

The Third Casket, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

When you come into Cyrus Girard's office suite on the thirty-second floor you think at first that there has been a mistake, that the elevator instead of bringing you upstairs has brought you uptown, and that you are walking into an apartment on Fifth Avenue where you have no business at all. What you take to be the sound of a stock ticker is only a businesslike canary swinging in a silver cage overhead, and while the languid debutante at the mahogany table gets ready to ask you your name you can feast your eyes on etchings, tapestries, carved panels and fresh flowers.

Cyrus Girard does not, however, run an interior-decorating establishment, though he has, on occasion, run almost everything else. The lounging aspect of his ante-room is merely an elaborate camouflage for the wild clamor of affairs that goes on ceaselessly within. It is merely the padded glove over the mailed fist, the smile on the face of the prize fighter.

No one was more intensely aware of this than the three young men who were waiting there one April morning to see Mr. Girard. Whenever the door marked Private trembled with the pressure of enormous affairs they started nervously in unconscious unison. All three of them were on the hopeful side of thirty, each of them had just got off the train, and they had never seen one another before. They had been waiting side by side on a Circassian leather lounge for the best part of an hour.

Once the young man with the pitch-black eyes and hair had pulled out a package of cigarettes and offered it hesitantly to the two others. But the two others had refused in such a politely alarmed way that the dark young man, after a quick look around, had returned the package unsampled to his pocket. Following this disrespectful incident a long silence had fallen, broken only by the clatter of the canary as it ticked off the bond market in bird land.

When the Louis XIII clock stood at noon the door marked Private swung open in a tense, embarrassed way, and a frantic secretary demanded that the three callers step inside. They stood up as one man.

"Do you mean—all together?" asked the tallest one in some embarrassment.

"All together."

Falling unwillingly into a sort of lock step and glancing neither to left nor right, they passed through a series of embattled rooms and marched into the private office of Cyrus Girard, who filled the position of Telamonian Ajax among the Homeric characters of Wall Street.

He was a thin, quiet-mannered man of sixty, with a fine, restless face and the clear, fresh, trusting eyes of a child. When the procession of young men walked in he stood up behind his desk with an expectant smile.

"Parrish?" he said eagerly.

The tall young man said "Yes, sir," and was shaken by the hand.

"Jones?"

This was the young man with the black eyes and hair. He smiled back at Cyrus Girard and announced in a slightly Southern accent that he was mighty glad to meet him.

"And so you must be Van Buren," said Girard, turning to the third. Van Buren acknowledged as much. He was obviously from a large city—unflustered and very spick-and-span.

"Sit down," said Girard, looking eagerly from one to the other. "I can't tell you the pleasure of this minute."

They all smiled nervously and sat down.

"Yes, sir," went on the older man, "if I'd had any boys of my own I don't know but what I'd have wanted them to look just like you three." He saw that they were all growing pink, and he broke off with a laugh. "All right, I won't embarrass you any more. Tell me about the health of your respective fathers and we'll get down to business."

Their fathers, it seemed, were very well; they had all sent congratulatory messages by their sons for Mr. Girard's sixtieth birthday.

"Thanks. Thanks. Now that's over." He leaned back suddenly in his chair. "Well, boys, here's what I have to say. I'm retiring from business next year. I've always intended to retire at sixty, and my wife's always counted on it, and the time's come. I can't put it off any longer. I haven't any sons and I haven't any nephews and I haven't any cousins and I have a brother who's fifty years old and in the same boat I am. He'll perhaps hang on for ten years more down here; after that it looks as if the house, Cyrus Girard, Incorporated, would change its name.

"A month ago I wrote to the three best friends I had in college, the three best friends I ever had in my life, and asked them if they had any sons between twenty-five and thirty years old. I told them I had room for just one young man here in my business, but he had to be about the best in the market. And as all three of you arrived here this morning I guess your fathers think you are. There's nothing complicated about my proposition. It'll take me three months to find out what I want to know, and at the end of that time two of you'll be disappointed; the other one can have about everything they used to give away in the fairy tales, half my kingdom and, if she wants him, my daughter's hand." He raised his head slightly. "Correct me, Lola, if I've said anything wrong."

At these words the three young men started violently, looked behind them, and then jumped precipitately to their feet. Reclining lazily in an armchair not two yards away sat a gold-and-ivory little beauty with dark eyes and a moving, childish smile that was like all the lost youth in the

world. When she saw the startled expressions on their faces she gave vent to a suppressed chuckle in which the victims after a moment joined.

"This is my daughter," said Cyrus Girard, smiling innocently. "Don't be so alarmed. She has many suitors come from far and near—and all that sort of thing. Stop making these young men feel silly, Lola, and ask them if they'll come to dinner with us tonight."

