

F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Six of One — an All American Story from Switzerland"

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During the time Zelda was hospitalized for psychiatric treatment by a specialist in nervous disorders, Dr. Forel, at the Prangins Clinic—Les Rives des Prangins was located on the lake's shore, 14 miles north of Geneva—beginning June 4, 1930 until September 1931, for nearly fifteen months, Scott Fitzgerald "lived near Zelda in Switzerland and visited Scottie, who remained with her governess in Paris, for four or five days every month." (1) (Meyers, *Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography*, 195). Switzerland to Scott Fitzgerald, as he comments in "The Hotel Child" (*Saturday Evening Post*, 31 January 1931), "this corner of Europe does not draw people; rather, it accepts them without too many inconvenient questions—live and let live." (2) (Brucoli, *The Short Stories*, 598). In an earlier story "One Trip Abroad" (*Post*, 11 Oct. 1930), as Brucoli succinctly states "is one of the stories in which Fitzgerald assessed the expatriate experience—as in "The Swimmers" (*Post*, 19 Oct. 1929)—just before Wall Street Crash of October 29, 1929 and "Babylon Revisited" (*Post*, 21 Feb. 1931). In all the three stories Fitzgerald touchingly contrasts the "corruption of European society with American innocence." (3) (Brucoli, *The Stories*, 599) The characteristics identified relate to European decadence, expatriate experience, emotional debilitation, analysis of American idealism, assessment of the effects of "unearned money on American character." (4) (Brucoli, *The Stories*, 616).

As Fitzgerald states earlier in the Tender Is the Night cluster story "One Trip Abroad," "Switzerland is a country where few things begin, but many things end." (5) (Brucoli, *Stories*, 594). And Lake Geneva "is the center of Europe."... "but the Lake Geneva that Nelson and Nicole came to was the dreary one of sanatoriums and rest hotels." James R. Mellow in his biography of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald explains, "In Switzerland, if for no other reason than economic necessity, Fitzgerald returned to writing his commercial stories. But they were stories that

tended to draw on his recent experiences—Zelda’s madness, his alcoholism—stories that were different from the madcap antics of the Jazz Age.” ... “It was one of the unfortunate circumstances of Fitzgerald’s career that the market where had made his reputation was so little interested in the stories in which he dropped the brittle glamour and attempted to deal honestly with the more complex problems of his experience.” (6) (*Invented Lives*, 375).

The editors of *The Saturday Evening Post* accepted a recent story “The Hotel Child,” but complained that the expatriate life and the characteristics Fitzgerald depicted were a bit more ‘shady’ than they liked. They were even less happy with the next three stories—“Flight and Pursuit,” “A New Leaf,” and “Indecision”—all of which were set in Europe and drew on Fitzgerald’s personal life. They pointedly asked Harold Ober, Fitzgerald’s literary agent, to relay their dissatisfaction, even though they accepted the trio. They preferred that Fitzgerald write “some American stories—that is stories laid on this side of the Atlantic.” They also felt that “the stories were lacking in plot.”... “More ominous were the signs that the winds of taste were changing in the magazines for which Fitzgerald had written so profitably. They were becoming more conservative, more chauvinistic.” (7) (*Mellow*, *Invented Lives*, 378). As Brucoli aptly comments, “the Depression readers wanted to be distracted from harsh reality.” (8) (*Stories*, 634).

“Flight and Pursuit” drew on Fitzgerald’s bitter experiences and impressions of Switzerland, and was probably written in Switzerland in April 1931. “Indecision” was probably written in Lausanne, Switzerland, January-February 1931, where Fitzgerald was staying at the Hotel de la Paix while Zelda Fitzgerald was under treatment at the Prangins Clinic.

It is against this background that the story “Six of One—“ deserves to be examined for its all Americanness, its nonexpatriateness, its critique of the American Dream, both successes and failures, its echoes of Ben Franklinian dictum of ‘way to wealth,’ its reverberations of Horatio Alger myth, its reflection on Jay Gatz becoming *Great Gatsby*, its cheerfulness. Perhaps the story is Fitzgerald’s response to the reluctance of the *Post*’s editors in publishing his 1930’s stories. It is difficult to be precise about Fitzgerald’s residences in 1931, especially his commuting between several locations in Switzerland to Paris to visit Scottie. Ironically, the story, written in Switzerland in July 1931, didn’t seem to find favor with *Post*’s editors. But Redbook paid \$3,000 for it.

