

## Fitzgerald's Last Triangle "Preformance"

IN 2007, PRINCETON University Library acquired a previously unpublished F. Scott Fitzgerald letter.<sup>1</sup> The letter is undated, but the postmark on the envelope indicates that Fitzgerald mailed it from Princeton on the afternoon of Thursday, December 7, 1916. This was during the first semester of his fourth year at the university; because of poor marks, he was still academically a junior. The recipient was Elizabeth "Litz" Clarkson, a girl from Fitzgerald's home town of St. Paul. Fitzgerald was inviting her and another St. Paul girl, Marie Hersey, to come to Princeton on Saturday, December 16, for a performance of *Safety First!*, the 1916–17 Triangle Club musical comedy, for which he had written the lyrics. This particular performance—or "preformance," as Fitzgerald calls it in the letter—was one of two that were to be given on campus in mid-December, before *Safety First!* went on the road for its holiday tour.<sup>2</sup> The initial performance would be for the student body on Friday, December 15. Fitzgerald was inviting Elizabeth and Marie to the second performance, to be given

1. The letter was purchased by the library at Bloomsbury Auctions, New York City, in the Literature sale for November 28, 2007, Lot 188. The letter was first published in *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 69, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 516. It does not appear in any of the standard editions of Fitzgerald's correspondence.

2. Fitzgerald's spelling was often faulty, but in this case "preformance" seems to have been the local term for the first two on-campus presentations of the Triangle shows.

the following evening for the Princeton faculty. The girls were only a short train ride away: both were enrolled in The French School, a young women's finishing academy at 24 East Ninety-Fourth Street in New York City.<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth and Marie did make the trip. In his personal ledger, a month-by-month record that Fitzgerald kept of his life, he wrote "Marie and Litz Clarkson to  $\Delta$  opening" beside the entry for December 1916.<sup>4</sup>

The letter reads as follows, with Fitzgerald's misspellings and punctuation preserved:

Dear Elizabeth:

Is this the second letter I've ever written you or the third?

Idea is this—You and Marie come down here Saturday afternoon—Dine with us at the Princeton Inn (as Jimmie Ackerman is unfortunately only a sophomore and cannot go up Prospect Avenue (where the clubs are). Then we will proceed to the  $\Delta$  show at the Casino. This is not a gala occasion and you two will very conceivably be the only out of town girls down here but as the  $\Delta$  isn't coming to St. Paul we thought you might like to see the faculty performance here (Yes, I said faculty) You will stay the evening at the Princeton Inn and on Sunday we will amuse you to the best of our ability though I haven't the slightest idea how as Sunday here is ~~bedlam~~ desolate. Hear you met Dave McDougal. Do you aimez him? Non! I met your friend Harold Bulkley the other day. Seems very charming. Oh dear! Saw Grant Worrel at a dance in Wilmington the other night. Your friend Jean Knox reminds me of Betty Mudge. How do you like the Wilmington stuff? Pretty good isn't it.

3. The French School was a French-language academy directed by Mlle. Jeanne Chéron, who held a diploma from the Sorbonne and supervised a staff of five teachers. See *A Handbook of American Private Schools* (Boston: Porter E. Sargent, 1917), 209, 625.

4. Fitzgerald's ledger is among the holdings in the Bruccoli Collection at the University of South Carolina. Digital images and transcriptions of the ledger pages are available on the website of the Irwin Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. For a printed reproduction, see *F. Scott Fitzgerald's Ledger: A Facsimile*, intro. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Washington, DC: NCR/Microcard, 1972). The entry for December 1916 is on page 171.

St. Paul looks perfectly dead Xmas. Got a letter from Bob Dunn which says he is trying to organize a subscription dance which will bring the number of parties up to five—imagine.

Bob C. showed me what you said about Alice. Trevor Hogg didn't even come to the prom. I think there is some mystery there. Alice was very popular but her remark about everybody reeling was entirely uncalled for. It was a terrifically sober prom. [Fitzgerald inserts a stick-figure sketch here.]

Well do drop a line as soon as you find out to  
Mr. Francis Scott Fitzgerald  
Cottage Club  
Princeton  
N.J.

Of course I've got my same old Chemistry condition and for the fourth time can't go on the trip or be in the show.

As usual I wrote the lyrics and they're using the same old "show girl picture" for advertising in the papers  
F.S.F.

