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## Film Reviews, by Jno.

# INFIRM OF PURPOSE

CASS TIMBERLANE

(M.G.M.)

THERE are few things I find more irksome than the film which begins with a social or moral problem, develops the theme halfway, then retreats precipitately from the logical conclusion. And when it dithers around for close on 11,000 feet—as Cass Timberlane does—and then gets nowhere, it can be downright annoying. But I am not sure whether I should be annoyed with M.G.M. or with Sinclair Lewis. My acquaintance with the latter is confined to his Dodsworth-Babbitt-Gantry period and Cass Timberlane is a more recent novel which (so the film credits told me) was serialised in one of the glossier U.S. weekly magazines. Success (he refused a Pulitzer award and was the first American to win a Nobel Prize for literature) may have made Lewis acceptable in strange quarters, or as so often happens he may have lost some of his bite with the passage of the years, but even making reasonable allowance for that I can't imagine him growing quite so toothless as this screen-story suggests. It is true that he is better at depicting the shortcomings of society than at finding solutions for them, but at least I would not accuse him of contriving facile and romantic endings.

As a satirist, Lewis is interested primarily in the American middle class and the principal characters in his novels tend to be types, a little larger (or smaller) than life-size. Babbitt is so much the epitome of the small go-getting businessman that his name has become a byword, Elmer Gantry is the religious hypocrite raised to the nth power. The Hon. Cass Timberlane is therefore, I assume, intended as a reasonably typical sample of the middle stratum of the United States judiciary.

The peculiar position of State circuit judges who may, apparently, owe office to political patronage would seem to be a first-class subject for a serious picture, but this aspect of the story receives, so far as I can recall, only two purely incidental mentions in the whole film. A good deal of time, on the other hand, is given over to depicting the social difficulties which follow the judge's marriage to a girl from the wrong side of the railroad tracks. And just in case it is not clear enough that she is from the wrong side of the tracks, his Honour (Spencer Tracy) is seen picking his way across them to meet her.

To New Zealanders who may have somewhat conservative ideas about the Bench all that may sound a trifle out of judicial character. But then, American circuit judges are different. Assuming that Cass Timberlane is typical (in a Gallupian sense) they are for the most part cheerful and whimsical fellows on the sunnier side of forty-five, not above taking an interest in a pretty witness or refereeing a ball-game when off duty. The average judge, apparently, also plays the flute and is allergic to cats. The film burbles on in this innocuous but wearying strain for about two-thirds of its slow length before (I assume) someone wakes up to the fact that Sinclair Lewis had more than the domestic problems of Mr. Timberlane in mind. It is

## BAROMETER

OVERCAST: "Cass Timberlane."  
CLOUDY: "The Foxes of Harrow."

then revealed that two of the judge's country-club acquaintances are relying on him to grant periodical *sine die* adjournments of a civil action which threatens to reveal their mishandling of certain war-contracts. Even then there are about another thousand feet to go before the judge himself wakes up to all this chicanery. In the meantime his sorely-tried wife runs away to New York, gets involved first with another man and then with a car accident, though fortunately neither collision proves fatal. Reconciliation supervenes just as his Honour is in a position to reveal that the graft case has been heard and the two principal defendants indicted. Conscience is therefore cleared before the final clinch. But for me the most interesting possibilities of the situation remained unexplored. Judge meets girl is all very well, but I would much rather have seen the judge meeting the country club after indicting its two most prominent members.

Spencer Tracy, who has hardly half-a-dozen lines that are worth repeating, and a great many that verge on drivel, bumbles about like an amiable but slightly puzzled teddy-bear, and Lana Turner is not much more than decorative. Of the players the only one who seemed to me to capture the spirit of a Sinclair Lewis original was Mary Astor, and her part was a minor one.

A week or so ago I had occasion to draw attention to the sterling performance of a shaggy dog in an otherwise undistinguished picture. Cass Timberlane runs to cats and there are some delightful shots of a small kitten which drew coos of appreciation from the Wellington first-night audience.

## THE FOXES OF HARROW

(20th Century-Fox)

WHAT M.G.M. did to Spencer Tracy in Cass Timberlane is as nothing compared with what the early 19th Century Foxes of Harrow and the 20th Century Foxes of Hollywood do to Rex Harrison. When we first meet Mr. Harrison—on a sandbank in the middle of the lower Mississippi, where he has been unceremoniously marooned for a trifling irregularity at a river-steamer card-table—he is almost on the uppers of his elastic-sided boots (the time is around 1830). Providentially rescued by Victor McLaglen, he speedily establishes himself in the good graces of New Orleans society through his facility at pontoon (*Sacre bleu!* I mean *vingt-et-un*) by which he fleeces the town's bad man prior to finishing him off properly in a duel. From that point on there seems to be no stopping him. He builds a great house, imports slaves, exports cotton, and almost overnight becomes the commercial kingfish of Louisiana. Then the stockmarket takes a dive. He gets hammered on 'Change, clouted on the cotton-market and leathered at Lloyds (he has also acquired shipping interests). Somewhere about this point the lights go up. "Ze less said about zis affaire ze bettaire," remarks one of the characters, in the quaint patois of old New Orleans. *Absolument*, as the French say.



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