

Irvin Faust

Scott Fitzgerald Has Left the Garden Of Allah

I

Life had been grimy tough in Hell's Kitchen for little Chaim Hershkowitz, the original me. And as the runt of the litter, he got zilch out of the trough, which had very little to start with. Therefore Chaim retreated, not into Chaim, for that was *gornisht*, but into Commerce High School. Where he absorbed the lectures of Marcel (Doc) Fajins, of Salzburg, who taught European History. Doc not only taught it, he dreamed it out loud. And while dreaming he drew on the blackboard arrows and crowns which morphed into the fascinating history of the old country.

Looking back from another world, i.e., Hollywood, I can see I was ready to inherit a part in a larger history; my father, Jake, the few times he spoke, told of his childhood in Galicia. So, my father and Doc Fajins both led me to the thought of finding a more appropriate path for Chaim, who became James Howard—after James Cagney, who could blast his way to the top of any family tree.

As soon as I graduated from Commerce High School, I hoboed out to Paradise on the Pacific. For that is where James Howard could climb to the top, not as an actor or phony restaurateur a la Mike Romanov, but as a writer of talking pictures, which had been Hadacol for my depressions during the Depression. I longed to place in the mouths of celluloid seals lines that were as great as “Goodness had nothing to do with it” and “Mother of God, is this the end of Rico?”

Followed by “Screenplay by James Howard.”

That image gave me a feeling of such powerhouse importance that I can't put it into words. Which turned out to be my problem: no matter how and with what I tried—pen, pencil, typewriter, Crayola—I just couldn't transform my terrific ideas into words that told a story. God

knows I read enough—Sax Rohmer, Edna Ferber, Sam Shellabarger, Ken Roberts and other plotters—so you’d think I could build a continuity like, say Rob Wittlemeyer, my screenplay mentor, who had three credits at Monogram. But whenever I tried to paste together a plot line, forget about it.

I should quickly note that I’d have been right up there with Anita Loos and Co. in the silent screen era what with my knack for TITLES, but I had to deal with soundtracks, which meant no deal.

In a bid to change my luck, I moved into the Garden of Allah, where many of the successful writers lived. A great believer in opposites, I loved Allah being on Sunset Boulevard because I was sure that on Sunset my fortunes would rise. I was checked in by Nazimova herself, who not only owned the joint but saved money by working the desk. And I not only got a room (which had just been vacated by a writer who had moved into a mansion), I got a job in the bargain, proving that a Jewish Allah was looking out for me. Here’s how I pulled that deal:

I make a great first impression, especially on over-the-hill broads, which was now Mova’s category; so, during my interview, I said excuse me, but you got more in your pinky than Duse has in her entire corpus; is there a job open around here by any chance? She said Duse sure is dirt, you flatterer; it so happens I need a bellhop; any experience? I never lie. I said no, which makes me a perfect choice; you can mold me. I was hired on the spot.

And it was a perfect fit for both of us. While molding me, Mova added a bonus—seminars on European acting, the ONLY acting. She said I listened so hard I could make it in Russia. I thanked her for the tasty praise, but insisted I wasn’t interested in the actor’s life. Not in Russia and certainly not here.

‘Twas the writer’s life for me. For I was ensconced in scrivener heaven.

Allah looked like birdseed on the outside but had on the inside the busiest collection of writers in L.A. You know the feeling when you walk into Belmont or Santa Anita and ingest the cigar smoke and clatter of the pari-mutuel machines? Well, there was a similar ambience at the G of A:

guys gabbing about motivations and turning points, typewriters pecking, fingers seeking out the key *juste*, pencils snapping, paper crunching. The joint even smelled sour punky, the writerly essence. Success resided in Allah: writers with credits. Writers with friends with credits. Whose punchy flowlines might just osmose into James Howard. We had pros like Bob Benchley, Don Ogden Stewart and Eddie Justis Mayer.

AND the pro's pro. Who pulled in 7/10/37. Circle that date for the man who had all those great ID's: Amory/Anthony/Jay/Nick/Dick/Basil/Duke. I give you: Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald, whom Chaim Hershkowitz had bumbled onto while not doing math at Commerce High and then defended with his Barney Ross dukes when Leo McBee claimed James T. Farrell had invented American Lit.

