

The Earlier Lewis

BY WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

ONCE a man attains fame he is trailed by the "I-knew-him-when"-ers. I am not writing this article precisely in that spirit. At the request of the editor of *The Saturday Review of Literature* I am setting down a few reminiscences concerning a man who was at one time one of my best friends, a man to some of whose early stages as a writer I was witness, a man for whom I have retained a sincere admiration as one of the most independent and honest spirits of our time. In certain formative years after leaving college—for I was late in developing a mature viewpoint—"Red" Lewis was one of the strongest influences in my life, and, I may say, a thoroughly beneficial one. That is not to say that we always got along well together. Our ideas often clashed. It is from such clashes, when you are young, that sparks are struck to kindle new ideas. The controversial battles of youth are necessary to growth.

I first heard of Harry Lewis, as he was called then—Sinclair being his middle name—when I was a Yale undergraduate. As he was in Yale College and I was in the Scientific School we had no occasion to meet. Second to the historic *Yale Literary Magazine* in those days there was another small literary magazine modeled somewhat upon Stone & Kimball's *Chap-Book*, known as the *Yale Courant*. Lewis was already drawing more books from the Yale library than, I believe, any undergraduate has before or since, and trying his prentice hand at writing, as he had doubtless done in school. It was quite natural that he quickly "made" both the *Lit* and the *Courant* and was elected to the Chairmanship of the latter. This office he almost immediately resigned to devote his literary energies to the *Lit*. I stood second in the *Courant* competition and succeeded

Henry Mencken, who professes a low opinion of poetry in general is, I believe, still trying to suppress any reappearance of his own early poetic efforts. As a matter of fact, "Red's" undergraduate verse was not at all bad for those days. I have some of it still, clipped from old *Courants*. He soon began to sell verse here and there to New York magazines. I remember a most rollicking stave he wrote about a priest, highly laudatory of this particular priest's convivial spirit and called "Father Kileen." It was modeled upon the late Richard Hovey's "Barney McGee." At that time there was another man of literary promise in Yale College, Allan Updegraff. He and Lewis were great friends and were associates later, I think, on *Transatlantic Tales* in New York, where they set themselves to translating foreign masterpieces of fiction. Updegraff has since become a well-known novelist.

I never saw Lewis again, that I remember, in college. It was after graduation, in California, that my best friend, Henry Hoyt (Elinor Wylie's brother), wrote me that he had run into "Red" in New York, found him a great scout, and that Lewis was coming to the Coast. I must meet him. At that time Henry and I had decided, with the arrogance of youth, that most people were bovine and that a soul could be discerned in very few. By that we meant, I suppose, that most people had very little independence of mind or spirit. "Red," however, quite evidently had.

I had lately come back from across the Pacific as deck yeoman on an Army transport, and I decided now to take a trip to Carmel, California, to meet this avatar. I arrived over a sandhill in a creaking buckboard of some sort to have a lanky individual, in corduroys and sweater or something of the kind, topped by the bonfire

knew, later became the wife of Harry Leon Wilson. We were all great friends, even though Mrs. Cooke dubbed me "William the Silent," and "Red" somewhat annoyed Helen Cooke, solely out of his admiration for her, by chanting a most complimentary song about her which he had made up, entitled "A Fugitive Queen." "Red" and I swam in the Pacific, picnicked on the beach, took long walks, did our own cooking, and even tried experiments with our own laundry. I was amazed then, as I have been ever since, at the man's ability to reel off stories. On the way home from George Sterling's, through the Carmel woods, of a summer night, he would launch into some yarn that he had made up on the spur of the moment; and before we were back at our cottage—we had moved into better quarters due to the benevolence of a grand old lady who was then one of the leading spirits in Carmel—the whole story would have been completed in recitative. It was a marvellous performance, and apparently his fund of invention was inexhaustible. Also there were, as doubtless there are still—and as appears in "The Man Who Knew Coolidge"—the almost endless monologues in which he suddenly took on a character part, and the fantastic imaginings that would be worked out in the most intricate detail, till one almost screamed for surcease from the spate of words. From intense hilarity the man would also, at times, turn as grave and didactic as a Baptist minister and proceed to lay down the moral law, according to his own highly individual ideas, with an almost snarling earnestness that seemed to bode hell-fire for the unbeliever. It appeared as if Shelley himself could never have been more deeply stirred by the injustices and tyrannies of the economic order, or disorder.

