VINTAGE

SAVE ME THE WALTZ

ZELDA FITZGERALD

VINTAGE CLASSICS

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‘If ever there was a pair whose fantasies matched, it was Zelda Sayre and Scott Fitzgerald’ – Edmund Wilson

Christened the ‘the First American Flapper’, Zelda Fitzgerald was a famous glamour girl of the 1920s and an aspiring ballerina. *Save Me the Waltz* is her first and only novel. It is a vivid and moving story – a confessional which captures the spirit of an era and one that illuminates the life and work of her husband, F. Scott Fitzgerald.

About the Author

Zelda Fitzgerald was born in Montgomery, Alabama in 1900. She became a ‘roarer’ of the pre-1920s and met F. Scott Fitzgerald at one of the many social dances she attended. They married in 1920 and began a decade of riotous living in France and America.

Zelda wrote magazine articles and short stories, and at twenty-seven became obsessed with a career as a dancer. The couple became increasingly eccentric and erratic; Scott became an alcoholic and Zelda developed schizophrenia. In 1932 Zelda became seriously ill and wrote *Save Me the Waltz* in six weeks to the envy of her husband who had been writing *Tender is the Night* for more than five years. Zelda died in a hospital fire in 1947.

To Mildred Squires

SAVE ME THE WALTZ

Zelda Fitzgerald

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY HARRY T. MOORE

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PREFACE

BY HARRY T. MOORE

Save Me the Waltz, by Zelda Fitzgerald, is a novel of an unusual kind. Based on some of the events the author's husband, F. Scott Fitzgerald, drew upon for his own novel, *Tender is the Night*, Mrs. Fitzgerald's book is, among other things, somewhat complementary to that volume. Yet it is not patterned exactly after it, since Fitzgerald's novel didn't come out until 1934, two years after his wife's. This will need some explaining.

Whatever the merits or demerits of Mrs. Fitzgerald's book, it is a literary curio. She had at least a surface ability to write, as she had at least a surface ability to paint and dance in ballet. She had a sense of phrasing and color in her writing, as we can see in such pieces as '"Show Mr. and Mrs. F. to Number—,"' – both she and her husband signed their names to this as authors, but the wife seems to have written it, with the husband ordering it and making emendations. Of course, neat sentences about various hotel rooms the couple had stayed in do not make a novelist; but they do show that Zelda Fitzgerald had a flair. Putting a novel together, with all its problems of character and form (yes, form), was a different matter. Yet *Save Me the Waltz* has a life of its own, as a picture of a fabulous age and the people in it; the book is something more than a mere literary curio.

There are numerous books of that kind, one of which is particularly interesting because it concerns contemporaries of the Fitzgeralds'. The book is *The Journey Down*, published in 1938 by Aline Bernstein, who had been the Esther Jack of

some of Thomas Wolfe's autobiographical novels. *The Journey Down*, the work of a sensitive and gifted woman, is only a thin echo of Wolfe's own writing vitality, but the novel has an importance for those who want to view Wolfe from a special angle, that of a woman in love with him. One other example of books of this kind may be mentioned in passing: the American writer Nelson Algren and the French author Simone de Beauvoir have written separate fictional accounts of their relationship.

But among all such volumes, Zelda Fitzgerald's stands out as unique because of the intense interest readers have today in the life and works of F. Scott Fitzgerald. At this point a rather elementary review may be needed for those not *au courant* with the Fitzgerald story. The review will be brief.

Soon after the First World War, Scott Fitzgerald persuaded Zelda Sayre – whom he had met while stationed near Montgomery, Alabama, on war service – to marry him. He was starting as a writer, and his prospects were good. Maxwell Perkins, the brilliant editor at Charles Scribner's Sons, took a close interest in Fitzgerald's writing, as he was later to do in the cases of Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe. In 1920 Fitzgerald's first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, was a success with critics and public. Fitzgerald went on writing, too often forcing himself to turn out *Saturday Evening Post* stories in order to get money to keep up the high living upon which he and his wife soon came to depend. In 1925 Fitzgerald brought out one of his masterpieces, *The Great Gatsby.* The critics hailed the book, but it didn't make money. Nine years later Fitzgerald published his prime masterpiece, *Tender is the Night*, and that brings us directly to the subject of *Save Me the Waltz*.

