

JOSEPH CORSO

ONE NOT-FORGOTTEN
SUMMER NIGHT:
SOURCES FOR FICTIONAL
SYMBOLS OF AMERICAN
CHARACTER IN *The Great Gatsby*

"One day I was out in the Bay when I noticed a handsome, big yacht had come into the harbor—one of the finest I'd ever seen and, with a kid's curiosity, I made for it.

"I noticed they'd run it in so the stern was up and I realized that when the tide ran out, as it was sure to do, the yacht would tilt more and more and probably break in two. So I rowed along side and yelled to one of the crew, "Hey, Mister, you're going to break your boat!"

The Captain waved the boy away, but the owner told the boy to come on board.

"What do you do?" he asked, and I told him.

"How'd you like to work for me?" he next asked. "I'll give you \$25 a week."

"I was barefoot and in old clothes, tanned and dirty. . . . I had only old clothes at the beach . . . so he took me to Jim Bell's . . . and had me outfitted completely, with blue coat with brass buttons and white flannels. O, it was great!"

These curiously familiar recollections might belong to a diary account by James Gatz of North Dakota, or to a draft of the scene F. Scott Fitzgerald put into Chapter VI of *The Great Gatsby*. But they are from a *Great Neck News* account of the adventures of fourteen-year-old Robert Crozier Kerr, Jr., on Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn, New York. The year is 1907 and the yacht belonged to Edward Robinson Gilman, general manager of the Iron Clad Manufacturing Company, among other things, of 23 Cliff Street, Brooklyn, New York.

Bob Kerr was a Great Neck resident who became Fitzgerald's friend during 1922-23. Kerr, a jeweler, philanthropist, singer, piano player, and engaging personality, exchanged stories with Fitzgerald, one of which the author immortalized. That situation, which will be dealt with in detail in section II below, is a vivid illustration of how Fitzgerald utilized such phenomena in his fiction. Like the pearl-bearing Mollusk, Fitzgerald absorbed the life flowing around him, particularly on the North Shore of Long Island in 1923, to help formulate characterizations and settings in his fiction.

Fitzgerald, in his own writings, alluded to the various influences on his fiction. With regard to *Gatsby*, he was very explicit. The most famous example is the notes he wrote on the endpaper of Andre Malraux's *Man's Hope* in 1938:

- I. Glamor of Rumsies & Hitchcocks
- II. Ash Heaps Memory of 125th Gt Neck
- III. Goddards Dwanns Swopes
- IV. A. Vegetable days in N.Y.
- B. Memory of Ginevras Wedding
- V. The Meeting all an invention. Mary.
- VI. Bob Kerr's story. The 2nd Party.
- VII. The Day in New York
- VIII. The Murder (inv.)
- IX. Funeral an invention

Fitzgerald had ruminated over the sources he recalled for the highlights of each chapter. However, until now, the meaning of the reference to chapter six, "Bob Kerr's story," was not known.



Robert C. Kerr, Jr. Courtesy of Doris Kerr Brown.

I. The Four Faces of James Gatz

A. The early youth of James Gatz belongs partially to Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald of St. Paul, Minnesota. Fitzgerald's own life provided the idea for his attribution to Gatsby of the belief that he "sprang from his platonic conception of himself." This idea was developed in Fitzgerald's first attempt at a third novel, a piece which, in substance, became the story "Absolution," published in June 1924 in *The American Mercury*. Its young protagonist is a Dakota farm boy named Rudolph Miller who had, as Fitzgerald had once done (see Fitzgerald's *Ledger*, p. 162), lied in confession. While talking to a priest, Father Schwartz, and attempting to tell of his mortal sin, Rudolph also confesses the following:

"Of—of not believing I was the son of my parents."

"What?" The interrogation was distinctly startled.

"Of not believing that I was the son of my parents."

"Why not?"

"Oh, just pride," answered the penitent airily.

"You mean you were too good to be the son of your parents?"

"Yes, Father."

Years later, in a piece called "Author's House," Fitzgerald has an autobiographical character write in remembrance of "my first childish love of myself, my belief that I would never die like other people, and that I wasn't the son of my parents but the son of a king, a king who ruled the world."

B. It is with the second face of James Gatz that the amalgam of his early life begins to solidify. Fitzgerald introduces us to James Gatz as a restless youth from North Dakota who eschewed an education at St. Olaf Lutheran College for the promise of the open road.

In a letter to John Jamieson, dated 15 April 1934, Fitzgerald said in reference to Gatsby:

He was perhaps created on the image of some forgotten farm type of

Minnesota that I have known and forgotten, and associated at the same moment with some sense of romance. It might interest you to know that a story of mine, called "Absolution," in my book *All The Sad Young Men* was intended to be a picture of his early life, but that I cut it because I preferred to preserve the sense of mystery.¹

There is evidence, however circumstantial, which points to a well-known Minnesotan who may have been the "farm type" from Dakota who attended St. Olaf College that Fitzgerald fused into the second face of young James Gatz. Old Edvart Rölvaag, (1876-1931), the Norwegian-American novelist, best remembered for his *Giants In The Earth*, appears to be the prime candidate.

Leaving his life in a fishing fleet, the adventurous Rölvaag sailed from Norway for New York in 1896, the year of Fitzgerald's birth, and eventually crossed westward to work on a relative's farm in South Dakota. Working there, he earned enough money to continue his education. He attended St. Olaf College, the Lutheran school in Northfield, Minnesota. Rölvaag did so well that he went from student to faculty member one year after his graduation in 1905. While all his fiction was originally written in Norwegian, one of the subjects he taught at St. Olaf, and an English translation of his works did not appear until the spring of 1926, Rölvaag was widely read and famous throughout Minnesota and the Middle West. He died in 1931, and his fiction today is usually relegated to the Middle-West schoolroom. That Fitzgerald knew of Rölvaag seems very likely, and that Rölvaag served some purpose in the creation of the young James Gatz as far as the "Dakota" and "St. Olaf" elements are concerned is quite possible.

C. The next face of Gatsby is the seventeen-year-old tramp searching for his fortune on the shores of Lake Superior in Michigan.

In June 1975, The Great Neck Library sponsored an exhibition entitled "F. Scott Fitzgerald And Great Neck In The 1920's." I had the honor and pleasure of contributing to the exhibition and addressing Great Neck residents one evening on the subject. On the last night of the exhibition, I was talking with various people when I was approached by two women. One of them introduced herself, and after confirming that I was Mr. Corso, she introduced the other:

"Mr. Corso, I would like you to meet the daughter of The Great Gatsby."

In fact, I had been introduced to the charming Mrs. Doris Brown, daughter of Robert C. Kerr, Jr., who as a child grew up amidst the zany

doings in Great Neck during the Roaring Twenties. The exhibition had brought Mrs. Brown out with some memorabilia that had once belonged to her father. She produced for me several documents which not only illuminate Fitzgerald's reference to "Bob Kerr's story," but provide significant insights into the creative process in the making of "Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island."

The most significant is Fitzgerald's letter to Kerr, the date of which can be placed around July 1924, when the Fitzgeralds were living at the Villa Marie in St. Raphael, France. This letter has not been previously published and appears now with the kind permission of Mrs. Brown.

Great Neck—I mean
St. Raphael, France
Villa Marie

Dear Bob:

Thanks for your letter & for selling the membership many thanks indeed. One hundred and fifty is more than I expected. I hope some time that I may be able to return the favor.

The part of what you told me which I am including in my novel is the ship, yacht I mean, & the mysterious yachtsman whose mistress was Nellie Bly. I have my hero occupy the same position you did & obtain it in the same way. I am calling him Robert B. Kerr instead of Robert C. Kerr to conceal his identity (this is a joke—I wanted to give you a scare. His name is Gatsby).

Best to you all from all of us and again thanks enormously for your courtesy & your trouble.

Sincerely,

Scott Fitzg —

The reference in the first paragraph is to Fitzgerald's membership in a local country club. The balance of the letter reveals that Kerr had related to Fitzgerald a story about a yacht and a "mysterious yachtsman whose mistress was Nellie Bly."

To further clarify her father's story, Mrs. Brown produced an inscribed first edition of *Gatsby*, as well as clippings from two Great

Good luck — Duncan
St. Raphael, France
Katie Marie

Dear Bob:

Thanks for your letter + for calling the membership many
thanks indeed. One hundred and fifty is more than I expected.
I hope some time that I may be able to return the favor.

The part of what you told me which I am including
in my novel is the ship, yacht Duncan, + the mysterious
patron whose mistress was Katie Oly. I have my
novel occupy the same position you did + obtain in
the same way. I am calling him Robert B. Kerr instead
of Robert C. Kerr to conceal his identity (this is a joke — I
wanted to give you a scare. His name is Gatsby).

Best to you all from all of us and again thanks
enormously for your courtesy + your trouble.

Sincerely
Scott Fitzgerald

Neck newspaper articles.² Around April of 1925, Fitzgerald sent Bob Kerr a copy of *Gatsby*, acknowledging his debt to Kerr once again. The inscription reads:

Dear Bob:

Keep reading and you'll finally come
to your own adventures which you told to
me one not-forgotten summer night.

Your Friend

F. Scott Fitzgerald

According to the first news article, Kerr met up with a Major Edwin R. Gilman in Sheepshead Bay almost exactly the way James Gatz met with Dan Cody in Little Girl's Bay on Lake Superior. The second article³ paraphrases some of the first but further states:

Yes sir, it was regular Horatio Alger stuff. . . . That was "From Rags to Riches" for fair, from a dirty dory to an immaculate yacht. Bob Kerr lived on board the boat acting as his employer's secretary for three and a half years, until Mr. Gilman died. At that time he was getting \$75 a week and found. In time he developed his skill at the piano and in singing. Mr. Gilman had a fine entertainer as well as secretary on board. Also the youth had a fine training in business.

The stories do contain a number of inaccuracies, which I shall set straight when I discuss the "Three Faces of Dan Cody" below.

Before we leave the young Gatsby, there is one other matter worth exploring. We are told in *Gatsby* that James Gatz had left behind him an old copy of a book called *Hopalong Cassidy* in which is inscribed the date September 12, 1906, followed by a number of resolutions the young Gatz was presumably laboring to keep. The behavior associated with these resolutions belonged to the influence of the dime-novel adventures of Horatio Alger (à la Bob Kerr) and Frank Merriwell. As a teen-ager, James Gatz, like thousands of American male youths around the turn of the century was reading publications called dime novels, particularly one called *Hopalong Cassidy*. Why did Fitzgerald choose the *Cassidy* book and not one of those of the well-known adventurers of the time to comment on the American character of

James Gatz? It seems clear that Fitzgerald saw in *Cassidy* an association with the illusory romantic American West which served to symbolize the milieu in which James Gatz was spinning his own dreams. This was the milieu later to be alloyed with Dan Cody's—that of the real American West of savage violence.

Fitzgerald was probably familiar with Clarence E. Mulford's novels about the American West, although he may never have actually read any. His citing of *Cassidy* with relation to 1906 is an error, since Mulford did not publish his novel of that name until early 1910. The first novel in which *Cassidy* appeared was Mulford's *Bar-20* of 1907, but it was in *Hopalong Cassidy* that Mulford's new character came into his own. Mulford, who was never west of Chicago until 1924, published twenty-seven volumes in which *Cassidy* appeared, including two published in 1924: *Rustler's Valley* and *Cassidy Returns*.

The significance of the *Cassidy* reference is in the fact that it serves to expose the whole area of the dime novel to review—that medium which was responsible for creating in American youth so many illusions and myths about Democracy and the American character emerging from the pioneer west. E. F. Bleiler, an authority on the American dime novel, has made observations remarkably relevant to Fitzgerald's purpose in *Gatsby* in his introduction to *Eight Dime Novels*:

During the years of its heyday . . . the dime novel permeated young America, molding folkways in the same manner that television does today. It influenced the popular stage, and in turn was counter-influenced. Its plots affected the early movies. . . . They also offered a picture, perhaps distorted, of what was going on in otherwise inaccessible parts of the country. . . .

The dime novels also reflected and served to reinforce the general cultural "myths" of the period: the ambivalence felt toward the successful criminal; admiration for the violent egotist; worship of physical strength; the Puritan ethic about wealth; the upward dynamism of progress; the righteousness of expansion; and a simplistic morality.⁴

D. The mature Jay Gatsby owes much to the personalities of two people, one of whom was, again, Fitzgerald himself. The other, we now know for certain, was Max Gerlach, a bootlegger whom Fitzgerald knew in and around Great Neck in 1922-24. Matthew J. Bruccoli has published his discoveries concerning Max Gerlach who used the term "old sport" in his conversation. But long before we knew the man's

CRABS AND KEDGE ANCHORS GAVE R. C. KERR, JR. BIG START AT 14

A Brooklyn Boy and Spent Vacations at Sheephead Bay—Showed Major Edwin R. Gilman He Knew About Yachts—Various Routes to Maiden Lane—Gives His Two Reasons for Success

By DORIS FLESON

REMEMBER as I Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," just a month, which the great author wrote in Great Neck and which those houses brought to his door, that Gatsby still is being picked up as a landmark and along the coast by a local politician who took him along with him everywhere for a few years?

"You see," said Robert C. Kerr, Jr., in the other room, in talking of his early days "there and I were 'Swabs' one evening and I told him what I'm doing now."

"I know with that start I ought to have the whole story—Jazz-age, individualism—the very same R.C.K. Jr., of the beautiful beach house on the hill on Cedar Hill, the Estates, and at No. 17 Maiden Lane diamonds, jewelry and silvers."

"I was born in Brooklyn, October 7, 1897," Mr. Kerr told me. "I went to public school and to high school. There wasn't much money in my family and so we attended night school with high school."

"Then I was a newspaper-copier in the Brooklyn Edison Company where I was promoted to assistant secretary to the Vice-President."

"In the Summer I'd spend my two weeks' vacation at Sheephead Bay, with the folks. You know, that's where the old famous race-track was and it was a great amusement place in those days."

"I was tall and a bit and I'd always spent vacations and Summers there, played around with the boys and fished a bit. Well, one of my clients was in and schaffel yards and set them to all the rating places thereabouts. It's quite a tricky task and I made good money in it for I was pretty skillful—sometimes \$10 and \$14 a week, which was real money for me then."

"One day I was out in the Bay when I noticed a handsome, big yacht had come into the harbor—one of the finest I'd ever seen and, with a kid's curiosity, I made for it."

"I noticed they'd run it in as the stern came up and I realized that when the yacht ran out, as it was sure to do, the yacht would tilt more and more and probably break in two. So I rushed alongside and yelled to one of the crew, 'Hey, Mister, you're going to break your boat!'"

"He told me to 'beat it' and then I saw the captain and repeated my advice. He joined the crew in ordering me away when the yacht appeared. He called out, 'What does this kid want?'"

"And I being a 'brash kid' said, 'Mister, he's going to break your boat in two because they're too lazy to put down his advice!'"

"He told me to 'beat it' and then I saw the captain and repeated my advice. He joined the crew in ordering me away when the yacht appeared. He called out, 'What does this kid want?'"



An interesting and intimate view of the redoubtable trio, the Bob Kerrs and Doris, in the living room of their charming home on the hill on Cedar Hill, the Estates. It's no longer that Mr. Kerr bought in 1924 when, in that New York minute after he saw the "For Sale" sign, which has brought him one of the most prominent and best kept families who are hard-working members of the community. (Continued on page 8, column 2)

"Thus," continued Mr. Kerr, "Major Edwin R. Gilman, for it was he, hired his secretary. 'I was barefoot and in old clothes, tanned and dirty. I remember that he drove me home in his car—a Thomas Flyer—and my mother came running out, scared to death.'"

"That was your ride in one of those run-around, Bob Kerr?" she asked me. "I only had old clothes at the beach and the Major wanted me to stay at Great Neck. Then I went into the automotive business and was Sales Manager for the Duxton Automobile Sales Company in the days when cars were custom-tailored separately."

"When the business collapsed they came down, that business failed again. I had

1906 in 1908. It was Major Gilman's business to inspect customers—he was in the regular army service—and the gear traveled all over and up and down the coast in the Major's yacht."

