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**GATSBY IN CHICAGO:  
THE CHICAGOAN WHO STOLE  
F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S HEART  
AND NEVER GAVE IT BACK.**

by  
DEAN YANNIAS

THE CHICAGO  
LITERARY CLUB  
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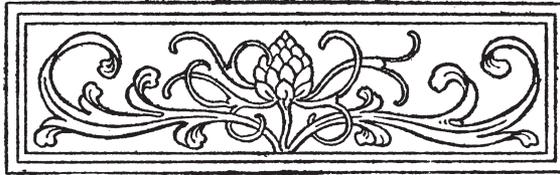
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One of the seminal stories in all of American fiction begins with the quiet, measured, humbled voice of its main character and narrator, Nick Carraway:

*In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.*

*"Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone," he told me, "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."*<sup>1</sup>

The story is F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. And every year since, for more than fifty, I have read it. This "calling" is driven by the urge to see how I've changed or remained unchanged—and to see how much or how little, after nearly a century, our nation and culture have changed. Or not. I return to the fictional characters and events, to the fictional times and places, to see, hear, and feel how Nick Carraway and Tom and Daisy Buchanan and the elusive Gatsby himself resonate in today's world. In our currently unhinged times, I seek an anchor and a

compass. I reread *Gatsby* because—and I quote Anais Nin: “We don’t see things as *they* are. We see things as *we* are.”<sup>2</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald saw things clearly and acutely then. Time never changes that. Also, I remain enchanted by his astonishing sentences, pitch-perfect dialogue, the music of his prose, and the imagery captured with relentless and confident vision. I “know” the story, but every rereading reveals something “new”—the seemingly casual, devastatingly offhanded character portrayals, the murder-mystery/confessional structure predating *film noire* by more than a decade—and how Jay Gatsby, even after many readings, remains so perfectly hidden in plain sight.

I believed I knew just who the character of Daisy was based on. For decades I believed the spark that ignited the *Gatsby* morality tale was Scott Fitzgerald’s wife, Zelda Sayer. She certainly influenced his life and fiction throughout their twenty-year marriage.

But before Zelda, there was a young girl from Chicago and Lake Forest who entered Fitzgerald’s life through a not-so-chance meeting. She influenced Fitzgerald’s work even more than Zelda, I believe. Her name was Ginevra King, and what she and her world of entitlement and extravagant wealth introduced to Fitzgerald’s life forms my tale tonight.

*The Great Gatsby* is, to me, *the* so-called Great American Novel. I know: there have been many Great American Novels, a new one proclaimed an instant classic every publishing season. That’s the advertising and promotional role of the publishing business. No formula exists for creating great literary art, but a few times every century someone literally creates something “novel” that forever breathes a timeless life all its own.

I also believe no other tale of American life more accurately captures our unique lust for unapologetic, soul-crushing, material success. The irony of the title itself—*The **Great** Gatsby*—establishes its impact at the novel’s conclusion, after factoring in the tale of one man’s longing, promise, fatal awakening, and betrayal, and another man’s bitterness, disenchantment, and resigned acceptance.

For if aspiration, getting ahead, and “making it” define the American way of life and character, we believe (despite our origins, drive, intelligence, and goals, we all aspire to some grand or great something or other) that that “something” is just within our grasp or just beyond it. So we try harder, work, wish, drive, scheme, plan . . . even steal, lie, and worse to advance ourselves to achieve that “great something.” Likewise, we are reluctant to express it. We tell no one what that “something” is, because in doing so, we’d reveal who we are, what we dream of, what we desire—and those dreams are seldom wise to admit to anyone, especially to one’s self. Yet that’s precisely Fitzgerald’s accomplishment. And as one commentator wrote: “*The Great Gatsby* embodies a criticism of American experience—not of manners, but of a basic historic attitude to life—more radical than anything in [Henry] James’s own assessment of the deficiencies of his country. The theme of *Gatsby* is the withering of the American dream.”<sup>3</sup> Was it a harbinger then of the America we are living in now? Like today’s instant “breaking news,” there suddenly was F. Scott Fitzgerald, whom his friend Dorothy Parker eulogized in an air-conditioned Hollywood mortuary only twenty years after the publication of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. She quoted a line from *The Great Gatsby* eulogizing Gatsby himself: “the poor son-of-a-bitch”—even though in his barely two and a half final years in Hollywood he’d earned today’s equivalent of five hundred thousand dollars for what he resentfully called the hack-work of Hollywood screenwriting in the “golden dream” factory of West Los Angeles.

