

Sentiment--and the Use of Rouge

F. Scott Fitzgerald

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I.

This story has no moral value. It is about a man who had fought for two years and how he came back to England for two days, and then how he went away again. It is unfortunately one of those stories which must start at the beginning, and the beginning consists merely of a few details. There were two brothers (two sons of Lord Blachford) who sailed to Europe with the first hundred thousand. Lieutenant Richard Harrington Syneforth, the elder, was killed in some forgotten raid; the younger, Lieutenant Clay Harrington Syneforth is the hero of this story. He was now a Captain in the Seventeenth Sussex and the immoral thing in the story happens to him. The important part to remember is that when his father met him at Paddington station and drove him up town in his motor, he hadn't been in England for two years—and this was in the early spring of nineteen-seventeen. Various circumstances had brought this about, wounds, advancement, meeting his family in Paris, and mostly being twenty-two and anxious to show his company an example of indefatigable energy. Besides, most of his friends were dead and he had rather a horror of seeing the gaps they'd leave in his England. And here is the story.

He sat at dinner and thought himself rather stupid and unnecessarily moody as his sister's light chatter amused the table, Lord and Lady Blachford, himself and two unsullied aunts. In the first place he was rather doubtful about his sister's new manner. She seemed, well, perhaps a bit loud and theatrical, and she was certainly pretty enough not to need so much paint. She couldn't be more than eighteen, and paint—it seemed so useless. Of course he was used to it in Lois mother, would have been shocked had she appeared in her unrouged furrowedness, but on Clara it merely accentuated her youth. Altogether he had never seen such obvious paint, and, as they had always been a shockingly frank family, he told her so.

"You've got too much stuff on your face." He tried to speak casually and his sister nothing wroth, jumped up and ran to a mirror.

"No, I haven't," she said, calmly returning.

"I thought," he continued rather annoyed, "that the criterion of how much paint to put on, was whether men were sure you'd used any or not."

His sister and mother exchanged glances and both spoke at once.

"Not now, Clay, you know——" began Clara.

"Really, Clay," interrupted his mother, "you don't know exactly what the standards are, so you can't quite criticize. It happens to be a fad to paint a little more."

Clayton was now rather angry.

"Will all the women at Mrs. Severance's dance tonight be striped like this?"

Clara's eyes flashed.

"Yes!"

"Then I don't believe I care to go."

Clara, about to flare up, caught her mother's eye and was silent.

"Clay, I want you to go," said Lady Blachford hastily. "People want to see you before they forget what you look like. And for tonight let's not talk about war or paint."

In the end Clay went. A navy subaltern called for his sister at ten and he followed in lonesome state at half-past. After half an hour he had had all he wanted. Frankly, the dance seemed all wrong. He remembered Mrs. Severance's ante-bellum affairs—staid, correct occasions they were, with only a mere scattering from the faster set, just those people who couldn't possibly be left out. Now it all was blent, some how, in one set. His sister had not exaggerated, practically every girl there was painted, overprinted; girls whom he remembered as curate-hunters, holders of long conversations with earnest young men on incense and the validity of orders, girls who had been terrifyingly masculine and had talked about dances as if they were the amusement of the feeble minded—all were there, trotting through the most extreme steps from over the water. He danced stiffly with many who had delighted his youth, and he found that he wasn't enjoying himself at all. He found that he had come to picture England as a land of sorrow and acetism and while there was little extravagance displayed tonight, he thought that the atmosphere had fallen to that of artificial gayety rather than risen to a stern calmness. Even under the carved, gilt ceiling of the Severances' there was strangely an impression of dance-hall rather than dance,

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people arrived and departed most informally and, oddly enough, there was a dearth of older people rather than of younger. But there was something in the very faces of the girls, something which was half enthusiasm and half recklessness, that depressed him more than any concrete thing.

When he had decided this and had about made up his mind to go, Eleanor Marbrooke came in. He looked at her keenly. She had not lost, not a bit. He fancied that she had not quiet so much paint on as the others, and when he and she talked he felt a social refuge in her cool beauty. Even then he felt that the difference between she and the others was in degree rather than in kind. He stayed, of course, and one o'clock found them sitting apart, watching. There had been a drifting away and now there seemed to be nothing but officers and girls; the Severances them—selves seemed out of place as they chattered volubly in a corner to a young couple who looked as if they would rather be left alone.

