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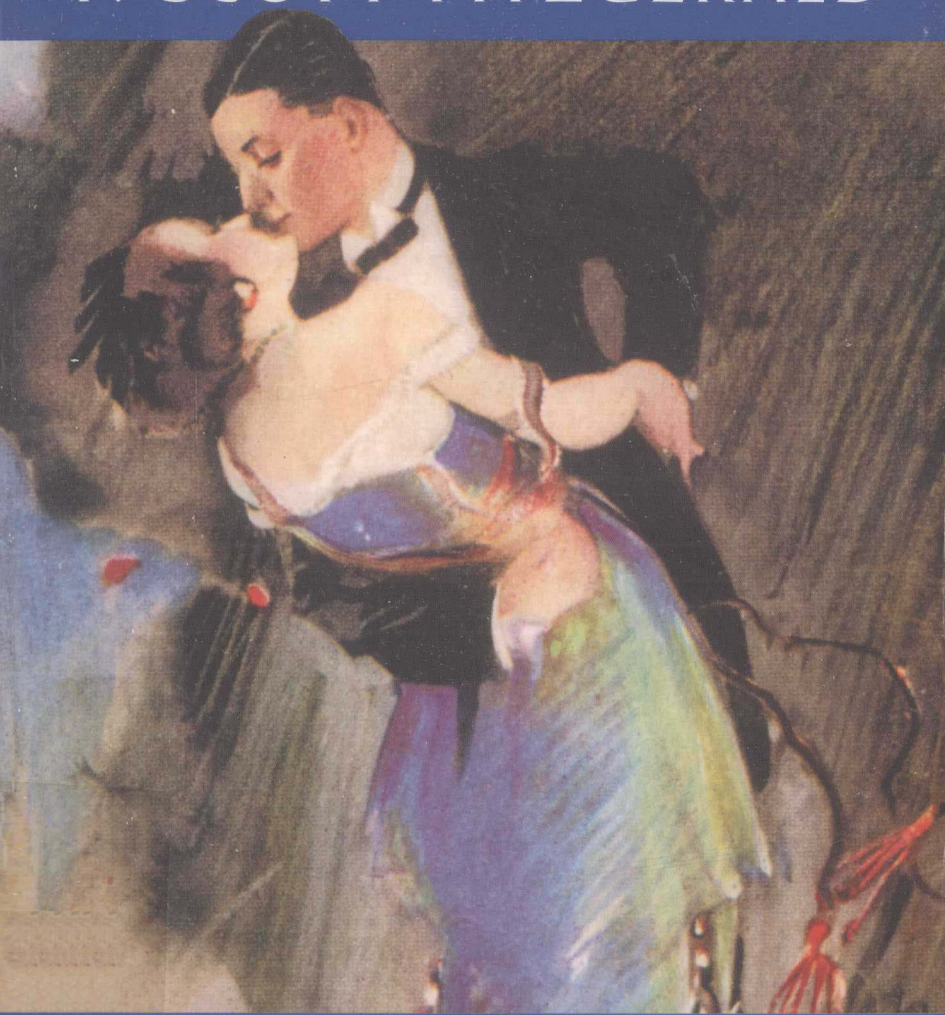
The Diamond as Big as the Ritz & Other Stories

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD



SELECTED STORIES

THE DIAMOND AS BIG AS THE RITZ

and other stories

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Introduction and Notes by
STUART HUTCHINSON
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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

The stories of Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (1896–1940) represented in this volume offer abbreviated treatments of his recurrent themes, namely men's and women's problematical relationships with one another; whether the possession of great wealth increases human happiness, there being in Fitzgerald's view no viable alternative even to the Darwinian ruthlessness of capitalism; and the significance of the artist when his productions too (it is always a man) become as complicit in the market as Fitzgerald's stories were themselves. The main period depicted begins with the liberating years after World War I, the so-called 'Jazz Age' of the 1920s, and ends with the post-1929 Wall Street crash, leading to the Depression of the 1930s, a decade 'some people would consider themselves lucky to've missed'

