Chapter One

In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

- Whenever you feel like criticising someone, remember that not everyone has enjoyed all the same advantages as you.

He didn't say any more, but as he and I have always been exceptionally communicative in a very reserved way I understood that the sentence implied much more than it expressed. As a result, I am inclined to reserve all my judgements, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me, but not without making me the victim of quite a few veteran bores. An abnormal mind is quick to discover this quality and to attach itself to it when it appears in a normal person.

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When I returned from New York last autumn, I would have liked the whole world to wear a uniform and stand frozen in a kind of moral attention; I no longer wished for tumultuous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. All I could exclude from this reaction was Gatsby, the man who gives this book its name. Yet Gatsby represented everything for which I have unaffected contempt. If it is true that personality is an uninterrupted series of successful gestures, there was something magnificent in this man, I don't know what exacerbated sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were like one of those complicated machines that register earthquakes ten miles away. Such readiness to react had nothing in common with the dull impressionability that dignifies with the name of

"It was an extraordinary gift of hope, a romantic state of readiness for events the like of which I had never found in a human being, and the like of which I am unlikely to encounter again. No - in the end, Gatsby was

It was what was gnawing at him, the poisonous dust that rose behind his dreams, that had for a time closed my interest to the abortive sorrows and short-lived joys of humanity.

My family is made up of well-known, comfortable people who have lived in this mid-western town for three generations. The Carraways are something of a clan and tradition has it that we are descended from the Dukes of Buccleuch, but the real founder of the line to which I belong was my grandfather's brother, who came here in eighteen fifty-one, took over during the Civil War and started the wholesale hardware business which my father still runs.

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I've never seen this great-uncle, but I'm told I look like him - especially if you believe the oil portrait hanging in Dad's study, where he appears unyielding and sceptical. I graduated from Yale in 1915, having justa quarter of a century after my father, and a little later faced the Teutonic emigration that we managed to stem, temporarily at least, and which we called the Great War. I enjoyed the counter-raid so much that I came back very agitated. The Middle West, where I had expected to find the burning centre of the world, seemed to me to be no more than its frayed edge - so much so that I decided to go to New York to do my apprenticeship in an issuing bank. All the young men I knew worked in issuing banks, so I assumed that the business could support one more bachelor. All my aunts and uncles debated the question, as if it had been a question of choosing a nursery school for me, and in the end said"After all, why not", with very serious and doubtful faces. My father agreed to look after me for a year and, after various delays, I went East for good, or so I thought, in the spring of 1922.

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But it was a warm season and I had just left a city full of wide lawns and fraternal trees. So when one of my young office mates suggested that we take a house in the suburbs together, it seemed like a brilliant idea. He found the house, a cardboard bungalow, for eighty dollars a month, but at the last minute the firm sent him to Washington and I went to the country on my own. I had a dog - at least I had him for a few days until he left - an old Dodge car and a Finnish woman who made my bed, cooked my breakfast and mumbled Finnish proverbs as she fussed over the electric stove.

I felt quite out of place for a day or two, until one morning a man who had arrived more recently than I had stopped me on the road.

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I never felt out of place again. I was a guide, a route planner, one of the first settlers. Without suspecting it, this man had given me the right to live in the village.

So with the sunshine and the great shoots of leaves growing on the trees at the rate things grow in fast-moving films, I felt that familiar conviction that life was beginning with summer.

First of all, there were so many books to read, so much good health to gather from the branches of the youthful, breath-giving air. I bought a dozen or so tomes on banking, credit and investments, which lined up in red and gold on a shelf, like cash fresh from the mint, promising to reveal glittering secrets known only to Midas, Morgan and Mécène. Besides, I had a serious intention of reading many more books. At school I'd been quite keen on literature - one whole year I'd written for the Yale News a

And now I was going to reincorporate all such things into my life and become once again one of those rare specialists: "the man of universal talent". This is not just an epigram - after all, you're much more successful when you look at life through a single window.

It was quite by chance that the house I rented was located in one of the strangest communities in the United States. . It stood on that thin, turbulent island that stretches out to the east of New York - and where, among other natural curiosities, there are two unusual land formations. Twenty miles from the big city, a pair of enormous eggs, identical in outline and separated only by a bay, so named purely as a courtesy, protrude into the most tame body of salt water in the western hemisphere, that vast wetland known as Long Island Sound. They are not perfect ovals - like Christopher Columbus's egg, they are both flattened at the point of contact - but they are the same.

I lived in West-Egg, which is, let's face it, the less posh of the two, although that's a very superficial label to express the bizarre and rather sinister contrast between them. My house was at the very tip of the egg, barely fifty yards from the strait, and squeezed between two huge buildings that were rented for twelve or fifteen thousand dollars a season. The one on my right was a colossal monument by any standard - in fact, it was a copy of I don't know which Norman town hall, with a strikingly youthful tower at one corner beneath its beard of raw ivy, a marble swimming pool and more than twenty hectares of lawns and gardens. It was Gatsby's castle. Or, to put it better, since I didn't know Mr Gatsby,

On the other side of the little bay, the white palaces of fashionable East-Egg gleamed at the water's edge, and the story of that summer really begins the evening I drove there for dinner with the Tom Buchanans. Daisy was my distant cousin, I had known Tom at university, and immediately after the war I had spent two days with them in Chicago.