This is a pleasant, chatty epistle, typical of the letters exchanged between young men and women of Fitzgerald's generation. They did not have cell phones or social media, but postal service in their time was rapid, especially in the urban Northeast. These young people developed conventions of letter-writing that kept them in touch with one another almost as efficiently as digital devices do for today's college students.

Once Fitzgerald has covered the details of the upcoming visit, he can move on to the gossip—what boys Elizabeth has met, whether she likes them, whom Fitzgerald has seen at dances or on campus, what the social scene is like in Wilmington. He and his friends sometimes showed letters to one another; thus Elizabeth's comment about "Alice," presumably made in a letter to "Bob C." (Bob Clark, a Princeton sophomore from St. Paul), has been seen by Fitzgerald. Alice's remark in the letter about "everybody reeling" probably had something to do with drinking at the Princeton prom. Fitzgerald wants to assure Elizabeth that it's all a fiction and that the prom was "terrifically sober."

What Fitzgerald did not know in November 1916, and what gives this letter a certain poignancy, was that entry into World War I was just around the corner for the United States. Congress would formally declare war on Germany and its allies on April 6, 1917. The Princeton students mentioned in the letter would all join the armed forces. Fitzgerald's career at the university would end in June 1917; he would return only for brief visits after that. December 1916 was almost the last moment at which he could write a letter as innocent as this one.

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Scott Fitzgerald, Elizabeth Clarkson, and Marie Hersey were members of the same social circle in St. Paul. The names of both girls appear in his personal ledger along with the names of three of the other St. Paul youths mentioned in the letter—Betty Mudge, Bob Dunn, and Bob Clark. These names are found also in Fitzgerald's "Thoughtbook," an adolescent diary kept in 1910–11 in which he described the maneuverings for popularity that took place in his dance class when he was fourteen years old.<sup>5</sup> Marie Hersey, the first girl he ever kissed, was his steady partner during those dancing classes. She and Elizabeth Clarkson both appeared in the plays that Fitzgerald wrote for the Elizabethan Dramatic Club, a local organization for teenagers that put on elaborately staged summer productions for the St. Paul community.<sup>6</sup> In January 1915, Marie had introduced Fitzgerald to Ginevra King, the beautiful Chicago socialite who became his first true love. He and she carried on an intense romance, largely epistolary, for two years. He visited her twice in Chicago but found himself at a disadvantage away from his home turf. The absence of Ginevra's name in the letter, in fact, tells us that Fitzgerald's infatuation with her was nearing its end. She too

5. *Thoughtbook of Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald*, intro. John R. Kuehl (Princeton: Princeton University Library, 1965). A later edition is *The Thoughtbook of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Dave Page (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). The text of the diary, edited with commentary by Page, appears in the Cambridge Edition volume *Last Kiss* (2017), 1–28.

6. Fitzgerald wrote three plays for the club. They have been published as *F. Scott Fitzgerald's St. Paul Plays, 1911–1914*, ed. Alan Margolies (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

was attending a Manhattan finishing school that year—Miss McFee's on West Seventy-Second Street—but she and Fitzgerald were quarreling in their letters and were about to call off their romance. It is therefore significant that he should have turned to his childhood sweetheart, Marie, and to another St. Paul girl for company during the “preformance.”<sup>7</sup>

In the letter Fitzgerald laments the fact that only a few parties seem to be planned for the holidays back in St. Paul. Youths from the Midwest who attended schools in the East looked forward to the parties in their hometowns over Christmas vacation. One of the most memorable passages in all of Fitzgerald's fiction occurs in chapter 9 of *The Great Gatsby*, where Nick Carraway, the narrator, remembers how he and his friends, on the way home for Christmas, would gather at Union Station in Chicago to change trains and compare notes about the parties they had been invited to. In the passage Fitzgerald uses the names of real St. Paul families, including Marie's: “Are you going to the Ordways'? The Herseys'? The Schultzes'?”<sup>8</sup> If Fitzgerald's letter is to be believed, the party scene in St. Paul for December 1916 looked bleak.

