MAIN STREET

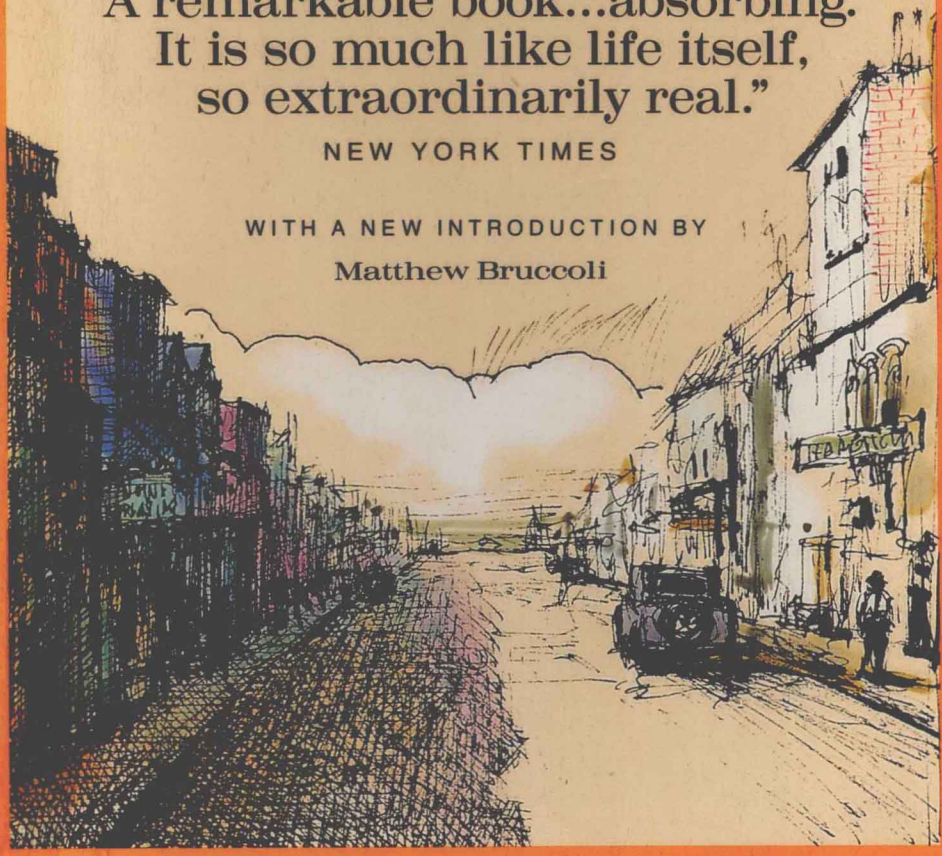
Sinclair Lewis

"A remarkable book...absorbing. It is so much like life itself, so extraordinarily real."

NEW YORK TIMES

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY

Matthew Bruccoli



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INTRODUCTION

I suspect tragedy in the American countryside because all the people capable of it move to the big towns at twenty. All the rest is pathos.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

Novels achieve renown in consequence of their merit and timing. Published in 1920, *Main Street* reached a prodigious readership at the start of what became the debunking decade. Its admirers were so eager for American social satire that the novel, although not written as satire, was acclaimed as one. Sinclair Lewis (1885–1951) described *Main Street* as "a genuinely realistic picture of American life" and claimed that "it is almost the first book which really pictures American small-town life." His use of *picture* as both noun and verb indicates that Lewis regarded his work as photographic realism—as did two authorities with opposing views of American civilization.

William Allen White—editor of the Emporia, Kansas *Gazette* and the influential apostle of the Edenic qualities of small-town America—sent Lewis a fan letter proclaiming: "With all my heart I thank you for William Kennicott and Sam Clark; they are the Gold Dust Twins of common sense.

I don't know where in literature you will find a better American, or more typical, than Dr. Will Kennicott . . . No American has done a greater service for a country in any sort of literature than you have done."