No one has convincingly defined the origins of genius in any human endeavor. But I know it’s more than the old saw “10 percent inspiration and 90 percent perspiration.” Scott Fitzgerald had both that spark of genius and a relentless work ethic, despite his lingering reputation to the contrary. But every now and then we hear about some brief incendiary event that jump-starts a looming genius on his way to achieving “some sort of epic grandeur.”<sup>4</sup> Before 1919, when Lieutenant F. Scott Fitzgerald met his future wife, Zelda Sayer, in Montgomery, Alabama, there was a Chicago

girl who burned in his imagination for the rest of his life, who epitomized his idealized and conflicted desire for something grander. He drew on his notebooks; her dozens of twenty-page handwritten letters; his memories of her, her friends and family, and their otherworldly social status; and her beguiling enchantment and sexual promise as a continuing source of inspiration for the remaining twenty years of his all-too-short life.

This Chicago girl—I believe—was the primary soul, voice, and source of Daisy Buchanan in Fitzgerald’s masterpiece of 1925. And she reappears under different names in his four other novels and in upwards of seventeen short stories he wrote about the “Jazz Age”—a term he coined to define his times.<sup>5</sup> Her name changes at every appearance, but you’d recognize her anywhere. Before I tell you more about this girl, let me briefly sketch in a few biographical facts about F. Scott Fitzgerald—whom even such a formidable and perceptive mind as Gertrude Stein considered a more potent thinker and brilliant stylist than Fitzgerald’s envious and critical friend Ernest Hemingway.<sup>6</sup> She knew them both very well. A few words about Scott Fitzgerald:

His life, fiction, and career paralleled his times, from the fashionably mindless excesses of the 1920s to the dismal crash throughout the 1930s. His fiction depicted both the times he lived in, and the Scott Fitzgerald who experienced them from within the lives and actions of his characters and as the acute observer/participant observing them—and himself, nose pressed against a window or from behind a security fence or reflected in the mirror of his own mind.

The literary critic Malcolm Cowley explains this duality of perception as a gift of “double vision” and tells us that: “[H]e surrounded his characters with a mist of admiration, and at the same time he kept driving the mist away. He liked to know,” quoting Fitzgerald, “where the milk is watered and the sugar sanded, the rhinestone passed for the diamond and the stucco for stone.”<sup>7</sup> Like Nick Carraway, narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald was present “simultaneously within and without, at once

immersed in his times and able to view them and himself with striking objectivity.”<sup>8</sup> One of Fitzgerald’s most famous quotes reveals his esthetic: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”

That assertion, I suggest, summarizes his dual-minded ability to “be there,” in the thick of things, and simultaneously watch what’s going on and comment on it with irony, detachment, and emotionally charged yet cool-minded accuracy.

Shortly before he was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 24, 1896, his two older sisters had died in an epidemic, so I sense he was cherished at birth and protected as an infant and toddler like a hothouse orchid. His father, Edward, owned a furniture factory. When it failed, he worked for Proctor & Gamble. The family lived in Syracuse and Buffalo for most of Scott’s first decade. Edward remained unsuccessful in business. He was fired from P&G and the family moved back to St. Paul in 1908. Scott’s mother’s side of the family had some money—a comfortable inheritance from her grandfather’s success in the wholesale grocery business, first in Galena, Illinois, then in St. Paul.

The comfortably middle-class Fitzgerald family rented a series of houses in St. Paul’s wealthy Summit Street neighborhood, but did not have the exceptional wealth of the families of Scott’s friends and neighbors. He worked hard to overcome that financial stigma by developing social skills such as dancing, witty conversation, and the charming Southern Maryland manners learned from his father. He was also very bright, and he knew it.

Then, as now, money defined one’s position within American society. Charm, intelligence, and breeding were important ornaments, but family wealth trumped all. Some things in life never change.

At an early age, his social drive and impeccable manners ran into roadblocks he never forgot. Once he invited his school friends to his sixth birthday party. All dressed up in a dandy sailor’s suit, he waited to welcome

them for an hour—until he and his mother knew no friends would be coming. He choked down his entire birthday cake alone. Does anyone forget a moment of rejection like that?<sup>9</sup> A note from the headmaster at St. Paul’s Academy—his middle school—recorded him as unpopular with schoolmates because he was a know-it-all, a bright kid who relentlessly showed off his wit, intelligence, and charm at every opportunity. And we remember kids like that from our own school days, don’t we?

