

The Bridal Party

by Francis Scott Fitzgerald

(Adapted book. Upper-Intermediate level)

Chapter 1.

There was the usual insincere little note saying: 'I wanted you to be the first to know.' Michael was shocked. She was getting married, and the wedding was going to be held not in New York, far away, but here in Paris right under his nose. The date was only two weeks off, early in June.

At first Michael was afraid and his stomach felt hollow. He left the hotel and wandered around the streets, but the fear stayed with him. After a while he recognized it as the fear that now he would never be happy. He had met Caroline Dandy in New York when she was seventeen. He had won her young heart and kept it for a year. Then he had lost her, slowly, tragically, uselessly, because he had no money and could make no money. He had lost her because he could not find himself. Although she still loved him, Caroline had begun to pity him. She had begun to see a future for herself which he could never share.

His only hope was that she loved him, and he held on to it desperately. But the hope became an empty dream, and he left for France. He carried the memories around with him in Paris in the form of photographs and packets of letters and a liking for a popular song called 'Among My Souvenirs'. He avoided other girls, as if Caroline would know it and be faithful like him. Her note informed him that he had lost her for ever.

It was a fine morning. In front of the shops in the rue de Castiglione people were standing looking upwards. Far above, the Graf Zeppelin, shining and beautiful, was sailing across the Paris sky. He heard a woman say in French that it would not surprise her if that thing started to drop bombs. Then he heard another, familiar voice, full of

laughter, and the hollow in his stomach froze. Turning suddenly, he was face to face with Caroline Dandy and her future husband.

'Why, Michael! We've been trying to contact you.'

Why didn't they just walk away, Michael thought. He imagined them walking backwards down the rue de Castiglione, across the rue de Rivoli and through the Tuileries Gardens till they disappeared completely across the river.

'This is Hamilton Rutherford.'

'We've met before.'

'At Pat's, wasn't it?'

'And last spring in the Ritz Bar.'

'Michael, where have you been all this time?'

'Around here.' This was too painful. He remembered things he had heard about Hamilton Rutherford. He knew that he had made a lot of money working in Wall Street. He was not handsome like Michael, but strong and attractive, confident, just the right height for Caroline, while Michael had always been too short for her when they danced.

Rutherford was saying: 'No, I'd like it very much if you'd come to the bachelor dinner. I've booked the Ritz Bar from nine o'clock on. Then right after the wedding there'll be a reception and breakfast at the Hotel Georges-Cinq.'

'And, Michael, George Packman is giving a party the day after tomorrow at Chez Victor, and I want you to come. And also to tea at Jebby West's on Friday; she'd love to see you. Where's your hotel so we can send you an invitation? You see, the reason we decided to have the wedding over here is because Mother has been sick in a nursing home here and the whole family is in Paris. And Hamilton's mother is here too-'

The whole family; they had always hated him, except her mother. They had always discouraged his interest in Caroline. How unimportant he was in this game of families and money! He began to make excuses.

Then it happened - Caroline saw deep into him. She saw through to his wounded heart, and something inside her reacted. He saw the emotion in the curve of her mouth and in her eyes. He had moved her. Their hearts had in some way touched across two feet of Paris sunlight. She took her fiance's arm suddenly, as if to steady herself.

They said goodbye. Michael walked quickly for a minute; then he stopped, pretending to look in a window. He saw them further up the street, walking fast into the Place Vendome, people with a lot to do.

He had things to do also - he had to get his laundry.

'Nothing will ever be the same again,' he said to himself. 'She will never be happy in her marriage and I will never be happy at all any more.'

The two years of his love for Caroline filled his thoughts. Memories came back to him - of rides in the Long Island moonlight; of a happy time at Lake Placid; of a terrible afternoon in a little cafe on Forty-eighth Street in the last sad months when their marriage finally seemed impossible.

Back at the hotel there was a telegram for Michael. In it he read that his grandfather had died, leaving him a quarter of a million dollars. 'If I'd known this a month ago-' he thought. 'But it's too late now.' After the first excitement, his unhappiness was greater than ever. He lay awake in bed, thinking of the look in Caroline's eyes that morning - the look that seemed to say: 'Oh, why weren't you stronger?

