



## Contents

The Crack-Up	I
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PIECES	3
<i>Echoes of the Jazz Age</i>	3
<i>My Lost City</i>	13
<i>Ring</i>	24
<i>“Show Mr and Mrs F. to Number —”</i>	30
<i>Auction – Model 1934</i>	45
<i>Sleeping and Waking</i>	52
<i>The Crack-Up</i>	58
<i>Pasting It Together</i>	64
<i>Handle with Care</i>	70
<i>Early Success</i>	75
THE NOTEBOOKS	81
<i>Note on the Text</i>	237
<i>Notes</i>	237
Extra Material	261
<i>F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Life</i>	263
<i>F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Works</i>	273
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	278

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# *The Crack-Up*



# Autobiographical Pieces

## Echoes of the Jazz Age

November 1931

It is too soon to write about the Jazz Age with perspective, and without being suspected of premature arteriosclerosis. Many people still succumb to violent retching when they happen upon any of its characteristic words – words which have since yielded in vividness to the coinages of the underworld. It is as dead as were the Yellow Nineties\* in 1902. Yet the present writer already looks back to it with nostalgia. It bore him up, flattered him and gave him more money than he had dreamt of, simply for telling people that he felt as they did, that something had to be done with all the nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War.

The ten-year period that, as if reluctant to die outmoded in its bed, leaped to a spectacular death in October 1929 began about the time of the May Day riots in 1919.\* When the police rode down the demobilized country boys gaping at the orators in Madison Square, it was the sort of measure bound to alienate the more intelligent young men from the prevailing order. We didn't remember anything about the Bill of Rights until Mencken began plugging it,\* but we did know that such tyranny belonged in the jittery little countries of south Europe. If goose-livered businessmen had this effect on the government, then maybe we had gone to war for J.P. Morgan's loans\* after all. But, because we were tired of Great Causes, there was no more than a short outbreak of moral indignation, typified by Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers*.\*

Presently we began to have slices of the national cake, and our idealism only flared up when the newspapers made melodrama out of such stories as Harding and the Ohio Gang or Sacco and Vanzetti.\* The events of 1919 left us cynical rather than revolutionary, in spite of the fact that now we are all rummaging around

in our trunks wondering where in hell we left the liberty cap – “I know I *had* it” – and the muzhik blouse. It was characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics at all.

It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire. A Stuffed Shirt, squirming to blackmail in a lifelike way, sat upon the throne of the United States; a stylish young man hurried over to represent to us the throne of England. A world of girls yearned for the young Englishman; the old American groaned in his sleep as he waited to be poisoned by his wife, upon the advice of the female Rasputin who then made the ultimate decision in our national affairs.\* But such matters apart, we had things our way at last. With Americans ordering suits by the gross in London, the Bond Street tailors perforce agreed to moderate their cut to the American long-waisted figure and loose-fitting taste, something subtle passed to America, the style of man. During the Renaissance, Francis the First looked to Florence to trim his leg. Seventeenth-century England aped the court of France, and fifty years ago the German Guards officer bought his civilian clothes in London. Gentlemen’s clothes – symbol of “the power that man must hold and that passes from race to race”.\*

We were the most powerful nation. Who could tell us any longer what was fashionable and what was fun? Isolated during the European War, we had begun combing the unknown south and west for folkways and pastimes, and there were more ready to hand.

The first social revelation created a sensation out of all proportion to its novelty. As far back as 1915, the unchaperoned young people of the smaller cities had discovered the mobile privacy of that automobile given to young Bill at sixteen to make him “self-reliant”. At first petting was a desperate adventure even under such favourable conditions, but presently confidences were exchanged and the old commandment broke down. As early as 1917 there were references to such sweet and casual dalliance in any number of the *Yale Record* or the *Princeton Tiger*.

But petting in its more audacious manifestations was confined to the wealthier classes – among other young people the old standard prevailed until after the War, and a kiss meant that a proposal was expected, as young officers in strange cities sometimes discovered to their dismay. Only in 1920 did the veil finally fall – the Jazz Age was in flower. Scarcely had the staid citizens of the republic caught their breaths when the wildest of all generations, the generation which had been adolescent during the confusion of the War, brusquely shouldered my contemporaries out of the way and danced into the limelight. This was the generation whose girls dramatized themselves as flappers, the generation that corrupted its elders and eventually overreached itself less through lack of morals than through lack of taste. May one offer in exhibit the year 1922! That was the peak of the younger generation, for though the Jazz Age continued, it became less and less an affair of youth.