H. L. Mencken—the Baltimore Anti-Christ who tirelessly ridiculed the "booboisie" (philistine boobs) and "boomers" (business promoters)—praised the accuracy and therefore the convincingness of *Main Street* when he reviewed it in his magazine, *The Smart Set*:

> . . . the virtue of the book lies in its packed and brilliant detail. It is an attempt, not to solve the American cultural problem, but simply to depict with great care a group of typical Americans . . . In particular, Mr. Lewis represents their speech vividly and accurately. It would be hard to find a false note in the dialogue, and it would be impossible to exceed the verisimilitude of the various extracts from the Gopher Prairie paper, or of the sermon by a Methodist dervish in the Gopher Prairie Wesleyan cathedral, or of a speech by a boomer at a banquet of the Chamber of Commerce.

That the author of *The American Language* insisted on the reportorial realism of such speeches as Sam Clark's encouragement to Carol Kennicott testifies to the fervor of the novel's partisans: "Now you just cuddle under Sam's wing, and if anybody rubbers at you too long, I'll shoo 'em off. Here we go! Watch my smoke—Sam'l, the ladies' delight and the bridegrooms' terror!" No American really talked that way outside of a Lewis novel.

After publishing a children's book and five unexceptional novels about questing characters, Harry Sinclair Lewis out of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, woke up one morning in 1920 and found himself famous and a satirist. He may have been amused to discover that he had inadvertently produced a satire in the process of writing a truthful representation of certain aspects of America. Lewis, along with Mencken, believed that he was creating believable American characters—or at least recognizable character types. But many readers, then and subsequently, have dismissed Lewis's Americans as stock charac-

ters or caricatures: a serious charge because great fiction requires great characters.

Main Street has a split focus: it is a depiction of Gopher Prairie and the account of Carol Kennicott's revolt against Gopher Prairie.* (Would anyone actually name a town Gopher Prairie?) Whatever its achievement as a fiction of pictorial and linguistic accuracy, *Main Street* is a novel of ideas. The subtitle, dropped from the title page at some post-publication point, is *The Story of Carol Kennicott.* The novel was written as her book, and through her it examines the role of women in American life—a hot subject in the nation that had recently passed the Nineteenth Amendment. The revolt-from-the-village theme is developed through Carol's rejection of the values and conformity of Gopher Prairie.

Main Street maintains a secure place in the line of novels that denounces the myth of wholesome small-town America—usually located in the Midwest. These works excoriate the ignorance, meanness, and hardship of rural life—often with emphasis on the plight of farm women. The list of such nineteenth-century volumes in this sub-genre include E. W. Howe's *The Story of a Country Town* (1883), Joseph Kirkland's *Zury* (1887), Hamlin Garland's *Main-Traveled Roads* (1891), and Mark Twain's "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1899). Two works in the twentieth-century prepared the readership for *Main Street*: Edgar Lee Master's verse narratives, *The Spoon River Anthology* (1915), and Sherwood Anderson's connected short stories, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919).

The problem with Carol as the protagonist of *Main Street* is that she is not intelligent enough or determined enough or even pitiable enough to lead a revolt against Gopher Prairie. Lewis acknowledged her limitations in his 1937 introduction to the novel. She is not "of as good stuff as her husband . . . I had most painstakingly planned that she shouldn't be—that she should be just bright enough to sniff a little but not bright enough to do anything about it." In the novel's strongest epi-

*The dual dedication of *Main Street* provides a key to Lewis's American literary allegiances: James Branch Cabell wrote allegorical romances; Joseph Hergesheimer wrote realistic and historical romances.

sode, Chapter 15, Kennicott amputates a farmer's arm on the kitchen table. The son of Dr. Edwin Lewis retained the memories of accompanying his father on calls. The country doctor's competence and courage contrast with his wife's dissatisfactions and yearnings. Carol's futile attempt to persuade Luke Dawson to finance the rebuilding of Gopher into an architectural wonder is merely foolish.

Seventy-five years after its initial publication *Main Street* endures as an American classic—only partly for historical reasons. One gauge of the staying power of Sinclair Lewis's best work is its capacity to give permanence to its settings and characters. The words "Main Street" are now firmly positioned in the American language to identify aspects of American provincialism. Sinclair Lewis was not America's Charles Dickens; but George F. Babbitt and Elmer Gantry are recognized as American figures by those who have read, as well as those who have not read, their books.

Inevitably, *Main Street* and the Lewis novels that followed were well received abroad, where denunciations of American philistinism are welcomed. This process climaxed in 1930 when he became the first American to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. In his acceptance speech, Sinclair Lewis insisted on the truth of his fiction:

> I had realized, in reading Balzac and Dickens, that it was possible to describe the French and English common people as one actually saw them. But it had never occurred to me that one might, without indecency, write of the people of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, as one felt about them. Our fictional tradition, you see, was that all of us in mid-Western villages were altogether noble and happy. But in Garland's *Main-Traveled Road* I discovered there was one man who believed mid-Western peasants sometimes were bewildered, hungry and vile. And, given this vision, I was released to write of life as giving life.

Matthew J. Bruccoli
December, 1995

This is America—a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves.

The town is, in our tale, called "Gopher Prairie, Minnesota." But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills.

Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters. What Ole Jenson the grocer says to Ezra Stowbody the banker is the new law for London, Prague, and the unprofitable isles of the sea; whatsoever Ezra does not know and sanction, that thing is heresy, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider.

Our railway station is the final aspiration of architecture. Sam Clark's annual hardware turnover is the envy of the four counties which constitute God's Country. In the sensitive art of the Rosebud Movie Palace there is a Message, and humor strictly moral.

Such is our comfortable tradition and sure faith. Would he not betray himself an alien cynic who should otherwise portray Main Street, or distress the citizens by speculating whether there may not be other faiths?

I

I

On a hill by the Mississippi where Chippewas camped two generations ago, a girl stood in relief against the cornflower blue of Northern sky. She saw no Indians now; she saw flour-mills and the blinking windows of skyscrapers in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Nor was she thinking of squaws and portages, and the Yankee fur-traders whose shadows were all about her. She was meditating upon walnut fudge, the plays of Brieux, the reasons why heels run over, and the fact that the chemistry instructor had stared at the new coiffure which concealed her ears.

A breeze which had crossed a thousand miles of wheat-lands bellied her taffeta skirt in a line so graceful, so full of animation and moving beauty, that the heart of a chance watcher on the lower road tightened to wistfulness over her quality of suspended freedom. She lifted her arms, she leaned back against the wind, her skirt dipped and flared, a lock blew wild. A girl on a hilltop; credulous, plastic, young; drinking the air as she longed to drink life. The eternal aching comedy of expectant youth.

It is Carol Milford, fleeing for an hour from Blodgett College.

The days of pioneering, of lassies in sunbonnets, and bears killed with axes in piney clearings, are deader now than Camelot; and a rebellious girl is the spirit of that bewildered empire called the American Middlewest.

II

Blodgett College is on the edge of Minneapolis. It is a bulwark of sound religion. It is still combating the recent heresies of Voltaire, Darwin, and Robert Ingersoll. Pious families in Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, the Dakotas send their children thither, and Blodgett protects them from the wickedness of the universities. But it secretes friendly girls, young men who sing, and one lady instructress who really likes Milton and Carlyle. So the four years which Carol spent at Blodgett were not altogether wasted. The smallness of the school, the fewness of rivals, permitted her to experiment with her perilous versatility. She played tennis, gave chafing-dish parties, took a graduate seminar in the drama, went "twosing," and joined half a dozen societies for the practise of the arts or the tense stalking of a thing called General Culture.

In her class there were two or three prettier girls, but none more eager. She was noticeable equally in the classroom grind and at dances, though out of the three hundred students of Blodgett, scores recited more accurately and dozens Bostoned more smoothly. Every cell of her body was alive—thin wrists, quince-blossom skin, ingénue eyes, black hair.

The other girls in her dormitory marveled at the slightness of her body when they saw her in sheer negligée, or darting out wet from a shower-bath. She seemed then but half as large as they had supposed; a fragile child who must be cloaked with understanding kindness. "Psychic," the girls whispered, and "spiritual." Yet so radioactive were her nerves, so adventurous her trust in rather vaguely conceived sweetness and light, that she was more energetic than any of the hulking young women who, with calves bulging in heavy-ribbed woolen stockings beneath decorous blue serge bloomers, thuddingly galloped across the floor of the "gym" in practise for the Blodgett Ladies' Basket-Ball Team.