My brain, to use Henry Hoyt's expression, was sometimes thoroughly "sand-papery" by the constant dissection of ideas, the questioning of every premise, the rovings of "Red's" insatiable curiosity concerning preconceived notions, and the constant challenge of his argument. And it did me a whole lot of good. This man was not content to stand and gaze at the horizon. He stalked forth immediately to crest the hill and find the next one. He may have come from Minnesota, but he was spiritually from Missouri, and had to be "shown." His intellect and his imagination were steaming up for the battle with life, and the ferment of young ambition in him shriveled up any "green sickness" of youth. The days of the making of a writer are days wonderful and absurd. "Red" himself has caught the yearning absurdity of such a period beautifully in his latest novel, "Work of Art," in the grand Swinburnian poem that the youngster in Black Thread chants from a rooftop. We had great days—as they seem to me now—days of typewriter-pounding with "great thoughts." Nights of conviviality and tremendous conversations. Once we "hiked" a long way down the Coast together, camping out at night. Then the time at Carmel came to an end.

Lewis took a job on the San Francisco *Bulletin* and I went back to Benicia Arsenal, the Ordnance post of which my father was then in command. I had "Red" out to stay at the Arsenal and meet my family. He took an immediate strong liking for my father whose enormous reading, individual mind, humorous disposition, and liking for discussion exhilarated him. My father retained a deep fondness for one he would always speak of as "Harry" Lewis, as he had known him. He admired the questing intelligence and the spiritual integrity of the man. Naturally they were usually on opposite sides of an argument—but then my father enjoyed that. In fact it was a habit of his to take the opposite side. Otherwise there was no sharpening of wits, no arraying of the whole armament of opinion. This was right up "Red's" street, and they would sit up half the night in an intellectual duello that fascinated them both.

Lewis returned to the East, and soon I followed him. He got me a hall bedroom next to his own larger room on Van Nest Place in the middle of Charles Street. That was long before the days when, as now, Seventh Avenue cut a swath through that section of town. So we lived in Greenwich



SINCLAIR LEWIS IN CALIFORNIA

Village, "Red" being employed by the Frederick A. Stokes firm of publishers, I as a cub editor on the old *Century Magazine*. The youth of that period was chiefly interested in sociological matters. It was some years before the war, and after the war the more or less disillusioned youth of America seemed to turn, in the Scott Fitzgerald days, toward intense individualism and the "eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die" attitude. Not so in that earlier time. Most of the young people were out to reform the world in one way or another—and, by Golly, the world was going to reform or know the reason why!

It was the day of the old *Masses* with Max Eastman and Floyd Dell as editors; of "The Working Girls' Home," namely the back room of O'Connor's old Café on the corner of Greenwich Avenue and Sixth, where beer flowed freely and music had charms—the place where John Masefield himself once tended bar. It was the day of "The Old Grapevine," long gone, up Sixth Avenue a few blocks, where were checker players and bar philosophers. It was a day that walked on the bar; it was the day of the Anarchist Ball, where I was introduced to Emma Goldman; it was the day when Frances Perkins, now a member of President Roosevelt's cabinet, was laying the foundation for a notable career in labor matters; when Edna Kenton lived not so far off; when Union Square was a veritable Hyde Park for soap-box orators; when "Red" came home one day with news of a new Stokes author who had just swum into their ken, by name Edna Ferber; when John Reed managed to get some of my poetry into the *American Magazine*; when Sinclair Lewis, on his way from Sauk Centre to Stockholm, pounded furiously at his typewriter, in his Van Nest Place room, lit by a tattered welsbach, composing lyrics for a comic opera he was sure he was going to sell to George M. Cohan. At the same time he had become fascinated by aviation and journeyed out to Mineola to renew acquaintance with Captain Paul Beck, one of the first Army fliers, whom he had originally met in Benicia, California. He also took time off from the office and wrote Stokes a boys' book, about a boy aviator; and he was as busy as a bird-dog doing a thousand and one literary jobs and sitting up arguing till dawn.

Then "Red" wrote his first novel, "Our Mr. Wrenn," and got married. His second novel, "The Trail of the Hawk," reflecting his still strong interest in flying—the conquest of the air took a strong hold upon his vivid imagination—dealt in 1915 with a character in some ways the prototype of Lindbergh. In fact, when "The Spirit of St. Louis" did land at Le Bourget, taxying to a stop with no casualties in spite of the enormous onrushing crowd, it seemed to me as though an early Sinclair Lewis novel had come true. He had called the prophetic turn upon American history—I do not mean in exact achievement, I mean in the spirit of American aviation. Charles Lindbergh, with his upstanding liberal of a father, with his own Minnesota background, and his own sturdy independence, would have been just the sort of American "Red" could have novelised with vehemence and enthusiasm.

