

The Love Boat, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

The boat floated down the river through the summer night like a Fourth of July balloon footloose in the heavens. The decks were brightly lit and restless with dancers, but bow and stern were in darkness; so the boat had no more outline than an accidental cluster of stars. Between the black banks it floated, softly parting the mild dark tide from the sea and leaving in its wake small excited gusts of music—"Babes in the Woods" over and over, and "Moonlight Bay." Past the scattered lights of Pokus Landing, where a poet in an attic window saw yellow hair gleam in the turn of a dance. Past Ulm, where the moon came up out of a boiler works, and West Esther, where it slid, unregretted, behind a cloud.

The radiance of the boat itself was enough for, among others, the three young Harvard graduates; they were weary and a little depressed and they gave themselves up promptly to its enchantment. Their own boat was casually drifting and a collision was highly possible, but no one made a movement to start the engine and get out of the way.

"It makes me very sad," one of them said. "It is so beautiful that it makes me want to cry."

"Go on and cry, Bill."

"Will you cry too?"

"We'll all cry."

His loud, facetious "Boo-hoo!" echoed across the night, reached the steamer and brought a small lively crowd to the rail.

"Look! It's a launch."

"Some guys in a launch."

Bill got to his feet. The two crafts were scarcely ten feet apart.

"Throw us a hempen rope," he pleaded eloquently. "Come on—be impulsive. Please do."

Once in a hundred years there would have been a rope at hand. It was there that night. With a thud the coil struck the wooden bottom and in an instant the motorboat was darting along behind the steamer, as if in the wake of a harpooned whale.

Fifty high-school couples left the dance and scrambled for a place around the suddenly interesting stern rail. Fifty girls gave forth immemorial small cries of excitement and sham fright. Fifty young men forgot the mild exhibitionism which had characterized their manner of the evening and looked grudgingly at the more effectual show-off of three others. Mae Purley, without the involuntary quiver of an eyelash, fitted the young man standing in the boat into her current dream, where he displaced Al Fitzpatrick with laughable ease. She put her hand on Al Fitzpatrick's arm and squeezed it a little because she had stopped thinking about him entirely and felt that he must be aware of it. Al, who had been standing with his eyes squinted up, watching the towed boat, looked tenderly at Mae and tried to put his arm about her shoulder. But Mae Purley and Bill

Frothington, handsome and full of all the passionate promise in the world, had locked eyes across the intervening space.

They made love. For a moment they made love as no one ever dares to do after. Their glance was closer than an embrace, more urgent than a call. There were no words for it. Had there been, and had Mae heard them, she would have fled to the darkest corner of the ladies' washroom and hid her face in a paper towel.

"We want to come on board!" Bill called. "We're life-preserver salesmen! How about pulling us around to the side?"

Mr. McVitty, the principal, arrived on the scene too late to interfere. The three young Harvard graduates—Ellsworth Ames soaking wet, unconsciously Byronic with his dark curls plastered damply to his forehead, Hamilton Abbot and Bill Frothington surer-footed and dry—climbed and were hoisted over the side. The motorboat bobbed on behind.

With a sort of instinctive reverence for the moment, Mae Purley hung back in the shadow, not through lack of confidence but through excess of it. She knew that he would come straight to her. That was never the trouble and never had been—the trouble was in keeping up her own interest after she had satisfied the deep but casual curiosity of her lips. But tonight was going to be different. She knew this when she saw that he was in no hurry; he was leaning against the rail making a couple of high-school seniors—who suddenly seemed very embryonic to themselves—feel at ease.

He looked at her once.

"It's all right," his eyes said, without a movement of his face, "I understand as well as you. I'll be there in just a minute."

Life burned high in them both; the steamer and its people were at a distance and in darkness. It was one of those times.

"I'm a Harvard man," Mr. McVitty was saying, "class of 1907." The three young men nodded with polite indifference. "I'm glad to know we won the race," continued the principal, simulating a reborn enthusiasm which had never existed. "I haven't been to New London in fifteen years."

"Bill here rowed Number Two," said Ames. "That's a coaching launch we've got."

"Oh. You were on the crew?"

"Crew's over now," said Bill impatiently. "Everything's over."

"Well, let me congratulate you."

Shortly they froze him into silence. They were not his sort of Harvard man; they wouldn't have known his name in four years there together. But they would have been much more gracious and polite about it had it not been this particular night. They hadn't broken away from the hilarious mobs of classmates and relatives at New London to exchange discomfort with the master of a mill-town high school.

"Can we dance?" they demanded.

