

Porcelain and Pink, F. Scott Fitzgerald

"And do you write for any other magazines?" inquired the young lady.

"Oh, yes," I assured her. "I've had some stories and plays in the 'Smart Set,' for instance—"

The young lady shivered.

"The 'Smart Set!'" she exclaimed. "How can you? Why, they publish stuff about girls in blue bathtubs, and silly things like that."

And I had the magnificent joy of telling her that she was referring to "Porcelain and Pink," which had appeared there several months before.

Porcelain and Pink

A room in the down-stairs of a summer cottage. High around the wall runs an art frieze of a fisherman with a pile of nets at his feet and a ship on a crimson ocean, a fisherman with a pile of nets at his feet and a ship on a crimson ocean, a fisherman with a pile of nets at his feet and so on. In one place on the frieze there is an overlapping—here we have half a fisherman with half a pile of nets at his foot, crowded damply against half a ship on half a crimson ocean. The frieze is not in the plot, but frankly it fascinates me. I could continue indefinitely, but I am distracted by one of the two objects in the room—a blue porcelain bath-tub. It has character, this bath-tub. It is not one of the new racing bodies, but is small with a high tonneau and looks as if it were going to jump; discouraged, however, by the shortness of its legs, it has submitted to its environment and to its coat of sky-blue paint. But it grumpily refuses to allow any patron completely to stretch his legs—which brings us neatly to the second object in the room:

It is a girl—clearly an appendage to the bath-tub, only her head and throat—beautiful girls have throats instead of necks—and a suggestion of shoulder appearing above the side. For the first ten minutes of the play the audience is engrossed in wondering if she really is playing the game fairly and hasn't any clothes on or whether it is being cheated and she is dressed.

The girl's name is Julie Marvis. From the proud way she sits up in the bath-tub we deduce that she is not very tall and that she carries herself well. When she smiles, her upper lip rolls a little and reminds you of an Easter Bunny. She is within whispering distance of twenty years old.

One thing more—above and to the right of the bath-tub is a window. It is narrow and has a wide sill; it lets in much sunshine, but effectually prevents any one who looks in from seeing the bath-tub. You begin to suspect the plot?

We open, conventionally enough, with a song, but, as the startled gasp of the audience quite drowns out the first half, we will give only the last of it:

Julie: (In an airy soprano—enthusiastico)
When Caesar did the Chicago
He was a graceful child,
Those sacred chickens
Just raised the dickens
The Vestal Virgins went wild.
Whenever the Nervii got nervy
He gave them an awful razz

They shook in their shoes
With the Consular blues
The Imperial Roman Jazz

(During the wild applause that follows Julie modestly moves her arms and makes waves on the surface of the water—at least we suppose she does. Then the door on the left opens and Lois Marvis enters, dressed but carrying garments and towels. Lois is a year older than Julie and is nearly her double in face and voice, but in her clothes and expression are the marks of the conservative. Yes, you've guessed it. Mistaken identity is the old rusty pivot upon which the plot turns.)

Lois: (Starting) Oh, 'scuse me. I didn't know you were here.

Julie: Oh, hello. I'm giving a little concert—

Lois: (Interrupting) Why didn't you lock the door?

Julie: Didn't I?

Lois: Of course you didn't. Do you think I just walked through it?

Julie: I thought you picked the lock, dearest.

Lois: You're so careless.

Julie: No. I'm happy as a garbage-man's dog and I'm giving a little concert.

Lois: (Severely) Grow up!

Julie: (Waving a pink arm around the room) The walls reflect the sound, you see. That's why there's something very beautiful about singing in a bath-tub. It gives an effect of surpassing loveliness. Can I render you a selection?

Lois: I wish you'd hurry out of the tub.

Julie: (Shaking her head thoughtfully) Can't be hurried. This is my kingdom at present, Godliness.

Lois: Why the mellow name?

Julie: Because you're next to Cleanliness. Don't throw anything please!

Lois: How long will you be?

Julie: (After some consideration) Not less than fifteen nor more than twenty-five minutes.

Lois: As a favor to me will you make it ten?