The bare synopsis of a life, as given just above, can hardly include the elaborate conflicts and complicated tensions of the Fitzgeralds' existence. Hemingway saw that in this family the wife continually interfered with her husband's work because she was jealous of it. Her frantic efforts to

become a painter, a ballerina, and a writer were part of that jealousy. She had talents in all these directions, but was usually frustrated in trying to realize them; for example, she seriously took up ballet dancing when she was too old to achieve anything important in that field. She finally had to go to sanatoriums to be treated for schizophrenia. The foregoing sounds as if it were an outline of *Save Me the Waltz*, but then that book is rather literally autobiographical.

Until recently it was difficult to find out much about *Save Me the Waltz.* Andrew Turnbull's biography makes only passing references to it, and even Arthur Mizener's *The Far Side of Paradise* skips over the problem. But Henry Dan Piper devotes a chapter to *Save Me the Waltz* in his recent *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Critical Portrait.* Mr. Piper does more than explicate that novel; he has good words to say for it.

In her story, Zelda Fitzgerald appears as Alabama Beggs, a glamour girl from the Deep South. Fitzgerald had used his wife as the model for the glamour girl of the twenties in various novels and stories; indeed, both she and her husband had become emblematic of the flaming youth of the time. Then, after Zelda Fitzgerald's breakdown, when she was in the Johns Hopkins hospital in Baltimore, she wrote *Save Me the Waltz* in what Mr. Piper has characterized as 'a furious six weeks.' He tells more of the history of the book:

> It was a desperate and moving attempt to give order to her confused memories. It was also a bitter attack on Fitzgerald, who was thinly disguised in her manuscripts as 'Amory Blaine' [The Fitzgerald-like hero of *This Side of Paradise*]. She had sent it to Max Perkins in March without Fitzgerald's knowledge, and Perkins was enough impressed to be willing to publish it. Besides its obvious merits, both he and Fitzgerald agreed with Zelda's physicians that bringing it out would be good for her shattered ego.

Fitzgerald, however, possibly went through the manuscript and changed some of the passages that dealt intimately with his marriage. His wife at first refused to make any revisions, but finally agreed to do so; and both she and Fitzgerald probably worked on the galley proofs. The name of the principal male character was changed from Amory Blaine to David Knight.

When the book came out in New York in the autumn of 1932, the critics jabbed at it. Yet when an edition appeared in London in 1953, the British reviewers greeted it with enthusiasm. The *Times Literary Supplement* called the writing 'powerful and memorable,' with 'qualities of earthiness and force.' Other journals were also full of praise.

But five years earlier its author had died in a fire at a hospital for patients with nervous diseases, eight years after the death of her husband from a heart attack. He had not completed a novel after *Tender is the Night.* This is his true masterpiece, one of the few books of this century with an authentically tragic centre: the gifted man who destroys himself. The tragedy is all the more forceful because most of the action is intensified by the glare of Riviera sunlight.

Tender was Fitzgerald's first novel after *Gatsby*, and he spent much of the nine years between those books writing, or trying to write, that story of exterior sunlight and interior shadow. He made several false starts, and at different times was developing the novel with such titles as *The Boy Who Killed His Mother* and *The World's Fair*, the latter suggesting the novel-of-manners milieu of Thackeray. Fitzgerald had originally intended to write the story of a film technician who commits matricide. But, many drafts later (seventeen, including that of the book's page proofs), Fitzgerald at last completed his story, and it was that of Dr. Dick Diver. Various characters who appeared in the Diver version were, in one way or another, in earlier drafts; for example, the couple who were once Seth and Dina Piper, subsequently merging into Dick and Nicole Diver: based partly on

Fitzgerald's friends, the Gerald Murphys, they were, in later versions, also modeled after the Fitzgeralds themselves.

The story of those seventeen drafts of *Tender* – and for literary detectives it is a breathless story – has been fully told in *The Composition of* Tender is the Night: *A Study of the Manuscripts*, by Matthew J. Bruccoli, who is the textual editor of the present version of *Save Me the Waltz.*

As Fitzgerald worked on *Tender is the Night* after reading his wife's story, his own book, according to Mr. Piper, 'clearly became a defense of their marriage.' Readers of both books will notice parallels between points of action, especially in the Riviera scenes; and it is of absorbing interest to note the differences between the husband's and the wife's version of what was happening.