At thirteen, he published his first story—a mystery tale—in the academy’s literary magazine, and scripted and acted in a half-hour detective play he wrote the same year.

He also began keeping what he called his “Thoughtbook” where he listed names of his favorite girls from school and dancing class.<sup>10</sup> At fourteen, his favorite girl was Marie Hersey, the prettiest. His second favorite was Margaret Armstrong, the best talker. He ached to be “first” among the girls’ favorites and sought the affections of both girls. He saw no need to limit the number to two. His favorite, pretty Marie Hersey, will figure in a significant event in a few years . . . when he first met Ginevra King, our Wonder Girl from Chicago and Lake Forest. He knew what to say and just how to say it to attract the girls in school. He even wrote detailed instructions for his younger sister, Annabel, on how to attract boys—parts of which reappeared in “Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” a short story from 1920.<sup>11</sup> Little of what he wrote in his notebooks was wasted, as if he knew that someday he would draw on his recorded experiences and memories for some tidbit that captured a special moment in his life. Yes, he was *that* egotistical and arrogant. Or prescient—perhaps knowing, early on, his life’s calling as a writer. He established this detailed note-taking in his early teens, and continued it throughout his life. He used his “Thoughtbook,” his early notebooks, and then an old-fashioned bookkeeping ledger as a repository of inspirational “spark-starters” for his plays, essays, and fictions during his brief twenty-year writing career.

Let me explain the significance of this ledger. He began keeping an oversized hardcover lined-and-columned accountant-style ledger book in 1919 or so. He jotted down ideas, visual impressions, snippets of overheard dialogue, dollar amounts paid for every story published, advances on sales of his novels, and amounts received for movie rights and plays based on his novels and stories. It included mundane yet detailed monthly expense/income statements. He kept track of *everything*—from monthly rent and grocery bills to liquor, entertainment bills, and travel expenses. Everything. He knew or intuited that at some time he'd draw on it all for some rare detail, telling phrase, insight, or gesture—whatever worked to capture the essence of a character or a moment. More than a compulsion, these ledger-book notes became his priceless resource for things to come. (A transcript of it is available online.)<sup>12</sup> After two years at the Newman School, he enrolled at Princeton in 1913 at the age of seventeen. “He had rather a young face, the ingenuousness was marred by the penetrating green eyes fringed with long dark lashes,” as Fitzgerald describes Armory Blaine (as himself) in his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. Scott was five feet seven inches tall, 140 pounds—a small boy. He was slope-shouldered, almost girlishly handsome, with blond hair and those green eyes that seemed to stare at people with disconcerting intensity and bemused curiosity.<sup>13</sup> Fitzgerald transformed his life experiences into his fiction and essays, believing as he did that the writer was a man of action who must experience his materials firsthand—not because he lacked imagination but because it allowed him to write about it all the more intensely.

Which brings us to the fateful 1915 trip he made back home to St. Paul during winter break from Princeton, a trip that changed his life and animated his fiction for the remaining twenty-five years of his life.

Let us now begin the slow dance, fox-trot, and Charleston toward the electric, fateful meeting of Scott Fitzgerald with the first woman of his life and of many future fictions, Ginevra King.

Her name was a serial and serious family matter. Ginevra was her maternal grandmother's name and her mother's name. She in turn named her daughter Ginevra, who in turn named her eldest daughter Ginevra. It traces back to Leonardo da Vinci's 1474 painting *Ginevra de' Benci*. It became a traditional family name, predestined like the family's wealth to stay in the family. On the back of the painting, da Vinci inscribed the Latin phrase VIRTUTEM FORMA DECORAT ("beauty adorns virtue"), which surrounds a sprig of juniper (in Italian, *ginepro*). This is also the semantic source of the word "gin," Fitzgerald's favorite drink.<sup>14</sup> Our Chicago Ginevra was the eldest of three daughters. Born here in 1898, she grew up just down the street from here (the Chicago Literary Club is located at 200 S. Michigan, as of this writing) in her maternal grandfather's South Michigan Avenue mansion and summered on an estate called "Kingdom Come Farm" in Lake Forest—only thirty miles to the north. But to a man of Fitzgerald's background, it might as well have been in a galaxy far, far away.