(p. 213). Significantly, this quotation from 'The Lost Decade' (*Esquire*, December 1939) is from a sketch about *not* engaging with the 1930s. It confirms that as far as the public world is concerned Fitzgerald's essential material during his short life was the 1920s and their immediate after-effects. As for short stories themselves, he apparently held them in low esteem, declaring in 1926, when he must have thought *The Great Gatsby* (1925) had confirmed his career as a great novelist: 'I hate writing short stories . . . and only do my six a year to have the leisure to write my novels' (*Letters*, p. 206). None the less, they 'sustained Fitzgerald financially' (Kuehl, p. 4), and he was eventually to write a hundred and seventy-eight. As I hope to show, some of them enhance a literary form that has been major in American literature since Poe.

II

'Evylyn. I'm going to give you a present that's as hard as you are and as beautiful and as empty and as easy to see through' (p. 2). So Evylyn Piper, the central character of 'The Cut-Glass Bowl' (*Scribner's Magazine*, May 1920), recollects the words of a suitor as he presented her with the bowl shortly before her marriage to another man. The story has begun seven years into this marriage to Harold Piper, with Evylyn about to bring one more affair to an end. Interrupted by Harold, she conceals the man, but he unintentionally betrays his presence by striking his arm against the fateful bowl. Thereafter the Pipers' marriage is dead, even though Evylyn discovers, at the very moment of her husband's humiliation, 'how much she loved [him]' and 'how indelibly she had hurt him' (p. 28). These deeper feelings are rebuffed by Harold and survive only in Evylyn's love for her son, who at the end of the story will be killed in World War I, the formal letter from the War Department being temporarily placed in the cut-glass bowl by a servant.

'You see, I am fate,' the bowl supposedly declares to Evylyn at the end, 'and stronger than your puny plans; and I am how-things-turn-out and I am different from your little dreams, and I am the flight of time and the end of beauty and unfulfilled desire' (p. 40). Given this moral, which the story grimly enforces by also getting the bowl to cause a disfigurement to the Pipers' daughter, how responsible can Evylyn be for 'how-things-turn-out'? The man who gave her the bowl believed it symbolised her essential vanity, but in its small way

the story presents Evylyn as being as trapped as Edith Wharton's Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*. The social world of 'The Cut-Glass Bowl', together with Fitzgerald's omniscient authorial manner, is indeed very much a development of Wharton's. It is still a hierarchical America where it is difficult to get good servants, and in which recent immigrants to America ('these Swedes' [p. 29]) will feature only as servants. It also is a Darwinian world, where established families like the Pipers are being challenged by new business energies embodied in the admirably adaptable Ahearns and, even more distastefully from the Pipers' point of view, in a Jewish rival Fitzgerald teasingly chooses to call Marx. A central dinner scene reveals Harold incapable of rising to the new competition, so what can Evylyn, tied to such a husband, do? 'Nothing' is the story's implicit answer, though this verdict is compromised by Fitzgerald himself being committed to understanding Evylyn only in terms of the evanescence of her beauty, as when he curtly informs us: 'If Evylyn's beauty had hesitated in her early thirties it came to an abrupt decision just afterward and completely left her' (p. 37). Having romanticised a woman's beauty, Fitzgerald insistently records its loss, thereby victimising Evylyn for the primary quality he has given her. Wharton's precedent with Lily Bart notwithstanding, this procedure might be seen as conventional male misogyny, especially when the woman is addressed as 'Evie' (p. 26) and is a beguiler of men.

