AN INTERPRETER OF AMERICAN LIFE

ARROWSMITH. *By Sinclair Lewis. 12mo. 448 pages. Harcourt, Brace and Company. $2.50.*

MR SINCLAIR LEWIS, like Mr H. L. Mencken, is a paradox in the United States of to-day. A leading trait of the American people is a youthful self-consciousness amounting to an inferiority complex, which makes us impatient of all criticism. Everything which we have done is right because we did it. All our wars were just; all our statesmen are pure; all our business is honest. Ours is the land of liberty, of tolerance, of opportunity, of righteousness. Our favourite prophets are the sayers of smooth things in Zion, those who speak comfortably to Jerusalem of her ideals and performances—Wilson, Harding, Coolidge. And yet by some sort of saving grace, in the midst of this complacency appear Mr Lewis and Mr Mencken, to tear the hoods and sheets off our moral and civic Ku Klux Klan, to show the cringing forms and the false, cowardly, cruel faces beneath the mask—and Mr Mencken and Mr Lewis as critic and novelist are, in this day and generation, the most read and considered interpreters of American life. They are constantly telling truths about their country for which less fortunate devils are being hounded out of pulpits and college chairs, losing business and social standing, and occasionally suffering physical punishment at the hands of court or clan, and yet they flourish like two green bay trees.

One explanation of this phenomenon is to be found in the fact that both Mr Mencken and Mr Lewis write the American language. It is a natural impulse when one hears one's own tongue in the midst of foreign speech—and most of his literature is foreign to the ordinary sensual American—to turn and listen, even if the meaning is unpleasant. And a second explanation lies in the fact that both Mr Mencken and Mr Lewis are good-natured and affable. They find the spectacle one tending to amusement rather than indignation. Humour is the form in which the American takes his cathartic—the Biglow Papers, Josh Billings, Artemus Ward, and Mark Twain, for examples. Even so there is still an unex-

plainable residuum, especially in the case of Mr Lewis who is undoubtedly long and, in the opinion of many readers whose devotion is the more remarkable, dull. If Mr Lewis attracts his great audience by the sense of reality which his pages convey, and the careless humour of his approach, he holds it by a sense of the importance of what he has to say.

In Main Street Mr Lewis employed the inclusive formula of the naturalists, setting down as much of the visual and audible stuff of life in Gopher Prairie as his vehicle could carry, the motive power being furnished by the ambitions of Carol Kennicott, wife of the local physician. In Babbitt he adopted a much more rapid and impressionistic method. The life of Zenith is merely the background for the hero, who in his egregious vulgarity and pitiful self-conceit, is accepted everywhere along with General Dawes as the typical American business man, booster, and patrioteer. If Main Street looks back to Zola, Babbitt is in the more humorous, highly coloured, exaggerated manner of Daudet. George F. Babbitt is an American Tartarin. In Arrowsmith, Mr Lewis returns to his earlier method. There is much of life as it is lived in a Mid-Western university town, a Dakota village, an Ic va city, and finally in New York; but the background is chiefly occupational as in the classics of the Rougon-Macquart series. Martin Arrowsmith is a physician and a medical scientist, and the experience of his disillusionment with that high calling is the core of the book. We first meet Arrowsmith as a medical student at the University of Winnemac; he gives up his scientific passion for a wife and general practice in the village of Wheatsylvania; he is stirred by the pretentious programme of public health, and becomes assistant and finally successor to Dr Pickerbaugh, Director of Public Health of Nautilus, Iowa. Driven forth by a citizenry justly indignant at his interference with business as usual, he turns to the McGurk Institute for medical research in New York. After fighting the bubonic plague in one of the lesser Antilles where his wife, Leora, dies, he returns to find the disinterested pursuit of truth as remote to the patrons and directors of McGurk as to the politicians of Nautilus, and takes refuge in a sort of hermitage of research among the Vermont hills.

In all this there is something of the conscientious thoroughness of Zola. Mr Lewis is determined to leave no stone of the medical

edifice unturned, and under each he finds human nature in reptilian form. Indeed, to reach the fraud of the commercial drug firm he is obliged to cut loose from the hero and follow the story of his teacher, Professor Gottlieb, on his way from Winnemac to McGurk. Undoubtedly in this occupational interest we miss something of the regional unity of Main Street and Babbitt. We do not know Mohalis, Wheatsylvania, and Nautilus as we do Gopher Prairie and Zenith. Toward the end of the book the social background of New York is hardly realized at all, and this is the chief reason why its entrance into Arrowsmith's life with his second marriage seems mere fiction. The essential truth of Arrowsmith's experience as medical student, country doctor, and director of public health, no physician will question. Even the preposterous Pickerbaugh, Director of Public Health of Nautilus, Iowa, is plausible enough to readers in New York and Chicago. Pickerbaugh revives the exuberant caricature of Babbitt. Besides his titular office he is "founder of the first Rotary Club in Iowa; superintendent of the Jonathan Edwards Congregational Sunday School of Nautilus; president of the Moccasin Ski and Hiking Club, of the West Side Bowling Club, and the 1912 Bull Moose and Roosevelt Club; organizer and cheer-leader of a Joint Picnic of the Woodmen, Moose, Elks, Masons, Oddfellows, Turnverein, Knights of Columbus, B'nai B'rith, and the Y. M. C. A.; and winner of the prizes both for reciting the largest number of biblical texts and for dancing the best Irish jig at the Harvest Moon Soirée of the Jonathan Edwards Bible Class for the Grown-ups," and author of such rhyming roads to health as

> "Boil the milk bottles, or by gum
> You better buy your ticket to Kingdom Come."

All this is in Mr Lewis's best vein. When he conducts Arrowsmith to the McGurk laboratory we feel that he is on less firm ground. Here he is indebted to Dr Paul H. DeKruif for the inside stuff. The bacteriological detail is, of course, sound. Never before in fiction has the psychology of the scientist, the passion for research, been rendered with such penetration and justice. When, however, Arrowsmith in fighting the plague in St Hubert is bidden by his scientific conscience to divide the population into two parts,

one half to be inoculated with his phage, the other half to be refused in order absolutely to control the results of the experiment, we have either an example of scientific fanaticism or a piece of pure fiction. The phenomena of the plague have been sufficiently observed to make it practically certain that, if all who were inoculated under favourable circumstances survived, the remedy had been found—and probably half the population would have resisted inoculation anyway. This air of unreality hangs over the latter part of the book as Mr Lewis becomes more absorbed in his purpose. Leora's death, from smoking in the laboratory a half finished cigarette on which a maid had spilt a test-tube of germs, at the time when Martin is caressing another woman, is necessary to Mr Lewis's programme. This other woman, Joyce Lanyon, the symbol of the intrusion of the social world into the privacies of science, would be obnoxious were she not quite inconceivable. We suspect her, along with Capitola McGurk, Rippleton Holabird, and other inmates of the McGurk Institute, of being aimed at the people who have been annoying Dr DeKruif. As such they do not reach their mark.

Arrowsmith is an important step in the campaign to de-bamboozle the American public and relieve its institutions of bunk. Mr Lewis has attacked this old enemy in one of its highest places. In all phases of medicine—education, private and public practice, and finally research—he has revealed its pretensions and exposed its perpetrators. If he has sacrificed the reality of fiction, it is in the interest of the reality of a public cause which gives largeness of view and significance to Arrowsmith.

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