Julie: (Reminiscing) Oh, Godliness, do you remember a day in the chill of last January when one Julie, famous for her Easter-rabbit smile, was going out and there was scarcely any hot water and young Julie had just filled the tub for her own little self when the wicked sister came and did bathe herself therein, forcing the young Julie to perform her ablutions with cold cream—which is expensive and a darn lot of troubles?

Lois: (Impatiently) Then you won't hurry?

Julie: Why should I?

Lois: I've got a date.

Julie: Here at the house?

Lois: None of your business.

(Julie shrugs the visible tips of her shoulders and stirs the water into ripples.)

Julie: So be it.

Lois: Oh, for Heaven's sake, yes! I have a date here, at the house—in a way.

Julie: In a way?

Lois: He isn't coming in. He's calling for me and we're walking.

Julie: (Raising her eyebrows) Oh, the plot clears. It's that literary Mr. Calkins. I thought you promised mother you wouldn't invite him in.

Lois: (Desperately) She's so idiotic. She detests him because he's just got a divorce. Of course she's had more experience than I have, but—

Julie: (Wisely) Don't let her kid you! Experience is the biggest gold brick in the world. All older people have it for sale.

Lois: I like him. We talk literature.

Julie: Oh, so that's why I've noticed all these weighty books around the house lately.

Lois: He lends them to me.

Julie: Well, you've got to play his game. When in Rome do as the Romans would like to do. But I'm through with books. I'm all educated.

Lois: You're very inconsistent—last summer you read every day.

Julie: If I were consistent I'd still be living on warm milk out of a bottle.

Lois: Yes, and probably my bottle. But I like Mr. Calkins.

Julie: I never met him.

Lois: Well, will you hurry up?

Julie: Yes. (After a pause) I wait till the water gets tepid and then I let in more hot.

Lois: (Sarcastically) How interesting!

Julie: 'Member when we used to play "soapo"?

Lois: Yes—and ten years old. I'm really quite surprised that you don't play it still.

Julie: I do. I'm going to in a minute.

Lois: Silly game.

Julie: (Warmly) No, it isn't. It's good for the nerves. I'll bet you've forgotten how to play it.

Lois: (Defiantly) No, I haven't. You—you get the tub all full of soapsuds and then you get up on the edge and slide down.

Julie: (Shaking her head scornfully) Huh! That's only part of it. You've got to slide down without touching your hand or feet—

Lois:(Impatiently) Oh, Lord! What do I care? I wish we'd either stop coming here in the summer or else get a house with two bath-tubs.

Julie: You can buy yourself a little tin one, or use the hose—

Lois: Oh, shut up!

Julie: (Irrelevantly) Leave the towel.

Lois: What?

Julie: Leave the towel when you go.

Lois: This towel?

Julie: (Sweetly) Yes, I forgot my towel.

Lois: (Looking around for the first time) Why, you idiot! You haven't even a kimono.

Julie: (Also looking around) Why, so I haven't.

Lois: (Suspicion growing on her) How did you get here?

Julie: (Laughing) I guess I—I guess I whisked here. You know—a white form whisking down the stairs and—

Lois: (Scandalized) Why, you little wretch. Haven't you any pride or self-respect?

Julie: Lots of both. I think that proves it. I looked very well. I really am rather cute in my natural state.

Lois: Well, you—

Julie: (Thinking aloud) I wish people didn't wear any clothes. I guess I ought to have been a pagan or a native or something.

Lois: You're a—

Julie: I dreamt last night that one Sunday in church a small boy brought in a magnet that attracted cloth. He attracted the clothes right off of everybody; put them in an awful state; people were crying and shrieking and carrying on as if they'd just discovered their skins for the first time. Only I didn't care. So I just laughed. I had to pass the collection plate because nobody else would.

Lois: (Who has turned a deaf ear to this speech) Do you mean to tell me that if I hadn't come you'd have run back to your room—un—unclothed?

Julie: Au naturel is so much nicer.

Lois: Suppose there had been some one in the living-room.

Julie: There never has been yet.

Lois: Yet! Good grief! How long—

Julie: Besides, I usually have a towel.

Lois: (Completely overcome) Golly! You ought to be spanked. I hope you get caught. I hope there's a dozen ministers in the living-room when you come out—and their wives, and their daughters.

