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A NOTE AS TO SINCLAIR LEWIS

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

PEOPLE who ought to know a great deal better will tell you that Sinclair Lewis has portrayed many aspects of our American life. In fact, when "Babbitt" and "Main Street" were but lately included in the library presented to President Herbert C. Hoover, it was upon the tactless ground, as stated by one of the selectors, that "the reading of them will help a man to understand the temperament of the American people." I put aside the ineluctable inference—as being an over-blunt if unintentional criticism of our first British President's conduct in office—and I remark merely that I do not think the statement itself is true.

I shall come back to that. Meanwhile, in whatsoever milieu, Mr. Lewis throughout the 'twenties has dealt incessantly with one single problem: whether or not it is better to do that which seems expected? As long ago as in the Spring of 1920, in "Main Street," the question was raised whether Carol Kennicott should or should not conform to what Gopher Prairie expected. The question was given perhaps its most nearly classic form in "Babbitt," wherein the protagonist fidgets before this problem, of conforming or of not conforming, in connection with well-nigh all departments of life as it is led in Zenith the Zip City. Then Mr. Lewis turned to the especial variant of the same problem as it concerns the scientist, in "Arrowsmith"; in "Elmer Gantry" he brought the minister of the gospel face to face with this problem; and a little later he confronted Sam Dodsworth with the problem (already touched upon in "Mantrap") of conforming or of not conforming to that which

seemed expected in—of all avocations—the pursuit of pleasure.

Very much as Ellen Glasgow has been haunted perpetually by the question, What should a woman do before the idiocy of male notions? so has Sinclair Lewis, I think, been beset for at least ten years by the kindred problem, What should a man do before the idiotic notions of other men? In brief, do the inhabitants of Zenith and Monarch and Sparta and Banjo Crossing, or of any other community in Winnemac, pay the more dearly for living as self-determining individuals or as conformists to their neighbors' communal follies?

Mr. Lewis does not ever answer that question outright: but he does very insistently compel his readers to cast about for an answer. Time and again Sinclair Lewis has exalted the bravery if not precisely the wisdom of individualism by the roundabout method of depicting the conformist. There is, he has discovered, a great deal of humbug and stupidity and viciousness going about masked as the correct thing to do in every walk of life as life speeds in Winnemac, the home of manly men and of womanly women and of other Regular Guys. And Mr. Lewis portrays with loving abhorrence superb monsters, now and then a bit suggestive of human beings, who make the very best (in an entirely utilitarian sense) of this humbug and of this stupidity and of this viciousness, to enhance their own moral standing and bank accounts.

I said, he portrays. Yet Sinclair Lewis is far too opulently gifted to have to plagiarize his manly men and his womanly women from the life about him. He has

turned instead—compelled it may be by those freakish planets which ruled over the date of his birth—to commemorate a more striking race. I perhaps can best explain my meaning by reminding you that upon February 7, 1812, was born at Portsmouth, in England, the discoverer of that gnomelike United States of America which, when young Martin Chuzzlewit visited it in 1842, was inhabited by Colonel Diver (of the *Rowdy Journal*) and Mr. Jefferson Brick and Major Cyrus Choke and Mr. Lafayette Kettle and the Hon. Elijah Pogram, and by yet other of the most remarkable goblins in the country—a discomfortable country that clung with untirable lungs “to the Palladium of rational Liberty,” in government of the people by people. All these, we know, are superb and somewhat sinister grotesques which were not, as we likewise know, in 1842 or at any other instant, the least bit “true to life,” but which none the less in 1930 continue exuberantly to live. I would remind you also that just seventy-three years after the birth of Charles Dickens, upon February 7, 1885, was born at Sauk Center, in Minnesota, the portrayer of Almus Pickersbaugh and Vergil Gunch and Elmer Gantry and Chum Frink and scores of still other superb yet somewhat sinister grotesques. Their names alone, not altogether of this sunlit earth, but cacophonous and grating and darkly gnomelike, betray the origin which their conduct confirms. These are most plainly the elvish grandchildren, upon the distaff side, of that unhuman race encountered by Martin Chuzzlewit Jr. during his exile to an uncanny land not ever again visited, I believe, by any other tourist until Sinclair Lewis went a-wayfaring on faëry seas and in 1920 discovered Winnemac.

