



# The Musicker's Gazette



No. 17

WALKING BOXES PRODUCTIONS

## F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S *THE CAMEL'S BACK*

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote of this story: "I suppose that of all the stories I have ever written this one cost me the least travail and perhaps gave me the most amusement. As to the labor involved, it was written during one day in the city of New Orleans, with the express purpose of buying a platinum and diamond wrist watch which cost six hundred dollars. I began it at seven in the morning and finished it at two o'clock the same night. My amusement was derived from the fact that the camel part of the story is literally true; in fact, I have a standing engagement with the gentleman involved to attend the next fancy-dress party to which we are mutually invited, attired as the latter part of the camel--this as a sort of atonement for being his historian."

### VISIT WALKING BOXES ONLINE

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## FITZGERALD IN MINNESOTA

Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul in 1896. He lived with his parents there until 1899 and again from 1908 to 1919 at various locations, including: 481 Laurel, 509 Holly, 593 Summit, 599 Summit, and 626 Goodrich. He completed his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, while living in St. Paul in 1919. He married a week after its publication to Zelda Sayre, youngest child of an Alabama State Supreme Court judge. He returned to St. Paul with Zelda, 1921-22, for the birth of their daughter (and only child) Scottie. Fitzgerald drew on St. Paul experiences for his fiction, especially the *Basil Duke Lee* stories, in which he describes the St. Paul Winter Carnival, the Minnesota State Fair, and the White Bear Yacht Club.

### THANKS

Walking Boxes wishes to send special thanks to: Steve & Sharon Roth, Elena Khalitov & Harmony Theatre, Steve Raymer & the Pavek Museum, Alice Larsson, Lisa Shaughnessy, Anne Brady Kane, the Hill House staff, and all the fine businesses advertising in our gazette.



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## THE CAST

### *The Erstwhilists:*

Will Holmes.....Perry  
Addie Phelps.....Betty  
Christine Nordin.....Narrator/Mrs. Nolak/  
Mrs. Tate  
Jeffry Nordin.....Narrator/Macy/Mr. Tate/  
Ringmaster/O'Sullivan  
J Roth.....Narrator/Bailly/Cab Driver  
Ann Nordin.....Emily Tate/Bale of Hay/  
Marion Cloud/Sound Effects

*\*Story adaptation and original music by J Roth*

### GIESEN'S COSTUME SHOP

Mrs. Nolak from our story is modeled after Olga Giesen. Olga ran *Giesen's Costume Shop* which was located (during Fitzgerald's time) on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of Mozart Hall on Franklin (now Main St.) in downtown St. Paul. Olga co-managed the shop with her husband Martin from 1904 until his death in 1943. Olga then continued alone with the shop until 1960.

It was Martin's mother Marie who opened the shop in 1872. Giesen's became Minnesota's first commercial costume business and would grow from a small shop of only twenty-two costumes into one of the ten largest in the country. It's said Marie founded the business not to succeed in the business world but provide a service to the cultural community – costumes were provided for operas, stage productions, masquerade balls, costume parties, and even costume lunches. Marie turned management of the shop over to Martin in 1901. The Giesen's lived at 184 Summit Ave, not far from their shop.

It's said that although the gilt-lettered name on the shop's door was Martin's, that it was to Olga that knowledgeable theater people turned to get their costumes. Not bad for a woman who is said to have broken into the business "pretty well cold". She and Martin learned about costumes through research at the St. Paul Public Library. They also subscribed to theater magazines and had them bound and indexed so they could readily put their hands on information about almost any opera or play.

Olga is said to have had no interest in what she herself wore (at least while working.) She usually wore long, dark dresses over which she wore an apron that was almost like that of a carpenter's, with pockets. Her clothes were always shot through with needles and pins, her graying hair pulled back into a bun from which, in the course of a busy day, strands would now and then escape.

A friend remembers Olga as having a "hearty laugh" and being "good company", but certain play directors may have had a different impression; it's told that she stopped more than one dress rehearsal to correct costumes. "I like them this way," argued one director. "Well, I don't and they're *my* costumes," retorted Olga.

The Pioneer Press wrote of the shop as "a house of real make believe despite its utilitarian 'warehouse' look". It was also described as "a little like a rummage sale all the time". Welcoming touches included a grinning clown (that became their logo) and a huge marble and gilt rococo mirror at the head of the well-worn stairs.

The final owners of Giesen's closed the shop in 1970, just two years short of it's 100<sup>th</sup> year.



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MARY KAY

## F. SCOTT'S SHORT STORIES

*The Camel's Back* was first published in the April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1920 edition of *The Saturday Evening Post* and then in *Six Tales of the Jazz Age* (a companion volume of stories for his second novel: *The Beautiful and the Damned*.)

In Fitzgerald's twenty years as a professional writer, he wrote 178 short stories. Most of these were for sale to commercial magazines in the '20s and '30s.

In his life, the sale of stories to magazines earned him approximately \$250,000. This was more than half the amount he earned in his career from all sources including for his novels, royalties, and scriptwriting for Hollywood.

