

CHAPTER 1

Dressed up in white flannels I went over to Gatsby's lawn a little after seven and wandered around rather ill-at-ease among swirls and eddies of people I didn't know—though here and there was a face I had noticed on the commuting train. I made an attempt to find my host but the two or three people of whom I asked his whereabouts stared at me in such an amazed way and denied so vehemently any knowledge of his movements that I slunk off in the direction of the cocktail table—the only place in the garden where a single man could linger without looking purposeless and alone.

“Do you live on Long Island?” one woman at the table inquired.

“I live at West Egg.”

“Really? I was down here at a party about a month ago. Given by a man named Gatsby. Do you know him?”

“I live next door to him.”

“Well, they say he's a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm's. That's where all his money comes from.”

“Really?”

She nodded.

“I'm scared of him. I'd hate to have him get anything on me.”

I was on my way to get roaring drunk from sheer embarrassment when Jordan Baker came out of the house and stood at the head of the marble steps, leaning a little backward and looking with contemptuous interest down into the garden. Welcome or not, I found it necessary to attach myself to someone I already knew before I should begin to address cordial remarks to the passers-by.

“Hello!” I roared, advancing toward her. My voice seemed unnaturally loud across the garden.

“I thought you might be here,” she responded absently as I came up. “I remembered you lived next door to—”

She held my hand impersonally, as a promise that she'd take care of me in a minute, and gave ear to two girls in twin yellow dresses who stopped at the foot of the steps.

"Hello!" they cried together. "Sorry you didn't win."

That was for the golf tournament. She had lost in the finals the week before.

"You don't know who we are," said one of the girls in yellow, "but we met you here about a month ago."

"You've dyed your hair since then," remarked Jordan, and I started but the girls had moved casually on and her remark was addressed to the premature moon, produced like the supper, no doubt, out of a caterer's basket. With Jordan's slender golden arm resting in mine we descended the steps and sauntered about the garden. A tray of cocktails floated at us through the twilight and we sat down at a table with the two girls in yellow and a Mrs. McKee.

"Do you come to these parties often?" inquired Jordan of the girl beside her.

"The last one was the one I met you at," answered the girl, in an alert, confident voice. She turned to her companion: "Wasn't it for you, Lucille?"

It was for Lucille, too.

"I like to come," Lucille said. "I never care what I do, so I always have a good time. When I was here last I tore my gown on a chair, and he asked me my name and address—inside of a week I got a package from Croirier's with a new evening gown in it."

"Did you keep it?" asked Jordan.

"Sure I did. I was going to wear it tonight, but it was too big in the bust and had to be altered. It was gas blue with lavender beads. Two hundred and sixty-five dollars."

"There's something funny about a fellow that'll do a thing like that," said the other girl eagerly. "He doesn't want any trouble with *anybody*."

"Who doesn't?" I inquired.

"Gatsby. Somebody told me—"

The two girls and Jordan leaned together confidentially.

"Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once."

A thrill passed over all of us.

"I don't think it's so much *that*," argued Lucille skeptically; "it's more that he was a German spy during the war."

Mrs. McKee nodded in confirmation.

"I heard that from a man who knew all about him, grew up with him in Germany," Mrs. McKee assured us positively.

"He's a bootlegger," said Lucille, 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."

"Oh, no," said the other girl, "it couldn't be that, because he was in the American army during the war." As our credulity switched back to her she leaned forward with enthusiasm. "You look at him sometimes when he thinks nobody's looking at him. I'll bet he killed a man."

She narrowed her eyes and shivered. Lucille shivered. We all turned and looked around for Gatsby. It was testimony to the romantic speculation he inspired that there were whispers about him from those who found little that it was necessary to whisper about in this world.

"Let's get out," whispered Jordan, after a somehow wasteful and inappropriate half hour. "This is much too polite for me."

We got up, and she explained to our tablemates that we were going to find the host—I had never met him, she said, and it was making me uneasy.

The bar, where we glanced first, was crowded but Gatsby was not there. She couldn't find him from the top of the steps, and he wasn't on the veranda. On a chance we tried an important-looking door, and walked into a high Gothic library, paneled with carved English oak, and probably transported complete from some ruin overseas.

A stout, middle-aged man with enormous owl-eyed spectacles was sitting somewhat drunk on the edge of a great table, staring with unsteady concentration at the shelves of books. As we entered he wheeled excitedly around and examined Jordan from head to foot.

“What do you think?” he demanded impetuously.

“About what?”

He waved his hand toward the bookshelves.

“About that. As a matter of fact you needn’t bother to ascertain. I ascertained. They’re real.”

“The books?”

He nodded.

“Absolutely real—have pages and everything. I thought they’d be a nice durable cardboard. Matter of fact, they’re absolutely real. Pages and—Here! Lemme show you.”

Taking our skepticism for granted, he rushed to the bookcases and returned with Volume One of the “Stoddard Lectures.”

“See!” he cried triumphantly. “It’s a bona fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella’s a regular Belasco. It’s a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too—didn’t cut the pages. But what do you want? What do you expect?”

He snatched the book from me and replaced it hastily on its shelf muttering that if one brick was removed the whole library was liable to collapse.

“Who brought you?” he demanded. “Or did you just come? I was brought. Most people were brought.”

Jordan looked at him alertly, cheerfully without answering.

“I was brought by a woman named Roosevelt,” he continued. “Mrs. Claud Roosevelt. Do you know her? I met her somewhere last night. I’ve been drunk for about a week now, and I thought it might sober me up to sit in a library.”

“Has it?”

“A little bit, I think. I can’t tell yet. I’ve only been here an hour. Did I tell you about the books? They’re real. They’re——”

“You told us.”

We shook hands with him gravely and went back outdoors.