

The Spire and the Gargoyle, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

The night mist fell. From beyond the moon it rolled, clustered about the spires and towers, and then settled below them so that the dreaming peaks seemed still in lofty aspiration toward the stars. Figures that dotted the daytime like ants now brushed along as ghosts in and out of the night. Even the buildings seemed infinitely more mysterious as they loomed suddenly out of the darkness, outlined each by a hundred faint squares of yellow light. Indefinitely from somewhere a bell boomed the quarter hour and one of the squares of light in an east campus recitation hall was blotted out for an instant as a figure emerged. It paused and resolved itself into a boy who stretched his arms wearily, and advancing threw himself down full length on the damp grass by the sun-dial. The cool bathed his eyes and helped to force away the tiresome picture of what he had just left, a picture that, in the two strenuous weeks of examinations now just over, had become indelibly impressed upon his memory—a room with the air fairly vibrating with nervous tension, silent with presence of twenty boys working desperately against time, searching every corner of tired brains for words and figures which seemed forever lost. The boy out on the grass opened his eyes and looked back at the three pale blurs which marked the windows of the examination room. Again he heard:

"There will be fifteen minutes more allowed for this examination." There had followed silence broken by the snapping of verifying watches and the sharp frantic race of pencils. One by one the seats had been left vacant and the little preceptor with the tired look had piled the booklets higher. Then the boy had left the room to the music of three last scratching pencils.

In his case it all depended on this examination. If he passed it he would become a sophomore the following fall; if he failed, it meant that his college days faded out with the last splendors of June. Fifty cut recitations in his first wild term had made necessary the extra course of which he had just taken the examination. Winter muses, unacademic and cloistered by Forty-second Street and Broadway, had stolen hours from the dreary stretches of February and March. Later, time had crept insidiously through the lazy April afternoons and seemed so intangible in the long Spring twilights. So June found him unprepared. Evening after evening the senior singing, drifting over the campus and up to his window, drew his mind for an instant to the unconscious poetry of it and he, goading on his spoiled and over-indulged faculties, bent to the revengeful books again. Through the careless shell that covered his undergraduate consciousness had broken a deep and almost reverent liking for the gray walls and gothic peaks and all they symbolized in the store of the ages of antiquity.

In view of his window a tower sprang upward, grew into a spire, yearning higher till its uppermost end was half invisible against the morning skies. The transiency and relative unimportance of the campus figures except as holders of a sort of apostolic succession had first impressed themselves on him in contrast with this spire. In a lecture or in an article or in conversation, he had learned that Gothic architecture with its upward trend was peculiarly adapted to colleges, and the symbolism of this idea had become personal to him. Once he had associated the beauty of the campus night with the parades and singing crowds that streamed through it, but in the last month the more silent stretches of sward and the quiet halls with an occasional late-burning scholastic light held his imagination with a stronger grasp—and this tower in full view of his window became the symbol of his perception. There was something terribly pure in the slope of the chaste stone, something which led and directed and called. To him the spire became an ideal. He had suddenly begun trying desperately to stay in college.

"Well, it's over," he whispered aloud to himself, wetting his hands in the damp, and running them through his hair. "All over."

He felt an enormous sense of relief. The last pledge had been duly indited in the last book, and his destiny lay no longer in his own hands, but in those of the little preceptor, whoever he was: the boy had never seen him before—and the face,—he looked like one of the gargoyles that nested in dozens of niches in some of the buildings. His glasses, his eyes, or his mouth gave a certain grotesque upward slant to his whole cast of feature, that branded him as of gargoyle origin, or at least gargoyle kinship. He was probably marking the papers. Perhaps, mused the boy, a bit of an interview, an arrangement for a rereading in case of the ever possible failure would be—to interrupt his thought the light went out in the examination room and a moment later three figures edged along the path beside him while a fourth struck off south towards the town. The boy jumped to his feet and, shaking himself like a wet spaniel, started after the preceptor. The man turned to him sharply as he murmured a good evening and started trudging along beside.