Of course Fitzgerald was a great artist, and the actuality behind the tale is of secondary consequence, though a knowledge of the underlying circumstances usually helps toward a better understanding of a story, its motivations, its attitudes, its tones. Fitzgerald transmutes everyday experience into significant art, raised to a high imaginative level, as he projects through the tragedy of Dick Diver that of his own life.

Obviously, *Save Me the Waltz* is not at this height of achievement. Yet it deserves to be read as something more than a mere commentary on or analogue of *Tender is the Night.* It is strikingly written – Mr. Piper points out that the reader who is jarred by the prose at first will find it less turgid beginning about one-third of the way along – it draws upon many modernistic attitudes for its effects of style. And, besides being an authentic picture of an age, it is a revealing portrait of a woman. It may lack the finished craftsmanship of Scott Fitzgerald's work, but *Save Me the Waltz* has a current of life running through it. It can be read for its own sake.

Southern Illinois University

October 12, 1966

We saw of old blue skies and summer seas
When Thebes in the storm and rain
Reeled, like to die.
O, if thou can’st again,
Blue sky – blue sky!

Oedipus, King of Thebes

1

I

‘THOSE GIRLS,’ PEOPLE said, ‘think they can do anything and get away with it.’

That was because of the sense of security they felt in their father. He was a living fortress. Most people hew the battlements of life from compromise, erecting their impregnable keeps from judicious submissions, fabricating their philosophical drawbridges from emotional retractions and scalding marauders in the boiling oil of sour grapes. Judge Beggs entrenched himself in his integrity when he was still a young man; his towers and chapels were builded of intellectual conceptions. So far as any of his intimates knew he left no sloping path near his castle open either to the friendly goatherd or the menacing baron. That inapproachability was the flaw in his brilliance which kept him from having become, perhaps, a figure in national politics. The fact that the state looked indulgently upon his superiority absolved his children from the early social efforts necessary in life to construct strongholds for themselves. One lord of the living cycle of generations to lift their experiences above calamity and disease is enough for a survival of his progeny.

One strong man may bear for many, selecting for his breed such expedient subscriptions to natural philosophy as to lend his family the semblance of a purpose. By the time the Beggs children had learned to meet the changing exigencies of their times, the devil was already upon their necks. Crippled, they clung long to the feudal donjons of their fathers, hoarding their spiritual inheritances – which

might have been more had they prepared a fitting repository.

One of Millie Beggs' school friends said that she had never seen a more troublesome brood in her life than those children when they were little. If they cried for something, it was supplied by Millie within her powers or the doctor was called to subjugate the inexorabilities of a world which made, surely, but poor provision for such exceptional babies. Inadequately equipped by his own father, Austin Beggs worked night and day in his cerebral laboratory to better provide for those who were his. Millie, perforce and unreluctantly, took her children out of bed at three o'clock in the morning and shook their rattles and quietly sang to them to keep the origins of the Napoleonic code from being howled out of her husband's head. He used to say, without humor, 'I will build me some ramparts surrounded by wild beasts and barbed-wire on the top of a crag and escape this hoodlum.'

Austin loved Millie's children with that detached tenderness and introspection peculiar to important men when confronting some relic of their youth, some memory of the days before they elected to be the instruments of their experience and not its result. You will feel what is meant in hearing the kindness of Beethoven's 'Springtime' sonata. Austin might have borne a closer relation to his family had he not lost his only boy in infancy. The Judge turned savagely to worry fleeing from his disappointment. The financial worry being the only one which men and women can equally share, this was the trouble he took to Millie. Flinging the bill for the boy's funeral into her lap, he cried heartbreakingly, 'How in God's name do you expect me to pay for that?'

Millie, who had never had a very strong sense of reality, was unable to reconcile that cruelty of the man with what she knew was a just and noble character. She was never again able to form a judgment of people, shifting her

actualities to conform to their inconsistencies till by a fixation of loyalty she achieved in her life a saintlike harmony.

‘If my children are bad,’ she answered her friend, ‘I have never seen it.’

