of the most brilliant and most serviceable students of society in our times. Wells is his master, but as a social novelist he has left Wells behind him, and if posterity forgets him it will not be for any lack of excellence in his work but because of the impermanence of the category in which he has chosen to labor. The best text books die when their service is rendered. Leora in "Arrowsmith" belongs to a more enduring form of literature than the gallery of illustrations of our times that accompany her.

"Arrowsmith" is an intensely American novel. The hero is scarcely conscious of another continent except as he touches its spirit in pure science. In spite of his lifelong fight against success, he remains as objective as a guinea pig and as strenuous as a subway. From the first page to the very last, when Martin has tasted of complete worldly success and thrown it all over for happiness in work, there is never any question except as to what he shall do. Action is the key to every chapter, every incident. "What shall I do?" is written in letters of fire on his brain. What he is, what life is, what he should think, what feel—these are all irrelevant to the story because in his hustling existence there is never any time for them. A Quaker of the seventeenth century or an aristocrat of the eighteenth would marvel at this book, and the society it depicts. Even Gottlieb wonders whether humanity is worth his science. In truth, the philosophy of America as "Arrowsmith" gives it is perhaps more deeply ironical than the author intended. There is essentially no greater clarity of mind in those who like Martin and Gottlieb despise success than in the "Holy Wren" and the cynical Angus who yearn for it. The idealists have no plan except to be always working at their passion. They are just as strenuous, just

as irresponsible, just as disregarding of any end except their own pleasure. The difference is solely that Lewis's heroes work at something greater than themselves, while his villains serve their baser instincts. To a saint, or an ascetic, or even to a civilized European all might seem to be mad though with a difference in the morale of their madness.

I suppose that Lewis has been unfair to the medical profession although he has certainly made its heroes stand out with a dignity which no one in "Babbitt" or "Main Street" achieved. I fancy that we who read the book will be for a while unduly suspicious of our physicians. All satires exaggerate—they have to in order to accomplish a satiric effect. Mr. Lewis has called in a scientific man as collaborator so as to direct his pen in unfamiliar ways and insure against too much injustice. But the injustice, if it exists, is not important. Was Dickens just? Was Main Street just? And yet Main Street existed in every small town even if it was never the whole of it. And Babbitt had a thousand prototypes, even if they were more than Babbitt. Main Street was purged and Babbitt lanced by those pungent volumes, though neither was cured, and we can accept their plea of injustice with equanimity, since more good was done than harm. So it will be with "Arrowsmith."

A harsh book, a hard book, in spite of Leora, an illuminating book in a good sense, since it touches upon a universal theme while airing a particular malady, a well written and intensely interesting book in spite of its medical jargon; not a great novel, I suppose, because Lewis knows little of the subtler springs of human nature, and cares less, preferring to grasp the type and let the individual go; and yet a shrewder and more comprehensive satire of American society in the prosperous phase of its materialistic era than anyone else now practising in English is capable of—this much can be said without exaggeration of Arrowsmith.**

As Youth Is

SOUNDINGS. By A. HAMILTON GIBBS. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1925. \$2.

Reviewed by GRANT OVERTON

THE quality of "Soundings," by A. Hamilton Gibbs, is easily such as to make it one of the important novels of the year. Its theme is simple—a girl of fine nature and free development is frustrated in love and discovers her instinct for maternity. This is a common human experience and upon the terms and treatment depend the result, which may be anything from an ephemeral sensation to a classic idyl by a Thomas Hardy.

Mr. Gibbs has made his Nancy Hawthorne the daughter of an R. A. living and working in an English village called Brimble. Jim Hawthorne is his daughter's admirable comrade. An experience at eighteen spurs Nancy to get out and see something of the world. She goes to Paris, lives in a studio, and chums with an American girl, Cornelia Evans. It is in Paris that she meets Cornelia's brother, Lloyd, and his chum from Oxford, Bob Whittaker. She falls in love with Bob.