I was cool as I carried the bags of the man who oozed gorgeous language like sweat of gold. To tell the honest truth he didn't look like much. Grayish face that matched his sideburns and collar. He sprayed class but he was sweating. Not from nerves but because he was wearing a polo coat that in its day would have been fit for Tommy Hitchcock but now resembled an overused horse blanket. He wasn't as small as I had pictured after reading about his cracking up; he was actually about my size if he stood up straight, five-eight and a scutch.

Well, still cool, I carried his bags, which took after his coat, to a unit he'd be sharing with Eddie Mayer (no relation to Louis). Eddie was a writer who hadn't hit it big but had bigness in him and even though this was Saturday he was slaving away at Paramount. I set the champ's bags down, refused a tip and said if you need anything give me a buzz. I then thanked him for the reading pleasure he had dispensed while I was in high school.

At which the Gibson-boy profile relaxed and he said, "That's so kind; what in particular did you like?"

"Oh," I said, "You got to be tired out and would relish taking it easy."

"Not at all," he said. "I like talking about my work with readers; what is your name?"

"James Howard. Call me Jimmy."

He shook my hand soft and said, "I'm Scott. Not Scottie; that's my

daughter.”

“You got it.”

“Well, then, which of my books do you like, Jimmy?”

“I dig *Tender Night* a lot. My choice in stories is *The Ice Palace* and the *Basil Duke Lees*. My outstanding title is *The Beautiful and Damned*.”

“My heavens, you did not say THE damned.”

“Most people goof there, all right, but I figure you had your reasons.”

“Yes, I did, Jimmy. Thank you. Do you take a special interest in titles?”

“Not to brag, but I have a knack for titles; if you don’t mind my saying so, you’re kinda the opposite. There’s some real stinkos, especially on the first try.”

“Oh? Would you care to elaborate?”

“I’ve heard you were considering *Trimalchio in West Egg* before you came up with *Gatsby*.”

“Bad?”

I held my nose. “Excuse me.”

“I assure you I’m not offended. In fact . . . well . . . Jimmy, perhaps I could tap into your sense of the appropriate occasionally.”

“Sure. Will you listen? Lotsa writers think they know it all.”

“I will categorically listen.”

“You got a deal. So, all right then, you want some Cokes sent up?”

“Why not gin or bourbon?”

“Ah, come on. You’re like a guy I useta know, my old man, no head for booze. But, Cokes by the case . . . and ice cream? He kept Breyers in business.”

The poor guy actually blushed. Then he said, “How about a case of Cokes and two quarts of ice cream? Butter pecan.”

That was chapter one. The would-be champ and the champ, who was an exemplary college man, which can often be a contradiction in terms. Truth is, the man reeked of Ivy, which forlorn types often do, especially if the Ivy grew in Princeton. After a few conversations, I confided that I had

come west to write screenplays. He warned me it would not be easy, but wished me the best and assured me he would be glad to help in any way. It was on the basis of this relationship that we marched into Chapter Two, Scene One:

A couple of weeks later. A Drop Deader had blown into town. Drop Deader: a guy who when he enters a room everybody drops dead. Gable, Cooper, etc. This one belonged to the writers' wing, Mr. Ernest Hemingway; not bad, but in my book at least, no Drop Deader. But, in the books that mattered, he was; so he was.

A real DD, Scott, had spent the day at MGM surrounded by Coke bottles. Not, I should add, doing much besides draining them and doodling. When he returned to the G of A, he retreated to the unit he shared with Eddie Mayer. I heard them gabbing; I loved parking near the stairs and inhaling writer. That's when I heard a third party, the thinly firm voice of Bob Benchley. And Bob was insistent on something. After a particularly insistent harangue, Scott let out a loud sigh, followed by, "All right, just for you."

Then a clatter of feet on the stairs. I scooted to the desk and shuffled papers. Stonecold sober, Benchley descended, followed by Scott in his polo coat. When he saw me, FSF stopped on the last step and said, "Why, hello, Jimmy; you know Bob Benchley?"

