

THE GREAT GATSBY CHAPTER 4

[Nick starts this chapter with rumors about Gatsby. He then goes on to list all the wealthy and famous people who attend Gatsby's parties. He tells us about Klipspringer, a man who lives at Gatsby's house.]

On Sunday morning while church bells rang in the villages alongshore, the world and its mistress returned to Gatsby's house and twinkled hilariously on his lawn.

“He’s a bootlegger,” said the young ladies, moving somewhere between his cocktails and his flowers. “One time he killed a man who had found out that he was nephew to Von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil. Reach me a rose, honey, and pour me a last drop into that there crystal glass.”

Once I wrote down on the empty spaces of a time-table the names of those who came to Gatsby's house that summer. It is an old time-table now, disintegrating at its folds, and headed "This schedule in effect July 5th, 1922." But I can still read the gray names, and they will give you a better impression than my generalities of those who accepted Gatsby's hospitality and paid him the subtle tribute of knowing nothing whatever about him.

A man named Klipspringer was there so often and so long that he became known as “the boarder.”— I doubt if he had any other home. Of theatrical people there were Gus Waize and Horace O’donavan and Lester Meyer and George Duckweed and Francis Bull. Also from New York were the Chromes and the Backhyssons and the Dennickers and Russel Betty and the Corrigans and the Kellehers and the Dewars and the Scullys and S. W. Belcher and the Smirkes and the young Quinns, divorced now, and Henry L. Palmetto, who killed himself by jumping in front of a subway train in Times Square.

[Nick and Gatsby go to the city for lunch; Gatsby tells Nick about his past.]

At nine o'clock, one morning late in July, Gatsby's gorgeous car lurched up the rocky drive to my door and gave out a burst of melody from its three-noted horn. It was the first time he had called on me, though I had gone to two of his parties, mounted in his hydroplane, and, at his urgent invitation, made frequent use of his beach.

“Good morning, old sport. You’re having lunch with me to-day and I thought we’d ride up together.”

He was balancing himself on the dashboard of his car with that resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American — that comes, I suppose, with the absence of lifting work or rigid sitting in youth and, even more, with the formless grace of our nervous, sporadic games. This quality was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness. He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand.

He saw me looking with admiration at his car.

"It's pretty, isn't it, old sport?" He jumped off to give me a better view. "Haven't you ever seen it before?"

I'd seen it. Everybody had seen it. It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns. Sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory, we started to town.

I had talked with him perhaps half a dozen times in the past month and found, to my disappointment, that he had little to say: So my first impression, that he was a person of some undefined consequence, had gradually faded and he had become simply the proprietor of an elaborate road-house next door.

[illegible]

Notes: 1) My children attend school with four girls. They were given the same name in physical person, but they were so identical one with another that it inevitably caused they had been twins before. I have forgotten their names – Jacques, Ethel, or the Canada, or Gloria or July or Anna, and their last names were either the midwestern names (Jewett and Marshall or the western ones of the great American explorers like Crockett, or Prescott, they would call themselves).

In addition to all that I can remember the names of those who came there at least once and the bandster girls and young boys, who had known that they in the war, and Mr. Albrechtberger and Miss Margaret, and James, and Arthur Pitt, Peter and Mr. J. Barrett, once head of the American Legion, and Miss Claude (Pitt), with a name repeated by her daughter, and a price of something, whom we called Duke, and whose name I can't find, and I have forgotten.

All these people came to Gardy's house in the summer.

And then came that disconcerting ride. We hadn't reached West Egg village before Gatsby began leaving his elegant sentences unfinished and slapping himself indecisively on the knee of his caramel-colored suit.

"Look here, old sport," he broke out surprisingly. "What's your opinion of me, anyhow?" A little overwhelmed, I began the generalized evasions which that question deserves.

"Well, I'm going to tell you something about my life," he interrupted. "I don't want you to get a wrong idea of me from all these stories you hear."

So he was aware of the bizarre accusations that flavored conversation in his halls.

"I'll tell you God's truth." His right hand suddenly ordered divine retribution to stand by. "I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West — all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition."