"Awful night," said the boy.

The gargoyle only grunted.

"Gosh, that was a terrible examination." This topic died as unfruitfully as that of the weather, so he decided to come directly to the point.

"Are you marking these papers, sir?"

The preceptor stopped and faced him. Perhaps he didn't want to be reminded of the papers, perhaps he was in the habit of being exasperated by anything of this sort, but most probably he was tired and damp and wanted to get home.

"This isn't doing you any good. I know what you're going to say—that this is the crucial examination for you and that you'd like me to go over your paper with you, and so on. I've heard the same thing a hundred times from a hundred students in the course of this last two weeks. My answer is 'No, No,' do you understand? I don't care to know your identity and I won't be followed home by a nagging boy."

Simultaneously each turned and walked quickly away, and the boy suddenly realized with an instinct as certain as divination that he was not going to pass the examination.

"Damned gargoyle," he muttered.

But he knew that the gargoyle had nothing to do with it.

II

Regularly every two weeks he had been drifting out Fifth Avenue. On crisp autumn afternoons the tops of the shining auto busses were particularly alluring. From the roofs of other passing busses a face barely seen, an interested glance, a flash of color assumed the proportion of an intrigue. He had left college five years before and the busses and the art gallery and a few books were his intellectual relaxation. Freshman year Carlyle's "Heroes and Hero-Worship," in the hands of an impassioned young instructor had interested him particularly. He had read practically nothing. He had neither the leisure to browse thoughtfully on much nor the education to cram thoughtfully on little, so his philosophy of life was molded of two elements: one the skeptical office philosophy of his associates, with a girl, a ten thousand dollar position, and a Utopian flat in some transfigured Bronx at the end of it; and the other, the three or four big ideas which he found in the plain speaking Scotchman, Carlyle. But he felt, and truly, that his whole range was pitifully small. He was not naturally bookish; his taste could be stimulated as in the case of "Heroes and Hero-Worship" but he was still and now always would be in the stage where every work and every author had to be introduced and sometimes interpreted to him. "Sartor Resartus" meant nothing to him nor ever could.

So Fifth Avenue and the top of the busses had really grown to stand for a lot. They meant relief from the painted, pagan crowds of Broadway, the crowded atmosphere of the blue serge suits and grated windows that he met down town and the dingy middle class cloud that hovered on his boarding house. Fifth Avenue had a certain respectability which he would have once despised; the people on the busses looked better fed, their mouths came together in better lines. Always a symbolist, and an idealist, whether his model had been a profligate but magnetic sophomore or a Carlylized Napoleon, he sought around him in his common life for something to cling to, to stand for what religions and families and philosophies of life had stood for. He had certain sense of fitness which convinced him that his old epicureanism, romantic as it might have been in the youth of his year at college, would have been exotic and rather disgusting in the city itself. It was much too easy; it lacked the penance of the five o'clock morning train back to college that had faced himself and his fellow student revelers, it lacked the penance of the long morning in classes, and the poverty of weeks. It had been something to have a reputation, even such a reputation as this crowd had had, but dissipation from the New York standpoint seemed a matter of spats and disgustingly rich Hebrews, and shoddy Bohemianism had no attraction for him.

Yet he was happy this afternoon. Perhaps because the bus on which he rode was resplendent in its shining new coat of green paint, and the stick-of-candy glamor of it had gone into his disposition. He lit a cigarette and made himself rather comfortable until he arrived at his destination. There were only certain sections of the museum that he visited. Statuary never attracted him, and the Italian madonnas and Dutch gentlemen with inconsequent gloves and books in the foreground rather bored him. It was only here and there in an old picture tucked away in the corner that his eye caught the glare of light on snow in a simple landscape or the bright colors and multiple figures of a battle painting, and he was drawn into long and detailed fits of contemplation and frequent revisits.

