

# THE BABBITT IN HIS WARREN

*An Indictment of Rotary, Kiwanis, the Lions, and All Their Cubs*

BRUCE BLIVEN

**L**ET'S be fair about it. Luncheon clubs are by no means altogether bad, and I do not propose to pretend that they are. No institution which has won the allegiance of so many thousands of men could fail to have some elements of value. When I say — as I do say most emphatically — that they should be abolished, I do not suggest that a vacuum should be left. I propose that they should be supplanted by something better. My contention is that as they now exist, they do not justify the time, energy, and money which are spent on them.

My first indictment, and one of the most serious, is that many of the things done at their meetings are simply downright silly. Numerous commentators have pointed out in recent years that American life is cursed with infantilism, the refusal of adults to accept a grown-up point of view. The luncheon clubs, with their kindergarten singing, their paper dunce caps, their insistence on the use of first names, their fines for this and that, their practical jokes, are certainly one of the most infantile features of the current scene. And it is no defense to say that if this is the level on which the members want to amuse themselves, then this level is good enough. On the contrary, the whole history of civilization from the Cro-Magnon to the French Academy has been brought about by operations under the alternative theory.

Neither is it adequate rebuttal to reply that business men, keyed up and tense from their labors, get wholesome relaxation out of horseplay. Having long been a business man, and having associated with many others of the breed, inside luncheon clubs and out of them, I can testify that this famous tenseness is largely mythical. The life of the average business man, especially in the smaller cities where the luncheon clubs have their greatest hold, is reasonably easy-going — and often unreasonably so. After all, only about four occupations actually deserve to be called nerve-racking. Telephone operators, jugglers, information bureau clerks, and city editors have some right to complain; but the tense business man is a rare exception. Usually he is a neurotic and should see a doctor.

Another reason for doing away with much if not all of the infantile amusement is that, down in their hearts, many of the members don't like it, and would say so if they only dared. Watch their faces while it is going on and you will see that they are bullied into it by a loud-mouthed minority, by professional song-leaders and masters of ceremonies. Some of them may get valuable relaxation, but I am skeptical. Certainly they could get far more out of half an hour playing handball in a gymnasium — which would have the additional merit of being much healthier than the luncheon meetings, where men eat too much, too fast, and then sit in a smoke-filled room trying to understand speeches while the digestive process is going on.

In an even more serious way, these clubs constitute an invasion of the personal liberty of their members. Some of my readers may be under the delusion that membership is optional, that no man need join unless he wishes. On the contrary, in scores and scores of cities, especially the smaller places in the Middle and Far West, you simply *must* get into one club or another or be seriously handicapped in your business or profession. The man who for any reason preferred to stay aloof would be looked upon as having something seriously wrong with him. It might even be said of him — most damning of all criticisms — that he was not a booster. I know from personal observation, checked by discussions with numerous other people, that many men join these clubs, just as they sometimes do the fraternal orders, just as they buy tickets to the policemen's ball or advertise in the high school annual, not because they want to, but because they are afraid not to.

Not only is membership almost compulsory, but to a considerable and undesirable degree the clubs enforce upon the individual a single attitude of mind. Tacitly, and on the whole good-naturedly, but with sharp claws behind the velvet paw, they demand conservatism in politics and effusive optimism in everything. Disagreement with the majority on any serious issue is hardly less than a crime. And in similar manner, the clubs have a tendency to swallow whole the opinions of their wealthiest and most important members. If these men's economic and social views are naïve or harmful, if they are labor-baiters or are opposed to badly-needed legislation — as not infrequently happens — the members of the clubs to which they belong are likely to take the same line. The organizations, of course, will assure you

that they don't, that they keep away from controversial questions. As a rule, this is technically true. But technically only. There are other ways of making opinions felt than by passing formal resolutions about them. Quiet, word-of-mouth influence is sometimes the most effective of all.

Even if the defense were true, it would not be a very striking tribute to the clubs, would it? One may concede that with a membership of both Republicans and Democrats (and an occasional very lone Socialist), they are wise not to go in for partisan politics. But on important questions involving the welfare of city, state, or nation, it seems to me regrettable that these clubs should make so little effort to arrive at an informed, intelligent opinion and give it public utterance. And this is especially true when you recall that for many of their members they are the only activity followed, other than business, home, and amusement.

Because of this situation, the clubs very often actually stand in the way of the municipal progress of their cities. No statement would move them to more indignant and vehement denials than that; yet it is true. While they fuss about with little projects for a better-lighted Main Street, or getting their town made a stopping point for the Overland Limited, they leave untouched many other things of far greater importance — decent housing for the poor, for instance; or a city plan not operated for the exclusive benefit of the land grabbers; or hospitalization for the middle class; or adult education; or electoral reform; or the preservation of civil liberties — to name at random just a few of the scores of things most of the clubs are too timid, or too ignorant, to touch. Few important civic reforms or developments can ever be made without treading on somebody's toes, and the clubs never do that — particularly, as I have suggested, if the toes belong to some of the local demigods, who are probably members.

