

The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald

Volume 5

The Lost Decade

and Other Stories

Penguin Modern Classics
The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald
Volume 5: The Lost Decade
and Other Stories

In Scott Fitzgerald, as in every writer of genius, there was something of the seer. He gave a name to an age – the Jazz Age – lived through that age, and saw it burn itself out. As a *New York Times* editorial stated after his death: 'He was better than he knew, for in fact and in the literary sense he invented a "generation" . . . he might have interpreted them and even guided them, as in their middle years they saw a different and nobler freedom threatened with destruction.'

F. Scott Fitzgerald was born in 1896 and educated in St Paul, Minnesota. He began writing when he was a schoolboy, and continued while at Princeton. In 1917 he left university for the army – but didn't get to France – and wrote in his spare moments. Then came *This Side of Paradise* – the first of his novels – followed by two volumes of short stories, and at last *The Great Gatsby*, which alone would assure Scott Fitzgerald's place among writers of major stature. He died in 1940.

Besides *The Great Gatsby* and *This Side of Paradise*, he wrote three other novels, *The Beautiful and Damned*, *Tender is the Night*, and *The Last Tycoon* (his last and unfinished work); and five volumes of short stories, which include *The Crack-Up*, a selection of his autobiographical pieces.

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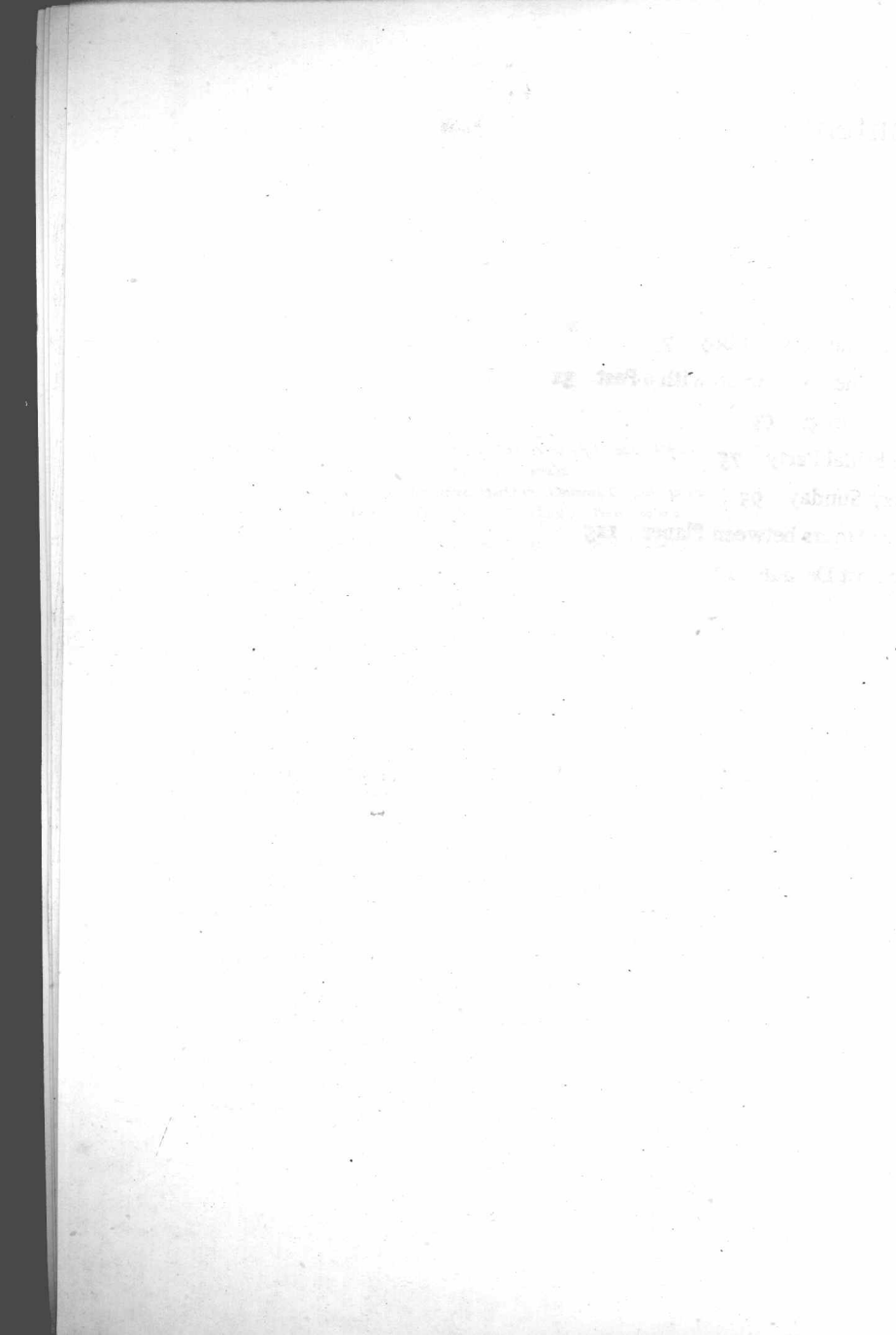
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Basil: The Freshest Boy

[1928]

I

It was a hidden Broadway restaurant in the dead of the night, and a brilliant and mysterious group of society people, diplomats and members of the underworld were there. A few minutes ago the sparkling wine had been flowing and a girl had been dancing gaily upon a table, but now the whole crowd were hushed and breathless. All eyes were fixed upon the masked but well-groomed man in the dress suit and opera hat who stood nonchalantly in the door.

'Don't move, please,' he said, in a well-bred, cultivated voice that had, nevertheless, a ring of steel in it. 'This thing in my hand might - go off.'

His glance roved from table to table - fell upon the malignant man higher up with his pale saturnine face, upon Heatherly, the suave secret agent from a foreign power, then rested a little longer, a little more softly perhaps, upon the table where the girl with dark hair and dark tragic eyes sat alone.

'Now that my purpose is accomplished, it might interest you to know who I am.' There was a gleam of expectation in every eye. The breast of the dark-eyed girl heaved faintly and a tiny burst of subtle French perfume rose into the air. 'I am none other than that elusive gentleman, Basil Lee, better known as the Shadow.'

Taking off his well-fitting opera hat, he bowed ironically from the waist. Then, like a flash, he turned and was gone into the night.

'You get up to New York only once a month,' Lewis Crum was saying, 'and then you have to take a master along.'

Slowly, Basil Lee's glazed eyes turned from the barns and

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billboards of the Indiana countryside to the interior of the Broadway Limited. The hypnosis of the swift telegraph poles faded and Lewis Crum's stolid face took shape against the white slip-cover of the opposite bench.

'I'd just duck the master when I got to New York,' said Basil.

'Yes, you would!'

'I bet I would.'

'You try it and you'll see.'

'What do you mean saying I'll see, all the time, Lewis? What'll I see?'

His very bright dark-blue eyes were at this moment fixed upon his companion with boredom and impatience. The two had nothing in common except their age, which was fifteen, and the lifelong friendship of their fathers – which is less than nothing. Also they were bound from the same Middle-Western city for Basil's first and Lewis's second year at the same Eastern school.

But, contrary to all the best traditions, Lewis the veteran was miserable and Basil the neophyte was happy. Lewis hated school. He had grown entirely dependent on the stimulus of a hearty vital mother, and as he felt her slipping farther and farther away from him, he plunged deeper into misery and homesickness. Basil, on the other hand, had lived with such intensity on so many stories of boarding-school life that, far from being homesick, he had a glad feeling of recognition and familiarity. Indeed, it was with some sense of doing the appropriate thing, having the traditional rough-house, that he had thrown Lewis's comb off the train at Milwaukee last night for no reason at all.

To Lewis, Basil's ignorant enthusiasm was distasteful – his instinctive attempt to dampen it had contributed to the mutual irritation.

'I'll tell you what you'll see,' he said ominously. 'They'll catch you smoking and put you on bounds.'

'No, they won't, because I won't be smoking. I'll be in training for football.'

'Football! Yeah! Football!'

'Honestly, Lewis, you don't like anything, do you?'

'I don't like football. I don't like to go out and get a crack in the eye.' Lewis spoke aggressively, for his mother had canonized all his timidities as common sense. Basil's answer, made with what he considered kindly intent, was the sort of remark that creates lifelong enmities.

'You'd probably be a lot more popular in school if you played football,' he suggested patronizingly.

Lewis did not consider himself unpopular. He did not think of it in that way at all. He was astounded.

'You wait!' he cried furiously. 'They'll take all that freshness out of you.'

'Clam yourself,' said Basil, coolly plucking at the creases of his first long trousers. 'Just clam yourself.'

