

# MAX PERKINS

Editor of Genius / A. Scott Berg



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# I

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## The Real Thing

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**S**hortly after six o'clock on a rainy March evening in 1946, a slender, gray-haired man sat in his favorite bar, the Ritz, finishing the last of several martinis. Finding himself adequately fortified for the ordeal ahead, he paid the check, got up, and pulled on his coat and hat. A well-stuffed briefcase in one hand and an umbrella in the other, he left the bar and ventured into the downpour drenching mid-Manhattan. He headed west toward a small storefront on Forty-third Street, several blocks away.

Inside the storefront, thirty young men and women were awaiting him. They were students in an extension course on book publishing which New York University had asked Kenneth D. McCormick, editor-in-chief of Doubleday & Company, to conduct. All were eager to find a foothold in publishing and were attending the weekly seminars to increase their chances. On most evenings there were a few latecomers, but tonight, McCormick noted, every student was on hand and seated by the stroke of six. McCormick knew why. This evening's lecture was on book editing, and he had persuaded the most respected, most influential book editor in America to "give a few words on the subject."

Maxwell Evarts Perkins was unknown to the general public, but to people in the world of books he was a major figure, a kind of hero. For he was the consummate editor. As a young man he had discovered great new talents—such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and

Thomas Wolfe—and had staked his career on them, defying the established tastes of the earlier generation and revolutionizing American literature. He had been associated with one firm, Charles Scribner's Sons, for thirty-six years, and during this time, no editor at any house even approached his record for finding gifted authors and getting them into print. Several of McCormick's students had confessed to him that it was the brilliant example of Perkins that had attracted them to publishing.

McCormick called the class to order, thumping the collapsible card table in front of him with the palm of his hand, and began the session by describing the job of editor. It was not, he said, as it once had been, confined mainly to correcting spelling and punctuation. Rather, it was to know what to publish, how to get it, and what to do to help it achieve the largest readership. At all this, said McCormick, Max Perkins was unsurpassed. His literary judgment was original and exceedingly astute, and he was famous for his ability to inspire an author to produce the best that was in him or her. More a friend to his authors than a taskmaster, he aided them in every way. He helped them structure their books, if help was needed; thought up titles, invented plots; he served as psychoanalyst, lovelorn adviser, marriage counselor, career manager, moneylender. Few editors before him had done so much work on manuscripts, yet he was always faithful to his credo, "The book belongs to the author."

In some ways, McCormick suggested, Perkins was unlikely for his profession: He was a terrible speller, his punctuation was idiosyncratic, and when it came to reading, he was by his own admission "slow as an ox." But he treated literature as a matter of life and death. He once wrote Thomas Wolfe: "There could be nothing so important as a book can be."

Partly because Perkins was the preeminent editor of his day, partly because many of his authors were celebrities, and partly because Perkins himself was somewhat eccentric, innumerable legends had sprung up about him, most of them rooted in truth. Everyone in Kenneth McCormick's class had heard at least one breathless version of how Perkins had discovered F. Scott Fitzgerald; or of how Scott's wife, Zelda, at the wheel of Scott's automobile, had once driven the editor into Long Island Sound; or of how Perkins had made Scribners lend Fitzgerald many thousands of dollars and had rescued him from his breakdown. It was said that Perkins had agreed to publish Ernest Hemingway's first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, sight unseen, then had to fight to keep his job when the manuscript arrived because it contained off-color language. Another favorite Perkins story concerned his confrontation with his ultraconservative publisher,

Charles Scribner, over the four-letter words in Hemingway's second novel, *A Farewell to Arms*. Perkins was said to have jotted the troublesome words he wanted to discuss—*shit*, *fuck*, and *piss*—on his desk calendar, without regard to the calendar's heading: "Things to Do Today." Old Scribner purportedly noticed the list and remarked to Perkins that he was in great trouble if he needed to remind himself to do those things.

Many stories about Perkins dealt with the untamed writing and temperament of Thomas Wolfe. It was said that as Wolfe wrote *Of Time and the River* he leaned his six-and-a-half-foot frame against his refrigerator and used the appliance's top for a desk, casting each completed page into a wooden crate without even rereading it. Eventually, it was said, three husky men carted the heavily laden box to Perkins, who somehow shaped the outpouring into books. Everyone in McCormick's class had also heard about Maxwell Perkins's hat, a battered fedora, which he was reputed to wear all day long, indoors and out, removing it from his head only before going to bed.

As McCormick talked, the legend himself approached the shop on Forty-third Street and quietly entered. McCormick looked up, and seeing a stooped figure in the door at the rear, cut himself off in mid-sentence to welcome the visitor. The class turned to get their first glimpse of America's greatest editor.

He was sixty-one years old, stood five feet ten inches, and weighed 150 pounds. The umbrella he carried seemed to have offered him little protection—he was dripping wet, and his hat drooped over his ears. A pinkish glow suffused Perkins's long, narrow face, softening the prominences. The face was aligned upon a strong, rubicund nose, straight almost to the end, where it curved down like a beak. His eyes were a blue pastel. Wolfe had once written that they were "full of a strange misty light, a kind of far weather of the sea in them, eyes of a New England sailor long months outbound for China on a clipper ship, with something drowned, sea-sunken in them."