The sum of her excursions into the irreconcilabilities of the human temperament taught her also a trick of transference that tided her over the birth of the last child. When Austin, roused to a fury by the stagnations of civilization, scattered his disillusions and waning hope for mankind together with his money difficulties about her patient head, she switched her instinctive resentment to the fever in Joan or Dixie’s twisted ankle, moving through the sorrows of life with the beatific mournfulness of a Greek chorus. Confronted with the realism of poverty, she steeped her personality in a stoic and unalterable optimism and made herself impervious to the special sorrows pursuing her to the end.

Incubated in the mystic pungence of Negro mammies, the family hatched into girls. From the personification of an extra penny, a street-car ride to whitewashed picnic grounds, a pocketful of peppermints, the Judge became, with their matured perceptions, a retributory organ, an inexorable fate, the force of law, order, and established discipline. Youth and age: a hydraulic funicular, and age, having less of the waters of conviction in its carriage, insistent on equalizing the ballast of youth. The girls, then, grew into the attributes of femininity, seeking respite in their mother from the exposition of their young-lady years as they would have haunted a shady protective grove to escape a blinding glare.

The swing creaks on Austin’s porch, a luminous beetle swings ferociously over the clematis, insects swarm to the golden holocaust of the hall light. Shadows brush the Southern night like heavy, impregnated mops soaking its oblivion back to the black heat whence it evolved.

Melancholic moon-vines trail dark, absorbent pads over the string trellises.

‘Tell me about myself when I was little,’ the youngest girl insists. She presses against her mother in an effort to realize some proper relationship.

‘You were a good baby.’

The girl had been filled with no interpretation of herself, having been born so late in the life of her parents that humanity had already disassociated itself from their intimate consciousness and childhood become more of a concept than the child. She wants to be told what she is like, being too young to know that she is like nothing at all and will fill out her skeleton with what she gives off, as a general might reconstruct a battle following the advances and recessions of his forces with bright-colored pins. She does not know that what effort she makes will become herself. It was much later that the child, Alabama, came to realize that the bones of her father could indicate only her limitations.

‘And did I cry at night and raise Hell so you and Daddy wished I was dead?’

‘What an idea! All my children were sweet children.’

‘And Grandma’s, too?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Then why did she run Uncle Cal away when he came home from the Civil War?’

‘Your Grandmother was a queer old lady.’

‘Cal, too?’

‘Yes. When Cal came home, Grandma sent word to Florence Feather that if she was waiting for her to die to marry Cal, she wanted the Feathers to know that the Beggs were a long-lived race.’

‘Was she so rich?’

‘No. It wasn’t money. Florence said nobody but the Devil could live with Cal’s mother.’

‘So Cal didn’t marry, after all?’

‘No – grandmothers always have their way.’

The mother laughs – the laugh of a profiteer recounting incidents of business prowess, apologetic of its grasping security, the laugh of the family triumphant, worsting another triumphant family in the eternal business of superimposition.

‘If I’d been Uncle Cal I wouldn’t have stood it,’ the child proclaims rebelliously. ‘I’d have done what I wanted to do with Miss Feather.’

The deep balance of the father’s voice subjugates the darkness to the final diminuendo of the Beggs’ bedtime.

‘Why do you want to rehash all that?’ he says judiciously.

Closing the shutters, he boxes the special qualities of his house: an affinity with light, curtain frills penetrated by sunshine till the pleats wave like shaggy garden borders about the flowered chintz. Dusk leaves no shadows or distortions in his rooms but transfers them to vaguer, grayer worlds, intact. Winter and spring, the house is like some lovely shining place painted on a mirror. When the chairs fall to pieces and the carpets grow full of holes, it does not matter in the brightness of that presentation. The house is a vacuum for the culture of Austin Beggs’ integrity. Like a shining sword it sleeps at night in the sheath of his tired nobility.

The tin roof pops with the heat; the air inside is like a breath from a long unopened trunk. There is no light in the transom above the door at the head of the upstairs hall.

‘Where is Dixie?’ the father asks.

‘She’s out with some friends.’

Sensing the mother’s evasiveness, the little girl draws watchfully close, with an important sense of participation in family affairs.

‘Things happen to us,’ she thinks. ‘What an interesting thing to be a family.’

‘Millie,’ her father says, ‘if Dixie is out traipsing the town with Randolph McIntosh again, she can leave my house for good.’