In my first marriage my wife and I lived hardly a stone's throw from the Lewises



YALE LITERARY MAGAZINE BOARD, 1906
Sinclair Lewis at extreme right

to his vacated office. Therefore, one afternoon, passing the precincts of the *Lit* in a basement passage of White Hall, on the way to my own editorial cubicle, I happened to espy the fellow of whose brilliance and independence I had already heard. A long, gangling youth with a conflagrate head of hair was stretched out on a high window-seat smoking a pipe. He invited me in with a wave of the hand. We exchanged a few remarks, the usual "kidding," I think, of undergraduates.

A little later, of course, Lewis threw in his fortunes with Upton Sinclair's "Helicon Hall," where he wrote poetry while tending a socialistic furnace. He wrote a lot of verse in those days. He caused quite a stir at Yale by his eminently characteristic espousing of the socialist cause so early in his career. It seemed to me at the time an interesting and sporting thing to do. It still does.

I am not going to dwell on Sinclair Lewis's undergraduate literary efforts.

of his hair, hail me from the door of a shack. I lighted down, and "Red" introduced me to our mutual dwelling. As I remember it, we sat up all that first night discussing the Christian religion. I was quite conventional in my religious views at that time and Lewis proceeded to give me all the benefit of the higher criticism. On the other hand, I contributed a song I had learned from an Army officer, a nonsense song which "Red" immediately caught up and proceeded to troll lustily. It became one of his favorites.

We spent some time in Carmel together. We got to know the late George Sterling, drank his muscadell and ate his abalone. We wrote and wrote. I was writing pretty bad verse and Lewis was, at the time, writing short stories considerably under the influence of Edith Wharton whose work he intensely admired. He was acting at Carmel as secretary for Grace MacGowan Cooke and her sister Alice MacGowan. Mrs. Cooke's daughter, Helen, whom we

at Port Washington, Long Island. "Red" and I commuted on the same train of a morning; but I regret to say that his industry in that period quite put me to shame. While I was content to loll in the smoker with a newspaper, "Red" was in another car, secreted from the conversation of commuters, writing furiously upon a new book during the whole journey from Port Washington to New York. Was that "The Trail of the Hawk," or could it have been "The Job"? At any rate, it was when he was still being published by Harper's, before Alfred Harcourt had left Henry Holt and Company to set up his own shop and to become Sinclair Lewis's publisher. After jobs with *Adventure* and the Publishers' Newspaper Syndicate (under "Bill" Woodward, so well-known now as a biographer) "Red" had become editor for George H. Doran. He began to sell stories to *The Saturday Evening Post*, and "The Innocents" and "Free Air" came along in their time. I am not, however, sure of my dates here—and the rest is history: how he took "time out" to write the novel Alfred Harcourt believed would be his most vital, how he went to Washington to do it (where Henry Hoyt and I once dropped in upon him at the room apart from his home that he had rented for a workshop), how he produced "Main Street" with only the motive of giving as true a picture of his own Middle West as a scrupulous artist could give; and then, surprisingly to him, the fame and the fanfare.

The simile one instinctively thinks of first for Sinclair Lewis is "dynamo." He is the journalist *par excellence*. He has that absorbing curiosity about life without which no great writer was ever born. I was lucky to hear something of that curiosity stated in his earlier years, to be in contact for awhile with that keen and searching mind, to have my lazy thinking questioned and exposed by that searchlight intellect. Conversation with him was always intensely stimulating. He could suggest a myriad new ideas in half an hour. And there is one incident I remember well because it seems to me the essential Lewis. Not Lewis the critic of his country, though he has been a badly-needed satirist of its institutions and the flame of his rage against our national stupidities has been a splendid cauterization.

We were dining together one night, and to our table came a stranger, a travelling salesman, whose conversation I thought a great bore and whose personality afflicted my intolerance. But "Red" plunged into conversation with him. Before he knew it the man was revealing all his characteristic ways of thinking and emoting, as well as giving us a good slice of his life. I can remember that I still maintained a rather annoyed attitude. The type didn't appeal to me. Then the man left and "Red" turned to me with a most quizzical smile. "Do you like that type of fellow?" I said—or words to that effect—believing my toplofty attitude to be inalienably the right one. "That's the trouble with you, Bill," said "Red" (or words to that effect), "you regard him as *hoi polloi*, he doesn't even represent the cause of labor or anything dramatic—but I understand that man—by God, I love him."

