

## BOOK OF THE WEEK.

## BABBITT.\*

This super-American novel will not, we suspect, be universally popular, because, as Mr. Hugh Walpole says in the introduction, "the English reader will find the first fifty pages difficult, the dialogue strange, the American atmosphere obscure and complicated." We agree, but would go further, and say that this criticism applies to the whole book, and yet, as he goes on to say, "Let the reader persevere. Soon he is sitting with Babbitt in his office, finding in his soul a strange and affectionate comradeship with this stout, middle-aged man, and (if he is she) an urgent maternal desire to comfort him and straighten his perplexities; and when the book is closed we are wiser not only about Babbitt and his companions, but about ourselves and our own hypocrisies."

Zenith is the name of the town where Babbitt pursued the calling of what we should term an estate agent. Mr. Babbitt is introduced to the reader as he slumbered, or endeavoured to do so, in the sleeping porch of his house. In his dreams, though he appeared prosperous, extremely married and unromantic, he saw the fairy child, who for years had come to him. When others saw but Georgie Babbitt, she discerned gallant youth. She waited for him in the darkness beyond mysterious groves. When at last he could escape from the crowded house he darted to her. His wife, his clamouring friends, sought to follow, but he escaped, the girl fleet beside him. 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, and struggled back towards his dream. He escaped from reality till the alarm clock rang at seven-twenty. He sulkily admitted 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.

His petulant sleep-swollen face set in harder lines. He suddenly seemed capable, an official, a man to contrive, to direct, to get things done. Babbitt's god was modern appliances—his house testified to it in every department. Their bedroom was a masterpiece among bedrooms, right out of Cheerful Modern Homes for Medium Incomes. Only it had nothing to do with the Babbitts nor anyone else. If people had ever lived and loved here, read thrillers at midnight, and lain in beautiful indolence on a Sunday morning, there was no sign of it. It had the air of being a very good room in a very good hotel. One expected the chambermaid to come in and make it ready for people who would stay but one night, go without looking back, and never think of it again. All the house was as competent and glossy as this room."

The description of the family breakfast throws a light on the Babbitt family. Dumpty, Verona,

decorative conceited young Ted, red-haired little Tinka, uninteresting Myra, his wife—nothing like the fairy girl, any of them.

"Be back 'bout usual time, I guess." He hurried out to the garage muttering "Lord what a family! Sometimes I'd like to quit the whole game. And the office worry and detail just as bad. And I act cranky and—I don't mean to, but I get—so darn tired."

"In twenty-three years of married life he had peered uneasily at every graceful ankle, every soft shoulder; in thought he had treasured them; but not once had he hazarded respectability by adventuring. Now, as he calculated the cost of repairing the Styles's house, he was restless again, discontented about nothing and everything, ashamed of his discontentment and lonely for the fairy girl.

Very pathetic is his friendship for Paul Riesling.

"He was just then neither the sulky child of the sleeping porch, the domestic tyrant of the breakfast table, the crafty money-changer, nor the blaring good fellow. He was an older brother to Paul, swift to defend him, admiring him with a proud and credulous love, passing the love of women. Paul and he shook hands solemnly; they smiled shyly as though they had been parted three years, not three days, and they said:

"How's the old horse thief?"

"All right, I guess. How're you, you poor shrimp?"

"I'm first-rate, you second-hand hunk o' cheese."

Re-assured thus of their high fondness, they went to lunch together.

Our readers may rightly say there is nothing particularly pathetic in such pleasantries, but Babbitt is in reality a lonely man, always seeking self-expression, and in Paul alone he found an outlet. True, later he tried to solace himself with women other than his lawful wife, but he had nothing of the libertine about him, and his *amours* were short-lived—he was soon "through with this chasing after girls." The real blow fell when Paul was arrested and sentenced to three years' imprisonment for maliciously wounding his wife, Zilla, a most exasperating woman—he was determined to "break with her, somehow."

Babbitt had to face a world without Paul, and it was then that he first strove to realise his fairy child by "chasing after girls."

His wife's sudden illness and operation brought him to his senses.

"He was on his knees by the bed. When she feebly ruffled his hair he sobbed. He kissed the lawn of her sleeve, and swore "Old honey, I love you more than anything in the world. I've kind of been worried by business, but that's all over now, and I'm back again."

She was out of hospital in seventeen days. Once he hinted something of his relations to Tanis, and she was inflated by the view that a wicked woman had captivated her poor George."

As we remarked before, the book is intensely American, and to what extent may be partly judged that a glossary is deemed expedient.

H. H.

\* By Sinclair Lewis. (Jonathan Cape, London.)

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