Her father’s head shakes with anger; outraged decency loosens the eyeglasses from his nose. The mother walks quietly over the warm matting of her room, and the little girl lies in the dark, swelling virtuously submissive to the way of the clan. Her father goes down in his cambric nightshirt to wait.

From the orchard across the way the smell of ripe pears floats over the child’s bed. A band rehearses waltzes in the distance. White things gleam in the dark – white flowers and paving-stones. The moon on the window panes careens to the garden and ripples the succulent exhalations of the earth like a silver paddle. The world is younger than it is, and she to herself appears so old and wise, grasping her problems and wrestling with them as affairs peculiar to herself and not as racial heritages. There is a brightness and bloom over things; she inspects life proudly, as if she walked in a garden forced by herself to grow in the least hospitable of soils. She is already contemptuous of ordered planting, believing in the possibility of a wizard cultivator to bring forth sweet-smelling blossoms from the hardest of rocks, and night-blooming vines from barren wastes, to plant the breath of twilight and to shop with marigolds. She wants life to be easy and full of pleasant reminiscences.

Thinking, she thinks romantically on her sister’s beau. Randolph’s hair is like nacre cornucopias pouring forth those globes of light that make his face. She thinks that she is like that inside, thinking in this nocturnal confusion of her emotions with her response to beauty. She thinks of Dixie with excited identity as being some adult part of herself divorced from her by transfiguring years, like a very sunburned arm which might not appear familiar if you had been unconscious of its alterations. To herself, she appropriates her sister’s love affair. Her alertness makes her drowsy. She has achieved a suspension of herself with the strain of her attenuated dreams. She falls asleep. The moon cradles her tanned face benevolently. She grows older

sleeping. Some day she will awake to observe the plants of Alpine gardens to be largely fungus things, needing little sustenance, and the white discs that perfume midnight hardly flowers at all but embryonic growths; and, older, walk in bitterness the geometrical paths of philosophical Le Nôtres rather than those nebulous byways of the pears and marigolds of her childhood.

Alabama never could place what woke her mornings as she lay staring about, conscious of the absence of expression smothering her face like a wet bath-mat. She mobilized herself. Live eyes of a soft wild animal in a trap peered out in skeptic invitation from the taut net of her features; lemon-yellow hair melted down her back. She dressed herself for school with liberal gestures, bending forward to watch the movements of her body. The schoolbell on the still exudings of the South fell flat as the sound of a buoy on the vast mufflings of the sea. She tiptoed into Dixie's room and plastered her face with her sister's rouge.

When people said, 'Alabama, you've got rouge on your face,' she simply said, 'I've been scrubbing my face with the nail brush.'

Dixie was a very satisfactory person to her young sister; her room was full of possessions; silk things lay about. A statuette of the Three Monkeys on the mantel held matches for smoking. *The Dark Flower, The House of Pomegranates, The Light that Failed, Cyrano de Bergerac*, and an illustrated edition of *The Rubáiyát* stretched between two plaster 'Thinkers.' Alabama knew the *Decameron* was hid in the top bureau drawer – she had read the rough passages. Over the books, a Gibson girl with a hatpin poked at a man through a magnifying glass; a pair of teddy bears luxuriated over a small white rocker. Dixie possessed a pink picture hat and an amethyst bar pin and a pair of electric curling irons. Dixie was twenty-five. Alabama would be fourteen at two o'clock in the morning on the fourteenth of July. The other Beggs

sister, Joan, was twenty-three. Joan was away; she was so orderly that she made little difference in the house, anyway.

Alabama slid down the banisters expectantly. Sometimes she dreamed that she fell down the well of the staircase and was saved at the bottom by landing astride the broad railing – sliding, she rehearsed the emotions of her dream.

Already Dixie sat at table, withdrawn from the world in furtive defiance. Her chin was red and red welts stood out on her forehead from crying. Her face rose and fell in first one place and then another beneath the skin, like water boiling in a pot.

‘I didn’t ask to be born,’ she said.

‘Remember, Austin, she is a grown woman.’

‘The man is a worthless cuss and an unmitigated loafer. He is not even divorced.’

‘I make my own living and I’ll do as I please.’

‘Millie, that man is not to enter my house again.’

Alabama sat very still, anticipating some spectacular protest against her father’s interruption of the course of romance. Nothing transpired but the child’s stillness.