"Sure," I said. "Hiya, Mr. B."

"Hello, Jimmy," Benchley said.

Scott said, "You know where Freddie March's house is?"

"Hey, I drove a tour bus for two weeks."

"Good," Scott said. "You'll drive us there? We're going to look upon Jesus Christ."

"March?"

Benchley said, hoisting an eyebrow, "Ernest Christ Heminway."

"Oh, him. Is this in connection with his Spanish Civil War picture? I hear he's all hopped up over that war and his picture."

"*This Spanish Earth*," Benchley murmured with unusual firmness.

Scott said quickly, "Bob, Jimmy will drive us over."

It wasn't too far from Allah and pretty much a straight run, but you would think we were driving to Death Valley. Scott was paler than usual and his voice when he talked was as shaky as Eddie Robinson's in *Two Seconds* as we drove in his '34 Ford (which he had bought for the trip back and forth to MGM. He had been signed for *A Yank at Oxford* because a Princeton man was sure to know all about college life). His shaky voice was no mystery to me; I'd heard that he and Jesus had had a b-i-i-ig grudge fight, but it wasn't my place to intrude, so I didn't.

As it turned out, there was no epic confrontation, or even a tepid confrontation. The Drop Deader was being Lionized, also Universalized, Columbiaized and RKOized. As this disgusting stuff was happening, Benchley headed for and surrounded a tasty dish named Martha Gellhorn, who turned from tight to bright. I had heard she was Jesus's latest.

Scott and I parked in the rear of the giant living room that doubled as a movie theater. Ernie Christo introduced his picture by saying this is a film that will speak for itself. Now when a movie is called a film, scrunch up your eyes, ears and nose; sure enough, the thing Hemmo rolled out would not have gotten ½ star from the *Daily News*. Naturally, that did not stop palms from cracking and whistles piercing. As the King of Kings sucked it all in, Scott said, with a stamped-on smile, let's drown our appreciation in Cokes and ice cream in the kitchen; J. C. won't even notice.

Wondering how these two could ever have been buddies and concluding it must have been a grim fairy tale, I followed him into the kitchen where Benchley was drinking Scotch and Gellhorn was sipping white wine. Scott said he needed a snort but would settle for ice cream. Bob nodded at an enormous fridge and Scott helped himself. I asked for gin. Bob pointed to a mahogany cabinet. I pulled out a fifth of Beefeater and cradled it between snorts.

Perched on a stool downing his ice cream, Scott looked like he'd rather be in West Egg. Benchley said in his fuzzy-kind way, "So, when is Franco giving Ernest a medal?"

“Was it as bad as I think?” Scott asked.

“Yes,” Bob said.

“Forget it,” Gellhorn said. “I’ve seen it five times and I have. I hear a bunch of them are going over to Dottie Parker’s. Shall we go?”

“Will J. C. be there?” Scott asked.

Benchley said, “If Martha’s there, Ernest will be there.” He smiled benignly.

About Dottie Parker: face like Stanwyck’s, hot to trot and disgusted-withtheworld, but like so many tormented-sizzlers, a truly sweet dame. And, as one of the New York crowd, she knew all about Scott and his love affair with the sauce. After an emphatic kiss, she told him the kitchen and its frozen contents were his. Linking her arm in mine, she said, “I just noticed, Jimmy; in a certain light you’re kinda cute; stick close; maybe you’ll get lucky.”

Squeezing tight, she walked us into the living room featuring the sun and his many planets. We hung on the outer fringes but then Hemmer, who’d been lecturing on the Basques, spotted us. He pushed the adoration aside, bulled up to us, yanked Dottie away and encircled her with his Strangler-Lewis arms.

“You little box,” he roared, “let’s do it.”

“Sure,” she said. “I’m on top.”

That got a burst of applause. She tossed him her tormented smile and said, “So when is El Cid coming out?”

J. C. grew solemn. “Believe it or not, you bitch, I’m the only writer in the world who isn’t touching Spain.”

“Great,” she said, “I’ll tell Scott it’s wide open.”

