



SINCLAIR LEWIS ■ *BABBITT* ■ 1922

The Good Citizens' League

Set in the fictional midwestern city of Zenith in 1920, Sinclair Lewis's classic novel *Babbitt* satirically portrayed the anxieties and adjustments of middle-class Americans after World War One. Unsettled by anarchist bombings, violent labor strikes, the specter of "alien radicals" fomenting revolution, and the very real Communist takeover in Russia, many strove to define "100% Americanism" and insisted on frequent and unambiguous demonstrations of loyalty. Lewis placed his main character, real estate broker George Babbitt, in the middle of this frenzy. Struggling to identify his own political stance, Babbitt is caught between his newly adopted liberal views and his colleagues' demand that he join the local "Good Citizens' League." As we enter the scene, a powerful city leader visits Babbitt in his real estate office.

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At four o'clock Vergil Gunch called on him.

Babbitt was agitated, but Gunch began in a friendly way:

"How's the boy? Say, some of us are getting up a scheme we'd kind of like to have you come in on."

"Fine, Verg. Shoot."

"You know during the war we had the Undesirable Element, the Reds and walking delegates and just the plain common grouches, dead to rights, and so did we for quite a while after the war, but folks forget about the danger and that gives these cranks a chance to begin working underground again, especially a lot of these parlor socialists. Well, it's up to the folks that do a little sound thinking to make a conscious effort to keep bucking these fellows. Some guy back East has organized a society called the Good Citizens' League for just that purpose. Of course the Chamber of Commerce and the American Legion and so on do a fine work in keeping the decent people in the saddle, but they're devoted to so many other causes that they can't attend to this one problem properly. But the Good Citizens' League, the G. C. L., they stick right to it. Oh, the G. C. L. has to have some other ostensible purposes —

Vergil Gunch: influential coal dealer and businessman in Zenith; president of the Boosters' Club

parlor socialists: middle-class supporters of unions and other liberal causes deemed Communist-inspired during the Red Scare

frinstance here in Zenith I think it ought to support the park extension project and the City Planning Committee — and then, too, it should have a social aspect, being made up of the best people — have dances and so on, especially as one of the best ways it can put the kibosh [lid] on cranks is to apply this social boycott business to folks big enough so you can't reach 'em otherwise. Then if that don't work, the G. C. L. can finally send a little delegation around to inform folks that get too flip that they got to conform to decent standards and quit shooting off their mouths so free. Don't it sound like the organization could do a great work? We've already got some of the strongest men in town, and of course we want you in. How about it?"

Babbitt was uncomfortable. He felt a compulsion back to all the standards he had so vaguely yet so desperately been fleeing. He fumbled:

"I suppose you'd especially light on fellows like Seneca Doane and try to make 'em—"

Seneca Doane: a liberal lawyer in Zenith

"You bet your sweet life we would! Look here, old Georgie: I've never for one moment believed you meant it when you've defended Doane, and the strikers and so on, at the [Boosters'] Club. I knew you were simply kidding those poor galoots like Sid Finkelstein At least I certainly hope you were kidding!"

"Oh, well — sure — Course you might say —" Babbitt was conscious of how feeble he sounded, conscious of Gunch's mature and relentless eye. "Gosh, you know where I stand! I'm no labor agitator! I'm a businessman, first, last, and all the time! But — but honestly, I don't think Doane means so badly, and you got to remember he's an old friend of mine."

"George, when it comes right down to a struggle between decency and the security of our homes on the one hand, and red ruin and those lazy dogs plotting for free beer on the other, you got to give up even old friendships. 'He that is not with me is against me.'"

lazy dogs . . . free beer: alluding to anti-German prejudice heightened during World War One and the campaign for Prohibition

"Ye-es, I suppose —"

"How about it? Going to join us in the Good Citizens' League?"

"I'll have to think it over, Verg."