Marie and Litz were members of the upper bourgeoisie in St. Paul. Marie, whom Fitzgerald called “Bug,” was tall, good-looking, and a first-class dancer. She lived in an eleven-bedroom red stone house, designed in the Queen Anne style, at 473 Summit Avenue, the show street of St. Paul. By Midwestern standards Marie came from old money. Her grandfather was Samuel F. Hersey, a congressman from Maine who had invested early in Minnesota and Wisconsin lumber. Marie's father, Edward Hersey, had come to St. Paul and taken over the business. He expanded it until he became a serious competitor of the lumber baron Frederick Weyerhaeuser. Edward Hersey had died in 1904 but had left his family in secure financial condition. In the 1910 US census, those living in the house on Summit Avenue are listed as Marie's mother, Mary Hersey; Marie and

7. For an account of Fitzgerald's relationship with Ginevra, see James L. W. West III, *The Perfect Hour: The Romance of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ginevra King* (New York: Random House, 2005).

8. *The Great Gatsby: A Variorum Edition*, ed. James L. W. West III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 211.

her two older sisters and four younger brothers; Mary's brother and sister-in-law and their five children; and seven servants. Fitzgerald kept in touch with Marie after college and marriage. He based at least one character in his fiction on her—Margaret Torrence in the Basil Duke Lee stories of 1928–29.<sup>9</sup>

Elizabeth Clarkson, a pretty brunette, was the daughter of Worrell Clarkson, the founder of People's Coal and Ice in St. Paul. He owned a coal dock in Duluth and also owned several ships that transported coal and mineral ore on the Great Lakes. The Clarksons lived in a large stucco, timber, and stone house at 94 Dellwood Avenue in St. Paul. On September 2, 1913, Litz's father and mother had held a dinner there for the cast of Fitzgerald's play *The Coward*, set for an encore performance later that evening. Litz's steady boyfriend was Bob Dunn, who is mentioned in Fitzgerald's letter. They would marry shortly before Dunn left for the war in the fall of 1917.<sup>10</sup>

In the first line of his letter to Elizabeth, Fitzgerald asks: "Is this the second letter I've ever written you or the third?" He had in fact written her at least once before, three years earlier, on September 15, 1913. In the letter, which he wrote on black-bordered mourning stationery, he apologizes for not being able to attend a social event to which she has invited him. He has been ill: "Bronchitis interposed its highly annoying hand," he explains. He laments his current state of mind: "I am in a particularly despondent and dissipated mood. Outside the sun is shining but I am perfectly positive it is only doing it out of spite." He promises to write her later at her prep school, Miss Hartridge's in Plainfield, New Jersey. To amuse her, he ends with rhymed apologies for the disorderly state of his letter:

*My mind is all a-tumble  
And the letter seems a jumble*

9. These stories, published as a series in the *Saturday Evening Post*, were first collected in *The Basil and Josephine Stories*, ed. John Kuehl and Jackson R. Bryer (New York: Scribner, 1973). Texts of the stories based on Fitzgerald's revised typescripts are included in *The Basil, Josephine, and Gwen Stories* (2009), a volume in the Cambridge Edition.

10. Information about the Hersey and Clarkson families is taken from Dave Page, *F. Scott Fitzgerald in Minnesota: The Writer and His Friends at Home* (St. Paul: Fitzgerald in St. Paul, 2017).

*For the words they seem to  
mumble  
And my pen's about to stumble  
And the papers made to jumble  
So I sign myself your humble  
Servant  
Francis Scott Fitzgerald<sup>11</sup>*

When he wrote the letter above, Fitzgerald had just been offered admission to Princeton. A week later he traveled by train to the university, settled into a rooming house near campus, and immersed himself in student activities, especially in the Triangle Club. This group, founded in 1891, mounted an elaborate musical comedy every fall. All parts in the productions were played by male students—with a member of the faculty occasionally taking a role. Music and lyrics, all original, were written and performed by students as well. Much of the humor came from the antics of the men who dressed in drag and took the female parts.

In the letter inviting Elizabeth to campus, Fitzgerald emphasizes that her visit to Princeton will be a quiet one. Nothing much will happen on Sunday—though he teases her by writing that Sundays in the town are “bedlam,” then striking through the word and substituting “desolate.” The girls were to stay at the Princeton Inn, a three-story brick hotel that stood on the site of the current Princeton Borough Hall. The performances of *Safety First!* would be at the Casino, a large wooden theatre built on campus in 1895 and still in use when Fitzgerald was a student. It burned down in 1924 and was not rebuilt.