Contrivance shows in 'The Cut-Glass Bowl', but two months later Fitzgerald's technique and social realism expanded into the multi-focused 'May Day' (*The Smart Set*, July 1920) which, along with 'Babylon Revisited', remains the best of his short stories. Like the earlier piece, it also intimates a Darwinian world immediately evident in the two returning soldiers, Carrol Key and Gus Rose: 'tossed as driftwood from their births, they would be tossed as driftwood to their deaths'. The blood of the former has been 'thinly diluted by generations of degeneration' while the latter, presumably of Jewish descent, is 'swart and bandy-legged, with rat-eyes and a much broken hooked nose' (p. 53). Contrastingly, we have the rich Philip Dean: 'Everything about him radiated fitness and bodily comfort. He smiled frequently, showing large and prominent teeth' (p. 44). Like Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*, Philip seems destined to get, predatorily, whatever he wants from the world, but his difference from Carrol's and Gus's 'driftwood' is as much the predictable result of nourishing food and an unstressful life as it is

the deserving survival of the fittest. He is presumably one of those 'that had the money to buy himself out of the war' (p. 55) from which Gordon Sterrett, his fellow student at Yale, has also just returned. Gordon will eventually shoot himself, but no more than Carrol's is his early death the entirely deserved fate of the weak. Significantly, Fitzgerald himself has a latent self-identification with both men, giving Carrol one of his own names ('Key'), and representing Gordon as an aspiring artist. Whatever their deserts, their expectations have been gratuitously blighted by the war.

A similar complication is evident in the presentation of Edith Bradin and Jewel Hudson, the rich woman and the poor woman in Gordon's life. Edith convinces herself she is 'falling in love with her recollection of Gordon' (p. 60), but when she actually meets him she cannot bear his alcoholic, wasted reality. Used to men 'in various stages of intoxication, from uncles all the way down to chauffeurs . . . here for the first time she was seized with a new feeling – an unutterable horror'. Accusingly she says to Gordon, 'you look like the devil' (p. 65), thus aligning herself with Philip's metaphysical and moral reach when he too found in Gordon 'a sort of evil' (p. 48). Jewel by contrast, kissing Gordon 'with soft, pulpy lips' (p. 74), might be seen as a girl from the lower social depths, entrapping him in entirely basic instinct. Yet it seems true that she is indifferent to Gordon's not having the money she had demanded, and that she is ready to take care of him. As befits her name, and even if she regards Gordon as a 'catch', her value is a humanity all the more to be prized in a world of false glitter. Whereas Philip hoped he could brush Gordon off with some money, she will give him the best of her love.

Not that 'May Day' is sentimental. Gordon kills himself because he knows the promise of his life is finished, whatever Jewel's comforts. Allied to its social range, the story is remarkable for an authorial objectivity which is neither detached from, nor indifferent to, its subjects. Fitzgerald himself had participated in a 'Mr In and Mr Out' routine at a dance at Delmonico's (Kuehl, p. 40) and undoubtedly is as amused by these two characters as he expects us to be, even as he appreciates the irresponsibility of a rich drunken young man, who 'reached over to a plate on the table beside him and picking up a handful of hash tossed it into the air' (p. 83). May Day, like the Twelfth Night in Shakespeare's play, is a time for festivity, bacchanal, riot, and the rich have as much right as the poor to let go, even though riot can always be dangerous. A drunken rich boy wants to

'beat up this waiter' (p. 83), and a rampaging mob of soldiers results in the death of one of their own number. Would socialism or communism, which May Day also celebrates, eliminate these tensions? Edith's brother is promulgating a version of these ideologies in his newspaper, but the soldiers, understandably, do not want to hear they have been duped into fighting a war on behalf of capitalism, and consequently have no time for such a creed. Nor has Fitzgerald, who dismisses it as the pouring of 'the latest cures for incurable evils into the columns of a radical weekly newspaper' (p. 62).