“Tell the world, baby.”

“Jimmy,” she said, “would you like to work on this guaranteed smasher with Mr. Fitz?”

“It’d be an honor, but we’re both writing screenplays.”

“That’s a whore’s profession,” yelled Hemmer.

Dottie grinned like Stanwyck nailing Fred MacMurray. “Honest

whores give you your money's worth," she said sweetly.

"Bitch. But I luvya."

He turned to his fans and said they could send checks to the Spanish consul or his publisher, made out to Nationalist Victory; he'd talked La Pasionara into sending an autograph for every thousand. Viva Espana! Viva Ernesto!

March, Florrie Eldridge and a slew of others gazed adoringly as Hemmer gave them the lowdown on Andre Malraux's squadron and its fruitcake leader. Rolling her eyes, Dottie led me back to the kitchen. I drank gin. Scott chugged Cokes. Dottie sipped white wine, Benchley swilled Scotch, and Gellhorn, holding her wine glass in one hand, kept feeling me up with the other.

When I look back at that party, I realize I was witness to an end and a beginning. Scott threw in the towel that night. The King of Kings flew up to the sky. The epic of Espana became the talk of the world. Benchley said it was a nice try. I said I'd take *The Return of Fu Manchu*. Scott said Jimmy has excellent taste.

II

Introducing Sheilah Graham. Nee Lily Sheil. Sheil, Sheilah, get it? A gorgeous dame from London who should have been a Dame; but she was a Jewish cockney and those birds don't make Damehood unless they marry a duke or a marquess. Which she was about to do until Scott got an eyeful at a party Benchley threw to celebrate her engagement to the marquess of soandso. Sheilah was a Drop Deader in her own category, which was face/figure/hair/gams/smarts, a package deal. When she got off the train in L. A., she took one look at Parsons and Hopper and said, the hell with movie stardom; I'll take gossip stardom; by the time she had worked her way up to the marquess, she was tightly crowding the big two.

Well, the night Scott looked at Sheilah, Sheilah looked at Scott; they talked and talked and five hours later, the marquess was GWTW. Scott was married? So? His wife was in the funny farm? So? Slavko Vorkapitch said it for the world: dey vas smitten!

And gorgeous Sheilah turned out to be good for the guy. He put on a coupla pounds, got a haircut, bought a new suit, sent his coat to the cleaner. She even made him chicken soup and oatmeal. AND kept him on the wagon (for a while).

When word of that got around, he landed another job at MGM and, like Sheilah, it was classy and glossy. *Three Comrades* was a book by the *All Quiet* guy, Erich Maria Remarque, a man, like Scott, who couldn't write a clumsy line if he tried. And *Three Comrades* talked to Scott. It was a German Dos Passos and for FSF Dos was king of the universe. And, believe you me, the guy worked on it. The trouble was, he was writing a novel of a novel. Great if you're translating Erich Maria into English, not so great if they're paying you to write a screenplay. I had to tell him.

He pulled a face and said, "Funny."

"What is?"

"Mankewicz said the same thing." (Joe M., his producer.)

"Well?"

"He's assigning me a mechanic to make literature literate."

"I hope you were polite."

"Sure. I politely argued."

"Well, you like the paycheck, right? And you promised to listen, right?"

Sigh, oh sigh.

Scott wrote gorgeously, the mechanic tinkered mechanically, and the treatment I read was literature for the masses, as good as the script for *All Quiet*, which Lew Milestone let me read when I took him to the fights. PROBLEM: Joe Mank didn't agree. The way I got it from Sheilah, Joe said the dialogue was not talkable (!) and Maggie Sullavan had complained about her lines. If that's true, Maggie must have been having one of her nervous breakdowns. Whatever, Joe re-wrote the whole shooting match. You might say, so? Mank is a damn good writer. Agreed. He just isn't a GREAT writer. Yeah, Scott took it hard. He wrote letters to Mank that sounded like Europe's leaders sucking up to Hitler. E.g., "Joe, I'm a good

writer, honest.” It gave me indigestion. I told Scott. He called me a traitor. I called him disgusting. He ranted. He raved. He didn’t talk for two days. Then, he tore up the remaining letters and took us to see *The Awful Truth*.

