

Untitled Fitzgerald paper
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by Fred Coppersmith

"I have asked a lot of my emotions," wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald, "one hundred and twenty stories. The price was high...because there was one little drop of something, not blood, not a tear, not my seed, but me more intimately than these, in every story, it was the extra I had." Indeed, F. Scott Fitzgerald and the life that he led cannot be readily divorced from the stories that he wrote. These stories, reflecting both the drunken excesses of the 1920s Jazz Age and the subsequent sobriety of the Great Depression, parallel Fitzgerald's own life in innumerable ways, and very often he and his characters are one and the same. Like Hemingway and other fellow American expatriate authors of the time, there is an umbilical connection between the work that Fitzgerald produced and the life that he led -- from the intoxicated revelry of the Roaring Twenties to the quiet maturity of his later years. Nowhere is this more evident than in his short story "Babylon Revisited," in which the history of Charlie Wales is strikingly similar to Fitzgerald's own.

Charlie Wales, one might then argue, *is* the F. Scott Fitzgerald of the 1930s, a more sedate and more mature man -- a far cry from the boisterous and perhaps decadent Jazz Age. "We were sort of royalty," Charlie says, remembering those drunken days and nights in Paris, "almost infallible, with a sort of magic around us." This world, teeming with Americans, was, as Fitzgerald himself wrote, a world where "the hangover became a part of the day as well allowed-for as the Spanish siesta." It is not, however, the world to which Charlie Wales feels he still belongs. "...It was nice while it lasted," he remarks, but at the same time we realize how briefly it did.

Charlie Wales, or at least the man we meet in "Babylon Revisited," is instead a man transformed by the Great Depression, by personal loss and a nervous breakdown exacerbated by alcoholism. His life and the events that have led him to this particular point mirror, in almost exact detail, the life of F. Scott Fitzgerald leading up to 1935, the year in which the story was published. As Arthur Mizener notes in *The Far Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald was quite simply a drunk, and of the same sort as Charlie Wales. Upon receiving a magnum of champagne on one occasion, Mizener states, Fitzgerald quickly proceeded to become intoxicated; "...it was, for Fitzgerald," he writes, "the beginning of trouble. When they reached New York he provided himself with gin to carry on where the champagne left off and by the time they were on the train...he had reached the stage where he was telling everyone who he was and how much he earned." Mizener also recounts stories of Fitzgerald, excluded from a party and throwing garbage over the wall at the guests and the sort of "champagne dinners and long luncheons that began at two and ended in a blurred vision" that Fitzgerald himself describes in "Babylon Revisited."

Fitzgerald's drunken behavior, largely abandoned near the end of his short life (if only for health reasons), is obviously not so far removed from the actions of a man who, as Charlie Wales recalls, would steal a butcher's tricycle in a state of "utter irresponsibility." "In retrospect, it was a nightmare," Charlie now feels. Perhaps it was indeed fun while it lasted, but, as Charlie points out, "it went just as quick as it came." And, Charlie is also quick to acknowledge, that is perhaps for the best.

For Charlie Wales -- and, indeed, for F. Scott Fitzgerald -- happiness is no longer found at the bottom of a bottle, and the old life of parties past dawn holds very little appeal. "So much for the effort and ingenuity of Montmartre," Charlie thinks, wandering Paris. "All the catering to vice and waste on an utterly childish scale, and he suddenly realized the meaning of the word 'dissipate' -- to dissipate into thin air; to make nothing out of something." Both Wales and Fitzgerald have staggered back from the edge, and, having stared into that abyss, have forced themselves to rebuild their lives. Both have endured alcoholism and mental breakdowns; both have lost wives -- Charlie to death, Fitzgerald to the manic depression that plagued Zelda all her life. Both, it could be argued, are eager to recreate that "something" they once allowed to dissipate.

For Charlie Wales, the all-important goal is regaining custody of his daughter. All else, especially drinking, is secondary to that. Though memories of his past life may beckon, "he wanted his child, and nothing was much good now, beside the fact." This, perhaps, is reflective of Fitzgerald's love for his own daughter,

nicknamed Scottie, on whom Fitzgerald apparently based Honoria, Wales' daughter. Obviously, neither Charlie nor Fitzgerald wished to be (though neither could they deny that had once been) the sort of people who, as Arthur Mizener writes, "rode down Fifth Avenue on the tops of taxis because it was hot or dove into the fountain at Union Square...or, in sheer delight at the splendor of New York, jumped dead sober, into the Pulitzer fountain in front of the Plaza."

"Babylon Revisited" might very well be viewed as autobiographical in nature, then. Much of Charlie Wales' life parallels Fitzgerald's, and the two are very nearly twins of each other. For both creator and creation, "Babylon Revisited" is a chance to view the past and its decadence through new (not to mention sober) eyes. It is, perhaps, a chance to atone for a time when alcohol was the top priority and money was "an offering to destiny that he might not remember the things most worth remembering, the things that now he would always remember..."