Finally, the story's title also refers to the international rescue call, 'May Day', which derives from the French *'m'aidez'*, meaning 'help me'. Gordon is making this plea, but the story suggests Philip, narcissistically 'polishing his body' (p. 45), and everyone else should be making it too. What significant basis do their post-war lives have? Was it for this America that Columbus made his great voyage, the story implicitly asks, as it presents 'magical, breathless dawn, silhouetting the great statue of the immortal Christopher' (p. 84). It is a similar question to the one implied at the end of *Gatsby*, and it leads to similar irresolvability. This America after all offers the consumer goods which may bring so much happiness, and to which Fitzgerald is apparently as attracted as are his characters. Witness Gordon's examination of Philip's shirts, ties and socks in Chapter 1, and the working girls looking into shop windows in the first two paragraphs of Chapter 2, when Fitzgerald writes of 'the wealthy, happy sun' (p. 50), as if materialism were necessarily in harmony with nature. The Prologue to 'May Day' may indicate a Belshazzar's Feast (with 'The Diamond as Big as the Ritz' presenting the writing on the wall), but in his American way Fitzgerald is sure that consumerism's expression of the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is better than anything communism offers.

Meanwhile, in 'The Lees of Happiness' (*Chicago Sunday Tribune*, December 1920) he writes a story in which characters, in contrast to those in 'The Cut-Glass Bowl', encounter fates recognised to be undeserved. 'What had he and Roxanne done that life should deal these crashing blows to them?' (p. 204), Harry Cromwell wonders. His own marriage is a mess, while Roxanne's husband and his friend, the writer Jeffrey Curtain, lies barely alive as a result of a blood clot breaking in his brain. Immediately prior to his affliction Jeffrey may have manifested a latent antagonism to Roxanne. Watching him

play cards at a poker party, Roxanne 'quite innocently . . . reached out her hand, intending to place it on Jeffrey's shoulder – as it touched him he started of a sudden, gave a short grunt, and, sweeping back his arm furiously, caught her a glancing blow on her elbow' (p. 199). This reaction, however, may signal no more than a discountable hair-line fissure in 'a marriage of love' (p. 194), or may even indicate the looming physiological quake in Jeffrey's brain. Similarly, Harry's slatternly wife may well be at least OK with her second husband, who has the money to give her whatever she wants and needs, including domestic help. Because 'The Lees of Happiness' presents characters in the grip of developments (external or internal to the self) over which they do not have control, it is not interested in culpability. Rather, it is aware of general vulnerability and even futility. These are exemplified in how a writer such as Jeffrey (or Fitzgerald himself) might be cut down before ever achieving what might have been his prime, and only leave 'passably amusing stories, a bit out of date now, but doubtless the sort that would then have whiled away a dreary half-hour in a dental office' (p. 193). They are exemplified too in the knowledge that even had Roxanne achieved the kind of fame available to her, it would have been mainly associated with triviality: 'Why did her name not linger in popular songs and vaudeville jokes and cigar bands, and the memory of that gay old uncle of yours . . . whither had she gone? What dark trap-door had opened suddenly and swallowed her up?' (p. 194).

What is it but good fortune that keeps such a trap-door from our path? In Roxanne's case her life is swallowed up attending the barely alive Jeffrey. Giving him this care, she experiences 'the lees of happiness', and perhaps the recipient experiences it also. Certainly Harry as witness does. Life turns out to be a grim business for the three main characters, but, as when Jeffrey found a use for Roxanne's cookies, they try to make it better rather than worse. In this effort Roxanne travels far from when she was a young 'butterfly of butterflies' (p. 193).

In 'The Diamond as Big as the Ritz' (*The Smart Set*, June 1922) Fitzgerald returns from personal to national themes. As a fable it contrasts with the realism of 'May Day', while complementing the earlier story's account of America. In it the significantly named Washingtons own the colossal diamond signifying that material wealth which the American New World, and especially its western territory (Montana in this case), has always seemed to proffer

human imagination. Ominously, the most significant theme of the story is what must be done to protect this source of the American good life, itself epitomised in all its splendour and comfort by the allusion to 'the Ritz-Carlton hotel' (p. 95). In the story the diamond must be guarded by violence, murder, and the corruption of any discourse ('survey', 'maps', 'compasses' [p. 99]) making an approach to it. Other races (blacks in the story) must be enslaved to preserve it, and nature itself perverted. So the 'wealthy, happy sun' in 'May Day', becomes 'the Montana sunset [lying] between two mountains like a gigantic bruise from which dark arteries spread themselves over a poisoned sky' (p. 96). No one currently worried about the exploitation of the planet could write a better line.