Lola got to her feet gravely and her gray eyes fell on them one after another.

"I only know part of your names," she said.

"Easily arranged," said Van Buren. "Mine's George."

The tall young man bowed.

"I respond to John Hardwick Parrish," he confessed, "or anything of that general sound."

She turned to the dark-haired Southerner, who had volunteered no information. "How about Mr. Jones?"

"Oh, just—Jones," he answered uneasily.

She looked at him in surprise.

"Why, how partial!" she exclaimed, laughing. "How—I might even say how fragmentary."

Mr. Jones looked around him in a frightened way.

"Well, I tell you," he said finally, "I don't guess my first name is much suited to this sort of thing."

"What is it?"

"It's Rip."

"Rip!"

Eight eyes turned reproachfully upon him.

"Young man," exclaimed Girard, "you don't mean that my old friend in his senses named his son that!"

Jones shifted defiantly on his feet.

"No, he didn't," he admitted. "He named me Oswald."

There was a ripple of sympathetic laughter.

"Now you four go along," said Girard, sitting down at his desk. "Tomorrow at nine o'clock sharp you report to my general manager, Mr. Galt, and the

tournament begins. Meanwhile if Lola has her coupe-sport-limousine-roadster-landulet, or whatever she drives now, she'll probably take you to your respective hotels."

After they had gone Girard's face grew restless again and he stared at nothing for a long time before he pressed the button that started the long-delayed stream of traffic through his mind.

"One of them's sure to be all right," he muttered, "but suppose it turned out to be the dark one. Rip Jones, Incorporated!"

II

As the three months drew to an end it began to appear that not one, but all of the young men were going to turn out all right. They were all industrious, they were all possessed of that mysterious ease known as personality and, moreover, they all had brains. If Parrish, the tall young man from the West, was a little the quicker in sizing up the market; if Jones, the Southerner, was a bit the most impressive in his relations with customers, then Van Buren made up for it by spending his nights in the study of investment securities. Cyrus Girard's mind was no sooner drawn to one of them by some exhibition of shrewdness or resourcefulness than a parallel talent appeared in one of the others. Instead of having to enforce upon himself a strict neutrality he found himself trying to concentrate upon the individual merits of first one and then another—but so far without success.

Every week-end they all came out to the Girard place at Tuxedo Park, where they fraternized a little self-consciously with the young and lovely Lola, and on Sunday mornings tactlessly defeated her father at golf. On the last tense week-end before the decision was to be made Cyrus Girard asked them to meet him in his study after dinner. On their respective merits as future partners in Cyrus Girard, Inc., he had been unable to decide, but his despair had evoked another plan, on which he intended to base his decision.

"Gentlemen," he said, when they had convoked in his study at the appointed hour, "I have brought you here to tell you that you're all fired."

Immediately the three young men were on their feet, with shocked, reproachful expressions in their eyes.

"Temporarily," he added, smiling good-humoredly. "So spare a decrepit old man your violence and sit down."

They sat down, with short relieved smiles.

"I like you all," he went on, "and I don't know which one I like better than the others. In fact—this thing hasn't come out right at all. So I'm going to extend the competition for two more weeks—but in an entirely different way."

They all sat forward eagerly in their chairs.

"Now my generation," he went on, "have made a failure of our leisure hours. We grew up in the most hard-boiled commercial age any country ever knew, and when we retire we never know what to do with the rest of our lives. Here I am, getting out at sixty, and miserable about it. I haven't any resources—I've never been much of a reader, I can't stand golf except once a week, and I haven't got a hobby in the world. Now some day you're going to be sixty too. You'll see other men taking it easy and having a good time, and you'll want to do the same. I want to find out which one of you will be the best sort of man after his business days are over."

He looked from one to the other of them eagerly. Parrish and Van Buren nodded at him comprehendingly. Jones after a puzzled half moment nodded too.

"I want you each to take two weeks and spend them as you think you'll spend your time when you're too old to work. I want you to solve my problem for me. And whichever one I think has got the most out of his leisure—he'll be the man to carry on my business. I'll know it won't swamp him like it's swamped me."

"You mean you want us to enjoy ourselves?" inquired Rip Jones politely. "Just go out and have a big time?"

Cyrus Girard nodded.

"Anything you want to do."

"I take it Mr. Girard doesn't include dissipation," remarked Van Buren.

"Anything you want to do," repeated the older man. "I don't bar anything. When it's all done I'm going to judge of its merits."

"Two weeks of travel for me," said Parrish dreamily. "That's what I've always wanted to do. I'll—"

"Travel!" interrupted Van Buren contemptuously. "When there's so much to do here at home? Travel, perhaps, if you had a year; but for two weeks—I'm going to try and see how the retired business man can be of some use in the world."