Why didn't you make me marry you? Don't you see how sad I am?'

Michael gripped the side of his bed.

'Well, I won't lose hope till the last moment,' he whispered. 'I've had all the bad luck up till now, but maybe my luck has changed at last. You have to fight for what you want. And if I can't have her, at least she'll go into this marriage with some of me in her heart.'

With this new determination he went to the party at Chez Victor two days later. He was early; the only other person in the bar was a tall, handsome man of about fifty. They spoke.

'You waiting for George Packman's party?'

'Yes. My name's Michael Curly.'

'My name's-'

Michael didn't hear the name. They ordered a drink, and Michael commented that the bride and groom were probably having a lively time.

'Too much so,' the other man agreed unenthusiastically. 'I don't know how they do it. We all crossed on the boat together; five days of that crazy life and then two weeks of Paris. You' - he hesitated, smiling slightly - 'You'll excuse me for saying that your generation drinks too much. Hamilton drinks too much, and all this crowd of young people drink too much. Do you live in Paris?'

'For the moment.' said Michael.

'I don't like Paris. My wife - that is to say, my ex-wife, Hamilton's mother - lives in Paris.'

'You're Hamilton Rutherford's father?'

'Yes. And I'm not denying that I'm proud of what he's done. I was just talking about young people in general.'

'Of course.'

Michael looked up as four people came in. He felt suddenly that his dinner coat was old and shiny; he had ordered a new one that morning. The people who had come in were rich and sure of themselves. When Caroline arrived, Michael hardly had time to talk to her. He could see that, like the others, she was tired. She was pale and there were shadows under her eyes. Michael was half glad, half disappointed when he was placed at another table far from her. He looked around at the other guests. They were not like the young people he and Caroline had known; the men were more than thirty and successful. Next to him was

Jebby West, whom he knew. On his left was a man who laughed a lot and immediately began to talk to Michael. He was planning a practical joke for the bachelor dinner - they were going to hire a French girl who would appear in the middle of the dinner with a real baby in her arms, crying: 'Hamilton, you can't leave me now!' The idea seemed unamusing to Michael, but his table companion was thoroughly pleased with it.

Further up the table there was talk of the financial crisis - another fall in the market today, the biggest since 1929. People were joking to Rutherford about it: 'Too bad, old man. You'd better not get married, after all.'

Michael asked the man on his left, 'Has he lost a lot?'

'Nobody knows. He's heavily involved, but he's one of the cleverest young men in Wall Street. Anyway, nobody ever tells you the truth.'

It was a champagne dinner from the start, and towards the end it became pleasantly lively. But Michael saw that all these people were too exhausted to enjoy themselves naturally. For weeks they had drunk cocktails before meals like Americans, wines like Frenchmen, beer like Germans. They were no longer in their twenties, and this unhealthy mixture helped only to make them less conscious of the mistakes of the night before. The only people who seemed really lively were those who drank nothing.

But Michael was not tired, and the champagne gave him confidence. He had been away from New York for more than eight months and most of the dance music was unfamiliar to him, but hearing a tune he knew, he crossed to Caroline's table and asked her to dance.

She was lovely in a dress of heavenly blue, and the nearness of her yellow hair, of her cool and tender grey eyes, made him dance badly. For a moment it seemed there was nothing to say. He wanted to tell her about his grandfather's money, but he didn't know how to start.

'Michael, it's so nice to be dancing with you again.'

He forced a smile.

'I'm so happy that you came,' she continued. 'I was afraid maybe you'd be silly and stay away. Now we can be just good friends and natural together. Michael, I want you and Hamilton to like each other.'

'I could kill him without hesitation,' he said pleasantly, 'but he looks like a good man. He's fine. But tell me, what happens to people like me who aren't able to forget?'

As he said this he could not hide the emotion in his voice. Caroline gave him a quick look and her heart opened, as it had the other morning.