Of course this is misquoted after all these years; but what I am trying to convey is that Sinclair Lewis does love the essential humanness of people. He can be savagely against the ideas they may hold; just as he can scourge, and has scourged America, for many things. But when he said, as he did recently, that he loved this country, he said the truth. He is fundamentally an American. No other soil could have grown him. And he is a better thing than a humanist, he is a human-beingist. I think it is one of Fannie Hurst's titles—"Every Soul has its Song." That is what Sinclair Lewis fundamentally believes. And he can extort that song from even the queerest kinds of human beings. I'll bet he could easily extort it from the most laconic of red Indians! And that is why when two or three of us who have "known him when" are gathered together, though we may criticize him for this or that now and again, we usually end up by smiling into space at some particularly vivid reminiscence of him, and murmur to ourselves, "A great scout, 'Red'!"

The Lady of the Lakes

(Continued from first page)

His style is a model of restraint, economy, and vigor, free from ostentation, and entirely appropriate to the subject.

Dorothy Wordsworth was a poem, indeed, and the source of poetry in her brother and in Coleridge. Her aptitude for discovering interest in things and persons furnished matter for their imaginations to mould into poetic form. She was their first audience. To her sensitive understanding they addressed their ideas; on her delicate language sense they tried their words; by her fine ear they tested the music of their lines. They recognized her as their equal in the basic appreciation of human nature and poetic expression, however superior they may have felt themselves to be in knowledge of books. A more indirect, but almost equally useful, contribution to their success was her unselfish, constant attention to practical affairs affecting their comfort and happiness. In this she was like many other good women everywhere and through all time, by whose advice, encouragement, and protection from petty cares men have been enabled to do their work.

It is pleasant to observe that William Wordsworth's character for generosity, tenderness of heart, and thoughtful attention to his family and friends is enhanced by the intimate revelations in this book. Mary, his wife, is shown to have been a wise and lovable woman. Coleridge does not fare so well. We find here many new

and in loving-kindness to one's fellow-men; but from these records she appears to have been neither a closely attached church-woman nor a bibliolater; rather, she found divine admonitions in her heart, in nature, and in the demands of duty. Her reading was extensive, yet she was no bluestocking. She loved company, and found it as attractive "in huts where poor men lie" as in great men's houses. She had a cheerful disposition, which was kept fresh by incessant useful activity and much exercise in the open air. She loved Coleridge with something more than sisterly or comradely affection—with romantic attachment, firmly restrained; but she loved her brother more.

The family tradition that her physical and mental breakdown in her fifty-eighth year was due to having taken excessively long walks is not confirmed by the testimony of this book. Nor is it apparent that it was caused by too much housework, though this may have contributed. There was cause enough in the intensity of her emotions, strained again and again by William's complications with Annette Vallon, by her brother John's death, by Coleridge's defection from their friendship and from his own high calling. She was always at the disposal of a large family connection when someone was needed to nurse the sick or take care of children or entertain visitors. If it be said that these and the ordinary cares of cooking and cleaning are, after all, the lot of most women the world over, it should be remembered that an equal amount of in-



DOVE COTTAGE ABOUT 1805

From "Dorothy Wordsworth," by Ernest de Selincourt

pieces of testimony that Wordsworth gave him much money out of his own very limited supply; helped to support his children, and afforded him unrestricted hospitality. Not only William, but even more the women of his household, Dorothy, Mary, and Sarah her sister, were infinitely patient with him when for long weeks he stayed in their already over-crowded house, a querulous, irresponsible guest.

Dorothy's own literary qualities—observation, sympathy, style—were of a very high order. Jane Austen is the only other woman of English race and speech who comes quite up to her level. Perhaps one should add the author of "Cranford" and "Mary Barton"; or perhaps such comparisons are altogether to be avoided! Peccavi. Her style at least, in its sweet simplicity, is absolutely perfect for narration and description. Her qualities were feminine: accuracy of observation, interest in details, delicacy of feeling, tenderness of heart, devotion to those whom she loved. It is her distinction to have been a woman of eminent literary genius chiefly because in her all womanly virtues were present and harmoniously combined. Her character, too, might serve as an example for all time. It has an eternal fitness and is not of her epoch alone nor merely of her country. She was free from vanity, bigotry, superstition, and triviality. Many of her contemporaries of the upper and middle classes in England were either complacently conformist or excitedly mystical in their religious behavior, eighteenth-century indifference surviving in some, nineteenth-century enthusiasm beginning to stir in others. She, on the other hand, was practically religious, if religion consists in reverence for what is best and highest

intellectual labor was also her portion. She was amanuensis, critic, secretary, and outdoor companion to a very active-minded poet, who was also a statesman, and when Coleridge was with them her intellectual tasks were more than doubled. It was in 1829 that her bodily health failed, and soon afterwards her bright intellect was dimmed. She survived till 1855, tenderly cherished by her family. Professor de Selincourt wisely withdraws our gaze at the point where darkness fell.