A few minutes later Bill and Mae Purley were walking down the deck side by side. Life had met over the body of Al Fitzpatrick, engulfing him. The two clear voices:

"Perhaps you'll dance with me," with the soft assurance of the moonlight itself, and: "I'd love to," were nothing that could be argued about, not by twice what Al Fitzpatrick pretended to be. The most consoling thought in Al's head was that they might be fought over.

What was it they said? Did you hear it? Can you remember? Later that night she remembered only his pale wavy hair and the long limbs that she followed around the dancing floor.

She was thin, a thin burning flame, colorless yet fresh. Her smile came first slowly, then with a rush, pouring out of her heart, shy and bold, as if all the life of that little body had gathered for a moment around her mouth and the rest of her was a wisp that the least wind would blow away. She was a changeling whose lips alone had escaped metamorphosis, whose lips were the only point of contact with reality.

"Then you live near?"

"Only about twenty-five miles from you," Bill said. "Isn't it funny?"

"Isn't it funny?"

They looked at each other, a trifle awed in the face of such manifest destiny. They stood between two lifeboats on the top deck. Mae's hand lay on his arm, playing with a loose ravel of his tweed coat. They had not kissed yet—that was coming in a minute. That was coming any time now, as soon as every cup of emotional moonlight had been drained of its possibilities and cast aside. She was seventeen.

"Are you glad I live near?"

She might have said "I'm delighted" or "Of course I am." But she whispered, "Yes; are you?"

"Mae—with an e," he said and laughed in a husky whisper. Already they had a joke together. "You look so darn beautiful."

She accepted the compliment in silence, meeting his eyes. He pressed her to him by her merest elbow in a way that would have been impossible had she not been eager too. He never expected to see her after tonight.

"Mae." His whisper was urgent. Mae's eyes came nearer, grew larger, dissolved against his face, like eyes on a screen. Her frail body breathed imperceptibly in his arms.

A dance stopped. There was clapping for an encore. Then clapping for another encore with what had seemed only a poor bar of music in between. There was another dance, scarcely longer than a kiss. They were heavily endowed for love, these two, and both of them had played with it before.

Down below, Al Fitzpatrick's awareness of time and space had reached a pitch that would have been invaluable to an investigator of the new mathematics. Bit by bit the boat presented itself to him as it really was, a wooden hulk garish with forty-watt bulbs, peopled by the commonplace young people of a commonplace town. The river was water, the moon was a flat meaningless symbol in the sky. He was in agony—which is

to speak tritely. Rather, he was in deadly fear; his throat was dry, his mouth drooped into a hurt half moon as he tried to talk to some of the other boys—shy unhappy boys, who loitered around the stern.

Al was older than the rest—he was twenty-two, and out in the world for seven years. He worked in the Hammacker Mills and attended special high-school classes at night. Another year might see him assistant manager of the shops, and Mae Purley, with about as much eagerness as was to be expected in a girl who was having everything her own way, had half promised to marry him when she was eighteen. His wasn't a temperament to go to pieces. When he had brooded up to the limit of his nature he felt a necessity for action. Miserably and desperately he climbed up to the top deck to make trouble.

Bill and Mae were standing close together by the lifeboat, quiet, absorbed and happy. They moved a little apart as he came near. "Is that you, Mae?" called Al in a hard voice. "Aren't you going to come down and dance?"

"We were just coming."

They walked toward him in a trance.

"What's the idea?" Al said hoarsely. "You've been up here over two hours."

At their indifference he felt pain swelling and spreading inside him, constricting his breath.

"Have you met Mr. Frothington?" She laughed shyly at the unfamiliar name.

"Yeah," said Al rudely. "I don't see the idea of his keeping you up here."

"I'm sorry," said Bill. "We didn't realize."

"Oh, you didn't? Well, I did." His jealousy cut through their absorption. They acknowledged it by an effort to hurry, to be impersonal, to defer to his wishes. Ungraciously he followed and the three of them came in a twinkling upon a scene that had suddenly materialized on the deck below.

Ellsworth Ames, smiling, but a little flushed, was leaning against the rail while Ham Abbot attempted to argue with a distraught young husky who kept trying to brush past him and get at Ames. Near them stood an indignant girl with another girl's soothing arm around her waist.

"What is it?" demanded Bill quickly.

The distraught young man glared at him. "Just a couple of snobs that come here and try to spoil everybody else's good time!" he cried wildly.

"He doesn't like me," said Ellsworth lightly. "I invited his girl to dance."

"She didn't want to dance with you!" shouted the other. "You think you're so damn smart—ask her if she wanted to dance with you."