Perkins took off his sopping raincoat and revealed an unpressed, pepper-and-salt, three-piece suit. Then his eyes shot upward and he removed his hat, under which a full head of metallic-gray hair was combed straight back from a V in the center of his forehead. Max Perkins did not care much about the impression he gave, which was just as well, for the first one he made on this particular evening was of some Vermont feed-and-grain merchant who had come to the city in his Sunday clothes and got caught in the rain. As he walked to the front of the room, he seemed

slightly bewildered, and more so as Kenneth McCormick introduced him as "the dean of American editors."

Perkins had never spoken to a group like this before. Every year he received dozens of invitations, but he turned them all down. For one thing, he had become somewhat deaf and tended to avoid groups. For another, he believed that book editors should remain invisible; public recognition of them, he felt, might undermine readers' faith in writers, and writers' confidence in themselves. Moreover, Perkins had never seen any point in discussing his career—until McCormick's invitation. Kenneth McCormick, one of the most able and best-liked people in publishing, who himself practiced Perkins's philosophy of editorial self-effacement, was a hard man to refuse. Or perhaps Perkins sensed how much fatigue and sorrow had subtracted from his own longevity and felt he had better pass along what he knew before it was too late.

Hooking his thumbs comfortably into the armholes of his waistcoat, speaking in his slightly rasping, well-bred voice, Perkins began. "The first thing you must remember," he said, without quite facing his audience: "An editor does not add to a book. At best he serves as a handmaiden to an author. Don't ever get to feeling important about yourself, because an editor at most releases energy. He creates nothing." Perkins admitted that he had suggested books to authors who had no ideas of their own at the moment, but he maintained that such works were usually below their best, though they were sometimes financially and even critically successful. "A writer's best work," he said, "comes entirely from himself." He warned the students against any effort by an editor to inject his own point of view into a writer's work or to try to make him something other than what he is. "The process is so simple," he said. "If you have a Mark Twain, don't try to make him into a Shakespeare or make a Shakespeare into a Mark Twain. Because in the end an editor can get only as much out of an author as the author has in him."

Perkins spoke carefully, with that hollow timbre of the hard-of-hearing, as if he were surprised at the sound of his own voice. At first the audience had to strain to hear him, but within minutes they had become so still that his every syllable was quite audible. They sat listening intently to the diffident editor talking about the electrifying challenges of his work—the search for what he kept calling "the real thing."

Once Perkins had concluded his prepared remarks, Kenneth McCormick asked the class for questions. "What was it like to work with F. Scott Fitzgerald?" was the first.

A fragile smile floated across Perkins's face as he thought for a moment. Then he replied, "Scott was always the gentleman. Sometimes he needed extra support—and sobering up—but the writing was so rich it was worth it." Perkins went on to say that Fitzgerald was comparatively simple to edit because he was a perfectionist about his work and wanted it to be right. However, Perkins added, "Scott was especially sensitive to criticism. He could accept it, but as his editor you had to be sure of everything you suggested."

The discussion turned to Ernest Hemingway. Perkins said Hemingway needed backing in the beginning of his career, and even more later, "because he wrote as daringly as he lived." Perkins believed Hemingway's writing displayed that virtue of his heroes, "grace under pressure." Hemingway, he said, was susceptible to overcorrecting himself. "He once told me that he had written parts of *A Farewell to Arms* fifty times," Perkins said. "Before an author destroys the natural qualities of his writing—that's when an editor has to step in. But not a moment sooner."

Perkins shared stories about working with Erskine Caldwell, then commented on several of his best-selling women novelists, including Taylor Caldwell, Marcia Davenport, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. At last, as though the class had been reluctant to raise a tender subject, came questions about the late Thomas Wolfe, from whom Perkins had become estranged. Most of the inquiries for the rest of the evening concerned Perkins's intense involvement with Wolfe, the most arduous endeavor of his career. For years it had been widely rumored that Wolfe and Perkins had been equal partners in producing Wolfe's sprawling novels. "Tom," he said, "was a man of enormous talent, genius. That talent, like his view of America, was so vast that neither one book nor a single lifetime could contain all that he had to say." As Wolfe transposed his world into fiction, Perkins had felt it was his responsibility to create certain boundaries—of length and form. He said, "These were practical conventions that Wolfe couldn't stop to think about for himself."

"But did Wolfe take your suggestions gracefully?" someone asked.