III

This time, he got a writing credit, which he ascribed to Joe’s guilty conscience and which he hadn’t gotten for *A Yank at Ox. Three Comrades* was a hit (I’m serious) and with that and the credit under his belt, Scott was re-signed with a raise. They sent him to Hunt Stromberg, a writer’s producer (with a bad back; hold on to that back). Hunt, a good guy, was hot to trot with a Joan Crawford property called *Infidelity*. And Joan was also hot (to trot). Now, I like Joanie; I admire the way she scrapped her way to the top. AND stays there. But, when it comes to acting, let me put it this way: it takes her fifteen minutes to go from sad to glad. So, I sympathized and empathized when Scott told me what I already knew.

“And,” he said, “I’ve got a bigger problem. So has Hunt. How in the world can we get a picture called *Infidelity* past the Hays Office? It’s killing Hunt’s back.”

“Will Hays is a post office guy and his people were probably mail carriers. How about calling it *Fidelity*? They won’t know the difference.”

“Wow. You *are* great with titles.”

Stromberg loved it. And, they didn’t know the difference and that includes Joan. But, somebody figured it out (I suspected Romanov) and leaked to Mayer. Louis got crazy, said they were playing him for a green-horn and screamed so loud that Stromberg’s back collapsed. So did *Fidelity*. Scott went on a diet of vanilla, butter pecan, strawberry, peach and cherry fudge and spiked his Coke with Pepsi.

Then, what does he do? Decides to take a vacation. With the family. Could even I make that up? As usual, I got the (grisly) details from Sheilah: he called Zelda’s doctor and convinced him it would be good for Z (he was a top convincer); Scottie was always coiled for a break from school. He flew east on his MGM money and picked them up in New York and they trained down to Virginia Beach and Norfolk, both out of

the Fitz family memory book.

Then. Lordy, *then*. From day one, hour one, Mum and Dad fought. In front of Scottie, in back of Scottie, to the left and right of Scottie. Naturally, at the opening bell, Scott dived off the wagon. After two days and six quarts, he conked out in the lobby. Zelda, crazy like a vulture, told the manager her husband was looney and possibly dangerous, but not to worry, she knew just how to handle him. Which she did by neatly skipping town with Scottie.

Scott finally came to. Somehow, the concierge got him out to the train, poured him into it and sent him back to L.A. He had enough sense left to call Sheilah. She cabbed to the station and brought him back to the flat in Hollywood Hills. There, Miss Nightingale nursed him until he could stand, even totter. "And then," she said, her voice breaking, "he showed his gratitude by blaming everything on me. Jimmy, he called me a *tart*, that little bahstard. I'm sending him back to you."

"Is this the end of the line?"

Her voice quavered. "Of course not."

Our hero tottered into Allah looking like Karloff in *The Old Dark House*. Eddie Mayer and I half-carried him upstairs and, for the next few days, with oatmeal and Wheatena, got him back on his feet and walkable. One morning I picked up a poem he had slipped under my door. Here's the last part (as you can see, the genius had flunked spelling):

"Tho I've cersed you and I've flayed you,
by the living God that mayd you,
you're a better man than I am, Jimmy How."

That night I met Sheilah at Schwab's around one a.m. After I gave her a medical report, she said, "Jimmy, I've made a decision."

"Sheilah, give the little *schmuck* one more chance."

She smiled sadly, gloriously. "He always gets one more and you know it, Jimmy. The Garden of Allah is bad for him."

"Oh, no, Sheilah, he loves it. And everyone puts up with him because

he was the best. He loves that, too.”

“Is he getting any work done? Movies or his own work?”

“Well . . . he’ll report to the studio Monday. He’ll get a picture, don’t worry. As for his own stuff, you know writers; it’s all down in the mine.”

“I know this writer. He won’t dig it out in that nut house.”

“There’s all kindsa nuttiness. This is great nuttiness.”