'I guess everybody knows you were the freshest boy at the Country Day!'

'Clam yourself,' repeated Basil, but with less assurance. 'Kindly clam yourself.'

'I guess I know what they had in the school paper about you -'

Basil's own coolness was no longer perceptible.

'If you don't clam yourself,' he said darkly, 'I'm going to throw your brushes off the train too.'

The enormity of this threat was effective. Lewis sank back in his seat, snorting and muttering, but undoubtedly calmer. His reference had been to one of the most shameful passages in his companion's life. In a periodical issued by the boys of Basil's late school there had appeared under the heading *Personals*:

If someone will please poison young Basil, or find some other means to stop his mouth, the school at large and myself will be much obliged.

The two boys sat there fuming wordlessly at each other. Then, resolutely, Basil tried to re-inter this unfortunate souvenir of the past. All that was behind him now. Perhaps he had been a little fresh, but he was making a new start. After a moment, the memory passed and with it the train and Lewis's dismal presence - the breath of the East came sweeping over him again with

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a vast nostalgia. A voice called him out of the fabled world; a man stood beside him with a hand on his sweater-clad shoulder.

'Lee!'

'Yes, sir.'

'It all depends on you now. Understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'All right,' the coach said, 'go in and win.'

Basil tore the sweater from his stripling form and dashed out on the field. There were two minutes to play and the score was 3 to 0 for the enemy, but at the sight of young Lee, kept out of the game all year by a malicious plan of Dan Haskins, the school bully, and Weasel Weems, his toady, a thrill of hope went over the St Regis stand.

'33-12-16-22!' barked Midget Brown, the diminutive little quarterback.

It was his signal -

'Oh, gosh!' Basil spoke aloud, forgetting the late unpleasantness. 'I wish we'd get there before tomorrow.'

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St Regis School, Eastchester,
November 18, 19—

Dear Mother:

There is not much to say today, but I thought I would write you about my allowance. All the boys have a bigger allowance than me, because there are a lot of little things I have to get, such as shoe laces, etc. School is still very nice and am having a fine time, but football is over and there is not much to do. I am going to New York this week to see a show. I do not know yet what it will be, but probably the Quacker Girl or little boy Blue as they are both very good. Dr Bacon is very nice and there's a good phycission in the village. No more now as I have to study Algebra.

Your affectionate Son,

Basil D. Lee.

As he put the letter in its envelope, a wizened little boy came into the deserted study hall where he sat and stood staring at him.

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'Hello,' said Basil, frowning.

'I been looking for you,' said the little boy, slowly and judicially. 'I looked all over - up in your room and out in the gym, and they said you probably might of sneaked off in here.'

'What do you want?' Basil demanded.

'Hold your horses, Bossy.'

Basil jumped to his feet. The little boy retreated a step.

'Go on, hit me!' he chirped nervously. 'Go on, hit me, cause I'm just half your size - Bossy.'

Basil winced. 'You call me that again and I'll spank you.'

'No, you won't spank me. Brick Wales said if you ever touched any of us -'

'But I never did touch any of you.'

'Didn't you chase a lot of us one day and didn't Brick Wales -'

'Oh, what do you want?' Basil cried in desperation.

'Doctor Bacon wants you. They sent me after you and somebody said maybe you sneaked in here.'

Basil dropped his letter in his pocket and walked out - the little boy and his invective following him through the door. He traversed a long corridor, muggy with that odour best described as the smell of stale caramels that is so peculiar to boys' schools, ascended a stairs and knocked at an unexceptional but formidable door.

Doctor Bacon was at his desk. He was a handsome, redheaded Episcopal clergyman of fifty whose original real interest in boys was now tempered by the flustered cynicism which is the fate of all headmasters and settles on them like green mould. There were certain preliminaries before Basil was asked to sit down - gold-rimmed glasses had to be hoisted up from nowhere by a black cord and fixed on Basil to be sure that he was not an impostor; great masses of paper on the desk had to be shuffled through, not in search of anything but as a man nervously shuffles a pack of cards.

'I had a letter from your mother this morning - ah - Basil.' The use of his first name had come to startle Basil. No one else in school had yet called him anything but Bossy or Lee. 'She

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feels that your marks have been poor. I believe you have been sent here at a certain amount of - ah - sacrifice and she expects -'

Basil's spirit writhed with shame, not at his poor marks but that his financial inadequacy should be so bluntly stated. He knew that he was one of the poorest boys in a rich boys' school.