The sequel was like a children's party taken over by the elders, leaving the children puzzled and rather neglected and rather taken aback. By 1923 their elders, tired of watching the carnival with ill-concealed envy, had discovered that young liquor will take the place of young blood, and with a whoop the orgy began. The younger generation was starved no longer.

A whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure. The precocious intimacies of the younger generation would have come about with or without prohibition – they were implicit in the attempt to adapt English customs to American conditions. (Our South, for example, is tropical and early maturing – it has never been part of the wisdom of France and Spain to let young girls go unchaperoned at sixteen and seventeen.) But the general decision to be amused that began with the cocktail parties of 1921 had more complicated origins.

The word jazz in its progress towards respectability has meant first sex, then dancing, then music. It is associated with a state of nervous stimulation, not unlike that of big cities behind the lines of a war. To many English the War still goes on because all the forces that menace them are still active – wherefore eat, drink



and be merry, for tomorrow we die. But different causes had now brought about a corresponding state in America – though there were entire classes (people over fifty, for example) who spent a whole decade denying its existence even when its puckish face peered into the family circle. Never did they dream that they had contributed to it. The honest citizens of every class, who believed in a strict public morality and were powerful enough to enforce the necessary legislation, did not know that they would necessarily be served by criminals and quacks, and do not really believe it today. Rich righteousness had always been able to buy honest and intelligent servants to free the slaves or the Cubans, so when this attempt collapsed, our elders stood firm with all the stubbornness of people involved in a weak case, preserving their righteousness and losing their children. Silver-haired women and men with fine old faces, people who never did a consciously dishonest thing in their lives, still assure each other in the apartment hotels of New York and Boston and Washington that “there’s a whole generation growing up that will never know the taste of liquor”. Meanwhile, their granddaughters pass the well-thumbed copy of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*\* around the boarding school and, if they get about at all, know the taste of gin or corn at sixteen. But the generation who reached maturity between 1875 and 1895 continue to believe what they want to believe.

Even the intervening generations were incredulous. In 1920, Heywood Broun\* announced that all this hubbub was nonsense, that young men didn’t kiss but told anyhow. But very shortly people over twenty-five came in for an intensive education. Let me trace some of the revelations vouchsafed them by reference to a dozen works written for various types of mentality during the decade. We begin with the suggestion that Don Juan leads an interesting life (*Jurgen*, 1919);\* then we learn that there’s a lot of sex around if we only knew it (*Winesburg, Ohio*, 1920),\* that adolescents lead very amorous lives (*This Side of Paradise*, 1920),\* that there are a lot of neglected Anglo-Saxon words (*Ulysses*, 1921),\* that older people don’t always resist sudden temptations (*Cytherea*, 1922),\* that

girls are sometimes seduced without being ruined (*Flaming Youth*, 1922),\* that even rape often turns out well (*The Sheik*, 1922),\* that glamorous English ladies are often promiscuous (*The Green Hat*, 1924),\* that in fact they devote most of their time to it (*The Vortex*, 1926),\* that it's a damn good thing too (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*, 1928),\* and finally that there are abnormal variations (*The Well of Loneliness*, 1928, and *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 1929).\*

In my opinion, the erotic element in these works, even *The Sheik* written for children in the key of *Peter Rabbit*, did not one particle of harm. Everything they described, and much more, was familiar in our contemporary life. The majority of the theses were honest and elucidating – their effect was to restore some dignity to the male as opposed to the he-man in American life. (“And what is a ‘He-man’?” demanded Gertrude Stein\* one day. “Isn’t it a large enough order to fill out to the dimensions of all that ‘a man’ has meant in the past? A ‘He-man’!”) The married woman can now discover whether she is being cheated, or whether sex is just something to be endured, and her compensation should be to establish a tyranny of the spirit, as her mother may have hinted. Perhaps many women found that love was meant to be fun. Anyhow, the objectors lost their tawdry little case, which is one reason why our literature is now the most living in the world.