The girl murmured indistinguishable words and disclaimed all responsibility by beginning to cry.

"You're too fresh, that's the trouble!" continued her defender. "I know what you said to her when you danced with her before. What do you think these girls are? They're just as good as anybody, see?"

Al Fitzpatrick moved in closer.

"Let's put 'em all off the boat," he suggested, stubborn and ashamed. "They haven't got any business butting in here."

A mild protest went up from the crowd, especially from the girls, and Abbot put his hand conciliatingly on the husky's shoulder. But it was too late.

"You'll put me off?" Ellsworth was saying coldly. "If you try to lay your hands on me I'll rearrange your whole face."

"Shut up, Ellie!" snapped Bill. "No use getting disagreeable. They don't want us; we'd better go." He stepped close to Mae, and whispered, "Good night. Don't forget what I said. I'll drive over and see you Sunday afternoon."

As he pressed her hand quickly and turned away he saw the argumentative boy swing suddenly at Ames, who caught the blow with his left arm. In a moment they were slugging and panting, knee to knee in the small space left by the gathering crowd. Simultaneously Bill felt a hand pluck at his sleeve and he turned to face Al Fitzpatrick. Then the deck was in an uproar. Abbot's attempt to separate Ames and his antagonist was misinterpreted; instantly he was involved in a battle of his own, cannonading against the other pairs, slipping on the smooth deck, bumping against noncombatants and scurrying girls who sent up shrill cries. He saw Al Fitzpatrick slap the deck suddenly with his whole body, not to rise again. He heard calls of "Get Mr. McVitty!" and then his own opponent was dropped by a blow he did not strike, and Bill's voice said: "Come on to the boat!"

The next few minutes streaked by in wild confusion. Avoiding Bill, whose hammerlike arms had felled their two champions, the high-school boys tried to pull down Ham and Ellie, and the harassed group edged and revolved toward the stern rail.

"Hidden-ball stuff!" Bill panted. "Save it for Haughton. I'm G-Gardner, you're Bradlee and Mahan-hip!"

Mr. McVitty's alarmed face appeared above the combat, and his high voice, ineffectual at first, finally pierced the heat of battle.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourselves! Bob-Cecil-George Roberg! Let go, I say!"

Abruptly the battle was over and the combatants, breathing hard, eyed one another impassively in the moonlight.

Ellie laughed and held out a pack of cigarettes. Bill untied the motor boat and walked forward with the painter to bring it alongside.

"They claim you insulted one of the girls," said Mr. McVitty uncertainly. "Now that's no way to behave after we took you aboard."

"That's nonsense," snapped Ellie, between gasps. "I only told her I'd like to bite her neck."

"Do you think that was a very gentlemanly thing to say?" demanded Mr. McVitty heatedly.

"Come on, Ellie!" Bill cried. "Good-by, everybody! Sorry there was such a row!"

They were already shadows of the past as they slipped one by one over the rail. The girls were turning cautiously back to their own men, and not one of them answered, and not one of them waved farewell.

"A bunch of meanies," remarked Ellie ironically. "I wish all you ladies had one neck so I could bite it all at once. I'm a glutton for ladies' necks."

Feeble retorts went up here and there like muffled pistol shots.

"Good night, ladies," Ham sang, as Bill shoved away from the side:

Good night, ladies,  
Good night, ladies,  
We're going to leave you now-ow-ow.

The boat moved up the river through the summer night, while the launch, touched by its swell, rocked to and fro gently in the wide path of the moon.

## II

On the following Sunday afternoon Bill Frothington drove over from Truro to the isolated rural slum known as Wheatly Village. He had stolen away from a house full of guests, assembled for his sister's wedding, to pursue what his mother would have called an "unworthy affair." But behind him lay an extremely successful career at Harvard and a youth somewhat more austere than the average, and this fall he would disappear for life into the banking house of Read, Hoppe and Company in Boston. He felt that the summer was his own. And had the purity of his intentions toward Mae Purley been questioned he would have defended himself with righteous anger. He had been thinking of her for five days. She attracted him violently, and he was following the attraction with eyes that did not ask to see.

Mae lived in the less offensive quarter of town on the third floor of its only apartment house, an unsuccessful relic of those more prosperous days of New England textile weaving that ended twenty years ago. Her father was a timekeeper who had fallen out of the white-collar class; Mae's two older brothers were working at the loom, and Bill's only impression as he entered the dingy flat was one of hopeless decay. The mountainous, soiled mother, at once suspicious and deferential, and the anaemic, beaten Anglo-Saxon asleep on the couch after his Sunday dinner were no more than shadows against the poor walls. But Mae was clean and fresh. No breath of squalor touched her. The pale pure youth of her cheeks, and her thin childish body shining through a new organdie dress, measured up full to the summer day.