"Major Gilman died in 1909 and I had to turn forty in quest of another job. I sold Blue-Java plans for a year, the first gas Long Island had, and I covered the 'Tillies' with plants, a lot of 'em in Great Neck. Then I went into the automotive business and was Sales Manager for the Duxton Automobile Sales Company in the days when cars were custom-tailored separately."

"When the business collapsed they came down, that business failed again. I had

came a jewelry salesman for Dineen & Clark and after a year had an opportunity to buy into a firm established for fifty years, John R. Murphy, Inc., and I became President of that."

"I required after eight years and in 1927 went into business for myself. I had studied gemology at Columbia for ten years and worked to perfect myself in the jewelry business."

It seems strange to talk to Mr. Kerr for so many paragraphs and not mention

(Continued on page 8, column 2)

The Great Neck News—unlocated clipping, c. 1929. Courtesy of Doris Kerr Brown.

identity, Fitzgerald had alluded to him in correspondence with his editor at Scribner's, Maxwell Perkins:

I myself didn't know what Gatsby looked like or was engaged in & you felt it. If I'd known & kept it from you you'd have been too impressed with my knowledge to protest. This is a complicated idea but I'm sure you'll understand. But I know now—and as a penalty for not having known first, in other words to make sure, I'm going to tell more.

It seems of almost mystical significance to me that you thought he was older—the man I had in mind, half unconsciously, *was* older (a specific individual) and evidently, without so much as a definite word, I conveyed the fact. Or rather I must qualify this Shaw Desmond trash by saying that I conveyed it without a word that I can at present and for the life of me trace.⁵

This is further emphasized in a letter Fitzgerald wrote to John Peale Bishop in August 1925:

Also you are right about Gatsby being blurred and patchy. I never at any one time saw him clear myself—for he started out as one man I knew and then changed into myself—the amalgam was never complete in my mind.⁶

Ultimately, of course, a significant aspect of the young man called Jay Gatsby was derived from the psyche of the author. Fitzgerald had a fascination with the self-made man, as well as with the romantic with "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life . . . an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness. . . ." The months in Great Neck had given Fitzgerald the opportunity to shape the experience of his twenty-seven years into the microcosm of East Egg and West Egg life; the opportunity to sum up his own disillusionment with the American Dream against the backdrop of the northeast, examining symbolically three centuries of American history during one short summer of 1922.

II. *The Three Faces of Dan Cody*

A. Of course, like most other lovers of *Gatsby*, I had noted the obvious relationship between Dan Cody and Colonel William F. Cody, the famous "Buffalo Bill" of the American West. That Fitzge-

rald intended such an association with his "pioneer debauchee, who during one phase of American life brought back to the Eastern seaboard the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon," is apparent.

It should be noted that William F. Cody spent many years traveling throughout Minnesota, appearing particularly in Minneapolis and Duluth. In fact, Cody owned property in Duluth, an estate he named "Codyview" and kept from 1899–1910. His sister, Wellie Cody Westmore lived there. Today in Duluth there is a Cody Street commemorating the Colonel. It was to Duluth from Lake Superior that Dan Cody took James Gatz "and bought him a blue coat, six pairs of white duck trousers, and a yachting cap." For the geographically curious, there is a spot on the Michigan end of Lake Superior called Little Girls Point. According to Mr. Ray Maurin, of the Ironwood Area Historical Society of Ironwood, Michigan, Little Girls Point ". . . has no bay. There is no way any yacht could anchor in this place. There is no marina at Little Girls Point. It is just a river mouth into Lake Superior with no anchoring facilities."

Fitzgerald was careless at times about facts of nature and locality. In one draft of *Gatsby* he had the hero "standing on the shore" watching the *Tuolomee* and seeing that the "very dressy little ship was going to be broken up by the tide within two hours." This was true of the yacht in Sheepshead Bay, but not at all true of Lake Superior where there are no tides, as Ring Lardner pointed out in a list of corrections he provided Maxwell Perkins after reading the proof of the novel.

B. I was surprised to learn that there once was a real Dan Cody. There are two references to this Dan Cody in print. The first, somewhat veiled, is in Fitzgerald's *Ledger*, appearing on page 177 under 1923 which reads: "March-Sold This Side of Paradise and South to Montgomery. Dapper Dan. The Whitfields. . . ." The second reference appears in Sara Mayfield's *Exiles From Paradise*, in which we learn that Dan Cody was one of Montgomery's most eligible and well-to-do bachelors in 1919 and also one of Zelda Sayre's favorite beaux. In fact, Dan Cody, a strikingly handsome young man, had been one of several beaux pressing Zelda for her hand in 1919 when she had temporarily broken her engagement with Fitzgerald. By March 1923, Dan Cody had married and the visit by the Fitzgeralds was presumably cordial; but in retrospect, Fitzgerald may have linked Dan Cody of Montgomery, Alabama to the "pioneer debauchee" in *Gatsby*, not just because the allusion to Cody suited the situation but because, psychologically, the wealthy Dan Cody of Montgomery represented someone rich who



Dan Cody, 1920. Courtesy of Miss Virginia Cody.

almost stole Zelda from Fitzgerald, just as surely as Tom Buchanan of Chicago was to steal Daisy Fay of Louisville from Jay Gatsby. The reference seems to have been intended to edify one person: Scott Fitzgerald.