Contrary to popular opinion, the movies of the Jazz Age had no effect upon its morals. The social attitude of the producers was timid, behind the times and banal – for example, no picture mirrored even faintly the younger generation until 1923, when magazines had already been started to celebrate it and it had long ceased to be news. There were a few feeble splutters and then Clara Bow in *Flaming Youth*;\* promptly the Hollywood hacks ran the theme into its cinematographic grave. Throughout the Jazz Age the movies got no farther than Mrs Jiggs,\* keeping up with its most blatant superficialities. This was no doubt due to the censorship as well as to innate conditions in the industry. In any case, the Jazz Age now raced along under its own power, served by great filling stations full of money.

The people over thirty, the people all the way up to fifty, had joined the dance. We greybeards (to tread down F.P.A.)<sup>\*</sup> remember the uproar when in 1912 grandmothers of forty tossed away their crutches and took lessons in the tango and the Castle Walk.<sup>\*</sup> A dozen years later a woman might pack the *Green Hat* with her other affairs as she set off for Europe or New York, but Savonarola was too busy flogging dead horses in Augean stables<sup>\*</sup> of his own creation to notice. Society, even in small cities, now dined in separate chambers, and the sober table learnt about the gay table only from hearsay. There were very few people left at the sober table. One of its former glories, the less sought-after girls who had become resigned to sublimating a probable celibacy, came across Freud and Jung<sup>\*</sup> in seeking their intellectual recompense and came tearing back into the fray.

By 1926, the universal preoccupation with sex had become a nuisance. (I remember a perfectly mated, contented young mother asking my wife's advice about "having an affair right away", though she had no one especially in mind, "because don't you think it's sort of undignified when you get much over thirty?") For a while, bootleg Negro records with their phallic euphemisms made everything suggestive, and simultaneously came a wave of erotic plays – young girls from finishing schools packed the galleries to hear about the romance of being a lesbian, and George Jean Nathan<sup>\*</sup> protested. Then one young producer lost his head entirely, drank a beauty's alcoholic bathwater and went to the penitentiary.<sup>\*</sup> Somehow his pathetic attempt at romance belongs to the Jazz Age, while his contemporary in prison, Ruth Snyder,<sup>\*</sup> had to be hoisted into it by the tabloids – she was, as *The Daily News* hinted deliciously to gourmets, about "to cook, *and sizzle, AND FRY!*" in the electric chair.

The gay elements of society had divided into two main streams, one flowing towards Palm Beach and Deauville, and the other, much smaller, towards the summer Riviera. One could get away with more on the summer Riviera, and whatever happened seemed to have something to do with art. From 1926 to 1929, the great

years of the Cap d'Antibes, this corner of France was dominated by a group quite distinct from that American society which is dominated by Europeans. Pretty much of anything went at Antibes – by 1929, at the most gorgeous paradise for swimmers on the Mediterranean no one swam any more, save for a short hangover dip at noon. There was a picturesque graduation of steep rocks over the sea, and somebody's valet and an occasional English girl used to dive from them, but the Americans were content to discuss each other in the bar. This was indicative of something that was taking place in the homeland – Americans were getting soft. There were signs everywhere: we still won the Olympic Games, but with champions whose names had few vowels in them – teams composed, like the fighting Irish combination of Notre Dame, of fresh overseas blood. Once the French became really interested, the Davis Cup gravitated automatically to their intensity in competition. The vacant lots of the Middle-Western cities were built up now – except for a short period in school, we were not turning out to be an athletic people like the British, after all. The hare and the tortoise. Of course, if we wanted to we could be in a minute; we still had all those reserves of ancestral vitality, but one day in 1926 we looked down and found we had flabby arms and a fat pot and couldn't say boop-boop-a-doop to a Sicilian. Shades of Van Bibber!\* No utopian ideal, God knows. Even golf, once considered an effeminate game, had seemed very strenuous of late – an emasculated form appeared and proved just right.

By 1927, a widespread neurosis began to be evident, faintly signalled, like a nervous beating of the feet, by the popularity of crossword puzzles. I remember a fellow expatriate opening a letter from a mutual friend of ours, urging him to come home and be revitalized by the hardy, bracing qualities of the native soil. It was a strong letter and it affected us both deeply, until we noticed that it was headed from a nerve sanitarium in Pennsylvania.

By this time, contemporaries of mine had begun to disappear into the dark maw of violence. A classmate killed his wife and himself on Long Island, another tumbled “accidentally” from a

skyscraper in Philadelphia, another purposely from a skyscraper in New York. One was killed in a speakeasy in Chicago; another was beaten to death in a speakeasy in New York and crawled home to the Princeton Club to die; still another had his skull crushed by a maniac's axe in an insane asylum where he was confined. These are not catastrophes that I went out of my way to look for – these were my friends; moreover, these things happened not during the depression but during the boom.