This much may perhaps be told to suggest the terms of the story; and now for the treatment. Given such terms, it is the happiest imaginable and the most successful. This is a story of young people in the years just preceding the war, with one brief scene or two during the war and a coda laid just afterward. On such material all varieties of method have been tried in recent fiction. Cynicism, both bitter and fatigued; sentimentalism; efforts between the lyric and the epic, and even hysteria have not given an impression of perdurability. Mr. Gibbs, by a property that seems rather magical, approaches from the precise direction of youth itself; he is romantic in the moments when youth is romantic and over the same objects, that is, things, or children, or much older people. But in the paramount concern of young people, their interest in and relations with others of their age and kind, he is as direct, as unsentimental, as eager, honest, and frank as they were—and are, and always will be.

The result is absolutely refreshing. It seems rather inevitable that a novelist who is the younger brother of Philip (Hamilton) Gibbs and Cosmo Hamilton (Gibbs) should be forced into comparisons. If one were to use "Soundings" as the only measure, one would be forced, I think, to believe

*A letter upon the medical aspects of "Arrowsmith," by Dr. Richard Cabot, will be printed next week.

that Hamilton Gibbs's is the best talent of the three as a novelist. For Philip Gibbs has always been, and by all signs is likely to remain, a most indifferent novelist; his greatness lies in other directions. And beside the freshness and power of "Soundings," the novels of Cosmo Hamilton are literary shallows on which, here and there, have been erected moralistic breakwaters and lighthouses flashing the Ten Commandments.

Candor without offense and equally without preachment is, on the contrary, characteristic of "Soundings," from Nancy's moment with Curly on the hill, through her question about Bob: "Is it Bob—or just man?" and on to that hour when, being twenty-seven, she says to her father: "Don't you think that any girl ought to be able to admit to herself, perfectly frankly, that one day she would like a child?"

All that candor requires is achieved with an equal emotion, directness, and beauty in regard to Bob, whose chum has just called him a despicable cad and who is under the necessity of confessing, in words of one syllable or thereabouts, the fault of his makeup.

For "Soundings" is an emotional novel. Its very great emotion is conveyed directly, and often dramatically; in its method is a good deal of the ardor of the dangerous ages. It is not "emotion recollected in tranquillity," compressed like a spring. It is not aimed solely at the reader's imagination, but at his nerves—and perhaps at his memories. There are touches here and there reminiscent of A. S. M. Hutchinson—nothing more than a word or the turn of a phrase. It is, one feels, what Mr. Hutchinson ought to have done if he were not emotionally epileptic.

Fairly known to America by the republication last year of his fine war book, "Gun Fodder," Hamilton Gibbs should become much better known by this novel. Actually it is something like his sixth or eighth book, and by no means his first novel; practically, so far as America is concerned, it introduces a new and interesting novelist.

Brilliance and Brilliants

THOSE BARREN LEAVES. By ALDOUS HUXLEY. New York: George H. Doran Co. 1925.

Reviewed by T. K. WHIPPLE

IN "Those Barren Leaves" Mr. Huxley has closely followed the formula he used for "Chrome Yellow." He has shifted the scene from an English to an Italian country-house, but otherwise little is changed. Like its predecessor, the present novel is a record of a house-party, in which is gathered a group of diverting eccentrics who make love in what time they can spare from their perpetual conversation. And, as one of them exclaims, "what a classy conversation!"—ranging over all topics from love and death and art to the Etruscan language and the breeding of mice and rabbits. As in "Chrome Yellow" there was the pathetic episode of the dwarfs, so in "Those Barren Leaves" there is the pathetic episode of the half-witted Miss Elver. And it is all clever and amusing and well written—that is, suavely and somewhat ornately written. The performance is fully up to Mr. Huxley's reputation as a lavish entertainer, brilliant and sparkling; and even if some of the sparklers are not genuine stones, the stage-effect is as good as ever. Mr. Huxley has never assembled a better cast of characters: Mrs. Aldwinkle, rich, romantic, sentimental, and middle-aged; the ingenuous pair of young folk, Irene and Lord Hovenden; Mr. Cardan, the cynical epicure and indefatigable talker; Miss Thriplow the novelist, so much the victim of her own poses that one never learns what, if anything, she is really like; Chelifer, the poet who fled all the amenities in search of "reality," which he thinks he has found in editing *The Rabbit Fanciers' Gazette* and in living at Miss Carruthers's boarding-house in Chelsea; Calamy, whose natural bent toward love-making and whose predilection for mystical contemplation ill agree—and so on. "Those Barren Leaves" is an excellent example of the smart, sophisticated novel, and very post-war.