'Does it upset you so much, Michael?'

'Yes.'

His voice seemed to come up from his shoes. For a second they were not dancing; they were simply holding on to one another. Then she turned away from him and twisted her mouth into a lovely smile.

'I didn't know what to do at first, Michael. I told Hamilton about you, but it didn't worry him, and he was right. Because I've recovered now - yes, I have. And you'll wake up some sunny morning and you'll realize that you have recovered too.'

He shook his head stubbornly.

'Oh, yes. We weren't made for each other. I need somebody like Hamilton to decide things. It was that more than the question of- of-'

'Of money.' Again he was tempted to tell her the news, but again he decided it was not the right moment.

'Then how do you explain what happened the other day,' he demanded helplessly, - 'and what happened just now? Those moments when we just open our hearts to one another the way we used to - as if we were one person?'

'Oh, don't!' she begged him. 'You mustn't talk like that; everything's decided now. I love Hamilton with all my heart. But I still remember certain things in the past and I feel sorry for you - for us - for the way we were.'

'I've got to see you alone,' he said. 'When can I?'

'I'll be at Jebby West's tea tomorrow,' she whispered.

But he did not talk to her at Jebby West's tea. Rutherford stood next to her all evening and they shared every conversation. They left early.

Michael was desperate. Finally he took a bold step; he wrote to Hamilton Rutherford, asking him for a meeting the following afternoon. Rutherford agreed.

They were going to meet in the bar of the Hotel Jena. Michael prepared a speech. 'See here, Rutherford,' he would say, 'do you realize the responsibility you are taking? Do you realize what will happen if you persuade a girl into a marriage that is against the needs of her heart?' He would explain that the question of money had now been solved. And he would demand that Caroline should have the chance to decide for herself before it was too late.

Rutherford would be angry; there might be a row, but Michael felt that he was fighting for his life now.

He found Rutherford talking with an older man.

'I saw what happened to most of my friends,' Rutherford was saying, 'and I decided it wasn't going to happen to me. It isn't so difficult. If you take a girl with common sense, and tell her what's what and do the right thing, it's a marriage. If you put up with any nonsense at the beginning, it won't last - either the man gets out, or the girl eats him up.'

Michael's blood boiled slowly.

'Haven't you ever thought,' he enquired coldly, 'that your ideas went out of fashion about a hundred years ago?'

'No, they didn't,' said Rutherford pleasantly, but impatiently. 'I'm as modern as anybody. I'd get married in an aeroplane next Saturday if it would please my girl.'

'I don't mean that way of being modern. You can't take a sensitive woman-'

'Sensitive? Women aren't so sensitive. It's fellows like you that are sensitive. It's fellows like you that let themselves be used by women.'

'Caroline is sensitive,' said Michael.

The other man got up to go. When they were alone, Rutherford turned to Michael.

'Caroline's more than sensitive,' he said. 'She's got sense. There aren't many men who are strong enough to take control of their marriage any more, but I intend to be one of them.'

'Do you realize the responsibility you're taking?'

'I certainly do,' interrupted Rutherford. 'I'm not afraid of responsibility. I'll make the decisions - fairly, I hope, but anyway they'll be final.'

'What if you didn't start right?' said Michael suddenly. 'What if your marriage is not built on shared love?'

'I think I see what you mean,' Rutherford said, still pleasant. 'But let me say that if you and Caroline had married, it wouldn't have lasted three years. You were sorry for each other, but that's not enough. Marriage should be built on hope.' He looked at his watch and stood up.

'I've got to meet Caroline. Remember, you're coming to the bachelor dinner the day after tomorrow.'

Michael felt the opportunity slipping away. 'Then Caroline's personal feelings don't matter to you?' he demanded fiercely.

'Caroline's tired and upset. But she has what she wants, and that's the main thing.'

'Are you referring to yourself?' demanded Michael in disbelief.

'Yes.'

'May I ask how long she's wanted you?'

'About two years.' Before Michael could answer he was gone.

