My Amiable Uncle

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INTRODUCTION

by James Woodress

WHEN I JOINED THE FACULTY OF BUTLER UNIVERSITY IN the fall of 1950, I was interested in seeing the city that Booth Tarkington had made famous. His novels and stories had delighted me when I was a high school student in Missouri, and I began to reread his works. I soon discovered that despite the great changes that had overtaken central Indiana following World War II Tarkington's fiction still was a good introduction to the social and cultural milieu of Indianapolis. As my interest in Tarkington grew, I decided to direct my scholarly efforts into a study of his life and work, and I was able to find a cousin who could introduce me to Susanah Tarkington, the author's widow. As it happened, she lived only a few blocks from where I had bought a house in Indianapolis. I met Mrs. Tarkington and immediately was attracted to her. She was a great lady, a grande dame of the sort I think is now extinct, and knowing her was one of the great experiences of my life. The memory of her casts a nostalgic glow over my early years in Indianapolis. She opened the vast Tarkington archives at Princeton University to me, and I embarked on a biography of her husband. He had been dead only since 1946, and the contents of his study, which had been hauled off to Princeton in a moving van after his death, had not yet been used by scholars. It was an inexhaustible source of material for a biographer, and I happily plunged into writing Tarkington's life.

Meantime, I was teaching at Butler, and one fall early in my years there, Tarkington's niece Susanah Mayberry enrolled in one of my classes. She had been out of Smith for a number of years but was

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then interested in getting a master's degree and teaching, both of which she did. This relationship also developed into a friendship that has lasted some thirty years. It is a pleasure to supply an introduction for Susanah Mayberry's memoirs of her uncle Booth. Her memories bring her "amiable uncle" to life and complement nicely my outsider's biography. Readers of Tarkington's novels and stories and students of American literature and culture will be glad to have her account available, for Tarkington is a writer of significance who deserves to be read more today than he is. I hope that Susanah Mayberry's book will send people back to the fiction of Booth Tarkington.

Besides the pleasures of reading the work of a witty, born storyteller, the large shelf of novels and stories that Tarkington wrote between 1900 and 1946 provide important insights into the urban development and the social mobility of the American Midwest during the years it was changing from an agrarian postfrontier society to the industrial heartland of the United States. Just as the novels of Faulkner's Mississippi or Willa Cather's Nebraska encapsulate in their art the social, political, and cultural history of their regions, so does Tarkington's work serve as a paradigm of growth in the Midwest. What happens in Tarkington's fiction is representative of what was happening in Saint Louis, Columbus, Cincinnati, or Kansas City.

Tarkington's work belongs in the mainstream of the realistic novel that developed in the United States in the years following the Civil War. The great writers of the late nineteenth century, Howells, James, and Twain, all belong to this tradition; and Tarkington, as one of the next generation of writers, carried on in the manner of these predecessors. The socio-economic novels of Howells, the international novels of James, the boy stories of Twain—all find their exemplars in Tarkington's oeuvre. Howells in particular was Tarkington's role model, and I would like to focus on this relationship beginning with the year 1885.

At that time Howells was the leading American novelist. The most discriminating readers, including Howells himself, recognized the importance of Henry James, but most people thought Howells more important. Mark Twain, on the other hand had far more readers than either Howells or James, but people did not equate humor with art. In November 1884 the Century Magazine began serializing Howells's novel The Rise of Silas Lapham. A fourteen-year-old boy in Indianapolis named Booth Tarkington was reading that serial and could hardly wait from one monthly installment to the next. When the March 1885 issue came with the chapter describing a particularly dramatic episode, the Corey's dinner party for the nouveau riche Laphams, young Booth was waiting for the postman. He wanted to be the first in the family to find out what happened to
Silas at the famous dinner. Many years later Tarkington remembered the scene vividly. He wrote in an article on the occasion of Howells's death in 1920 that “I had seized upon the parcel, opened it, and, like a pig indeed, had read the precious installment in a hidden retreat.” As he finished and came out of his hiding place, his sister grabbed the magazine.

“What happened to Silas at the dinner?” she asked.

“He — he got drunk!” replied Tarkington, and then he went on to write that although he tried hard to be a very nonchalant and sophisticated reader, he choked up and had to hurry off to be alone.

