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*Babbitt*



To  
EDITH WHARTON



## CHAPTER I

### I

THE TOWERS OF ZENITH aspired\* above the morning mist – austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods. They were neither citadels nor churches, but frankly and beautifully office buildings.

The mist took pity on the fretted structures of earlier generations: the post office with its shingle-tortured mansard, the red-brick minarets of hulking old houses, factories with stingy and sooted windows, wooden tenements coloured like mud. The city was full of such grotesqueries, but the clean towers were thrusting them from the business centre, and on the farther hills were shining new houses, homes – they seemed – for laughter and tranquillity.

Over a concrete bridge fled a limousine of long sleek hood and noiseless engine. These people in evening clothes were returning from an all-night rehearsal of a Little Theatre play, an artistic adventure considerably illuminated by champagne. Below the bridge curved a railroad, a maze of green and crimson lights. The New York Flyer\* boomed past, and twenty lines of polished steel leapt into the glare.

In one of the skyscrapers the wires of the Associated Press were closing down. The telegraph operators wearily raised their celluloid eyeshades after a night of talking with Paris and Peking.\* Through the building crawled the scrubwomen, yawning, their old shoes slapping. The dawn mist spun away. Cues of men with lunch-boxes clumped towards the immensity of new factories, sheets of glass and hollow tile, glittering shops where five thousand men worked beneath one roof, pouring out the honest wares that would be sold up the Euphrates\* and across the veldt.\* The whistles rolled out in greeting a chorus cheerful as the April dawn – the song of labour in a city built – it seemed – for giants.



## II

There was nothing of the giant in the aspect of the man who was beginning to awaken on the sleeping porch of a Dutch Colonial house in that residential district of Zenith known as Floral Heights.

His name was George F. Babbitt. He was forty-six years old now, in April 1920, and he made nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay.

His large head was pink, his brown hair thin and dry. His face was babyish in slumber, despite his wrinkles and the red spectacle dents on the slopes of his nose. He was not fat, but he was exceedingly well fed; his cheeks were pads, and the unroughened hand which lay helpless upon the khaki-coloured blanket was slightly puffy. He seemed prosperous, extremely married and unromantic – and altogether unromantic appeared this sleeping porch, which looked on one sizeable elm, two respectable grass plots, a cement driveway and a corrugated-iron garage. Yet Babbitt was again dreaming of the fairy child, a dream more romantic than scarlet pagodas by a silver sea.

For years the fairy child had come to him. Where others saw but Georgie Babbitt, she discerned gallant youth. She waited for him, in the darkness beyond mysterious groves. When at last he could slip away from the crowded house, he darted to her. His wife, his clamouring friends, sought to follow, but he escaped, the girl fleet beside him, and they crouched together on a shadowy hillside. She was so slim, so white, so eager! She cried that he was gay and valiant, that she would wait for him, that they would sail—

Rumble and bang of the milk truck.

Babbitt moaned, turned over, struggled back towards his dream. He could see only her face now, beyond misty waters. The furnaceman slammed the basement door. A dog barked in the next yard. As Babbitt sank blissfully into a dim, warm tide, the paper carrier went by whistling, and the rolled-up *Advocate* thumped the front door. Babbitt roused, his stomach constricted with alarm. As he relaxed, he was pierced by the familiar and irritating rattle of someone cranking a Ford: snap-ah-ah, snap-ah-ah, snap-ah-ah. Himself a pious motorist, Babbitt cranked with the unseen driver, with him waited through taut hours for the roar of the starting engine, with him agonized as the roar ceased and again began the infernal patient “snap-ah-ah” – a round, flat sound, a shivering cold-morning sound, a sound infuriating and inescapable. Not till

the rising voice of the motor told him that the Ford was moving was he released from the panting tension. He glanced once at his favourite tree, elm twigs against the gold patina of sky, and fumbled for sleep as for a drug. He who had been a boy very credulous of life was no longer greatly interested in the possible and improbable adventures of each new day.

He escaped from reality till the alarm clock rang, at seven twenty.