The sun on the silvery fern fronds, and the silver water pitcher, and Judge Beggs’ steps on the blue and white pavings as he left for his office measured out so much of time, so much of space – nothing more. She heard the trolley stop under the catalpa trees at the corner and the Judge was gone. The light flicked the ferns with a less organized rhythm without his presence; his home hung pendant on his will.

Alabama watched the trumpet-vine trailing the back fence like chip coral necklaces wreathing a stick. The morning shade under the chinaberry tree held the same quality as the light – brittle and arrogant.

‘Mamma, I don’t want to go to school any more,’ she said, reflectively.

‘Why not?’

‘I seem to know everything.’

Her mother stared at her in faintly hostile surprise; the child, thinking better of her intended expositions, reverted to her sister to save her face.

‘What do you think Daddy will do to Dixie?’

‘Oh, pshaw! Don’t worry your pretty head about things like that till you have to, if that’s what’s bothering you.’

‘If I was Dixie, I wouldn’t let him stop me. I like ’Dolph.’

‘It is not easy to get everything we want in this world. Run on, now – you will be late to school.’

Flushed with the heat of palpitant cheeks, the school room swung from the big square windows and anchored itself to a dismal lithograph of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Slow days of June added themselves in a lump of sunlight on the far blackboard. White particles from the worn erasers sprayed the air. Hair and winter serge and the crust in the inkwells stifled the soft early summer burrowing white tunnels under the trees in the street and poulticing the windows with sweet sickly heat. Humming Negroid intonations circulated plaintively through the lull.

‘H’ye ho’ tomatoes, nice ripe tomatoes. Green, colla’d greens.’

The boys wore long black winter stockings, green in the sun.

Alabama wrote ‘Randolph McIntosh’ under ‘A debate in the Athenian Assembly.’ Drawing a ring around ‘All the men were at once put to death and the women and children sold into slavery,’ she painted the lips of Alcibiades and drew him a fashionable bob, closing her *Myer’s Ancient History* on the transformation. Her mind rambled on irrelevantly. How did Dixie make herself so fluffy, so ready always for anything? Alabama thought that she herself would never have every single thing about her just right at once – would never be able to attain a state of abstract preparedness. Dixie appeared to her sister to be the perfect instrument for life.

Dixie was the society editor of the town paper. There was telephoning from the time she came home from the office in the evening till supper. Dixie's voice droned on, cooing and affected, listening to its own vibrations.

'I can't tell you now—' Then a long slow gurgle like the water running out of a bathtub.

'Oh, I'll tell you when I see you. No, I can't tell you now.'

Judge Beggs lay on his stern iron bed sorting the sheafs of the yellowing afternoons. Calf-skin volumes of the *Annals of British Law* and *Annotated Cases* lay over his body like leaves. The telephone jarred his concentration.

The Judge knew when it was Randolph. After half an hour, he'd stormed into the hall, his voice quaking with restraint.

'Well, if you can't talk, why do you carry on this conversation?'

Judge Beggs brusquely grabbed the receiver. His voice proceeded with the cruel concision of a taxidermist's hands at work.

'I will thank you never to attempt to see or to telephone to my daughter again.'

Dixie shut herself in her room and wouldn't come out or eat for two days. Alabama revelled in her part of the commotion.

'I want Alabama to dance at the Beauty Ball with me,' Randolph had said over the wire.

Her children's tears infallibly evoked their mother.

'Why do you bother your father? You could make your arrangements outside,' she said placatingly. The wide and lawless generosity of their mother was nourished from many years of living faced with the irrefutable logic of the Judge's fine mind. An existence where feminine tolerance plays no rôle being insupportable to her motherly temperament, Millie Beggs, by the time she was forty-five, had become an emotional anarchist. It was her way of proving to herself her individual necessity of survival. Her inconsistencies seemed to assert her dominance over the scheme had she so

desired. Austin couldn’t have died or got sick with three children and no money and an election next fall and his insurance and his living according to law; but Millie, by being a less closely knit thread in the pattern, felt that she could have.

Alabama mailed the letter that Dixie wrote on her mother’s suggestion and they met Randolph at the ‘Tip-Top’ Café.

Alabama, swimming through her teens in a whirlpool of vigorous decision, innately distrusted the ‘meaning’ communicated between her sister and Randolph.