Perkins laughed for the first time that evening. He told of the time, at the midpoint of their relationship, when he had tried to get Wolfe to delete a big section of *Of Time and the River*. "It was late on a hot night, and we were working at the office. I put my case to him and then sat in silence, reading on in the manuscript." Perkins had known Wolfe would eventually agree to the deletion because the reasons for it were artistically sound. But Wolfe would not give in easily. He tossed his head about and

swayed in his chair, while his eyes roved over Perkins's sparsely furnished office. "I went on reading in the manuscript for not less than fifteen minutes," Max continued, "but I was aware of Tom's movements—aware at last that he was looking fixedly at one corner of the office. In that corner hung my hat and overcoat, and down from under the hat, along the coat, hung a sinister rattlesnake skin with seven rattles." It was a present from Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. Max looked at Tom, who was glaring at the hat, coat, and serpent. "Aha!" Wolfe exclaimed. "The portrait of an editor!" Having had his little joke, Wolfe then agreed to the deletion.

A few of the questions from the would-be publishers that evening had to be repeated so that Perkins could hear them. There were long, puzzling silences in his speech. He answered the questions eloquently, but in between them his mind seemed to wander among a thousand different remembrances. "Max seemed to be going into a private world of his own thoughts," McCormick said years later, "making interior, private associations, as though he had entered a little room and closed the door behind him." All in all it was a memorable performance, and the class sat mesmerized. The rural Yankee who had stumbled in out of the rain hours earlier had transformed himself before them into the very legend of their imaginings.

Shortly after nine o'clock, McCormick notified Perkins of the time so that Max could catch his train. It seemed a shame to stop. He had not even mentioned his experiences with novelists Sherwood Anderson, J. P. Marquand, Morley Callaghan, Hamilton Basso; he had not spoken of biographer Douglas Southall Freeman, or Edmund Wilson, or Allen Tate, or Alice Roosevelt Longworth or Nancy Hale. It was too late to talk about Joseph Stanley Pennell, whose *Rome Hanks* Perkins considered the most exciting novel he had edited in recent years. There was no time to talk about new writers—Alan Paton and James Jones, for example, two authors whose promising manuscripts he was presently editing. Perkins, however, undoubtedly felt he had said more than enough. He picked up his hat and tugged it down over his head, put on his raincoat, turned his back on the standing ovation of his audience, and slipped out as unobtrusively as he had entered.

It was still raining hard. Under his black umbrella he trudged to Grand Central Station. He had never talked so much about himself so publicly in his life.

When he arrived at his home in New Canaan, Connecticut, late that night, Perkins found that the eldest of his five daughters had come over

for the evening and was waiting up for him. She noticed that her father seemed melancholy, and she asked why.

"I gave a speech tonight and they called me 'the dean of American editors,'" he explained. "When they call you the dean, that means you're through."

"Oh, Daddy, that doesn't mean you're through," she objected. "It just means you've reached the top."

"No," Perkins said flatly. "It means you're through."

It was the twenty-sixth of March. On March 26, twenty-six years earlier, there had been a great beginning for Maxwell Perkins—the publication of a book that changed his life, and a great deal more.

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# II

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## Paradise

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In 1919 the rites of spring in Manhattan were extraordinary demonstrations of patriotism. Week after week, battalions marched triumphantly up Fifth Avenue. The "war to end all wars" had been fought and won.

At Forty-eighth Street the parades passed before the offices of Charles Scribner's Sons—Publishers and Booksellers. The Scribner Building was a ten-story structure of classical design, crowned with two obelisks and graced with stately pilasters. The ground floor was faced in shiny brass—the elegant storefront of the Scribner bookshop, a spacious, oblong room with a high vaulted ceiling and narrow metal staircases which spiraled to upper galleries. John Hall Wheelock, who managed the store before becoming a Scribner editor, called it "a Byzantine cathedral of books."

Adjacent to the bookstore was an unobtrusive entrance. Behind it, a vestibule led to an elevator that clattered its way into the upper realms of the Scribner enterprise. The second and third floors housed financial and business departments. Advertising was on the fourth floor. And on the fifth were the editorial rooms—bare white ceilings and walls; uncarpeted concrete floors; rolltop desks and bookcases. In this austere style, Scribners, a family business in its second generation, maintained itself as the most genteel and tradition-encrusted of all the American publishing houses. There was still a Dickensian atmosphere about the place. The accounting office, for example, was run by a man in his seventies who spent his days perched on a high stool, poring over leather-bound ledgers. Typewriters

had by then become standard equipment, and because women had to be hired to operate the contraptions, gentlemen were expected not to smoke in the offices.

From the fifth floor, the company was governed like a nineteenth-century monarchy. Charles Scribner II, "old CS," was the undisputed ruler. His face usually wore a severe expression, and he had a sharp nose and white close-cropped hair and mustache. At age sixty-six, he had reigned forty years. Next in succession was his amiable brother Arthur, nine years younger, with softer features, who Wheelock said "was always a little paralyzed by his brother's vitality." William Cray Brownell, the editor-in-chief, white-bearded and walrus-mustached, had a brass spittoon and a leather couch in his office. Every afternoon he would read a newly submitted manuscript and then "sleep on it" for an hour. Afterward he would take a walk around the block, puffing a cigar, and by the time he had returned to his desk and spat, he was ready to announce his opinion of the book.