"Eleanor," he demanded, "why is it that everyone looks so— well, so loose—so socially slovenly?"

"It's terribly obvious, isn't it?" she agreed, following his eyes around the room.

"And no one seems to care" he continued.

"No one does," she responded, "but my dear man, we can't sit here and criticize our hosts. What about me? How do I look?"

He regarded her critically.

"I'd say on the whole, that you've kept your looks."

"Well, I like that," she raised her brows at him in reproof. "You talk as if I were some shelved, old play—about, just over some domestic catastrophe."

There was a pause; then he asked her directly.

"How about Dick?"

She grew serious at once.

"Poor Dick—I suppose we were engaged."

"Suppose," he said astonished, "why it was understood by everyone, both our families knew. I know I used to lie awake and envy my lucky brother."

She laughed.

"Well, we certainly thought ourselves engaged. If war hadn't come we'd be comfortably married now, but if he were still alive under these circumstances, I doubt if we'd be even engaged."

"You weren't in love with him?"

"Well, you see, perhaps that wouldn't be the question, perhaps he wouldn't marry me and perhaps I wouldn't marry him."

He jumped to his feet astounded and her warning hush just prevented him from exclaiming aloud. Before he could control his voice enough to speak she had whisked off with a staff officer. What could she mean?—except that in some moment of emotional excitement she had—but he couldn't bear to think of Eleanor in that light. He must have misunderstood—he must talk more with her. No, surely—if it had been true she wouldn't have said it so casually. He watched her—how close she danced. Her bright brown hair lay against the staff officer's shoulder and her vivacious face was only two or three inches from his when she talked. All things considered Clay was becoming more angry every minute with things in general.

Next time he danced with her she seized his arm, and before he knew her intention, they had said goodbyes to the Severances' and were speeding away in Eleanor's limousine.

"It's a nineteen—thirteen car—imagine having a four year old limousine before the war."

"Terrific privation," he said ironically. "Eleanor, I want to speak to you—"

"And I to you. That's why I took you away. Where are you living?"

"At home."

"Well then we'll go to your old rooms in Grove Street. You've still got them, haven't you?"

Before he could answer she had spoken to the chauffeur and was leaning back in the corner smiling at him.

"Why Eleanor, we can't do that—talk there—"

"Are the rooms cleaned?" she interrupted.

"About once a month I think, but—"

"That's all that's necessary. In fact it'll be wonderfully proper, won't be clothes lying around the room as there usually are at bachelor teas. At Colonel Hotesane's farewell party, Gertrude Evarts and I saw—in the middle of

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the floor, well, my dear, a series of garments and—as we were the first to arrive we—.”

"Eleanor," said Clay firmly, "I don't like this."

"I know you don't, and that's why we're going to your rooms to talk it over. Good heavens, do you think people worry these days about where conversations take place, unless they're in wire-less towers, or shoreways in coast towns?"

The machine had stopped and before he could bring further argument to bear she had stepped out and scurried up the steps, where she announced that she would wait until he came and opened the door. He had no alternative. He followed, and as they mounted the stairs inside he could hear her laughing softly at him in the darkness.

He threw open the door and groped for the electric light, and in the glow that followed both stood without moving. There on the table sat a picture of Dick, Dick almost as they had last seen him, worldly wise and sophisticated, in his civilian clothes. Eleanor was the first to move. She crossed swiftly over, the dust rising with the swish of her silk, and elbows on the table said softly

"Poor old handsome, with your beautiful self all smashed." She turned to Clay "Dick didn't have much of a soul, such a small soul. He never bothered about eternity and I doubt if he knows any—but he had a way with him, and oh, that magnificent body of his, red gold hair, brown eyes—" her voice trailed off and she sank lazily onto the sofa in front of the hearth.

"Build a fire and then come and put your arm around me and we'll talk." Obediently he searched for wood while she sat and chatted. "I won't pretend to busybody around and try to help—I'm far too tired. I'm sure I can give the impression of home much better by just sitting here and talking, can't I?"