This is an engaging picture of the novelist as adolescent — Booth Tarkington still in his Penrod period being moved to tears by Howells’s fiction. Howells's impact on Tarkington was a significant factor throughout his career. He never changed his mind about Howells's talent and importance as a novelist. In this same obituary article, Tarkington wrote of Howells: “He knew how to make true things and showed others how to make them.” Earlier when Howells wrote Tarkington in 1914 praising The Turmoil, Tarkington replied: “Any writer in America would rather have a word from you than from any other man. . . . you are responsible for whatever good . . . we produce.” Tarkington later told George Ade that Howells was the “only critic alive worth pleasing.” Even if we discount these words from a grateful younger writer to a distinguished older one, they still are significant. Tarkington does carry on in American literature the Howells brand of realism — truthful treatment of material, fidelity to the depiction of everyday incident, creation of character we all recognize as normal. Tarkington always felt himself a sort of inheritor of the Howells tradition and was proud to carry it on. When Howells's reputation went into eclipse in the sociological thirties, Tarkington’s fame also suffered; but the pendulum has a way of swinging back, and the “beautiful time” that Henry James predicted for Howells may already be here. If so, Tarkington should benefit too.

The bulk of our serious fiction has always been and continues to be written more or less in the realistic mode. This is true despite the contemporary appeal of the fabulators and the creators of currently fashionable metafiction and surfiction. The Nabokovs, Vonneguts, Barthelmes, Pynchons, and Kosinskis may receive more space in the critical journals, but interest in Howells continues strong and is growing. I suspect also that if people would try some of Tarkington’s best work they would find him better than they have been led to believe. I tried teaching The Magnificent Ambersons in a graduate seminar at the University of California recently, and it was a big success. My students knew of the novel, because the Orson Welles film made from it seems to be revived once in a while on TV in California. They found the novel well worth their time and an appropriate companion for novels by Sherwood Anderson, Edith
Wharton, Willa Cather, and others that we were reading in the same course. It is a pity that *The Magnificent Ambersons* is the only one of the *Growth* trilogy in print—no doubt the Orson Welles influence—but I would like to see both *The Turmoil* and *The Midlander* put out in paperback. In addition, I have been suggesting for some time that publishers reissue *Alice Adams* in a paperback edition—so far unsuccessfully—for I think that novel stands the test of time pretty well. As for other Tarkington titles, I am sorry to say, only *Monsieur Beaucaire* and *Penrod* are available in paperbound editions. Another eight titles are in print in hardcover editions—some pretty expensive—aimed at library sales—and that is it.

To return to Tarkington himself. The fifteen-year-old boy who wept over Silas Lapham's disaster grew up to be a novelist. It wasn't easy, and the road to success was strewn with rejection slips. Tarkington's struggle was not as grim as that of another young man in San Francisco—Jack London—who was trying to get published at about the same time. Tarkington did not have to pawn his bicycle and overcoat and to starve himself as London did, but the frustrations were similar. London thought that New York publishers must have some kind of mechanical monster that opened envelopes and sent back manuscripts without any human involvement. Tarkington's manuscripts came back from New York so fast that he thought there must be someone in Philadelphia intercepting his mail. Fortunately for Tarkington the great man of the family, the uncle for whom he was named, Newton Booth, former governor of California, had died in 1892 and left him a bequest. With this money and free board and room in his parents' house, he was able to survive the lean years of apprenticeship. He recalled in 1900 after *The Gentleman from Indiana* had rocketed him to national prominence: "I was for five years and more one of the rejected—as continuously and successively, I suppose, as anyone who ever wrote."

Early one morning during this period he went for a walk after an unusually long writing session. He met the milkman coming up the walk and stopped to talk:

"You been up all night?" he [the milkman] asked.
"What you been doin'?" he went on.
"Working," said I.
"Workin'?" said he. "What at?"
"Writing," said I.
"How long?" said he.
"Since yesterday noon," said I. "About sixteen hours."
"My God," said he. "You must have lots of time to waste!"

If he seemed lazy and self-indulgent to the milkman and the
neighbors, it was appearance only, not reality. In fact he was working very hard to learn his trade. He sometimes bogged down in the sentimental claptrap of the 1890s; and when he began writing his first novel, he made a false start by laying the opening scenes in Bar Harbor, Maine, instead of Indiana where it belonged. Eventually he got the action properly located and the novel completed, but it took five years.