There were also younger men at Scribners. One of them, Maxwell Evarts Perkins, had arrived in 1910. He had spent four and a half years as advertising manager before ascending to the editorial floor to be apprenticed under the venerable Brownell. By 1919, Perkins had already established himself as a promising young editor. Yet as he observed the parades outside his office window, he felt twinges of disappointment about his career. In his thirties, he had considered himself too old and overburdened with responsibilities to enlist for action overseas. Watching the colorful homecoming, he felt sorry that he had not witnessed the war firsthand.

Scribners itself had scarcely experienced the war and its upheavals. The Scribner list was a backwater of literary tastes and values. Its books never transgressed the bounds of "decency." Indeed, they seldom went beyond merely diverting the reader. There were none of the newer writers who were attracting attention—Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson. The three pillars of the House of Scribner were long-established writers steeped in the English tradition. The firm published John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* and the complete works of Henry James and Edith Wharton. Indeed, most of Scribners' important books were by writers they had been publishing for years, whose manuscripts required no editing. William C. Brownell stated the company's editorial policy in responding to one of Mrs. Wharton's manuscripts: "I don't believe much in tinkering, and I am not *suffisant* enough to think the publisher can contribute much by counselling modifications."

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For the most part, Maxwell Perkins's duties as an editor were limited to proofreading galleys—long printed sheets, each containing the equivalent of three book pages—and to other perfunctory chores. Occasionally he was called upon to correct the grammar in a gardening book or arrange the selections in school anthologies of classic short stories and translations of Chekhov. The work demanded little creativity.

One regular Scribner author was Shane Leslie, an Irish journalist, poet, and lecturer who spent years at a time in America. On one of his extended tours he was introduced to a teen-aged boy by the headmaster of the Newman School in New Jersey. Leslie and the handsome youth—an aspiring writer from Minnesota—became friends. Eventually the young man entered Princeton University but enlisted in the army before graduating. He was commissioned and sent to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. "Every Saturday at one o'clock when the week's work was over," he recalled years later, "I hurried up to the Officer's Club and there in a corner of a room full of smoke, conversation and rattling newspapers, I wrote a one hundred and twenty thousand word novel on the consecutive weekends of three months." In the spring of 1918 he believed the army was about to send him overseas. Unsure of his future, the young officer—F. Scott Fitzgerald—entrusted the manuscript to Leslie.

The work, entitled *The Romantic Egotist*, was little more than a grab bag of stories, poems, and sketches recounting the author's coming of age. Leslie sent it to Charles Scribner, suggesting that he give a "judgment" upon it. By way of introduction he wrote,

In spite of its disguises, it has given me a vivid picture of the American generation that is hastening to war. I marvel at its crudity and its cleverness. It is naive in places, shocking in others, painful to the conventional and not without a touch of ironic sublimity—especially toward the end. About a third of the book could be omitted without losing the impression that it is written by an American Rupert Brooke. . . . It interests me as a boy's book and I think gives expression to that real American youth that the sentimentalists are so anxious to drape behind the canvas of the YMCA tent.

The manuscript went from editor to editor during the next three months. Brownell "could not stomach it at all." Edward L. Burlingame, another senior editor, found it "hard sledding." The material was passed down until it reached Maxwell Perkins. "We have been reading 'The Romantic Egoist' \* with a very unusual degree of interest," Perkins wrote

\* Perkins misspelled the title. All spellings and punctuation are preserved in the directly quoted material in this book, except where the error might cause confusion.

Fitzgerald that August; "in fact no ms. novel has come to us for a long time that seemed to display so much vitality." But Perkins was extrapolating from a single response. Only *he* had liked the book, and his letter went on reluctantly to decline it. He cited governmental restrictions on printing supplies, high manufacturing costs, and "certain characteristics of the novel itself."

Editors at Scribners considered criticism of works they turned down as beyond their function and likely to be resented by an author. But Perkins's enthusiasm for Fitzgerald's manuscript impelled him to comment further. Commandeering the editorial "we," he risked offering some general remarks, because, he said, "we should welcome a chance to reconsider its publication."

His main complaint with *The Romantic Egotist* was that it did not advance to a conclusion. The protagonist drifted, hardly changing over the course of the novel.

This may be intentional on your part for it is certainly not untrue to life [Perkins wrote]; but it leaves the reader distinctly disappointed and dissatisfied since he has expected him to arrive somewhere either in an actual sense by his response to the war perhaps, or in a psychological one by "finding himself" as for instance Pendennis is brought to do. He does go to the war, but in almost the same spirit that he went to college and school—because it is simply the thing to do.

"It seems to us in short," Perkins asserted, "that the story does not culminate in anything as it must to justify the reader's interest as he follows it; and that it might be made to do so quite consistently with the characters and with its earlier stages." Perkins did not want Fitzgerald to "conventionalize" the book so much as intensify it. "We hope we shall see it again," he wrote in closing, "and we shall then reread it immediately."