In the spring of '27, something bright and alien flashed across the sky. A young Minnesotan\* who seemed to have had nothing to do with his generation did a heroic thing, and for a moment people set down their glasses in country clubs and speakeasies and thought of their old best dreams. Maybe there was a way out by flying, maybe our restless blood could find frontiers in the illimitable air. But by that time we were all pretty well committed; and the Jazz Age continued; we would all have one more.

Nevertheless, Americans were wandering ever more widely – friends seemed eternally bound for Russia, Persia, Abyssinia and Central Africa. And by 1928 Paris had grown suffocating. With each new shipment of Americans spewed up by the boom the quality fell off, until towards the end there was something sinister about the crazy boatloads. They were no longer the simple pa and ma and son and daughter, infinitely superior in their qualities of kindness and curiosity to the corresponding class in Europe, but fantastic Neanderthals who believed something, something vague that you remembered from a very cheap novel. I remember an Italian on a steamer who promenaded the deck in an American Reserve Officer's uniform picking quarrels in broken English with Americans who criticized their own institutions in the bar. I remember a fat Jewess, inlaid with diamonds, who sat behind us at the Russian ballet and said as the curtain rose, "Thad's luffly: dey ought to baint a bicture of it." This was low comedy, but it was evident that money and power were falling into the hands of people in comparison with whom the leader of a village Soviet would be a gold mine of judgement and culture. There were

citizens travelling in luxury in 1928 and 1929 who, in the distortion of their new condition, had the human value of Pekinese, bivalves, cretins, goats. I remember the judge from some New York district who had taken his daughter to see the Bayeux Tapestries and made a scene in the papers advocating their segregation because one scene was immoral. But in those days life was like the race in *Alice in Wonderland*: there was a prize for everyone.

The Jazz Age had had a wild youth and a heady middle age. There was the phase of the necking parties, the Leopold-Loeb murder\* (I remember the time my wife was arrested on Queensboro Bridge on the suspicion of being the “Bob-haired Bandit”)\* and the John Held clothes.\* In the second phase such phenomena as sex and murder became more mature, if much more conventional. Middle age must be served, and pyjamas came to the beach to save fat thighs and flabby calves from competition with the one-piece bathing suit. Finally, skirts came down and everything was concealed. Everybody was at scratch now. Let’s go...

But it was not to be. Somebody had blundered and the most expensive orgy in history was over.

It ended two years ago,\* because the utter confidence which was its essential prop received an enormous jolt, and it didn’t take long for the flimsy structure to settle earthward. And after two years the Jazz Age seems as far away as the days before the War. It was borrowed time anyhow – the whole upper tenth of a nation living with the insouciance of grand dukes and the casualness of chorus girls. But moralizing is easy now, and it was pleasant to be in one’s twenties in such a certain and unworried time. Even when you were broke you didn’t worry about money, because it was in such profusion around you. Towards the end one had a struggle to pay one’s share; it was almost a favour to accept hospitality that required any travelling. Charm, notoriety, mere good manners weighed more than money as a social asset. This was rather splendid, but things were getting thinner and thinner as the eternal necessary human values tried to spread over all that expansion. Writers were geniuses on the strength of one respectable book or

play; just as during the War officers of four months' experience commanded hundreds of men, so there were now many little fish lording it over great big bowls. In the theatrical world, extravagant productions were carried by a few second-rate stars, and so on up the scale into politics, where it was difficult to interest good men in positions of the highest importance and responsibility, importance and responsibility far exceeding that of business executives, but which paid only five or six thousand a year.

Now once more the belt is tight, and we summon the proper expression of horror as we look back at our wasted youth. Sometimes, though, there is a ghostly rumble among the drums, an asthmatic whisper in the trombones that swings me back into the early Twenties, when we drank wood alcohol and every day in every way grew better and better, and there was a first abortive shortening of the skirts, and girls all looked alike in sweater dresses, and people you didn't want to know said, "Yes, we have no bananas," and it seemed only a question of a few years before the older people would step aside and let the world be run by those who saw things as they were – and it all seems rosy and romantic to us who were young then, because we will never feel quite so intensely about our surroundings any more.