As of May 2017, that forty-seven-acre Lake Forest estate was being subdivided and developed into thirty-seven or so mini-estates. It's now called Westleigh Farm. The address is 210 South Ridge Road, Lake Forest. It's still there, but the 7,500-square-foot estate home, farmhouse, stables, and large pond need serious repair.<sup>15</sup> It had been developed in 1905 by Charles Bohan King, Ginevra's paternal grandfather, who arrived in Chicago in 1863. A wholesale grocer, a jobber in hats, caps, and furs, King became a banker, retiring in 1885 as president of Commercial Safe Deposit Company. He sent his first son to Harvard and his second, Charles Garfield King, Ginevra's father, to Yale.<sup>16</sup> That's just what one did then. Son Charles began his career as a mortgage broker in one of his father's firms, Shanklin & King, working on the side as a stockbroker. In 1906 he became a full-time broker, and started the firm King, Farnum & Co. with seats on both the Chicago and New York exchanges. He, with his wife and children, still lived in his father-in-law's mansion on South Michigan Avenue in 1915 when Ginevra and Scott first met.

## GATSBY IN CHICAGO

The main family house was then still under construction, an elegant four-story mansion, which Ginevra's father began building in 1914. It stood at 1450 Astor, at the corner of Astor and Burton here in Chicago. It's long since gone. A condominium complex currently occupies the site.

The maternal side of Ginevra's family was also financially formidable. It was just as solemnly dedicated to keeping the wealth in the family—and protecting both family and its wealth to create, maintain, and perpetuate the grand tradition.

William Alden Fuller, Ginevra's maternal grandfather, moved to Chicago in 1854, traded in lumber, and was a bookkeeper. Obviously a good one, because by 1866, with backing from Potter Palmer, he formed Palmer, Fuller & Co., a building materials company. His wealth grew following the Chicago Fire in 1871, and he built his new mansion at 2913 South Michigan Avenue, near the Prairie Avenue District where most of Chicago's late nineteenth-century elite families lived. Along with his peers, he was a member in good standing at the Union League Club.<sup>17</sup> Ginevra's father, Charles, and her mother belonged to Onwentsia Country Club in Lake Forest, where he played golf and polo during the 1890s and early 1900s. He stabled his own string of polo ponies. (Does that ring a bell? Tom Buchanan in *Gatsby* did, too.) The Kings socialized with other prominent Chicago families—the Swifts, Armours, Cudahys, Palmers, McCormicks. All the children attended the same schools and church, played together during the summers up in the then-distant countryside of Lake Forest, went to fashionable prep schools back East in New England, and then on to either Yale or Harvard. Nothing special; that's just what they did.<sup>18</sup> Aware of her elite social standing and powered by a confident personality, the fifteen-year-old Ginevra and three of her friends proclaimed themselves the “Big Four”—the four most attractive and socially advantaged young women in all of Chicago. As James L. West III suggests: “The girls went to dances and house parties together, and they were seen as a foursome on the golf links and tennis courts

at Onwentsia. If other girls were jealous, Ginevra and her three friends did not care. The Big Four was complete; it would admit no further members.”<sup>19</sup> West continues: “Ginevra herself was lovely. She was small, about five feet four . . . with refined features and a good profile. She had a slim figure, pretty legs and ankles, and small graceful hands. Her hair was dark and curly; her eyes, deep brown in color, were lively and sparkling . . . [her] voice was her most unusual attribute—low and expressive. . . . She loved parties, adored dancing, and was adept in social situations, relying on her looks and instincts to see her through.”<sup>20</sup> Of course she kept a diary. All society girls did then—to record her victories, conquests, her catty comments about the other girls in school. Today it’s Facebook. She was intensely competitive and a talented golfer who could challenge even Edith Cummings, one of the Big Four, who eventually won two national championships in women’s golf and appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine. (Does Edith resemble Jordan Baker in *Gatsby*? As I said earlier, Fitzgerald wasted nothing.)

So—here we are. It’s 1915. And boy is about to meet girl.

On a cold January afternoon in 1915, Scott Fitzgerald arrived with a few Princeton friends at Chicago’s old LaSalle Street Station—also not far from where we are tonight—and transferred to the old Union Station for the train to St. Paul for winter break. He would return to Princeton a few days later to enter his second semester of his sophomore year.

On his last day home in St. Paul—January 4, 1915, a Monday—he attended an informal sledding party and dinner organized by Marie “Bug” Hersey, Fitzgerald’s early childhood sweetheart from middle school whom I mentioned earlier, that “best-looking girl” in his middle-school class at St. Paul’s Academy.

