

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76973-0 - The Basil, Josephine, and Gwen Stories

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Excerpt

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THE BASIL STORIES

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THAT KIND OF PARTY

After the party was over a top-lofty Stevens-Duryea and two 1909 Maxwells waited with a single Victoria at the curb—the boys watched as the Stevens filled with a jovial load of little girls and roared away. Then they strung down the street in threes and fours, some of them riotous, others silent and thoughtful. Even for the always surprised ages of ten and eleven, when the processes of assimilation race hard to keep abreast of life, it had been a notable afternoon.

So thought Basil Duke Lee, by occupation actor, athlete, scholar, philatelist and collector of cigar bands. He was so exalted that all his life he would remember vividly coming out of the house, the feel of the spring evening, the way that Dolly Bartlett walked to the auto and looked back at him, pert, exultant and glowing. What he felt was like fright—appropriately enough, for one of the major compulsions had just taken its place in his life. Fool for love was Basil from now, and not just at a distance but as one who had been summoned and embraced, one who had tasted with a piercing delight and had become an addict within an hour. Two questions were in his mind as he approached his house—how long had this been going on, and when was he liable to encounter it again?

His mother greeted a rather pale, dark-headed little boy with the bluest of eyes and thin keen features. How was he? He was all right. Did he have a good time at the Gilrays'? It was all right. Would he tell her about it? There was nothing to tell.

"Wouldn't you like to have a party, Basil?" she suggested. "You've been to so many."

"No, I wouldn't, Mother."

"Just think—ten boys and ten little girls, and ice cream and cake and games."

"What games?" he asked, not faintly considering a party but from reflex action to the word.

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“Oh, Euchre or Hearts or Authors.”

“They don’t have that.”

“What do they have?”

“Oh, they just fool around. But I don’t want to have a party.”

Yet suddenly the patent disadvantages of having girls in his own house and bringing into contact the worlds within and without—like indelicately tearing down the front wall—were challenged by his desire to be close to Dolly Bartlett again.

“Could we just be alone without anybody around?” he asked.

“Why, I wouldn’t bother you,” said Mrs. Lee. “I’d simply get things started, then leave you.”

“That’s the way they all do.” But Basil remembered that several ladies had been there all afternoon, and it would be absolutely unthinkable if his mother were anywhere at hand.

At dinner the subject came up again.

“Tell Father what you did at the Gilrays’,” his mother said. “You must remember.”

“Of course I do, but—”

“I’m beginning to think you played kissing games,” Mr. Lee guessed casually.

“Oh, they had a crazy game they called Clap-in-and-clap-out,” said Basil indiscreetly.

“What’s that?”

“Well, all the boys go out and they say somebody has a letter. No, that’s Post-Office. Anyhow they have to come in and guess who sent for them.” Hating himself for the disloyalty to the great experience, he tried to end with: “—and then they kneel down and if he’s wrong they clap him out of the room. Can I have some more gravy please?”

“But what if he’s right?”

“Oh, he’s supposed to hug them,” Basil mumbled. It sounded so shameful—it had been so lovely.

“All of them?”

“No, only one.”

“So that’s the kind of party you wanted,” said his mother, somewhat shocked. “Oh, Basil.”

“I did not,” he protested, “I didn’t say I wanted that.”

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“But you didn’t want me to be there.”

“I’ve met Gilray downtown,” said Mr. Lee. “A rather ordinary fellow from upstate.”

This sniffishness toward a diversion that had been popular in Washington’s day at Mount Vernon was the urban attitude toward the folkways of rural America. As Mr. Lee intended, it had an effect on Basil, but not the effect counted on. It caused Basil, who suddenly needed a pliable collaborator, to decide upon a boy named Joe Shoonover, whose family were newcomers in the city. He bicycled over to Joe’s house immediately after dinner.

His proposition was that Joe ought to give a party right away and, instead of having just a few kissing games, have them steadily all afternoon, scarcely pausing for a bite to eat. Basil painted the orgy in brutal but glowing colors:

“Of course you can have Gladys. And then when you get tired of her you can ask for Kitty or anybody you want, and they’ll ask for you too. Oh, it’ll be wonderful!”

“Supposing somebody else asked for Dolly Bartlett.”

“Oh, don’t be a poor fool.”

“I’ll bet you’d just go jump in the lake and drown yourself.”

“I would not.”

“You would too.”

This was poignant talk but there was the practical matter of asking Mrs. Shoonover. Basil waited outside in the dusk till Joe returned.

“Mother says all right.”

“Say, she won’t care what we do, will she?”

