

Salute To Lucy and Elsie, F. Scott Fitzgerald

Each time George Lawson Dubarry came down to visit his father in Cuba the same thing happened. George's mail arrived in Cuba before he did, and his father whose name was Lawson Dubarry, without the George, slit open the first letter and read "Dear George" (or sometimes "George darling") before he realized that it was not for him. Always then he literally shut his eyes as he slipped it back in the envelope—and when later he gave the letter to his son, wore a guilty expression as he explained how it happened.

What Lawson afterwards referred to as "The Letter" arrived in his offices at the Pan-American Refining Company on a hot day in July. Perhaps it was the sweat on his glasses, perhaps it was the letter's ambiguous beginning: "Greetings Old Boy" which made Lawson read the first few pages before recognizing the advance guard of his son's correspondence.

After that he had to go right through to the end.

George was eighteen, a sophomore at New Haven, whence Lawson himself had graduated. George's mother was dead and Lawson had worked hard and clumsily at the mother-and-father role until George managed to flop into Yale, in the manner of an exhausted gamefish flopping into a boat causing Lawson to hope that the worst was over.

The letter, postmarked Paris, was from George's roommate, Wardman Evans; after one reading Lawson went to the door and said to his secretary: "No phones for an hour."

Returning to his desk he read the letter a second time. Omitting the young man's scathing comments on foreign ways and places, his attention focused on the following:

June 30, 1939

... Well, she gave in on the boat and I don't mind telling you I was scared about being the first. Scared for just a minute, because I thought she might lose her head and we were two days from Cherbourg. But the worst of it was she suddenly took it all so seriously and I had an awful time shaking her off in Paris. She's seventeen and in college and if it hadn't been me it would have been somebody else... How did it go with Elsie? Did you G. the L. or is she still pulling that one about being a Catholic and doesn't believe in Birth Control. Get 'em young is my theory and at least you won't run into anything like I did last April... if you hear that we're going to get the suite in Harkness send me a night cable. And when you write tell me about Sweet Sixteen. We can compare some juicy notes if she went through with it. (I meant to tell you that the doctor said before I left God's Country that I'm O.K., but after a week in this crazy burg—well, I'm more worried about myself than I am about Lucy).

Ever yours

Wardman (Roomie)

Lawson Dubarry had taken reservations at the Valedero Beach Club where they would do a lot of fishing while he "caught up with his son." But as he tapped the letter on the table he said to himself, "Catch up with what?" and he could have sworn that no hour had elapsed before his secretary opened the click latch and assured him it had.

"Could you bring me in a typewriter—I want to pound out a letter myself."

"Can you type, Mr. Dubarry?"

"I think I can."

"Remember—" she said, "—if it's to your son he'll be on the Miami clipper tomorrow. It'll cross him."

She saw from his expression that this was out of order and covered up with an inquiry about the beach club reservation.

"Hold everything," Lawson said, "Or no, go ahead just as if—"

He stopped himself. He felt very much alone. There was no man with whom he cared to discuss this—most certainly not with George. He remembered with distaste a scoutmaster of his youth who had talked about the dangers of "secret sin"—also of a robust friend who had deliberately taken his boy to a "house" at seventeen. But Lawson was of his day, and reticent and George knew it—and there would be at best an orgy of embarrassment for them both. He had another plan.

On the typewriter, slowly and painstakingly he wrote a letter to Wardman Evans.

He began by explaining how he had happened to open the letter—then he descended swiftly into blackmail:

If you will remember its details you will understand that I can't pass it on to my son, and that I don't think it best for you two to room together next year. This implies no criticism of you, nor any suggestion that you have been a bad influence. Perhaps it's the reverse. But preoccupations such as you describe cannot but hurt both of you in your work.

I count on you as the elder to immediately notify the Yale registrar and my son of the change of plan about the room, inventing any excuse you want.

No doubt you will prefer such an extremely intimate and revealing letter returned—so at the same time that you send me a copy of your letter to the registrar send me also an address where you would like it mailed.

Yours—not without sympathy but thoroughly disturbed and entirely determined—
Lawson Dubarry

Lawson put on proper stamps for it to reach Wardman Evans in Paris—he should have an answer in three weeks.

There was a question as to whether Wardman would show fight. Lawson remembered him as a handsome, metallic boy with a wide-eyed frankness and thin Park Avenue manners.

Lawson had never met his father and casual seduction might be their family tradition, reaching back two generations to the emigrant ship, or twenty to the Crusades.

As he waited for the plane at the customs dock he kept thinking that there was nothing in the letter which convicted George and "Sweet Sixteen"—he winced at even thinking the girl's name. George might merely have toyed with designs in scarlet. Lawson's role was certainly to exercise patience and self-control, while he "won George's confidence,"

and encourage him to unpack his ethical standards—if any. By the time Wardman's answer arrived he hoped that he and not Wardman would be George's best friend..

"Father! You look fine!"

Relief stole over Lawson. This healthy, generous, jovial specimen simply couldn't think in the manner of that letter. Lawson strutted with him from the dock.

"I wanted to work with you this summer," George said. "You shouldn't have planned all this vacation."

"It's my vacation too."

"But I want to sweat, like you have to. Let's save swimming and fishing for week ends. I've got a couple of house parties I'm going to in September."

At the end of the first week George dropped the name Wardman Evans while they were at luncheon at El Patio. It seemed to fall like a live grenade in Lawson's plate.

"He and I have the same sense of humor," George said. "That's one reason I like rooming with him. He's limited but when I get thoughtful I hang around with other guys."

"He impressed me as—rather ordinary," said Lawson evenly.

"Ordinary!" objected George. "He's dead sure of any Senior Society he wants!"