He looked at me sideways — and I knew why Jordan Baker had believed he was lying. He hurried the phrase "educated at Oxford," or swallowed it, or choked on it, as though it had bothered him before. And with this doubt, his whole statement fell to pieces, and I wondered if there wasn't something a little sinister about him, after all.

"What part of the Middle West?" I inquired casually.

"San Francisco."

"I see."

"My family all died and I came into a good deal of money."

His voice was solemn, as if the memory of that sudden extinction of a clan still haunted him. For a moment I suspected that he was pulling my leg, but a glance at him convinced me otherwise.

"After that I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe — Paris, Venice, Rome — collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little, things for myself only, and trying to forget something very sad that had happened to me long ago."

With an effort I managed to restrain my incredulous laughter. The very phrases were worn so threadbare that they evoked no image except that of a turbaned "character," leaking sawdust at every pore as he pursued a tiger through the Bois de Boulogne [*a park in Paris*].

"Then came the war, old sport. It was a great relief, and I tried very hard to die, but I seemed to bear an enchanted life. I accepted a commission as first lieutenant when it began. In the Argonne Forest I took two machine-gun detachments so far forward that there was a half mile gap on either side of us where the infantry couldn't advance. We stayed there two days and two nights, a hundred and thirty men with sixteen Lewis guns, and when the infantry came up at last they found the insignia of three German divisions among the piles of dead. I was promoted to be a major, and every Allied government gave me a decoration — even Montenegro, little Montenegro down on the Adriatic Sea!"

Little Montenegro! He lifted up the words and nodded at them — with his smile. The smile comprehended Montenegro's troubled history and sympathized with the brave struggles of the Montenegrin people. It appreciated fully the chain of national circumstances which had elicited this tribute from Montenegro's warm little heart. My incredulity was submerged in fascination now; it was like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines.

He reached in his pocket, and a piece of metal, slung on a ribbon, fell into my palm.

"That's the one from Montenegro."

To my astonishment, the thing had an authentic look.

"Orderi di Danilo," ran the circular legend, "Montenegro, Nicolas Rex."

By the next autumn she was gay again, gay as ever. She had a debut after the Armistice, and in February she was presumably engaged to a man from New Orleans. In June she married Tom Buchanan of Chicago, with more pomp and circumstance than Louisville ever knew before. He came down with a hundred people in four private cars, and hired a whole floor of the Seelbach Hotel, and the day before the wedding he gave her a string of pearls valued at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

I was bridesmaid. I came into her room half an hour before the bridal dinner, and found her lying on her bed as lovely as the June night in her flowered dress — and as drunk as a monkey. she had a bottle of Sauterne in one hand and a letter in the other.

““Gratulate me,” she muttered. “Never had a drink before, but oh how I do enjoy it.”

“What’s the matter, Daisy?”

I was scared, I can tell you; I’d never seen a girl like that before.

“Here, deares’.” She groped around in a waste-basket she had with her on the bed and pulled out the string of pearls. “Take ’em down-stairs and give ’em back to whoever they belong to. Tell ’em all Daisy’s change’ her mine. Say: ‘Daisy’s change’ her mine!’.”

She began to cry — she cried and cried. I rushed out and found her mother’s maid, and we locked the door and got her into a cold bath. She wouldn’t let go of the letter. She took it into the tub with her and squeezed it up into a wet ball, and only let me leave it in the soap-dish when she saw that it was coming to pieces like snow.

But she didn’t say another word. We gave her spirits of ammonia and put ice on her forehead and hooked her back into her dress, and half an hour later, when we walked out of the room, the pearls were around her neck and the incident was over. Next day at five o’clock she married Tom Buchanan without so much as a shiver, and started off on a three months’ trip to the South Seas.

