

AMERICAN GILT

TRIOLOGY

‘Downtown Abbey’ meets *‘The Age of Innocence’*
with a touch of *‘Mr. Selfridge’* and *‘The Great Gatsby’*

- Based on the true story of the Belmont-Whiting Scandal of 1883.
- I don’t have time in these two minutes to tell you all of the sub-stories, like the sinking of the Vanderbilt yacht, or Mrs. Astor’s decline into dementia, but keep in mind there are many sub-stories to this intricate true tale.
- A young debutante, Sara Swan Whiting falls in love with Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont, the wealthy and spoiled son of August Belmont.
- Sent to the Navy to follow in his uncle – and namesake’s footsteps as a naval hero, Oliver instead finds gambling, drinking and partying more to his liking, which gets him a reprimand more than once.
- Looking to escape his father’s demands Oliver seeks to marry. While on leave in Newport, RI he sets his sights on the beautiful and popular Miss Whiting.
- Miss Whiting is smitten with Oliver, and her mother is anxious for the match which will elevate her standing among the social set – called ‘the 400’.
- While on holiday in France, Miss Whiting courts Oliver Belmont, who has gone AWOL from the Navy much to his parents’ dismay. While on an outing, Oliver spontaneously proposes marriage, breaking social protocol – and Miss Whiting accepts.
- Oliver seeks his parents’ blessing for the marriage, calling the couple ‘half-engaged’ but his parents are furious and instead of their blessing, Oliver is sent to Germany to intern at the Rothschild’s banking house for a term of two years, during which he must have no contact with Sara Whiting or the conditional acceptance of the engagement will be withdrawn by his father.
- Oliver discovers the wonders of absinthe and drowns his sorrows in the elixir that caused many to go mad.

- Sara continues to court hiding her dismay at the Belmont's rejection of her as a daughter-in-law. Mrs. Whiting hounds the Belmonts, insistent they honor their son's marriage proposal.
- Oliver becomes melancholy and alcoholic. His mother suspects the situation and capitulates to the marriage, telling her husband "better he have the influence of someone closer to him, like a wife, rather than lying around their house drinking and smoking."
- Oliver returns to Newport and on December 27, 1882 Sara Swan Whiting and Oliver H.P. Belmont are married at Swanhurst in the presence of the Astors, the Vanderbilts and the Roosevelt families, among others of the social set.
- The couple depart for a Paris honeymoon on the Champs Elysees. They are blissfully happy enjoying the rewards of marriage.
- Mrs. Whiting and her two spinster daughters come to visit the couple, staying in the honeymoon suite as previously planned. At first all is well.
- Oliver grows disgruntled at the presence of Sara's family and complains to Sara, offending her. The newlyweds begin to argue – fueled by Oliver's penchant for absinthe.
- Oliver grows violent, striking Sara. She locks herself in their bedchamber refusing him entry.
- Oliver begins to frequent brothels and drinks absinthe in excess, which changes his mood and demeanor for the worse.
- The situation erupts into another argument, and again Oliver strikes Sara while yelling "You are not my wife!" He packs a suitcase and leaves the apartment saying he is going away for a few days to clear his head.
- Days turn to weeks and weeks turn into a month, Oliver does not return.
- Sara hears rumors that Oliver is in Bordeaux, Spain with a French 'dancer'. Other rumors claim he was married once before, while in the Navy. Sara works to prevent a scandal and tells people Oliver is in Spain on business.
- Sara secretly leaves and goes to New York to attend the Vanderbilt Fancy Ball – the party of the year (3-27-1883) She continues to tell all Oliver is on business in Spain. On her return to Paris she grows ill.
- When Sara gets back to the Champs Elysees she discovers she is pregnant with Oliver's child.
- Oliver is contacted and told of the situation. Both his parents and Mrs. Whiting demand Oliver return to his wife – but he does not return.

