

The Great Gatsby Chapter 6

About this time an ambitious young reporter from New York arrived one morning at Gatsby's door and asked him if he had anything to say.

"Anything to say about what?" inquired Gatsby politely.

"Why — any statement to give out."

It transpired after a confused five minutes that the man had heard Gatsby's name around his office in a connection which he either wouldn't reveal or didn't fully understand. This was his day off and with laudable initiative he had hurried out "to see."

It was a random shot, and yet the reporter's instinct was right. Gatsby's notoriety, spread about by the hundreds who had accepted his hospitality and so become authorities on his past, had increased all summer until he fell just short of being news. Contemporary legends such as the "underground pipe-line to Canada." attached themselves to him, and there was one persistent story that he didn't live in a house at all, but in a boat that looked like a house and was moved secretly up and down the Long Island shore. Just why these inventions were a source of satisfaction to James Gatz of North Dakota, isn't easy to say.

James Gatz — that was really, or at least legally, his name. He had changed it at the age of seventeen and at the specific moment that witnessed the beginning of his career — when he saw Dan Cody's yacht drop anchor over the most insidious flat on Lake Superior. It was James Gatz who had been loafing along the beach that afternoon in a torn green jersey and a pair of canvas pants, but it was already Jay Gatsby who borrowed a rowboat, pulled out to the Tuolomee, and informed Cody that a wind might catch him and break him up in half an hour.

I suppose he'd had the name ready for a long time, even then. His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people — his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God — a phrase which, if it

means anything, means just that — and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.

[In a nutshell: Nick notes that newspaper reporters soon started to spear at Gatsby's home to try to interview him. He then gives Gatsby's biographical details, the truth behind both the public rumors and Gatsby's own claims: born Jay Gatz on a farm in North Dakota around 1900; changed his name to Jay Gatsby at age 17; spends more than a year on the south shore of Lake Superior clamming and fishing; attends and drops out of St. Olaf College in southern Minnesota after two weeks; meets Dan Coy, a fifty year old multimillionaire expert in mining and precious metals, and ends up as his assistant for five years aboard the Tuolomee, Cody's boat; Cody dies and leaves Gatsby \$25,000, which he never receives due to a legal technicality; Gatsby dedicates himself to becoming rich and successful.]

[For a few weeks, Nick doesn't see Gatsby. Then, one afternoon, Gatsby turns up at his house. A few moments later, Tom Buchanan also shows up unexpectedly with some friends, the Sloanes. Gatsby tells Tom that he knows his wife, and invites Tom and his friends to stay for dinner. They say they can't stay, but invite Gatsby to dinner. Gatsby doesn't realize that the invitation was just to be polite, and accepts.]

[Tom and Daisy go to a party at Gatsby's.]

Tom was evidently perturbed at Daisy's running around alone, for on the following Saturday night he came with her to Gatsby's party. Perhaps his presence gave the evening its peculiar quality of oppressiveness — it stands out in my memory from Gatsby's other parties that summer. There were the same people, or at least the same sort of people, the same profusion of champagne, the same

many-colored, many-keyed commotion, but I felt an unpleasantness in the air, a pervading harshness that hadn't been there before. Or perhaps I had merely grown used to it, grown to accept West Egg as a world complete in itself, with its own standards and its own great figures, second to nothing because it had no consciousness of being so, and now I was looking at it again, through Daisy's eyes. It is invariably saddening to look through new eyes at things upon which you have expended your own powers of adjustment.

They arrived at twilight, and, as we strolled out among the sparkling hundreds, Daisy's voice was playing murmurous tricks in her throat.

"These things excite me so," she whispered.

"If you want to kiss me any time during the evening, Nick, just let me know and I'll be glad to arrange it for you. Just mention my name. Or present a green card. I'm giving out green ——"

"Look around," suggested Gatsby.

"I'm looking around. I'm having a marvelous ——"

"You must see the faces of many people you've heard about."

Tom's arrogant eyes roamed the crowd.

"We don't go around very much," he said. "In fact, I was just thinking I don't know a soul here."

"Perhaps you know that lady." Gatsby indicated a gorgeous, scarcely human orchid of a woman who sat in state under a white plum tree. Tom and Daisy stared, with that peculiarly unreal feeling that accompanies the recognition of a hitherto ghostly celebrity of the movies.

"She's lovely," said Daisy.

"The man bending over her is her director."

He took them ceremoniously from group to group:

"Mrs. Buchanan . . . and Mr. Buchanan ——" After an instant's

hesitation he added: "the polo player."

"Oh no," objected Tom quickly, "not me."

But evidently the sound of it pleased Gatsby, for Tom remained "the polo player." for the rest of the evening.

"I've never met so many celebrities!" Daisy exclaimed. "I liked that man — what was his name?— with the sort of blue nose."