Even when she was tired her dark eyes were observant. She did not yet know the immense ability of the world to be casually cruel and proudly dull, but if she should ever learn those dismaying powers, her eyes would never become sullen or heavy or rheumily amorous.

For all her enthusiasms, for all the fondness and the "crushes" which she inspired, Carol's acquaintances were shy of her. When she was most ardently singing hymns or planning deviltry she yet seemed gently aloof and critical. She was credulous, perhaps; a born hero-worshipper; yet she did question and examine unceasingly. Whatever she might become she would never be static.

Her versatility ensnared her. By turns she hoped to discover that she had an unusual voice, a talent for the piano, the ability to act, to write, to manage organizations. Always she was disappointed, but always she effervesced anew—over the Student Volunteers, who intended to become missionaries, over painting scenery for the dramatic club, over soliciting advertisements for the college magazine.

She was on the peak that Sunday afternoon when she played in chapel. Out of the dusk her violin took up the organ theme, and the candle-light revealed her in a straight golden frock, her arm arched to the bow, her lips serious. Every man fell in love then with religion and Carol.

Throughout Senior year she anxiously related all her experiments and partial successes to a career. Daily, on the library steps or in the hall of the Main Building, the co-eds talked of "What shall we do when we finish college?" Even the girls who knew that they were going to be married pretended to be considering important business positions; even they who knew that they would have to work hinted about fabulous suitors. As for Carol, she was an orphan; her only near relative was a vanilla-flavored sister married to an optician in St. Paul. She had used most of the money from her father's estate. She was not in love—that is, not often, nor ever long at a time. She would earn her living.

But how she was to earn it, how she was to conquer the world—almost entirely for the world's own good—she did not see. Most of the girls who were not betrothed meant to be teachers. Of these there were two sorts: careless young women who admitted that they intended to leave the "beastly classroom and

grubby children" the minute they had a chance to marry; and studious, sometimes bulbous-browed and pop-eyed maidens who at class prayer-meetings requested God to "guide their feet along the paths of greatest usefulness." Neither sort tempted Carol. The former seemed insincere (a favorite word of hers at this era). The earnest virgins were, she fancied, as likely to do harm as to do good by their faith in the value of parsing Caesar.

At various times during Senior year Carol finally decided upon studying law, writing motion-picture scenarios, professional nursing, and marrying an unidentified hero.

Then she found a hobby in sociology.

The sociology instructor was new. He was married, and therefore taboo, but he had come from Boston, he had lived among poets and socialists and Jews and millionaire uplifters at the University Settlement in New York, and he had a beautiful white strong neck. He led a giggling class through the prisons, the charity bureaus, the employment agencies of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Trailing at the end of the line Carol was indignant at the prodding curiosity of the others, their manner of staring at the poor as at a Zoo. She felt herself a great liberator. She put her hand to her mouth, her forefinger and thumb quite painfully pinching her lower lip, and frowned, and enjoyed being aloof.

A classmate named Stewart Snyder, a competent bulky young man in a gray flannel shirt, a rusty black bow tie, and the green-and-purple class cap, grumbled to her as they walked behind the others in the muck of the South St. Paul stockyards, "These college chumps make me tired. They're so top-lofty. They ought to of worked on the farm, the way I have. These workmen put it all over them."

"I just love common workmen," glowed Carol.

"Only you don't want to forget that common workmen don't think they're common!"

"You're right! I apologize!" Carol's brows lifted in the astonishment of emotion, in a glory of abasement. Her eyes mothered the world. Stewart Snyder peered at her. He rammed his large red fists into his pockets, he jerked them out, he resolutely got rid of them by clenching his hands behind him, and he stammered:

"I know. You *get* people. Most of these darn co-eds—— Say, Carol, you could do a lot for people."

"How?"

"Oh—oh well—you know—sympathy and everything—if you were—say you were a lawyer's wife. You'd understand his clients. I'm going to be a lawyer. I admit I fall down in sympathy sometimes. I get so dog-gone impatient with people that can't stand the gaff. You'd be good for a fellow that was too serious. Make him more—more—*you* know—sympathetic!"