- At the beginning of May the doctor tells Sara she must return to Newport before the pregnancy advances. The Whitings depart for the States via London.
- Oliver hears that his wife is leaving Paris and heads to France – but he doesn't make it in time. The Whitings are already in New York. He sends a telegram for them to wait but Mrs. Whiting intercepts the communiqué and telegrams back to Paris – impersonating Sara. She tells him “Do not come. I cannot see you at present. All is at an end.”
- The Whitings arrive in New York and discover Mr. and Mrs. Belmont are in town. They immediately head to Newport R.I. to avoid a confrontation. Once in Newport, Mrs. Whiting goes to the press and tells the story of the groom abandoning his bride in Paris, in an effort to save Sara's reputation and lay blame for the couple's problems at Oliver's feet.
- A huge scandal erupts and Sara is at the center of it all. Oliver returns and his parents hold dinner parties swaying their friends in the Belmont's favor. Mr. Belmont plants propaganda in the newspapers sympathetic to Oliver.
- Oliver is given Oakland Farm by his father and Oliver requests Sara join him so they can live again as husband and wife. Sara refuses saying she is frightened of him, and frightened he will harm her while pregnant.
- Sara files for divorce at the insistence of her mother. When visiting the lawyer's office Sara arrives as a meeting is concluded by a committee erecting a statue in honor of Oliver Hazard Perry – her husband's namesake. A weird twist of fate. (And a true occurrence.)
- Sara gives birth on September 1, 1883 to a girl, Natica Caroline Belmont, but she refuses Oliver visitation. Oliver in turn denies his paternity to the child.
- Sara is shunned and outcast by society, while Oliver continues to socialize unscathed by the rumors. Men were allowed many more indiscretions at the time, while women were expected to be the epitome of propriety.
- Sara contemplates suicide, but her attempt is thwarted.
- Sara remains for the winter in Newport hounded by the press looking for gossip. Oliver also stays in Newport to show he is willing to make the marriage work. The divorce is granted in late spring of 1884.
- Sara resigns herself to the life of a spinster as an unwed mother in 1884. She lives with her mother and two sisters at Swanhurst, raising the baby.
- Oliver secretly wishes for a relationship with his daughter. He watches her from afar and even feigns a flat tire in front of Swanhurst hoping to see the girl.

- Sara's mother, dying, apologizes for the trouble she caused with Sara's marriage.
- Sara's widower brother dies, leaving his daughter, Charlotte, orphaned. Sara and her sisters take the girl in. Three years older than Natica, the two girls become friends and confidants.
- A friend of Sara's is widowed, George Rives. George proposes marriage and Sara and George, along with his teenage son, create a blended family.
- The couple has a son and a daughter. Sara's place in society begins to return as the stigma of her divorce fades.
- Natica grows into a beautiful young debutante as does her cousin Charlotte. Charlotte marries and soon after, Natica makes her début. Natica is very popular and frequently in the society pages of the newspaper. She's the Kim Kardashian of 1900s New York society.
- Natica realizes Oliver is her birth father and confronts him about leaving her mother (Sara) and herself in the throes of shame and scandal.
- Oliver tries to apologize but Natica turns her back on him. Oliver is heartbroken.
- Natica falls in love but her mother disapproves of the match. Sara encourages her daughter to focus on William Burden, a very wealthy bachelor.
- A violent argument ensues between mother and daughter. Sara takes Natica to Paris to forget her love interest. In the interim, he proposes marriage to another woman.
- Natica courts William Burden. He proposes and Natica accepts. The newspapers have a field day with the story.
- Natica grows melancholy and takes in healing waters with trips to spas.
- Sara plans for her daughter's wedding.
- Natica returns to New York and takes a room at a hotel to escape the press, while her mother prepares for the wedding.
- Oliver leaves New York to escape the heartbreak of not being invited to his daughter's wedding.
- Crowds throng the streets to see Natica on her wedding day as she enters the church on the arm of her stepfather, George Rives.
- Natica and William Burden go on a tour of Europe for their honeymoon. Upon their return Mrs. Burden throws a huge ball to welcome back the newlyweds.