On this particular afternoon he was wandering rather aimlessly from one room to another when he suddenly noticed a small man in overshoes, his face latticed with enormous spectacles, thumbing a catalogue in front of a Flemish group. He started, and with a sense of recollection walked by him several times. Suddenly he realized that here was that one time instrument of his fate, the gargoyle, the little preceptor who had flunked him in his crucial examination.

Oddly enough his first sensation was one of pleased reminiscence and a desire for conversation. Following that he had a curious feeling of shyness, untinged by any bitterness. He paused, staring heavily, and instantly the huge glasses glimmered suspiciously in his eyes.

"Pardon me sir, but do you remember me?" he asked eagerly.

The preceptor blinked feverishly.

"Ah-no."

He mentioned the college and the blinks became more optimistic. He wisely decided to let the connection rest there. The preceptor couldn't, couldn't possibly remember all the men who had passed before his two "Mirrors of Shallot" so why bring up old, accusing facts—besides—he felt a great desire to chat.

"Yes—no doubt—your face is familiar, you'll pardon my—my chilliness a moment since—a public place." He looked around depreciatingly. "You see, I've left the university myself."

"So you've gone up in the game?" He instantly regretted this remark for the little man answered rather quickly:

"I'm teaching in a high school in Brooklyn." Rather embarrassed, the younger man tried to change the subject by looking at the painting before them, but the gargoyle grimly continued:

"I have—a—rather a large family, and much as I regretted leaving the University, the salary was unfortunately very much of a factor."

There was a pause during which both regarded the picture steadily. Then the gargoyle asked a question:

"How long since you've graduated?"

"Oh, I never graduated. I was there for only a short while." He was sure now that the gargoyle had not the slightest conception of his identity; he might rather enjoy this, however, and he had a pleasant notion that the other was not averse to his company.

"Are you staying here much longer?" The gargoyle was not, and together they moved to a restaurant two blocks down where they indulged in milk, tea and jam and discussed the university. When six o'clock pushed itself into the crowded hours it was with real regret that they shook hands, and the little man, manipulating his short legs in mad expostulation, raced after a Brooklyn car. Yes, it had been distinctly exhilarating. They had talked of academic atmospheres, of hopes that lay in the ivied walls, of little things that could only have counted after the mystic hand of the separation had made them akin. The gargoyle had touched lightly upon his own story, of the work he was doing, of his own tepid, stuffy environment. It was his hope some day to get back, but now there were young appetites to satisfy (the other thought grotesquely of the young gargoyles)—if he could see his way clear in the next few years,—so it went, but through all his hopeful talk there was a kind of inevitability that he would teach in a Brooklyn high school till the last bell called him to his last class. Yes, he went back occasionally. He had a younger brother who was an instructor there.

So they had talked, knit together by the toast and the sense of exile. That night the shrivelled spinster on his left at table asked him what college he thought would be worthy of ushering her promising nephew into the outer world. He became voluble and discursive. He spoke of ties that bind, of old associations, and remarked carelessly as he left her, that he was running back himself for a day the next week. But afterwards he lay awake and thought until the chairs and bedposts of his room became grey ghosts in the dawn.

III

The car was hot and stuffy with most of the smells of the state's alien population. The red plush seats radiated dust in layers and stratas. The smoking car had been even more impossible with filthy floor and heavy air. So the man sat next to a partly open window in the coach and shivered against the cutting cloud of fog that streamed in over him. Lights sped by vaguely blurred and spreading, marking towns and farmhouses with the democratic indiscrimination of the mist. As the conductor heralded each station the man felt a certain thrill at the familiarity of the names. The times and conditions under which he had heard them revolved in a medley of memories of his one year. One station particularly near the university had a peculiar significance for him because of the different ways it had affected him while he had been in college. He had noted it at the time. September of his entrance year, it had been the point where he grew acutely nervous and fidgety. Returning that November from a football defeat, it had stood for all that seemed gloomy in the gloomy college he was then going back to. In February it had meant the place to wake and pull one's self together, and as he had passed it for the last time that June, he had wondered with a sudden sinking of his heart if it was to be the last time. Now as the train shook and trembled there for a moment, he stared out the window, and tried to get an impression. Oddly enough his first one came back to him; he felt rather nervous and uncertain.