C. And then there was "Major Edwin R. Gilman." As I stated above, the newspaper accounts of this man attributed to Bob Kerr were not entirely accurate. For one thing, Edward Robinson Gilman was not an army Major, although he did have a commission as a Second Lieutenant from West Point in 1885.⁷ Gilman was born in Pennsylvania on 13 October 1863. His West Point biography reads as follows:

He was the son of the late Colonel Jeremiah H. Gilman, of the Class of 1856, and was appointed to the Military Academy from Maine, his father's native state. He entered the Academy July 1, 1881, graduated June 13, 1885, and was thereupon appointed Second Lieutenant, Fifth Infantry. He joined his regiment at Fort Keogh, Montana.

He resigned in June, 1888, to enter business at St. Paul, Minnesota, as representative of the Thompson-Houston Electric Company (now General Electric Company) and established a large and prosperous business for his company in the Northwest.

In 1890 or 1891 he went to Chicago and there organized the Great Western Electric Supply Co., of which he was president and general manager. In the financial panic in 1893 the company went out of business. Following this he took up his residence in New York City, and for a time was connected with the Merriam Publishing Co. and in promoting various concerns. In 1899 he was employed to re-organize the Iron Clad Manufacturing Co. of Brooklyn, N.Y., of which he became general manager in 1900 and later, also of the American Steel Barrel Co. With these two he remained until his death.

He was Democratic candidate for Congress from the Sixth District of New York in 1908 and was defeated. The nomination again was offered to him in the fall of 1910, but his health made acceptance impossible.

Mr. Gilman was a member of the Army and Navy Club and Lawyers' Club of New York City, New York Yacht Club, The Canarsie Yacht Club, The Automobile Club of America and the Aero Club. He was vice-president of the Brooklyn Democratic Club and president of the Waterway League of Greater New York and Long Island.

He never married, and was buried beside his father and mother, at Kensico, N.Y.

His sister Katherine, (the wife of Dr. John E. MacKenty of New York City), survives him.

Edward Gilman was a self-made man, very successful and well-known along the east coast of America, and prior to his death on 9 February 1911, at Sheepshead Bay, he apparently had some relationship with that most famous of early female reporters, Elizabeth Cochrane Seaman, popularly known as Nellie Bly. The only allusion to the alleged liaison we have is Fitzgerald's, in his letter to Bob Kerr. Presumably, had Gilman and Mrs. Seaman been having an affair, Kerr would have been privy to it in his capacity of secretary to Gilman. Now we can fully understand Fitzgerald's reference to "Ella Kaye, the newspaper woman" in *Gatsby*, and why her relationship with Cody would have been "common knowledge to the turgid sub or suppressed journalism of 1902." However, there are no references to it in books and articles on Nellie Bly published over the last 53 years, since her death on 27 January 1922 at St. Marks Hospital in New York.

Elizabeth Cochrane, like Gilman, was born in Pennsylvania, and it was she, as a reporter for the *New York World*, who made headlines with her exposé in 1887 of the lunatic asylum on Blackwell's Island (later Welfare, now Roosevelt Island, and the same one Nick Carraway alludes to in Chapter IV of *Gatsby*). Her greatest claim to fame, though, was her trip around the world, alone, from 14 November 1889 until 25 January 1890. The trip lasted a bit more than 72 days, breaking the fictional trip of Jules Verne's Phineas Fogg. She was greeted first in Jersey City and then elsewhere in America with the hoopla accorded today's astronauts. In 1895 at the age of 28, somewhat inexplicably, she married Robert L. Seaman, a Brooklyn manufacturer, who was over 70 years old at the time. That the marriage raised eyebrows is quite likely. In fact, it was not long before newspaper stories cast shadows over the relationship between Nellie Bly and her husband. The *New York Times* printed the following article on 10 November 1895, less than six months after the wedding:

Robert Seaman, old and a millionaire, married Elizabeth Cochrane better known as "Nellie Bly" last Spring. Mrs. Seaman last night caused the arrest of Robert Hanson, Superintendent of a private detective agency in Catskill, N.Y.



Edward R. Gilman, c. 1903. Courtesy of the U.S. Military Academy, West Point.

Hanson, in a cab, had been following Mrs. Seaman, also in a cab, the greater part of the day. He said, when he was arrested at Thirty-fourth Street and Broadway, that he had been employed by Mr. Seaman to follow Mrs. Seaman. He made a note of her every stopping place.

After the arrest, Mrs. Seaman called to her driver "Barney! To the Imperial Hotel!"

Her husband, whose home is at 15 West Thirty-seventh Street went to the West Thirtieth Street Station and gave bail for Hanson.

This story indicates two significant things: first, that Seaman had suspicions concerning Nellie's behavior and secondly, that the Seamans may not have been living together. However, not all the controversy surrounded Nellie, as is indicated in another *Times* article printed on 24 November 1895:

Chicago. Nov. 23. The litigation between L. H. Bisbee, a Chicago Attorney, and Robert Seaman, the New York millionaire, and husband of "Nellie Bly," involving the recovery of \$50,000 from the lawyer, assumed a sensational phase yesterday in the Court of Master in Chancery Leaming, before whom evidence is being taken.

In a long cross-examination conducted for the millionaire, Mr. Bisbee stated that he visited New York in 1887 and effected a settlement between Mr. Seaman and Ernestine Sanderson who claimed to be Mr. Seaman's common-law wife, whereby the woman was to go away and cease to be a burden upon his mind. The defendant said he had a verbal agreement with the millionaire that his services in effecting a release of the woman's claims were to liquidate any amount of money for which Mr. Seaman might hold Mr. Bisbee's notes.

