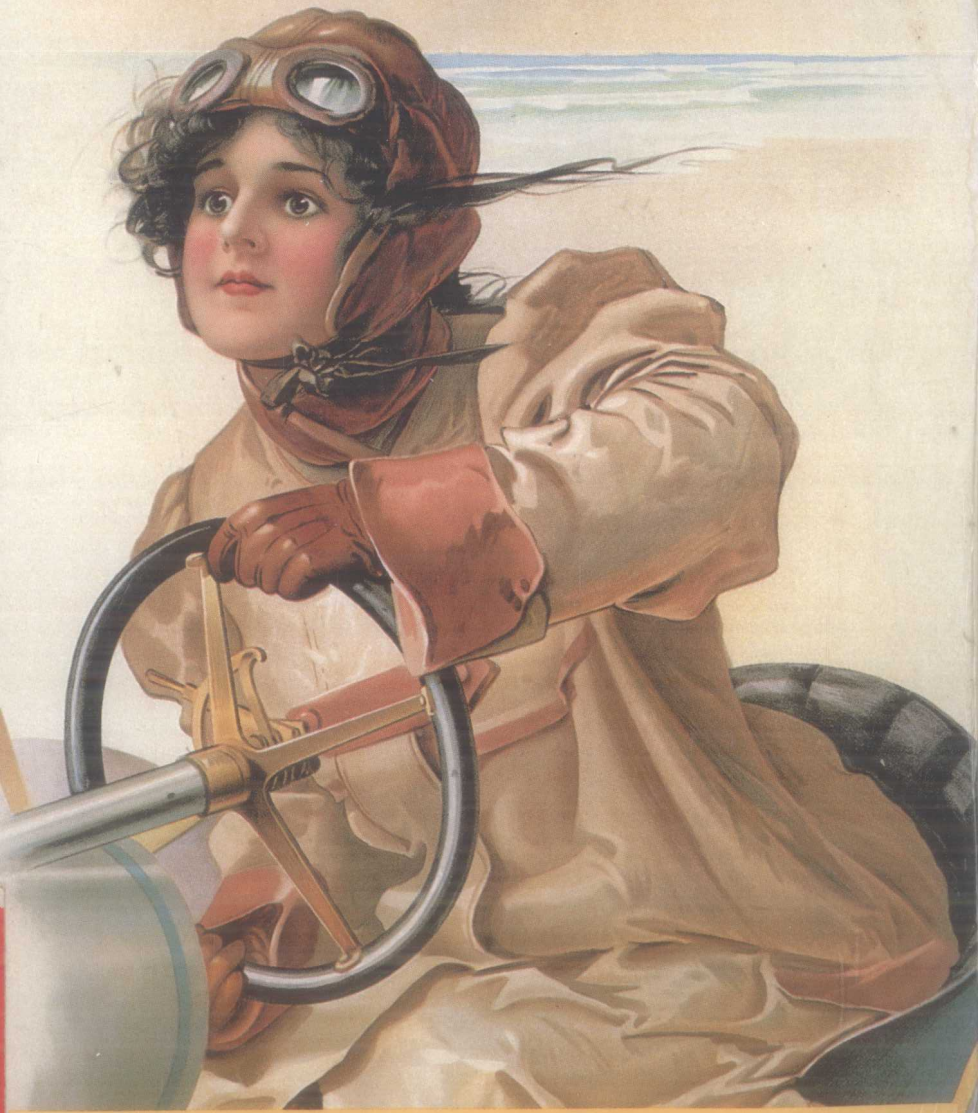
SINCLAIR LEWIS

# FREE AIR



INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT E. FLEMING

# FREE AIR

BY

SINCLAIR LEWIS

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*by Robert E. Fleming*


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# INTRODUCTION

by Robert E. Fleming

Sinclair Lewis is best remembered for his great novels of the 1920s: *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Elmer Gantry* (1927), and *Dodsworth* (1929). During that incredibly successful decade, Lewis appeared regularly on the best-seller lists, won—and refused—the Pulitzer Prize, and became the first American ever to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, which was awarded to him in 1930 in spite of considerable controversy.

To much of the American public, *Main Street* appeared to be Lewis's first novel, but as Emerson said of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass, Main Street* had had a long foreground. Between 1912 and 1920, Lewis had learned to tell short stories well enough to crack the tough but high-paying *Saturday Evening Post* market. He had also published one boys' book (which appeared under the pseudonym Tom Graham) and five modestly successful novels. *Free Air* (1919) is the last of that series of early novels, and Lewis believed enough in its merits to suggest to his publisher that it should be submitted to the Pulitzer Prize Committee for consideration.