He had discovered a few minutes ago that the little preceptor sat ahead of him three seats, but the younger man had not joined him or even addressed him. He

wanted to draw to himself every impression he could from this ride.

They drew in. Grip in hand, he swung off the train, and from force of habit turned toward the broad steps that led to the campus. Then he stopped and dropping his suit case, looked before him. The night was typical of the place. It was very like the night on which he had taken his last examination, yet somehow less full and less poignant. Inevitability became a reality and assumed an atmosphere of compelling and wearing down. Where before the spirit of spires and towers had thrilled him and had made him dreamily content and acquiescent, it now overawed him. Where before he had realized only his own inconsequence, he now realized his own impotence and insufficiency. The towers in faint outlines and the battlemented walls of vague buildings fronted him. The engine from the train he had just left wheezed and clanged and backed; a hack drove off; a few pale self-effacing town boys strode away voicelessly, swallowed up in the night. And in front of him the college dreamed on—awake. He felt a nervous excitement that might have been the very throb of its slow heart.

A figure brushed violently into him, almost knocking him off his feet. He turned and his eyes pierced the trembling darkness of the arclight to find the little preceptor blinking apprehensively at him from his gargoyle's eyes.

"Good evening."

He was hesitatingly recognized.

"Ah—how do you do? How do you do? Foggy evening, hope I didn't jar you."

"Not at all. I was just admiring the serenity." He paused and almost felt presumptuous.

"Are you—ah—pretending to be a student again?"

"I just ran out to see the place. Stay a night perhaps." Somehow this sounded far-fetched to him. He wondered if it did to the other.

"Yes?—I'm doing the same thing. My brother is an instructor here now you know. He's putting me up for a space." For an instant the other longed fiercely that he too might be invited to be "put up for a space."

"Are you walking up my way?"

"No—not quite yet."

The gargoyle smiled awkwardly. "Well, good-night." There was nothing more to say. Eyes staring, he watched the little figure walking off, propelled jerkily by his ridiculous legs.

Minutes passed. The train was silent. The several blurs on the station platform became impersonal and melted into the background. He was alone face to face with the spirit that should have dominated his life, the mother that he had renounced. It was a stream where he had once thrown a stone but the faint ripple had long since vanished. Here he had taken nothing, he had given nothing; nothing?—his eyes wandered slowly upward—up—up—until by straining them he could see where the spire began—and with his eyes went his soul. But the mist was upon both. He could not climb with the spire.

A belated freshman, his slicker rasping loudly, slushed along the soft path. A voice from somewhere called the inevitable formula toward an unknown window. A hundred little sounds of the current drifting on under the fog pressed in finally on his consciousness.

"Oh God!" he cried suddenly, and started at the sound of his own voice in the stillness. He had cried out from a complete overwhelming sense of failure. He realized how outside of it all he was. The gargoyle, poor tired little hack, was

bound up in the fabric of the whole system much more than he was or ever could be. Hot tears of anger and helplessness rushed to his eyes. He felt no injustice, only a deep mute longing. The very words that would have purged his soul were waiting him in the depths of the unknown before him—waiting for him where he could never come to claim them. About him the rain dripped on. A minute longer he stood without moving, his head bent dejectedly, his hands clenched. Then he turned, and picking up his suit case walked over to the train. The engine gave a tentative pant, and the conductor, dozing in a corner, nodded sleepily at him from the end of the deserted car. Wearily he sank onto a red plush seat, and pressed his hot forehead against the damp window pane.