The habit of doing business, whenever possible, only with fellow members, is an uneconomic and otherwise undesirable practice. I am told that this custom is no longer officially encouraged as it once was; but everyone with any first-hand experience knows that it is still going on. To an extent, I grant, it is normal to trade with men you know and like; but the thing is carried much farther than that. It constitutes, in a way, the creation of trade barriers of just the sort which, when set up be-

tween countries (in Europe) causes the International Chamber of Commerce to rise, shake an admonitory finger, and say "Naughty! Naughty!"

Club members, if they are candid, will agree, I am sure, that not very many of the speeches delivered at the average meeting are worth the time and trouble of hearing. "Controversial" questions being barred, and the clubs being unable to pay the fees asked by professional lecturers, these talks must perforce fall into one or the other of two classes. First, there is the product of the rank novice, the prominent business man, of your own or some near-by city, who takes a long time (and it seems longer) to deliver a "ten-minute talk" on "Main Developments in the Cold Storage Industry, 1920-1927," or "The Trust Company: Your Friend, Your Counselor, Your Guide." This gentleman is usually suffering from an acute case of exhibitionism, with nothing to justify it. He dearly loves to read in public the papers written for him by his advertising man, who has been careful to work in generous reference to his own company, its resources and facilities.

The other standard type, just as bad, is the "inspirational" address. Even to-day, after all the ridicule that has been rained upon this weird product, it is still being uttered, day in and day out, North, East, South, and West — especially West. Every member of every club ought to know it by heart — but seemingly he doesn't, for he tolerates its endless reiteration. Sometimes the speaker is a professional, who goes from city to city "pepping up" salesmen at annual conventions, and he speaks at the club luncheon because of the free advertisement. Sometimes he is even worse, a semi-professional — a local variant on the Narcissus theme in love with his own voice, or a "live-wire" minister who makes it a point of honor to be the last man in the room a stranger would identify as being of the cloth.

It is no answer to my criticism to say that most of this inspirational stuff is true. What if it is? It is also true that the world is round. But that is no reason why men should get together once a week in a badly ventilated room, bolt down a heavy and indigestible meal, smoke more than is good for them, and hear this ancient truth expounded with fist-wavings and bellowings, for half an hour if they are lucky and an hour if they aren't.

Neither shall I be crushed if someone produces a long list of eminent men, ranging from George Bernard Shaw to President

Coolidge, who have spoken at meetings of one club or another. I admit the exceptions; what I am talking about, as I have indicated, is the average.

The clubs make a great point of their philanthropic and charitable activities. They are proud of their Christmas work for the poor, their orphans' homes, their assistance to struggling genius, and so on. Some of this is fine, and I remove my chapeau to it. But ask the expert social workers in their cities about the club philanthropies as a whole, and you will learn that these amateur efforts are regarded by them with the gravest misgivings as being, at best, likely to do as much harm as good. Their work is wasteful. It involves a risk of pauperization. Often, it aids a small group of poor people at Christmas and ignores them the other fifty-one weeks of the year, or singles out a few unfortunates and ignores all the others. It never, of course, inquires into the causes of poverty — economic, social, or psychological. Worst of all, the club member tends to assume that when he has participated in this effort, to the extent of a few dollars or a few hours of time, he has fulfilled all his obligations to the community. He then seals his pocketbook and his heart for another year.

And finally, the clubs are bad because they make the members take themselves too seriously. Not in the meetings, which, as I have said, seem to me to be less serious than they should, but all the time, and in general. America is "organized to death." Every thoughtful student of our national life knows that we suffer from mass-mindedness, from the inability to think for ourselves as individuals. These clubs encourage a tendency which would be quite bad enough without them. They exalt business into an end, whereas it ought to be only a means. They help support the false thesis that the machinery of life is more important than life itself. They prevent a proper and healthful humility on the part of their members.

It is perhaps natural that any group should exaggerate its own usefulness, to itself and to others; but this is doubly unfortunate in a country where the material aspects of life have, for the time, so completely outrun the intellectual and spiritual. I don't expect the clubs to begin to cultivate humility just because it is suggested that they should; I merely stand by the thesis that until they can do so, they will not have earned the right to survive.

*For a defense of Rotary, see page 953.*



## THE DAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

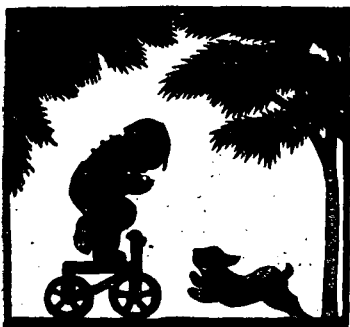
ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN

*Scissor-cuts by Lisl Hummel*

### I

He couldn't toot the bugle horn  
Or carry the big sword  
Or ride the horse, so he's the place  
Where our buns are stored.

The last man is the baggage van,  
He knows he is to die:  
We let him be it in our war  
So he wouldn't cry.



### II

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John —  
Now I lay me down to sleep —  
Daddy, God, and Santa Claus —  
Turn this dog into a sheep!