

Booster Babbitt of Zenith, the Zip City

Sinclair Lewis, Author of "Main Street," Produces "Babbitt," His Second Satire at the Expense of the Solid American Citizen—A Masterpiece of Slang and Photograph Detail.

By Prof. W. T. Allison.

Not content with having cleaned up a fortune from "Main Street," Sinclair Lewis has now written a rollicking satire, entitled "Babbitt," which will probably have twice as large a sale as its predecessor. I imagine that "Babbitt" will be received with an agile of laughter by the good-natured American public, but, if I were an American, I know that I would be displeased with any novelist who should give such an exaggerated, not to say distorted, picture of the home, business, and church life of my country as is to be found in the four hundred pages of this story. If a Canadian or English writer were to pillory the people of the United States as Mr. Lewis has done, there would be a frightful roar of anger from an insulted nation. But critics in the great republic approve of "Babbitt." Burton Rascoe has written a review of it in which he fairly shouts with delight; he declares that "Babbitt" is "absolutely immense." Professor Stuart P. Sherman of the University of Illinois says that Sinclair Lewis is "conspiring with the spirit of the time to become the most interesting and important novelist in America." Even the acridulous Henry L. Menckel pines with delight. "I know of no novel," he roundly asserts, "that more accurately presents the real America. George F. Babbitt should become as real as Jack Dempsey or Charlie Schwab. The fellow simply drips with human juices." There is no disputing the fact that Babbitt is human, but when Mr. Lewis presents him and his neighbors and associates in business as typical American nation-builders and the American of this story as the real America he is beside himself and truth is not in him. In spite of the fact that the author of this novel is a realist after Zola's own heart, he has not yet learned to portray life accurately. He is an adept in photographing individuals and hole-in-corner scenes, but he has no sense of proportion. He sees American life through yellow goggles; he does not see it in its own clear, healthy, normal light, and he does not see it whole.

A Story of Zenith, "The Zip City." Mr. Lewis might have redeemed his story from exaggeration if he had not deliberately made Babbitt the most attractive citizen in Zenith, "the Zip city," the beautiful and prosperous American metropolis, "the best city town in the U.S.A." He keeps Babbitt, the most active member of the Babbitt-Thompson Realty Company, in the limelight all the time, and the other characters, the members of his family, of his social

circle, of his clubs and the business world in which he moves, are made out of the same clay as his own coarse self. We can believe that there are thousands of American citizens who act and talk like Babbitt, but it is equally true that there are just as many, I hope more, who are superior to him in character and in speech. It is a pity that Mr. Lewis found no place for a few of these better-type Americans near the centre of his stage. He has made a wonderful study of the loud-mouthed, slangy, pushful, hectoring, immoral son of Uncle Sam in George F. Babbitt, who is amusing, pathetic, disgusting, and always interesting, but why could we not have been brought into touch with at least one neighbor or business associate who could have reminded us of the fact that the Zeniths of the U.S.A. possess some citizens who are men of refinement and high principle? Mr. Lewis allows a Presbyterian minister, a Y.M.C.A. secretary, and a bank president to flit across his stage, but they are caricatures introduced for the purpose of holding up religion to ridicule. Next to Babbitt in the affections of the writer of this story, who is evidently a socialist, are Seneca Doane, a strike leader, and Paul Riesling, who shoots his wife and lands in penitentiary.

A Long Day in Babbitt's Life. The plot, if it can be called such, of this story, is exceedingly simple. Its unity centres in Babbitt and the author never lets him get out of our sight. He gives the most abundant details of his sayings and doings; for example, the first hundred pages are consumed in describing what Babbitt said and did, and incidentally what the members of his family and his acquaintances said to him, in one long day in his feverishly active life. I question whether any novelist has ever devoted such generous space to trivialities. We catch our first glimpse of Babbitt, aged forty-six, as he indulges in an early-morning sleeping-porch dream. At the hero (?) he is tossing uneasily at every dog bark in the street, Mr. Lewis calls our attention to his large pink head, his babyish face, the red spectacle-dents on the slopes of his nose, and his slightly puffy hands against the khaki-colored blanket. It takes two pages of description to transfer the awakened Babbitt from the porch to the bathroom, and another page to shave him. We are told that he slipped on the mat and slid against the tub and swore. He lathered himself furiously and raked his plump cheeks with a safety-razor. A bad-tempered search for a new blade was crowned with success; he found