### III

It was the best of nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm clocks, with all modern attachments, including cathedral chime, intermittent alarm and a phosphorescent dial. Babbitt was proud of being awakened by such a rich device. Socially, it was almost as creditable as buying expensive cord tyres.

He sulkily admitted now that there was no more escape, but he lay and detested the grind of the real-estate business, and disliked his family, and disliked himself for disliking them. The evening before, he had played poker at Vergil Gunch's till midnight, and after such holidays he was irritable before breakfast. It may have been the tremendous home-brewed beer of the Prohibition Era\* and the cigars to which that beer enticed him – it may have been resentment of return from this fine, bold man world to a restricted region of wives and stenographers, and of suggestions not to smoke so much.

From the bedroom beside the sleeping porch, his wife's detestably cheerful "Time to get up, Georgie boy" and the itchy sound – the brisk and scratchy sound – of combing hairs out of a stiff brush.

He grunted; he dragged his thick legs, in faded baby-blue pyjamas, from under the khaki blanket; he sat on the edge of the cot, running his fingers through his wild hair, while his plump feet mechanically felt for his slippers. He looked regretfully at the blanket – forever a suggestion to him of freedom and heroism. He had bought it for a camping trip which had never come off. It symbolized gorgeous loafing, gorgeous cursing, virile flannel shirts.

He creaked to his feet, groaning at the waves of pain which passed behind his eyeballs. Though he waited for their scorching recurrence, he looked blurrily out at the yard. It delighted him, as always: it was the neat yard of a successful businessman of Zenith – that is, it was perfection, and made him also perfect. He regarded the corrugated-iron garage. For

the three-hundred-and-sixty-fifth time in a year he reflected, "No class to that tin shack. Have to build me a frame garage. But by golly it's the only thing on the place that isn't up to date!" While he stared, he thought of a community garage for his acreage development, Glen Oriole.\* He stopped puffing and jiggling. His arms were akimbo. His petulant, sleep-swollen face was set in harder lines. He suddenly seemed capable – an official, a man to contrive, to direct, to get things done.

On the vigour of his idea he was carried down the hard, clean, unused-looking hall into the bathroom.

Though the house was not large, it had, like all houses on Floral Heights, an altogether royal bathroom of porcelain and glazed tile and metal sleek as silver. The towel rack was a rod of clear glass set in nickel. The tub was long enough for a Prussian guard, and above the set bowl was a sensational exhibit of toothbrush holder, shaving-brush holder, soap dish, sponge dish and medicine cabinet, so glittering and so ingenious that they resembled an electrical instrument board. But the Babbitt whose god was Modern Appliances was not pleased. The air of the bathroom was thick with the smell of a heathen toothpaste. "Verona been at it again! 'Stead of sticking to Lilidol, like I've re-peat-ed-ly asked her, she's gone and gotten some confounded stinkum stuff that makes you sick!"

The bath mat was wrinkled, and the floor was wet. (His daughter Verona eccentrically took baths in the morning, now and then.) He slipped on the mat, and slid against the tub. He said "Damn!" Furiously he snatched up his tube of shaving cream, furiously he lathered, with a belligerent slapping of the unctuous brush, furiously he raked his plump cheeks with a safety razor. It pulled. The blade was dull. He said, "Damn... oh... oh... damn it!"

He hunted through the medicine cabinet for a packet of new razor-blades (reflecting, as invariably, "Be cheaper to buy one of these dinguses and strop your own blades") – and when he discovered the packet, behind the round box of bicarbonate of soda, he thought ill of his wife for putting it there and very well of himself for not saying "Damn". But he did say it, immediately afterwards, when with wet and soap-slippery fingers he tried to remove the horrible little envelope and crisp, clinging oiled paper from the new blade.

Then there was the problem, oft-pondered, never solved, of what to do with the old blade, which might imperil the fingers of his young. As usual, he tossed it on top of the medicine cabinet, with a mental note that some day he must remove the fifty or sixty other blades that were, also temporarily, piled up there. He finished his shaving in a growling

testiness, increased by his spinning headache and by the emptiness in his stomach. When he was done, his round face smooth and streamy and his eyes stinging from soapy water, he reached for a towel. The family towels were wet – wet and clammy and vile, all of them wet, he found, as he blindly snatched them: his own face towel, his wife’s, Verona’s, Ted’s, Tinka’s and the lone bath towel with the huge welt of initial. Then George F. Babbitt did a dismaying thing. He wiped his face on the guest towel! It was a pansy-embroidered trifle which always hung there to indicate that the Babbitts were in the best Floral Heights society. No one had ever used it. No guest had ever dared to. Guests secretly took a corner of the nearest regular towel.