Ginevra had come to St. Paul with “Bug” Hersey, her boarding school roommate, over winter break from Westover, an exclusive girls’ school in Middlebury, Connecticut. Ginevra was sixteen and Scott eighteen. “Bug” had plotted the party expressly to see what would happen when these

two beautiful, intelligent, social powerhouses met. As it turned out, it was a mutually breathless “love-at-first-sight” event for both Scott and Ginevra. An enchanted Fitzgerald rescheduled his return that night to Princeton until the following day to attend a dance being given in her honor by another of “The Big Four.” I’m sure he told her; I’m sure she was flattered that he chose to stay.

Let’s remember that at sixteen, Ginevra was only a high school sophomore. Too young to become serious, you would think. But remember: this was 1915. Wealthy, elite families presented their daughters at eighteen or so as debutantes at extravagant, ritualized debutante balls, and the girls—excuse me, young ladies—were expected to attract eligible men who attended these “meet and marry” parties before the age of twenty. Thereafter loomed dreaded spinsterhood or second-rate marriages in the event of failure.

Ginevra’s diary recorded that mutually magical Monday night: “Scott perfectly darling.” “Am dipped about,” she wrote.<sup>21</sup> Her future diary entries record her delight at receiving the torrent of twenty-page typed and handwritten letters from Scott. En route to Princeton the next day, he telegraphed Ginevra. On his arrival there, he then sent a special-delivery letter—a young man’s signal back then that he was seriously pursuing her. (Today’s e-mails, Facebook postings, and mindless tweets fall frightfully short of that gallant gesture . . . big-ly!) The New Jersey letter reached her the next day.

Let me add a brief aside: Ginevra’s diaries were thought to be lost. But in April 2003, twenty-three years after Ginevra’s death in 1980, one of her granddaughters came upon a biographer’s treasure trove: her grandmother’s diary, her letters to Scott that he’d returned to her at her request, one telegram, and one letter from Scott postmarked 1918. Fitzgerald had asked her to destroy all his letters, which she virtuously did. Little to nothing remains of his correspondence to her. Scott, on the other hand, kept every one of her letters—every one.

The sole Fitzgerald letter in the 2003 discovery was one of congratulations, responding to her 1918 letter to him, announcing her pending marriage to the son of one of her father's business associates. Fitzgerald was outwardly gracious and yet emotionally shattered, for Ginevra was now beyond his reach.

In 1930, more than a decade later, he had his secretary type Ginevra's letters into document form, because reading the originals, touched by her hand and in her handwriting, were too emotionally difficult for him to deal with. He kept the 227 typewritten pages in a folder marked "STRICTLY PRIVATE AND PERSONAL LETTERS: Property of F. SCOTT FITZGERALD (Not manuscript)." The originals were returned to Ginevra in 1950 by Scottie Fitzgerald Lanahan, Scott's daughter, which is how they got into Ginevra's closet to be discovered fifty-three years later in 2003.

He borrowed from her letters to gain inspiration and capture the cadence, impressions, expressions, and thoughts of a young girl's speech in the fiction he created throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In addition to his ledger notes, he also borrowed from or plagiarized the prose and letters of his wife, Zelda—another enormous influence on and source for his fiction. He used every experience, image, slice of dialogue, and impression for his stories and novels and for the screenplays he wrote and script-doctored for Irving Thalberg at MGM, Selznick, and the other major studios in Hollywood.

Over the next year and a half, Scott and Ginevra exchanged letters on a nearly daily basis. They were breathless, foxy, playful letters, letters testing their love—letters filled with longing, urgency, and disappointment. This we can assume only from Ginevra's letters as she responded to Fitzgerald's. It was developing into a serious relationship. The correspondence continued through the spring of 1915 but slowly began to change in tone and was not nearly as affectionate by year's end.