During the next two days Michael drifted in an ocean of helplessness. He phoned Caroline, but she insisted that she could not possibly see him until the day before the wedding. Then he went to the bachelor dinner.

The Ritz Bar had been decorated with French and American flags. Michael felt different in his new dinner coat and his new hat. He did not feel such an outsider among all these people who were rich and confident. For the first time since he had left college he felt rich and confident himself; he felt that he was part of all this. He even agreed to help Johnson, the practical joker. The woman Johnson had hired was waiting quietly with her baby in the room across the hall.

'We don't want to overdo it,' Johnson said, 'Ham's probably had enough worries today. It's been another bad day on Wall Street. Fullman Oil is sixteen points down.'

'Is that bad news for him?' Michael asked, trying to hide his interest.

'Naturally. He's heavily involved; he's always heavily involved. He's had luck - until now, that is.'

The glasses were filled and emptied faster now, and men were shouting at one another across the narrow table.

'Now's the time,' Johnson said. 'You stand by the door, and we'll both pretend to try and stop her coming in - just long enough to get everybody's attention.'

He went out into the corridor, and Michael waited. Several minutes passed. Then Johnson reappeared with a curious expression on his face.

'There's something odd about this.'

'Isn't the girl there?'

'She's there all right, but there's another woman there, too; and it's not anybody I hired. She wants to see Hamilton Rutherford, and she looks as if she intends to make trouble.'

They went out into the hall. In a chair near the door sat an American girl who looked slightly drunk, but wore a determined expression on her face.

'Well, d'you tell him?' she demanded. 'The name is Marjorie Collins, and he'll know it. I've come a long way, and I want to see him now and quick.'

'You go in and tell Ham,' whispered Johnson to Michael. 'Maybe he'd better get out. I'll keep her here.'

Back at the dinner table Michael whispered into Rutherford's ear:

'A girl outside named Marjorie Collins says she wants to see you. I think she wants to make trouble.'

Hamilton Rutherford's mouth fell open; then slowly the lips came together in a straight line and he said in a firm voice:

'Please keep her there. And send the head waiter to me straight away.'

Michael spoke to the head waiter. Then, without returning to the table, he asked quietly for his coat and hat. He passed Johnson and the girl in the hall without speaking and went out into the rue Cambon. He stopped a taxi and gave the driver the address of Caroline's hotel.

Michael did not want to bring her bad news; he just wanted to be with her when she needed him. Rutherford thought he was soft - well, he was hard enough, and he would take any opportunity that offered itself. If she decided to turn away from Rutherford, she would find him there.

Caroline was in; she was surprised when he called, but she came down to sit with him in the hotel lounge. She was holding two blue telegrams in her hand.

'But Michael, is the dinner over?'

'I wanted to see you, so I came away.'

'I'm glad.' Her voice was friendly, but distant. 'Maybe we can talk a little.'

'You're tired,' he guessed. 'Perhaps I should go.'

'No, I was waiting for Hamilton. There are these telegrams for him. He said he might be late, so I'm glad I have someone to talk to.'

'Doesn't it matter to you what time he gets home?'

'Naturally,' she said, laughing, 'but what can I do? I can't start telling him what he can and can't do.'

'Why not?'

'He wouldn't accept it.'

'He seems to want a housekeeper and nothing more,' said Michael in a low voice.

'Tell me about your plans, Michael,' she asked quickly.

'My plans? I can't see any future after the day after tomorrow. The only real plan I ever had was to love you.'

Their eyes met for a moment and Michael recognized that same look in Caroline's eyes. Words poured quickly from his heart:

'Let me tell you just once more how well I've loved you. I've never doubted, never thought of another girl. And now, when I think of a future without you, I don't want to live, Caroline darling. I used to dream about our home, our children, about holding you in my arms and touching your face and hands and hair. I've never stopped dreaming, and now I can't wake up.'