“Why should she?” asked Joe innocently. “I told her about it this afternoon and she just laughed.”

Basil’s schooling was at Mrs. Cary’s Academy, where he idled through interminable dull grey hours. He guessed that there was little to learn there and his resentment frequently broke forth in insolence, but on the morning of Joe Shoonover’s party he was simply a quiet lunatic at his desk, asking only to be undisturbed.

“So the capital of America is Washington,” said Miss Cole, “and the capital of Canada is Ottawa—and the capital of Central America—”

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“—is Mexico City,” someone guessed.

“Hasn’t any,” said Basil absently.

“Oh, it must have a capital,” said Miss Cole looking at her map.

“Well, it doesn’t happen to have one.”

“That’ll do, Basil. Put down Mexico City for the capital of Central America. Now that leaves South America.”

Basil sighed.

“There’s no use teaching us wrong,” he suggested.

Ten minutes later, somewhat frightened, he reported to the principal’s office where all the forces of injustice were confusingly arrayed against him.

“What you think doesn’t matter,” said Mrs. Cary. “Miss Cole is your teacher and you were impertinent. Your parents would want to hear about it.”

He was glad his father was away, but if Mrs. Cary telephoned, his mother would quite possibly keep him home from the party. With this wretched fate hanging over him he left the school gate at noon and was assailed by the voice of Albert Moore, son of his mother’s best friend, and thus a likely enemy.

Albert enlarged upon the visit to the principal and the probable consequences at home. Basil thereupon remarked that Albert, due to his spectacles, possessed four visual organs. Albert retorted as to Basil’s pretention to universal wisdom. Brusque references to terrified felines and huge paranoiacs enlivened the conversation and presently there was violent weaving and waving during which Basil quite accidentally butted into Albert’s nose. Blood flowed—Albert howled with anguish and terror, believing that his life blood was dripping down over his yellow tie. Basil started away, stopped, pulled out his handkerchief and threw it toward Albert as a literal sop, then resumed his departure from the horrid scene, up back alleys and over fences, running from his crime. Half an hour later he appeared at Joe Shoonover’s back door and had the cook announce him.

“What’s the matter?” asked Joe.

“I didn’t go home. I had a fight with Albert Moore.”

“Gosh. Did he take off his glasses?”

“No, why?”

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“It’s a penitentiary offense to hit anybody with glasses. Say, I’ve got to finish lunch.”

Basil sat wretchedly on a box in the alley until Joe appeared, with news appropriate to a darkening world.

“I don’t know about the kissing games,” he said. “Mother said it was silly.”

With difficulty Basil wrested his mind from the spectre of reform school.

“I wish she’d get sick,” he said absently.

“Don’t you say that about my mother.”

“I mean I wish her sister would get sick,” he corrected himself. “Then she couldn’t come to the party.”

“I wish that too,” reflected Joe. “Not very sick though.”

“Why don’t you call her up and tell her her sister is sick.”

“She lives in Tonawanda. She’d send a telegram—she did once.”

“Let’s go ask Fats Palmer about a telegram.”

Fats Palmer, son of the block’s janitor, was a messenger boy, several years older than themselves, a cigarette smoker and a blasphemer. He refused to deliver a forged telegram because he might lose his job but for a quarter he would furnish a blank and get one of his small sisters to deliver it. Cash down in advance.

“I think I can get it,” said Basil thoughtfully.

They waited for him outside an apartment house a few squares away. He was gone ten minutes—when he came out he wore a fatigued expression and after showing a quarter in his palm sat on the curbstone for a moment, his mouth tightly shut, and waved them silent.

“Who gave it to you, Basil?”

“My aunt,” he muttered faintly, and then: “It was an egg.”

“What egg?”

“Raw egg.”

“Did you sell some eggs?” demanded Fats Palmer. “Say, I know where you can get eggs—”

Basil groaned.

“I had to eat it raw. She’s a health fiend.”

“Why, that’s the easiest money I ever heard of,” said Fats. “I’ve sucked eggs—”

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“Don’t!” begged Basil, but it was too late. That was an egg without therapeutic value—an egg sacrificed for love.

II

This is the telegram Basil wrote:

Am sick but not so badly could you come at once please

Your loving sister

By four o’clock Basil still knew academically that he had a family, but they lived a long way off in a distant past. He knew also that he had sinned, and for a time he had walked an alley saying “Now I lay me’s” over and over for worldly mercy in the matter of Albert Moore’s spectacles. The rest could wait until he was found out, preferably after death.