The Triangle show was likely to be tame. One of the purposes of the “performances” was to allow the faculty, and especially Jenny Davidson Hibben, the wife of John Grier Hibben, president of the university, to identify anything risqué or off-color in the plot and

11. This letter was also sold, as Lot 187, at the Bloomsbury auction mentioned in note 1. The letter was reproduced in facsimile in the auction catalogue. So far as I can determine, only seventeen Fitzgerald letters with dates earlier than this one are known to survive. Five of these are to girls; the others are to his parents and to relatives and teachers.

lyrics. Offending elements would be toned down or struck from the script before the tour began. Mrs. Hibben was thorough in her work: the standard history of the Triangle Club mentions her “all-hearing Presbyterian ear” and her “inexhaustible supply of sharpened blue pencils.”<sup>12</sup>

*Safety First!* was set in the twenty-first century, with scenes laid in Paris, Hawaii, and Turkey (in a sultan’s harem). It satirized “futurist” art, prison reform, and the dilettantism of the wealthy. One character in the production, a painter, was attempting to make a representation of “the nude angleworm”; another sought to capture “the soul of a banana in flight.” Fitzgerald incorporated much of this foolishness into his lyrics:

*There are no strict requirements  
for a cubist,  
You only need a dipper full of  
paint,  
A little distance bring it,  
And at your canvas fling it,  
Then shut your eyes and name it  
what it ain't.  
I'm using as a sitter,  
A young banana fritter,  
And painting her in pantalettes  
and bangs . . .*

And so on. Fitzgerald, who was remarkably adept at this sort of thing, had penned the lyrics for the previous two Triangle productions, *Fie! Fie! Fi-Fi!* (1914–15) and *The Evil Eye* (1915–16). By the time he wrote his second letter to Elizabeth, he was probably capable of turning out these dithyrambs in his sleep. The best of the lyrics for *Safety First!* are for the songs “One Lump Percy,” about a character named “Percy, the Parlor Snake,” who requires but a single lump of sugar in his tea; “The Vampires Won’t Vampire for Me,” concerning

12. Donald Marsden, *The Long Kickline: A History of the Princeton Triangle Club* (Princeton: Princeton Triangle Club, 1968), 110.



a young swain's romantic frustrations; and "Charlotte Corday," about the bloody-minded Girondist who murdered Jean-Paul Marat in his bathtub on July 13, 1793. ("Gee they were mean / To guillotine / That sweet, little innocent thing!")<sup>13</sup>

Fitzgerald must have been eager for Marie and Elizabeth to see *Safety First!* The show was scheduled for performances in Brooklyn, Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, and several other cities—but not, alas, in St. Paul.<sup>14</sup> In any case Fitzgerald would not have been allowed to participate in, or even to attend, any of the road performances. This was a sore point with him. The holiday tour for the Triangle Club was an occasion for receptions, parties, newspaper notices, socializing, and lots of flirting with girls. Had he been able to take part, Fitzgerald would have been entirely in his element, accepting compliments for the lyrics and exercising his considerable personal charm. Academic troubles, however, stood in the way.

Almost from the moment he arrived at Princeton, Fitzgerald had been an indifferent student. He had failed a mathematics class during the second term of his freshman year but had worked off the "condition," as it was called, that summer. During his sophomore year he picked up the first of two conditions in chemistry. These prevented him from taking part in extracurricular activities that involved travel away from campus. A "conditioned man" was one who had performed poorly in a required class. He had to undergo special tutoring and pass a makeup exam in the subject before he was allowed to engage in sports or dramatics or to hold offices in the eating clubs or in student organizations. Fitzgerald never erased his second condition in chemistry; it was still in effect during his last full semester at Princeton, and it remains on his academic transcript today.<sup>15</sup> In the spring of 1917 Fitzgerald gave up the struggle.

13. *Safety First!* (Cincinnati: John Church Co., 1916). Fitzgerald's lyrics for all three of the Triangle shows are reprinted in the Cambridge Edition volume *Spires and Gargoyles* (2010), 47–100. "Charlotte Corday" appears on 88–89.

14. A record of the cities on the 1916–17 tour was published in the Princeton yearbook. See *The Princeton Bric-a-Brac* 42 (1918): 88.