As a realist Lewis, writing about the Great Plains, knew his territory well. *Free Air* grew out of an automobile trip Lewis took with his new wife, Grace Hegger Lewis, in 1916. Lewis had returned to Sauk Centre, Minnesota, to introduce his wife to his family and to complete his third novel, *The Job* (1917). Afterwards, he and Grace bought a Model T Ford—modified to convert into a simple camper by the attachment of a tent—and set out for Seattle. Never one to waste material, Lewis turned out nonfiction articles such as "Adventures in Autobumming" based on the expedition.

However, Lewis realized that his material was too good to waste on mere low-paying journalism and soon turned his hand to a serial called "Free Air," which ran in the *Saturday Evening Post* from May 31 through June 21, 1919. The serial so pleased editor George Horace Lorimer that he urged Lewis to write a sequel, offering him $2,500 for two additional episodes. Lewis, who had already been thinking of expanding his work to legitimate book length, produced "Danger—Run Slow," which appeared in the *Post* on October 18 and 25, 1919. On October 23, Harcourt, Brace and Howe published the novel.

In spite of its having appeared first in a high-circulation magazine, *Free Air* sold respectably for an early Lewis novel—over eight thousand copies in prepublication sales. Reviewers for *Dial*, the *New York Times Review of Books*, and *New Republic* praised the novel for its various strengths: its accurate transcription of American speech patterns, its photographic reproduction of the western landscape, and in particular, its emphasis on the merit of the individual rather than his or her social class or family background.

By the time he wrote *Free Air* Lewis had grown confident about his ability to tell a good story laced with humor and was moving toward the role of social critic. Lewis honed the skills he would need and explored some of the themes he would treat in *Main Street*. Thus, there are many satirical passages, and, as he would in his more famous novel, Lewis directs his satire in both directions, toward his city heroine, Claire Boltwood, as well as toward the rural characters and settings with which she comes in contact. But one positive feature of her western trip across the plains is the western hero she encounters on her travels.

Milt Daggett lacks many of the social graces that would have made him welcome in polite society of his time. The son of a country doctor, Milt points with pride to the New England origins of his family and to a grandfather who was a judge. Milt, however, is only the proprietor of a two-man auto repair shop in Schoenstrom. He is a provincial westerner who has never in his life been out of Minnesota before he sees Claire Boltwood, falls in love, and decides to follow her cross-country to Seattle.

When easterner Claire Boltwood first encounters him, he seems to

her the antithesis of all she has been told to admire in a man. He has grease under his fingernails and speaks a rough and ready English that betrays his lack of formal education. but although he lacks schooling, Milt displays both intelligence and adaptability. He is equal to any road emergency, from fouled spark plugs to a mistimed distributor. While rescuing Claire and her father from a farmer who is overcharging them for pulling their car out of the mud, Milt displays a working knowledge of human nature, broken but serviceable German, and the fine art of beating a bully at his own game. In addition, he is enough of a natural gentleman to refuse the tip which Claire's grateful father offers him after the rescue. Like Carl Ericson, of Lewis's 1915 novel *The Trail of the Hawk,* Milt anticipates later Lewis heroes such as medical researcher Martin Arrowsmith and automobile designer Sam Dodsworth, who will combine twentieth-century scientific and technical expertise with midwestern common sense and morality.

To complement his western hero, Lewis creates one of his finest examples of the new American woman, a character he had just experimented with in Una Golden, the feminist heroine of *The Job*. Much like Grace Lewis, her real-life source, Claire Boltwood is too intellectual, too independent, to be content with a role as charming hostess for a man and as housebound mother of his children. The man she marries will find that he has taken on a full partner. Claire anticipates not only Carol Kennicott of *Main Street* but later characters such as the protagonist of *Ann Vickers* (1933). Reared in luxury in a New York suburb, Claire seems destined to become the wife of Geoffrey Saxton, a man of her own social set. Sixteen years older than Claire, Saxton understands all about high finance—and nothing about women. While Claire's excuse for her western vacation is to cure her father of nervous prostration brought on by overwork, a better reason is to postpone the inevitability of marriage to Saxton. Yet for all her admirable qualities, Claire can be comically quixotic, refusing to allow Milt to accompany her and her father when both her self-interest and her romantic interest in Milt make her want him to stay with them.

In *Free Air* Lewis sounds a positive note that would also be present in *Main Street*—an appreciation for the free western spirit, the democratic atmosphere of the American frontier and its continuing impor-

tance even in the twentieth century. Sparsely settled by eastern standards, the West challenges its inhabitants. Rough, raw, and energetic new towns bear little resemblance to the conventional, cultured, long-established cities of the East. Although the West is no longer as wild as it once was, it still offers a vast natural setting where the individual is largely on his or her own and where people are judged by what they do rather than by who their parents are or where they went to school. The dominance of unpredictable nature and the absence of eastern amenities allow—or force—individuals into tests of character. As Claire gains more self-reliance than she could ever have developed in Brooklyn Heights, she also learns more about her own values and character.