Despite her youth, Ginevra was astutely aware of a certain “something” in Scott’s letters and warned him in a letter: “For heaven’s sake DON’T idealize me!” In another she starkly cautioned him: “Don’t fool yourself; you haven’t got me catalogued yet.”<sup>22</sup> She sensed even then a writer at work, baiting her, apologizing, flirting, promising, betraying her, not writing for a week or more just to provoke her—all to initiate and read her reactions and responses as he created a character out of her for his stories. His letters thrilled and enchanted Ginevra. She proudly read parts of them to roommates and close friends. The volume and length of his letters were matched by hers in return. They were seriously and exuberantly and longingly in love. “Oh Scott, why aren’t we [long dash] somewhere else tonight? Why aren’t we at a dance in summer now with a full moon, a big lovely garden and soft music in the distance?” This letter from Ginevra was dated March 12, three months after their first meeting. For the first time she signed it: “Love, Ginevra.”<sup>23</sup> She was to start summer vacation in June 1915; Scott was allowed to meet up with her and her mother in Manhattan on June 8 for dinner on the Ritz roof garden and a play afterward, capped by attending Ziegfeld’s *Midnight Frolic* at the New Amsterdam. He recreated it years later when a character based on Ginevra “made luminous the Ritz Roof on a brief passage through New York.” He was top man on her list but knew himself only one of many boys pursuing her. Ginevra and her mother left the next day for a fashionable Maine resort. Scott was traveling the other direction to Montana to spend part of the summer of 1915 on a school friend’s family ranch. Two months later, in August, and nine months after they first met, she wrote, after doing a little calculation: “I told you, didn’t I, that I figured out that we have seen each other for exactly 15 hours.”<sup>24</sup> He knew he was not on firm ground with her. Nor was he on firm ground with her at Lake Forest, when he visited her later that summer at “Kingdom Come Farm.” He was Irish Catholic—in those days a serious disadvantage in that North Shore, solidly Protestant stronghold—and did not rank among Ginevra’s

set of high social-status friends and extravagant family fortunes. Mr. and Mrs. King were polite and initially charmed, but quickly chilled when they discovered no trust fund in his future. I can only imagine how they found out this casual little tidbit of disqualifying news.

In November 1915, Ginevra traveled down from Westover for the annual Yale–Princeton game and planned to meet up with Scott. After the game, she left him at the train station to return to her Connecticut boarding school. But with a school friend she had also planned to meet up with two guys from Yale just minutes after Scott left on his trip back to Princeton. She was really something. That was their only meeting in the fall of 1915.

The following month, December 1915, Fitzgerald withdrew from Princeton. His work on the annual Triangle Club show and ill health, most likely tuberculosis, took their toll on his grade point average. He planned to return the following fall.

The relationship continued to cool. Scott sensed it. Living at home in St. Paul that winter of 1915–16, he wrote two stories about Ginevra and himself as he recuperated. He sent her the manuscripts, the first fictional world in which they both existed. Neither of these early stories survives because they were presumably lost when he asked her to destroy his letters.

In one of his stories, entitled “The Perfect Hour,” apparently based on the hopeful belief that she’d often expressed in letters to him, Fitzgerald imagined what “one perfect hour” together would be like without chaperones, meddling parents, football crowds, or Lake Forest friends. Of course, this impossibly “perfect hour” would never be allowed to take place. Ginevra was charmed, however, by the story he mailed to her in February 1916.<sup>25</sup> Only a week or so later, on March 6, Ginevra replied to Scott with a story of her own, surely quite different from his, but foreshadowing and incorporating the plot elements of a novel he would publish, nine years later, in 1925.

In Ginevra's story, a Miss Ginevra King was to marry a Russian count who adored her. In line with her elite-status expectations, she had succeeded in marrying properly, nothing less than a titled count, pure nobility, don't you know? Some years pass. Then comes the turning point. She writes: "But an indefinable something was lacking in her married life—and that thing (if she could have guessed it) was . . . *LOVE!*"

One day, her story goes, she impulsively leaves her suburban mansion and takes a train into the city to visit a Mr. Fitz-[hyphen]-Gerald at his huge, stylish, grand piano-ed apartment. The older, now-Countess Ginevra is startled to see an older, thriving, successful businessman dressed in a flashy brown-and-white checked suit—an *impresario* no less, a playwright, an opera librettist. He doesn't, however, recognize her. She tells him: "I'm Ginevra King!" Still a blank stare. Then, rifling through a file box, he rattles off a list of names—Helen, Ruth, Fandria . . . "Ah, here we are. King—Ginevra—Xmas—1914—Short Stocky—dark, fair looker and dancer—passionate—no character . . . no brains . . ."

Countess Ginevra was crushed. The "perfect hour" was fading away and, she realizes, would never come true. She'd have to return to the count, her suburban home, and her old, dreary life. Ginevra continues: "Her sense of loss was beyond expression and she shivered as she sat deep in thought. Suddenly she was rudely awakened by F. S. F.'s return with the cocktails—'Won't you stay a little longer,' he said cheerily. 'My wife ought to be home directly!'—"*FINIS*"<sup>26</sup> So what do we have here? It sounds to me like the broad outline of *The Great Gatsby* written as a brief sketch in a letter years earlier by a seventeen-year-old girl on the brink of life. A disenchanted suburban wife seeks out her old flame who happens to be a gaudy theater producer, a wealthy celebrity, a dandy dresser, living in a beautiful apartment with a clock on the mantel—foretelling of Gatsby's reunion with Daisy in Nick Carraway's cottage . . . replete with a clock on the mantel and an unhappily married woman. The parallels are barely there, but there are enough.