15. Copies of Fitzgerald's transcripts are preserved in Box 24 of the F. Scott Fitzgerald Additional Papers (Co188) at Princeton University Library.

He decided to put his academic woes behind him and make an honorable exit from Princeton by answering the call to colors and entering the war.

The only public role that Fitzgerald was allowed in *Safety First!* was to have his photograph appear in newspaper advertisements. For *The Evil Eye* the previous year, he had been photographed in drag as a Triangle chorus girl. Cross-dressing was standard in the Triangle shows; one of the anticipated features of each production was the pony chorus, made up of padded and bewigged young men who pranced across the stage in some semblance of a routine from the Moulin Rouge. Fitzgerald, however, must have hoped for something more than seeing himself in flowing skirt, face paint, and high-heeled shoes in a few newspaper advertisements.<sup>16</sup>

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Five Princeton students are mentioned in the letter.<sup>17</sup> Four were sophomores: James Harvey Ackerman from Plainfield, New Jersey; David Blean McDougal from Chicago; Harold Kidder Bulkley from Englewood, New Jersey; and Robert Dean Clark from St. Paul. As the letter implies, sophomores were not allowed to appear on Prospect Street until they had accepted bids to the eating clubs there. Bicker (the period of selection) would occur during the coming spring, when all four would receive bids. Ackerman and Clark joined Tiger Inn; McDougal and Bulkley went to Cap and Gown. The fifth student mentioned in the letter was a senior, Frank Trevor Hogg, known as “Kootch,” a native of Brownsville, Pennsylvania, who was the captain of the football team and a member of Ivy. Fitzgerald belonged to University Cottage Club.

All of the Princeton men whose names appear in the letter joined the armed forces. Bob Clark served in the American Ambulance Field Service and drove a camion at the Somme and in the Aisne-Marne offensive; Dave McDougal was a second lieutenant in the 101st Field Artillery; Trevor Hogg joined the navy and commanded a

16. The photograph of Fitzgerald as a showgirl is published in *The Romantic Egoists*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli, Scottie Fitzgerald Smith, and Joan P. Kerr (New York: Scribner, 1974), 24.

17. Grant Worrel and Jean Knox, whose names appear in the second paragraph of the letter, have not been identified, nor has “Alice” in paragraph four.

squadron of submarine chasers off the coast of Ireland. Jimmie Ackerman and Harold Bulkley became fliers. Ackerman was wounded on June 11, 1918, during the Battle of Château-Thierry and spent more than a year recuperating in military hospitals. Bulkley was killed on February 18, 1918, in a midair collision while training for combat at Hounslow Heath, just outside London.<sup>18</sup>

Princeton had begun to prepare for the war not long after the outbreak of hostilities in August 1914. Beginning in March 1915, the university offered lectures in military history and rifle training; there was also instruction in how to build trenches, roads, and pontoons. By the fall term of 1916 (while Fitzgerald was writing the lyrics for *Safety First!*), the university was offering an elective class in military instruction to juniors and seniors. The Princeton Provisional Battalion was organized in February 1917; by the end of March, one thousand undergraduates had volunteered. Drill exercises were held in the campus gymnasium, and for those interested in aviation, a flying field was established on a nearby farm.

Fitzgerald enrolled in an intensive military training course that spring. He wanted to serve as an officer and therefore planned to apply for a commission in the army. He felt relatively certain that he would be accepted; officer trainees were for the most part drawn from the ranks of college men. That summer he traveled to Fort Snelling, Minnesota, thirty miles to the south of St. Paul, and took the examination for a commission. His application was approved the following October, shortly after he had turned twenty-one.

Princeton men of Fitzgerald's generation distinguished themselves in the war. More than 40 percent of the student body served in some capacity; the majority of these "got over" to England or France, and many fought on the front lines. Most of Fitzgerald's classmates were in the infantry. Others served in the navy or in aviation or in the medical corps. Several were cited for gallantry: among Fitzgerald's classmates (the Class of 1917), three men won the Navy Cross, seven were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, and no fewer

18. Information about the academic and military records of these students has been taken from the alumni files in the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.

than twelve won the Croix de Guerre. Edmund Wilson and John Peale Bishop, Fitzgerald's two best friends at Princeton, both made it to France. Wilson served there in the Intelligence Corps and the Interpreters Corps; Bishop was in charge of a company of German prisoners of war.