The sights the Boltwoods see as they travel west are predictable in a novel named *Free Air*: they are exposed to a part of the country and a way of life of which they have been completely ignorant. Symbolic of this different world are modern-day reminders of the prairie schooners that once traveled the Oregon Trail, mechanized Conestogas driven by twentieth-century travelers:

> "Sagebrush Tourists" these camping adventurers were called. Claire became used to small cars, with curtain-lights broken, bearing wash-boilers or refrigerators on the back, pastboard [sic] suitcases lashed by rope to the running-board, frying pans and canvas water bottles dangling. . . . In each car was what looked like a crowd at a large farm-auction—grandfather, father, mother, a couple of sons and two or three daughters . . . all jammed into two seats already filled with trunks and baby-carriages. (119–20)

Such passages not only look back to James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie* but forward to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Restaurants and hotels available to early tourists allow Lewis some of his best opportunities for satirical humor. A romantically named culinary establishment, the "Eats Garden" of Reaper, North Dakota, greets the hungry travelers with "a belch of smoke" from its overheated grill. A single table is graced with a utilitarian oilcloth "deco-

rated with venerable spots of dried egg yolk," and the waiter-cook wears a filthy apron. The menus are fly-specked, steaks are like leather, and the cook can't even make toast successfully. In Gopher Prairie, a town soon to become familiar to many readers, Claire and her father find a single "tolerable" hotel, the decor of its unappealing lobby dominated by "poison-green" paint, brass cuspidors, and insurance company calendars. Claire's room in this "up-to-date place" is furnished with a bed so tilted that she is afraid to fall asleep lest she roll out. Lewis's experience and imagination furnish a comic variety of similarly unsavory accommodations and restaurants.

Travelers crossing the nation in the early twentieth century also faced a host of problems with their cars: fragile tube-type tires required frequent patching, brakes needed multiple overhauls between Minneapolis and Seattle, and engines suffered badly when cars climbed the intervening mountains. With enthusiasm, Lewis documents these early years of America's growing love affair with the automobile, a time when it was considered the height of adventure for a woman to attempt a cross-country drive. Just a few years earlier, in 1909, the Maxwell-Briscoe company had sought publicity by commissioning Alice Huyler Ramsey to drive one of its cars from New York to San Francisco, and in 1915 Paramount had sponsored actress Anita King's "solo" drive from Los Angeles to New York—accompanied by the press corps. The reader learns to admire Claire not only for her adventurous spirit in challenging the road west but also for her plucky willingness to patch inner tubes and change tires. And what modern reader can fail to sympathize when she falls into the hands of unscrupulous repairmen?

As the Boltwoods progress down the road, they continue to encounter Milt, whose skills as a traveler, a pathfinder, and a mechanic overshadow his lack of social acceptability. His skillful handling of the automobile epitomized the spirit of America in an era when the empty miles of the West could at long last be traversed in a relatively short time by automobile. Through Milt Daggett, Lewis speaks both for and to his age, an age when technology will replace bravery and physical force even in times of war. Milt is called upon to protect his charges from few melodramatic dangers, although a tramp attempts to com-

mandeer the Boltwoods' car and a "highwayman" points a revolver at Milt. In keeping with Lewis's realistic and satirical view of America, the twentieth-century automobile pioneer contends not with highwaymen or Indians but with dishonest or incompetent garage mechanics and sloppy hotel-keepers. Not risk but extreme inconvenience besets the tourist who drives the vulnerable automobiles of the day.

If Milt is an expert at overcoming technological problems, he is less adept at overcoming social barriers. The outcome of his pursuit is by no means certain as he tries to woo Claire not only on the road but in Washington state, where she stays with her socially prominent relatives. Invited to the home of these pretentious relatives, Milt feels that his dress, table manners, and speech mark him as an ill-mannered lout, completely unworthy of such a refined woman as Claire. Lewis's skills at building suspense, honed by his years of writing for the popular magazines, keep his readers guessing about Milt's fate in this unlikely romance right up to the final chapter.

*Free Air* displays Sinclair Lewis's skills in development and anticipates the spectacularly successful career he was to enjoy during the next decade. He rapidly delineates characters, both sketching in unforgettable minor characters in the manner of Charles Dickens and depicting his protagonists first with the broad strokes of the caricaturist and then with a more subtle exploration of their complex feelings. He shows a linguist's ear for the American language—its regional dialects and its ability to cut through hypocrisy and get at the truth. He describes and analyzes the natural landscape, small-town peculiarities, and the haphazard "development" of larger cities with a deftness that prefigures his creation of the Gopher Prairies and Zeniths of his later career. His two principle characters look ahead to Carol and Will Kennicott, Leora and Martin Arrowsmith, Sam Dodsworth, and Ann Vickers. In *Free Air* Lewis depicts his country in all its strengths and weaknesses during an exciting period in its cultural history, a period that requires the fresh, free spirits of adventurous young Americans like Milt Daggett and Claire Boltwood.

