

*Adpec*: [konkurs-eng2017@yandex.ru](mailto:konkurs-eng2017@yandex.ru)

Francis Scott Fitzgerald

**AFTERNOON OF AN AUTHOR**

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I

When he woke up he felt better than he had for many weeks, a fact that became plain to him negatively — he did not feel ill. He leaned for a moment against the door frame between his bedroom and bath till he could be sure he was not dizzy. Not a bit, not even when he stooped for a slipper under the bed.

It was a bright April morning, he had no idea what time because his clock was long unwound but as he went back through the apartment to the kitchen he saw that his daughter had breakfasted and departed and that the mail was in, so it was after nine.

“I think I’ll go out today,” he said to the maid.

“Do you good — it’s a lovely day.” She was from New Orleans, with the features and coloring of an Arab.

“I want two eggs like yesterday and toast, orange juice and tea.”

He lingered for a moment in his daughter’s end of the apartment and read his mail. It was an annoying mail with nothing cheerful in it — mostly bills and advertisements with the diurnal Oklahoma school boy and his gaping autograph album. Sam Goldwyn might do a ballet picture with Spessiwitza and might not — it would all have to wait till Mr. Goldwyn got back from Europe when he might have half a dozen new ideas. Paramount wanted a release on a poem that had appeared in one of the author’s books, as they didn’t know whether it was an original or quoted. Maybe they were going to get a title from it. Anyhow he had no more equity in that property — he had sold the silent rights many years ago and the sound rights last year.

“Never any luck with movies,” he said to himself. “Stick to your last, boy.”

He looked out the window during breakfast at the students changing classes on the college campus across the way.

“Twenty years ago I was changing classes,” he said to the maid. She laughed her débutante’s laugh.

“I’ll need a check,” she said, “if you’re going out.”

“Oh, I’m not going out yet. I’ve got two or three hours’ work. I meant late this afternoon.”

“Going for a drive?”

“I wouldn’t drive that old junk — I’d sell it for fifty dollars. I’m going on the top of a bus.”

After breakfast he lay down for fifteen minutes. Then he went into the study and began to work.

The problem was a magazine story that had become so thin in the middle that it was about to blow away. The plot was like climbing endless stairs, he had no element of surprise in reserve, and the characters who started so bravely day-before-yesterday couldn’t have qualified for a newspaper serial.

“Yes, I certainly need to get out,” he thought. “I’d like to drive down the Shenandoah Valley, or go to Norfolk on the boat.”

But both of these ideas were impractical — they took time and energy and he had not much of either — what there was must be conserved for work. He went through the manuscript underlining good phrases in red crayon and after tucking these into a file slowly tore up the rest of the story and dropped it in the waste-basket. Then he walked the room and smoked, occasionally talking to himself.

“Wee-l, let’s see — ”

“Nau-ow, the next thing — would be — ”

“Now let’s see, now — ”

After awhile he sat down thinking:

“I’m just stale — I shouldn’t have touched a pencil for two days.”

He looked through the heading “Story Ideas” in his notebook until the maid came to tell him his secretary was on the phone — part time secretary since he had been ill.

“Not a thing,” he said. “I just tore up everything I’d written. It wasn’t worth a damn. I’m going out this afternoon.”

“Good for you. It’s a fine day.”

“Better come up tomorrow afternoon — there’s a lot of mail and bills.”

He shaved, and then as a precaution rested five minutes before he dressed. It was exciting to be going out — he hoped the elevator boys wouldn’t say they were glad to see him up and he decided to go down the back elevator where they did not know him. He put on his best suit with the coat and trousers that didn’t match. He had bought only two suits in six years but they were the very best suits — the coat alone of this one had cost a hundred and ten dollars. As he must have a destination — it wasn’t good to go places without a destination

— he put a tube of shampoo ointment in his pocket for his barber to use, and also a small phial of luminol.

“The perfect neurotic,” he said, regarding himself in the mirror. “By-product of an idea, slag of a dream.”

## II

He went into the kitchen and said good-bye to the maid as if he were going to Little America. Once in the war he had commandeered an engine on sheer bluff and had it driven from New York to Washington to keep from being A.W.O.L. Now he stood carefully on the street corner waiting for the light to change, while young people hurried past him with a fine disregard for traffic. On the bus corner under the trees it was green and cool and he thought of Stonewall Jackson’s last words: “Let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of the trees.” Those Civil War leaders seemed to have realized very suddenly how tired they were — Lee shriveling into another man, Grant with his desperate memoir-writing at the end.

The bus was all he expected — only one other man on the roof and the green branches ticking against each window through whole blocks. They would probably have to trim those branches and it seemed a pity. There was so much to look at — he tried to define the color of one line of houses and could only think of an old opera cloak of his mother’s that was full of tints and yet was of no tint — a mere reflector of light. Somewhere church bells were playing “*Venite Adoremus*” and he wondered why, because Christmas was eight months off. He didn’t like bells but it had been very moving when they played “*Maryland, My Maryland*” at the governor’s funeral.