I saw them in Santa Barbara when they came back, and I thought I’d never seen a girl so mad about her husband. If he left the room for a minute she’d look around uneasily, and say: “Where’s Tom gone?” and wear the most abstracted expression until she saw him coming in the door. She used to sit on the sand with his head in her lap by the hour, rubbing her fingers over his eyes and looking at him with unfathomable delight. It was touching to see them together — it made you laugh in a hushed, fascinated way. That was in August. A week after I left Santa Barbara Tom ran into a wagon on the Ventura road one night, and ripped a front wheel off his car. The girl who was with him got into the papers, too, because her arm was broken — she was one of the chambermaids in the Santa Barbara Hotel.

The next April Daisy had her little girl, and they went to France for a year. I saw them one spring in Cannes, and later in Deauville, and then they came back to Chicago to settle down. Daisy was popular in Chicago, as you know. They moved with a fast crowd, all of them young and rich and wild, but she came out with an absolutely perfect reputation. Perhaps because she doesn’t drink. It’s a great advantage not to drink among hard-drinking people. You can hold your tongue, and, moreover, you can time any little irregularity of your own so that everybody else is so blind that they don’t see or care. Perhaps Daisy never went in for amour at all — and yet there’s something in that voice of hers. . . .

Well, about six weeks ago, she heard the name Gatsby for the first time in years. It was when I asked you — do you remember?— if you knew Gatsby in West Egg. After you had gone home she came into my room and woke me up, and said: “What Gatsby?” and when I described him — I was half asleep — she said in the strangest voice that it must be the man she used to know. It wasn’t until then that I connected this Gatsby with the officer in her white car.

When Jordan Baker had finished telling all this we had left the Plaza for half an hour and were driving my scarlet sports through Central Park. The car had gone down behind the tall apartment of the movie stars to the West Hill, and the clear voices of girls, already gathered like children on the grass, came through the birch foliage of the Black St. Johns. The first thing I saw. At eight, when only six were sitting. How good that I caught—

“It was a strange coincidence,” I said.

“But it wasn’t a coincidence at all.”

“Why not?”

“Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay.”

Then it had not been merely the stars to which he had aspired on that June night. He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor.

“He wants to know,” continued Jordan, “if you’ll invite Daisy to your house some afternoon and then let him come over.”

The modesty of the demand shook me. He had waited five years and bought a mansion where he dispensed starlight to casual moths — so that he could “come over.” some afternoon to a stranger’s garden.

“Did I have to know all this before he could ask such a little thing?”

“He’s afraid, he’s waited so long. He thought you might be offended. You see, he’s a regular tough underneath it all.”

Something worried me.

“Why didn’t he ask you to arrange a meeting?”

“He wants her to see his house,” she explained. “And your house is right next door.”

“Oh!”

“I think he half expected her to wander into one of his parties, some night,” went on Jordan, “but she never did. Then he began asking people casually if they knew her, and I was the first one he found. It was that night he sent for me at his dance, and you should have heard the elaborate way he worked up to it. Of course, I immediately suggested a luncheon in New York — and I thought he’d go mad:

“‘I don’t want to do anything out of the way!’ he kept saying. ‘I want to see her right next door.’”

“When I said you were a particular friend of Tom’s, he started to abandon the whole idea. He doesn’t know very much about Tom, though he says he’s read a Chicago paper for years just on the chance of catching a glimpse of Daisy’s name.”

It was dark now, and as we dipped under a little bridge I put my arm around Jordan’s golden shoulder and drew her toward me and asked her to dinner. Suddenly I wasn’t thinking of Daisy and Gatsby any more, but of this clean, hard, limited person, who dealt in universal scepticism, and who leaned back jauntily just within the circle of my arm. A phrase began to beat in my ears with a sort of heady excitement: “There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired.”

“And Daisy ought to have something in her life,” murmured Jordan to me.

“Does she want to see Gatsby?”

“She’s not to know about it. Gatsby doesn’t want her to know. You’re just supposed to invite her to tea.”

We passed a barrier of dark trees, and then the facade of Fifty-ninth Street, a block of delicate pale light, beamed down into the park. Unlike Gatsby and Tom Buchanan, I had no girl whose disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs, and so I drew up the girl beside me, tightening my arms. Her wan, scornful mouth smiled, and so I drew her up again closer, this time to my face.