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## CHAPTER I

### MISS BOLTWOOD OF BROOKLYN IS LOST IN THE MUD

WHEN the windshield was closed it became so filmed with rain that Claire fancied she was piloting a drowned car in dim spaces under the sea. When it was open, drops jabbed into her eyes and chilled her cheeks. She was excited and thoroughly miserable. She realized that these Minnesota country roads had no respect for her polite experience on Long Island parkways. She felt like a woman, not like a driver.

But the Gomez-Dep roadster had seventy horsepower, and sang songs. Since she had left Minneapolis nothing had passed her. Back yonder a truck had tried to crowd her, and she had dropped into a ditch, climbed a bank, returned to the road, and after that the truck was not. Now she was regarding a view more splendid than mountains above a garden by the sea—a stretch of good road. To her passenger, her father, Claire chanted:

"Heavenly! There's some gravel. We can make time. We'll hustle on to the next town and get dry."

"Yes. But don't mind me. You're doing very well," her father sighed.

Instantly, the dismay of it rushing at her, she saw the end of the patch of gravel. The road ahead was a wet black smear, criss-crossed with ruts. The car shot into a morass of prairie gumbo—which is mud mixed with tar, fly-paper, fish glue, and well-chewed, chocolate-covered caramels. When cattle get into gumbo, the farmers send for the stump-dynamite and try blasting.

It was her first really bad stretch of road. She was frightened. Then she was too appallingly busy to be frightened, or to be Miss Claire Boltwood, or to comfort her uneasy father. She had to drive. Her frail graceful arms put into it a vicious vigor that was genius.

When the wheels struck the slime, they slid, they wallowed. The car skidded. It was terrifyingly out of control. It began majestically to turn toward the ditch. She fought the steering wheel as though she were shadow-boxing, but the car kept contemptuously staggering till it was sideways, straight across the road. Somehow, it was back again, eating into a rut, going ahead. She didn't know how she had done it, but she had got it back. She longed to take time to retrace her own cleverness in steering. She didn't. She kept going.

The car backfired, slowed. She yanked the gear

from third into first. She sped up. The motor ran like a terrified pounding heart, while the car crept on by inches through filthy mud that stretched ahead of her without relief.

She was battling to hold the car in the principal rut. She snatched the windshield open, and concentrated on that left rut. She felt that she was keeping the wheel from climbing those high sides of the rut, those six-inch walls of mud, sparkling with tiny grits. Her mind snarled at her arms, "Let the ruts do the steering. You're just fighting against them." It worked. Once she let the wheels alone they comfortably followed the furrows, and for three seconds she had that delightful belief of every motorist after every mishap, "Now that this particular disagreeableness is over, I'll never, never have any trouble again!"

But suppose the engine overheated, ran out of water? Anxiety twanged at her nerves. And the deep distinctive ruts were changing to a complex pattern, like the rails in a city switchyard. She picked out the track of the one motor car that had been through here recently. It was marked with the swastika tread of the rear tires. That track was her friend; she knew and loved the driver of a car she had never seen in her life.

She was very tired. She wondered if she might not stop for a moment. Then she came to an up-slope. The car faltered; felt indecisive beneath her. She

jabbed down the accelerator. Her hands pushed at the steering wheel as though she were pushing the car. The engine picked up, sulkily kept going. To the eye, there was merely a rise in the rolling ground, but to her anxiety it was a mountain up which she—not the engine, but herself—pulled this bulky mass, till she had reached the top, and was safe again—for a second. Still there was no visible end of the mud.

In alarm she thought, "How long does it last? I can't keep this up. I—Oh!"

The guiding tread of the previous car was suddenly lost in a mass of heaving, bubble-scattered mud, like a batter of black dough. She fairly picked up the car, and flung it into that welter, through it, and back into the reappearing swastika-marked trail.

Her father spoke: "You're biting your lips. They'll bleed, if you don't look out. Better stop and rest."

"Can't! No bottom to this mud. Once stop and lose momentum—stuck for keeps!"

She had ten more minutes of it before she reached a combination of bridge and culvert, with a plank platform above a big tile drain. With this solid plank bottom, she could stop. Silence came roaring down as she turned the switch. The bubbling water in the radiator steamed about the cap. Claire was conscious of tautness of the cords of her neck in front; of a pain at the base of her brain. Her father glanced at her curiously. "I must be a wreck. I'm sure my hair