

The Last Gatsby - Synopsis

The action is presented here in chronological order for the sake of continuity. In the manuscript, chapters within each part alternate between past and present, allowing plots in either time frame (1918 through 1926 in the past, and 'the present' in 1968, respectively) to mirror and echo each other.

Part One:

Born in 1900 and raised on a farm in the Inland Empire, west of Los Angeles, Frank Potter grows up during the First World War and the birth of the movies before losing his stepmother in the Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918. Her wake is interrupted by the chance arrival of a film crew from New World Moving Pictures, asking to shoot location footage on outskirts of the farm. Intrigued, he follows them and watches from a distance, enthralled as the crew films a beautiful actress swimming naked in a stream under a willow tree.

On Frank's return to the farm, an entanglement with a local girl and the farm's overseer, Harlan, comes to a head and his father, showing early signs of sickness, orders Frank off the farm. With nowhere to go, he returns to the film crew's encampment, is welcomed by the bohemian group and charmed by Nova Romanov, the actress he observed earlier. He passes the night with them, sharing a tent with Theo, an actor in the company about his age.

Frank spends the next day learning to handle a movie camera, proving so adept that the troupe's director, Cyril MacKenzie, suggests he join them—but stipulates that Frank must return and tell his father, promising that they will stop by for him as they leave.

Frank returns to find that his father has died during the night and that Harlan, having taken advantage of Frank's departure to repeat an offer to buy the farm, has forged the bill of sale. Harlan confronts Frank with the forged deed, then draws and fires on him as he tries to flee. Hearing the shot as they arrive, the film crew rescues Frank, forcing Harlan to dig a grave at gunpoint. The troupe helps Frank bury his father and escorts Harlan off the property. As they prepare to leave, Cyril draws Frank aside and presents an offer: the studio has considered buying a farm to use as a location property. Frank agrees to sell the land and join them, over the western hills in budding Hollywood.

Fifty years later, Frank and several surviving members of the company find themselves in the neglectful care of the Silent Picture Rest Home, where they watch a horribly censored cut of their old film, *Purity*, (the picture Frank had first watched them working on). He is awakened that night by his old friend, the former silent star Anna Randall, who has become confused and imagines herself shooting one of her old epics. He fends off the intrusive efforts of an incompetent attendant as he gently puts her back to bed.

The next day the group (including Anna in better form after a night's rest and the wheelchair-bound Little Lulu, once a child actress in early serials), attends the funeral of silent star Ramón Novarro, where they are joined by their former colleague, Gladys de la

Vigne. They pay their respects at Cyril's grand tomb, discover an unexpected gravesite there beside his, and discuss the disappearance of Nova, who vanished without explanation during the filming of their now-lost film of *The Great Gatsby*, a disaster which ended in the accidental death of one of the troupe and led to the dissolution of the studio. Frank is unsettled by the day's events, and finds himself thinking about history and the perishability of silent film. Over breakfast the following morning, he broaches the idea of re-filming the lost movie, using the resources they now have on hand, with the aim of solving the mystery of the long-lost actress.

Part Two:

Frank revels in the atmosphere of early Hollywood and establishes himself as a cameraman with New World Moving Pictures, and he finds himself fascinated by Nova, with her unstudied glamor and freedom. He lives with Theo, and their relationship deepens.

Little Lulu dies after contracting polio, and at her funeral Frank notes that Anna and Cyril, who have been a casual couple, are no longer together, and Nova has taken Anna's place.

Frank joins the studio's production of *The Great Gatsby*, which features most of the actors we've now met, and he shoots several key scenes. During the production, however, Theo has a sexual encounter with Nova, which Eddie, a jealous fellow-cameraman, surreptitiously films. This footage is revealed and Theo and Frank, Cyril and Nova separate. Frank is taken in by Anna, and learns that Little Lulu is still very much alive, but in hiding.

As they continue filming *Gatsby*, Frank and Theo reconcile. Frank is behind the camera when Theo, playing *Gatsby's* George Wilson, shoots the actor playing Gatsby, as in the book—but kills him when the gun he's using turns out to be loaded with live ammunition. In the ensuing investigation, Theo and Frank are arrested, Nova Romanov vanishes, and an inquest is launched. Theo is acquitted, and Nova is never found. The members of the company finish the film as best they can, and Cyril retires and descends into alcoholism, dying soon after New World Moving Pictures is bought out by a larger film company.

Fifty years later, the inmates of the Silent Picture Rest Home secure a camera and set about recreating their lost film. They re-film significant scenes described earlier, and rediscover that Cyril had coerced Nova into a sexual relationship, from which she had used Theo as an opportunity to escape, but not before she found herself pregnant.

Scene by scene, clues accumulate until it becomes clear that the mysterious grave in Cyril's monument was intended for Nova. Since there was no funeral, however, the group questions what is actually buried in Cyril's monument.

Under the cover of darkness, the group escapes the Rest Home and opens the mysterious grave, finding a casket containing the last surviving print of the lost *Great Gatsby*. They are almost apprehended by police, but Gladys arrives, and they escape with the film to Frank's old family farm.

There, when Anna suffers a moment of confusion and provides a vital clue, they realize that Cyril, believing Nova's child to be his, had secluded her on the farm where she died in childbirth. He then buried the film, her last performance, after burying Nova in Frank's family plot on the farm and giving up the child, a girl, for adoption. He had been aided by Gladys before swearing her to secrecy and drinking himself to death. They watch the last print of *The Great Gatsby* before giving themselves up and returning to the Home.

Part Three:

The group secrets the recovered *Gatsby* print, the last surviving performance of Nova Romanov, under Anna's bed at the Home. As they sort out the strands of the mystery, they attend a screening of a film featuring an actress who looks remarkably like the long-lost Nova, and who must have been born at about the time she gave birth. As it occurs to them that this is her missing daughter—and that the child was Theo's—the old and chemically-unstable nitrate reels of the last print of the silent *Gatsby* spontaneously combust, causing the death of Anna and setting fire to the Silent Picture Rest Home.