

A Full Life, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

At twilight on September 3d, 1923, a girl jumped from the fifty-third-story window of a New York office building. She wore a patented inflatable suit of rubber composition which had just been put on the novelty market for purposes of having fun—the wearer by a mere jump or push could supposedly sail over fences or street intersections. It was fully blown up when she jumped. The building was a set-back and she landed on the projecting roof of the fiftieth floor. She was bruised and badly shaken but not seriously hurt.

She recovered consciousness in the ambulance and gave the name Gwendolyn Davies but in the emergency room when the intern so addressed her she denied it, and insisted on leaving the hospital after necessary stitches had been taken. Several inquiries that were undoubtedly for this girl asked for a different name. The intern, Dr. Wilkinson, gathered that a little orgy after hours had been taking place in the office at the time.

A week later Dr. Wilkinson took out a library book that he had borrowed there some time before. It was a collection of mysterious cases re-written from contemporary newspaper accounts, and the third story, entitled The Vanished Girl, read as follows:

In 1915 Delphis, N.Y., was an old town of large, faded houses, built far back on shady lawns—not at all like the Long Island and New Jersey villages where even Sunday is only a restless lull between the crash of trains. During the war there was a murder there, and in 1922 bandits held up a garage. After that nothing happened for a long time till Gwendolyn Davies walked out of her father's house one day and disappeared off the face of the earth.

She was the daughter of a poor doctor and the prettiest girl in town. She had a brave, bright face that made you look at her, yellow hair and a beggar's lips that would not beg in vain. The last person who ever laid eyes on Gwen Davies was the station master who put her suitcase on the train. She told him lightly that she was leaving for her family's own good—she didn't want to "raise the roof," but no scandal ever developed about her. When she reached New York she was to go directly to a recommended boarding house adjacent to the college. She didn't appear there—she simply melted like a shadow into the warm September night.

"Height, five feet five inches, weight, one hundred and sixteen pounds. Features, regular and pleasing. Left eye slighty larger than the right. Wearing a blue traveling suit and a red, leather-trimmed hat. Bright personality. We ask everyone to keep an eye out for this girl whose parents are prostrated by her disappearance."

She was one of many thousands of lost girls, but her beauty and the fact that her father was a reputable physician made it news. There was a "ring" said the tabloids; there was original sin, said the pulpit; and "mark my words," said the citizens of Delphis, their words being wild suppositions about somebody knowing something more than he or she saw fit to tell. For awhile the town of Delphis was as sad as the village of Hamelin after the Pied Piper had come and gone—there were young men who forgot their partners entirely when the orchestra played "Babes in the Woods" or "Underneath the Stars," and fanned they had loved Gwen and would never love another.

After a few years a New York judge walked away into the blue and the case of Gwen Davies was revived for a day in the newspapers, with a note that someone had lately seen her or her double in a New York surface car; after that the waters closed over her, apparently forever.

Dr. Wilkinson was sure it was the same girl—he thought for awhile of trying to trace her by going to a newspaper with the story but he was a retiring young man

and the idea became shelved like the play he was always going to write and the summer he was going to spend on the Riviera.

But he never forgot—he was forever haunted by the picture of the girl floating slowly out over the city at dusk, buoyed up by delicious air, by a quintessence of golden hope, like a soaring and unstable stock issue. She was the girl for whom a part of him was always searching at cafes and parties and theatres, when his practical wife would ask:

“Why are you staring around, Harvey? Do you see anybody we know?”

He did not explain.

II

Five years later the following story appeared in the New York papers:

This afternoon at four o'clock the Comtesse de Frejus jumped from the deck of the liner Stacia one day out from New York. She was rescued after the ship had turned around and searched for two hours through a fortunately calm sea. The Comtesse is an American, the former Mrs. Cornelius B. Hasbrouk, who obtained her divorce in Reno last year and then married Rene, Compt de Frejus, in Paris. She gave out no statement but said to an officer of the cutter which picked her up that her chief thought in the water was to beat off the huge birds who attempted to perch on her head and peck at her eyes. The passengers with whom she had been talking had no warning of her sudden act nor any explanation.