It was not all work, however, during the apprentice years. Tarkington was active in local theatricals, in which he acted as well as wrote plays. And he was very social. He often could be seen racing about Indianapolis in a red-wheeled runabout behind a lively pair of trotting horses. There is a bit of Booth Tarkington in the portrait of young Georgie Minafer of The Magnificent Ambersons. Georgie too raced about the city in his runabout, but unlike his creator he was a much-spoiled young man with no interest in doing anything for a career. Tarkington sandwiched his long hours of writing between his hours of partying, but also like Georgie, he was very attractive to women. When I was working on Tarkington’s biography in the Princeton Library in 1952, among the mountainous pile of material accumulated from a long lifetime were bundles of old love letters. These were mute testimony to his charm in the 1890s. Most of them, however, were very dull reading half a century later, but one of his old girl friends interested me considerably, a girl named Irma von Starkloff from Saint Louis, who had met Tarkington while visiting a cousin in Indianapolis. She had a lively intelligence, and while she obviously had fallen for Tarkington, the two carried on a literary dialogue. Later I found out that this girl had become Irma Rombauer, the author of The Joy of Cooking, and while I was writing my book, I visited her in Saint Louis. She was a spry seventy-five then and reminisced about Tarkington as we sipped scotch on the rocks in her living room. She was appalled to learn that her letters were enshrined in the Princeton Library, but she confirmed all the reports of Tarkington’s attractiveness in his apprentice years.

When Tarkington finally finished his novel, eastern publishers did not beat a track to his door. It remained for his indomitable sister Hauté [also spelled Hautie], who was by then Mrs. Ovid Butler Jameson, to browbeat S. S. McClure into reading the manuscript. She had great faith in her brother’s eventual success and on one of her trips to New York carried along a copy of Tarkington’s eighteenth-century costume romance, Monsieur Beaucaire. That perennial favorite that once provided a play for Richard Mansfield, movies for Rudolph Valentino and Bob Hope, and reading enjoyment for countless thousands was written before the completion of The Gentleman from Indiana. Mrs. Jameson, who had a letter of introduction to McClure, left the manuscript for him to read. When she returned some days later, McClure’s partner, John Philips, tried
to reject the manuscript. Mrs. Jameson made him confess that McClure had not even read the story and then bullied McClure into reading it. But when McClure did not care for an eighteenth-century romance, Mrs. Jameson told him about the Indiana novel her brother was finishing. McClure, who grew up in Illinois after emigrating from Ireland, thought he would like to examine a manuscript about a crusading small-town Hoosier newspaper editor. Mrs. Jameson wired her brother to rush the manuscript to New York.

Tarkington sent it off without much hope. His sister was the perennial optimist. He expected it to come back as all the rest of his fiction had. You can imagine his shocked surprise when he received a letter a couple of weeks later from Hamlin Garland, who then was at the peak of his literary success. The letter began: “Mr. McClure has given me your manuscript, *The Gentleman from Indiana*, to read. You are a novelist.” Tarkington never forgot that letter, which, as he remembered, “changed everything for me,” with its four dumbfounding words: “You are a novelist.” And so he was. By the time he died forty-seven years later, he had produced over forty volumes of prose fiction, won two Pulitzer Prizes, and achieved a respectable place for himself in the history of American letters.

I find it interesting and appropriate that Garland should have been the reader that McClure turned to for advice. Garland was a Howells protégé, and in 1891 when Garland’s own *Main-Travelled Roads* had appeared, Howells had given it a send-off by writing a handsome introduction. Garland too had grown up in the Midwest — in Iowa — and had made his reputation by writing realistic stories of Midwest farm life. Thus Tarkington’s story of rural Indiana found an interested reader. Then, too, the Howells connection has another interesting aspect: Howells himself had come out of the Midwest and had succeeded in working his way into the Eastern literary establishment.

Howells, however, did not discover Tarkington in 1899. *The Gentleman from Indiana* had too much sentimental romance in it for his taste and was only partially realistic. When Howells visited Indianapolis on a lecture tour in 1899 after Tarkington’s novel had come out, he had little to say about the book. Even though he was taken to dinner at Mrs. Jameson’s house where he dined with Tarkington and ex-President Benjamin Harrison, he merely said, when asked by a reporter, that he had read the novel with pleasure. He added that Tarkington was a novelist of great promise, but his remarks seem in retrospect more a gracious gesture than a conviction. Howells restrained his enthusiasm until Tarkington hit his stride with the first of the *Growth* trilogy. Then the praise was unstinting; it was a sort of laying on of hands.