On the college football field men were working with rollers and a title occurred to him: “Turf-keeper” or else “The Grass Grows,” something about a man working on turf for years and bringing up his son to go to college and play football there. Then the son dying in youth and the man’s going to work in the cemetery and putting turf over his son instead of under his feet. It would be the kind of piece that is often placed in anthologies, but not his sort of thing — it was sheer swollen antithesis, as formalized as a popular magazine story and easier to write. Many people, however, would consider it excellent because it was melancholy, had digging in it and was simple to understand.

The bus went past a pale Athenian railroad station brought to life by the blue shirted redcaps out in front. The street narrowed as the business section began and there were suddenly brightly dressed girls, all very beautiful — he thought he had never seen such beautiful girls. There were men too but they all looked rather silly, like himself in the mirror, and there were old

undecorative women, and presently, too, there were plain and unpleasant faces among the girls; but in general they were lovely, dressed in real colors all the way from six to thirty, no plans or struggles in their faces, only a state of sweet suspension, provocative and serene. He loved life terribly for a minute, not wanting to give it up at all. He thought perhaps he had made a mistake in coming out so soon.

He got off the bus, holding carefully to all the railings and walked a block to the hotel barbershop. He passed a sporting goods store and looked in the window unmoved except by a first baseman's glove which was already dark in the pocket. Next to that was a haberdasher's and here he stood for quite a while looking at the deep shade of shirts and the ones of checker and plaid. Ten years ago on the summer Riviera the author and some others had bought dark blue workmen's shirts, and probably that had started that style. The checkered shirts were nice looking, bright as uniforms and he wished he were twenty and going to a beach club all dolled up like a Turner sunset or Guido Reni's dawn.

The barbershop was large, shining and scented — it had been several months since the author had come downtown on such a mission and he found that his familiar barber was laid up with arthritis; however, he explained to another man how to use the ointment, refused a newspaper and sat, rather happy and sensually content at the strong fingers on his scalp, while a pleasant mingled memory of all the barbershops he had ever known flowed through his mind.

Once he had written a story about a barber. Back in 1929 the proprietor of his favorite shop in the city where he was then living had made a fortune of \$300,000 on tips from a local industrialist and was about to retire. The author had no stake in the market, in fact, was about to sail for Europe for a few years with such accumulation as he had, and that autumn hearing how the barber had lost all his fortune he was prompted to write a story, thoroughly disguised in every way yet hinging on the fact of a barber rising in the world and then tumbling; he heard, nevertheless, that the story had been identified in the city and caused some hard feelings.

The shampoo ended. When he came out into the hall an orchestra had started to play in the cocktail room across the way and he stood for a moment in the door listening. So long since he had danced, perhaps two evenings in five years, yet a review of his last book had mentioned him as being fond of night clubs; the same review had also spoken of him as being indefatigable. Something in the sound of the word in his mind broke him momentarily and feeling tears of weakness behind his eyes he turned away. It was like in the

beginning fifteen years ago when they said he had “fatal facility,” and he labored like a slave over every sentence so as not to be like that.

“I’m getting bitter again,” he said to himself. “That’s no good, no good — I’ve got to go home.”

The bus was a long time coming but he didn’t like taxis and he still hoped that something would occur to him on that upper-deck passing through the green leaves of the boulevard. When it came finally he had some trouble climbing the steps but it was worth it for the first thing he saw was a pair of high school kids, a boy and a girl, sitting without any self-consciousness on the high pedestal of the Lafayette statue, their attention fast upon each other. Their isolation moved him and he knew he would get something out of it professionally, if only in contrast to the growing seclusion of his life and the increasing necessity of picking over an already well-picked past. He needed reforestation and he was well aware of it, and he hoped the soil would stand one more growth. It had never been the very best soil for he had had an early weakness for showing off instead of listening and observing.

Here was the apartment house — he glanced up at his own windows on the top floor before he went in.

“The residence of the successful writer,” he said to himself. “I wonder what marvelous books he’s tearing off up there. It must be great to have a gift like that — just sit down with pencil and paper. Work when you want — go where you please.”

His child wasn’t home yet but the maid came out of the kitchen and said:

“Did you have a nice time?”

“Perfect,” he said. “I went roller skating and bowled and played around with Man Mountain Dean and finished up in a Turkish Bath. Any telegrams?”

“Not a thing.”

“Bring me a glass of milk, will you?”

He went through the dining room and turned into his study, struck blind for a moment with the glow of his two thousand books in the late sunshine. He was quite tired — he would lie down for ten minutes and then see if he could get started on an idea in the two hours before dinner.