Gatsby identified him, adding that he was a small producer.

"Well, I liked him anyhow."

"I'd a little rather not be the polo player," said Tom pleasantly, "I'd rather look at all these famous people in — in oblivion."

Daisy and Gatsby danced. I remember being surprised by his graceful, conservative fox-trot — I had never seen him dance before. Then they sauntered over to my house and sat on the steps for half an hour, while at her request I remained watchfully in the garden. "In case there's a fire or a flood," she explained, "or any act of God."

Tom appeared from his oblivion as we were sitting down to supper together. "Do you mind if I eat with some people over here?" he said. "A fellow's getting off some funny stuff."

"Go ahead," answered Daisy genially, "and if you want to take down any addresses here's my little gold pencil." . . . she looked around after a moment and told me the girl was "common but pretty," and I knew that except for the half-hour she'd been alone with Gatsby she wasn't having a good time.

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Almost the last thing I remember was standing with Daisy and watching the moving-picture director and his Star. They were still under the white plum tree and their faces were touching except for a pale, thin ray of moonlight between. It occurred to me that he had been very slowly bending toward her all evening to attain this proximity, and even while I watched I saw him stoop one ultimate degree and kiss

at her cheek.

“I like her,” said Daisy, “I think she’s lovely.”

I sat on the front steps with them while they waited for their car. It was dark here in front; only the bright door sent ten square feet of light volleying out into the soft black morning. Sometimes a shadow moved against a dressing-room blind above, gave way to another shadow, an indefinite procession of shadows, who rouged and powdered in an invisible glass.

“Who is this Gatsby anyhow?” demanded Tom suddenly. “Some big bootlegger?”

“Where’d you hear that?” I inquired.

“I didn’t hear it. I imagined it. A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know.”

“Not Gatsby,” I said shortly.

He was silent for a moment. The pebbles of the drive crunched under his feet.

“Well, he certainly must have strained himself to get this menagerie together.”

A breeze stirred the gray haze of Daisy’s fur collar.

“At least they’re more interesting than the people we know,” she said with an effort.

“You didn’t look so interested.”

“Well, I was.”

“Lots of people come who haven’t been invited,” she said suddenly.

“That girl hadn’t been invited. They simply force their way in and he’s too polite to object.”

“I’d like to know who he is and what he does,” insisted Tom. “And I think I’ll make a point of finding out.”

“I can tell you right now,” she answered. “He owned some drug-stores, a lot of drug-stores. He built them up himself.”

The dilatory limousine came rolling up the drive.

“Good night, Nick,” said Daisy.

The glasses fell on and caught the lighted top of the new Gatsby. There O’clock in the morning, came, and later, under the open door. After all, in the new Gatsby of Gatsby’s party there were certainly possibilities usually absent from her world. What was it up there in the way that seemed to be calling her back inside? What would happen now in the day, the doable hour? Perhaps some of the things that were most alive, a person infinitely old and to be remembered as, were automatically taking young girl who took her fresh place as Gatsby’s one moment of angelic existence. Would there not then the year of answering to him.

I stayed late that night, Gatsby asked me to wait until he was free, and I lingered in the garden until the inevitable swimming party had run up, chilled and exalted, from the black beach, until the lights were extinguished in the guest-rooms overhead. When he came down the steps at last the tanned skin was drawn unusually tight on his face, and his eyes were bright and tired.

“She didn’t like it,” he said immediately.

“Of course she did.”

“She didn’t like it,” he insisted. “She didn’t have a good time.”

He was silent, and I guessed at his unutterable depression.

“I feel far away from her,” he said. “It’s hard to make her understand.”

“You mean about the dance?”

“The dance?” He dismissed all the dances he had given with a snap of his fingers. “Old sport, the dance is unimportant.”

He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: “I never loved you.” After she had obliterated four years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken. One of them was that, after she was free, they were to go back to Louisville and be married from her house — just as if it were five years ago.

“And she doesn’t understand,” he said. “She used to be able to understand. We’d sit for hours ——”

He broke off and began to walk up and down a desolate path of fruit rinds and discarded favors and crushed flowers.

“I wouldn’t ask too much of her,” I ventured. “You can’t repeat the past.”

“Can’t repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. “Why of course you can!”

He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand.

“I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before,” he said, nodding determinedly. “She’ll see.”

He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was. . . .

. . . One autumn night, five years before, they had been walking down the street when the leaves were falling, and they came to a place where there were no trees and the sidewalk was white with moonlight. They stopped here and turned toward each other. Now it was a cool night with that mysterious excitement in it which comes at the two changes

of the year. The quiet lights in the houses were humming out into the darkness and there was a stir and bustle among the stars. Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees — he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder.

His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy’s white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips’ touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete.

Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something — an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man’s, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever.