

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40234-7 - This Side of Paradise: F. Scott Fitzgerald

Edited by James L. W. West III

Excerpt

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BOOK ONE

THE ROMANTIC EGOTIST

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CHAPTER I

AMORY, SON OF BEATRICE

Amory Blaine inherited from his mother every trait, except the stray inexpressible few, that made him worth while. His father, an ineffectual, inarticulate man with a taste for Byron and a habit of drowsing over the “Encyclopædia Britannica,” grew wealthy at thirty through the deaths of two elder brothers, successful Chicago brokers, and in the first flush of feeling that the world was his, went to Bar Harbor and met Beatrice O’Hara. In consequence, Stephen Blaine handed down to posterity his height of just under six feet and his tendency to waver at crucial moments, these two abstractions appearing in his son Amory. For many years he hovered in the background of his family’s life, an unassertive figure with a face half-obliterated by lifeless, silky hair, continually occupied in “taking care” of his wife, continually harassed by the idea that he didn’t and couldn’t understand her.

But Beatrice Blaine! There *was* a woman! Early pictures taken on her father’s estate at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, or in Rome at the Sacred Heart Convent—an educational extravagance that in her youth was only for the daughters of the exceptionally wealthy—showed the exquisite delicacy of her features, the consummate art and simplicity of her clothes. A brilliant education she had—her youth passed in renaissance glory; she was versed in the latest gossip of the Older Roman Families; known by name as a fabulously wealthy American girl to Cardinal Vitori and Queen Margherita and more subtle celebrities that one must have had some culture even to have heard of. She learned in England to prefer whiskey and soda to wine, and her small talk was broadened, in two senses, during a winter in Vienna. All in all Beatrice O’Hara absorbed the sort of education that will be quite impossible ever again, a tutelage measured by the number of things and people one could be contemptuous of and charming about, a culture rich in all arts and traditions, barren of all ideas, in the last of those days

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when the great gardener clipped the inferior roses to produce one perfect bud.

In her less important moments she returned to America, met Stephen Blaine and married him—this almost entirely because she was a little bit weary, a little bit sad. Her only child was carried through a tiresome season and brought into the world on a spring day in ninety-six.

When Amory was five he was already a delightful companion for her. He was an auburn-haired boy with great handsome eyes which he would grow up to in time, a facile, imaginative mind and a taste for fancy dress. From his fourth to his tenth year he *did* the country with his mother in her father's private car, from Coronado, where his mother became so bored that she had a nervous breakdown in a fashionable hotel, down to Mexico City, where she took a mild, almost epidemic consumption. This trouble pleased her, and later she made use of it as an intrinsic part of her *atmosphere*—especially after several astounding bracers.

So while more or less fortunate little rich boys were defying governesses on the beach at Newport or being spanked or tutored or read to from "Do and Dare," or "Frank on the Lower Mississippi," Amory was biting acquiescent bell-boys in the Waldorf, outgrowing a natural repugnance to chamber music and symphonies, and deriving a highly specialized education from his mother.

"Amory."

"Yes, Beatrice." (Such a quaint name for his mother; she encouraged it.)

"Dear, don't *think* of getting out of bed yet. I've always suspected that early rising in early life makes one nervous. Clothilde is having your breakfast brought up."

"All right."

"I am feeling very old today, Amory," she would sigh, her face a rare cameo of pathos, her voice exquisitely modulated, her hands as facile as Bernhardt's. "My nerves are on edge—on edge. We must leave this terrifying place tomorrow and go searching for sunshine."

Amory's penetrating green eyes would look out through tangled hair at his mother. Even at this age he had no illusions about her.

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[More information](#)*Amory, Son of Beatrice*

13

“Amory.”

“Oh, yes.”

“I want you to take a red-hot bath—as hot as you can bear it, and just relax your nerves. You can read in the tub if you wish.”

She fed him sections of the “Fêtes Galantes” before he was ten; at eleven he could talk glibly, if rather reminiscently, of Brahms and Mozart and Beethoven. One afternoon when left alone in the hotel at Hot Springs he sampled his mother’s apricot cordial, and as the taste pleased him he became quite tipsy. This was fun for awhile, but he essayed a cigarette in his exaltation—and succumbed to a vulgar, plebeian reaction. Though this incident horrified Beatrice, it also secretly amused her and became part of what in a later generation would have been termed her “line.”

“This son of mine,” he heard her tell a room full of awe-struck, admiring women one day, “is entirely sophisticated and quite charming—but delicate—we’re all delicate; *here*, you know.” Her hand was radiantly outlined against her beautiful bosom; then sinking her voice to a whisper, she told them of the apricot cordial. They rejoiced, for she was a brave raconteuse, but many were the keys turned in sideboard locks that night against the possible defection of little Bobby or Barbara. . . .

These domestic pilgrimages were invariably in state: two maids, the private car, or Mr. Blaine when available, and, very often, a physician. When Amory had the whooping cough four disgusted specialists glared at each other hunched around his bed; when he took scarlet fever the number of attendants, including physicians and nurses, totalled fourteen. However, blood being thicker than broth, he was pulled through.

The Blaines were attached to no city. They were the Blaines-of-Lake-Geneva; they had quite enough relatives to serve in place of friends, and an enviable standing from Pasadena to Cape Cod. But Beatrice grew more and more prone to like only new acquaintances, as there were certain stories, such as the history of her constitution and its many amendments, and her memories of her years abroad, that it was necessary for her to repeat at regular intervals. Like Freudian dreams they must be thrown off, else they would sweep in and lay siege to her nerves.

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Beatrice was critical about American women, especially the floating population of ex-Westerners.

“They have accents, my dear,” she told Amory. “Not Southern accents or Boston accents, not an accent attached to any locality, just accent”—she became dreamy. “They pick up old, moth-eaten London accents that are down on their luck and have to be used by someone. They talk as an English butler might after several years in a Chicago grand opera company.” She became almost incoherent— “Suppose—time in every Western woman’s life—she feels her husband is prosperous enough for her to have—accent—they try to impress *me*, my dear—”

Though she thought of her body as a mass of frailties, she considered her soul quite as ill, and therefore important in her life. She had once been a Catholic, but discovering that priests were infinitely more attentive when she was in process of losing or regaining faith in Mother Church, she maintained an enchantingly wavering attitude. Often she deplored the bourgeois quality of the American Catholic clergy and was quite sure that had she lived in the shadow of the great Continental cathedrals her soul would still be a thin flame on the mighty altar of Rome. Still, next to doctors, priests were her favorite sport.

“Ah, Bishop Wiston,” she would declare, “I do not *want* to talk of myself. I can imagine the stream of hysterical women fluttering at your doors, *beseeking* you to be *simpatico*”—then after an interlude filled by the clergyman—“but my mood—is—oddly dissimilar.”

Only to bishops and above did she divulge her clerical romance. When she had first returned to her country there had been a pagan, Swinburnian young man in Asheville, for whose passionate kisses and unsentimental conversation she had taken a decided penchant—they had discussed the matter pro and con with an intellectual romancing quite devoid of sopiness. Eventually she had decided to marry for background, and the young pagan from Asheville had gone through a spiritual crisis, joined the Catholic Church, and was now—Monsignor Darcy.

“Indeed, Mrs. Blaine, he is still delightful company—quite the cardinal’s right-hand man.”

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15

Amory will go to him one day, I know," breathed the beautiful lady, "and Monsignor Darcy will understand him as he understood me."

Amory became thirteen, rather tall and slender and more than ever *on* to his Celtic mother. He had tutored occasionally—the idea being that he was to “keep up,” at each place “taking up the work where he left off,” yet as no tutor ever found the place he left off, his mind was still in very good shape. What a few more years of this life would have made of him is problematical. However, four hours out from land, Italy bound, with Beatrice, his appendix burst, probably from too many meals in bed, and after a series of frantic telegrams to Europe and America, to the amazement of the passengers the great ship slowly wheeled around and returned to New York to deposit Amory at the pier. You will admit that if it was not life it was magnificent.

After the operation Beatrice had a nervous breakdown that bore a suspicious resemblance to delirium tremens, and Amory was left in Minneapolis, destined to spend the ensuing two years with his aunt and uncle. There the crude, vulgar air of Western civilization first catches him—in his underwear, so to speak.

A KISS FOR AMORY.

His lip curled when he read it.

“I am going to have a bobbing party,” it said, *“on Thursday, December the seventeenth, at five o’clock, and I would like it very much if you could come.”*

Yours Truly,

R.S.V.P.

Myra St. Claire.”

He had been two months in Minneapolis, and his chief struggle had been the concealing from “the other guys at school” how particularly superior he felt himself to be, yet this conviction was built upon shifting sands. He had shown off one day in French class (he was in senior French class) to the utter confusion of Mr. Reardon, whose accent Amory damned contemptuously, and to the delight of the class. Mr. Reardon, who had spent several weeks in Paris ten

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years before, took his revenge on the verbs, whenever he had his book open. But another time Amory showed off in history class, with quite disastrous results, for the boys there were his own age, and they shrilled innuendoes at each other all the following week:

“Aw—I b’lieve, doncherknow, the Umuricun revolution was *lawgely* an affair of the middul *clawses*,” or

“Washington came of very good blood—aw, quite good—I b’lieve.”

Amory ingeniously tried to retrieve himself by blundering on purpose. Two years before he had commenced a history of the United States which, though it only got as far as the Colonial Wars, had been pronounced by his mother completely enchanting.

His chief disadvantage lay in athletics, but as soon as he discovered that it was the touchstone of power and popularity at school, he began to make furious, persistent efforts to excel in the winter sports, and with his ankles aching and bending in spite of his efforts, he skated valiantly around the Lorelei rink every afternoon, wondering how soon he would be able to carry a hockey-stick without getting it inexplicably tangled in his skates.

The invitation to Miss Myra St. Claire’s bobbing party spent the morning in his coat pocket, where it had an intense physical affair with a dusty piece of peanut brittle. During the afternoon he brought it to light with a sigh, and after some consideration and a preliminary draft in the back of “Collar and Daniell’s First Year Latin,” composed an answer:

My dear Miss St. Claire,;—

Your truly charming invitation for the evening of next Thursday evening was truly delightful to recieve this morning. I will be charm and enchanted indeed to present my compliments on next Thursday evening.

Faithfully,

Amory Blaine.

On Thursday, therefore, he walked pensively along the slippery, shovel-scraped sidewalks and came in sight of Myra’s house on the half-hour after five, a lateness which he fancied his mother would have favored. He waited on the doorstep with his eyes nonchalantly half-closed and planned his entrance with precision. He would cross

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17

the floor, not too hastily, to Mrs. St. Claire, and say with exactly the correct modulation:

“My dear Mrs. St. Claire, I’m *frightfully* sorry to be late, but my maid”—he paused there and realized he would be quoting—“but my uncle and I had to see a fella—— Yes, I’ve met your enchanting daughter at dancing-school.”

Then he would shake hands, using that slight, half-foreign bow with all the starchy little females, and nod to the fellas who would be standing ’round paralyzed into rigid groups for mutual protection.

A butler (one of the three in Minneapolis) swung open the door. Amory stepped inside and divested himself of cap and coat. He was mildly surprised not to hear the shrill squawk of conversation from the next room, and he decided it must be quite formal. He approved of that—as he approved of the butler.

“Miss Myra,” he said.

To his surprise the butler grinned horribly.

“Oh Yeah,” he declared. “She’s here.” He was unaware that his failure to be cockney was ruining his standing.

Amory considered him coldly.

“But,” continued the butler, his voice rising unnecessarily, “she’s the only one what *is* here. The party’s gone.”

Amory gaped in sudden horror.

“What?”

“She’s been waitin’ for Amory Blaine. That’s you, ain’t it? Her mother says that if you showed up by five-thirty you two was to go after ’em in the Packard.”

Amory’s despair was crystallized by the appearance of Myra herself, bundled to the ears in a polo coat, her face plainly sulky, her voice pleasant only with difficulty.

“’Lo, Amory.”

“’Lo, Myra.” He had described the state of his vitality.

“Well—you *got* here, *anyways*.”

“Well—I’ll tell you. I guess you don’t know about the auto accident,” he romanced.

Myra’s eyes opened wide.

“Who was it to?”

“Well,” he continued desperately, “Uncle ’n Aunt ’n I.”

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“Was anyone *killed*?”

Amory paused and then nodded.

“Your uncle?”—alarm.

“Oh, no—just a horse—a sorta grey horse.”

At this point the Erse butler snickered.

“Probably killed the engine,” he suggested. Amory would have put him on the rack without a scruple.

“We’ll go now,” said Myra coolly. “You see, Amory, the bobs were ordered for five and everybody was here, so we couldn’t wait—”

“Well, I couldn’t help it, could I?”

“—so Mama said for me to wait till ha’past five. We’ll catch the bob before it gets to the Minnehaha Club, Amory.”

Amory’s shredded poise dropped from him. He pictured the happy party jingling along snowy streets, the appearance of the limousine, the horrible public descent of him and Myra before sixty reproachful eyes, his apology—a real one this time. He sighed aloud.

“What?” inquired Myra.

“Nothing. I was just yawning. Are we going to *surely* catch up with ’em before they get there?” He was encouraging a faint hope that they might slip into the Minnehaha Club and meet the others there, be found in blasé seclusion before the fire and quite regain his lost attitude.

“Oh, sure Mike, we’ll catch ’em all right—let’s hurry.”

He became conscious of his stomach. As they stepped into the machine he hurriedly slapped the paint of diplomacy over a rather box-like plan he had conceived. It was based upon some “trade-lasts” gleaned at dancing school, to the effect that he was “awful good-looking and *English*, sort of.”

“Myra,” he said, lowering his voice and choosing his words carefully, “I beg a thousand pardons. Can you ever forgive me?”

She regarded him gravely, his intent green eyes, his mouth, that to her thirteen-year-old, Arrow-collar taste was the quintessence of romance. Yes, Myra could forgive him very easily.

“Why—yes—sure.”