Perkins's letter encouraged Lieutenant Fitzgerald to spend the next six weeks revising his novel. By mid-October he sent the reworked manuscript to Scribners. Perkins read it immediately, as promised, and was delighted to find it much improved. Rather than approaching old CS directly, he sought an ally in Scribner's son. Charles III liked the book too, but his support was not enough. The older editors again voted Perkins down. With that, as Perkins later admitted to Fitzgerald, "I was afraid that . . . you might be done with us conservatives."

Max was nonetheless determined to see the book published. He brought it to the attention of two rival publishers. One Scribner colleague

remembered Perkins was "terrified that they would accept it, for all the time he saw how vitally it might still be improved. The other publishers, however, sent it back without comment."

Undeterred, Perkins continued to harbor a private hope that he could still get it published. He believed that Fitzgerald might revise the novel further after he got out of the army, then allow Perkins to take it before his editorial board a third time.

Fitzgerald, however, was not as indomitable as his champion in New York. When *The Romantic Egotist* was turned down for the second time, he was at Camp Sheridan in Montgomery, Alabama. He lost confidence in the book, but his disappointment was softened by a distraction—Zelda Sayre, an Alabama supreme court justice's daughter whose graduating high school class had just voted her the "prettiest and most attractive." Lieutenant Fitzgerald was introduced to her at a country club dance in July and was one of the admirers who called on her that August. Fitzgerald later confided to his Ledger that on the seventh of September he "fell in love." Zelda loved him too, but kept him at bay. She was waiting to see whether his talents were strong enough to earn them the luxuries they both dreamed of. The army discharged Fitzgerald in February, 1919, and he headed for New York and a job at the Barron Collier advertising agency. Upon his arrival he wired Zelda: I AM IN THE LAND OF AMBITION AND SUCCESS AND MY ONLY HOPE AND FAITH IS THAT MY DARLING HEART WILL BE WITH ME SOON.

Fitzgerald, of course, went to see Max Perkins. It is not known what they said to each other, except that Perkins suggested, off the record, that Scott rewrite his novel, changing the narrative from first to third person. "Max's idea was to give the author some distance from the material," John Hall Wheelock said years later of Perkins's advice. "He admired the exuberance of Fitzgerald's writing and personality but believed no publisher, certainly not Scribners, would accept an author's work so brash and self-indulgent as it was."

In midsummer, 1919, Fitzgerald wrote Perkins from St. Paul. "After four months attempt to write commercial copy by day and painful half-hearted imitations of popular literature at night," he said, "I decided that it was one thing or another. So I gave up getting married and went home." By the end of July he finished a draft of a novel called *The Education of a Personage*. "It is in no sense a revision of the ill-fated *Romantic Egotist*," he assured Perkins, "but it contains some of the former material improved and worked over and bears a strong family resemblance besides." Fitz-

gerald added, "While the other was a tedious disconnected casserole this is a definite attempt at a big novel and I really believe I have hit it."

Once again sanguine about his novel, Fitzgerald asked if an August 20 submission might result in an October publication. "This is an odd question I realize since you haven't even seen the book," he wrote Perkins, "but you have been so kind about my stuff that I venture to intrude once more upon your patience." Fitzgerald gave Perkins two reasons for rushing the book out: "because I want to get started both in a literary and financial way; second—because it is to some extent a timely book and it seems to me that the public are wild for decent reading matter."

*The Education of a Personage* struck Max as an excellent title and aroused his curiosity about the work. "Ever since the first reading of your first manuscript we have felt that you would succeed," he wrote back immediately. Regarding publication, he said, he was certain of one thing: Nobody could bring this book out in two months without greatly injuring its chances. To shorten the deliberation period, however, Perkins offered to read chapters as they were finished.

Fitzgerald sent no chapters, but in the first week of September, 1919, a complete revision arrived on Perkins's desk. Fitzgerald had changed the book considerably, taking, in fact, every one of Perkins's suggestions. He had transposed the story to the third person and put the material he had salvaged to much better use. He had also given the work a new title: *This Side of Paradise*.

Perkins prepared for his third assault on the monthly meeting of the editorial board, dutifully circulating the new manuscript among his colleagues. In mid-September the editors met. Charles Scribner sat at the head of the table, glowering. His brother Arthur sat by his side. Brownell was there too, a formidable figure, for he was not just editor-in-chief but one of the most eminent literary critics in America. He had "slept on the book," and he looked eager to argue against any of the half-dozen other men sitting around the table who might want to accept it.

Old CS held forth. According to Wheelock, "He was a born publisher with great flair, who truly loved getting books into print. But Mr. Scribner said, 'I'm proud of my imprint. I cannot publish fiction that is without literary value.' Then Brownell spoke for him when he pronounced the book 'frivolous.'" The discussion seemed over—until old CS, with his forbidding eyes, peered down the conference table and said, "Max, you're very silent."