"Where you going to take my little girl?" Mrs. Purley asked anxiously.

"I'm going to run away with her," he said, laughing.

"Not with my little girl."

"Oh, yes, I am. I don't see why she hasn't been run away with before."

"Not my little girl."

They held hands going downstairs, but not for an hour did the feeling of being intimate strangers pass. When the first promise of evening blew into the air at five o'clock and the light changed from white to yellow, their eyes met once in a certain way and Bill knew that it was time. They turned up a side road and down a wagon track, and in a moment the spell was around them again—the equal and opposite urge that drew them together. They talked about each other and then their voices grew quiet and they kissed, while chestnut blossoms slid in white diagonals through the air and fell across the car. After a long while an instinct told her that they had stayed long enough. He drove her home.

It went on like that for two months. He would come for her in the late afternoon and they would go for dinner to the shore. Afterward they would drive around until they found the center of the summer night and park there while the enchanted silence spread over them like leaves over the babes in the wood. Some day, naturally, they were going to marry. For the present it was impossible; he must go to work in the fall. Vaguely and with more than a touch of sadness both of them realized that this wasn't true; that if Mae had been of another class an engagement would have been arranged at once. She knew that he lived in a great country house with a park and a caretaker's lodge, that there were stables full of cars and horses, and that house parties and dances took place there all summer. Once they had driven past the gate and Mae's heart was leaden in her breast as she saw that those wide acres would lie between them all her life.

On his part Bill knew that it was impossible to marry Mae Purley. He was an only son and he wore one of those New England names that are carried with one always. Eventually he broached the subject to his mother.

"It isn't her poverty and ignorance," his mother said, among other things. "It's her lack of any standards—common women are common for life. You'd see her impressed by cheap and shallow people, by cheap and shallow things."

"But, mother, this isn't 1850. It isn't as if she were marrying into the royal family."

"If it were, it wouldn't matter. But you have a name that for many generations has stood for leadership and self-control. People who have given up less and taken fewer responsibilities have had nothing to say aloud when men like your father and your Uncle George and your Great-grandfather Frothington held their heads high. Toss your pride away and see what you've left at thirty-five to take you through the rest of your life."

"But you can only live once," he protested—knowing, nevertheless, that what she said was, for him, right. His youth had been pointed to make him understand that exposition of superiority. He knew what it was to be the best, at home, at school, at Harvard. In his senior year he had known men to dodge behind a building and wait in order to walk with him across the Harvard Yard, not to be seen with him out of mere poor snobbishness, but to get something intangible, something he carried within him of the less obvious, less articulate experience of the race.

Several days later he went to see Mae and met her coming out of the flat. They sat on the stairs in the half darkness.

"Just think of these stairs," he said huskily. "Think how many times you've kissed me on these stairs. At night when I've brought you home. On every landing. Last month when we walked up and down together five times before we could say good night."

"I hate these stairs. I wish I never had to go up them any more."

"Oh, Mae, what are we going to do?"

She didn't answer for a moment. "I've been thinking a lot these last three days," she said. "I don't think it's fair to myself to go on like this—or to Al."

"To Al," he said startled. "Have you been seeing Al?"

"We had a long talk last night."

"All" he repeated incredulously.

"He wants to get married. He isn't mad any more."

Bill tried suddenly to face the situation he had been dodging for two months, but the situation, with practiced facility, slid around the corner. He moved up a step till he was beside Mae, and put his arm around her.

"Oh, let's get married!" she cried desperately. "You can. If you want to, you can."

"I do want to."

"Then why can't we?"

"We can, but not yet."

"Oh, God, you've said that before."

For a tragic week they quarreled and came together over the bodies of unresolved arguments and irreconcilable facts. They parted finally on a trivial question as to whether he had once kept her waiting half an hour.

Bill went to Europe on the first possible boat and enlisted in an ambulance unit. When America went into the war he transferred to the aviation and Mae's pale face and burning lips faded off, faded out, against the wild dark background of the war.

### III

In 1919 Bill fell romantically in love with a girl of his own set. He met her on the Lido and wooed her on golf courses and in fashionable speak-easies and in cars parked at night, loving her much more from the first than he had ever loved Mae. She was a better person, prettier and more intelligent and with a kindlier heart. She loved him; they had much the same tastes and more than ample money.