“I say no. He’s going to Malibu. It will be a nerve tonic.”

“Suppose he doesn’t wanna go?”

“He’ll go. I’ve rented a place for him. He will go.”

He went. I thought he might pop his cork but he turned into Donald Meek. And I’ll say this for the set-up: the waterfront was as quiet as Remarque’s front on 11/11/18. In that cool hush, Sheila bolted Scott to the wagon, bolted the wagon to a typewriter. And thus . . .

IV

Walter Wanger.

As in danger.

An Ivy Leaguer out of Dartmouth. A Jewish Ivy Leaguer (nee Feuchtwanger). Who had made some gutsy pictures (vide: *Gabriel Over the White House*). Oozed more charm than Thalberg and had a stronger heart. Married to Joan, the sexy Bennett. Was dying to do a picture about his alma mater. And who better to write *Winter Carnival* than fellow Ivy Leaguer, Scott Fitz? One call and FSF grabbed it. Then I found out about the COLLABORATOR. Before I could yell, he said yeah, yeah, but this kid is a winner, just got out of Dartmouth himself and has read all my books. Budd Schulberg, two d’s. Son of Ben Schulberg, who used to be a big shot at Paramount. “Maybe,” he said with his Spanky McFarland grin, “I’ll teach the English teachers up there how to teach English.”

This I got from Ben Schulberg, Budd’s old man, who liked to hang around Allah and sniff days of glory.

“Scott’s bimbo,” he said, “flew east with the boys.”

“She is not a bimbo.”

“Palm me. May I carry on?”

“Shoot.”

“Like I said, the lady flew east with the boys. She put them on the train to Hanover. That’s the location of Dartmoor.”

“Dartmouth.”

“Right. Well, on the train, they got chummy and Budd opened a bottle of champagne I gave him. They rolled into the place feelin’ nice and warm even tho it’s cold in Dartmoor.”

“Did they produce a goddam script?”

“What kinda script? They was talkin’ important stuff and imbibin’ . . . ”

“Was Wanger up there?”

“Sure. A producer what cares hasta be on the scene.”

“Did he fire them?”

“Of course he did. I’d fired them also.”

“Did Budd get Scott back to New York?”

“Of course. He’s a good boy. Budd and the ladyfriend checked him into a hospital right away because he had a high tempacha.”

“He’s worried about TB. That’s why he wears an overcoat.”

“He should try a mustid plasta.”

I left him and drove over to Sheilah’s place. I said I thought Scott would be there.

“He sneaked out of the hospital and made it back to L.A.”

“He’s at Malibu?”

“Malibu was too expensive and he wouldn’t take money from his ‘courtesan.’ So, I found him a place on Eddie Horton’s estate.”

“You wanna drive over with me?”

“Not tonight; I need time off. The bahstard pulled a gun on me; I had to wrestle it away. It’s a good thing I’m stronger than he is when he’s pissed. Maybe he’ll shoot himself and do us all a favor.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Boulder Dam cracked wide open.

I drove to Eddie Horton’s in Encino. FSF looked like always after a binge, stupid. He was sitting in a mushy Morris chair, staring at a half-

empty quart of sherry. I grabbed the bottle and poured the rest down the toilet. He rocked to his feet and told me to put up my dukes. I shoved him back into the chair.

“Keep this up,” I said, “and Sheilah may take you back, but I won’t.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Yes.”

“You would desert the one person who understands you?”

“Yes.”

He began to cry. He peeked out from under the tears. “Well,” he said, “that cooks my goose.” He got up and weaved to the kitchenette. He returned with two Dixie cups filled with chocolate ice cream drowning in fudge and two wooden spoons. “Join me in sweet solace.” We each had four cups. The sugar gave him the strength to sit up.

“Are you writing?” I said.

“Yes. Stories. Fooled you.”

“The Pat Hobby stuff? Pat Hobby ain’t *The Ice Palace*.”

“They’re honest.”

“You’re the best in the world.”

“What about Jesus Christ?”

“Overrated.”

He broke into a cackle that turned into a coughing fit which gave me the opening to slam him on the back. He flailed me away. “What do you want me to do?”