(Fitzgerald began outlining his third novel, *The Great Gatsby*, less than six years later, in 1922. Perhaps, while revisiting his trusty ledger book and leafing through some old documents and letters in search of a story idea, he found Ginevra's story and began to wonder about a reunion between a once-poor, now rich, successful man and a wealthy, apparently unhappy woman. We will never know.)

In May 1916, a few months after sending the story-letter to Scott, Ginevra was expelled from her Connecticut boarding school for chatting up and flirting with some passing boys. Her father, in New York on business, went up to Westover to deal with the issue. The school relented, but Charles King was outraged and rejected their apology. He enrolled Ginevra in another school in New York City for the following fall and she retreated, Daisy-like, into her comfortable wealth with good old Dad to Lake Forest.

At "Kingdom Come Farm," during Fitzgerald's second and final visit there in August 1916, we can imagine Mr. King or some close family friend taking the charming, vibrant, but obviously not wealthy young man out onto the magnificent veranda at twilight for cocktails, a smoke, and an obligatory man-to-man talk. It was there that the fatal words were spoken. They actually never appeared in *The Great Gatsby* nor any of his other fiction, but Scott dutifully entered them into his ledger. (The line does appear, however, in recent film remakes of *The Great Gatsby*.)

It was a simple declarative sentence that would forever burn in his brain and that would animate much of his fiction: "*Poor boys shouldn't think of marrying rich girls.*"<sup>27</sup> We can only imagine the shame that burned through him when the proclamation was delivered. As West reminds us: "When the rich were young they liked to divert themselves with friends from less elevated social ranks—perhaps during school holidays or summer vacations—but they knew not to allow flirtations or friendships to develop beyond a certain point. The role of the outsider [Fitzgerald's, during his visits to Chicago and Lake Forest] was to be amusing to his hosts,

to pay attention to the less attractive girls, and to be impressed by the surroundings. Marriage into this world was only a distant possibility.”<sup>28</sup> Here’s a brief synopsis of the next five months:<sup>29</sup> “By January 1917, it had fizzled for good, and a year and a half later [in June 1918] Ginevra . . . wrote to tell Fitzgerald about her engagement to the dashing and affluent William Mitchell, whose father did business with Mr. King. Like Tom Buchanan (Daisy’s husband in *Gatsby*), Mitchell, like his future father-in-law, loved the polo ponies and hailed from Chicago high society. “To say I am the happiest girl on earth would be expressing it mildly,” she wrote in her final letter. Fitzgerald sent back tepid congratulations, adding, “From all I’ve heard of him he must be one of the best ever—Doesn’t it make you sigh with relief to be settled and think of all the men you escaped marrying?” Later, Fitzgerald would say that King had dumped him “with the most supreme boredom and indifference.” Still, true to form, he saved a newspaper clipping about Ginevra’s marriage in the ledger, along with her handkerchief and the wedding invitation she’d sent him. At the bottom of the ledger page, he had scrawled, “The End of a Once Poignant Story.”

And so Fitzgerald lost his chance to woo and wed a “king’s daughter”—but for the rest of his life, she appeared in his fiction. He kept her name on a ledger list of “feminine fixations.” Rumor had it that for many years, just her memory would bring him to tears. But their story isn’t over quite yet.

Nearly twenty years later, in 1937, Ginevra and Fitzgerald met once more—and for the last time—in the bar at the Beverly Wiltshire in Los Angeles. He was trying to “make it” as a screenwriter in Hollywood and conquer his alcoholic demons. In a letter to his daughter, Scottie, before his meeting with Ginevra, he seemed reluctant to attend the rendezvous. “She was the first girl I ever loved,” he wrote. “And I have faithfully avoided seeing her up to this moment to keep that illusion perfect.”<sup>30</sup> The meeting went poorly—Fitzgerald had fallen off the wagon he’d been on for

months—and when Ginevra asked which of his characters was modeled after her, he reportedly replied to his dream girl, “Which bitch do you think you are?”<sup>31</sup> Perhaps he said it in a gentle, velvety voice empty of all malice and with a charming, ironic smile. He still had Southern manners, after all, and in some part of his complex emotional core perhaps he still loved her. Or maybe he just stared at her with his penetrating green eyes and delivered the line, after a momentary dramatic pause, with a flat, bitter voice. We’ll never know.