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That afternoon three men shouldered into Babbitt's office with the air of a Vigilante committee in frontier days. They were large, resolute, big-jawed men, and they were all high lords in the land of Zenith — Dr. Dilling the surgeon, Charles McKelvey the contractor, and, most dismaying of all, the white-bearded Colonel Rutherford Snow, owner of the *Advocate-Times*. In their whelming [engulfing] presence Babbitt felt small and insignificant.

"Well, well, great pleasure, have chairs, what c'n I do for you?" he babbled.

They neither sat nor offered observations on the weather.

"Babbitt," said Colonel Snow, "we've come from the Good Citizens' League. We've decided we want you to join. Vergil Gunch says you don't care to, but I think we can show you a new light. The League is going to combine with the Chamber of Commerce in a campaign for the Open Shop, so it's time for you to put your name down."

Open Shop: a non-union workplace, in which union membership is not a condition of employment. Unions promoted the "closed shop," in which employers agreed to hire only union members, as a means of balancing workers' and employers' negotiating strength. Employers argued that the closed shop violated their property rights in a capitalist democracy and fostered socialist/communist ideologies that would undermine American security.

In his embarrassment Babbitt could not recall his reasons for not wishing to join the League, if indeed he had ever definitely known them, but he was passionately certain that he did not wish to join, and at the thought of their forcing him he felt a stirring of anger against even these princes of commerce.

"Sorry, Colonel, have to think it over a little," he mumbled.

McKelvey snarled, "That means you're not going to join, George?"

Something black and unfamiliar and ferocious spoke from Babbitt: "Now, you look here, Charley! I'm damned if I'm going to be bullied into joining anything, not even by you plutes!"

plutes: plutocrats; plutocracy: government or control by the wealthy

“We’re not bullying anybody,” Dr. Dilling began, but Colonel Snow thrust him aside with, “Certainly we are! We don’t mind a little bullying, if it’s necessary. Babbitt, the G. C. L. has been talking about you a good deal. You’re supposed to be a sensible, clean, responsible man; you always have been; but here lately, for God knows what reason, I hear from all sorts of sources that you’re running around with a loose crowd, and what’s a whole lot worse, you’ve actually been advocating and supporting some of the most dangerous elements in town, like this fellow Doane.”

“Colonel, that strikes me as my private business.”

“Possibly, but we want to have an understanding. You’ve stood in, you and your father-in-law, with some of the most substantial and forward-looking [business] interests in town, like my friends of the Street Traction Company, and my papers have given you a lot of boosts. Well, you can’t expect the decent citizens to go on aiding you if you intend to side with precisely the people who are trying to undermine us.”

Babbitt was frightened, but he had an agonized instinct that if he yielded in this he would yield in everything. He protested:

“You’re exaggerating, Colonel. I believe in being broad-minded and liberal, but, of course, I’m just as much agin the cranks and blatherskites and labor unions and so on as you are. But fact is, I belong to so many organizations now that I can’t do ’em justice, and I want to think it over before I decide about coming into the G. C. L.”

Colonel Snow condescended, “Oh, no, I’m not exaggerating! Why the doctor here heard you cussing out and defaming one of the finest types of Republican congressmen, just this noon! And you have entirely the wrong idea about ‘thinking over joining.’ We’re not begging you to join the G. C. L. — we’re permitting you to join. I’m not sure, my boy, but what if you put it off it’ll be too late. I’m not sure we’ll want you then. Better think quick — better think quick!”

defaming one of the finest . . . : Babbitt had voiced disapproval of the congressman’s anti-immigrant comments at the Boosters’ Club lunch.

The three Vigilantes, formidable in their righteousness, stared at him in a taut silence. Babbitt waited through. He thought nothing at all, he merely waited, while in his echoing head buzzed, “I don’t want to join — I don’t want to join — I don’t want to.”

“All right. Sorry for you!” said Colonel Snow, and the three men abruptly turned their beefy backs.

IV

As Babbitt went out to his car that evening he saw Vergil Gunch coming down the block. He raised his hand in salutation, but Gunch ignored it and crossed the street. He was certain that Gunch had seen him. He drove home in sharp discomfort.