Randolph was a reporter for Dixie’s paper. His mother kept his little girl in a paintless house down-state near the canebreaks. The curves of his face and the shape of his eyes had never been mastered by Randolph’s expression, as if his corporeal existence was the most amazing experience he had ever achieved. He conducted night dancing classes for which Dixie got most of his pupils – his neckties, too, for that matter, and whatever about him that needed to be rightly chosen.

‘Honey, you must put your knife on your plate when you’re not using it,’ Dixie said, pouring his personality into the mould of her society.

You’d never have known he had heard her, though he seemed to be always listening for something – perhaps some elfin serenade he expected, or some fantastic supernatural hint about his social position in the solar system.

‘And I want a stuffed tomato and potatoes *au gratin* and corn on the cob and muffins and chocolate ice cream,’ Alabama interrupted impatiently.

‘My God! – So we’re going to do the *Ballet of the Hours*, Alabama, and I will wear harlequin tights and you will have a tarlatan skirt and a three-cornered hat. Can you make up a dance in three weeks?’

‘Sure. I know some steps from last year’s carnival. It will go like this, see?’ Alabama walked her fingers one over the other inextricably. Keeping one finger firmly pressed on the table to mark the place she unwound her hands and began again. ‘—And the next part is this way—And it ends with a br – rr – rr – oop!’ she explained.

Dubiously Randolph and Dixie watched the child.

‘It’s very nice,’ commented Dixie hesitantly, swayed by her sister’s enthusiasm.

‘You can make the costumes,’ Alabama finished glowing with the glamour of proprietorship. Marauder of vagrant enthusiasm, she piled the loot on whatever was at hand, her sisters and their sweethearts, performances and panoplies. Everything assumed the qualities of improvisation with the constant change in the girl.

Every afternoon Alabama and Randolph rehearsed in the old auditorium till the place grew dim with dusk and the trees outside seemed bright and wet and Véronèse as if it had been raining. It was from there that the first Alabama regiment had left for the Civil War. The narrow balcony sagged on spindle iron pillars and there were holes in the floor. The sloping stairs led down through the city markets: Plymouth Rocks in cages, fish, and icy sawdust from the butcher shop, garlands of Negro shoes and a doorway full of army overcoats. Flushed with excitement, the child lived for the moment in a world of fictitious professional reserves.

‘Alabama has inherited her mother’s wonderful coloring,’ commented the authorities, watching the gyrating figure.

‘I scrubbed my cheeks with a nail brush,’ she yelled back from the stage. That was Alabama’s answer about her complexion; it was not always accurate or adequate, but that was what she said about her skin.

‘The child has talent,’ they said, ‘it should be cultivated.’

‘I made it up myself,’ she answered, not in complete honesty.

When the curtains fell at last on the tableau at the end of the ballet she heard the applause from the stage as a mighty roar of traffic. Two bands played for the ball; the Governor led the grand march. After the dance she stood in the dark passage that led to the dressing room.

‘I forgot once,’ she whispered expectantly. The still fever of the show went on outside.

‘You were perfect,’ Randolph laughed.

The girl hung there on his words like a vestment waiting to be put on. Indulgently, Randolph caught the long arms and swept her lips with his as a sailor might search the horizons of the sea for other masts. She wore this outward sign that she was growing up like a decoration for valor – it stayed on her face for days, and recurred whenever she was excited.

‘You’re almost grown, aren’t you?’ he asked.

Alabama did not concede herself the right to examine those arbitrary points of view, meeting places of the facets of herself envisaged as a woman, conjured up behind his shoulders by the kiss. To project herself therein would have been to violate her confessional of herself. She was afraid; she thought her heart was a person walking. It was. It was everybody walking at once. The show was over.

‘Alabama, why won’t you go out on the floor?’

‘I’ve never danced. I’m scared.’

‘I’ll give you a dollar if you’ll dance with a young man who’s waiting.’

‘All right, but s’pose I fall down or trip him up?’

Randolph introduced her. They got along quite nicely, except when the man went sideways.

‘You are so cute,’ her partner said. ‘I thought you must be from some other place.’

She told him he could come to see her some time, and a dozen others, and promised to go to the Country Club with a red-head man who slid over the dance floor as if he were skimming milk. Alabama had never imagined what it would be like to have a date before.