Perkins stood and began to pace the room. "My feeling," he ex-



plained, "is that a publisher's first allegiance is to talent. And if we aren't going to publish a talent like this, it is a very serious thing." He contended that the ambitious Fitzgerald would be able to find another publisher for this novel and young authors would follow him: "Then we might as well go out of business." Perkins returned to his original place at the meeting table and, confronting Scribner head on, said, "If we're going to turn down the likes of Fitzgerald, I will lose all interest in publishing books." The vote of hands was taken. The young editors tied the old. There was a silence. Then Scribner said he wanted more time to think it over.

Fitzgerald was earning some money at a temporary job of repairing the roofs of railroad cars. On the eighteenth of September, just before his twenty-third birthday, he received a special delivery letter from Maxwell Perkins.

I am very glad, personally, to be able to write to you that we are all for publishing your book *This Side of Paradise*. Viewing it as the same book that was here before, which in a sense it is, though translated into somewhat different terms and extended farther, I think that you have improved it enormously. As the first manuscript did, it abounds in energy and life and it seems to me to be in much better proportion. . . . The book is so different that it is hard to prophesy how it will sell but we are all for taking a chance and supporting it with vigor.

Scribners' expectation was to publish that spring.

No money was to be paid Fitzgerald as an advance against future earnings—advances, customary today, were not always offered in that time. But Fitzgerald already envisioned a prosperous future. In his essay "Early Success" (1937) he wrote, "That day I quit work and ran along the streets, stopping automobiles to tell friends and acquaintances about it—my novel *This Side of Paradise* was accepted for publication. . . . I paid off my terrible small debts, bought a suit, and woke up every morning with a world of ineffable toploftiness and promise." Fitzgerald left all the terms of the contract to Perkins, but there was one condition which he did not relinquish without a slight struggle. He was obsessed with the idea of being a published writer by Christmas, February at the latest. He finally told Perkins why: Zelda Sayre was within his grasp. Beyond that, Fitzgerald wrote Perkins, "It will have a psychological effect on me and all my surroundings and besides open up new fields. I'm in that stage where every month counts frantically and seems a cudgel in a fight for happiness against time."

Perkins explained that there were two seasons in the publishing year and that Scribners prepared for each long before it began. For example, each July and August, Scribner salesmen canvassed the country, carrying trunks filled with sample chapters and dust jackets of books meant to enjoy their greatest sale during the Christmas season. A book put on the fall list after the "travelers" had visited their stores would have to make it entirely on its own. It would come without introduction to the bookseller, who, said Perkins, was already going "nearly mad with the number of books in his store and had invested all the money he could in them"; it would come, he said, "as a most unwelcome and troublesome thing which would suffer accordingly." Perkins recommended the second publishing season, preparations for which began the month after the Christmas rush. By then the booksellers had made their year's biggest profits and were ready to stock up again, this time on the new spring books, including, one hoped, *This Side of Paradise*.

Fitzgerald understood and acquiesced. "While I waited for the novel to appear," he wrote further in his 1937 essay, "the metamorphosing of amateur into professional began to take place—a sort of stitching together of your whole life into a pattern of work, so that the end of one job is automatically the beginning of another." He broke ground on a number of projects. Of greatest interest to Perkins was a novel called *The Demon Lover*, which Fitzgerald estimated would take a year to complete. When his enthusiasm on that flagged, he wrote short stories and submitted them to *Scribner's*, a monthly magazine published by the firm. It accepted only one of his first four submissions.

Fitzgerald wanted some word of encouragement to offset the rejection slips. Perkins read the pieces that had been declined and told Scott he was sure there would be no difficulty in placing them elsewhere. "The great beauty of them," Perkins wrote, "is that they are alive. Ninety percent of the stories that appear are derived from life through the rarefying medium of literature. Yours are direct from life it seems to me. This is true also of the language and style; it is that of the day. It is free of the conventions of the past which most writers love . . . to their great inconvenience." The pieces, Perkins wrote, "indicate to me that you are pretty definitely lodged as a writer of short stories."

Later, in the final weeks of the year, Fitzgerald wrote Perkins: "I feel I've certainly been lucky to find a publisher who seems so generally interested in his authors. Lord knows this literary game has been discouraging enough at times." What Fitzgerald did not realize was that

Maxwell Perkins was just as jubilant about having Scribners' brightest young author as his first literary discovery.

When Fitzgerald was a student at Princeton he told the visiting poet-in-residence Alfred Noyes that he thought it in his power "to write either books that would sell or books of permanent value" and he was not sure which he should do. It became a conflict with which Scott would wrestle for the remainder of his life. Perkins quickly realized that while both objectives mattered to Fitzgerald, money mattered a very great deal. As *This Side of Paradise* was being set into galleys, Fitzgerald wrote Perkins that he had a notion for still another novel. "I want to start it," he said, "but I don't want to get broke in the middle and start in and have to write short stories again—because I don't enjoy [writing stories] and just do it for money." Thinking of cash on hand more than future literary credit, he asked, "There's nothing in collections of short stories is there?"