That dumbfounding letter from Garland was followed immediately by a business letter from McClure, who not only wanted to
publish the novel in book form but also to serialize it in his magazine. For the purposes of the magazine, however, the manuscript would have to be cut drastically, and McClure invited Tarkington to come East to do it. Tarkington lost no time in getting to New York, and from the moment he walked into McClure’s office, he found himself surrounded by editors and writers falling all over themselves to be cordial. He met Garland and F. N. Doubleday that first morning in McClure’s office, and as McClure introduced him to the famous journalist Ida Tarbell, the publisher said: “This is to be the most famous young man in America.” McClure was given to hyperbole and uninhibited enthusiasm for the writers he discovered, and we have to discount his words somewhat, but Tarkington was indeed no longer to be an obscure young man from the provinces. For the rest of his life he occupied a prominent place in the American literary world. And it must be said that McClure had a good track record for discovering talent. For example, just four years later an obscure high school English teacher in Pittsburgh, who had sent a manuscript to McClure, received a telegram summoning her to New York to discuss publishing her first work of fiction. That was the real beginning of Willa Cather’s literary career.

A few days after Tarkington arrived in New York, McClure took him to his home on the south shore of Long Island and installed him in a guest room so that he could carry out the surgical procedures necessary to prepare *The Gentleman from Indiana* for the serial version. Tarkington lived in a perpetual state of excitement as he made the cuts, wrote connecting links, and waited for the typist to retype the manuscript. McClure overwhelmed him with hospitality, offered him a job on the magazine, and solicited his company on a trip to Europe the next summer. He resisted these blandishments, however, and after a marvelous three months in New York returned to Indianapolis in May 1899, as the novel began its serialization. His career was well launched, and the following year McClure brought out in book form *Monsieur Beaucaire* after serializing it in the magazine in December and January. Thus within a year the “most famous young man in America” had two best-sellers making the cash registers ring in bookstores throughout the land.

I now skip over the next three years of Tarkington’s life which included two more novels and his foray into Indiana politics. The legislative experience resulted in some interesting political stories published in 1905 as *In the Arena*, but what I want to talk about next is a personal relationship that became extremely significant some ten years later. This was the relationship between Tarkington and his sister’s children. Booth Tarkington had a genius for being an uncle, and the three Jameson boys, who ranged in ages from one to fourteen at the time I am speaking of, were always a source of interest to their uncle. Their relationship first comes to our attention
during Tarkington's grand tour of Europe in 1903–04, which he made with his wife and parents. During the trip he wrote frequent letters home to John and Donald, the two older nephews. These letters were published after his death under the title *Your Amiable Uncle*. He illustrated them with his own drawings, and they are still amusing to read. They are witty, satiric, and above all entertaining; the avuncular interest is clear in every one. Some examples: from Paris on October 12, 1903, he wrote: "We are buying Xmas presents for you — they have such wonderful things here; and we have bought you each a lovely, calf-bound hymnal. You will be mad with joy. But that is not all. Perhaps I shouldn't tell you, so far ahead — it may spoil half your pleasure in getting them, but I can't resist. Each of you is to have a fine woodcut engraving of the Apostle Peter." A few days later from Switzerland Tarkington sent Donald Jameson (then twelve) a postcard and wrote on it: "This is where William Tell lived. I bought the apple shot off his son's head, but I thoughtlessly left it in my room. Papa John [Tarkington's father] came in and ate it, not knowing it wasn't an ordinary apple." Still later after Tarkington had traveled by train from Venice to Florence, he wrote the Jameson boys about some of the people in their compartment on the train. "We had four boys of your age in that compartment; but much better educated than you are, because they spoke Italian fluently. It ought to make you ashamed — we saw children of four in Paris who spoke French. It made me feel that my nephews are an idle, worthless lot." On other occasions he continued the joking about gifts, and from Capri he wrote that among the presents now on hand for the nephews were a "handsome big doormat with 'Wipe Your Feet' in large, attractive letters . . . a splendid edition of *Lives of the Saints*," and embroidered mottoes such as "Home Sweet Home," "Virtue Is Its Own Reward," and "Honor Thy Uncle." This interest in his nephews flowered a decade later when Tarkington began writing the Penrod stories.