He was raging: “By golly, here they go and use up all the towels, every doggone one of ’em, and they use ’em and get ’em all wet and sopping, and never put out a dry one for me... of course, I’m the goat!... And then I want one and... I’m the only person in the doggone house that’s got the slightest doggone bit of consideration for other people and thoughtfulness and consider there may be others that may want to use the doggone bathroom after me and consider—”

He was pitching the chill abominations into the bath tub, pleased by the vindictiveness of that desolate flapping sound – and in the midst his wife serenely trotted in, observed serenely, “Why Georgie dear, what are you doing? Are you going to wash out the towels? Why, you needn’t wash out the towels. Oh, Georgie, you didn’t go and use the guest towel, did you?”

It is not recorded that he was able to answer.

For the first time in weeks he was sufficiently roused by his wife to look at her.

#### IV

Myra Babbitt – Mrs George F. Babbitt – was definitely mature. She had creases from the corners of her mouth to the bottom of her chin, and her plump neck bagged. But the thing that marked her as having passed the line was that she no longer had reticences before her husband, and no longer worried about not having reticences. She was in a petticoat now, and corsets which bulged, and unaware of being seen in bulgy corsets. She had become so dully habituated to married life that in her full matronliness she was as sexless as an anaemic nun. She was a good woman, a kind woman, a diligent woman, but no one – save perhaps Tinka, her ten-year-old – was at all interested in her or entirely aware that she was alive.

After a rather thorough discussion of all the domestic and social aspects of towels, she apologized to Babbitt for his having an alcoholic headache – and he recovered enough to endure the search for a BVD\* undershirt which had, he pointed out, malevolently been concealed among his clean pyjamas.

He was fairly amiable in the conference on the brown suit.

“What do you think, Myra?” He pawed at the clothes hunched on a chair in their bedroom, while she moved about mysteriously adjusting and patting her petticoat, and, to his jaundiced eye, never seeming to get on with her dressing. “How about it? Shall I wear the brown suit another day?”

“Well, it looks awfully nice on you.”

“I know, but gosh, it needs pressing.”

“That’s so. Perhaps it does.”

“It certainly could stand being pressed all right.”

“Yes, perhaps it wouldn’t hurt it to be pressed.”

“But gee, the coat doesn’t need pressing. No sense in having the whole darn suit pressed when the coat doesn’t need it.”

“That’s so.”

“But the pants certainly need it all right. Look at them: look at those wrinkles – the pants certainly do need pressing.”

“That’s so. Oh, Georgie, why couldn’t you wear the brown coat with the blue trousers we were wondering what we’d do with them?”

“Good Lord! Did you ever in all my life know me to wear the coat of one suit and the pants of another? What do you think I am? A busted bookkeeper?”

“Well, why don’t you put on the dark-grey suit today, and stop in at the tailor and leave the brown trousers?”

“Well, they certainly need... Now, where the devil is that grey suit? Oh, yes, here we are.”

He was able to get through the other crises of dressing with comparative resoluteness and calm.

His first adornment was the sleeveless dimity\* BVD undershirt, in which he resembled a small boy humourlessly wearing a cheesecloth tabard at a civic pageant. He never put on BVDs without thanking the God of Progress that he didn’t wear tight, long, old-fashioned undergarments, like his father-in-law and partner, Henry Thompson. His second embellishment was combing and slicking back his hair. It gave him a tremendous forehead, arching up two inches beyond the former hairline. But most wonder-working of all was the donning of his spectacles.