They like my books (Miss Thriplow is speaking) because they're smart and unexpected and rather paradoxical and cynical and elegantly brutal. They don't see how serious it all is. They don't see the tragedy and the tenderness underneath. You see . . . I'm trying to do something new—a chemical compound of all the categories. Lightness and tragedy and loveliness and wit and fantasy and realism and irony and sentiment all combined. People seem to find it merely amusing, that's all.

Surely Mr. Huxley could not have written that

passage without thinking of his own works. Nor is his protest altogether without justification, for, impossible as it seems, many readers seem to have missed the marked tragic theme in "Antic Hay"—a theme which is still more marked in "Those Barren Leaves." From the beginning Mr. Huxley has shown a fondness for the rôle of the broken-hearted buffoon, and has given us many variations on the theme of "Pagliacci"; in his last two novels, he has depicted a Dance of Death, has grown more and more macabre.

His tragedy might be called the tragedy of incongruity. He is nothing if not ironical. He has a keen eye for inconsistencies of all sorts—for the disagreement between circumstances and human wishes, between facts and human beliefs, between flesh and spirit, between action and purpose, between emotion and intelligence. By a process of disintegration, he reduces human life and human beings to a chaos of warring elements. He likes to blow little bubbles of sentiment in order that he may prick them, especially he likes to mix the categories of the mental and the mechanical. For instance: "The greatest tragedy of the spirit is that sooner or later it succumbs to the flesh. . . . The tragedies of the spirit are mere struttings and posturings on the margin of life, and the spirit itself is only an accidental exuberance, the product of spare vital energy, like the feathers on the head of a hoopoo or the innumerable populations of useless and foredoomed spermatozoa."

Mr. Huxley's tragedy is also the tragedy of freedom. Most of his people are sceptics who have emancipated themselves from belief in anything, have freed themselves from the last scruple, restraint, or prejudice—"religion, patriotism, the moral order, humanitarianism, social reform"—says Chelifer—"we have all of us, I imagine, dropped all those overboard long ago." The result is boredom and futility. Nothing matters; what can one do save seek oblivion in the distraction of the senses, in ever cruder and stronger sensations? Thus in the end Mr. Huxley's is a tragedy of nervous exacerbation, beneath which always beats the refrain of Ecclesiastes. His work is a treatise, in twentieth-century terms *de contemptu mundi*, or perhaps *de contemptu vitae*. But at the end of "Those Barren Leaves" is heard a note which heretofore has been absent from his writing: in the best mediæval manner, Calamy forsakes the world to try to lead the meditative or contemplative life. Perhaps this action is merely another of those vagaries to which Mr. Huxley's characters are given, such as Chelifer's editing of *The Rabbit Fanciers' Gazette*; but I think not. For one thing, throughout the final discussions as to the nature of reality there runs an almost H. G. Wellsian solemnity. For another thing, it is natural that nowadays disillusion should continue to lead where it has always led, to mysticism, and that scepticism should still lose itself finally, as it has always lost itself at last, in an O Altitude. Not, of course, that Mr. Huxley commits himself; but he seems to suggest, with somewhat more seriousness than is usual with him, that in mystical contemplation there might possibly be an escape from the inanity of life.

