

The "Sauk-Centricities" of SINCLAIR LEWIS



By CHARLES BREASTED

Few writers in the long history of literature have been more colorful in their personal behavior than Sinclair Lewis—which accounts for the spate of reminiscences that have been written about him since his death in January 1951. This memoir by Charles Breasted, son of the late James Henry Breasted, covers the period from 1922 to 1926—from "Babbitt" to "Elmer Gantry"—and reveals that behind the eccentricities, exhibitionism, and bombast there was a fundamentally humane man who lived, as he died, in ultimate loneliness.

I FIRST met Sinclair Lewis in the United States, when he was capitalizing on the success of "Main Street" by lecturing far and wide; but our real acquaintance and eventual friendship dated from a February afternoon in 1922, when we both happened simultaneously to converge upon the American Consulate General in London to have our passports extended. Lewis was then completing "Babbitt" in a bare-walled, single-windowed room, furnished with a table and two chairs, which he had

rented in the Middle Temple in London. During those days he used to join me periodically for dinners and simple soirées at the homes of old friends in the Holland Park and Camden Hill sections of London, where we met such diverse personalities as George Peabody Gooch, the English historian; Hermann Gollancz, the Semitist; Maxwell Armfield, the sadly crippled yet extraordinarily active artist; Cyril Scott, the composer; Edmund Dulac, the illustrator; and many others. Lewis had already struck up

a warm friendship with H. G. Wells (which was to prove sadly short-lived), and had met Galsworthy, Claude Lovat Fraser, Barrie (his historic visit with Conrad, which Wolfe so witheringly described in "The Web and the Rock," came much later), and other leading figures of the day. He was greatly impressed with what seemed to him their un-British easy informality, and with the fact that their social gatherings included every age level and that the young people in their teens seemed genuinely to enjoy such association with their elders. He would always compliment his hosts especially on this latter aspect of their social life, which was in such contrast to the separation between generations in the United States. This in turn would lead him to expound upon the foibles and fortes of life in America. If the occasion included games, he was likely to be in the middle of them, usually on the floor; and as often as not he would end up by teaching a group of guests, including the prettiest girl present, the subtleties of poker.

One evening when we were on our

way in a taxi to some such gathering I asked Lewis if "Main Street" wasn't largely autobiographical. He answered that of course Doc Kennicut was a portrait of his father. Then I said, "What about Carol Kennicut—isn't she a portrait of you?" He seemed startled and said that only a very few people had guessed her identity. "Yes," he added, "Carol is 'Red' Lewis: always groping for something she isn't capable of attaining, always dissatisfied, always restlessly straining to see what lies just over the horizon, intolérant of her surroundings, yet lacking any clearly defined vision of what she really wants to do or to be."

For a number of years during which my work involved much travel to the Middle East, I saw Lewis often as I moved back and forth. Wherever it might be, he was always a magnet for a heterogeneous agglomeration of personalities who at all hours of the day, and more especially of the night, trooped through his current domicile. While they flattered his ego, they primarily reflected his inexhaustible interest in people, among whom young writers were always the objects of his special solicitude, encouragement, and, very frequently, financial assistance. Somehow, despite his own work and crowded off-hours, he always managed to find the time for reading, or at least tentatively appraising, most

of the manuscripts which he continually received from eager young hopefuls. He was genuinely delighted whenever this stream of bathos and mediocrity yielded anything of even modest promise, and felt supremely rewarded when—as in one instance which I have never forgotten—he came upon a pearl of great price.

ONE morning in the spring of 1928, when he was again keeping bachelor quarters in London at No. 10 Bury Street, I happened in, en route home from Egypt, and found him completely enthralled by a typescript, about which in his overwhelming enthusiasm he was for once almost inarticulate. "If this isn't it," he burst out, "I predict that the young giant who wrote it will eventually produce the American novel, and anyway some of the finest work of our generation! His name's Tom Wolfe, and he's absolutely superb! I want you to meet him—he's dropping in tonight about two A. M."