There was a child, after a while there were four children, then only three again. Bill grew a little stout after thirty, as athletes will. He



was always going to take up something strenuous and get into real condition. He worked hard and drank a little too freely every week-end. Later he inherited the country house and lived there in the summer.

When he and Stella had been married eight years they felt safe for each other, safe from the catastrophes that had overtaken the majority of their friends. To Stella this brought relief; Bill, once he had accepted the idea of their safety, was conscious of a certain discontent, a sort of chemical restlessness. With a feeling of disloyalty to Stella, he shyly sounded his friends on the subject and found that in men of his age the symptoms were almost universal. Some blamed it on the war: "There'll never be anything like the war."

It was not variety of woman that he wanted. The mere idea appalled him. There were always women around. If he took a fancy to someone Stella invited her for a week-end, and men who liked Stella fraternally, or even somewhat sentimentally, were as often in the house. But the feeling persisted and grew stronger. Sometimes it would steal over him at dinner—a vast nostalgia—and the people at table would fade out and odd memories of his youth would come back to him. Sometimes a familiar taste or a smell would give him this sensation. Chiefly it had to do with the summer night.

One evening, walking down the lawn with Stella after dinner, the feeling seemed so close that he could almost grasp it. It was in the rustle of the pines, in the wind, in the gardener's radio down behind the tennis court.

"Tomorrow," Stella said; "there'll be a full moon."

She had stopped in a broad path of moonlight and was looking at him. Her hair was pale and lovely in the gentle light. She regarded him for a moment oddly, and he took a step forward as if to put his arms around her; then he stopped, unresponsive and dissatisfied. Stella's expression changed slightly and they walked on.

"That's too bad," he said suddenly. "Because tomorrow I've got to go away."

"Where?"

"To New York. Meeting of the trustees of school. Now that the kids are entered I feel I should."

"You'll be back Sunday?"

"Unless something comes up and I telephone."

"Ad Haughton's coming Sunday, and maybe the Amesese."

"I'm glad you won't be alone."

Suddenly Bill had remembered the boat floating down the river and Mae Purley on the deck under the summer moon. The image became a symbol of his youth, his introduction to life. Not only did he remember the deep excitement of that night but felt it again, her face against his, the rush of air about them as they stood by the lifeboat and the feel of its canvas cover to his hand.

When his car dropped him at Wheatly Village next afternoon he experienced a sensation of fright. Eleven years—she might be dead; quite possibly she had moved away. Any moment he might pass her on the street, a tired, already faded woman pushing a baby carriage and leading an extra child.

"I'm looking for a Miss Mae Purley," he said to a taxi driver. "It might be Fitzpatrick now."

"Fitzpatrick up at the works?"

Inquiries within the station established the fact that Mae Purley was indeed Mrs. Fitzpatrick. They lived just outside of town.

Ten minutes later the taxi stopped before a white Colonial house.

"They made it over from a barn," volunteered the taxi man. "There was a picture of it in one of them magazines."

Bill saw that someone was regarding him from behind the screen door. It was Mae. The door opened slowly and she stood in the hall, unchanged, slender as of old. Instinctively he raised his arms and then, as he took another step forward, instinctively he lowered them.

"Mae."

"Bill."

She was there. For a moment he possessed her, her frailty, her thin smoldering beauty; then he had lost her again. He could no more have embraced her than he could have embraced a stranger.

On the sun porch they stared at each other. "You haven't changed," they said together.

It was gone from her. Words, casual, trivial, and insincere, poured from her mouth as if to fill the sudden vacancy in his heart:

"Imagine seeing you—know you anywhere—thought you'd forgotten me—talking about you only the other night."

Suddenly he was without any inspiration. His mind became an utter blank, and try as he might, he could summon up no attitude to fill it.

"It's a nice place you have here," he said stupidly.

"We like it. You'd never guess it, but we made it out of an old barn."

"The taxi driver told me."

"—stood here for a hundred years empty—got it for almost nothing—pictures of it before and after in Home and Country Side."

Without warning his mind went blank again. What was the matter? Was he sick? He had even forgotten why he was here.

He knew only that he was smiling benevolently and that he must hang on to that smile, for if it passed he could never re-create it. What did it mean when one's mind went blank? He must see a doctor tomorrow.

"—since Al's done so well. Of course Mr. Kohlsatt leans on him, so he don't get away much. I get away to New York sometimes. Sometimes we both get away together."

"Well, you certainly have a nice place here," he said desperately. He must see a doctor in the morning. Doctor Flynn or Doctor Keyes or Doctor Given who was at Harvard with him. Or perhaps that specialist who was recommended to him by that woman at the Amesese'; or Doctor Gross or Doctor Studeford or Doctor de Martel—

"—I never touch it, but Al always keeps something in the house. Al's gone to Boston, but I think I can find the key."