His wife attacked at once: “Georgie dear, Muriel Frink was in this afternoon, and she says that Chum says the committee of this Good Citizens’ League especially asked you to join and you wouldn’t. Don’t you think it would be better? You know all the nicest people belong, and the League stands for — ”

“I know what the League stands for! It stands for the suppression of free speech and free thought and everything else! I don’t propose to be bullied and rushed into joining anything, and it isn’t a question of whether it’s a good league or a bad league or what the hell kind of a league it is; it’s just a question of my refusing to be told I got to — ”

“But dear, if you don’t join, people might criticize you.”

“Let ’em criticize!”

“But I mean *nice* people!”

“Rats, I — Matter of fact, this whole League is just a fad. It’s like all these other organizations that start off with such a rush and let on they’re going to change the whole works, and pretty soon they peter out and everybody forgets all about ’em!”

“But if it’s *the* fad now, don’t you think you — ”

“No, I don’t! Oh, Myra, please quit nagging me about it. I’m sick of hearing about the confounded G. C. L. I almost wish I’d joined it when Verg first came around, and got it over. And maybe I’d’ve come in

today if the committee hadn't tried to bullyrag me, but, by God, as long as I'm a free-born independent American cit —"

"Now, George, you're talking exactly like the German furnace man."

"Oh, I am, am I! Then, I won't talk at all!"

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V

If Babbitt had not been certain about Vergil Gunch's avoiding him, there could be little doubt about William Washington Eathorne, next morning. When Babbitt was driving down to the office he overtook Eathorne's car, with the great banker sitting in anemic solemnity behind his chauffeur. Babbitt waved and cried, "Mornin'!" Eathorne looked at him deliberately, hesitated, and gave him a nod more contemptuous than a direct cut.

Babbitt's partner and father-in-law came in at ten:

"George, what's this I hear about some song and dance you gave Colonel Snow about not wanting to join the G. C. L.? What the dickens you trying to do? Wreck the firm? You don't suppose these Big Guns will stand your bucking them and springing all this 'liberal' poppycock you been getting off lately, do you?"

"Oh, rats, Henry T., you been reading bum fiction. There ain't any such a thing as these plots to keep folks from being liberal. This is a free country. A man can do anything he wants to."

"Course th' ain't any plots. Who said they was? Only if folks get an idea you're scatter-brained and unstable, you don't suppose they'll want to do business with you, do you? One little rumor about your being a crank would do more to ruin this business than all the plots and stuff that these fool story-writers could think up in a month of Sundays."

That afternoon, when the old reliable Conrad Lyte, the merry miser, Conrad Lyte, appeared, and Babbitt suggested his buying a parcel of land in the new residential section of Dorchester, Lyte said hastily, too hastily, "No, no, don't want to go into anything new just now."

A week later Babbitt learned, through Henry Thompson, that the officials of the Street Traction Company were planning another real estate coup, and that Sanders, Torrey and Wing, not the Babbitt-Thompson Company, were to handle it for them. "I figure that Jake Offutt is kind of leery about the way folks are talking about you. Of course Jake is a rock-ribbed old die-hard, and he probably advised the Traction fellows to get some other broker. George, you got to do something!" trembled Thompson.

And, in a rush, Babbitt agreed. All nonsense the way people misjudged him, but still — he determined to join the Good Citizens' League the next time he was asked, and in furious resignation he waited. He wasn't asked. They ignored him. He did not have the courage to go to the League and beg in, and he took refuge in a shaky boast that he had "gotten away with bucking the whole city. Nobody could dictate to him how he was going to think and act!"

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Gray fear loomed always by him now. . . . Daily he fancied slights. He noted that he was not asked to speak at the annual Chamber of Commerce dinner. When Orville Jones gave a large poker party and he was not invited, he was certain that he had been snubbed. He was afraid to go to lunch at the Athletic Club, and afraid not to go. He believed that he was spied on; that when he left the table they whispered about him. Everywhere he heard the rustling whispers: in the offices of clients, in the bank when he made a deposit, in his own office, in his own home. Interminably he wondered what They were saying of him. All day long in imaginary conversations he caught them marveling, "Babbitt? Why, say, he's a regular anarchist! You got to admire the fellow for his nerve, the way he turned liberal and, by golly, just absolutely runs his life to suit himself, but say, he's dangerous, that's what he is, and he's got to be shown up."