When I returned late that evening "Hal" Lewis (as he was known to his older friends) was still sitting amongst the typescript of "Look Homeward, Angel." He continued to expatiate upon it and towards two o'clock glanced at his watch and remarked that Tom should be along any minute now. "He'll announce himself long

before he gets here," Hal said. He had hardly spoken when from the far end of Bury Street the stillness was shattered by an unholy clatter as of ash and refuse cans being dragged across sidewalks, emptied into the gutter, and tossed high into the air, to roll booming and clanging down toward St. James's. From the speed with which the cacophony was approaching, it was evident that more than one man was at work. We leaned out of a window and watched the methodical, efficient Halloween rampage of a pair of young Americans, one of whom, in the light of the street lamps, looked like a titan. When they reached No. 10 they dusted each other off, and, leaving Bury Street looking like a prophecy of a future "blitz," started upstairs in the lift, which they insisted on operating themselves.

"After midnight," Hal said, "Tom upsets ash cans all over London, and the bobbies on the beat always politely look the other way!"

Tom Wolfe and the other marauder, a young American musical-comedy librettist, appeared at Hal's door, greeted him cordially, apologized for being so late—"We had to work our way over from Leicester Square," Tom explained—and after washing up, poured themselves double drinks and settled in for some of the best talk I had ever heard. They were still going strong toward five in the morning when I finally left my first, and only, meeting with Tom Wolfe.

Two years prior to this encounter, in the summer of 1926, Hal and I had unexpectedly met again, as fellow guests at a houseparty on one of the ten thousand islands in Rainy Lake, Minnesota. He was at work on "Elmer Gantry." His father, old Doc Kennicut of "Main Street," was at the moment gravely ill, and one night Hal's almost feminine intuition suddenly warned him that the coming morning might bring news from Sauk Center of the old doctor's death. He was unable to sleep, and so came and roused me and asked me to sit with him in the dressing room of our guest house and talk—which for me meant listening. We sat on a bench, he with his knees drawn up and his arms resting on them as he smoked incessantly.

"My father has never forgiven me for 'Main Street,'" he said. "When I saw him a few weeks ago, we shook hands—but he can't comprehend the book, much less grasp that it's the greatest tribute I knew how to pay him. He felt that I should have served an honored profession by becoming a doctor myself, instead of derogating and besmirching it in a book libeling my own birthplace. 'Main

(Continued on page 33)



Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

TUNEFUL TITLES



Fannie Gross, of Asheville, North Carolina, presents a list of twenty literary titles which might easily be mistaken for a program of music. Can you match them with their authors? Allowing five points for each correct tie-up, a score of sixty is moderato, seventy crescendo, and eighty or better rhapsodic. Answers on page 13.

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| 1. "The Prelude" | () Don Appell |
| 2. "The Cradle Song" | () Witter Bynner |
| 3. "Duet in Floodlight" | () Stuart Cloete |
| 4. "Four Quartets" | () Sydney Dobell |
| 5. "Piano Quintet" | () T. S. Eliot |
| 6. "The Indian Serenade" | () John Galsworthy |
| 7. "Congo Song" | () André Gide |
| 8. "La Symphonie Pastorale" | () Nelson Hayes |
| 9. "Chamber Music" | () Fannie Hurst |
| 10. "Appassionata" | () Aldous Huxley |
| 11. "A Canticle of Pan" | () James Joyce |
| 12. "The Waltz" | () G. Martinez-Sierra |
| 13. "A Chanted Calendar" | () Dorothy Parker |
| 14. "The Lost Chord" | () J. B. Priestley |
| 15. "Music at Night" | () Adelaide Procter |
| 16. "The Kreutzer Sonata" | () Edward C. Sackville-West |
| 17. "Lullaby" | () J. D. Scott |
| 18. "Rhapsody in Andros" | () Percy Bysshe Shelley |
| 19. "The End of an Old Song" | () Leo Tolstoy |
| 20. "Swan Song" | () William Wordsworth |