Caroline was crying softly. 'Poor Michael - poor Michael.' Her hand reached out and her fingers touched the sleeve of his dinner coat. 'I was so sorry for you the other night. You looked so thin and as if you needed a new coat. I thought you needed somebody to take care of you.' She looked more closely at his coat. 'Why, you've got a new suit! And a new hat! Why, Michael, how fine!' She laughed and was suddenly cheerful despite her tears.

'My grandfather left me about a quarter of a million dollars,' he said.

'Why, Michael,' she cried, 'how perfectly wonderful! I'm so glad. I've always thought you were the sort of person who ought to have money.'

'Yes, just too late to make a difference.'

The door opened and Hamilton Rutherford walked in. His eyes were restless and impatient.

'Hello, darling; hello, Mr Curly.' He bent and kissed Caroline. 'I left the dinner for a minute to find out if I had any telegrams. I see you've got them there.' He took the telegrams from her, remarking to Michael: 'That was an odd business there in the bar, wasn't it? Especially when some of you were planning a similar sort of joke yourselves.' He opened one of the telegrams, closed it and turned to Caroline.

'A girl I haven't seen for two years came to the dinner,' he said. 'It seems she wanted money, though I've never owed her anything in my life.'

'What happened?'

'The head waiter called the police and the matter was settled in five minutes. French law takes this sort of thing very seriously, and they gave the girl a fright that she'll remember. But it seems wiser to tell you.'

'Are you suggesting that I mentioned the matter?' said Michael stiffly.

'No,' Rutherford said slowly. 'No, you were just going to be available. And since you're here, I'll tell you some news that will interest you even more.'

He handed Michael one telegram and opened the other.

'What does it mean?' asked Michael.

'Together these two telegrams mean that I have to start life again.'

Michael saw Caroline's face grow a shade paler, but she sat as quiet as a mouse.

'It was a mistake and I didn't realize it soon enough,' continued Rutherford. 'So you see I don't have all the luck, Mr Curly. And that reminds me; they tell me you've received some money.'

'Yes,' said Michael.

'That's it then,' Rutherford turned to Caroline. 'You understand, darling, that I'm not joking or exaggerating. I've lost everything and I'm starting again from nothing.'

Two pairs of eyes were fixed on her - Rutherford's calm and undemanding, Michael's hungry, tragic, begging. In a minute she had

risen from her chair and with a little cry thrown herself into Hamilton Rutherford's arms.

'Oh, darling,' she cried, 'what does it matter! It's better; I like it better, honestly I do! I want to start that way; I want to! Oh, please don't be sad or worry even for a minute!'

'All right, baby,' said Rutherford. His hand stroked her hair gently for a moment; then he took his arm from around her.

'I promised to join the party for an hour,' he said. 'So I'll say good night, and I want you to go to bed soon and get a good sleep. Good night, Mr Curly. I'm sorry you've become involved in all these financial matters.'

But Michael had already picked up his hat. 'I'll go along with you,' he said.

Chapter 3.

It was such a fine morning. Michael's new jacket hadn't been delivered, so he felt rather uncomfortable when he saw the cameras and moving-picture machines in front of the little church on the avenue Georges-Cinq. It was such a clean, new church that it seemed unforgivable not to appear properly dressed. Michael, white and shaky from the night before, decided to stand at the back. From there he looked at the back of Caroline, and the fat back of George Packman, who looked unsteady as if he wanted to support himself against the bride and groom.

Michael was standing near the door when the bride and groom began to walk back towards him between the rows of seats, followed by a line of people. He realized with alarm that everyone would see him and speak to him.

Rutherford and Caroline reached him first. Rutherford was serious and Caroline was lovelier than he had ever seen her. Michael managed to say, 'Beautiful, simply beautiful,' and then other people passed and

spoke to him - old Mrs Dandy, looking well despite her illness, a very fine old lady indeed; and Rutherford's father and mother, ten years separated, but walking side by side and looking proud. Then all Caroline's sisters and their husbands and her little nephews.

He wondered what would happen now. Rutherford had sent out invitations for a party at the Georges-Cinq, an expensive place. Would Rutherford change his plans after those disastrous telegrams? It seemed not, since everyone was moving off in the direction of the hotel in colourful groups. With their long dresses the girls were like flowers in the bright June sunlight.