His slightly pouting lips, his mastiff eyes, were begging her to beg him to go on. She fled from the steam-roller of his sentiment. She cried, "Oh, see those poor sheep—millions and millions of them." She darted on.

Stewart was not interesting. He hadn't a shapely white neck, and he had never lived among celebrated reformers. She wanted, just now, to have a cell in a settlement-house, like a nun without the bother of a black robe, and be kind, and read Bernard Shaw, and enormously improve a horde of grateful poor.

The supplementary reading in sociology led her to a book on village-improvement—tree-planting, town pageants, girls' clubs. It had pictures of greens and garden-walls in France, New England, Pennsylvania. She had picked it up carelessly, with a slight yawn which she patted down with her finger-tips as delicately as a cat.

She dipped into the book, lounging on her window-seat, with her slim, lisle-stockinged legs crossed, and her knees up under her chin. She stroked a satin pillow while she read. About her was the clothy exuberance of a Blodgett College room: cretonne-covered window-seat, photographs of girls, a carbon print of the Coliseum, a chafing-dish, and a dozen pillows embroidered or beaded or pyrographed. Shockingly out of place was a miniature of the Dancing Bacchante. It was the only trace of Carol in the room. She had inherited the rest from generations of girl students.

It was as a part of all this commonplaceness that she regarded the treatise on village-improvement. But she suddenly stopped fidgeting. She strode into the book. She had fled half-way through it before the three o'clock bell called her to the class in English history.

She sighed, "That's what I'll do after college! I'll get my hands on one of these prairie towns and make it beautiful. Be an inspiration. I suppose I'd better become a teacher then, but—I won't be that kind of a teacher. I won't drone. Why should they have all the garden suburbs on Long Island? Nobody has done anything with the ugly towns here in the Northwest except hold revivals and build libraries to contain the Elsie books. I'll make 'em put in a village green, and darling cottages, and a quaint Main Street!"

Thus she triumphed through the class, which was a typical Blodgett contest between a dreary teacher and unwilling children of twenty, won by the teacher because his opponents had to answer his questions, while their treacherous queries he could counter by demanding, "Have you looked that up in the library? Well then, suppose you do!"

The history instructor was a retired minister. He was sarcastic today. He begged of sporting young Mr. Charley Holmberg, "Now Charles, would it interrupt your undoubtedly fascinating pursuit of that malevolent fly if I were to ask you to tell us that you do not know anything about King John?" He spent three delightful minutes in assuring himself of the fact that no one exactly remembered the date of Magna Charta.

Carol did not hear him. She was completing the roof of a half-timbered town hall. She had found one man in the prairie village who did not appreciate her picture of winding streets and arcades, but she had assembled the town council and dramatically defeated him.

III

Though she was Minnesota-born Carol was not an intimate of the prairie villages. Her father, the smiling and shabby, the learned and teasingly kind, had come from Massachusetts, and through all her childhood he had been a judge in Mankato, which is not a prairie town, but in its garden-sheltered streets and aisles of elms is white and green New England reborn. Mankato lies between cliffs and the Minnesota River, hard by Traverse des Sioux, where the first settlers made treaties with the Indians, and

the cattle-rustlers once came galloping before hell-for-leather posses.

As she climbed along the banks of the dark river Carol listened to its fables about the wide land of yellow waters and bleached buffalo bones to the West; the Southern levees and singing darkies and palm trees toward which it was forever mysteriously gliding; and she heard again the startled bells and thick puffing of high-stacked river steamers wrecked on sand-reefs sixty years ago. Along the decks she saw missionaries, gamblers in tall pot hats, and Dakota chiefs with scarlet blankets. . . . Far off whistles at night, round the river bend, plunking paddles reechoed by the pines, and a glow on black sliding waters.

Carol's family were self-sufficient in their inventive life, with Christmas a rite full of surprises and tenderness, and "dressing-up parties" spontaneous and joyously absurd. The beasts in the Milford hearth-mythology were not the obscene Night Animals who jump out of closets and eat little girls, but beneficent and bright-eyed creatures—the tam htab, who is woolly and blue and lives in the bathroom, and runs rapidly to warm small feet; the ferruginous oil stove, who purrs and knows stories; and the skitamarigg, who will play with children before breakfast if they spring out of bed and close the window at the very first line of the song about puellas which father sings while shaving.