(Matthew Brucoli sums up the earnings from Fitzgerald’s short stories thus: “After Zelda’s breakdown in April 1930 Fitzgerald concentrated on short stories—instead of his novel—*Tender Is the Night*—for two years, writing sixteen stories to

earn the money for hospital bills. In 1931—his most lucrative year before Hollywood—his income from nine stories was \$36,000 (less 10% commission) whereas his total royalties from seven books was \$100. Although the 1930-1931 stories include two intensely personal masterpieces, "One Trip Abroad" and "Babylon Revisited," most of them are clearly contrived." Yet "as a short story writer he was far more competent in 1931 than he had been in 1924.")

Though written in Switzerland, "Six of One—," untainted by Fitzgerald's bitter and maudlin concerns and emotionally wrenching experiences traceable in "Indecision" and "Hotel Child," as Bruccoli clarifies "is largely populated with unattractive people. Fitzgerald had little reason to write pleasant stories about Switzerland because for him it was a land of illness and despair." In his September 1930 letter from Geneva, Switzerland, to Maxwell Perkins, Fitzgerald bemoans "All the world seems to end up in this flat and antiseptic smelling land—with an overlay of flowers." (9) (Turnbull, Letters, 228).

Given the frustrating circumstances and negative response to Switzerland, Fitzgerald was certainly not in a frame of mind to write cheerful and uplifting stories. Yet, how one could explain the 'smiling,' 'cheerful,' 'all American' story "Six of One—" sprout from the "flat and antiseptic smelling land"! "Following the example of Keats, his favorite poet, Fitzgerald "learned how to cultivate a negative capability toward himself and his experience—believing that" (10) (Henry Dan Piper, F.Scott Fitzgerald, 236), as he said at the beginning of "The Crack Up" of February, 1936:

...the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.

...

Life, ten years ago, was largely a personal matter. I must hold in balance the sense of the futility of effort and the sense of the necessity to struggle; the conviction of the inevitability of failure and still the determination to "succeed"—and, more than these, the contradiction between the dead hand of the past and the high intentions of the future. (10a) (F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson, 69-70)

The story "Six of One—" is one that testifies to Scott Fitzgerald's ability to hold two opposed views, ideas without cracking up with the pressing burden of his wife's illness, mounting hospital bills, providing emotional and parental security to

Scottie, and yet be able to crank out stories fast for economic security. In fact, the cumulative effect of physical, emotional, spiritual exhaustion, financial problems made it imperative for him to write more. And to top everything, the Post's editors' strong conviction to have 'American stories,' "more good one-hundred-per-cent American background in his stories, evidently prompted Scott Fitzgerald to turn to 'rags to riches' stories such as "Six to One—"; it was "the last story he wrote before ending his expatriation," according to Robert Sklar (11) (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Last Laocoon*, 257). Sklar continues that Scott Fitzgerald "stood back as it were and looked down on his generation from the long, historical view.

Henry Dan Piper in his critical portrait of F. Scott Fitzgerald initially wrongly identifies the story as—"another Saturday Evening Post story of that year" (1932) which he later corrects by assigning the name of the correct magazine—Red Book (February 1932) in the "Notes" to his study. (12) (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Critical Portrait*, 176). Piper, the first critic to have paid any critical attention to the story, in his brief analysis recounts "how a certain Mr. Barnes, a self-made Minnesota millionaire, has his faith restored in the American system of free enterprise as the result of an ingenious experiment. He had begun to question the American dream because the children of his rich friends were so weak and pampered. So he gave an equal sum of money to twelve young men, six rich boys and six poor boys. Naturally, his wealthy friends assured him their sons would make best use of it. Instead the rich boys frittered it away, while the poor boys put it to work and were soon collecting dividends and clipping coupons." (13) (Piper, 176)... "Fitzgerald offered the hard-working young men portrayed in "Six of One—," who had restored Mr. Barnes's faith in the future of America." (14) (Piper, 177). "He was," Fitzgerald said of Mr. Barnes, "that he was able to feel that the republic could survive the mistakes of a whole generation, pushing the waste aside, sending ahead the vital and strong. Only it was too bad and very American that there should be all that waste at the top and he felt that he would not live long enough to see it end, to see great seriousness in the same skin with great opportunity—to see the race achieve at last." (15) (Brucoli, ed. *The Price Was High: The Last Uncollected Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald.*, 381).