In spite of all her vicarious suffering, in spite of the demands made on her physical strength, and in spite of copying millions of words for her brother, which she was glad to do since they were his, and also in some sense hers, Dorothy was a happy girl and woman during her fifty-seven years of health. Her own writings, many of which are now for the first time published, make this evident. Fully half of the volume consists of her language, and this is well. The biographer has effaced himself judiciously.

Professor de Selincourt has wisely refrained from including the only known portrait of Dorothy, which was taken late in her life and bears no resemblance to the sane, healthy, lovable woman whom Hazlitt, De Quincey, and others describe. He has enriched his book with the beautiful and significant Edridge drawing of her brother, with which most people are unfamiliar but which is one of the best portraits of the poet. Facsimiles of Dorothy's handwriting are also given.

Altogether this is a notable biography, written by a true scholar, who to his rich equipment of knowledge adds discrimination, distinction of thought, and a charming style.

Going Nowhere

YOUTH CAN'T BE SERVED. By Norah Hoult. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GLADYS GRAHAM

WHETHER or not youth can or must be served the three young people in Miss Hoult's novel receive no help from outside in their struggles against a world that takes little thought of the individual as such. But the middle-aged are no better off. The mother and father in the novel have never succeeded for a moment in understanding themselves, and their children appear to them not only headstrong and incomprehensible but perverse as well. With these five people, each inward looking and hastily impatient of the others, Miss Hoult works out the unhappy drama of uncongenial family life. Ancient history used to teach that the family is the cornerstone of the state; modern fiction finds it the beginning of most evil.

The Boyces live outside London. Mr. Boyce has as little as possible to do with his family, and while he means no particular harm he does no particular good. His feeble revenge on life for cheating him of romance is a constant barrage of sarcasm directed at his wife and children. Shut fast in his study, reading and dreaming of strange places, he can achieve a mirage like happiness for himself. No help here for youth.

Mrs. Boyce knows what mothers should be like if children would only be what children should. She could love and listen to a son who thought of her first, daughters who turned to her for advice on familiar problems, but these daughters and son who tell her nothing, whose problems are beyond her guessing, snatch from her a coveted role she had hoped to play. She can turn to them only a sweet, false face.

One of the daughters finds her own way out easily and complacently. She becomes engaged to an automobile salesman and refuses to look beyond this private haven.

It is the other children, Eileen and Ronald, who wage the conflict against an uninterested world. Feeling themselves to be "different" because they want more than they can have and desire to do more than lies within possibility, they ease their unrest by breaking away from home. Separately they go to London to seek freedom. They find new bondages.

Haphazardly, since she has no definite drive in any direction, Eileen decides to try the stage. She joins a school of drama called "the Pansy" and settles in stuffy lodgings with an uncongenial semi-friend. Classes, movies, slovenly living, and furtive little sorties into romance make up a life no richer than that at home. Another break for freedom leads only to uglier surroundings and further hopelessness. Briefly, in contact with love, Eileen attains actuality. From being just any girl playing at life, she becomes for a few days an individual in her own right in earnest grip with something real.

Ronald runs a different course. He wants to be social minded, to make the world a better place for man to live in. He passes from Fabian socialism to Social Revolutionism. He attends meetings and canvasses votes, but all his activities are tinged with the same unreality that marks Eileen's more personal attempts to find herself. Love eludes him on whatever plane he seeks her.

These are the Boyces,—the futile lot of them. A short epilogue shows them all more content after a few years. Husband and wife reconciled to each other's inadequacies, Jean married, and Ronald and Eileen sinking into the conventional grooves which will carry them to a mediocre middle age. Norah Hoult presents her characters vividly, she creates groups in self-absorbed activities that can scarcely be bettered as self-revealing and self-destroying portraiture, and she keeps her narrative clear of impediment, but when all the characters in a novel are as unprepossessing as the Boyces and all so busily going nowhere the novel itself takes on something of dullness and indirection. The parts stand out with their separate merits but they are unfortunately greater than their whole.