Julie: There wouldn't be room for them in the living-room, answered Clean Kate of the Laundry District.

Lois: All right. You've made your own—bath-tub; you can lie in it.

(Lois starts determinedly for the door.)

Julie: (In alarm) Hey! Hey! I don't care about the k'mono, but I want the towel. I can't dry myself on a piece of soap and a wet wash-rag.

Lois: (Obstinately) I won't humor such a creature. You'll have to dry yourself the best way you can. You can roll on the floor like the animals do that don't wear any clothes.

Julie: (Complacent again) All right. Get out!

Lois: (Haughtily) Huh!

(Julie turns on the cold water and with her finger directs a parabolic stream at Lois. Lois retires quickly, slamming the door after her. Julie laughs and turns off the water)

Julie: (Singing)
When the Arrow-collar man
Meets the D'jer-kiss girl
On the smokeless Sante Fé
Her Pebeco smile
Her Lucile style
De dum da-de-dum one day—

(She changes to a whistle and leans forward to turn on the taps, but is startled by three loud banging noises in the pipes. Silence for a moment—then she puts her mouth down near the spigot as if it were a telephone)

Julie: Hello! (No answer) Are you a plumber? (No answer) Are you the water department? (One loud, hollow bang) What do you want? (No answer) I believe you're a ghost. Are you? (No answer) Well, then, stop banging. (She reaches out and turns on the warm tap. No water flows. Again she puts her mouth down close to the spigot) If you're the plumber that's a mean trick. Turn it on for a fellow. (Two loud, hollow bangs) Don't argue! I want water—water! Water!

(A young man's head appears in the window—a head decorated with a slim mustache and sympathetic eyes. These last stare, and though they can see nothing but many fishermen with nets and much crimson ocean, they decide him to speak)

The Young Man: Some one fainted?

Julie: (Starting up, all ears immediately) Jumping cats!

The Young Man: (Helpfully) Water's no good for fits.

Julie: Fits! Who said anything about fits!

The Young Man: You said something about a cat jumping.

Julie: (Decidedly) I did not!

The Young Man: Well, we can talk it over later, Are you ready to go out? Or do you still feel that if you go with me just now everybody will gossip?

Julie: (Smiling) Gossip! Would they? It'd be more than gossip—it'd be a regular scandal.

The Young Man: Here, you're going it a little strong. Your family might be somewhat disgruntled—but to the pure all things are suggestive. No one else would even give it a thought, except a few old women. Come on.

Julie: You don't know what you ask.

The Young Man: Do you imagine we'd have a crowd following us?

Julie: A crowd? There'd be a special, all-steel, buffet train leaving New York hourly.

The Young Man: Say, are you house-cleaning?

Julie: Why?

The Young Man: I see all the pictures are off the walls.

Julie: Why, we never have pictures in this room.

The Young Man: Odd, I never heard of a room without pictures or tapestry or panelling or something.

Julie: There's not even any furniture in here.

The Young Man: What a strange house!

Julie: It depend on the angle you see it from.

The Young Man: (Sentimentally) It's so nice talking to you like this—when you're merely a voice. I'm rather glad I can't see you.

Julie; (Gratefully) So am I.

The Young Man: What color are you wearing?

Julie: (After a critical survey of her shoulders) Why, I guess it's a sort of pinkish white.

The Young Man: Is it becoming to you?

Julie: Very. It's—it's old. I've had it for a long while.

The Young Man: I thought you hated old clothes.

Julie: I do but this was a birthday present and I sort of have to wear it.

The Young Man: Pinkish-white. Well I'll bet it's divine. Is it in style?

Julie: Quite. It's very simple, standard model.

The Young Man: What a voice you have! How it echoes! Sometimes I shut my eyes and seem to see you in a far desert island calling for me. And I plunge toward you through the surf, hearing you call as you stand there, water stretching on both sides of you—

(The soap slips from the side of the tub and splashes in. The young man blinks)

YOUNG MAN: What was that? Did I dream it?

Julie: Yes. You're—you're very poetic, aren't you?

The Young Man: (Dreamily) No. I do prose. I do verse only when I am stirred.

Julie: (Murmuring) Stirred by a spoon—

The Young Man: I have always loved poetry. I can remember to this day the first poem I ever learned by heart. It was "Evangeline."