Ginevra King married William Mitchell in 1918, lived in a house at 901 Rosemary Lane, in Lake Forest, and had three children. William’s parents were killed in a car crash, and his inherited wealth set them up for life. They divorced, however, in 1939, but she remarried soon thereafter—a certain John T. Pirie Jr., who owned a department store in the Loop, just around the corner from here actually. (Yes, *that* Pirie of department store fame.) Mitchell had a stockbrokerage firm much like his father-in-law’s and it remained in business until 2003 when it merged with Paine Weber. He remarried the daughter of the CEO of Sears, Roebuck & Co. The money stayed where it belonged.

### **A Final Accounting**

Scott married the fragile, brilliant, alluring, bold, and sexually charged youngest daughter of an emotionally distant Alabama Supreme Court judge. He’d met Zelda Sayer while stationed in the Air Corps near Montgomery in July 1918, just more than a year after the breakup with Ginevra. Zelda and Scott married in 1920. They had one daughter.

Poor Scott? Emotionally? Financially? Perhaps poor only in that he died devoted to his art of the novel, but was constantly sidelined into writing short stories and performing movie scripts for money, fulfilling his husbandly and fatherly duty for those whom he loved and felt financially responsible . . . his institutionalized wife and his only child.

Speaking, I believe, both for himself and his grand creation, *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald had his narrator, Nick Carraway, write: “Gatsby . . . represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life . . . Gatsby turned out all right in the end. . . .”<sup>32</sup>

And so, in a way, did F. Scott Fitzgerald. He saw America for what it was and wrote about it as it is, in all its decaying glamour—time flowing ceaselessly and inexorably into some darkening and questionable future which he foresaw and captured even then.

Both Ginevra and Zelda populated Fitzgerald’s vision of the American myth of ceaselessly striving for both fame and success. Fitzgerald achieved both, but died in Hollywood virtually broke and writing for money . . . but still working to explain to himself—and for us—the endless allure of the American Promise and the elusive, glittering Dream almost within reach at the end of the pier toward the green light of the future.

“It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

### **Coda**

Poor Scott? For sure, in the sense of a stifled, unfulfilled career. But remember those words denying him a king’s daughter: “*Poor boys shouldn’t think of marrying rich girls.*” Poor Scott? I’ll rattle off some surprising financial data here as a coda to our story as I conclude this Lake Forest and Chicago love idyll. His ledger book, in 1919, records that he earned \$879 from short story sales. (In 2017 dollars, about \$12,000.)

But his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, saw twelve printings in 1920 and 1921, for a total of 49,075 copies—huge “blockbuster” sales for those times. In total, in 1920 he earned \$6,200 (\$83,000 in 2017 dollars)

from the book. Its success helped the now-famous Fitzgerald earn much higher rates for his short stories. Even then, he began drawing royalties from the plays and movies based on his fictions.

He was able to get \$2,000 a story in the mid-1920s and then about \$4,000 a story thereafter—in today’s dollars, roughly \$28,000 to \$56,000. *A story!* From 1925 through the remaining fifteen years of his life, he earned only \$8,400 in royalties from *The Great Gatsby*—about \$116,000 in 2017 dollars. Today, books sales of *The Great Gatsby* alone regularly generate \$500,000 a year in royalties paid to his daughter Scottie’s children . . . not counting film royalties.<sup>33</sup> Some poor boy!

He earned \$1,100 to \$1,500 a week in Hollywood. During an eighteen-month stretch from June 1937 to December 1938: \$85,000 . . . about \$1,500,000 today. In comparison, in the 1940s, Warner Bros. paid William Faulkner \$300 a week (about \$5,300 today.) During his twenty-one-year professional writing career—from 1919 to 1940—Fitzgerald’s ledger reported a total of \$449,713. In 2017 dollars, he averaged an annual \$500,000 a year after taxes.<sup>34</sup>

Let’s compare Fitzgerald’s creative output to his more highly self-regarded contemporaries. More than 179 stories and essays of Fitzgerald’s have been published, admittedly not all of high literary quality. That, versus Hemingway’s *First 49* story collection plus a few more, and Faulkner’s fifty—give or take a few. (Most recently, in its March 20, 2017 issue, the *New Yorker* published a story rejected by *Harper’s* in 1920. A new collection of Fitzgerald’s previously unpublished stories was released in 2017.)

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