### CHANGES TO THE STORY

The vast majority of our script for *The Camel's Back* contains the unaltered words of Fitzgerald. One change that occurred, was the creation of the character Father O'Sullivan. In the original story, it is an African-American waiter at the party (who also happens to be a "sho-nuff" minister) named Jumbo who unwittingly marries Perry and Betty. We deemed Fitzgerald's early 20<sup>th</sup> Century characterization of Jumbo as inappropriate for modern audiences, who have thankfully become more racially sensitive.

Another change, was the dispensing with of Fitzgerald's thin charade of setting the story in Toledo. We moved it back to St. Paul.

The song "On Moonlight Bay" does not appear in the original. There the drunken trio sing a verse of complete nonsense. "On Moonlight Bay" was referenced though in another St. Paul story of F. Scott Fitzgerald's called: *He Thinks He's Wonderful*.



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## HILL HOUSE (LETTER)

Louis Hill was the son of railroad tycoon and empire-builder James J. Hill. Louis lived with his family in "Maryhill", the mansion-home James built for Louis, adjacent to James' own mansion-palace on Summit Avenue. Louis wrote the following regarding "The Camel's Back" to his daughter Maudie (who was away at boarding school):

"...under a separate cover I am sending to you a story by Scott Fitzgerald, the St. Paul boy who wrote the book [This Side of Paradise] which has taken so well. This is the story of Eddie Saunders and the camel at our Christmas party at the house. Perry Parkhurst is Eddie Saunders and evidently the Mrs. Nolak is Mrs. Geason and the 'Tate' house is our house. The 'Club' is the University Club."

Though Fitzgerald was not present at this particular party in 1919, he would have been familiar with the Hill's Christmas parties, having escorted Marie Hersey to one in 1915.

### BETTY MEDILL & THE FLAPPERS

The term "flapper" refers to a "new breed" of young women who emerged in the 1920s. They wore short skirts, bobbed their hair, and flaunted their disdain for what was then considered "decent" behavior. The flappers were seen as brash in their time for wearing excessive makeup, drinking hard liquor, treating sex in a more casual manner, smoking cigarettes, driving automobiles, and otherwise flouting conventional social and sexual norms. Some accused Fitzgerald and his stories of inspiring many young women into becoming flappers - some reputedly using his books as flapper instruction manuals.



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## CAMELS ROAMING MINNESOTA?

Camelids are even-toed ungulates: they are classified in the same order as pigs, hippos, cattle, goats, antelope and many others.

Camelids are unusual in that their modern distribution is almost a mirror-image of their origin. Camelids first appeared around 45 million years ago in present-day North America. The family diversified and prospered but remained confined to North America until only about 2 or 3 million years ago, when representatives wandered to Asia and South America.

The original camelids of North America remained common until the quite recent geological past, but then disappeared, possibly as a result of hunting or habitat alterations by the earliest human settlers. Three species groups survive today: the Dromedary Camel of northern Africa/southwest Asia; the Bactrian Camel of central Asia; and the Llama of South America.

## \$300 A MONTH TO DRESS ON

Fitzgerald writes of his character Betty being given \$300 a month by her father to bolster her wardrobe. That's approximately \$3,414.00 to \$3,720.00 in today's dollars. A quick search online for "Simpsons Fall/Winter 1918-1919 Catalog" will allow you to browse through Betty's choices and imagine what you would have spent the \$300 on. The illustrations from the catalog are a window on this by-gone age. Here's a sampling of the prices: \$22.00 for a silk dress, \$31.95 for a velour coat, \$54.69 for a Lynx collar and muff (or in Canadian mink at \$114.00), \$3.25 for silk-lined suede gloves, \$8.98 for a top-quality skirt, \$6.25 for the most expressive hat.

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## PROHIBITION

Alcohol is very prevalent in *The Camel's Back*. Certainly, writing it in 1920, Fitzgerald must have been considering Prohibition, which was just descending upon the country.

The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, banning the manufacture, sale and transportation of intoxicating liquors in the U.S., was passed by Congress in December 1918; its ratification by the mandatory thirty-six states was finally achieved on January 16, 1919 (Minnesota was the 37<sup>th</sup> state to ratify.) The ratified amendment was stipulated to begin in one year on January 16, 1920.

It's possible the revelers appearing in the story (based on actual St. Paul personages from December 1919) were imbibing with a bit more vigor than usual due to the fact that Prohibition was rapidly descending upon them. Then again, St. Paul is reputed to have been a safe haven for gangsters during the Prohibition era. Perhaps all along the St. Paul-ites knew that nothing would get between them and their alcohol. Perhaps it would have been best for Fitzgerald if something had gotten between him and his drinking, as alcoholism is reputed to have led to his young death.

## JAZZ

The early jazz sounds emanating from our old radio were all recorded during the 1920s. The Tallyho Club features the music of Duke Ellington's orchestra. The Tate's party features Bix Biederbecke's group. Bailly's hotel room and Nolak's shop feature King Oliver's ensemble (it should be noted that King Oliver's song "Olga" was chosen for the costume shop scene in homage to the real Mrs. Nolak - Olga Giesen.)

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