Michael needed a drink. He went through a side entrance to the hotel and asked for the bar. But - how did it happen? - the bar was full. There was already a small crowd of men and women from the wedding, all needing a drink. Cocktails and champagne were served - Rutherford's cocktails and champagne. He had hired the whole bar and hall and the two great reception rooms and all the stairs between the floors, and windows looking out over Paris. Eventually, Michael went and joined the line of guests who were waiting to congratulate the bridal party. He listened to the voices around him: 'Such a lovely wedding'; 'My dear, you were simply lovely'; 'You're a lucky man, Rutherford.' When Michael came to Caroline, she took a single step forward and kissed him on the lips, but he felt no contact in the kiss - it was unreal; and he continued along the line. Old Mrs Dandy held his hand for a minute and thanked him for the flowers he had sent when she was ill.

'I'm sorry I haven't written; you know, we old ladies are grateful for-' Michael saw that all this - the flowers, the fact that she had not written, the wedding - all this was equally important or unimportant to her. She had married off five other children and she had seen two of those marriages break up. To her this whole thing was just a familiar show which she had seen many times before.

Waiters were already serving a lunch with champagne at small tables and there was music. Michael sat down with Jebby West. 'Wasn't

Caroline lovely?' Jebby West said. 'So perfectly calm. I asked her this morning if she was at all nervous, and she said "Why should I be? I've wanted him for two years, and now I'm just happy, that's all."'

'It must be true,' said Michael gloomily.

'What?'

'What you just said.'

He had been wounded, but he felt nothing.

He asked Jebby to dance. An hour or so later Michael realized suddenly that it was afternoon. In one corner of the hall photographers were taking official pictures of the bride and groom. Still as death and pale under the bright lights, they appeared like wax models.

After the bridal party had been photographed, pictures were taken of the families and children. Later, Caroline, active and excited, came and caught Michael by the sleeve.

'Now we'll have some pictures taken of just old friends.' Her voice suggested that this was the best friend of all. 'Come here - Jebby, George - not you, Hamilton; this is just my friends - Sally-'

A little while after that, the party became wilder and the hours floated past on a steady stream of champagne. In the modern fashion, Hamilton Rutherford sat at the table with his arm around an old girl of his. He told his guests, including a few alarmed but enthusiastic Europeans, that the party was not over yet; they were all going to meet at Zelli's after midnight.

'It's amazing,' George Packman was telling Michael enthusiastically. 'This party will cost Ham about five thousand dollars, and that's about all the money he has in the world. But did he change any of the arrangements? Not he! He's got something special, that young man. Do you know T. G. Vance offered him a job at fifty thousand dollars a year ten minutes before the wedding this morning? In another year he'll be back with the millionaires.'

The conversation was interrupted by a plan to carry Rutherford out on the shoulders of half a dozen of his friends. After that they stood

in the four o'clock sunshine waving goodbye to the bride and groom. But there must have been a mistake somewhere because five minutes later Michael saw both bride and groom coming down the stairs to the reception, each with a glass of champagne held high.

'This is our way of doing things,' he thought. 'Generous and fresh and free, but at a more nervous speed nowadays.'

Standing in the middle of the room, he realized suddenly that he hadn't really thought of Caroline for hours. He looked around with a sort of alarm, and then he saw her across the room, very bright and young and happy. He saw Rutherford near her, looking at her as if he could never look long enough. And as Michael watched them, they seemed to drift away into a future of their own, just as he had imagined that day in the rue de Castiglione. Soon they were so far away that he could hardly see them.

Michael was free again. The wedding had been for him an introduction into a new life, leaving old regrets behind. All the bitterness went out of him and the world appeared fresh and new in the spring sunshine. He had arranged to have dinner tonight with one of the girls at the wedding, but he couldn't remember which one. He was still trying to remember as he walked forward to wish Hamilton and Caroline Rutherford goodbye.

- THE END -

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