“Ditch the booze. Again.”

“Yeah, yeah. Then what?”

“Do what a novelist does. Write a goddam novel.”

By May, 1939, a few months before the war in Europe started, Sheilah reported that he was still dry. And he had returned to educating her (the guy was better than a college prof when he was dry). Movie projects, she said, kept fizzling out, but he was amazingly cheerful which meant, and she knew the boy, he was—shhh—working on a novel. She thought it was about H-wood, but when she asked, he was mum. The only person he confided in was Zelda, on the phone: whispers, grunts, giggles. She didn’t

even sound envious. “Around here,” she glowed, “he’s a *darling*.”

A year later, May 1940, the Germans swept around the “impenetrable” Maginot Line and broke through Sedan. Holland and Belgium cried uncle and the Brits got kicked out of Europe by way of a town named Dunkirk, which the papers pumped up as a great victory.

Scott would have given a million to get over as a correspondent; it killed him that he hadn’t made it overseas in the first big parade and he was sure we would soon be in this one. But he was now 44, had a chest made of tissue paper and no longer had any pull, as Hemmer did, who was going over as a Hitchcock movie.

He settled for moving one block from Sheilah; she was suddenly doubly precious: as a Jew, she represented all the people in the world who were taking it on the chin and, if there was one thing F. Scott Fitz understood, it was taking it on the chin.

I helped him move from Encino. Also helped him tack oaktag all over the walls of his bedroom. “Just following the war,” he said casually. “Now that the bum has waltzed into Paris.” Printing in locales, actions and characters, Sheilah said, was his scaffold for the guts of every book. She held a classy forefinger to her classy lips.

I was a happy clam.

V

Roosevelt beat Willkie for his third term and I loved it; I wanted a lifetime emperor.

After that, working on a screenplay temporarily titled “The Great American Movie,” I kept writing into the early a.m. By the end of November, I was struggling with my hero, who was a combination of Franklin Roosevelt and Sam Spade, when Nazimova walked in and said there was a call.

I followed her back to the telephone and picked up.

“Jimmy, it’s Sheilah.”

“What’s wrong? I can hear something’s wrong.”

“He’s had a heart attack.”

“ . . . is he . . . is he?”

“No . . . Jimmy?”

“I’m here . . .”

“He’s with me. But he insists on going home.”

“Why?”

“You know the man. He insists. I’d say it has to do with his book . . .”

“He’ll make it then. I’ll be right over.”

Mova’s Renault was in the shop, so I flagged a taxi on Sunset. At North Laurel, I told the cabbie to wait. Scott was dressed and sitting on a stool in the kitchen. He looked grayer than usual and squintier but otherwise not too horrible. He said he hated to bother me.

“Yeah yeah, what did the Doc say?”

He shrugged. “Bumpy ticker.”

“What’s the treatment?”

“Stay in bed. That’s what they always say.”

“And?”

“I’ll obey.” He glanced at his blond beauty. “I promised.”

“I want the little bahstard to get well,” she said.

“See? She adores me.”

The cab crawled one block and Scott insisted on paying. Upstairs we had two Dixie cups of butter pecan and I put him to bed. Then we had Cokes.

Three days later he asked me to move him back to Sheilah’s and she took charge of the medicines: seconal, digitalis followed by pheno-barb. He made noises about her place being more convenient for the doctor and his portable cardiograph machine.

“Come on, already,” I barked. “Stop with the phony ploys; everyone in town knows you’re banging her.”

“You’re absolutely right,” he said. “Alas, I’m an insufferable prude.”

Knowing he was in good hands, I backed off and buckled down to my plot, which had FDR/Spade working on the Lindbergh kidnap case. Nazimova gave me lots of time off because I was a true artist; she let it be

known she was available to play any part. I said she was so high on my list that she flew off the casting chart. She kissed me on my adorable forehead.

On December 21, I was working at Mova's desk in her office when she trilled that there was a call for me . . .

"Jimmy, it's Sheilah." By the way she sounded, I knew it was bad. "Jimmy. He's gone."