There is character in spectacles – the pretentious tortoiseshell, the meek pince-nez of the schoolteacher, the twisted silver-framed glasses of the old villager. Babbitt's spectacles had huge, circular, frameless lenses of the very best glass; the earpieces were thin bars of gold. In them he was the modern businessman – one who gave orders to clerks and drove a car and played occasional golf and was scholarly in regard to Salesmanship. His head suddenly appeared not babyish, but weighty, and you noted his heavy, blunt nose, his straight mouth and thick, long upper lip, his chin overfleshy but strong – with respect you beheld him put on the rest of his uniform as a Solid Citizen.

The grey suit was well cut, well made, and completely undistinguished. It was a standard suit. White piping on the V of the vest added a flavour of law and learning. His shoes were black laced boots, good boots, honest boots, standard boots, extraordinarily uninteresting boots. The only frivolity was in his purple knitted scarf. With considerable comment on the matter to Mrs Babbitt (who, acrobatically fastening the back of her blouse to her skirt with a safety pin, did not hear a word he said), he chose between the purple scarf and tapestry effect with stringless brown harps among blown palms, and into it he thrust a snake-head pin with opal eyes.

A sensational event was changing from the brown suit to the grey the contents of his pockets. He was earnest about these objects. They were of eternal importance, like baseball or the Republican Party. They included a fountain pen and a silver pencil (always lacking a supply of new leads) which belonged in the right-hand upper-vest pocket. Without them he would have felt naked. On his watch chain were a gold penknife, silver cigar-cutter, seven keys (the use of two of which he had forgotten) and, incidentally, a good watch. Depending from the chain was a large, yellowish elk's tooth – proclamation of his membership in the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks.\* Most significant of all was his loose-leaf pocket notebook, that modern and efficient notebook which contained the addresses of people whom he had forgotten, prudent memoranda of postal money orders which had reached their destinations months ago, stamps which had lost their mucilage,\* clippings of verses by T. Cholmondeley Frink and of the newspaper editorials from which Babbitt got his opinions and his polysyllables, notes to be sure and do things which he did not intend to do and one curious inscription: "D.S.S.D.M.Y.P.D.F."

But he had no cigarette case. No one had ever happened to give him one, so he hadn't the habit, and people who carried cigarette cases he regarded as effeminate.

Last, he stuck in his lapel the Boosters' Club\* button. With the conciseness of great art the button displayed two words: "Boosters – Pep!" It made Babbitt feel loyal and important. It associated him with Good Fellows, with men who were nice and human, and important in business circles. It was his VC,\* his Legion of Honour\* ribbon, his Phi Beta Kappa key.\*

With the subtleties of dressing ran other complex worries. "I feel kind of punk\* this morning," he said. "I think I had too much dinner last evening. You oughtn't to serve those heavy banana fritters."

"But you asked me to have some."

"I know, but... I tell you, when a fellow gets past forty, he has to look after his digestion. There's a lot of fellows that don't take proper care of themselves. I tell you, at forty a man's a fool or his doctor – I mean, his own doctor. Folks don't give enough attention to this matter of dieting. Now, I think... 'Course a man ought to have a good meal after the day's work, but it would be a good thing for both of us if we took lighter lunches."

"But Georgie, here at home I always do have a light lunch."

"Mean to imply I make a hog of myself, eating downtown? Yes, sure! You'd have a swell time if you had to eat the truck\* that new steward hands out to us at the Athletic Club! But I certainly do feel out of sorts, this morning. Funny, got a pain down here on the left side – but no, that wouldn't be appendicitis, would it? Last night, when I was driving over to Verg Gunch's, I felt a pain in my stomach too. Right here it was – kind of a sharp shooting pain. I... Where'd that dime go to? Why don't you serve more prunes at breakfast? Of course I eat an apple every evening – an apple a day keeps the doctor away – but still, you ought to have more prunes, and not all these fancy doodads."

"The last time I had prunes you didn't eat them."

"Well, I didn't feel like eating 'em, I suppose. Matter of fact, I think I did eat some of 'em. Anyway – I tell you, it's mighty important to... I was saying to Verg Gunch, just last evening, most people don't take sufficient care of their diges—"

"Shall we have the Gunches for our dinner, next week?"

"Why, sure – you bet."

"Now see here, George: I want you to put on your nice dinner jacket that evening."

"Rats! The rest of 'em won't want to dress."