—or Doctor Ramsay or old Doctor Ogden, who had brought him into the world. He hadn't realized that he knew so many doctors. He must make a list.

"—you're just exactly the same."

Suddenly Bill put both hands on his stomach, gave a short coarse laugh and said "Not here." His own act startled and surprised him, but it dissipated the blankness for a moment and he began to gather up the pieces of his afternoon. From her chatter he discovered her to be under the impression that in some vague and sentimental past she had thrown him over. Perhaps she was right. Who was she anyhow— this hard, commonplace article wearing Mae's body for a mask of life? Defiance rose in him.

"Mae, I've been thinking about that boat," he said desperately.

"What boat?"

"The steamboat on the Thames, Mae. I don't think we should let ourselves get old. Get your hat, Mae. Let's go for a boat ride tonight."

"But I don't see the point," she protested. "Do you think just riding on a boat keeps people young? Maybe if it was salt water—"

"Don't you remember that night on the boat?" he said, as if he were talking to a child. "That's how we met. Two months later you threw me over and married Al Fitzpatrick."

"But I didn't marry Al then," she said. "It wasn't till two years later when he got a job as superintendent. There was a Harvard man I used to go around with that I almost married. He knew you. His name was Abbot—Ham Abbot."

"Ham Abbot—you saw him again?"

"We went around for almost a year. I remember Al was wild. He said if I had any more Harvard men around he'd shoot them. But there wasn't anything wrong with it. Ham was just cuckoo about me and I used to let him rave."

Bill had read somewhere that every seven years a change is completed in the individual that makes him different from his self of seven years ago. He clung to the idea desperately. Dimly he saw this person pouring him an enormous glass of applejack, dimly he gulped it down and, through a description of the house, fought his way to the front door.

"Notice the original beams. The beams were what we liked best—" She broke off suddenly. "I remember now about the boat.

You were in a launch and you got on board with Ham Abbot that night."

The applejack was strong. Evidently it was fragrant also, for as they started off, the taxi driver volunteered to show him where the gentleman could get some more. He would give him a personal introduction in a place down by the wharf.

Bill sat at a dingy table behind swinging doors and, while the sun went down behind the Thames, disposed of four more applejacks. Then he remembered that he was keeping the taxi waiting. Outside a boy told him that the driver had gone home to supper and would be back in half an hour.

He sauntered over to a bale of goods and sat down, watching the mild activity of the docks. It was dusk presently. Stevedores appeared momentarily against the lighted hold of a barge and jerked quickly out of sight down an invisible incline. Next to the barge lay a steamer and people were going aboard; first a few people and then an increasing crowd. There was a breeze in the air and the moon came up rosy gold with a haze around.

Someone ran into him precipitately in the darkness, tripped, swore and staggered to his feet.

"I'm sorry," said Bill cheerfully. "Hurt yourself?"

"Pardon me," stuttered the young man. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not at all. Here, have a light."

They touched cigarettes.

"Where's the boat going?"

"Just down the river. It's the high-school picnic tonight."

"What?"

"The Wheatly High School picnic. The boat goes down to Groton, then it turns around and comes back."

Bill thought quickly. "Who's the principal of the high school?"

"Mr. McVitty." The young man fidgeted impatiently. "So long, bud. I got to go aboard."

"Me too," whispered Bill to himself. "Me too."

Still he sat there lazily for a moment, listening to the sounds clear and distinct now from the open deck: the high echolalia of the girls, the boys calling significant but obscure jokes to one another across the night. He was feeling fine. The air seemed to have distributed the applejack to all the rusty and unused corners of his body. He bought another pint, stowed it in his hip pocket and walked on board with all the satisfaction, the insouciance of a trans-atlantic traveler.

A girl standing in a group near the gangplank raised her eyes to him as he went past. She was slight and fair. Her mouth curved down and then broke upward as she smiled, half at him, half at the man beside her. Someone made a remark and the group laughed. Once again her glance slipped sideways and met his for an instant as he passed by.

Mr. McVitty was on the top deck with half a dozen other teachers, who moved aside at Bill's breezy approach.

"Good evening, Mr. McVitty. You don't remember me."

"I'm afraid I don't, sir." The principal regarded him with tentative noncommittal eyes.

"Yet I took a trip with you on this same boat, exactly eleven years ago tonight."

"This boat, sir, was only built last year."