" . . . oh no . . . come on, no—"

"He's gone."

" . . . damn. I thought he was getting better."

"So did I. I couldn't save him, Jimmy."

"Don't do that to yourself. You kept him alive."

"I don't know. Did I?"

"You did. I had a ringside seat. Are you with him?"

"Yes. Everything happened in fast motion. I'm at Pierce Brothers on West Washington."

"I know where it is . . . ah, hell . . ."

The Pierces had done a beautiful job. They had tinted the pallor just enough and his natural moviestar looks had emerged. Some oldtimers said he was handsomer even than Wally Reid in the coffin and Wally was the Ty Power of his day. Sheilah was all class. Comforting the Allah crowd, the New Yorkers in particular. When I began to cry, she pulled my head to her neat little headlights and murmured yes, yes, I know.

I calmed down and sighed, "What about the funeral?"

"Back east . . . Maryland. I spoke with Mr. Ober, his agent. He's handling everything."

"Are you going east?"

"I'd love to, but you know him. Wouldn't want his family to mix with his paramour."

"Who kept him alive."

"You don't know how much I appreciate that. And Jimmy . . ."

"Yeah?"

“How many women have slept with a genius?”

Zelda felt she wasn't “up” to attending the funeral. But we got one laugh out of the final scene: the Baltimore Diocese wouldn't give him a Catholic burial because, get this, he wasn't practicing his religion when he died. Translation: somebody spilled about Sheilah. So, F. Scott Fitzgerald was buried by an Episcopal priest. I could hear him: “What the hell, a priest is a priest.”

I helped Sheilah clean out his apartment. Scott had always been a favorite of Mova's because of his charming manners; she said, by all means take all the time you need. I spent the beginning of 1942 running back and forth to North Hayworth Avenue. It was rough at first, but there were good moments: one day we dug up some story ideas: PAT HOBBY CHORMS MADGA GOBELS, GERTRUDE STINE SECRIT AJENT, FOR WHOM THE BALL BOWNCES . . .

The pot of gold, of course, was the novel to date, plus notes. It categorically told us that Monroe Stahr was Scott as Thalberg. We even found a pack of index cards that showcased some titles: STAHR: A ROMANCE; THE LOVE OF THE LAST TYCOON: A WESTERN; THE LAST OF THE TYCOONS. As FSF fans know, his Princeton “pal” finished the book based on the notes (we found) and tagged it *THE LAST TYCOON*. Okay, but I tellya, I don't quite trust a grown man called Bunny.

The obits were dumb. You'd think he was big a century ago. The *TIMES* (NY) screwed up like everyone else with *The Beautiful and the Damned*. And they really blew it by calling that poor maligned book a short story. Scott shrugged it off. I didn't.

Sheilah's visits and calls tapered off. If you ask me, I'd say she was writing a book.

Near the end of January, as the British drove toward Benghazi in North Africa, I asked Nazimova if I could move into Scott's room. She

looked into my eyes and said but of course, *mon cher*.

True confession: I still couldn't work. I sat at the man's desk and inhaled FSF punkiness. I kept staring at the walls, tried a line, scratched it out. My hero, Sam Rose, was up shit creek but whenever I tried to throw him a paddle, it sank beneath a montage of Scott: chugging a Coke, looking painfully at Hemmer, gazing mournfully, happily, at Sheilah, getting stinko with Budd, genuflecting to Joe Mank, spooning up ice cream or chicken soup. I kept staring at that uglymagic picture.

Until one late night, as the Philippines were sliding down the tube and Goering was bombing the hell out of London, and Ed Murrow was calmly telling us that London could take it, I went downstairs and got myself a bottle of vodka, went back up, sat at that desk and took a long swig. I stared out at a brilliant, star-sprinkled California night, then gazed at my manuscript. I took a deep gulp of sour-punky writer's air, said Sorry, Sam, and tore *The Great American Movie* into bits and pieces and swept them onto the cracked and grimy floor.

Then, I took another swig of vodka, and dived thankfully, furiously into *Scott Fitzgerald Has Left the Garden of Allah*.