He was so twitchy that when he rounded a corner and chanced on two acquaintances talking — whispering — his heart leaped, and he stalked by like an embarrassed schoolboy. When he saw his neighbors Howard Littlefield and Orville Jones together, he peered at them, went indoors to escape their spying, and was miserably certain that they had been whispering — plotting — whispering.

Through all his fear ran defiance. He felt stubborn. Sometimes he decided that he had been a very devil of a fellow, as bold as Seneca Doane; sometimes he planned to call on Doane and tell him what a revolutionist he was, and never got beyond the planning. But just as often, when he heard the soft whispers enveloping him he wailed, "Good Lord, what have I done? Just played with the Bunch, and called down Clarence Drum about being such a high-and-mighty sodger. Never catch *me* criticizing people and trying to make them accept *my* ideas!"

He could not stand the strain. Before long he admitted that he would like to flee back to the security of conformity, provided there was a decent and creditable way to return. But, stubbornly, he would not be forced back; he would not, he swore, "eat dirt."

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The Good Citizens' League had spread through the country, but nowhere was it so effective and well esteemed as in cities of the type of Zenith, commercial cities of a few hundred thousand inhabitants, most of which — though not all — lay inland, against a background of cornfields and mines and of small towns which depended upon them for mortgage loans, table manners, art, social philosophy and millinery [women's hats].

To the League belonged most of the prosperous citizens of Zenith. They were not all of the kind who called themselves "Regular Guys." Besides these hearty fellows, these salesmen of prosperity, there were the aristocrats, that is, the men who were richer or had been rich for more generations: the presidents of banks and of factories, the landowners, the corporation lawyers, the fashionable doctors, and the few young-old men who worked not at all but, reluctantly remaining in Zenith, collected lusterware and first editions as though they were back in Paris. All of them agreed that the working classes must be kept in their place; and all of them perceived that American Democracy did not imply any equality of wealth, but did demand a wholesome sameness of thought, dress, painting, morals, and vocabulary.

lusterware: prized English pottery with a metallic glaze
first editions: original book editions sought by collectors

In this they were like the ruling class of any other country, particularly of Great Britain, but they differed in being more vigorous and in actually trying to produce the accepted standards which all classes, everywhere, desire, but usually despair of realizing.

The longest struggle of the Good Citizens' League was against the Open Shop — which was secretly a struggle against all union labor. Accompanying it was an Americanization Movement, with evening classes in English and history and economics, and daily articles in the newspapers, so that newly arrived foreigners might learn that the true-blue and one-hundred-percent American way of settling labor troubles was for workmen to trust and love their employers. . . .

The League was of value to the American Legion at a time when certain of the lesser and looser newspapers were criticizing that organization of veterans of the Great War. One evening a number of young men raided the Zenith Socialist Headquarters, burned its records, beat the office staff, and agreeably dumped desks out of the window. All of the newspapers save the *Advocate-Times* and the *Evening Advocate* attributed this valuable but perhaps hasty direct action to the American Legion. Then a flying squadron from the Good Citizens' League called on the unfair papers and explained that no ex-soldier could possibly do such a thing, and the editors saw the light, and retained their advertising. When Zenith's lone Conscientious Objector came home from prison and was righteously run out of town, the newspapers referred to the perpetrators as an "unidentified mob."

After his real estate firm is boycotted by the city business leaders, Babbitt joins the Good Citizens' League and regains "self-respect, placidity, and the affection of his friends." When it is announced at a Boosters' Club lunch that a shocking fact about him would be revealed—that his middle name is Follansbee—Babbitt knows he has been accepted back into the "Clan of Good Fellows," a security he would never jeopardize again.