Before I take up these stories, however, I need to summarize the decade between the grand tour of 1903–04 and the invention of Penrod Scofield. During the rest of the first decade of this century, Tarkington lived a peripatetic life as novelist, playwright, and expatriate. The trip to Europe with his wife and parents led to more European travel, long stays abroad, and the literary use of his foreign experiences. His playwriting often kept him in New York where he lived out of a suitcase, drank, smoked, and played too much. The antics of his Kokomo lawyer in *The Man from Home*, the play that he wrote with Harry Leon Wilson, were a tremendous box office success, but this period in his life was generally unproductive and very unstable. Its products were not vintage Tarkington. By 1911 he was fast killing himself with alcohol, and before the year was out his marriage went sour and ended in divorce.
Tarkington's life breaks sharply on the sixteenth of January 1912. This was the day he swore off liquor and started both a physical and spiritual recovery. By the end of that year, he had progressed so far that he managed to persuade Susanah Robinson of Dayton to marry him. His second marriage turned out to be a great success, a warm and fulfilling relationship that lasted for the rest of his life. Happily married, Tarkington then settled down in Indianapolis with Susanah and began writing the novels and stories that mark the major phase of his literary career. During the next decade, he produced one after another: *The Flirt, Penrod, The Turmoil, Seventeen, Penrod and Sam, The Magnificent Ambersons,* and *Alice Adams.* He also returned to playwriting and wrote his best play, *Clarence,* the vehicle that launched Alfred Lunt on his distinguished career and provided Helen Hayes with one of her first adult roles.

The first important result of his happy second marriage and his renewed creative energy was *The Flirt.* This is a flawed novel, but it is an important one because in it Tarkington finally found his flood subject—middle-class, urban, Midwestern life. *The Flirt* is his first Indianapolis novel, and the title character, Cora Madison, is the best fictional creation Tarkington had yet produced. The novel also has a significant boy character in Cora's bumptious younger brother, Hedrick. Three months after *The Flirt* was published, Hedrick's avatar appeared as Penrod in his sawdust box in the stable behind the Scofield house.

Susanah Tarkington, whose love and efficiency created a productive environment for her writer-husband, played a seminal part in the creation of *Penrod.* She had been reading a novel dealing with boy life at the English public school Harrow and had been moved by the suffering the small boys went through during hazing by the older lads. She gave the book to her husband to read and was much surprised when he reacted unfavorably. He admitted that the hazing was probably authentic, but he complained that no boys—not even English boys at a public school—ever talked like the children in that novel. Susanah then challenged him to write about boys as they really were. Well, he thought maybe he would, and he disappeared into his workroom for two or three weeks of concentrated effort. He would not discuss what he was writing until one day he called Susanah and read her the first of the Penrod stories, “Penrod and the Pageant.” This tale, which appeared in June 1913, in *Everybody's Magazine,* ultimately grew into the book *Penrod,* an American classic of boy life.

The Penrod stories are compounded from several sources. First of all was Tarkington's own memory of boyhood, his growing up in the old homestead at 1100 North Pennsylvania. The initial story of Penrod and the pageant was drawn from his youthful suffering as a
pinned, powdered, bewigged, and involuntary actor in charity entertainments gotten up by his older sister Haute. He too had been the child Sir Launcelot in tights made from old silk stockings, trunks fashioned from wornout red flannel underdrawers, and a doublet created from a discarded dress. Tarkington also remembered and used the distasteful dancing classes he had been made to attend as a boy, the annual visit of the circus, the feud with his fourth grade teacher, shows staged in the stable loft, and the narratives he wrote as a schoolboy.

When the well of his own memories ran dry, he remembered or watched the antics of his nephews. In the early years of his literary career, Tarkington had had under his daily observation the play of John and Donald Jameson, who lived across the street and were just the ages of Penrod Scofield and Sam Williams. Finally, in 1913 when he actually began writing the stories, John Jameson was out of college and Donald was a senior at Princeton; but Booth Jameson, born in 1902, was just Penrod’s age, and every day Uncle Booth watched the neighborhood children playing in the old stable that still survived behind the house. On one occasion he asked Booth Jameson what he thought of a particular neighborhood lad who seemed from observation somewhat more civilized than the rest of the boys. “We call him the little gentleman,” replied young Booth, and from that youthful epithet was born Georgie Bassett, the model boy whose impeccable behavior is a continual reproach to Penrod. The Penrod stories are in essence, to use Henry James’s phrase, “a direct impression of life.” Tarkington himself commented later when the stories were being dramatized: “I know what makes Penrod because I’ve been years on the job.”