Lawson's thought: "that wouldn't prove anything" was left unsaid.

There was mail for George in Wardman's handwriting from here and there in Europe—mail which Lawson passed on to his son without a quaver.

And there were girl's letters in many handwritings which Lawson read in his imagination; they were all signed by Elsie, all saying: "George—help me! What have we done?"

But in the mornings Lawson could be modern enough to think: "This isn't 1890. And it takes two to make a seduction."

Somewhat along this line George first displayed his ethical equipment.

"I'm steering clear of Philadelphia when I go back. My God! when a girl has a yen for a man she'll go to any lengths."

"Will she?"

"Absolutely. The old mouse trap play."

"Why don't they go after men in a position to marry?"

"That's later. I'm talking about sex, which I hope doesn't shock you. It still goes on you know."

—Lay low, Lawson whispered to himself—remembering only that George must be separated from Wardman, and that if George was brutally predatory he

must be slowed up this side of disaster to himself and "Sweet Sixteen." So the weeks passed—with George making him both young and old. Then letters came.

Lawson's envelope, posted from London, contained a carbon of a letter to the Registrar. It informed him that he, Wardman Evans, would not be rooming with George Dubarry next term, but the reason it gave was: "—since I am resigning from the University and have so informed the Dean."

At the bottom was an addenda in pen and ink.

I hope this will please you. I am not enclosing a copy of my letter to George because a man does not have to take orders from anyone except his own father or employer but I assure you (in case you plan to "accidentally" open it) that it does not mention your letter in any way, shape or form.

Yours truly
G. Wardman Evans.

There was a letter for George in the same handwriting but George was on a two day business trip to Pinar del Rio and Lawson could only spend a bad week-end reading over Wardman's letter to George and his own letter to Wardman, wondering if he could have forced the young man to such an extreme. He consoled himself with the thought that since Wardman's interests were obviously not at New Haven, he would be no loss to the student body.

George, coming into the office on Monday, pocketed the letter addressed to him and talked of Pinar del Rio and his desire to abandon the house-parties and work in Cuba until college opened. But later that afternoon, when they met at Lawson's club, George was in a state of profound gloom.

"That fool Wardman! It isn't just the trouble of getting another roommate though it won't be quite the same—but he's such a fool."

"What's he done?"

"Quit college," said George aghast. "Of all the insane things."

Lawson was silent, his nerves tingling.

"Why did he quit? Or is it a secret."

"Oh, you can't keep that a secret!"

"Well then—can I know—what has he done?"

"He seems to have married a little trollop named Lucy Bickmaster."

Lawson called a passing waiter and ordered a double whiskey. George took a beer. There was silence as George took out the letter and studied it.

"Why did he marry her?" Lawson asked.

"That's the mystery."

"Maybe he—had to."

"Don't make me laugh. I've known Lucy three years." Then he added quickly, "but don't get any ideas in your head, father—I never had designs on her. I simply know her character and my guess is he must have been tight."

"Aren't you jumping at conclusions about the girl," said Lawson coldly, "lacking evidence to the contrary can't you presume that a girl of seventeen—"

He stopped himself at George's puzzled look.

"How do you know she's a girl of seventeen?"

"I think you told me."

"I don't remember mentioning her."

Taking down his drink Lawson ordered another.

"He mentions you in the letter," George said.

Lawson's heart jumped.

"He sends his regards and he hopes you'll be a good influence on me."

"Let's forget it all," said Lawson. "I'm sorry because you're sorry, but he was a fool, as you say—giving up his education for a girl."

"He was trapped."

"Maybe."

They stood up.

"I don't know the girl," said Lawson, "speaking impersonally I only hoped she isn't trapped too."

He was tempted to snatch one more drink on the way out but that would have violated his rules. Then due to the slight frustration involved he made another slip.

"Maybe Wardman isn't such a prize physical package himself."

Stepping out of the club into the blinding sunlight Lawson felt triumphant and talkative; he was glad for the sake of discretion that George and he weren't spending the evening together.

...Later he stopped for a nightcap at a bar where young girls waited on the customers. On departing he tipped his hat in the Latin manner.

"Multa gratia, Lucia," he said jovially—and then to the other barmaid, "Adios Elsie."

He tipped his hat again and bowed and as he walked out left the two girls staring, unaware that he had bowed across two generations into an American past.

The feeling of triumph persisted into the next morning when he entered his office late and full of new hopes for his son and himself. George was not yet in but on the desk was an envelope in his handwriting marked

"Personal." Lawson opened and read it. Then, as upon another occasion, he rang for his secretary and said "Please-no phones." Then he read it a second time:

-I guessed from your last remark that there was something phoney going on. I worried about it all night and this morning when I came in early your secretary handed me a letter which she said must have got into your files by mistake. Attached to it was your answer and I'm not even pretending that it was an "accident" that I read that too.

By the time you get this I will be on the clipper. The cashier advanced the wages due me. In saying goodbye I want to state I have tried to be a good son and act like a gentleman as far as I understand what the word means.

Not till weeks later, when he saw a newspaper item about George's marriage ("the ceremony was performed in Elkton, Maryland-Miss Elsie Johnson, the bride, is sixteen years old") did Lawson realize that, in the welter of good intentions, that doubtful quantity, Elsie, had been saved-but the sacrifice was his son's.

He was never quite able to realize how he could have acted otherwise, but at certain times thereafter he would remark upon modern young women and their ways. His kindest comment was that they were the only hunters desperate enough to bait a trap with crushed and broken portions of themselves. And he would qualify even this with: "-it's not their own courage-it's the courage of nature."

There were other things that he caught himself saying which cannot be set down. Wardman Evans, among others, might have been honestly shocked to hear them.