Four o’clock found him with Joe in the Shoonover’s pantry where they had chosen to pass the last half hour, deriving a sense of protection from the servants’ presence in the kitchen. Mrs. Shoonover had gone, the guests were due—and as at a signal agreed upon the doorbell and the phone pealed out together.

“There they are,” Joe whispered.

“If it’s my family,” said Basil hoarsely, “tell them I’m not here.”

“It’s not your family—it’s the people for the party.”

“The phone I mean.”

“You’d better answer it.” Joe opened the door to the kitchen. “Didn’t you hear the doorbell, Irma?”

“There’s cake dough on my hands and Essie’s too. You go, Joe.”

“No, I certainly will not.”

“Then they’ll have to wait. Can’t you two boys walk?”

Once again the double summons, emphatic and alarming, rang through the house.

“Joe, you got to tell my family I’m not here,” said Basil tensely.

“I can’t say I’m not here, can I? It’ll only take a minute to tell them. Just say I’m not here.”

“We’ve got to go to the door. Do you want all the people to go home?”

“No, I don’t. But you simply got to—”

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Irma came out of the kitchen wiping her hands.

“My sakes alive,” she said. “Why don’t you tend the door before the children get away?”

They both talked at once, utterly confused. Irma broke the deadlock by picking up the phone.

“Hello,” she said. “Keep quiet Basil, I can’t hear. Hello—hello. . . . Nobody’s on that phone now. You better brush your hair, Basil—and look at your hands!”

Basil rushed for the sink and worked hastily with the kitchen soap.

“Where’s a comb?” he yelled. “Joe, where’s your comb?”

“Upstairs, of course.”

Still wet Basil dashed up the back stairs, realizing only at the mirror that he looked exactly like a boy who had spent most of the day in the alley. Hurriedly he dug for a clean shirt of Joe’s; as he buttoned it a wail floated up the front stairs—

“Basil, they’ve gone. There’s nobody at the door—they’ve gone home.”

Overwhelmed, the boys rushed out on the porch. Far down the street two small figures receded. Cupping their hands Basil and Joe shouted. The figures stopped, turned around—then suddenly they were joined by other figures, a lot of figures: a Victoria drove around the corner and clopped up to the house. The party had begun.

At the sight of Dolly Bartlett, Basil’s heart rose chokingly and he wanted to be away. She was not anyone he knew, certainly not the girl about whom he put his arms a week ago. He stared as at a spectre. He had never known what she looked like, perceiving her almost as an essence of time and weather—if there was frost and elation in the air she was frost and elation, if there was a mystery in yellow windows on a summer night she was that mystery, if there was music that could inspire or sadden or excite she was that music. She was “Red Wing” and “Alice, Where Art Thou?” and the “Light of the Silvery Moon.”

To cooler observers Dolly’s hair was child’s gold in knotted pigtails, her face was as regular and as cute as a kitten’s, and her legs were neatly crossed at the ankles or dangled helplessly from a chair. She was so complete at ten, so confident and alive, that she

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was many boys' girl—a precocious mistress of the long look, the sustained smile, the private voice and the delicate touch, devices of the generations.

With the other guests Dolly looked about for the hostess and finding none infiltrated into the drawing room to stand about whispering and laughing in nervous chorus. The boys also grouped for protection, save two unselfconscious minims of eight who took advantage of their elders' shyness to show off, with dashings about and raucous laughter. Minutes passed and nothing happened; Joe and Basil communicated in hissing whispers, their lips scarcely moving.

"You ought to start it," muttered Basil.

"You start it. It was your scheme."

"It's your party, and we might just as well go home as stand around here all afternoon. Why don't you just say we're going to play it and then choose somebody to go out of the room."

Joe stared at him incredulously.

"Big chance! Let's get one of the girls to start it. You ask Dolly."

"I will not."

"How about Martha Robbie?"

Martha was a tomboy who had no terrors for them, and no charm; it was like asking a sister. They took her aside.

"Martha, look, would you tell the girls that we're going to play Post-Office?"

Martha drew herself away in a violent manner.

"Why, I certainly will not," she cried sternly. "I most certainly won't do any such thing."

To prove it she ran back to the girls and set about telling them.

"Dolly, what do you think Basil asked me. He wanted to—"

"Shut *up!*" Basil begged her.

"—play Post—"

"Shut up! We didn't want anything of the sort."

There was an arrival. Up the verandah steps came a wheel chair, hoisted by a chauffeur, and in it sat Carpenter Moore, elder brother of that Albert Moore from whom Basil had drawn blood this morning. Once inside Carpenter dismissed the chauffeur and rolled himself deftly into the party, looking about him arrogantly.