the packet in the medicine cabinet behind a round box of bicarbonate of soda. After this he laid vandal hands on the guest towel, a pansy-embroidered trifle which no guest ever dared touch. His wife came along just in time to discover him snoring. The ideal of American manhood and culture isn't a lot of cranks sitting around chewing the rag about their Rights and their Wrongs, but a God-fearing, bustling, successful, two-footed Regular Guy, who belongs to some church with pep and plety to it, who belongs to the Boosters or the Rotarians or the Kiwanis, to the Elks or Moose or Redmen or Knights of Columbus of any one of a score of organizations of good, jolly, kidding, laughing, sweating, upstanding, lending-handing Royal Good Fellows, who plays hard and works hard, and whose answer to his critics is a square-toed boot that'll teach the grouchies and smart alecks to respect the He-man and get out and root for Uncle Samuel, U.S.A.!"

Babbitt's Turn as Regular Guy. Mr. Lewis uses up his space in this book to put Babbitt through his paces as a "regular guy." We see him in his office putting through a crooked real estate deal for certain street-traction officials; flirting with a manicure girl in a barber shop; discharging one of his old employees; mixing cocktails for a dinner party in his home on Floral Heights, a dinner which was, as he put it, not only "a regular society spread but a real sure-enough highbrow affair, with some of the keenest intellects and in this act of irreverence and he had to listen to a thorough discussion of all the domestic and social aspects of towels. We are spared a verbatim account of this deliverance, but nearly a whole page of dialogue is devoted to the question whether Babbitt should wear his brown or his gray suit. No wonder the author had to begin chapter two before he gathered the Babbitt family around the breakfast table.

Babbitt Reads Morning Paper. The chief impression which Mr. Sinclair Lewis seeks to leave on the reader is that the average American is foolishly conservative in his views on public questions, especially in his prejudices against socialism. After coffee and corn-flakes, to say nothing of a slangy row between the youthful Babbitts, Ted and Verona, the head of the house settles down to enjoy his morning drug, the "Advocate-Times." "Lots of news," he cries to his wife, who in twenty-three years of married life had seen the paper before her husband just sixty-seven times. "Terrible big tornado in the south. Hard luck, all right. But this, say, it is corking! Beginning of the end for those fellows New York Assembly has passed some bills that ought to completely outlaw the socialists! And there's an elevator-runners' strike in New York and a lot of college boys are taking their places. That's the stuff! And a mass-meeting in Birmingham's demanded that this Mick agitator, this fellow De Valera, be deported. Dead right, by golly! All these agitators paid with German gold, anyway. And we got no business interfering with the Irish or any other foreign government. Keep our hands strictly off. And there's another well-authenticated rumor from Russia that Lenin is dead. That's fine. It's beyond me why we don't just step in there and kick those Bolshevik cusses out." "That's so," said Mrs. Babbitt. "And it says here a fellow was inaugurated mayor in overall—a preacher too! What do you think of that?" "Humph! Well!" "He searched for an attitude, but neither as a Republican, a Presbyterian, an Elk, nor a real-estate broker did he have any doctrine about preacher-mayors, laid down for him, so he grunted and went on. She looked sympathetic and did not hear a word. Later she would read the headlines, the society columns, and the department-store advertisements."

Picture of Solid American Citizens. According to this story, Americans pride themselves on being standardized. At least the author makes the crowd roar applause when G. F. Babbitt, at the annual dinner of the Zenith Real Estate Board, describes the standardized citizen. Babbitt's set speech, full of oratory and bad English, occupies nine pages and is calculated to make every Canadian laugh loud and long at the expense of the nation which has "a golden roster of cities," all of them standing together "for power and purity, and against foreign ideas and communism." Speaking for the nation of "Regular Guys," Babbitt orates as follows: "Some time I hope folks will quit handing all the credit to a lot of moth-eaten, mildewed, out-of-date, old European damps, and give proper credit to the famous Zenith spirit, that clean fighting determination to win success that has made the little old Zip City celebrated in every land and clime whenever condensed milk and pastboard cartoons are known! Believe me, the world has fallen too long for these worn-out countries that aren't producing anything but toothbacks and scenery and booze, that haven't got one bathroom per hundred people, and that don't know a loose-leaf ledger from a slip-cover; and it's just about time for some Zenithite to get his back up and holler for a show-down!" With all modesty, I want to stand up here as a representative business man and gently whisper, "Here's our kind of folks! Here's the new generation of Americans; fellows with hair on their chests and smiles in their eyes and adding-machines in their offices. We're not doing any boasting, but we like ourselves first-rate, and if you don't like us, look out—better get under cover before the cyclone hits

the brightest bunch of little women in town"; putting new life into the Presbyterian Sunday school; exchanging repartee with his friends at the Boosters' Club; buying bootlegger Canadian whiskey at the request of a merry widow with whom he carries on an amour while his wife is out of town; allowing his ego to expand at a real estate dealers' convention; asserting his right to think for himself during a big strike and then allowing himself to be dragged off by big business; finding a new love rising in his heart for his much-abused wife when she goes to the hospital for an operation, and, finally, blessing his pert son for showing up his college career and dropping with the young daughter of the next-door neighbor. These episodes will give my readers some idea of the action of this story. In spite of his mastery of the art of observation and of the slang now current in the zip cities in America, in spite of the energy of his style and his power to raise a laugh in almost every paragraph, I do not feel that Mr. Sinclair Lewis should pride himself on having written this parody of American life. —W. T. ALLISON.

Literary Notes. A Canadian writer, who in the near future may be expected to write a long poem after the style of Virgil's "Georgics," is F. L. Pollock. He has forsaken the city for the country and has recently established an apathy in Sledsden, Ontario. This year he obtained from his industrious little workers several thousand pounds of honey. In a year or so he will be shipping honey by the carload. But Mr. Pollock is extracting not only honey but stories from his hives. Several years ago he wrote "Wholesome Honey," a capital narrative which attracted so many readers that the Century Company has persuaded him to write a sequel, which is now in the press. In addition to being an accomplished story teller, Mr. Pollock is a poet with a real style. An important event in the history of the Anglican Church in Canada this year was the publication of a revised edition of the Book of Common Prayer. The Ven. Archdeacon Armitage, of Halifax, who was secretary of the revision committee, has written "The Story of the Revision of the Prayer Book," wherein he has described the aims and labors of the committee and has explained the changes that have been made.

Robert Keable, the ex-clergyman who wrote exotic novels, "Simon Called Peter" and "The Mother of All Living," has now produced another story which will shock his former associates in the church. "Peradventure" is the story of a young man who passes through one denominational belief after another in search of spiritual satisfaction and of peace. The author shows that he is a rebel against organized religion. His novel will be widely discussed and probably preached about.

Among scholars there has been, during the last twenty years, a decided modification in the old views of the causes which led to the American Revolution. "The Causes of the War of Independence," by Prof. C. H. Van Tynes, of the University of Michigan, is the first book in which all recent investigations in the archives of America, France and England have authoritatively been employed. The English publisher of this book is Constable, of London.

An American writer, Willard H. Wright, has put on his war paint and taken up his hatchet against the editors of the latest edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica because they have failed to mention in their supplement many of his fellow-countrymen. Even when they have noticed prominent Americans, Newton D. Baker, for instance, he claims that they have revealed bias. Listen, however, to Mr. Wright's plangent indictment of the E.B. He says that it is "characterized by misstatements, inexcusable omissions, racial and patriotic prejudices, personal animosities, blatant errors of fact, scholastic ignorance, gross neglect of non-British culture, an astounding egotism, and an undignified contempt for American progress." This is passing strange, for there are a number of American scholars on the staff of E.B. If Mr. Wright's charges are true it looks as if he ought to lay the blame at the door of his fellow-citizens.

In view of the desire which has been expressed that a biography of the late Viscount Bryce should be published, Viscountess Bryce would be grateful if his friends in the United States and Canada would have the courtesy to forward to her any of his letters which they may have preserved. The letters will be duly returned as soon as copies of them have been made. —W.T.A.

