Fitzgerald Explodes His Heroine

BY JAMES L.W. WEST III

In March 1937, F. Scott Fitzgerald was living in a hotel in Tryon, North Carolina, attempting to write short stories for the New York magazine market. His situation was discouraging: he was heavily in debt to Charles Scribner's Sons, his publisher, and to Harold Ober, his literary agent. Fitzgerald had been in debt to Scribner's and Ober many times before, but he had always been able to rescue himself by writing fiction for popular magazines—especially for his best-paying market, The Saturday Evening Post, and for such magazines as Redbook, Metropolitan, Woman's Home Companion, and Liberty. By 1937, however, Fitzgerald had lost the knack of writing for the magazines, and his stories were not selling. He had his drinking under control, was in relatively good health, and was working hard on his fiction, but during the troubled years of 1935 and 1936—years that had seen the publication of his penetrating Crack-Up essays and other confessional writings for Esquire magazine—Fitzgerald had somehow lost the ability to turn out consistently saleable short fiction.

This situation was caused in part by his inability to continue to write convincingly about a character who had appeared in his stories for years—the Fitzgerald heroine. Young, beautiful, and willfully independent, she had become a feature of his popular fiction for the Post and other magazines. His female characters like Ardita Farnam of "The Offshore Pirate," Nancy Lamar of "The Jelly-Bean," Rags Martin-Jones of "Rags Martin-Jones and the Prince of W-les," and Emily Castleton of "Majesty" had become trademarks of Fitzgerald's work. By 1937, however, he was no longer much interested in this heroine, and his attempts to recreate her for the "slick" magazines were mostly unsuccessful. His wife Zelda, on whom many of these heroines had been modeled, was now confined to a mental hospital; Fitzgerald himself had recently turned 40; the glamorous 20s and the glamorous legend the Fitz toughals had created were dead.
Fitzgerald's published short fiction from 1935 to 1937 reflects these difficulties. Stories like "The Intimate Strangers," "The Passionate Eskimo," "Zone of Accident," "Fate in Her Hands," "Image on the Heart," "Too Cute for Words," "Inside the House," and "Trouble" have always puzzled Fitzgerald scholars and critics. The familiar matter is undoubtedly there, but the manner is distinctly lacking. The heroines especially are curiously diminished versions of their more engaging, vital sisters from Fitzgerald's earlier short stories. At his best, Fitzgerald could infuse the characters of any magazine story, no matter how frivolous or improbable, with a depth of feeling not usually found in popular fiction, but in the stories published after 1935 that spark of emotion is missing. Fitzgerald had not lost the ability to write: during these same years he was turning out excellent autobiographical and semi-autobiographical material—stories like "The Long Way Out" and "Financing Finnegans," and articles like "Early Success" and "Afternoon of an Author"—but the ability to write convincing romantic fiction had deserted him. As a professional writer, however, he had to meet the demands of his market. That market, as he interpreted it, still wanted his heroine.

This article is a record of one of Fitzgerald's attempts to resurrect his heroine. It was an unsuccessful attempt and a frustrating experience for him. Finally he became so weary of writing about her and so disgusted by his situation that he made a telling private gesture: he filled his heroine with dynamite and blew her up. The aborted short story published here for the first time reveals his attitude toward his heroine and helps account for the difficulties he had in writing saleable magazine fiction after 1935.1

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On 11 March 1937 the typescript of a Fitzgerald story entitled "The Vanished Girl" arrived at Harold Ober's office in New York. Fitzgerald's accompanying letter tells something about the conditions under which the story had been written:

1 The only surviving draft of "A Full Life" is part of the Fitzgerald Additional Papers, Marie Shank Additions, Box 12, Folder 11, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Marie Shank was Fitzgerald's secretary in 1937.
Dear Harold:

This will reach you with a story The Vanished Girl. It is, I think, a pretty good story—at least it reads and isn’t muffed, even if the conception isn’t very full-bodied.