Perhaps some dormant sensibility in Doctor Bacon became aware of his discomfort; he shuffled through the papers once more and began on a new note.

'However, that was not what I sent for you about this afternoon. You applied last week for permission to go to New York on Saturday, to a *matinée*. Mr Davis tells me that for almost the first time since school opened you will be off bounds tomorrow.'

'Yes, sir.'

'That is not a good record. However, I would allow you to go to New York if it could be arranged. Unfortunately, no masters are available this Saturday.'

Basil's mouth dropped ajar. 'Why, I - why, Doctor Bacon, I know two parties that are going. Couldn't I go with one of them?'

Doctor Bacon ran through all his papers very quickly. 'Unfortunately, one is composed of slightly older boys and the other group made arrangements some weeks ago.'

'How about the party that's going to the *Quaker Girl* with Mr Dunn?'

'It's that party I speak of. They feel that the arrangements are complete and they have purchased seats together.'

Suddenly Basil understood. At the look in his eye Doctor Bacon went on hurriedly:

'There's perhaps one thing I can do. Of course there must be several boys in the party so that the expenses of the master can be divided up among all. If you can find two other boys who would like to make up a party, and let me have their names by five o'clock, I'll send Mr Rooney with you.'

'Thank you,' Basil said.

Doctor Bacon hesitated. Beneath the cynical incrustations of many years an instinct stirred to look into the unusual case of

this boy and find out what made him the most detested boy in school. Among boys and masters there seemed to exist an extraordinary hostility towards him, and though Doctor Bacon had dealt with many sorts of schoolboy crimes, he had neither by himself nor with the aid of trusted sixth-formers been able to lay his hands on its underlying cause. It was probably no single thing, but a combination of things; it was most probably one of those intangible questions of personality. Yet he remembered that when he first saw Basil he had considered him unusually prepossessing.

He sighed. Sometimes these things worked themselves out. He wasn't one to rush in clumsily. 'Let us have a better report to send home next month, Basil.'

'Yes, sir.'

Basil ran quickly downstairs to the recreation room. It was Wednesday and most of the boys had already gone into the village of Eastchester, whither Basil, who was still on bounds, was forbidden to follow. When he looked at those still scattered about the pool tables and piano, he saw that it was going to be difficult to get anyone to go with him at all. For Basil was quite conscious that he was the most unpopular boy at school.

It had begun almost immediately. One day, less than a fortnight after he came, a crowd of the smaller boys, perhaps urged on to it, gathered suddenly around him and began calling him Bossy. Within the next week he had two fights, and both times the crowd was vehemently and eloquently with the other boy. Soon after, when he was merely shoving indiscriminately, like everyone else, to get into the dining-room, Carver, the captain of the football team, turned about and, seizing him by the back of the neck, held him and dressed him down savagely. He joined a group innocently at the piano and was told, 'Go on away. We don't want you around.'

After a month he began to realize the full extent of his unpopularity. It shocked him. One day after a particularly bitter humiliation he went up to his room and cried. He tried to keep out of the way for a while, but it didn't help. He was accused of sneaking off here and there, as if bent on a series of nefarious

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errands. Puzzled and wretched, he looked at his face in the glass, trying to discover there the secret of their dislike – in the expression of his eyes, his smile.

He saw now that in certain ways he had erred at the outset – he had boasted, he had been considered yellow at football, he had pointed out people's mistakes to them, he had showed off his rather extraordinary fund of general information in class. But he had tried to do better and couldn't understand his failure to atone. It must be too late. He was queered forever.

He had, indeed, become the scapegoat, the immediate villain, the sponge which absorbed all malice and irritability abroad – just as the most frightened person in a party seems to absorb all the others' fear, seems to be afraid for them all. His situation was not helped by the fact, obvious to all, that the supreme self-confidence with which he had come to St Regis in September was thoroughly broken. Boys taunted him with impunity who would not have dared raise their voices to him several months before.

This trip to New York had come to mean everything to him – surcease from the misery of his daily life as well as a glimpse into the long-awaited heaven of romance. Its postponement for week after week due to his sins – he was constantly caught reading after lights, for example, driven by his wretchedness into such vicarious escapes from reality – had deepened his longing until it was a burning hunger. It was unbearable that he should not go, and he told over the short list of those whom he might get to accompany him. The possibilities were Fat Gaspar, Treadway, and Bugs Brown. A quick journey to their rooms showed that they had all availed themselves of the Wednesday permission to go into Eastchester for the afternoon.

