

The Room with the Green Blinds, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

It was ominous looking enough in broad daylight, with its dull, brown walls, and musty windows. The garden, if it might be called so, was simply a mass of overgrown weeds, and the walk was falling to pieces, the bricks crumbling from the touch of time. Inside it was no better. Rickety old three-legged chairs covered with a substance that had once been plush, were not exactly hospitable looking objects. And yet this house was part of the legacy my grandfather had left me. In his will had been this clause: "The house, as it now stands, and all that is inside it, shall go to my grandson, Robert Calvin Raymond, on his coming to the age of twenty-one years. I furthermore desire that he shall not open the room at the end of the corridor, on the second floor until Carmatle falls. He may fix up three rooms of the house as modern as he wishes, but let the others remain unchanged. He may keep but one servant."

To a poor young man with no outlook in life, and no money, but a paltry eight hundred a year, this seemed a windfall when counted with the twenty-five thousand dollars that went with it. I resolved to fix up my new home, and so started South to Macon, Ga., near which my grandfather's house was situated. All the evening on the Pullman I had thought about that clause, "He shall not open the room at the end of the corridor on the second floor until Carmatle falls." Who was Carmatle? And what did it mean when it said, "When Carmatle falls?" In vain I supposed and guessed and thought; I could make no sense of it.

When I finally arrived at the house, I lighted one of a box of candles which I had brought with me and walked up the creaking stairs to the third floor and down a long, narrow corridor covered with cobwebs and bugs of all sorts till I finally came to a massive oaken door which barred my further progress. On the door I could just make out with the aid of the candle the initials J. W. B. in red paint. The door was barred on the outside by heavy iron bars, effectually barricaded against anybody entering or going out. Suddenly, without even a warning flicker my candle went out, and I found myself in complete darkness. Though I am not troubled with weak nerves, I confess I was somewhat startled by this, for there was not a breath of air stirring. I relit the candle and walked out of the corridor down to the room of the three-legged chairs. As it was now almost nine o'clock and as I was tired after my day of traveling, I soon fell off to sleep.

How long I slept I do not know. I awoke suddenly and sat bolt upright on the lounge. For far down the downstairs hall I heard approaching footsteps, and a second later saw the reflection of a candle on the wall outside my door. I made no noise but as the steps came closer I crept softly to my feet. Another sound and the intruder was directly outside and I had a look at him. The flickering flame of the candle shone on a strong, handsome face, fine brown eyes and a determined chin. A stained grey Confederate uniform covered a magnificent form and here and there a blood stain made him more weird as he stood looking straight ahead with a glazed stare. His clean shaven face seemed strangely familiar to me, and some instinct made me connect him with the closed door on the right wing.

I came to myself with a start and crouched to leap at him, but some noise I made must have alarmed him, for the candle was suddenly extinguished and I brought up against a chair, nursing a bruised shin. I spent the rest of the night trying to connect the clause in my uncle's will with this midnight prowler.

When morning came, things began to look clearer, and I resolved to find out whether I had been dreaming or whether I had had a Confederate officer for a guest. I went into the hall and searched for any sign which might lead to a revelation of the mystery. Sure enough, just outside my door was a tallow stain. About ten yards further on was another, and I found myself following a trail of spots along the hall, and upstairs toward the left wing of the house. About

twenty feet from the door of the forbidden room they stopped; neither was there any trace of anyone having gone further. I walked up to the door and tried it to make sure that no one could possibly go in or out. Then I descended and, sauntering out, went around to the east wing to see how it looked from the outside. The room had three windows, each of which was covered with a green blind, and with three iron bars. To make sure of this I went around to the barn, a tumbly old structure, and, by dint of much exertion, succeeded in extracting a ladder from a heap of debris behind it. I placed this against the house, and climbing up, tested each bar carefully. There was no deception. They were firmly set in the concrete sill.

Therefore, there could be but one explanation, the man concealed there must have a third way of getting out, some sort of secret passageway. With this thought in mind I searched the house from garret to cellar, but not a sign could I see of any secret entrance. Then I sat down to think it over.

In the first place there was somebody concealed in the room in the east wing. I had no doubt of that, who was in the habit of making midnight visits to the front hall. Who was Carmatle? It was an unusual name, and I felt if I could find its possessor I could unravel this affair.

Aha! now I had it. Carmatle, the governor of Georgia; why had I not thought of that before? I resolved that that afternoon I would start for Atlanta to see him.

II.

"Mr. Carmattyle, I believe?"

"At your service."

"Governor, it's rather a personal matter I have come to see you about and I may have made a mistake in identity. Do you know anything about 'J. W. B.' or did you ever know a man with those initials?"

The governor paled.

"Young man, tell me where you heard those initials and what brought you here?"

In as few words as possible I related to him my story, beginning with the will and ending with my theories regarding it.

When I had finished, the governor rose to his feet.

"I see it all; I see it all. Now with your permission I shall spend a night with you in your house in company with a friend of mine who is in the secret service. If I am right, concealed in that house is—well," he broke off. "I had better not say now, for it may be only a remarkable coincidence. Meet me at the station in half an hour, and you had better bring a revolver.

Six o'clock found us at the manor and the governor and I with the detective he had brought along, a fellow by the name of Butler, proceeded at once to the room.

After half an hour's labor we succeeded in finding no such thing as a passageway, secret or otherwise. Being tired I sat down to rest and in doing so my hand touched a ledge projecting from the wall. Instantly a portion of the wall swung open, disclosing an opening about three feet square. Instantly the governor, with the agility of a cat, was through it and his form disappeared from view. We grasped the situation and followed him. I found myself crawling along on hard stone in black darkness. Suddenly a shot resounded, and another. Then the passageway came to an end. We were in a room magnificently hung with oriental draperies, the walls covered with medieval armor and ancient swords, shields and battle axes. A red lamp on the table threw a lurid glare over all

and cast a red glow on a body which lay at the foot of a Turkish divan. It was the Confederate officer, shot through the heart, for the life blood was fast staining his grey uniform red. The governor was standing near the body, a smoking revolver in his hand.

"Gentlemen," said he, "let me present to you John Wilkes Booth, the slayer of Albraham Lincoln."

III.

"Mr. Carmatle, you will explain this I hope."

"Certainly," and drawing up a chair the governor began:

"My son and I served in Forest's cavalry during the Civil War, and being on a scouting expedition did not hear of Lee's surrender at Appomatox until about three months afterwards. As we were riding southward along the Cumberland pike we met a man riding down the road. Having struck up an acquaintance, as travelers do, we camped together, the next morning the man was gone, together with my son's old horse and my son's old uniform, leaving his new horse and new civilian suit instead. We did not know what to make of this, but never suspected who this man was. My son and I separated and I never saw him again. He was bound for his aunt's in Western Maryland and one morning he was shot by some Union soldiers in a barn where he had tried to snatch a minute's rest on the way. The story was given out to the public that it was Booth that was shot but I knew and the government knew that my innocent son had been shot by mistake and that John Wilkes Booth, the man who had taken his horse and clothes had escaped. For four years I hunted Booth, but until I heard you mention the initials J. W. B. I had heard no word of him. As it was, when I found him he shot first. I think that his visit to the hall in the Confederate uniform was simply to frighten you away. The fact that your grandfather was a Southern sympathizer probably had protected him all these years. So now, gentlemen, you have heard my story. It rests with you whether this gets no farther than us three here and the government, or whether I shall be proclaimed a murderer and brought to trial."

"You are as innocent as Booth is guilty," said I. "My lips shall be forever sealed."

And we both pressed forward and took him by the hand.