"Of course they will. You remember when you didn't dress for the Littlefields' supper party, and all the rest did, and how embarrassed you were."

“Embarrassed, hell! I wasn’t embarrassed. Everybody knows I can put on as expensive a tux as anybody else, and I should worry if I don’t happen to have it on sometimes. All a darn nuisance, anyway. All right for a woman that stays around the house all the time, but when a fellow’s worked like the dickens all day, he doesn’t want to go and hustle his head off getting into the soup-and-fish\* for a lot of folks that he’s seen in just reg’lar ordinary clothes that same day.”

“You know you enjoy being seen in one. The other evening you admitted you were glad I’d insisted on your dressing. You said you felt a lot better for it. And oh, Georgie, I do wish you wouldn’t say ‘tux’. It’s ‘dinner jacket’.”

“Rats, what’s the odds?”

“Well, it’s what all the nice folks say. Suppose Lucile McKelvey heard you calling it a ‘tux’.”

“Well, that’s all right now! Lucile McKelvey can’t pull anything on me! Her folks are common as mud, even if her husband and her dad are millionaires! I suppose you’re trying to rub in *your* exalted social position! Well, let me tell you that your revered paternal ancestor, Henry T., doesn’t even call it a ‘tux’! He calls it a ‘bobtail jacket for a ringtail monkey’ – and you couldn’t get him into one unless you chloroformed him!”

“Now, don’t be horrid, George.”

“Well, I don’t want to be horrid, but Lord! You’re getting as fussy as Verona. Ever since she got out of college she’s been too rambunctious to live with... doesn’t know what she wants... Well, I know what she wants!... All she wants is to marry a millionaire and live in Europe, and hold some preacher’s hand and simultaneously at the same time stay right here in Zenith and be some blooming kind of a socialist agitator or boss charity worker or some damn thing! Lord... and Ted is just as bad! He wants to go to college, and he doesn’t want to go to college. Only one of the three that knows her own mind is Tinka. Simply can’t understand how I ever came to have a pair of shilly-shallying children like Rone and Ted. I may not be any Rockefeller or James J. Shakespeare,\* but I certainly do know my own mind, and I do keep right on plugging along in the office and... Do you know the latest? Far as I can figure out, Ted’s new bee is he’d like to be a movie actor and... And here I’ve told him a hundred times: if he’ll go to college and law school and make good, I’ll set him up in business and... Verona just exactly as bad. Doesn’t know what she wants. Well, well... come on! Aren’t you ready yet? The girl rang the bell three minutes ago.”



## V

Before he followed his wife, Babbitt stood at the westernmost window of their room. This residential settlement, Floral Heights, was on a rise, and though the centre of the city was three miles away – Zenith had between three and four hundred thousand inhabitants now – he could see the top of the Second National Tower, an Indiana-limestone building of thirty-five storeys.

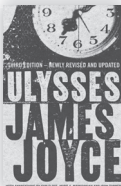
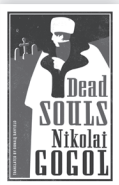
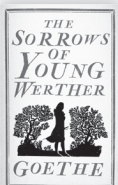
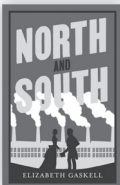
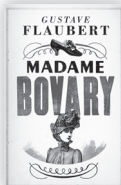
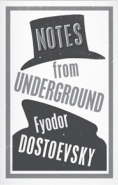
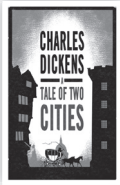
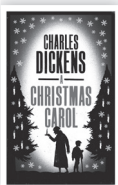
Its shining walls rose against April sky to a simple cornice, like a streak of white fire. Integrity was in the tower, and decision. It bore its strength lightly as a tall soldier. As Babbitt stared, the nervousness was soothed from his face – his slack chin lifted in reverence. All he articulated was “That’s one lovely sight!”, but he was inspired by the rhythm of the city – his love of it renewed. He beheld the tower as a temple spire of the religion of business – a faith passionate, exalted, surpassing common men – and as he clumped down to breakfast, he whistled the ballad “Oh, by gee, by gosh, by jingo”,\* as though it were a hymn melancholy and noble.

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