Judge Milford's pedagogical scheme was to let the children read whatever they pleased, and in his brown library Carol absorbed Balzac and Rabelais and Thoreau and Max Müller. He gravely taught them the letters on the backs of the encyclopedias, and when polite visitors asked about the mental progress of the "little ones," they were horrified to hear the children earnestly repeating A-And, And-Aus, Aus-Bis, Bis-Cal, Cal-Cha.

Carol's mother died when she was nine. Her father retired from the judiciary when she was eleven, and took the family to Minneapolis. There he died, two years after. Her sister, a busy proper advisory soul, older than herself, had become a stranger to her even when they lived in the same house.

From those early brown and silver days and from her independence of relatives Carol retained a willingness to be different from brisk efficient book-ignoring people; an instinct to observe and wonder at their bustle even when she was taking part in it.

But, she felt approvingly, as she discovered her career of town-planning, she was now roused to being brisk and efficient herself.

IV

In a month Carol's ambition had clouded. Her hesitancy about becoming a teacher had returned. She was not, she worried, strong enough to endure the routine, and she could not picture herself standing before grinning children and pretending to be wise and decisive. But the desire for the creation of a beautiful town remained. When she encountered an item about small-town women's clubs or a photograph of a straggling Main Street, she was homesick for it, she felt robbed of her work.

It was the advice of the professor of English which led her to study professional library-work in a Chicago school. Her imagination carved and colored the new plan. She saw herself persuading children to read charming fairy tales, helping young men to find books on mechanics, being ever so courteous to old men who were hunting for newspapers—the light of the library, an authority on books, invited to dinners with poets and explorers, reading a paper to an association of distinguished scholars.

V

The last faculty reception before commencement. In five days they would be in the cyclone of final examinations.

The house of the president had been massed with palms suggestive of polite undertaking parlors, and in the library, a ten-foot room with a globe and the portraits of Whittier and Martha Washington, the student orchestra was playing "Carmen" and "Madame Butterfly." Carol was dizzy with music and the emotions of parting. She saw the palms as a jungle, the pink-shaded electric globes as an opaline haze, and the eye-glassed faculty as Olympians. She was melancholy at sight of the mousey girls with whom she had "always intended to get acquainted," and the half dozen young men who were ready to fall in love with her.

But it was Stewart Snyder whom she encouraged. He was so

much manlier than the others; he was an even warm brown, like his new ready-made suit with its padded shoulders. She sat with him, and with two cups of coffee and a chicken patty, upon a pile of presidential overshoes in the coat-closet under the stairs, and as the thin music seeped in, Stewart whispered:

"I can't stand it, this breaking up after four years! The happiest years of life."

She believed it. "Oh, I know! To think that in just a few days we'll be parting, and we'll never see some of the bunch again!"

"Carol, you got to listen to me! You always duck when I try to talk seriously to you, but you got to listen to me. I'm going to be a big lawyer, maybe a judge, and I need you, and I'd protect you——"

His arm slid behind her shoulders. The insinuating music drained her independence. She said mournfully, "Would you take care of me?" She touched his hand. It was warm, solid.

"You bet I would! We'd have, Lord, we'd have bully times in Yankton, where I'm going to settle——"

"But I want to do something with life."

"What's better than making a comfy home and bringing up some cute kids and knowing nice homey people?"

It was the immemorial male reply to the restless woman. Thus to the young Sappho spake the melon-venders; thus the captains to Zenobia; and in the damp cave over gnawed bones the hairy suitor thus protested to the woman advocate of matriarchy. In the dialect of Blodgett College but with the voice of Sappho was Carol's answer:

"Of course. I know. I suppose that's so. Honestly, I do love children. But there's lots of women that can do housework, but I—well, if you *have* got a college education, you ought to use it for the world."

"I know, but you can use it just as well in the home. And gee, Carol, just think of a bunch of us going out on an auto picnic, some nice spring evening."

"Yes."

"And sleigh-riding in winter, and going fishing——"

Blarrrrrrr! The orchestra had crashed into the "Soldiers' Chorus"; and she was protesting, "No! No! You're a dear, but I want to do things. I don't understand myself but I want—every-