"Well, a boat like it," said Bill. "I wouldn't have known the difference myself."

Mr. McVitty made no reply. After a moment Bill continued confidently, "We found that night that we were both sons of John Harvard."

"Yes?"

"In fact on that very day I had been pulling an oar against what I might refer to as dear old Yale."

Mr. McVitty's eyes narrowed. He came closer to Bill and his nose wrinkled slightly.

"Old Eli," said Bill; "in fact, Eli Yale."

"I see," said Mr. McVitty dryly. "And what can I do for you tonight?"

Someone came up with a question and in the enforced silence it occurred to Bill that he was present on the slightest of all pretexts—a previous and unacknowledged acquaintance. He was relieved when a dull rumble and a quiver of the deck indicated that they had left the shore.

Mr. McVitty, disengaged, turned toward him with a slight frown. "I seem to remember you now," he said. "We took three of you aboard from a motor boat and we let you dance. Unfortunately the evening ended in a fight."

Bill hesitated. In eleven years his relation to Mr. McVitty had somehow changed. He recalled Mr. McVitty as a more negligible, more easily dealt with person. There had been no such painful difficulties before.

"Perhaps you wonder how I happen to be here?" he suggested mildly.

"To be frank, I do, Mr—"

"Frothington," supplied Bill, and he added brazenly, "It's rather a sentimental excursion for me. My greatest romance began on the evening you speak of. That was when I first met—my wife."

Mr. McVitty's attention was caught at last. "You married one of our girls?"

Bill nodded. "That's why I wanted to take this trip tonight."

"Your wife's with you?"

"No."

"I don't understand—" He broke off, and suggested gently,

"Or maybe I do. Your wife is dead?"

After a moment Bill nodded. Somewhat to his surprise two great tears rolled suddenly down his face.

Mr. McVitty put his hand on Bill's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "I understand your feeling, Mr. Frothington, and I respect it. Please make yourself at home."

After a nibble at his bottle Bill stood in the door of the salon watching the dance. It might have been eleven years ago. There were the high-school characters that he and Ham and Ellie had laughed at afterward—the fat boy who surely played center on the football team and the adolescent hero with the pompadour and the blatant good manners, president of his class. The pretty girl who had looked at him by the gangplank danced past him, and with a quick lift of his heart he placed her, too; her confidence and the wide but careful distribution of her favors—she was the popular girl, as Mae had been eleven years before.

Next time she went past he touched the shoulder of the boy she was dancing with. "May I have some of this?" he said.

"What?" her partner gasped.

"May I have some of this dance?"

The boy stared at him without relinquishing his hold.

"Oh, it's all right, Red," she said impatiently. "That's the way they do now."

Red stepped sulkily aside. Bill bent his arm as nearly as he could into the tortuous clasp that they were all using, and started.

"I saw you talking to Mr. McVitty," said the girl, looking up into his face with a bright smile. "I don't know you, but I guess it's all right."

"I saw you before that."

"When?"

"Getting on the boat."

"I don't remember."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"May Schaffer. What's the matter?"

"Do you spell it with an e?"

"No; why?"

A quartet of boys had edged toward them. One of its members suddenly shot out as if propelled from inside the group and bumped awkwardly against Bill.

"Can I have part of this dance?" asked the boy with a sort of giggle.

Without enthusiasm Bill let go. When the next dance began he cut in again. She was lovely. Her happiness in herself, in the evening would have transfigured a less pretty girl. He wanted to talk to her alone and was about to suggest that they go outside when there was a repetition of what had happened before—a young man was apparently shot by force from a group to Bill's side.

"Can I have part of this dance?"

Bill joined Mr. McVitty by the rail. "Pleasant evening," he remarked. "Don't you dance?"

"I enjoy dancing," said Mr. McVitty; and he added pointedly, "In my position it doesn't seem quite the thing to dance with young girls."

"That's nonsense," said Bill pleasantly. "Have a drink?"

Mr. McVitty walked suddenly away.

When he danced with May again he was cut in on almost immediately. People were cutting in all over the floor now—evidently he had started something. He cut back, and again he started to suggest that they go outside, but he saw that her attention was held by some horseplay going on across the room.

"I got a swell love nest up in the Bronx," somebody was saying.

"Won't you come outside?" said Bill. "There's the most wonderful moon."

"I'd rather dance."

"We could dance out there."

She leaned away from him and looked up with innocent scorn into his eyes.

"Where'd you get it?" she said.

"Get what?"

"All the happiness."

Before he could answer, someone cut in. For a moment he imagined that the boy had said, "Part of this dance, daddy?" but his annoyance at May's indifference drove the idea from his mind. Next time he went to the point at once.