There were no pictures of the Comtesse de Frejus and when Dr. Wilkinson went to the newspaper files at the public library he found that there were no pictures of Mrs. Cornelius B. Hasbrouk either, save with her arm covering her face. But there were a great many columns about Mrs. Hasbrouk's first marriage and one of them mentioned a scar on her forehead—a scar that corresponded to a suture he had performed himself.

The columns had been written two years before. Mrs. Hasbrouk's first marriage had begun stormily. The groom, a junior at Harvard, was twenty and had just inherited a fortune of twenty million dollars from his father, the powder manufacturer. The bride was a voting lady of no background, not even the stage. The story ran that when Mr. Hasbrouk was located the next morning in a barber shop he had to be shown his picture in the paper before he realized that he was married.

The new Mrs. Hasbrouk was the cross of the cameramen but the reporters did rather well by her. She was described as lovely, modest, well-bred, and charming. There was a vague impression that she was either from the South, North or West, though one paper announced her birthplace as New York City. She said rather cryptically that she had married the young munitions magnate because she had “always really belonged to him” but that she would give him up if he preferred. Pending an annulment the couple departed for a trip to the South Seas.

Dr. Wilkinson was rather relieved that this marriage had not lasted and that her subsequent union with a member of the French nobility had led her to jump into the Atlantic. He felt that he knew her, in some such manner as one might know a composer or a writer one had never seen—he knew her though she had written only on air and there was a mysterious compulsion that made him follow her career with admiration and curiosity. He made certain notes from these newspaper files and settled down to wait for her to become news again.

III

At two o'clock on a June afternoon in 1937 Dr. Wilkinson, now a stout baldish man of forty, parked his car by a circus which had pitched on the shores of Long Island. The performance was not to begin until three but there were certain preliminary attractions and it was one of these which had attracted him to the

spot. A little aside from the main tent stretched a large white banner on which was lettered:

THE HUMAN SHELL

At two-thirty this afternoon the Countess of Frejus will be fired out of this cannon.

A crowd of intellectuals was already inspecting the enormous piece of ordinance but Dr. Wilkinson stationed himself beside the net which was to catch the living bullet at the end of its trajectory.

In a few minutes a little group approached the cannon and Dr. Wilkinson's heart put-putted like a motor boat. There, not a hundred feet away, dressed in the costume of an aviatrix, stood the girl whose life he had followed in the headlines. For him this was the high point of a somewhat humdrum and defeated life—he felt a great excitement, almost a reverence, in the face of the moment.

There was a sudden deep booming sound and a great pull of smoke from the mouth of the cannon; on the instant the form of the Countess of Frejus, nee Gwendolyn Davies, arched gracefully into the air, described a perfect parabola and plumped gently into the net beside which he stood. In a moment she had clambered out and the doctor advanced toward her.

"Good afternoon," he said and introduced himself as a doctor who had once attended her.

"So it was you," she said politely. "I'm afraid I must have seemed ungracious in leaving the hospital so quickly."

"But I understand," he assured her. "In fact I have been greatly interested in your career."

"You're not a reporter too."

"No indeed. My interest is personal. I do want to ask you a few questions."

Her lovely face clouded.

"I hate questions," she said.

"But I have waited so long. Come, Countess—I simply want you to explain certain remarks you made here and there. For instance when you ran away from Delphis you said you 'did not want to raise the roof,' and when you got married you said you had 'always really belonged to Mr. Hasbrouk.' But you never said anything about why you jumped out the window or off the boat. Couldn't you give me a little clue for my own satisfaction?"

She looked at him closely.

"And if I won't tell you?"

He had his trump in reserve.

"Then, Countess, I shall be forced to give information to the police of Delphis and collect the reward for information leading to your whereabouts. While I have conceived a great admiration for you, there are others who might judge otherwise. It would be a salutary story for prospective runaways to find you ending up as an artificial shell."

She gave a little laugh.

"But I'm not an artificial shell," she said. "The joke's on you—I'm full of

dynamite so I always thought I'd go off."

Even as this explanation issued from her lips she exploded with a tremendous bang, which was heard as far as New York City.

There were headlines in all the papers but Dr. Wilkinson was unfortunately killed by the concussion and did not see them. And so another glamor girl passes into history.