Perkins confirmed Fitzgerald's hunch that as a rule anthologies did not make best-selling books. "The truth is," Perkins explained, "it has seemed to me that your stories were likely to constitute an exception, after a good many of them had been printed and your name was widely known. It seems to me that they have the popular note which would be likely to make them sell in book form. I wish you did care more about writing them . . . because they have great value in making you a reputation and because they are quite worthwhile in themselves."

Fitzgerald remained anxious all winter. Zelda Sayre agreed to marry him, but the wedding still hinged on his success as an author. He saw the short stories as a shortcut to his goal. He broke up the work he had done on *The Demon Lover* into several character sketches and sold them for forty dollars apiece to *The Smart Set*, the popular literary magazine published by George Jean Nathan and H. L. Mencken. More than anyone else in 1920, editor and critic Mencken encouraged writers to buck the "genteel tradition" and record the living language of the day. By winter's end, after *The Smart Set* had published six of Fitzgerald's slick pieces about idle dandies and cheeky debutantes, the young writer's reputation was spreading rapidly.

As publication of *This Side of Paradise* drew near, many people at Charles Scribner's Sons caught the fever of excitement that had infected Maxwell Perkins months earlier. Some, however, were not so much excited as appalled. Malcolm Cowley, a literary critic, wrote that even before

its publication the book was recognized as "the terrifying voice of a new age, and it made some of the older employees of Scribners cringe." Roger Burlingame, son of senior editor Edward L. Burlingame and later a Scribners editor himself, gave an example of this reaction in his *Of Making Many Books*, an informal history of Scribners. The bellwether at Scribners in those days, Burlingame noted, was an important member of the sales department. Often mistrusting his own literary judgment he spoke "advisedly" about many books, and used to take them home for an erudite sister to read. His sister was supposed to be infallible and it was true that many of the novels she had "cried over" sold prodigiously. So when it was known that he had taken *This Side of Paradise* home for the weekend, his colleagues were agog on Monday morning. "And what did your sister say?" they asked in chorus. "She picked it up with the tongs," he replied, "because she wouldn't touch it with her hands after reading it, and put it into the fire."

On March 26, 1920, *This Side of Paradise* appeared at last, and Fitzgerald was proudly advertised as "the youngest writer for whom Scribners have ever published a novel." Perkins wandered down into the store that day and saw two copies sold right before him, which he thought augured well. A week later, in the rectory of St. Patrick's Cathedral, just blocks from the Scribner Building, Zelda Sayre and Scott Fitzgerald were married. They always considered their wedding to have occurred under Perkins's auspices.

*This Side of Paradise* unfurled like a banner over an entire age. It commanded attention in literary columns and sales charts. H. L. Mencken in his *Smart Set* review wrote that Fitzgerald had produced "a truly amazing first novel—original in structure, extremely sophisticated in manner, and adorned with brilliancy that is as rare in American writing as honesty is in American statecraft." Mark Sullivan, in his social history of America, *Our Times*, which was published by Scribners, wrote that Fitzgerald's first book "has the distinction, if not of creating a generation, certainly of calling the world's attention to a generation."

Fitzgerald himself had made just that point in the book's final pages. "Here was a new generation," he wrote, "shouting the old cries, learning the old creeds, through a revery of long days and nights; destined finally to go out into that dirty gray turmoil to follow love and pride; a new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken."

Of the book's popular appeal, the author himself recalled in "Early Success":

In a daze I told the Scribner Company that I didn't expect my novel to sell more than twenty thousand copies and when the laughter died away I was told that a sale of five thousand was excellent for a first novel. I think it was a week after publication that it passed the twenty thousand mark, but I took myself so seriously that I didn't even think it was funny.

The book did not make Fitzgerald rich so much as it made him famous. He was only twenty-four and seemingly destined to succeed. Charles Scribner wrote Shane Leslie later in the year: "Your introduction of Scott Fitzgerald proved to be an important one for us; *This Side of Paradise* has been our best seller this season and is still going strong."

In the first rush of the book's celebrity many serious misprints went overlooked. Perkins took all the blame for them. He had been so frightened of the reaction to the book from the other employees at Scribners that he had hardly let it out of his hands during any stage of its preparation—not even to proofreaders. In *Of Making Many Books*, Roger Burlingame noted that if it had not been for the stern supervision of Irma Wyckoff, Perkins's devoted secretary, Max "would probably be something of an orthographic phenomenon himself." Soon the misspellings Perkins never spotted became a major topic of literary conversation. By summer, the witty New York *Tribune* book columnist Franklin P. Adams had turned the search for errors into a parlor game. Finally, a Harvard scholar sent Scribners a list of over 100 mistakes. This was humiliating for Perkins; but even more humiliating was that the author, himself an atrocious speller, was pointing out errors too. Scott was excited that his book was running through entire printings each week but disgruntled that many of those errors on Franklin Adams's growing list remained uncorrected as late as the sixth printing.