He looked up from where he knelt at her feet manipulating the kerosene can, and realized that his voice was husky as he spoke.

"Just talk about England—about the country a little and about Scotland and tell me things that have happened, amusing provincial things and things with women in them—put yourself in" he finished rather abruptly.

Eleanor smiled and kneeling down beside him lit the match and ran it along the edge of the paper that undermined the logs. She twisted her head to read it as it curled up in black at the corners, "August 14h, 1915. Zeppelin raid in—there it goes" as it disappeared in little, licking flames. "My little sister—you remember Katherine; Kitty, the one with the yellow hair and the little lisp—she was killed by one of those things—she and a governess, that summer."

"Little Kitty," he said sadly, "a lot of children were killed I know, a lot, I didn't know she was gone," he was far away now and a set look had come into his eyes. She hastened to change the subject.

"Lots—but we're not on death tonight. We're going to pretend we're happy. Do you see?" She patted his knee reprovingly, "we are happy. We are! Why you were almost whimsical awhile ago. I believe you're a sentimentalist. Are you?"

He was still gazing absently at the fire but he looked up at this.

"Tonight, I am—almost—for the first time in my life. Are you, Eleanor?"

"No, I'm romantic. There's a huge difference; a sentimental person thinks things will last, a romantic person hopes they wont."

He was in a reverie again and she knew that he had hardly heard her.

"Excuse please," she pleaded, slipping close to him. "Do be a nice boy and put your arm around me." He put his arm gingerly about until she began to laugh quietly. When he hastily withdrew it, and bending forward, talked quickly at the fire.

"Will you tell me why in the name of this mad world we're here tonight? Do you realize that this is—was a bachelor apartment before the bachelors all married the red widow over the channel—and you'll be compromised?"

She seized the straps of his shoulder belt and tugged at him until his grey eyes looked into hers.

"Clay, Clay, don't—you musn't use small petty words like that at this time. Compromise! What's that to words like Life and Love and Death and England. Compromise! Clay I don't believe anyone uses that word except servants." She laughed. "Clay, you and our butler are the only men in England who use the word compromise. My maid and I have been warned within a week—How odd—Clay, look at me."

He looked at her and saw what she intended, beauty heightened by enthusiasm. Her lips were half parted in a smile, her hair just so slightly disarranged.

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"Damned witch," he muttered. "You used to read Tolstoy, and believe him."

"Did I?" her gaze wandered to the fire. "So I did, so I did." Then her eyes came back to him and the present. "Really, Clay, we must stop gazing at the fire. It puts our minds on the past and tonight there's got to be no past or future, no time, just tonight, you and I sitting here and I most tired for a military shoulder to rest my head upon." But he was off on an old tack thinking of Dick and he spoke his thoughts aloud.

"You used to talk Tolstoy to Dick and I thought it was scandalous for such a good-looking girl to be intellectual."

"I wasn't, really," she admitted. "It was to impress Dick."

"I was shocked, too, when I read something of Tolstoy's, I struck the something Sonata."

"Kreutzer Sonata," she suggested.

"That's it. I thought it was immoral for young girls to read Tolstoy and told Dick so. He used to nag me about that. I was nineteen."

"Yes, we thought you quite the young prig. We considered ourselves advanced."

"You're only twenty, aren't you?" asked Clay suddenly. She nodded.

"Don't you believe in Tolstoy any more?" he asked, almost fiercely.

She shook her head and then looked up at him almost wistfully.

"Won't you let me lean against your shoulder just the smallest bit?" He put his arm around her, never once taking his eyes from her face, and suddenly the whole strength of her appeal burst upon him. Clay was no saint, but he had always been rather decent about women. Perhaps that's why he felt so helpless now. His emotions were not complex. He knew what was wrong, but he knew also that he wanted this woman, this wallet creature of silk and life who crept so close to him. There were reasons why he oughtn't to have her, but he had suddenly seen how love was a big word like Life and Death, and she knew that he realized and was glad. Still they sat without moving for a long while and watched the fire.

II.

At two—twenty next day Clay shook hands gravely with his father and stepped into the train for Dover. Eleanor, comfortable with a novel, was nestled into a corner of his compartment, and as he entered she smiled a welcome and closed the book.