Julie: That's a fib.

The Young Man: Did I say "Evangeline"? I meant "The Skeleton in Armor."

Julie: I'm a low-brow. But I can remember my first poem. It had one verse:
Parker and Davis
Sittin' on a fence
Tryne to make a dollar
Outa fif-teen cents.

The Young Man: (Eagerly) Are you growing fond of literature?

Julie: If it's not too ancient or complicated or depressing. Same way with people. I usually like 'em not too ancient or complicated or depressing.

The Young Man: Of course I've read enormously. You told me last night that you were very fond of Walter Scott.

Julie: (Considering) Scott? Let's see. Yes, I've read "Ivanhoe" and "The Last of the Mohicans."

The Young Man: That's by Cooper.

Julie: (Angrily) "Ivanhoe" is? You're crazy! I guess I know. I read it.

The Young Man: "The Last of the Mohicans" is by Cooper.

Julie: What do I care! I like O. Henry. I don't see how he ever wrote those stories. Most of them he wrote in prison. "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" he made up in prison.

The Young Man: (Biting his lip) Literature—literature! How much it has meant to me!

Julie: Well, as Gaby Deslys said to Mr. Bergson, with my looks and your brains there's nothing we couldn't do.

The Young Man: (Laughing) You certainly are hard to keep up with. One day you're awfully pleasant and the next you're in a mood. If I didn't understand your temperament so well—

Julie: (Impatiently) Oh, you're one of these amateur character-readers, are you? Size people up in five minutes and then look wise whenever they're mentioned. I hate that sort of thing.

The Young Man: I don't boast of sizing you up. You're most mysterious, I'll admit.

Julie: There's only two mysterious people in history.

The Young Man: Who are they?

Julie: The Man with the Iron Mask and the fella who says "ug uh-glug uh-glug uh-glug" when the line is busy.

The Young Man: You are mysterious. I love you. You're beautiful, intelligent, and virtuous, and that's the rarest known combination.

Julie: You're a historian. Tell me if there are any bath-tubs in history. I think they've been frightfully neglected.

The Young Man: Bath-tubs! Let's see. Well, Agamemnon was stabbed in his bath-tub. And Charlotte Corday stabbed Marat in his bath-tub.

Julie: (Sighing) Way back there! Nothing new besides the sun, is there? Why only yesterday I picked up a musical-comedy score that must have been at least twenty years old; and there on the cover it said "The Shimmies of Normandy," but shimie was spelt the old way, with a "C."

The Young Man: I loathe these modern dances. Oh, Lois, I wish I could see you. Come to the window.

(There is a loud bang in the water-pipe and suddenly the flow starts from the open taps. Julie turns them off quickly)

The Young Man: (Puzzled) What on earth was that?

Julie: (Ingeniously) I heard something, too.

The Young Man: Sounded like running water.

Julie: Didn't it? Strange like it. As a matter of fact I was filling the gold-fish bowl.

The Young Man: (Still puzzled) What was that banging noise?

Julie: One of the fish snapping his golden jaws.

The Young Man: (With sudden resolution) Lois, I love you. I am not a mundane man but I am a forger—

Julie: (Interested at once) Oh, how fascinating.

The Young Man:—a forger ahead. Lois, I want you.

Julie: (Skeptically) Huh! What you really want is for the world to come to attention and stand there till you give "Rest!"

The Young Man: Lois I-Lois I-

(He stops as Lois opens the door, comes in, and bangs it behind her. She looks peevishly at Julie and then suddenly catches sight of the young man in the window)

Lois: (In horror) Mr. Calkins!

The Young Man: (Surprised) Why I thought you said you were wearing pinkish white!

(After one despairing stare Lois shrieks, throws up her hands in surrender, and sinks to the floor.)

The Young Man: (In great alarm) Good Lord! She's fainted! I'll be right in.

(Julie's eyes light on the towel which has slipped from Lois's inert hand.)

Julie: In that case I'll be right out.

(She puts her hands on the side of the tub to lift herself out and a murmur, half gasp, half sigh, ripples from the audience.)

A Belasco midnight comes quickly down and blots out the stage.)