John C. Patterson, counsel for Mr. Seaman, was surprised at the revelation of the "woman in the case." Mr. Bisbee said Mr. Seaman deeded property to the woman, and a lot of jewels, and that Mr. Seaman agreed to relinquish all claims against the defendant on the further payment of \$5,000.

How and when Nellie Bly and Edward Gilman met is not yet known, but we do know from the *New York Times* obituary for Nellie Bly on

28 January 1922, the following: "In 1895 she married Robert L. Seaman, forty years her senior, President of the American Steel Barrel Company and the Iron Clad Manufacturing Company." This is a confirmation of what appears in another *New York Times* article announcing Seaman's death in March of 1904:

Robert Seaman, President of the Iron Clad Manufacturing Company, died yesterday at his home, 15 West Thirty-seventh Street. Mr. Seaman, who was eighty years old, was knocked down by a horse three weeks ago, and died from the injuries received. Mr. Seaman's wife was with him at the time of his death. She was Miss Elizabeth Cochran, and was widely known at the time of marriage in 1895 as "Nellie Bly." Mr. Seaman was at one time a Director of the Merchant's National Bank.

It was noted above that in 1899 Edward Gilman "was employed to reorganize the Iron Clad Manufacturing Co. of Brooklyn, N.Y., of which he became general manager in 1900 and later, also of the American Steel Barrel Co." We may surmise from this information that by 1899 or 1900 Gilman and Mrs. Seaman had met. Whether this was their first contact remains unknown. Gilman came to New York City around 1894 and could have known Nellie Bly before her marriage. It is also possible that he and Nellie were the source of Robert Seaman's concern in November 1895, but it is not likely that Seaman would trust and hire Gilman several years later if he knew of any such affair.

When Robert Seaman died in 1904, very advanced in age and blind, Elizabeth Seaman was still young at 38 and Gilman was 40. Their liaison probably peaked between then and 1910. We know that he declined to run for Congress out of New York in 1910 because "his health made acceptance impossible," and he must have been inactive during the last year or so of his life. This was not the "physically robust" Dan Cody of *Gatsby* but could have been the Dan Cody "on the verge of soft-mindedness. . . ." On the other hand, Fitzgerald may have been aware, possibly through Bob Kerr, that Robert Seaman was extremely infirm and blind during his last years, although it was an accident which killed him, and that there was a struggle over the estate left by Seaman. In fact, two wills were set forth within months of his death. According to *New York Times* articles of 17 June and 2 September 1904, Nellie Bly was able to make claim to everything Seaman left:

The will of Robert Seaman was filed yesterday in the office of the



S. F. HILL & SON, NEW-YORK

Copyrighted by Nellie Bly, 1890

MADE IN U.S.A. BY FRED W. H. H.

The New York WORLD'S Correspondent,
who Placed a Giraffe Round the Earth in 72 Days, 6 Hours, and 11 Minutes.

Nov. 14th, 1889—Jan. 23th, 1890.

SUPPLEMENT—THE WORLD, N. Y., FEB. 2, 1890, VOL. 3, NO. 10,332

Surrogate. He leaves the bulk of his estate, of which the value is not stated, though it was believed to be large, to his widow, Elizabeth C. Seaman, and some nephews, grand-nephews, and grand-nieces. He makes bequests of shares of stock in the Iron Clad Manufacturing Company to a number of its employees.

To Sarah Fawcett, who was "in his household," he leaves \$10,000; to a friend, Ester A. Savage, \$15,000; to Ernestine Sanderson, \$5,000; to Catherine B. Lockwood, \$5,000.

His grand-nieces, Arlisle and Nellie Young, will each receive \$10,000, and the residuary estate will go to his nephew, William H. Seaman and his nieces, Elizabeth S. Johns and Emma S. Bennet. Mr. Seaman's wife was once a newspaper woman known as "Nellie Bly."

Through her counsel, Robert W. Hardle, Mrs. Elizabeth Cochrane Seaman, also known as "Nellie Bly," widow of Robert Seaman, who died on March 11, last, filed a second will executed by Mr. Seaman on November 29, 1897, in the Surrogate's office yesterday. This will leaves all the property to the widow.

On June 16 last David Otis, an executor and residuary legatee of Robert Seaman, filed a will bearing date of December 24, 1895, in which Mrs. Seaman got only the bulk of the estate, specific bequests being left to a nephew, two nieces, and several grand-nephews and grand-nieces, amounting to \$80,000. The second will is dated in Wiesbaden, Germany.

These circumstances indicate that Seaman made the first will out shortly after the incident with Nellie and the detective in November of that same year. It also provides the setting for what Fitzgerald may have had in mind when he alluded to Ella Kaye's attempts at separating Dan Cody from his wealth. The second will, which was made in Germany during one of several trips the Seamans are known to have made early in their marriage, gave Nellie full control of Seaman's fortune upon his death. Seaman was 73 at the time and was experiencing approaching blindness. It is not difficult to imagine Nellie working her will on the aged millionaire, resulting in her becoming the sole beneficiary of his estate. The will reads:

I give and bequeath all my property personal and real of any kind and in any place whatsoever to my wife Elizabeth C. Seaman and hereby appoint her sole Executrix.
This is my Last Will and Testament.

Robert Seaman

Witnessed:
Carl Ebbighausen
Alfred Raab

Wiesbaden 29 November 1897

The interesting circumstance concerning this will is that its authenticity was contested by Seaman's relatives, those who had been cut out altogether. However, it was not until 21 May 1909 that the Honorable Abner C. Thomas, Surrogate for Manhattan County, ruled the following:

Now, therefore, upon all the papers and proceedings herein, it is hereby Ordered Adjudged and Decreed that said instrument purporting to be the last will and Testament of said Robert Seaman deceased bearing date the 29th day of November, 1897 was properly executed and is genuine and valid; that the said Robert Seaman at the time of the execution of said instrument was in all respects competent to execute the same and was not under restraint or undue influence. . . .

Nellie had attempted to assume her husband's responsibilities during his incapacity before death, with the help, no doubt, of Edward Gilman. However, by the time the estate was settled and Gilman had himself died, Nellie had had little success with her properties. Her obituary in the *New York Times* of 28 January 1922 reads:

. . . on Mr. Seaman's death . . . she took entire charge of the properties. Luck turned against her, however, and a series of forgeries by her employes, disputes of various sorts, bankruptcy and a mass of vexations and costly litigation swallowed up Nellie Bly's fortune, however, and she returned to journalism with her old spirit. At the time of her death she was a member of the staff of the *New York Evening Journal*.

The one aspect of this situation that remains unclear is what Gilman's

role in the operation of the Iron Clad Manufacturing Company was between Seaman's death and his own.⁸ We are told in his West Point biography that he remained with the company until he died. However, the fact that Seaman's estate was not finally settled until May of 1909 indicates that the problems Nellie had with her husband's fortune and businesses may not have begun until after Gilman was already terminally ill, or perhaps, after his death in 1911. It is not likely that the businesses would have faltered while Gilman, an astute businessman, was still alive and managing them. It is also probable that the years between Seaman's death and Gilman's (1904-1911) were those when the relationship was stabilized and young Bob Kerr learned of it. Since Kerr allegedly spent the three and one-half years prior to Gilman's death on Gilman's yacht, it is likely that the affair was either still a fact or was waning during the last part of the same period. The known facts in the matter, when compared with Kerr's story, tend to substantiate Kerr's thorough knowledge of the situation, an awareness due perhaps to Gilman's trust or Kerr's alertness, or both.

It is purely coincidental, I believe, that Gilman was employed in Saint Paul, Minnesota when Edward Fitzgerald and Mollie McQuillan were married there in 1890; but it is nonetheless interesting to note that both mentor and parent of Gatsby and Fitzgerald were salesmen in the Middle West (Gilman with the Thompson-Houston Electric Company, and Fitzgerald with the American Rattan & Willow Works and Proctor & Gamble) who came east to New York (Gilman to New York City and Fitzgerald to Buffalo), one to succeed and one to fail.

D. The remaining elements of the Dan Cody characterization are interesting in themselves for their elucidation of another aspect of *Gatsby*. I noted earlier that Gilman's yacht was allegedly called the *Kemah*, although this appears to have been a fabrication on Kerr's part. Whatever its actual name, Fitzgerald chose the name *Tuolomee* for Dan Cody's yacht. It was an apt choice since Tuolumne County in California was the scene of considerable gold mining in the 1850's and 1860's. But the key to understanding Fitzgerald's choice lies in the awareness that Mark Twain once lived in a mining camp on Jackass Hill in Tuolumne County, which he wrote about in *Roughing It*. Fitzgerald was probably also aware of a much publicized event which took place at Jackass Hill on 10 June 1922 while he was at Dellwood Lake in Minnesota. The *St. Paul Dispatch* was the only Minnesota paper to carry the story, headlining the A.P. dispatch "TWIN'S CABIN DEDICATED. Author Lived in Shack During California Gold Rush." The *New York Times* story did make mention of the fact

that William D. Stephens, Governor of California, dedicated the sight as a landmark in Tuolumne County. But the other significant aspect of this matter is the fact that the largest gold mine south of the town of Tuolumne is the *Buchanan* Mine which has yielded over \$2 million. Fitzgerald may have intended a link between the fortune of Dan Cody and the wealth associated with the Buchanan family of Chicago.

III. Tommy Hitchcock, Allan Dwan, The Wilsons, Daisy, Jordan, and The Owl-Eyed Man

Back in Great Neck, New York where Fitzgerald lived at 6 Gateway Drive in the Great Neck Estates, the social life was thriving, and from October 1922 to May 1924, Fitzgerald absorbed much that was subsequently reflected in *Gatsby*.

To begin with, in the list in Malraux's book, Fitzgerald attributes elements of the Buchanans' high life in Chapter I to the "Glamor of Rumsies and Hitchcocks." Charles Cary Rumsey and Tommy Hitchcock, Jr. had large estates in Old Westbury, Long Island (actually, Thomas Hitchcock, Sr. was still alive at the time), and Hitchcock was noted as one of the country's best polo players at age 23. He and Fitzgerald were friendly, and in a letter to his daughter Scottie in 1939, Fitzgerald praised Hitchcock:

... who came back from England in 1919 already a newspaper hero in his escapes from Germany and the greatest polo player in the world—and went up to Harvard in the same year to become a *freshman*—because he had the humility to ask himself "Do I know anything?" That combination is what forever will put him in my pantheon of heroes.⁹

It is not too difficult to see how Tom Buchanan became a polo player, nor how the young military hero Jay Gatsby went to Oxford after the war. Tommy Hitchcock was one of the few very wealthy people Fitzgerald was close to in his lifetime, and one that along with Gerald Murphy, Fitzgerald admired.