"Well," she began. I felt like a minion of the almighty secret service as I slid by your inspiring and impeccable father, swathed in yards and yards of veiling."

"He wouldn't have noticed you without your veil," answered Clayton, sitting down. "He was really most emotional under all that brusqueness. Really, you know he's quite a nice chap. Wish I knew him better."

The train was in motion; the last uniforms had drifted in like brown, blown leaves, and now it seemed as if one tremendous wind was carrying them shoreward.

"How far are you going with me?" asked Clayton.

"Just to Rochester, an hour and a half. I absolutely had to see you before you left, which isn't very Spartan of me. But really, you see, I feel that you don't quite understand about last night, and look at me, as" she paused "well—as rather exceptional."

"Wouldn't I be rather an awful cad if I thought about it in those terms at all?"

"No," she said cheerily, "I, for instance, am both a romantiscist and a psychologist. It does take the romance out of anything to analyze it, but I'm going to do it if only to clear myself in your eyes."

"You don't have to—" he began.

"I know I don't," she interrupted, "but I'm going to, and when I've finished you'll see where weakness and inevitability shade off. No, I don't believe in Zola."

"I don't know him."

"Well, my dear, Zola said that environment is environment, but he referred to families and races, and this is the story of a class."

"What class?"

"Our class."

"Please," he said, "I've been wanting to hear."

She settled herself against his shoulder, and gazing out at the vanishing country, began to talk very deliberately.

"It was said, before the war, that England was the only country in the world where women weren't safe from men of their own class."

"One particular fast set," he broke in.

"A set, my dear man, who were fast but who kept every bit of their standing and position. You see even that was reaction. The idea of physical fitness came in with the end of the Victorians. Drinking died down in the Universities. Why you yourself once told me that the really bad men never drank, rather kept themselves fit for moral or intellectual crimes."

"It was rather Victorian to drink much," he agreed. "Chaps who drank were usually young fellows about to become curates, sowing the conventional wild oats by the most orthodox tipping."

"Well," she continued, "there had to be an outlet—and there was, and you know the form it took in what you called the fast set. Next enter Mr. Mars. You see as long as there was moral pressure exerted, the rotten side of society was localized. I won't say it wasn't spreading, but it was spreading slowly, some people even thought, rather normally, but when men began to go away and not come back, when marriage became a hurried thing and widows filled London, and all traditions seemed broken, why then things were different."

"How did it start?"

"It started in cases where men were called away hurriedly and girls lost their nerve. Then the men didn't come back—and there were the girls.—"

He gasped.

"That was going on at the beginning?—I didn't know at all."

"Oh it was very quiet at first. Very little leaked out into daylight, but the thing spread in the dark. The next

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thing, you see, was to weave a sentimental mantle to throw over it. It was there and it had to be excused. Most girls either put on trousers and drove cars all day or painted their faces and danced with officers all night."

"And what mighty principle had the honor of being a cloak for all that?" he asked sarcastically.

"Now here, you see, is the paradox. I can talk like this and pretend to analyze, and even sneer at the principle. Yet I'm as much under the spell as the most wishy-washy typist who spends a week end at Brighton with her young man before he sails with the conscripts."

"I'm waiting to hear what the spell is."

"It's this—self sacrifice with a capitol S. Young men going to get killed for us.—We would have been their wives—we can't be—therefore we'll be as much as we can. And that's the story."

"Good God!"

"Young officer comes back," she went on; "must amuse him, must amuse him; must give him the impression that people here are with him, that it's a big home he's coming to, that he's appreciated. Now you know, of course, in the lower classes that sort of thing means children. Whether that will ever spread to us will depend on the duration of the war."

"How about old ideas, and standards of woman and that sort of thing?" he asked, rather sheepishly.

"Sky-high, my dear—dead and gone. It might be said for utility that it's better and safer for the race that officers stay with women of their own class. Think of the next generation in France."

To Clay the whole compartment had suddenly become smothering. Bubbles of conventional ethics seemed to have burst and the long stagnant gas was reaching him. He was forced to seize his mind and make it cling to whatever shreds of the old still floated on the moral air. Eleanor's voice came to him like the grey creed of a new materialistic world, the contrast was the more vivid because of the remains of erratic honor and sentimental religiosity that she flung out with the rest.