The genre to which Penrod belongs is the realistic boy story, which had a well-rooted tradition in American literature by 1913. Tarkington traced the type back to Mark Twain, who created the first boy story, as Tarkington put it, in which “the hero was recognizable as a boy throughout the whole narrative.” Until Tom Sawyer was written, he added, “nearly all the boys of fiction were adults with a lisp, or saintly infants, or mischievous eccentrics or merely the sturdy ‘young gentlemen’ who fought with the butcher’s boy before going to Eton in the English novels.” William Allen White’s Boyville stories (1899) and Stephen Crane’s Whilomville Stories (1900) continued the tradition; and after Tarkington added his distinguished contribution to this genre, the tradition was continued briefly by F. Scott Fitzgerald with his Basil Duke Lee stories that reflect a strong Tarkington influence and more recently in the stories and the novel, The Catcher in the Rye, of J. D. Salinger.

Tarkington had firm ideas of what boy life was really like and relegated to the limbo of bogus literary works most stories of childhood. Thomas Hughes’s British novel, Tom Brown’s Schooldays, and
its American counterpart, Thomas Bailey Aldrich's *The Story of a Bad Boy*, were two of the phony ones. In both of these novels, at the appropriate moment the hero thrashes the bully and virtue triumphs in good didactic fashion. Tarkington believed that kids were little savages who had to be civilized by relentless parental and societal pressures. The bully Rupe Collins gets beaten up in *Penrod* by Penrod's black playmates, Herman and Verman, but the boys do not play by any Marquis of Queensberry rules. They go after their adversary with a variety of garden implements, and Rupe Collins is lucky he does not get killed.

The differences between *Tom Sawyer* and *Penrod* are instructive. Although Tarkington believed the real boy story stemmed from Mark Twain, the Penrod stories are quite unlike Twain's book. "Tom and Huck [Finn]," wrote Tarkington, "are realistic only in character. He [Twain] gave 'em what boys don't get when it came to 'plot.' All that the boy, Sam [Clemens], had wished to happen, he made happen." Penrod doesn't find buried treasure, run away from home, and then sneak back to watch his own funeral, or get lost in a cave — these are exceptional adventures. Penrod's escapades are the sort of stuff that boy life is really made of — but Tarkington does allow Penrod to have the last word. Most of Penrod's effects are subdued, and the book succeeds through the abundant use of accurately observed detail. "The detail — *not plot* — is what has made it," wrote Tarkington to George Tyler when the latter wanted to have the stories dramatized. The Penrod stories were not written for children, any more than were Twain's book and Stephen Crane's tales. It's Penrod's suffering and his mental processes, not what happens to him, that adults enjoy.

When Tarkington remarried and settled down in Indianapolis after eight years of wandering, he found that his roots still were deeply planted in the Midwest. He felt unexpected stirrings as he began to survey his hometown as the source of fiction. For the rest of his life he regarded himself as a resident Hoosier, even after he built a summer home at Kennebunkport, Maine, and spent more than half the year there. He always came back to Indiana for the winter, and while he admitted he liked Maine better than Indiana, Indianapolis, he exclaimed, "is sort of a person — my uncle or somebody." But long residence in the East and abroad gave him perspective on the Midwest and brought into sharp focus the contrasts between Indianapolis at the turn of the century and on the eve of World War I. And when he thought of the city of his youth, the differences were even more astonishing. Indianapolis had grown from an oversized country town to become a good-sized industrial city. The self-contained society that he remembered had crumbled before the growing complexities of a polyglot urban population. To make the contrast even more startling — and depressing — the natural gas that
had fueled the furnaces of central Indiana at the beginning of the century had run out and been replaced by soft coal. Dirt, grime, soot were everywhere, and to one who lived at 1100 North Pennsylvania, there was no getting away from the soft coal smoke.