The point is that I have to sell it right away. I mean I’d rather have a little for it now than a lot in two weeks. On Monday there is income tax—thank God very little, Scotty to get out of school hotel bills + two doctors who are driving me frantic. On a guess I can get by with about $900.00. Do you think Costain would give that—I have absolutely no way to raise the money

I know all this is poor policy and if I could struggle along until it could get a hearing I would, but it has been struggle a plenty to get this out—a good eight hours a day for five weeks + This the only one of four starts to come through at all. I am well, not pessimistic and doing my level best, including being 2 mos. on the absolute wagon and the next one will as usual try to be Post story but this just has to be sacrificed for immediate gold. Four hundred on the 15th and $500 on the 20th would do it. Isn’t there some editor who would advance me that much on a delivered story. Tell them anything, tell them frankly that you’ve advanced me the limit but for Gods sake raise me something on this story + wire it to Baltimore. If the income tax isn’t paid the 15th it has to all be paid—and as for the insurance...

Wont Costain come through? I mean I dont mind his knowing I’ve been sick and strapped—I honestly don’t mind anyones knowing if I can get money by the 15th. Please wire me about the story

Ever Yours,
Scott²

"The Vanished Girl" was not one of Fitzgerald's better efforts. Among the surviving records at Harold Ober Associates is this synopsis of the story, written by Constance Smith, Ober's assistant:

Girl leaves N.J. town to go to college in N.Y. and isn't found for 10 years. Man who doesn’t know her has inter-

ested himself in case and traced her. Forced to marry a man to save father she has deliberately forgotten earlier life. Carried on several careers under different names including demonstrating inflated suits for window jumping. Not credible and I fear a very dull and silly story. C.S.  

On 17 March, Ober sent “The Vanished Girl” to Edwin Balmer, editor of Redbook, but Balmer promptly rejected it. Ober seems not to have liked the story himself and had little confidence in its saleability. On 24 March he returned the typescript to Fitzgerald via special delivery and, on that same day, included these comments in a follow-up letter:

I like the first few pages of this very much indeed but when the girl floated out the window, it began to be improbable and all the latter part of the story seemed to me weak. Balmer has just declined it. I talked to him about it and he says he is very keen to get a modern story of yours but that this story is too crazy for him. I really don’t know where to offer it. I wish you could work the story out without having the girl a mental case. Do you think that Esquire would take it? That may be a way to get some immediate money for it.  

Fitzgerald attempted to follow Ober’s advice and rewrite “The Vanished Girl” as a new story, possibly intending it for Esquire. He took the first three pages of the “Vanished Girl” typescript, revised them heavily, and re-used them as pages 2–4 of the first and only draft of the new story; the remaining pages were apparently discarded and do not survive.  

The new story, entitled “A Full Life,” begins with the improbable incident that Ober disliked. The heroine jumps from the 53rd story of a New York skyscraper in an inflated rubber flying suit—and sur-

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4 Bruccoli and Atkinson, As Ever, Scott Fits, p. 303.

5 A telegram from Fitzgerald to Ober reveals that the original typescript of “The Vanished Girl” was at least 22 pages long. See Bruccoli and Atkinson, As Ever, Scott Fits, p. 299.
vives. From this point the story proceeds through various twists of plotting in order to present other scenes from the life of this heroine, whose name is Gwen Davies. Fitzgerald’s use of this name is surprising. In 1936 he published two stories in the Post about a young female character named Gwen Bowers.⁶ Gwen was to have been the subject of a series, but these first two stories are poor work, and Fitzgerald was unable to sell further Gwen material to the Post. It is puzzling to see him giving the name “Gwen” to the heroine of “A Full Life,” because this new Gwen is quite a different character from the Gwen of the Post stories. Possibly Fitzgerald was using “Gwen” as a temporary name on his working draft, and planned to change the name for his fair-copy typescript. Another possibility is that he meant for a connection to be drawn between the two characters; he wanted readers to know that he disliked the Gwen of the Post stories enough to explode her.

