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Review of "Ann Vickers"

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Brownings. Osbert Burdett. Houghton Mifflin Co., 1929

The Brownings is a sympathetic study of the two English poets, which considers the life and writing of each contributory to a single life-story. That story is a romantic one. The author states it tersely when he says, "Among love stories it is a fairytale, and it is true."

Mr. Burdett has viewed the two Brownings as opposites, in their early life, their writing, their health, and much of their thinking. "She was wholly feminine . . . and he, as man and artist, was masculine to the core." One-half in itself was inadequate, but together, a nearly perfect whole was formed.

It was with this thought in mind that the chapters were planned. The youth of Elizabeth Barrett, in the first place, is presented as a direct contrast to that of Robert Browning; then, their early writings are unlike. The chapters which follow contain the love letters; which, this author maintains, reveal the real genius of the woman better than any of her poems. The next sections are concerned with the period of married life, during which Mrs. Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and Browning's masterpieces, *Men and Women* and *The Ring and the Book* were produced. A concluding chapter is devoted to Browning's widowed years, but always with reference to the influence of his wife upon him, even after her death.

The biographer has done his utmost to be judicious. It is obvious that he admires both Brownings, but at the same time he has not failed to indicate defects in their writing and their characters. Her prose, as exemplified in the letters, ranks with Browning's best poetry, whereas his prose style is poorer than her worst poems. The author supports his contentions by numerous excerpts from the letters and the poems, to the end that our appetites are whetted to read more of the originals.

Aside from the valuable critical study, the impetus to further reading given by this volume is its chief recommendation. After completing the book, the reader cannot overcome an irresistible urge to read the poems and the love letters in their entirety.

Elizabeth W. Hibbs.

Ann Vickers. Sinclair Lewis. Doubleday, Doran, 1933

In his recent novel, *Ann Vickers*, Sinclair Lewis is essentially a realist. His drawing of the Copperhead Gap Penitentiary is probably one of his most vivid pictures; certainly it is one of his most natural-

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istic. And the hanging of Lil Hezekiah is told in all of its sordid and revolting details. Nevertheless, the book does not give the impression of being realistic merely to disgust the reader.

This book has a humorous touch that seems to be woefully lacking in some of his other novels. The humor is derived from the use of anti-climax, absurd yet effective grouping, and is maintained by the odd twists he gives to his statements and definitions. For instance, he tells of some teachers who "are given to morality and peanut butter". He sums up the spirit of war times with the motto, "Let us eat, drink, and be nasty, for the world has gone to Hell and there will never again be youth and springtime and hope". The period before the war he classifies as the time "when Sex had been invented, but had not yet come into popular use and quantity production".

Mr. Lewis's sarcasm is swift, darting, and so close to the truth as to be uncomfortable. Ann searches for this truth and too often finds it hidden by hypocrisy. With stinging comment she decries conditions as she finds them. One of the characters says, "Politicians are the middlemen of Economics; they take the Economic Truth out and peddle small quantities of it at inordinate prices." Ann makes the astounding discovery that "there are no prisoners or criminals, only men who have done something that at that moment was regarded as breaking the law, and tho, at the hit-or-miss guess-verdict of a judge (who was no judge at all, but only a man judging in accordance as his digestion and his wife's nagging affected him) were carried off to prison."

The story itself concerns Ann Vickers, who is described as "complex only as environment clashed with her simple desires for frankness, efficiency, kindness, and sexual freedom". She starts out with a high idealism and explores the suffrage movement, the social settlement house, philanthropy and organized charity, and prison reform. Each of these disillusioned her, but not to the point of causing her to lose faith; for she always retains her characteristic naivete. During her entire story we see the hypocrisy of all of her environments. She herself, while matron of a prison, has a child by one man while inconveniently and unsatisfactorily married to another. Throughout life she is constantly faced by the dominating instinct of the reformer and her desire for a healthy, normal life as a wife and mother. She finally attains happiness by finding her man.

Hazelle M. Allen.