After two years back in Indiana, Tarkington wrote the first of his *Growth* trilogy, *The Turmoil*, in which he indicts business, the pursuit of wealth, and the mindless advocacy of physical growth. Smoke is the dominant symbol of the novel, and the monstrous industrial complex that spews it out seems to repeat this refrain: “Wealth! I will get Wealth! I will make Wealth! I will sell Wealth for more Wealth! I shall be dirty, my garment shall be dirty, and I will foul my neighbor so that he cannot be clean—but I will get Wealth!” Tarkington wrote to a friend while his novel was being serialized: “Commercialism is the savage of the world; it’s that stinking brute I’m after . . . in *The Turmoil*, which is written much more feebly than I’d like.” Despite his disclaimer, however, it is a strong story and makes interesting reading in the ecological 1980s. A few years ago I wrote an introduction to a new edition of this novel at the request of a professor of engineering who was working up materials to support courses in environmental studies. The novel is well suited for this extrinsic purpose. It depicts dramatically a period in our history when haste, waste, and insensitivity to social problems had few opponents. When the self-made millionaire James Sheridan in the novel sees smoke pouring out of smokestacks, he chuckles. As soot falls on his cuff, he smacks his lips and says: “Good, clean soot; it’s our life-blood, God bless it!” He saw the smoke as a symbol of his fortune and the growing wealth of the city. When a smoke-abatement committee of women visits him, asking his aid in ridding the city of its blight, he tells them jovially: “Smoke’s what brings your husbands’ money home on Saturday night.”

*The Turmoil* is the story of an ascending family, first generation makers of the wealth. James Sheridan at the outset of the novel is the owner of the biggest skyscraper, the biggest trust company, and the biggest manufacturing works in the city. Having come from the country in his youth, Sheridan, like Howells’s paint manufacturer in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, has risen to wealth but not to social position. His success in business has not prepared him for success in human relations, and while he possesses a Midas touch, his acquisitive genius is no more able than the fabled king’s to buy happiness. The conflicts in the novel arise from his efforts to run his family like a financial and industrial empire. He kills his favorite son as a sacrifice on the altar of business. He dismisses an unacceptable suitor, only to have his daughter elope. He forces a second son into the business and watches the boy crack under the double strain of parental coercion and marital trouble. Sheridan wins his main contest, however, which involves his youngest son, Bibbs, a fragile, poetic
young man who wants no part in the family enterprises. Bibbs ultimately suppresses his own desire to write and by an act of will makes himself into the image of his father.

The Sheridans in *The Turmoil* are a composite of many families who rose to positions of affluence and power in the Midwest during the early years of the century. The father is the high priest of Bigness, who all his life has "struggled and conquered, and must all his life go on struggling and inevitably conquering, as part of a vast impulse not his own." He is a convincing character, though his material values and domestic bullheadedness do not inspire affection. Bibbs also is a real creation, as Howells wrote appreciatively when the novel began to appear in *Harper's*. He recalls something of Tarkington's own attractiveness during the 1890s, and under different circumstances Tarkington himself might have lived the part he made for Bibbs.

Bibb's compensation for having to go into the family business is a charming heroine, Mary Vertrees, who is the daughter of a declining old family; and this linking of the *nouveau riche* with the old aristocracy provides the material for Tarkington's next volume in the *Growth* trilogy, *The Magnificent Ambersons*. This novel is perhaps too well known to need further discussion, but it brought Tarkington his first Pulitzer Prize; and it depicts vividly the other side of the coin — the slow disintegration of the Amberson fortune through the onslaught of modern growth. At the end of the novel, the spoiled Georgie Minafer swallows his pride and goes to work to make a place for himself in the new era; and the cycle that Howells had described in the fortunes of the Boston Corey family in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is once more repeated in midland American society.

After *The Magnificent Ambersons* appeared, Indianapolis residents made a parlor game out of matching up the fictional setting to the real history of the city. They figured out the Amberson Addition with its large homes and cast-iron statues had been modeled after Woodruff Place. The Amberson mansion, however, was put in Woodruff Place by artistic license, as Tarkington explained to a *Life* magazine editor in 1942 when Orson Welles was making his movie out of the novel. The actual model was the old Knights of Columbus headquarters on Delaware Street. Of further historic interest too was the character of Eugene Morgan, the pioneer automobile manufacturer, who reminded Indianapolis readers that their city once had rivaled Detroit as a center for making motor vehicles.