Regrettably, the story is not entirely successful. It begins with the account of Hades, 'a small town on the Mississippi River' (p. 93), apparently created to let Fitzgerald, like Twain at his weakest, do easy jokes for their own sake. Soon we find ourselves in the Washingtons' domain, where the relationship between John Unger and Kismine is uninteresting even as a fable, and where the story requires 'Negroes' to be naturally gullible and foolish. So the Washingtons' slaves not only believe the South won the Civil War, they also 'passed a vote declaring it a good thing and held revival services immediately' (p. 105). In her preface to *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Harvard University Press Cambridge, Mass., 1992), Toni Morrison argues 'The readers of virtually all American fiction have been positioned as white', and in this story, and others in this selection referring to blacks (see p. 23, p. 173, p. 212), readers may well find evidence for her case. Disappointingly, 'The Diamond as Big as the Ritz' does not live up to its powerful suggestiveness about the absolute corrupting power of great wealth. Consequently, Braddock Washington's offer of 'a bribe to God' (p. 125), if only he can be left immune (what else have the very rich ever done to placate a divinity imagined in their own image?), becomes too big a moment for the accompanying triviality involving John and Kismine.

Referring to Fitzgerald as 'poor Julian', a Hemingway character in 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' remembers

> his romantic awe of [the rich] and how he had started a story once that began, 'The very rich are different from you and me.' And how someone had said to Julian, Yes, they have more money. But

that was not humorous to Julian. He thought they were a special glamorous race and when he found they weren't it wrecked him just as much as any other things that wrecked him.

Whatever it was that wrecked Fitzgerald, none of the stories so far in this volume expresses an author romantically captivated, only to be disillusioned, by the very rich, and who indeed would want to spend much time with fiction having so simple a theme? Rather we have pervasively in Fitzgerald a theme more central to his age and our own. He shows how material wealth may be celebrated as the only measure of life we have left, even though it be accompanied by human, not to say spiritual, impoverishment. 'The Rich Boy' (*Redbook Magazine*, January and February 1926), to which Hemingway's story explicitly refers, is a case in point, offering as it does a mainly expository account of the rich boy's, Anson Hunter's, incapacity for love, *because* he is very rich. Though Anson is to conclude life 'has made a cynic of me' (p. 144), it is the narrator's point that to be very rich is inevitably to be 'cynical where we are trustful' (p. 131). He also mordantly observes: 'Anson accepted without reservation the world of high finance and high extravagance, of divorce and dissipation, of snobbery and privilege. Most of our lives end as compromise – it was as compromise that his life began' (p. 133). A strength of the story is its dramatic substantiation of these enactive comments. 'Ask me – oh, Anson, ask me!' (p. 142), Paula Legendre's heart cries out, as she longs for his proposal of marriage, but he won't/can't, because he has no fund of idealism to draw on. Why should he commit when he can always exploit? Matched to 'his strong, attractive presence, the paternal, understanding stature of his mind' is his 'other face . . . gross, humorous, reckless of everything but pleasure' (p. 139).

Not surprisingly his own explanation for his eventual 'growing loneliness' (p. 157) is misogynistic. With appalling insouciance he tells Paula, now happily married: 'I could settle down if women were different . . . If I didn't understand so much about them, if women didn't spoil you for other women, if they only had a little pride' (p. 163). Earlier, with equal self-ignorance, he has priggishly destroyed the love affair his aunt Edna was having and caused the death of her lover: 'Cary Sloane's body was found next morning on the lower shelf of a pillar of Queensboro Bridge. In the darkness and in his excitement he thought it was the flowing water beneath him,

but in less than a second it made no possible difference – unless he had planned to think one last thought of Edna, and call out her name as he struggled feebly in the water' (p. 155). Though no one is perfect in this story, least of all the infatuated Cary Sloane, they are all able to risk more of themselves than Anson can. Better to be head-over-heels with consideration, as Paula's last husband is, than routinely to break others' lives as Anson does, leaving even a Dolly Karger 'lying awake and staring at the ceiling, never again [to believe] in anything at all' (p. 149).