"I live near here," he said. "I'd be awfully pleased if I could call and drive you over for a week-end sometime."

"What?" she asked vaguely. Again she was listening to a miniature farce being staged in the corner.

"My wife would like so much to have you," went on Bill. Great dreams of what he could do for this girl for old times' sake rose in his mind.

Her head swung toward him curiously. "Why, Mr. McVitty told somebody your wife was dead."

"She isn't," said Bill.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the inevitable catapult coming and danced quickly away from it.

A voice rang out: "Just look at old daddy step."

"Ask him if I can have some of this dance."

Afterward Bill only remembered the evening up to that point. A crowd swirled around him and someone kept demanding persistently who was a young boiler maker.

He decided, naturally enough, to teach them a lesson, as he had done before, and he told them so. Then there was a long discussion as to whether he could swim. After that the confusion deepened; there were blows and a short sharp struggle. He picked up the story himself in what must have been several minutes later, when his head emerged from the cool waters of the Thames River.

The river was white with the moon, which had changed from rosy gold to a wafer of shining cheese on high. It was some time before he could locate the direction of the shore, but he moved around unworried in the water. The boat was a mere speck now, far down the river, and he laughed to think how little it all mattered, how little anything mattered. Then, feeling sure that he had his wind and wondering if the taxi was still waiting at Wheatly Village, he struck out for the dark shore.

#### IV

He was worried as he drew near home next afternoon, possessed of a dark, unfounded fear. It was based, of course, on his own silly transgression. Stella would somehow hear of it. In his reaction from the debonair confidence of last night, it seemed inevitable that Stella would hear of it.

"Who's here?" he asked the butler immediately.

"No one, sir. The Amesese came about an hour ago, but there was no word, so they went on. They said—"

"Isn't my wife here?"

"Mrs. Frothington left yesterday just after you."

The whips of panic descended upon him.

"How long after me?"

"Almost immediately, sir. The telephone rang and she answered it, and almost immediately she had her bag packed and left the house."

"Mr. Ad Haughton didn't come?"



"I haven't seen Mr. Haughton."

It had happened. The spirit of adventure had seized Stella too. He knew that her life had been not without a certain pressure from sentimental men, but that she would ever go anywhere without telling him—

He threw himself face downward on a couch. What had happened? He had never meant things to happen. Was that what she had meant when she had looked at him in that peculiar way the other night?

He went upstairs. Almost as soon as he entered the big bedroom he saw the note, written on blue stationery lest he miss it against the white pillow. In his misery an old counsel of his mother's came back to him: "The more terrible things seem the more you've got to keep yourself in shape."

Trembling, he divested himself of his clothes, turned on a bath and lathered his face. Then he poured himself a drink and shaved. It was like a dream, this change in his life. She was no longer his; even if she came back she was no longer his. Everything was different—this room, himself, everything that had existed yesterday. Suddenly he wanted it back. He got out of the bathtub and knelt down on the bath mat beside it and prayed. He prayed for Stella and himself and Ad Haughton; he prayed crazily for the restoration of his life—the life that he had just as crazily cut in two. When he came out of the bathroom with a towel around him, Ad Haughton was sitting on the bed.

"Hello, Bill. Where's your wife?"

"Just a minute," Bill answered. He went back into the bathroom and swallowed a draught of rubbing alcohol guaranteed to produce violent gastric disturbances. Then he stuck his head out the door casually.

"Mouthful of gargle," he explained. "How are you, Ad? Open that envelope on the pillow and we'll see where she is."

"She's gone to Europe with a dentist. Or rather her dentist is going to Europe, so she had to dash to New York—"

He hardly heard. His mind, released from worry, had drifted off again. There would be a full moon tonight, or almost a full moon. Something had happened under a full moon once. What it was he was unable for the moment to remember.

His long, lanky body, his little lost soul in the universe, sat there on the bathroom window seat.

"I'm probably the world's worst guy," he said, shaking his head at himself in the mirror—"probably the world's worst guy. But I can't help it. At my age you can't fight against what you know you are."

Trying his best to be better, he sat there faithfully for an hour. Then it was twilight and there were voices downstairs, and suddenly there it was, in the sky over his lawn, all the restless longing after fleeing youth in all the world—the bright uncapturable moon.

Notes

The story was written in August 1927 at "Ellerslie," a rented mansion near Wilmington, Delaware. Fitzgerald had returned to America to write

Tender Is the Night, but the work on the novel was interrupted and postponed while he wrote money-making stories.

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