II

I am far from suggesting that this shared birthday has made of Mr. Lewis our American Dickens. In fact, to describe any author whatsoever as “the American So-and-So” is the hall-mark of those whom

an education beyond their mental means has but enabled to express their entire lack of ideas grammatically. Then, too, not even that kindred ever-present humorousness which flickers through the writings of both men, like incessant heat lightnings, should blind us to the fact that in fundamentals no writers differ more decisively.

In every book by Dickens the backbone of all is optimism and a fixed faith that by-and-by justice and candor will prevail. No reader of “Martin Chuzzlewit” believes for one paragraph that Martin and Mark Tapley may perhaps not win safely through the troll-haunted America to which they have been temporarily exiled. They are but taking part in a very old form of fairy tale, in which a particular room may not be entered by the human hero, or a magic broom be touched, or a pomegranate be tasted, except at the cost of his eternal slavery in goblin land. The goblins, that is, will get you if you don’t watch out. They will get you if you enter the room they suggest or eat the pomegranates they offer you in profusion. But the firm of Chuzzlewit & Tapley, as we well know, travels in the cause of conventional righteousness: it follows, in Dickens’ philosophy, as indeed it usually follows in actual life, that the pair will in due course be provided with monetary competence and acceptable brides. They will escape, in fine, from the goblins—just as in all fairy tales the heroes lightly escape, by the simple process of not conforming to that which the goblins urge them to do—and somewhere in the neighborhood of the Blue Dragon Inn, near Salisbury, they will enter into a future of generally unalloyed bliss wherein will figure no Major Cyrus Choke and no Hon. Elijah Pogram.

The doctrine of Mr. Lewis would seem to run quite the other way. In book after book he has presented one or another individualist at least as truly heroic as ever was young Martin Chuzzlewit, and an individualist who, in opposing the solicitations of the elvish burghers of Winnemac, remains theoretically in the right, but who

ends as a rule in material ruin and who ends always in defeat. I shall not labor this point, because Mr. Lewis himself does not make much of it. He does but indicate, by sketching lightly the careers of a Frank Shallard or of a Max Gottlieb, the truism that in Winnemac as elsewhere the opponent of any communal folly is in for a bad time of it. These adventurers find that the old recipe, of not conforming to that which the goblins urge them to do, is of no least avail to deliver them from the goblins of Winnemac. Instead, the Rev. Elmer Gantry and the Hon. Almus Pickerbaugh are with them to the very end, in some not unfriendly bewilderment as to why the poor mutt should have opposed the *mores* of Winnemac when he could so easily have made use of them to enhance his moral standing and his bank account.

This is a tragedy, I repeat, which Mr. Lewis does but indicate. His real interest turns otherwhither as though bewitched by the quaintness of the commonplace. It remains fascinated by the conformist and by the droll ways of his goblin flourishing (wherein timidity turns to sound money and lies become limousines) at the cost of intellectual and spiritual ruin. The individualist is lost in a world made over-safe for democracy; and the conformist becomes not worth saving. That is the doctrine which informs all the derisive apologues Sinclair Lewis has fetched out of Winnemac. That is, in one sense, the powder which speeds his every shot at our polity. In another sense it is the powder disguised in the succulent jam of his caricatures.

So it has been throughout the ten years since Mr. Lewis first toyed with his pet problem in Gopher Prairie. He then told us, with a mendacity which time and his later books have coöperated to expose, that Gopher Prairie was a small town in Minnesota. We all know now that Gopher Prairie—like Zenith and Monarch and Sparta and Banjo Crossing, and like every other place that Mr. Lewis has written about since 1920—is a portion of the grotesque goblin land of Winnemac.