- Life settles into an easy pace, William working at his father's business office.
- Natica grows ill for several days. She discovers she is pregnant.
- Taking to her room one evening she waits for William to come home to tell him the good news of the pregnancy. Her maid comes in before retiring for the night and delivers a letter. Natica asks her to adjust the gas lamp and instructs the maid not to disturb her until 10 o'clock the next morning.
- William comes in and Natica tells him he is going to be a father. William is overjoyed and tells Natica he loves her. She returns the sentiment. William retires to his own chambers.
- Natica reads the letter delivered by her maid. It is from Oliver, asking that she meet him the next day for lunch so that the two may reconcile. Natica considers her request and with the new perspective of an expectant mother, decides it is time to forgive Oliver. She plans to write him in the morning and agree to the luncheon.
- But that is not to be. The next morning a terrible storm rages over New York and Natica is overcome by gas fumes in the night. When the maid goes to wake her at 10 o'clock she finds Natica dead. February 22, 1908.
- Sara rushes to the scene, hysterical, intercepting the coroner. The coroner yells for someone to 'call the girl's father'.
- Sara follows the gurney out to the ambulance when Oliver arrives. A huge argument ensues between the two. George, Sara's husband appears on the scene and demands Oliver leave, just as Sara faints in his arm from the trauma of Natica's death.
- The newspapers have a field day with the story, claiming Natica's death was a suicide although the coroner has ruled her death an accidental asphyxiation.
- An imposter appears claiming she is really Natica, trying to gain the girl's fortune. The imposter is shunned.
- Oliver is struck by a deathly case of appendicitis. As he lays dying, Natica's ghost comes to him. Father and daughter are reunited when Oliver dies. June 5, 1908
- Mrs. Astor, now old, suffers from dementia. She dresses as if for a fancy ball in 1880 and talks to invisible guests. Mrs. Astor instructs her butler to prepare for dinner parties that will never be held. One day she falls down her marble staircase and severely injures her head. October 30, 1908 Mrs. Astor dies.
- It is the end of the Gilded Age as the modern times of the 20th century take over the propriety of a bygone era.

- Sara pieces her life together, focusing on her other children; Bayard and Mildred. The two grow up and marry. George dies shortly after Mildred's wedding.
- Sara, living in her New York home enjoys her granddaughters. One night she drifts to sleep, memories of the fancy balls of the Gilded Age drifting through her mind. She dreams she is at Swanhurst again with her family; her grandfather, Judge Swan, her beloved father and mother, her brother and sisters and Natica, looking young and beautiful, all in attendance at the Swanhurst dinner party. Natica turns toward her and says; "Here she is now, America's débutante has finally come home."
- Sara dies that night in her New York home.
- Swanhurst is bequeathed to her daughter Mildred, as it has been passed from mother to daughter for three generations.
- Mildred dies in childbirth a few years later.
- A stipulation in Sara's will donates the home to the Newport Art Association in the event of Mildred's death, instead of keeping it in the family for Sara's son, Bayard, and his heirs.
- A ceremony is held at Swanhurst by the Newport Art Association as they accept the bequest. Bayard, Sara's son, is the only surviving family member.
- At the ceremony Bayard meets Carrie Astor Wilson and Edith Wharton, both in attendance. The women speak highly of Sara and the horrible scandal delivered on her by Oliver Belmont. They commend Sara's courage and strength to move forward and build a new life for herself and her children, returning to a place of respect in polite society.
- Bayard takes one last walk through the family home, memories of his mother and family flooding his thoughts.
- He gets in his car and drives down Bellevue Avenue toward the setting sun over the Newport coast. (*The same way the story started. See book 1 **Début** opening paragraph.*)
- Bayard watches the sun set one last time over the Newport horizon.