Of Fitzgerald's classmates who served in the war, probably the most famous was the flier Elliott White Springs. He enlisted in the fall of 1917 and was sent to England, where he trained with the Royal Air Force. He transferred to the US Air Service and eventually commanded the 148th Aero Squadron. Springs was shot down but survived; he himself shot down eleven German aircraft in the course of the war and won the Distinguished Service Cross. Later he published *War Birds: Diary of an Unknown Aviator* (1926), a book based on the experiences of his friend and fellow aviator John McGavock Grider, who was killed in combat. Another Princetonian who went to war, and whom Fitzgerald remembered years later, was Curtis Whittlesey "Hack" McGraw, a member of the Class of 1919. McGraw led troops in the Meuse-Argonne offensive and was wounded at Ivergny in July 1918. He returned to Princeton after the war and became captain of the football team in his senior year. After graduating, McGraw spent his professional career at McGraw-Hill in New York, a publishing house founded by his father. Of McGraw's exploits on the gridiron after the war, Fitzgerald wrote, "I never saw him play without wondering what he thought about it all."<sup>19</sup>

Fitzgerald's record in the army was unimpressive. He entered as a provisional second lieutenant on November 26, 1917, and was assigned to the 45th Infantry. He trained at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; Camp Taylor, Kentucky; Camp Gordon, Georgia; and (after a transfer to the 68th Infantry) at Camp Sheridan, Alabama, where he served as aide-de-camp to General Ryan, commander of the 17th Infantry Brigade, 9th Division. Fitzgerald's most important accomplishment while in the army was to finish the manuscript of

19. Fitzgerald mentioned both Springs and McGraw in his 1940 essay "My Generation," which remained unpublished during his lifetime. "My Generation" first appeared in the October 1968 issue of *Esquire*. Most recently it has been reprinted in the Cambridge Edition volume *My Lost City* (2005), 192-98; the comment about McGraw appears on page 195.

a novel called "The Romantic Egotist." He later remembered writing the novel "on the consecutive weekends of three months" while sitting in the officers' club "in a roomful of smoke, conversation and rattling newspapers."<sup>20</sup> "The Romantic Egotist" was rejected twice by Scribner but, in revised form, was published as *This Side of Paradise* in 1920.

Certainly it was not Fitzgerald's fault that he did not participate in the war in Europe. His division was scheduled to embark in November 1918, the month in which the Armistice was signed. Fitzgerald was discharged on February 14, 1919, without having left the United States. Other American writers of his generation saw the war firsthand: Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, E. E. Cummings, William March, Thomas Boyd, and others. Fitzgerald must have compared his wartime experiences to theirs, but he also compared his record to the achievements of his fellow Princetonians. Among these men, his record was negligible.

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For Fitzgerald the weekend visit from the two St. Paul girls would have been an unsatisfactory substitute for traveling with the Triangle Club over the Christmas holiday, but the "preformance" would at least have given him a chance to show off his accomplishments. Marie and Litz, however, might well have asked Fitzgerald an awkward question that weekend. What did he plan to do with himself after leaving Princeton? Most of the other members of his class would graduate in the spring. Fitzgerald, if he chose to continue, would be required to return to the university in the fall of 1917, work off his conditions, and take his degree in the spring of 1918. During his childhood and adolescence in St. Paul, Fitzgerald had been clever, witty, prankish, and a great deal of fun to be around. He continued to behave this way in college and enjoyed some successes at Princeton. He was known chiefly for his work on the Triangle Club shows and for his writings in the *Nassau Lit*, the campus literary magazine. What were his plans going forward?

20. "Who's Who—and Why," *Saturday Evening Post*, September 18, 1920; collected in the Cambridge *My Lost City*, 3–5.