The misprints seemed not to matter to the reading public. The writing especially excited the uncertain youth of the nation. Mark Sullivan later said of Fitzgerald's hero: "Young people found in Amory's behavior a model for their conduct—and alarmed parents found their worst apprehensions realized." Roger Burlingame noted further that the novel "waked all the comfortable parents of the war's fighting generation out of the hangover of their security into the consciousness that something definite, terrible and, possibly, final, had happened to their children. And it gave their children their first proud sense of being 'lost.'" "America was going

on the greatest, gaudiest spree in history and there was going to be plenty to tell about it," Fitzgerald later wrote.

Within a month of his novel's publication, Fitzgerald mailed to his editor eleven stories, six poems—three of which had drawn "quite a bit of notice in the *Second Book of Princeton Verse*"—and a hatful of possible titles for an anthology. Max read all the material, selected eight stories, and chose *Flappers and Philosophers* as the strongest of Fitzgerald's lighthearted titles. Charles Scribner thought the choice was "horrid" but was inclined to let Perkins parlay his first success into another.

Fitzgerald's income from writing zoomed from \$879 in 1919 to \$18,850 in 1920, and he frittered it all away. So far as Scribner could see, Fitzgerald was not much concerned with thrift and seemed little interested in the future. He wrote Shane Leslie that Fitzgerald "is very fond of the good things of life and is disposed to enjoy it to the full while the going is good. Economy is not one of his virtues."

Beginning with Fitzgerald, Perkins developed the habit of sending books to his laboring authors. "Max was like an old-time druggist," remarked one of them, James Jones. "Whenever he saw you getting sluggish, he prescribed a book that he thought would pep you up. They were always specially selected for your condition, perfectly matched to your particular tastes and temperament, but with enough of a kick to get you thinking in a new direction." In June, 1920, Max sent Fitzgerald a copy of *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* by Van Wyck Brooks. Brooks, Max wrote Scott, "is a brilliant chap and very attractive and if you do care for the book I would like to have you meet him at lunch some day." Van Wyck Brooks was Max Perkins's closest friend. They had known each other since kindergarten in Plainfield, New Jersey, and had been at Harvard together. Now, twelve years after graduation, Brooks was on his way to becoming the era's foremost surveyor of American literature.

"It's one of the most inspirational books I've read and has seemed to put the breath of life back in me," Fitzgerald wrote back a few days after receiving the book. "Just finished the best story I've done yet & my novel is going to be my life masterpiece." Fitzgerald's heavily underlined copy of *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* is evidence of the deeper effect Brooks's work had on his next group of stories. Scott read in Brooks about a Clemens novel called *The Gilded Age*, in which a man goes west in search of a mountain of coal and strikes it rich enough to marry the woman he loves. Scott then wrote a novella in which FitzNorman Culpepper Washington stumbled upon a mineral treasure, at about the same

time, in Montana. Fitzgerald called his story "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz."

The author worked on through the summer, but Perkins did not. He was never content on a vacation unless he felt he had earned it, and that summer, for the first time in his career as an editor, he believed he had. Before leaving for his respite, Perkins sent Fitzgerald his address, to be used should he need him for anything. It was simply the name of the small town he had gone to practically every summer of his life.

Windsor, Vermont rests a third of the way up the Vermont-New Hampshire border, on the western bank of the Connecticut River. It was for Max Perkins the most glorious place on earth. Some seventy years earlier, just beyond the shadow of Mount Ascutney, his maternal grandfather had built a compound of houses in which to assemble his family around him. "Windsor was the personal heaven of my grandfather's grandchildren," Max's sister Fanny Cox wrote in *Vermont*. "In the winter we lived in different settings . . . but in the summer we gathered together in the big place behind the picket fence where six houses faced the village street and the grounds stretched back across green lawns with clipped hemlock hedges and round begonia-filled flower beds to slope down the hill to the pond." Rising behind the pond was a particularly lovely part of the acreage, where streams raced down hills and footpaths wove through stands of pine and birch. The family called these special woods "Paradise."

In Paradise a youth could run as wild and free as his imagination. Young Max Perkins had spent innumerable hours there with his brothers and sisters and cousins. Later, as a father, he took his own children. All the pleasures at the other end of the seven-hour ride from New York on the White Mountain Express, a wonderfully comfortable summer train, were passed on to them.

Perkins told one of his daughters, "The greatest feeling is to go to bed tired." Bedtime had always been Perkins's favorite time of day, those few minutes just before falling asleep when he could "steer his dreams." In those final moments of wakefulness Maxwell Perkins recurrently transported himself back to Russia in 1812—the scene of his favorite book, *War and Peace*. Night after night his mind filled with visions of Napoleon's army retreating from Moscow in the frost and early winter snow. On mornings in Vermont after Tolstoi's characters had paraded before him, he insisted that his dreams were more vivid and that he slept more soundly in Windsor than anywhere else.

Once every summer Max took his daughters for a hike up Mount Ascutney, marching them for thirty minutes and then resting for ten, just as Prince Andrei in *War and Peace* might have marched his soldiers. But Perkins's greatest pleasure in Windsor was in losing himself on a long solitary stroll. A "real walk" he used to call it. Alone, he would stride across the same ground his ancestors had before him.