

Outside the Cabinet-Maker's, F. Scott Fitzgerald

The automobile stopped at the corner of Sixteenth and some dingy-looking street. The lady got out. The man and the little girl stayed in the car.

"I'm going to tell him it can't cost more than twenty dollars," said the lady.

"All right. Have you the plans?"

"Oh, yes"—she reached for her bag in the back seat—"at least I have now."

"Dites qu'il ne faut pas avoir les forts placards," said the man. "Ni le bon bois."

"All right."

"I wish you wouldn't talk French," said the little girl.

"Et il faut avoir un bon 'height.' L'un des Murphys etait comme ca."

He held his hand five feet from the ground. The lady went through a door lettered "Cabinet-Maker" and disappeared up a small stairs.

The man and the little girl looked around unexpectantly. The neighborhood was red brick, vague, quiet. There were a few darkies doing something or other up the street and an occasional automobile went by. It was a fine November day.

"Listen," said the man to the little girl, "I love you."

"I love you too," said the little girl, smiling politely.

"Listen," the man continued. "Do you see that house over the way?"

The little girl looked. It was a flat in back of a shop. Curtains masked most of its interior, but there was a faint stir behind them. On one window a loose shutter banged from back to forth every few minutes. Neither the man nor the little girl had ever seen the place before.

"There's a Fairy Princess behind those curtains," said the man. "You can't see her but she's there, kept concealed by an Ogre. Do you know what an Ogre is?"

"Yes."

"Well, this Princess is very beautiful with long golden hair."

They both regarded the house. Part of a yellow dress appeared momentarily in the window.

"That's her," the man said. "The people who live there are guarding her for the Ogre. He's keeping the King and Queen prisoner ten thousand miles below the earth. She can't get out until the Prince finds the three—" He hesitated.

"And what, Daddy? The three what?"

"The three—Look! There she is again."

"The three what?"

"The three—the three stones that will release the King and Queen."

He yawned.

"And what then?"

"Then he can come and tap three times on each window and that will set her free."

The lady's head emerged from the upper story of the cabinet-maker's.

"He's busy," she called down. "Gosh, what a nice day!"

"And what, Daddy?" asked the little girl. "Why does the Ogre want to keep her there?"

"Because he wasn't invited to the christening. The Prince has already found one stone in President Coolidge's collar-box. He's looking for the second in Iceland. Every time he finds a stone the room where the Princess is kept turns blue. Gosh!"

"What, Daddy?"

"Just as you turned away I could see the room turn blue. That means he's found the second stone."

"Gosh!" said the little girl. "Look! It turned blue again, that means he's found the third stone."

Aroused by the competition the man looked around cautiously and his voice grew tense.

"Do you see what I see?" he demanded. "Coming up the street—there's the Ogre himself, disguised—you know: transformed, like Mombi in 'The Land of Oz.'"

"I know."

They both watched. The small boy, extraordinarily small and taking very long steps, went to the door of the flat and knocked; no one answered but he didn't seem to expect it or to be greatly disappointed. He took some chalk from his pocket and began drawing pictures under the door-bell.

"He's making magic signs," whispered the man. "He wants to be sure that the Princess doesn't get out this door. He must know that the Prince has set the King and Queen free and will be along for her pretty soon."

The small boy lingered for a moment; then he went to a window and called an unintelligible word. After a while a woman threw the window open and made an answer that the crisp wind blew away.

"She says she's got the Princess locked up," explained the man.

"Look at the Ogre," said the little girl. "He's making magic signs under the window too. And on the sidewalk. Why?"

"He wants to keep her from getting out, of course. That's why he's dancing. That's a charm too—it's a magic dance."

The Ogre went away, taking very big steps. Two men crossed the street ahead and passed out of sight.

"Who are they, Daddy?"

"They're two of the King's soldiers. I think the army must be gathering over on Market Street to surround the house. Do you know what 'surround' means?"

"Yes. Are those men soldiers too?"

"Those too. And I believe that the old one just behind is the King himself. He's keeping bent down low like that so that the Ogre's people won't recognize him."

"Who is the lady?"

"She's a Witch, a friend of the Ogre's."

The shutter blew closed with a bang and then slowly opened again.

"That's done by the good and bad fairies," the man explained. "They're invisible, but the bad fairies want to close the shutter so nobody can see in and the good ones want to open it."

"The good fairies are winning now."

"Yes." He looked at the little girl. "You're my good fairy."

"Yes. Look, Daddy! What is that man?"

"He's in the King's army too." The clerk of Mr. Miller, the jeweler, went by with a somewhat unmartial aspect. "Hear the whistle? That means they're gathering. And listen—there goes the drum."

"There's the Queen, Daddy. Look at there. Is that the Queen?"

"No, that's a girl called Miss Television." He yawned. He began to think of something pleasant that had happened yesterday. He went into a trance. Then he looked at the little girl and saw that she was quite happy. She was six and lovely to look at. He kissed her.

"That man carrying the cake of ice is also one of the King's soldiers," he said. "He's going to put the ice on the Ogre's head and freeze his brains so he can't do any more harm."

Her eyes followed the man down street. Other men passed. A darky in a yellow darky's overcoat drove by with a cart marked The Del Upholstery Co. The shutter banged again and then slowly opened.

"See, Daddy, the good fairies are winning again."

The man was old enough to know that he would look back to that time—the tranquil street and the pleasant weather and the mystery playing before the child's eyes, mystery which he had created, but whose luster and texture he could never see or touch any more himself. Again he touched his daughter's cheek instead and in payment fitted another small boy and limping man into the story.

"Oh, I love you," he said.

"I know, Daddy," she answered, abstractedly. She was staring at the house. For a moment he closed his eyes and tried to see with her but he couldn't see—those ragged blinds were drawn against him forever. There were only the occasional darkies and the small boys and the weather that reminded him of more glamorous mornings in the past.

The lady came out of the cabinet-maker's shop.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"Good. Il dit qu'il a fait les maisons de poupee pour les Du Ponts. Il va le faire."

"Combien?"

"Vingt-cinq. I'm sorry I was so long."

"Look, Daddy, there go a lot more soldiers!"

They drove off. When they had gone a few miles the man turned around and said, "We saw the most remarkable thing while you were there." He summarized the episode. "It's too bad we couldn't wait and see the rescue."

"But we did," the child cried. "They had the rescue in the next street. And there's the Ogre's body in that yard there. The King and Queen and Prince were killed and now the Princess is Queen."

He had liked his King and Queen and felt that they had been too summarily disposed of.

"You had to have a heroine," he said rather impatiently.

"She'll marry somebody and make him Prince."

They rode on abstractedly. The lady thought about the doll's house, for she had been poor and had never had one as a child, the man thought how he had almost a million dollars and the little girl thought about the odd doings on the dingy street that they had left behind.