

The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

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THE ENGINEER'S BOOKSHELF

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

My Son, My Son!

LAST May a novel appeared on the book shelves in this country by a new British author, a man known to very few American readers. His name was Howard Spring and the blurb on the jacket of his book said that he was a literary critic for a London newspaper. His book, which bore the title, "My Son, My Son!", had only a few sales during the first month. The public—that is, the reading public—was not interested in the novel, apparently because they knew nothing about the author. Little by little, however, readers became interested in the story, and by last November the novel was in the top few of best seller lists in all parts of the country. And despite the fact that it is a novel by a new author, and despite the fact that its publication took place almost a year ago, I believe that it is a story that is definitely worth reading. "My Son, My Son!" is probably the most gripping novel that I have read for many years. Its sordid story, painted on a large canvas that reminds one of the Galsworthy saga, moves logically and conclusively in its repellent action

to a distressing close. It is an outstanding book in a day when many outstanding books are being published.

The title, most naturally, is taken from the passage in the Second Book of Samuel, 18:33: "And the king was moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he wept, thus he said, O my son Absalom! my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Mr. Spring has so carefully written his novel that the action can be plotted according to the dates in the story, and the time over which the story flows extends from 1880 to 1922. The action takes place for the most part in Manchester, England, and later in the story it shifts to London. There are a few delightful scenes, however, on the Cornish coast, and since the time of the story covers the period of the World War from 1914 to 1918, a few scenes are placed on the Western Front, and some in Ireland during the Irish Rebellion. But for the main part, the characters move into each others lives and then out, through the media of London homes and theatres and cafes.

Strictly speaking, "My Son, My Son!" is the story of the lives of William Essex and Dermot O'Riorden, and the havoc they wrought on the lives of their two sons, Oliver Essex and Rory O'Riorden, who, curiously enough, had been born on the same evening in May 1894. Oliver was the only son of William and Nellie Essex, while Rory had two sisters, Maeve and Eileen.

The first part of the book deals with the young manhood of the two fathers. Each had been born in the mean streets of Manchester, and by streaks of fate each had legitimately amassed considerable money. Each had married a girl of his own class who had been a help-mate during the struggling years. Dermot and his wife Sheila did not lavish the growing riches on their son Rory; instead, Dermot fired in Rory the ambition to be a great Irish leader, to encourage the Irish into their revolt from British oppression. On the other hand, William and his wife Nellie pampered their son Oliver to such an extent that he turned out to be one of the most insufferable pigs in modern literature.

Briefly, the story of Rory and Oliver is this. Rory at the age of fifteen is "farmed out" by his father to his friends in Dublin, all leaders in the growing Irish revolt. There Rory lives, eats and breathes the very seeds of revolt, absorbing Irish ideas and Irish thought. With Oliver, who remains in England, the years are passed in an entirely different atmosphere. Following the death of his mother, Oliver is placed in a private school, where the "brattishness" that has been instilled into him by his father, begins to assert itself. He is arrogant, he is a liar, he is a bore, he is insufferable in the full sense of the word. On vacations he starts a liaison with a girl his father expects to marry. Just before the war breaks out in 1914 he travels to the Continent with her, spending several months. Upon his return he refuses to have anything to do with William, tries to live "on his own", becomes a kind of distinguished sponger about the cafes of London.

Oliver serves with distinction during the years of the Great War, and is decorated for bravery, is decorated for killing men, the very thing for which he is hanged on the last page of the book. Oliver's slaughter of German soldiers during the War instilled in him the hardness, which, in 1922, led him to the murder of a civilian, and for which in turn the courts take his life. Before his ignoble death, however, he has raped and killed Rory's sister Maeve, has ruined the life of the girl his father had expected to marry, and had been the cause of Rory's death in the April 1916 Irish Rebellion.

As you can understand, it is not a pleasant story. Many people do not like to read it for that very reason; they feel that just a little too much wreck and ruin are wrought by this pampered son. And yet, I feel that if Mr. Spring had ended his novel otherwise he would have defeated the purpose with which he started out. But Oliver, understand, is not the villain after all; it is his father, William Essex, who is to blame. For, as I see the story, the theme concerns the disastrous con-

sequences of parents trying to realize the unfulfilled ambitions of their sons. To have ended the story otherwise, to have given it a Hollywood conclusion, would have defeated the purpose.

I am told that Hollywood is dickering for the script, and I shudder when I think what they might do with it, how they probably might twist and distort the characters, and unbalance the situations in which Mr. Spring has placed them. If the cinema gets the story it would be not only blasphemous to art but also profane to life to change the original script. To date, I have never known Hollywood to improve on a really good story.

Sinclair Lewis

Mr. Sinclair Lewis of Sauk Center and Gopher Prairie has been in town. In fact Mr. Lewis brought his new "wife" to town on Friday evening, December 30. Her name is Angela and she is twenty-two years of age. Mr. Lewis, by the way, is "52". When they arrived in Columbus they aired their courtship on the stage of the Hartman theatre. In a second act they allowed the audience to see how their ship of blissful happiness was drifting to the divorce rocks, and in the third act they permitted the audience to view the "remains" after Angela had deserted and after Mr. Lewis had settled down to his routine life of passing out sugar pills in a streamlined office to neurotic ladies of uncertain age.

I really mean all of this, for who am I to "kid" the reader of this column? After all, there is nothing astonishing about this information. The astonishing feature of the occasion is the very fact that the winner of the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes has entered into the fields of the play writers. For Mr. Lewis in collaboration with Miss Fay Wray has written a play, has called it "Angela Is Twenty-two", and has established himself in the leading role as Dr. Jerrett.

And let it be said here and now that the play is not a bad one even if it did seem to go to pieces in the third act. With a little doctoring those rough places can be erased, for I learned the other day from one of my Cleveland students who saw the play in that city the week after I saw it in Columbus, that the third act had been so successfully altered that a first nighter would now never recognize it.

So much for the play; it really is good clean fun with the accent on the romantic side. It is beautifully set in three acts and five scenes, and Mr. Lewis has surrounded himself with a splendid cast who can actually act. But what about Mr. Lewis? Can he act? No, definitely no! He read his lines like a junior high school boy on the stage for the first time. His diction is hysterically bad and his timing of lines is nothing short of theatrical disaster. But I liked him for the very fact that he seemed to be a good sport about it all.

To sum up "Angela Is Twenty-two" I am asking myself this question: If I were in Manhattan and had the choice of only one play, would I select Mr. Lewis' and Miss Wray's play? Definitely no!