"So you see, my dear, utility, heroism and sentiment all combine and levoice. And we're pulling into Rochester," she turned to him pathetically. "I see that in trying to clear myself I've only indicted my whole sex," and with tears in their eyes they kissed.

On the platform they talked for half a minute more. There was no emotion. She was trying to analyze again and her smooth brow was wrinkled in the effort. He was endeavoring to digest what she had said, but his brain was in a whirl.

"Do you remember," he asked, "what you said last night about love being a big word like Life and Death?"

"A regular phrase; part of the technique of—of the game; a catch word." The train moved off and as Clay swung himself on the last car she raised her voice so that he could hear her to the last—"Love is a big word, but I was flattering us. Real Love's as big as Life and Death, but not that love—not that—" Her voice failed and mingled with the sound of the rails, and to Clay she seemed to fade out like a grey ghost on the platform.

III.

When the charge broke and the remnants lapped back like spent waves, Sergeant O'Flaherty, a bullet through the left side, dropped beside him, and as weary castaways fight half listlessly for shore, they crawled and pushed and edged themselves into a shell crater. Clay's shoulder and back were bleeding profusely and he searched heavily and clumsily for his first aid package.

"That'll be that the Seventeenth Sussex gets reorganized," remarked O'Flaherty, sagely. "Two weeks in the rear and two weeks home."

"Damn good regiment, it was, O'Flaherty," said Clay. They would have seemed like two philosophic majors commenting from safe behind the lines had it not been that Clay was flat on his back, his face in a drawn ecstasy of pain, and that the Irishman was most evidently bleeding to death. The latter was twining an improvised tourniquet on his thigh, watching it with the careless casual interest a bashful suitor bestows upon his hat.

"I can't get up no emotion over a regiment these nights," he commented disgustedly. "This'll be the fifth I was in that I seen smashed to hell. I joined these Sussex byes so I needn't see more o' me own go."

"I think you know every one in Ireland, Sergeant.

"All Ireland's me friend, Captain, though I niver knew it 'till I left. So I left the Irish, what was left of them. You see when an English bye dies he does some play actin' before. Blood on an Englishman always calls rouge to me mind. It's a game with him. The Irish take death damn serious."

Clayton rolled painfully over and watched the night come softly down and blend with the drifting smoke. They were certainly between the devil and the deep sea and the slang of the next generation will use "no man's land" for that. O'Flaherty was still talking.

"You see you has to do somethin'. You haven't any God worth remarkin' on. So you pass from life in the names of your holy principles, and hope to meet in Westminster."

"We're not mystics, O'Flaherty," muttered Clay, "but we've got a firm grip on God and reality."

"Mystics, my eye, beggin' your pardon, lieutenant," cried the Irishman, "a mystic ain't no race, it's a saint. You got the most airy way o' thinkin' in the wurruld an yit you talk about plain faith as if it was cloud gazin'. There was a lecture last week behind Vimy Y. M. C. A., an' I stuck my head in the door; 'Tan-gi-ble,' the fellow was sayin' 'we must be Tan-gi-ble in our religion, we must be practicle' an' he starts off on Christian brotherhood an' honorable death—so I stuck me head out again. An' you got lots a good men dyin' for that every day—tryin' to be tan-gi-ble, dyin' because their father's a Duke or because he ain't. But that ain't what I got to think of. An' right here let's light a pipe before it gets dark enough for the damn burgomasters to see the match and practice on it."

Pipes, as indispensable as the hard ration, were going in no time, and the sergeant continued as he blew a huge lung full of smoke towards the earth with incongruous supercaution.

"I fight because I like it, an' God ain't to blame for that, but when it's death you're talkin' about I'll tell you what I get an' you don't. Pere Dupont gets in front of the Frenchies an' he says: 'Allon, mes enfants!' fine! an' Father O'Brien, he says: 'Go on in byes and bate the Luther out o' them'—great stuff! But can you see the reverent Updike—Updike just out o' Oxford—yellin' 'mix it up, chappies,' or 'soak 'em blokes?'—NO, Captain, the best leader you ever get is a six foot rowin' man that thinks God's got a seat in the House o' Commons. All sportin' men have to have a bunch o' cheerin' when they die. Give an Englishman four inches in the sportin' page this side of the whistle an' he'll die happy—but not O'Flaherty."