Brucoli in his 'head notes' to the story affirms that it "is an indirect response to the Depression in that it excoriates 'all that waste at the top' and expresses confidence in the Alger types. This story is one of Fitzgerald's rare expressions of open hostility toward the rich, mixed with a sense of regret that seriousness and privilege or ambition and glamour do not often inhabit the same skin" ... "the story is obviously not a call to class warfare, for Fitzgerald was keenly sensitive to the attractions of the aristocracy." (16) (*The Price Was High*, 369).

Writing in the early 1930s, Fitzgerald opens the story in 1920. From a little town in Ohio, Barnes, childless, now a wealthy older man, meets his college mate Schofield in Minnesota and challenges him to match “six boys from any high school in Cleveland, give them an education, and I believe that ten years from this time your young fellows here would be utterly outclassed. There’s so little demanded of them, so little expected of them—what could be softer than just to have to go on being charming and athletic?”...”they’re only asked to be serious about trivial things.” (17) (*The Price Was High*, 371-372). Schofield, on the other hand, confident, complacent that his group of well-rounded five young men between sixteen and eighteen couldn’t be matched in any city in the country and that “they don’t have to worry about money, they’re brought up to serve the state.” (18) (*The Price Was High*, 371). Barnes admits that Schofield’s ‘ornamental bunch’ have ‘glamour’ and do “look like the cigarette ads in the magazines.” Yet he projects that they can’t be “setting the world on fire, doing better than their fathers.” “The more charming they are, the harder it’s going to be for them. In the East people are beginning to realize what wealthy boys are up against.” (19) (*The Price Was High*, 371). By the same token, Barnes assures Schofield that he will give a ‘chance’ to six geniuses of a little town high school in Ohio and give them education. “If they fail, the chance is lost. That is a serious responsibility and they’ve got to take it seriously.” (20) (*The Price Was High*, 372).

A fortnight after their initial meeting when Barnes flings down the gauntlet at Schofield, he, in the small town of Ohio, interviews the principal, makes a donation to the school, finally selects Otto Schlach, a farmer’s son, with “extraordinary mechanical aptitude and a gift for mathematics”(372); James Matsko, legacy of a drunken father to the town, self-supporting, and frugal; entrepreneurial one-armed Jack Stubbs—overcoming enormous handicap played on the high-school team; George Winfield, almost twenty, having lost his father at fourteen, left school to support his family for four years and comes back to finish high school; eccentric Louis Ireland, “the most brilliant and most difficult boy at school; untidy, “insubordinate and eccentric” ... with a “big talent nascent somewhere in him;” finally, a younger boy, Gordon Vandervere, handsomest and one of the most popular, son of a harassed minister. “Barnes was content with himself; he felt godlike in being able to step in to mold these various destinies. He felt as if they were his own sons, and backs them against the world.

Ten years later! “Of all Barnes’s protégés, Stubbs with his one arm was the first to achieve fame; “Stubbs, together with Schlach, now a prominent consulting engineer, were the most satisfactory of his experiments, although James Matsko at twenty-seven had just been made a partner in a Wall Street brokerage house. Financially he was the most successful of the six.” (21) (*The Price Was High*, 377).

According to Barnes's assessment finally the successful are: Jack Stubbs, Otto Schlach, James Matsko; Louis Ireland is going to be a great sculptor; Gordon Vandervere, though initially counted a 'failure,' eventually, after graduating from Princeton, not only was appointed to arrange a merger between J.P. Morgan and Queensborough Bridge, and, more importantly, received consent from H.B. Crosby to marry his only daughter; together they would be going into the diplomatic service. He is considered 'a howling success,' 'top of the list.' (22) (*The Price Was High*, 379). Though Ed Barnes considers Winfield a 'failure,' because he has disappeared, he is, however, accounted for toward the end of the story. In turn, Schofield explains about his son Charley; despite a bad start with trouble at Hotchkiss, Charley succeeds with running the business along with Barnes's protégé Winfield. Thus, "another one of Barnes' six accounted for! He felt a surge of triumph."