I do not wish, however, unduly to moralize Mr. Huxley's fantasies. They remain, when all is said, chiefly means of amusement—amusement for those who enjoy sophistication. Mr. Huxley may complain if he likes that his readers don't see the tragedy and the tenderness underneath, and we readily grant that the tragic element is there—but we may retort that it is no more than a spice which adds piquancy to the entertainment, like the doleful melodies which are jazzed in the "blues." It is true that Mr. Huxley's theme is "All is vanity and vexation of spirit"; nevertheless, what matters is less the theme than the treatment of it. To talk of mixing lightness and tragedy and wit and irony and sentiment is all very well—but the result of the mixture turns out to be merely amusing. How could it turn out otherwise? To write tragedy in terms of burlesque is, after all, to write burlesque; to write romance in terms of farce is to write farce; to speak flippantly of pathetic matters, or of anything else, is to be flippant. When Mr. Huxley puts his fantastic puppets through their antics, the spectacle is diverting, but it cannot well be moving; and those of Mr. Cardan's persuasion who say "True, I like to be amused. But I demand from my art the added luxury of being moved," will necessarily care less for Mr. Huxley than for more single-hearted and simple-minded writers who are unsophisticated enough to afford them that luxury.

A Colorful Autobiography

THE WIND AND THE RAIN. By THOMAS BURKE. New York: George H. Doran Co. 1924. \$2.

Reviewed by WILBUR NEEDHAM

THE author of "Limehouse Nights" has written an unconventional autobiography, without dates and anecdotes, that is very like some of his tales, and no less readable. It begins abruptly in a talk with a young composer over the corners they have turned in life, and it ends suddenly at a point where there are no more corners to turn. Perhaps there will be more, later; but if it is to be, as Burke says, "in the straight," this sequel cannot help but be less interesting.

In a swiftly moving, colorful prose, Burke relates the story of his early days in Limehouse, allowing himself some latitude where the bare facts would rob the narrative of its smoothness; and he is enabled to do this because he has not tied himself down to academic biography. His family was sunk in sordidness, but it always remained clean despite surroundings, and Burke himself appears to have kept his own garments clean. Standing before the shop window of Quong Lee of Limehouse, looking in but not daring to enter, the little boy finds himself at one of the corners of life, and when the silent old Chinaman beckons him to enter and presents him with a stick of ginger and his friendship, Burke turns the corner and enters a little into the life of Limehouse that he was later to know intimately.

But another turn is before him, and for four years he lives in an orphanage, under a restraint and cruelty against which his timid nature does not dare rebel. With the death of the uncle whose life he had shared for a time in a one-room house and in the kitchen of a big house at Greenwich, he finds the orphanage glad to wash its hands of him by renting him out to a "hotel" in Caledonian Road, wherein queer things go on that he only half understands. From this house he is taken by Creegan, a musician friend he had known before, to go into business in London, for Creegan sees what the boy has fallen into; and here begins the business career of a sensitive youth who is always in revolt against his work and his associates. From office boy to clerk, with little adventures on the side, the story takes him; and then he learns to parade newly discovered gods like Keats and Beethoven through his drudging office hours, not comprehending the real significance of what he reads and hears, but groping toward a love of literature and music. He has something to say, and he says it on paper. For a time, there are no results but the usual rejection slips, pencilled by kindly editors. And finally a manuscript accepted.

Of course, the path is not cleared of brambles in this easy fashion. There are more corners to turn; more poverty to face when his temper loses him his job; and only the kindness of a former companion at the orphanage, turning up as a clown in London vaudevilles, saves him from drifting into a vagabondage of the London streets.

At times, Burke writes clearly, a master of English for the moment; but at other times he drops into careless or sensational language all the cheaper because it comes from a man who is by no means to be ranked with hucksters of mediocrity; and, again, he buries an insignificant matter beneath a mass of confused and twisted verbiage, thick as a London fog. But whatever you say of Thomas Burke, you cannot say that he is not human and colorful and interesting.

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