'The Rich Boy' ends with Anson leaving for Europe, and Fitzgerald writing so evocatively of Anson's ship moving off 'into the wet space between the worlds, leaving his principality behind' (p. 164). Momentarily, the story has a metaphysical dimension, causing us to wonder what the meaning of anyone's life journey is, and whether worlds connected only by 'wet space' can be anything other than futile. Will Anson wreck the life of the new girl he now chats up on board? Whether he will or not, Fitzgerald throughout the story offers us the possibility of being as sympathetic to him as is the shadowy narrator. Why else is there a narrator, if not to offer an implicit double perspective also giving readers the opportunity *not* to identify with the point of view of this version of 'poor Julian', though it is a long way from Hemingway's? Arguably, unless the narrator has this function, he is unnecessary, and Fitzgerald might as well have delivered the story in his own authorial voice. Author needs narrator, however, because responding to the rich is never as straightforward as Hemingway's character believes. Even as we may wish we too were born with Anson's immense wealth, we see that his 'principality', where he has had the liberty to pursue whatever happiness he likes, has been his prison.

If Anson settles in Paris, he will have too much pedigree to live there as wildly as Charlie Wales has done. The central figure in 'Babylon Revisited' (*Saturday Evening Post*, February 1931), Charlie finds life is bleak after excesses in Paris sustained by the power of the mighty dollar during the stock market boom years of the 1920s. Returning to the city, he meets a head barman who remembers him:

> 'I heard that you lost a lot in the crash.'
>
> 'I did,' and he added grimly, 'but I lost everything I wanted in the boom.'
>
> 'Selling short.'

'Something like that.'

Again the memory of those days swept over him like a nightmare – the people they had met travelling; the people who couldn't add a row of figures or speak a coherent sentence. The little man Helen had consented to dance with at the ship's party, who had insulted her ten feet from the table; the women and girls carried screaming with drink or drugs out of public places –

– The men who locked their wives out in the snow, because the snow of twenty-nine wasn't real snow. If you didn't want it to be snow, you just paid some money. [p. 235]

Paris is now nearly empty of Americans, because so many lost their money in the crash that eventually came in 1929. Having now recovered financially, Charlie is left with the ironic self-knowledge that he lost everything he valued (his wife and daughter) in the earlier boom. Separated from reality by his money, he locked his wife out in the snow, probably contributing to her early death, which then resulted in his daughter being taken from him into the custody of his wife's sister. What are we to think of those hedonistic pre-crash years in Paris, when the barman Charlie is talking to 'had come to work in his own custom-built car' (p. 217)? Their desperateness must have caused Charlie and Helen, his wife, 'to abuse each other's love, tear it into shreds' (p. 229), so is not Marion, Helen's sister, right to be entirely disapproving? Is not Charlie implicitly supporting her in his shocked remembrance of the kind of people he and Helen had mixed with? Even though it is presented from Charlie's point of view, the story is a triumph of objectivity, reminiscent on its smaller scale of James's presentation of the world of *The Ambassadors* through Strether's eyes, and sharing one of that novel's themes, namely pleasure in Paris versus someone's sense of responsibility. A sentimental Fitzgerald, intent on justifying Charlie as a version of himself, would have given us only the Marion Charlie wants to see. Fitzgerald, however, writes: 'She was a tall woman with worried eyes, who had once possessed a fresh American loveliness. Charlie had never been sensitive to it and was always surprised when people spoke of how pretty she had been. From the first there had been an instinctive antipathy between them' (pp. 219–20). The antipathy, therefore, ante-dates all experience, and is either cause or effect of Charlie's lack of sensitivity to Marion. She and her husband (first-named 'Lincoln'