

The Guest in Room Nineteen, F. Scott Fitzgerald

Mr. Cass knew he couldn't go to sleep so he put his tie on again and went back to the lobby. The guests were all gone to bed but a little aura of activity seemed to linger about a half-finished picture puzzle, and the night watchman was putting a big log on the fire.

Mr. Cass limped slowly across the soft carpet, stopped behind him and grunted, "Heavy?"

The watchman, a wiry old mountaineer, looked around sharply.

"A hundred pound. It's wet—it'll be one o'clock before it's burning good."

Mr. Cass let himself into a chair. Last year he had been active, driving his own car—but he had suffered a stroke before coming South last month and now life was like waiting for an unwelcome train. He was very lonely.

The watchman built burning chunks about the wet log.

"Thought you was somebody else when you came in," he said.

"Who did you think I was?"

"I thought you was the fella who's always coming in late. First night I was on duty he came in at two without any noise and give me a start. Every night he comes in late."

After a pause Mr. Cass asked:

"What's his name?"

"I never did ask him his name."

Another pause. The fire leapt into a premature, short-lived glow.

"How do you know he's a guest here?"

"Oh, he's a guest here." But the watchman considered the matter for the first time. "I hear him go down the corridor and around the corner and then I hear his door shut."

"He may be a burglar," said Mr. Cass.

"Oh, he's no burglar. He said he'd been coming here a long time."

"Did he tell you he wasn't a burglar?"

The watchman laughed.

"I never asked him that."

The log slipped and the old man adjusted it; Mr. Cass envied his strength. It seemed to him that if he had strength he could run out of here, hurry along the roads of the world, the roads that led back, and not sit waiting.

Almost every evening he played bridge with the two clerks, and one night last week he simply passed away during a bridge hand, shrinking up through space, up through the ceilings like a wisp of smoke, looking back, looking down at his body hunched at the table, his white fist clutching the cards. He heard the bids and his own voice speaking—then the two clerks were helping him into his room and one of them sat with him till the doctor came... After awhile Mr. Cass had to go to the bathroom and he decided to go to the public one. It took him some time. When he came back to the lobby the watchman said:

"That fella came in late again. I found out he's in number nineteen."

"What's his name?"

"I didn't like to ask him that—I knew I could find out from his number."

Mr. Cass sat down.

"I'm number eighteen," he said. "I thought there were just some women next to me."

The watchman went behind the desk to the mail rack. After a moment he reported.

"Funny thing—his box ain't here. There's number eighteen, that's Mr. Cass—"

"That's me."

"—and the next one is twenty, on the second floor. I must of understood him wrong."

"I told you he was a burglar. What did he look like?"

"Well, now he wasn't an old man and he wasn't a young man. He seemed like he'd been sick and he had little holes all over his face."

Despite its inadequacy the description somehow conjured up a picture for Mr. Cass. His partner, John Canisius, had never looked old or young and he had little holes in his face.

Suddenly Mr. Cass felt the same sensation stealing over him that he had felt the other night. Dimly he was aware that the watchman had gone to the door and dimly he heard his own voice saying: "Leave it open"; then the cold air swept in and his spirit left him and romped around the room with it. He saw John Canisius come in the open door and look at him and advance toward him, and then realized it was the watchman, pouring a paper cup of water into his mouth and spilling it on his collar.

"Thanks."

"Feel all right now?"

"Did I faint?" he muttered.

"You fell over kind of funny. Reckon I better help you get back into your room."

At the door of number eighteen Mr. Cass halted and pointed his cane at the room next door.

"What's that number?"

"Seventeen. And that one without a number is the manager's rooms. There ain't any nineteen."

"Do you think I'd better go in?"

"Sure thing." The watchman lowered his voice. "If you're thinking about that fella, I must of heard him wrong. I can't go looking for him tonight."

"He's in here," said Mr. Cass.

"No, he ain't."

"Yes, he is. He's waiting for me."

"Shucks, I'll go in with you."

He opened the door, turned on the light and took a quick look around.

"See—ain't nobody here."

Mr. Cass slept well and the next day was full Spring, so he decided to go out. It took him a long time to walk down the hill from the hotel and his progress across the double tracks took a good three minutes and attracted solicitous attention, but it was practically a country stroll compared to his negotiation of the highway which was accompanied by a great caterwauling of horns and screech of brakes. A welcoming committee waited him on the curb and helped him into the drug store where, exhausted by his adventure, he called a taxi to go home.