The plot of “A Full Life” is formulaic: There is a hero, Dr. Harvey Wilkinson, who is on a romantic search for the heroine, Gwen. The structure of the story is episodic, and the action covers 14 years. Fitzgerald was apparently planning to use the motif of Gwen’s flying and falling—from a skyscraper window, from the deck of an ocean liner, and from a circus cannon—as a unifying device in the story.

These materials are fairly promising, but as one reads over the surviving draft of “A Full Life,” one sees that Fitzgerald’s heart was far from his work. The familiar Fitzgerald style is present, but plotting is artificial and improbable, characters are wooden, and motivations are unclear. Fitzgerald apparently knew this. Close study of his revisions on the manuscript reveals that about midway through the draft he realized that the story was not going well and decided to work in a grisly joke. He filled Gwen with dynamite. On page three he added, as a revision, her comment that she had originally left home because she did not want to “raise the roof.” Also added as revisions were the identification of her first husband as the son of a gunpowder manufacturer and her cryptic explanation that she married this young munitions heir because she had “always really belonged to him.” Fitzgerald was trying to prepare the way for Gwen’s admission, near the end of the story, that she had always been “full of dynamite.” One won-

⁶ The stories are “Too Cute for Words” (18 April 1936) and “Inside the House” (13 June 1936), The Saturday Evening Post.
ders whether Fitzgerald originally meant to carry the joke out in literal terms—that is, by blowing Gwen to pieces. The surviving manuscript gives no answer to that question.

If one is so minded, one can find much interesting symbolism in “A Full Life.” The hero, Dr. Wilkinson, first encounters Gwen in 1923, when the Boom Decade is in full swing. To him her leap from the skyscraper is symbolic of the recklessness of the period. He likes to imagine her “floating slowly out over the city at dusk, buoyed up by delicious air, by a quintessence of golden hope, like a soaring and unstable stock issue.” Dr. Wilkinson, shy and retiring, is intrigued by Gwen and follows her progress through life. He learns of her two marriages, the first to the munitions heir and the second to a wealthy French count. To Dr. Wilkinson her life seems mysterious, glamorous, and dangerous, but by the time he catches up with her in June 1937 she has fallen in status. She is now working as a human cannonball in a traveling circus. By this time Dr. Wilkinson is himself 40 years old—Fitzgerald’s age when he was writing this story. Gwen has for years fascinated the doctor, but her performing name suggests that there is actually little with which to be fascinated. Fitzgerald has dubbed this heroine “The Human Shell,” and indeed she is an empty, artificial character. By entitling the story “A Full Life,” Fitzgerald is indulging in additional word-play. Gwen is “full”—of dynamite—as he proceeds to show by detonating her. The explosion kills Dr. Wilkinson, who is standing too close. Perhaps he, like Fitzgerald, should have abandoned interest in this particular heroine long before.

Exploding Gwen seems to have been a private gesture for Fitzgerald. According to Arnold Gingrich, then editor of Esquire, Fitzgerald did not offer this story to him for publication, nor is there any record among the Ober papers of an attempt to sell “A Full Life” to another magazine.7 No fair-copy typescript survives, probably because none was ever prepared. Fitzgerald may have considered publishing this story in Esquire or elsewhere as a public statement of his feelings about his famous heroine, but such a move might have damaged further his already shaky position on the commercial fiction market. Done in the proper tongue-in-cheek fashion, “A Full Life” might

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7 Gingrich to West, 13 April 1970. There is no mention of “A Full Life” in Bruccoli and Atkinson, As Ever, Scott Fitz. Jennifer Atkinson has informed me that the story is not mentioned in any of the Harold Ober Associates materials on Fitzgerald omitted from the book.
have made its point with a kind of black humor, but there is a grim quality about the story that keeps it from being genuinely funny. Fitzgerald must have recognized this shortcoming and decided to put no more effort into the story.

Unsuccessful attempts to write—unfinished and discarded manuscripts—sometimes reveal more about an author than do completed and published works. What an author chooses to offer for publication is often not a true reflection of his state of mind. In this case, the surviving draft of "A Full Life" tells us that for Fitzgerald, his heroine was dead long before he exploded her.