But Clay's thoughts were far away. Half delirious, his mind wandered to Eleanor. He had thought of nothing else for a week, ever since their parting at Rochester, and so many new sides of what he had learned were opening up. He had suddenly realized about Dick and Eleanor, they must have been married to all intents and purposes. Of course Clay had written to Eleanor from Paris, asking her to marry him on his return, and just yesterday he had gotten a very short, very kind, but definite refusal. And he couldn't understand at all.

Then there was his sister—Eleanor's words still rang in his ear. "They either put on trousers and act as chauffers all day or put on paint and dance with officers all night." He felt perfectly sure that Clara was still well—virtuous. Virtuous—what a ridiculous word it seemed, and how odd to be using it about his sister. Clara had always been so painfully good. At fourteen she had been sent to Boston for a souvenir picture of Louisa M.

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Alcott to hang over her bed. His favorite amusement had been to replace it by some startling soubrette in tights, culled from the pages of the Pink Un. Well Clara, Eleanor, Dick, he himself, were all in the same boat, no matter what the actuality of their innocence or guilt. If he ever got back—.

The Irishman, evidently sinking fast, was talking rapidly.

"Put your wishy-washy pretty clothes on everythin' but it ain't no disguise. If I get drunk it's the flesh and the devil, if you get drunk it's your wild oats. But you ain't disguisin' death, not to me you ain't. It's a damn serious affair. I may get killed for me flag, but I'm goin' to die for meself. 'I die for England' he says. 'Settle up with God, you're through with England' I says."

He raised himself on his elbow and shook his fist toward the German trenches.

"It's you an' your damn Luther," he shouted. "You been pro-testin' and analyzin' until you're makin' my body ache and burn like hell; you been evolvin' like mister Darwin, an' you stretched yourself so far that you've split. Everythin's in-tan-gi-ble except your God. Honor an' Fatherland an' Westminster Abbey, they're all in-tan-gi-ble except God an' sure you got him tan-gi-ble. You got him on the flag an' in the constitution. Next you'll be writin' your bibles with Christ sowin' wild oats to make him human. You say he's on your side. Onc't, just onc't, he had a favorite nation and they hung Him up by the hands and feet and his body hurt him and burn't him," his voice grew fainter. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is wit' thee—." His voice trailed off, he shuddered and was dead.

The hours went on. Clayton lit another pipe, heedless of what German sharpshooters might see. A heavy March mist had come down and the damp was eating into him. His whole left side was paralyzed and he felt chill creep slowly over him. He spoke aloud.

"Damned old mist—damned lucky old Irishman—Damnation." He felt a dim wonder that he was to know death but his thoughts turned as ever to England, and three faces came in sequence before him. Clara's, Dick's and Eleanor's. It was all such a mess. He'd like to have gone back and finished that conversation. It had stopped at Rochester—he had stopped living in the station at Rochester. How queer to have stopped there—Rochester had no significance. Wasn't there a play where a man was born in a station, or a handbag in a station, and he'd stopped living at— what did the Irishman say about cloaks, Eleanor said something about cloaks; too, he couldn't see any cloaks, didn't feel senti-mental—only cold and dim and mixed up. He didn't know about God— God was a good thing for curates—then there was the Y. M. C. A; God—and he always wore short sleeves, and bumpy Oxfords—but that wasn't God—that was just the man who talked about God to soldiers. And then there was O'Flaherty's God. He felt as if he knew him, but then he'd never called him God—he was fear and love, and it wasn't dignified to fear God—or even to love him except in a calm respectable way. There were so many God's it seemed—he had thought that Christianity was monotheistic, and it seemed pagan to have so many Gods.

Well, he'd find out the whole muddled business in about three minutes, and a lot of good it'd do anybody else left in the muddle.

Damned muddle—everything a muddle, everybody offside, and the referee gotten rid of—everybody trying to say that if the referee were there he'd have been on their side. He was going to go and find that old referee—find him—get hold of him, get a good hold—cling to him—cling to him—ask him—.