Predictably, Schofield's protégés didn't fare well—the two Kavenaughes, Larry Patt, Bean Lebaume, and the two Shofields—Wister and Charley. Most of them ended up in a mess at New Haven during their Yale years. The only success that Schofield could boast of is about his son Charley who runs Schofield's business along with Barnes's protégé Winfield—is it possible that Winfield may have been instrumental in having Charley be on the right track. Finally "when Schofield asked him (Barnes) if he'd carried out his intention of putting some boys through college, he avoided answering. "After all, any given moment has its value; it can be questioned in the light of after-events, but the moment remains. The young princes in velvet gathered in lovely domesticity around the queen amid the hush of rich draperies may presently grow up to be Pedro the Cruel or Charles the Mad, but the moment of beauty was there." (23) (*The Price Was High*, 381). Scott Fitzgerald ironically employs military imagery—images such as 'knights,' 'samurai,'—in referring to Schofield's 'rich' 'six'; they are even statue like as the very first paragraph of the story reveals.

In the final analysis, "the poor boys turn out better than the rich ones, but Fitzgerald refused to simplify the situation." (24) (Brucoli, *The Short Stories*, 667). Sklar considers the story "indifferent art, but significant for its feelings and ideas. It is more an essay than a story, with an inadequate plot devised to carry along the more important thrust of meaning." (25) (F. Scott Fitzgerald: *The Last Laocoon*, 246). "For all its inadequacies, 'Six of One—' stands as one of Fitzgerald's significant forward steps—as 'The Swimmers' had newly perceived his country, and 'Babylon Revisited' the decade past, so 'Six of One—'—achieved a new perspective on his own generation's destiny, the downward curve of its flight from youth into maturity." (26) (Sklar, F. Scott Fitzgerald: *The Last Laocoon*, 247).

It is meaningful to consider the story as a series of snapshots, vignette portraits, short sketches that are strung together for a specific purpose—Fitzgerald's ability to function as a professional using profitably his creative imagination in the midst of the death of his father (January 1931), Zelda's madness, his alcoholism, his economic necessity to support Zelda's mounting hospital bills, and his occasional visits to Scottie in Paris, and, of course, as though to heed the Post's editors' call for cheerful "all American stories."

The story "Six of One—" is certainly not an essay; not a non fictional piece. It is an imaginary tale—perhaps in the tradition of 'oriental tales.' Could it be considered in the tradition of "Arabian Nights" or Boccaccio's "Decameron" or Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales"? May be the story does not neatly and clearly align with any particular genre or sub classification. Yes, it is an imaginary tale grounded in American history of the 1920's and 1930's. It is a study in contrasts; it's a critique of American rich and celebration of American Dream. And, evidently, it was written in Switzerland—"a country where very few things begin, but many things end." Zelda Fitzgerald was released from Prangins. In September 1931, the Fitzgeralds returned to America on the *Aquitania*. The Fitzgeralds' expatriate life finally ended in Switzerland. And Fitzgerald entertained both optimism and pessimism simultaneously and maintained the balance to function and be professionally productive "despite the worry and distractions of Prangins period." (27) (Brucoli, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur*, 308). The story, according to Brucoli, "arraigns the wastage of the privileged class." (28) (*Some Sort of Epic Grandeur*, 314).

References and Notes

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22. *Ibid.*, 379.
23. *Ibid.*, 381.
24. Brucoli, *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald.*, 667.
25. Sklar, 246.
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28. *Ibid.*, 314

Summary

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Unconnected with the cluster stories such as "One Trip Abroad" of Tender Is the Night and untainted by Fitzgerald's expatriate experiences in such stories as "Babylon Revisited," "The Swimmers," "The Hotel Child," "Six of One—" is essentially Fitzgerald's response to the Saturday Evening Post's editors' preference for American stories with setting and theme laid on this side of the Atlantic. Fitzgerald, despite Zelda's hospitalization in Prangins, Switzerland, for treatment of her madness, mounting hospital bills, economic insecurity, etc. succeeds in presenting the typical Alger types and his "open hostility toward the rich." Though undervalued as a story, "Six of One—"deserves recognition and critical appreciation.