I delight in Winnemac and in all its citizenry: yet it is, as I have suggested, with very much the same pleasure I derive from Dickens. That pleasure is, to the one side, somewhat the pleasure I get from the "Mr. and Mrs." cartoons in the Sunday paper and from Amos and Andy over the radio, and (to the other side) from a great deal of Molière and Swift and Aristophanes and Lucian—the pleasure, that is, of seeing a minim of reality exaggerated into Brobdingnagian incredibility. There is apparent in each that single grain of truth which has budded, through more or less skilled and patient gardening, into this gaudy efflorescence of the impossible. The seed explains the flowering: but it is the flowering which counts, and which charms. So when I hear Sinclair Lewis classed as a "realist," it is with something of the same wonderment in which I have heard that he lives, along with Messrs. Dreiser and Cabell and Anderson, in a never-lifting atmosphere of despair and frustration. Each of these critical clichés has very often tempted me, I admit, toward just that quiet and ambiguous giving-out of a sedate "Well, well, we know," or of a "If we but list to speak," which the one Prince of Denmark to attain any international fame so justly reprobates.

All that, though, is extraneous, in addition to being only a matter of faith. If you can believe in the "realism" of Sinclair Lewis it will give you a great deal more of comfort than does any other "realism." For my part, I can but protest that I very heartily enjoy his books without any more believing in Almus Pickerbaugh and Elmer Gantry and the other hobgoblins as persons whom one may hope to encounter in our imperfect world than I can believe (after any such literal fashion) in Joe and Vi, or in Jefferson Brick and Colonel Diver, or, for that matter, in Bottom and Caliban.

Meanwhile if, as one hears freely nowadays, Sinclair Lewis is obsolescent, and his books are doomed, the trouble is not merely that the United States is due to lose one of its most interesting commonwealths,

in the State of Winnemac. For one really wonders what in the world is to be done about George Follansbee Babbitt? As I have said in another place, Babbitt has passed from the pages of a book into the racial consciousness of mankind. He is one of those satisfying large symbols which at long intervals some author hits upon, and which promptly take on a life that is not confined to the books wherein they first figured. Babbitt is in train, I think, to become one of those myths which rove forever through the irrational Marches of Antan, and about which writers not yet born will weave their own new stories as inevitably as writers will continue to concern themselves with Faust and Don Juan and the Brown God Pan.

III

No, not even we new humanists can kill Babbitt. Babbitt thrives not merely through the art of selling houses for more than the people of Zenith can afford to pay for them. He graces yet other sound business enterprises everywhere: his voice is heard in our legislative assemblies, nor is it silent in Wall Street: his matured opinions upon political matters have been known to issue even from the White House. He writes the most of our books: he reviews all of them. He shapes each law by which our lives are governed, and he instructs us too how to evade these laws: not even in death may we look to escape from Babbitt, for then to the one side of us shall sit Babbitt the physician and to the other side Babbitt the clergyman, each pottering over our last needs in that dark hour. The natural grief of our heirs and assigns he will forthwith capitalize in the form of a fat overcharge for our coffins: and about a year later, when

once the grave has settled down cosily, then Babbitt will be engraving our tombstones with the most exalted sentiments of his own smug selecting. Babbitt cannot ever perish so long as all good Americans cling (in Colonel Diver's fine phrase) to the Palladium, in government of the people by the people, and the perturbed neighbors cling in self-protection to their sense of humor. There is something of Babbitt in every one of us.

Moreover, this Babbitt is no parvenu born but eight years ago. He had existed since time's youth; and Mr. Lewis did but serve as his literary sponsor in an oddly belated christening. George Follansbee Babbitt, as Walter Pater has phrased it, is older than the rocks he quarries into building material. For Babbitt, also, has trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants. His was the presence which rose so strangely beside the waters to further the commercial supremacy of Tyre, and Carthage, and Liverpool. Under the alias of Marco Polo, as was lately shown us, he has established satisfactory business relations with the Khan of Cathay; and as Cristoforo Colombo, he has looked for a paying traffic route into India. He has gone well-greaved against Troy, at the behest of the Greek draft laws; he has shouted "Crucify him!" in Jerusalem; he has burned Jews in Seville, and he has hanged witches in Salem, as conscientiously as he fetched back from his unwillingly attended Crusades only the syphilis. And all this, to that level head upon which all the ends of the world are come, all this has been to Babbitt, not quite as the sound of liars and brutes, but merely that which seemed expected of him, or of any other level-headed Regular Guy, in his then present circumstances.