He had recently turned twenty. Was he destined for conventional success? Would he settle down and put campus theatricals behind him? Fitzgerald talked a good deal about becoming a writer, but this was not really a profession that one could train for, as with medicine or law. He had tried his hand already at fiction and poetry but had shown the most talent for song lyrics. He was good at versifying in the Gilbert-and-Sullivan manner. It was conceivable that he might take his talents to Broadway, as Oscar Hammerstein II, his contemporary and rival at Columbia University, would do. Hammerstein wrote song lyrics for several of the Varsity Show musicals at Columbia University during Fitzgerald's time at Princeton.<sup>21</sup> Hammerstein was connected to the theatre world through his grandfather, his father, and other members of his family. After a half-hearted attempt at law school, he began to write for Broadway and eventually became one of the great lyricists of his generation. Fitzgerald had no such contacts in New York. Perhaps he could have produced song lyrics for the music publishers on Tin Pan Alley, but this would have been a long shot. Marie and Litz probably assumed that he would return to St. Paul after college, though there was no position waiting for him in a business back home. He was from a respectable family, but the wealth amassed by his grandfather, Philip McQuillan, had begun to diminish, and his own father, Edward Fitzgerald, was not a successful businessman. The Fitzgeralds lived modestly in a row house on Summit Avenue. Fitzgerald's desire to earn a living as a writer must have seemed improbable. He was certainly aware of the problem. Like Amory Blaine, the autobiographical hero of *This Side of Paradise*, he must have wondered whether there was a place in American society for someone with his particular talents. "How'll I fit in?" laments Amory. "What am I for?" (200).

21. Hammerstein collaborated on the lyrics for *Home James!*, the 1917 Varsity Show, which had its debut at the Hotel Astor on the evenings of March 28–31, 1917. Fitzgerald might have seen this production. One of his friends from Triangle, Ormond V. Gould, was "loaned out" to play the part of Lucius Vodka in the musical. Hammerstein himself played the *maitre d'hotel*, Armand Dubonnett. *Home James!* included a burlesque Hawaiian hula (with the Columbia boys in grass skirts) followed by a ragtime chorus. Fitzgerald mentions *Home James!* in one of his early *Saturday Evening Post* stories, "Head and Shoulders" (1920), but he makes the play into a professional production, with tryout performances at the Shubert Theatre in New Haven.

Fitzgerald was not a great success at Princeton. In fact, he failed at almost everything he attempted there. He enjoyed some victories during the spring of his sophomore year—he was elected secretary of the Triangle Club, and he received his bid to Cottage—but in the semesters that followed he did not improve his academic record and never took a degree. His disappointments continued for a time after he left Princeton. He made no special mark as a soldier. The most important event of the war for him was his romance with Zelda Sayre, the southern belle with whom he fell in love while stationed at Camp Sheridan. He persuaded her to marry him and, after his discharge, took a job as a writer of advertising copy for the Barron Collier agency in New York City, hoping to make a strike in that line of work. But writing advertising jingles bored him and paid little. Zelda, in Montgomery, grew tired of waiting and broke off their engagement in June 1919. A distraught Fitzgerald quit his job and limped home to St. Paul to take up residence with his parents in his old bedroom. There he considered his prospects, such as they were.

With the twice-rejected manuscript of "The Romantic Egotist" in hand, he climbed to the top floor of his family's brownstone on Summit Avenue and went to work. Laboring almost around the clock that July and August, he salvaged the best parts of his manuscript, composed fresh chapters, and pulled off an inspired cut-and-paste job, transforming "The Romantic Egotist" into *This Side of Paradise*. The novel was accepted for publication by Scribner on September 16, 1919.<sup>22</sup> Thereafter Fitzgerald's star began to shine. Backed by his success with Scribner, he persuaded Zelda to renew their engagement. The novel was published and went into the bookstores on March 26, 1920. A week later, on April 3, he and Zelda were married in St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue. Most of the reviews of *This Side of Paradise* were laudatory, and sales were gratifyingly brisk. After so many setbacks, he suddenly found himself one of the most famous and successful young authors in America.

22. The acceptance letter has been published in *Dear Scott / Dear Max: The Fitzgerald-Perkins Correspondence*, ed. John Kuehl and Jackson R. Bryer (New York: Scribner, 1971), 21. For an account of the composition and publication of the novel, see the introduction to the Cambridge edition of *This Side of Paradise* (1995).

Fitzgerald never forgot his early struggles. They became parts of his personal myth, and he used them again and again in his fiction. In various guises and forms—novels, short stories, and personal essays—he repeatedly crafted versions of his tale of pluck, luck, and talent for readers who, even today, seem never to tire of these fictions. Fitzgerald wrote his letter to Elizabeth Clarkson near the end of his time at Princeton, when he was beginning to realize that most of his dreams of college success were not destined to come true. He would later go on to greater successes on much larger stages, but in December 1916, all of this was yet to come.