Basil did not hesitate. He had until five o'clock and his only chance was to go after them. It was not the first time he had broken bounds, though the last attempt had ended in disaster and an extension of his confinement. In his room, he put on a heavy sweater – an overcoat was a betrayal of intent – replaced his jacket over it and hid a cap in his back pocket. Then he went downstairs and with an elaborate careless whistle struck out

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across the lawn for the gymnasium. Once there, he stood for a while as if looking in the windows, first the one close to the walk, then one near the corner of the building. From here he moved quickly, but not too quickly, into a grove of lilacs. Then he dashed around the corner, down a long stretch of lawn that was blind from all windows and, parting the strands of a wire fence, crawled through and stood upon the grounds of a neighbouring estate. For the moment he was free. He put on his cap against the chilly November wind, and set out along the half-mile road to town.

Eastchester was a suburban farming community, with a small shoe factory. The institutions which pandered to the factory workers were the ones patronized by the boys – a movie house, a quick-lunch wagon on wheels known as the Dog and the Bostonian Candy Kitchen. Basil tried the Dog first and happened immediately upon a prospect.

This was Bugs Brown, a hysterical boy, subject to fits and strenuously avoided. Years later he became a brilliant lawyer, but at that time he was considered by the boys of St Regis to be a typical lunatic because of the peculiar series of sounds with which he assuaged his nervousness all day long.

He consorted with boys younger than himself, who were without the prejudices of their elders, and was in the company of several when Basil came in.

'Who-ee!' he cried. 'Ee-ee-ee!' He put his hand over his mouth and bounced it quickly, making a wah-wah-wah sound. 'It's Bossy Lee! It's Bossy Lee! It's Boss-Boss-Boss-Boss-Bossy Lee!'

'Wait a minute, Bugs,' said Basil anxiously, half afraid that Bugs would go finally crazy before he could persuade him to come to town. 'Say, Bugs, listen. Don't, Bugs – wait a minute. Can you come up to New York Saturday afternoon?'

'Whe-ee-ee!' cried Bugs to Basil's distress. 'Wee-ee-ee!'

'Honestly, Bugs, tell me, can you? We could go up together if you could go.'

'I've got to see a doctor,' said Bugs, suddenly calm. 'He wants to see how crazy I am.'

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'Can't you have him see about it some other day?' said Basil without humour.

'Whee-ee-ee!' cried Bugs.

'All right then,' said Basil hastily. 'Have you seen Fat Gaspar in town?'

Bugs was lost in shrill noise, but someone had seen Fat: Basil was directed to the Bostonian Candy Kitchen.

This was a gaudy paradise of cheap sugar. Its odour, heavy and sickly and calculated to bring out a sticky sweat upon an adult's palms, hung suffocatingly over the whole vicinity and met one like a strong moral dissuasion at the door. Inside, beneath a pattern of flies, material as black point lace, a line of boys sat eating heavy dinners of banana splits, maple nut, and chocolate marshmallow nut sundaes. Basil found Fat Gaspar at a table on the side.

Fat Gaspar was at once Basil's most unlikely and most ambitious quest. He was considered a nice fellow - in fact he was so pleasant that he had been courteous to Basil and had spoken to him politely all fall. Basil realized that he was like that to everyone, yet it was just possible that Fat liked him, as people used to in the past, and he was driven desperately to take a chance. But it was undoubtedly a presumption, and as he approached the table and saw the stiffened faces which the other two boys turned towards him, Basil's hope diminished.

'Say, Fat -' he said, and hesitated. Then he burst forth suddenly. 'I'm on bounds, but I ran off because I had to see you. Doctor Bacon told me I could go to New York Saturday if I could get two other boys to go. I asked Bugs Brown and he couldn't go, and I thought I'd ask you.'

He broke off, furiously embarrassed, and waited. Suddenly the two boys with Fat burst into a shout of laughter.

'Bugs wasn't crazy enough!'

Fat Gaspar hesitated. He couldn't go to New York Saturday and ordinarily he would have refused without offending. He had nothing against Basil; nor, indeed, against anybody; but boys have only a certain resistance to public opinion and he was influenced by the contemptuous laughter of the others.