The first party at *Gatsby*'s in Chapter III was one Fitzgerald created out of experiences he had at those given by the "Goddards. Dwanns. Swopes." Movie director Alan Dwan and editor Herbert Bayard Swope were well-known personalities of the 1920's, but the Goddard alluded to is not. For the record, Charles Harold Goddard, like Bob Kerr, was a Great Neck Estates neighbor of Fitzgerald's. Goddard had

large real estate holdings, and he and his wife Grace lived with their two children and five servants in a large home a couple of blocks from Fitzgerald's place. With regard to Dwan, there is a good possibility that he was the model for the movie director referred to in the scene at Gatsby's second party in Chapter VI. Dwan was working very closely at that time with Gloria Swanson. An entry for July 1923 in the *Ledger* reads "Parties at Allan Dwanns. Gloria Swanson and the movie crowd."

On the subject of Daisy and her friend Jordan Baker, I suggest a connection with Father Fay. Jordan Baker's Aunt in *Gatsby* is Mrs. Sigourney Howard, and Daisy Buchanan's maiden name is Fay. One of Fitzgerald's early and most influential mentors was Monsignor Sigourney Fay; he was used for a character in *This Side of Paradise*.

Finally, we come to the Owl-Eyed man we meet twice in *Gatsby*. As I previously suggested to the audience in Great Neck at the Fitzgerald Exhibition, my belief is that the Owl-Eyed man was based on Ring Lardner, Fitzgerald's only close friend in Great Neck. That Lardner and Fitzgerald shared a taste for literature, practical jokes, and liquor while together in Great Neck is a matter of record. It is also true that Lardner was one of the few people to have read, contributed to and otherwise criticized the proofs of *Gatsby*. There is some evidence that the men shared certain of the ideas on the American character seen in *Gatsby*.

The reference to "owl eyes" is one clearly associated with Lardner: it was a nickname he picked up while following the White Sox in Chicago as a sportswriter during the early 1900's—the team that Meyer Wolfshiem fixed.

This concludes a first examination of some of the experiences of Scott Fitzgerald, spanning the first 27 years of his life, which helped shape *The Great Gatsby*. It seems fitting in this Bicentennial year, the year in which we will celebrate the 80th anniversary of Fitzgerald's birth, that we can say with more certainty and understanding of his great American novel, "So that's what he was thinking—that's what was on his mind when he wrote it." The creative process is a bit clearer. If nothing else, I hope that I have conveyed with some clarity how this literary genius took the many disparate elements of his time and forged a fable that remains the most compelling examination of the illusion-studded ethos of the American Republic written to date.

¹*The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Andrew Turnbull, New York: Scribners, 1963, p. 509.

²Doris Fleeson, "Crabs and Kedge Anchors Gave R. C. Kerr, Jr. Big Start At 14," undated clipping from the *Great Neck News*; John Yard, *Duograph*, undated pamphlet published by the *Great Neck News*.

³The second article includes the following pertinent material:

When Bob was fourteen, his parents had a dory at Sheepshead Bay. One day he was rowing into Sheepshead Bay inlet when he saw the famous schooner yacht "Kemah" stranded on a bar. He yelled to those on deck to get out a kedge anchor from the mast or the craft would break in two. The captain waved the boy away but the owner, Edwin R. Gilman, then President of the Guarantee Trust Company, told the boy to come on board.

Bob put out the kedge anchor where he thought it should be and then Mr. Gilman wanted to know all about him.

⁴New York: Dover, 1974.

⁵*Letters*, pp. 172-173.

⁶*Letters*, p. 358.

⁷Besides the discrepancies in first name and military rank, the Kerr articles include the following errors:

- A. The reference to Gilman's being the President of the Guarantee Trust Company. Sources at the Morgan Guaranty Trust Company, 15 Broad Street, N.Y., advised that Alexander J. Hemphill, not Gilman was the company's leader during the period in question.
- B. The reference to Gilman's owning the yacht *Kemah*. Based on research by Ms. Elsa Resnick, Reference Librarian at the Great Neck Library in New York, the yacht *Kemah* was owned by Thomas Alsop of Connecticut in 1908 and 1909. The ship was built in 1906 and was first named *America*, a fact which along with the other points appears in *Lloyd's Register of American Yachts*.
- C. The reference to Gilman's death in 1909. Edward R. Gilman died on 9 February 1911 of carcinoma of the prostate and chronic hepatitis at his home in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, N.Y.
- D. The reference to Gilman's occupation as a canteen inspector for the Army. All factual information known about Edward R. Gilman establishes that he left the military in 1888 and was involved in numerous business ventures until his death. The reference to canteen inspection is either a complete fabrication or there may be a remote chance that the Iron Clad Manufacturing Company produced canteens under a government contract.

⁸For the record, Edward Gilman did not appear to benefit in any unusual way from his position with Seaman's companies or his relationship to Nellie Bly. Gilman never became an officer of Seaman's companies, and at the time of his death in 1911, he left less than \$1,000 in his estate. There was a search for his will but none was found. In May, 1913, Letter of Administration were granted to J. Holly Clark, Jr. of Flushing, N.Y. who had a claim of \$330.22 against Gilman's estate. Clark had assumed the bill due the Stephen Merritt Burial and Cremation Company for materials furnished and services rendered for Gilman's funeral. It appears that Gilman and Nellie Bly may have ended their liaison or that Nellie could not come forth at the time of Seaman's death. In any event, since Clark and Gilman's survivors could not locate a will, Clark's petition was granted and the matter closed. Strange as it may seem, Edward Gilman was nearly poor when he died.

⁹*Letters*, p. 49.