Tarkington's marvelous social comedy *Alice Adams* and the third novel in the *Growth* trilogy, *The Midlander*, also are important novels and round out Tarkington's greatest accomplishment in his most fruitful decade. In *Alice Adams* Tarkington returned to social comedy, and while he still was studying social mobility among urban groups, Alice's efforts to catch a rich socially prominent
young man end not in tragedy but in pathos. As she climbs the steps of Frincke's Business College to begin learning typing and shorthand, the reader sighs and reminds herself that this is life, not romance, that Alice's fate is after all what happens to most of us. *The Midlander*, the last of the *Growth* trilogy, appeared after a three-year interval, in 1924, and it is a somber story of blasted hopes and unrealized possibilities. Its hero, Dan Oliphant, is a real-estate promoter, a man with a vision of the city beautiful, but he is crushed by the consolidators who take over his financial empire. He dies at the end, lonely and unhappy, a victim of the city's growth.

There is an interesting connection between this novel and Tarkington's own life at this time. One of Dan Oliphant's projects in the novel is the development of a new subdivision on the outskirts of the city in the area north of Thirty-eighth Street. It was into this section of the city that Tarkington was about to move himself, and in the same year the *The Midlander* was published, he bought a house at 4270 North Meridian. He lived in that house the rest of his life. Leaving the old home at 1100 North Pennsylvania, however, caused a pang, but he wasn't sorry to leave the smoke and dirt. The commercial center of the city long since had encroached on the old homestead, and North Meridian Street was then like living in the country. The house he bought, a half-timbered house constructed in the Tudor style, had been built eleven years earlier or just about the time his fictional Dan Oliphant was building houses in his Ornaby Addition. The house stood on a beautiful lot covered with trees—some of them the original forest trees—and both of the Tarkingtons were enchanted with their surroundings.

The year after moving into the new house, the Tarkingtons made a long trip to Europe, then settled down to what Booth called his milk run—up to Maine in the spring and back to Indiana in the winter. He soon began to develop cataracts and was blind for a period, after which he underwent several operations at Johns Hopkins. He regained partial sight, but his physical vigor was diminished in his final years.

After the return of his sight, Tarkington plunged into art collecting on a substantial scale. His interest in art began in his youth with some modest acquisitions, but by the thirties he was turning his avocation into literary material. The stories he wrote for the *Saturday Evening Post* about the art business were collected into a very entertaining book, *Rumbin Galleries* (1937), and he went on to write a book about his own collection, *Some Old Portraits* (1939). The inspiration for the latter volume was his delight at the vivid colors he could see following his operations. Gone was the gray world of the cataract sufferer, and the paintings he already owned took on subtleties of texture and tone that he never had noticed before.
When the bottom dropped out of the art market during the Great Depression, Tarkington's income dipped only slightly. He was able to afford an impressive number of paintings by Reynolds, Gainsborough, Lawrence, Lely, Stuart, and others— even a Titian, a Velásquez, and a Goya. He wrote a friend that he was buying pictures instead of stocks and argued that they were more depression-proof than securities. The paintings that he gathered about him during the last decade of his life provided endless enjoyment. *Some Old Portraits* is a charming book that reflects this pleasure, but it is more than that. As his friend, the art historian Erwin Panofsky, said, it was a book "the like of which no art historian could ever write—a book that compels the painter to tell us more about human nature than he reveals in the picture, and compels the sitter to tell us more about human nature than he revealed to the painter."

The last eight years of Tarkington's life were spent quietly— winters in Indianapolis and summers at Kennebunkport, Maine. He continued to work, as the habits of a lifetime did not desert him, and he wrote five more novels between 1939 and his death seven years later. He enjoyed the company of his neighbor Kenneth Roberts during his summers in Maine and served as advisor and critic for Roberts's historical fiction. In the winters in Indianapolis, he entertained old friends like the Lunts, Alexander Woollcott, and Helen Hayes and took pleasure in the company of his nephews and nieces, as well as his grandnephews and grandnieces. Performances of the Indianapolis Symphony and recordings of classical music brightened his final years. He remained a *bon vivant* and witty raconteur, as Susanah Mayberry's memoir demonstrates, until the end, and when he died in 1946, he had lived a full, satisfying, and fulfilled life.