Because of this he fell asleep while undressing and waking at twelve felt dismal and oppressed. Finding it difficult to rise he rang, and the night watchman answered the bell.

"Glad to help you, Mr. Cass, if you'll wait five minutes. It's turned cold again and I want to get in a big log of wood."

"Oh," said Mr. Cass, and then, "Has the guest come in yet?"

"He just got in now."

"Did you ask him if he's a burglar?"

"He's no burglar, Mr. Cass. He's a nice fella. He's going to help me with this big log. I'll be right back."

"Did he say what room—" But the watchman was gone and Mr. Cass could only wait.

He waited five minutes, he waited ten. Then he gradually realized that the watchman was not coming back. It was plain that the watchman had been sent for.

Everyone tried to keep distressing things from Mr. Cass, and it was not until the following evening that he heard what had happened from some whispering at the desk.

The man had collapsed trying to lift a log too heavy for him. Mr. Cass said nothing because he knew that old people have to be careful what they say. Only he knew the watchman had not been alone.

After Easter the hotel's short season faded out and it was not worth while to hire a new watchman, but Mr. Cass continued to have lonely nights and often he sat in the lobby after the other guests went to bed. One April night he dozed there for awhile, awakening to find that it was after two and he was not alone in the lobby.

The current of cooler air might have roused him, for a man he did not know had just come in the door.

The man was of no special age but even by the single light left burning Mr. Cass could see that he was a pale man, that there were little holes in his face like the ravages of some disease and he did not look like John Canisius, his partner.

"Good evening," said the stranger.

"Hm," said Mr. Cass, and then as the man turned down the corridor he spoke up in a strong voice:

"You're out late."

"Yes, quite late."

"You a guest here?"

"Yes."

Mr. Cass dragged himself to his feet and stood leaning on his cane.

"I suppose you live in room nineteen," he said.

"As it happens, I do."

"You needn't lie to me," said Mr. Cass, "I'm not an ignorant mountaineer. Are you a burglar—or did you come for some one?"

The man's face seemed to grow even whiter.

"I don't understand you," he said.

"In any case I want you to get out of here," said Mr. Cass. He was growing angry and it gave him a certain strength. "Otherwise I'm going to arouse the hotel."

The stranger hesitated.

"There's no need of doing that," he said quietly. "That would be—"

Mr. Cass raised his cane menacingly, held it up a moment, then let it down slowly.

"Wait a minute," he said, "I may want you to do something for me."

"What is it?"

"It's getting cold in here. I want you to help me bring in a log to put on the fire."

The stranger was startled by the request.

"Are you strong enough?" he asked.

"Of course I'm strong enough," Mr. Cass stood very upright, throwing back his shoulders.

"I can get it alone."

"No, you can't. You help me or I'll arouse the house."

They went out and down the back steps, Mr. Cass refusing the stranger's arm.

He found, in fact, that he could walk much better than he thought and he left his cane by the stoop so that both hands were free for the log.

It was dark in the woodshed and the stranger lit a match. There was only one log, but it was over a hundred pounds, quite big enough to amply fill the small fireplace.

"Hadn't I better do this?" said the stranger.

Mr. Cass did not answer, but bent and put his hands on the rough surface. The touch seemed to stimulate him, he felt no pain or strain in his back at all.

"Catch hold there," he ordered.

"Are you sure—"

"Catch hold!"

Mr. Cass took a long breath of cool air into his lungs and shifted his hands on the log. His arms tightened, then his shoulders and the muscles on his back.

"Lift," he grunted. And suddenly the log moved, came up with him as he straightened, and for a triumphant moment he stood there squarely, cradling it against him. Then out into space he went, very slowly, carrying the log which seemed lighter and lighter, seeming to melt away in his arms. He wanted to call back some word of mockery and derision to the stranger, but he was already too far away, out on the old roads that led back where he wished to be.

Everyone in the hotel was sorry to lose Mr. Cass, the manager especially, for he read the open letter on Mr. Cass' desk saying that no further money could be remitted that year.

"What a shame. He'd been here so many years that we'd have been glad to carry him awhile until he made arrangements."

Mr. Cass was the right sort of client—it was because of such guests that the manager had tried to keep his brother out of sight all winter.

The brother, a tough number, was considerably shaken by what had happened.

"That's what I get for trying to be a help," he said, "I should have known better. Both those old guys looked exactly like death itself to me."

Published in Esquire magazine (October 1937).