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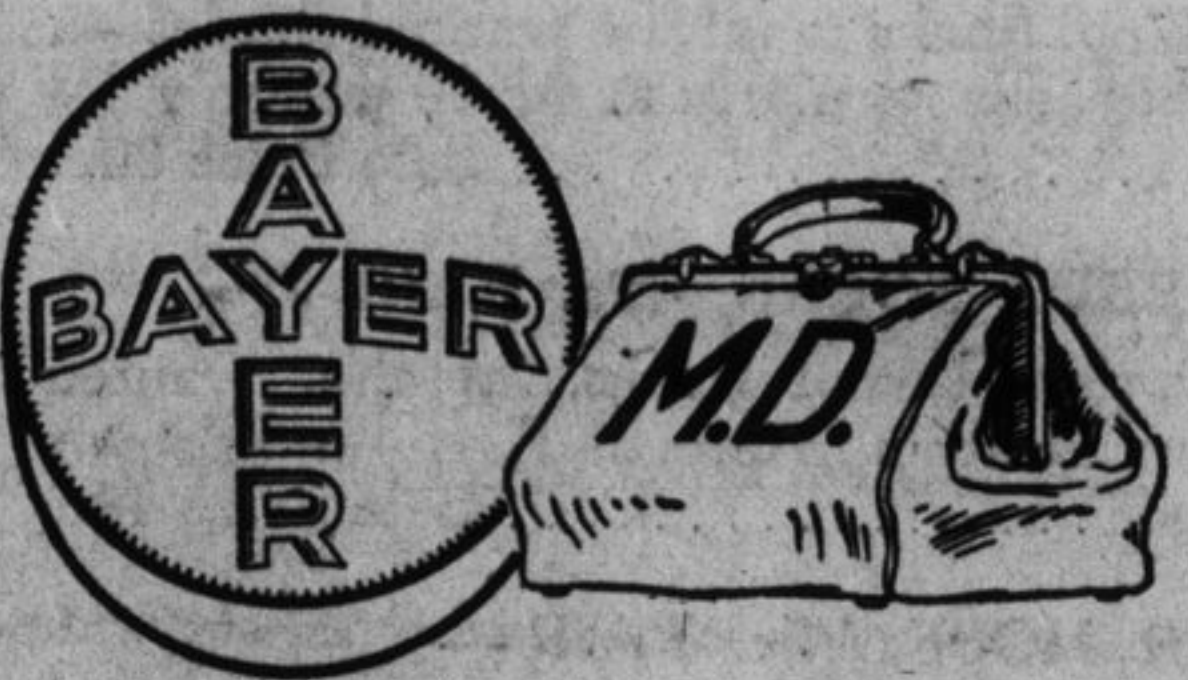
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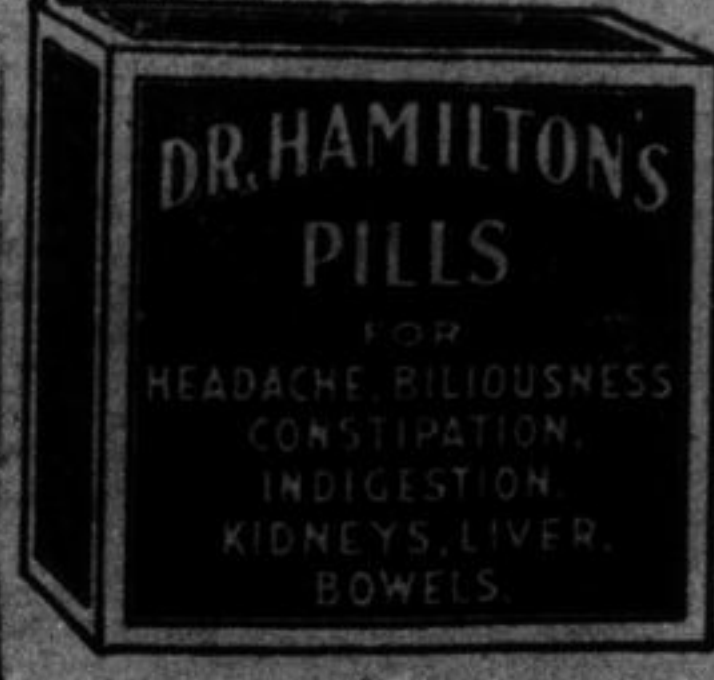
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