"I said travel," repeated Parrish sharply. "I believe we're all to employ our leisure in the best—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Cyrus Girard. "Don't fight this out in talk. Meet me in the office at 10:30 on the morning of August first—that's two weeks from tomorrow—and then let's see what you've done." He turned to Rip Jones. "I suppose you've got a plan too."

"No, sir," admitted Rip Jones with a puzzled look; "I'll have to think this over."

But though he thought it over for the rest of the evening Rip Jones went to bed still uninspired. At midnight he got up, found a pencil and wrote

out a list of all the good times he had ever had. But all his holidays now seemed unprofitable and stale, and when he fell asleep at five his mind still threshed disconsolately on the prospect of hollow useless hours.

Next morning as Lola Girard was backing her car out of the garage she saw him hurrying toward her over the lawn.

"Ride in town, Rip?" she asked cheerfully.

"I reckon so."

"Why do you only reckon so? Father and the others left on the nine-o'clock train."

He explained to her briefly that they had all temporarily lost their jobs and there was no necessity of getting to the office today.

"I'm kind of worried about it," he said gravely. "I sure hate to leave my work. I'm going to run in this afternoon and see if they'll let me finish up a few things I had started."

"But you better be thinking how you're going to amuse yourself."

He looked at her helplessly.

"All I can think of doing is maybe take to drink," he confessed. "I come from a little town, and when they say leisure they mean hanging round the corner store." He shook his head. "I don't want any leisure. This is the first chance I ever had, and I want to make good."

"Listen, Rip," said Lola on a sudden impulse. "After you finish up at the office this afternoon you meet me and we'll fix up something together."

He met her, as she suggested, at five o'clock, but the melancholy had deepened in his dark eyes.

"They wouldn't let me in," he said. "I met your father in there, and he told me I had to find some way to amuse myself or I'd be just a bored old man like him."

"Never mind. We'll go to a show," she said consolingly; "and after that we'll run up on some roof and dance."

It was the first of a week of evenings they spent together. Sometimes they went to the theater, sometimes to a cabaret; once they spent most of an afternoon strolling in Central Park. But she saw that from having been the most light-hearted and gay of the three young men, he was now the most moody and depressed. Everything whispered to him of the work he was missing.

Even when they danced at teatime, the click of bracelets on a hundred women's arms only reminded him of the busy office sound on Monday morning. He seemed incapable of inaction.

"This is mighty sweet of you," he said to her one afternoon, "and if it was after business hours I can't tell you how I'd enjoy it. But my mind is on all the things I ought to be doing. I'm—I'm right sad."

He saw then that he had hurt her, that by his frankness he had rejected all she was trying to do for him. But he was incapable of feeling differently.

"Lola, I'm mighty sorry," he said softly, "and maybe some day it'll be after hours again, and I can come to you—"

"I won't be interested," she said coldly. "And I see I was foolish ever to be interested at all."

He was standing beside her car when this conversation took place, and before he could reply she had thrown it into gear and started away.

He stood there looking after her sadly, thinking that perhaps he would never see her any more and that she would remember him always as ungrateful and unkind. But there was nothing he could have said. Something dynamic in him was incapable of any except a well-earned rest.

"If it was only after hours," he muttered to himself as he walked slowly away. "If it was only after hours."

III

At ten o'clock on the morning of August first a tall, bronzed young man presented himself at the office of Cyrus Girard, Inc., and sent in his card to the president. Less than five minutes later another young man arrived, less blatantly healthy, perhaps, but with the light of triumphant achievement blazing in his eyes. Word came out through the palpitating inner door that they were both to wait.

"Well, Parrish," said Van Buren condescendingly, "how did you like Niagara Falls?"

"I couldn't tell you," answered Parrish haughtily. "You can determine that on your honeymoon."

"My honeymoon!" Van Buren started. "How—what made you think I was contemplating a honeymoon?"

"I merely meant that when you do contemplate it you will probably choose Niagara Falls."

They sat for a few minutes in stony silence.

"I suppose," remarked Parrish coolly, "that you've been making a serious study of the deserving poor."

"On the contrary, I have done nothing of the kind." Van Buren looked at his watch. "I'm afraid that our competitor with the rakish name is going to be late. The time set was 10:30; it now lacks three minutes of the half hour."

The private door opened, and at a command from the frantic secretary they both arose eagerly and went inside. Cyrus Girard was standing behind his desk waiting for them, watch in hand.

"Hello!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Where's Jones?"

Parrish and Van Buren exchanged a smile. If Jones were snagged somewhere so much the better.

"I beg your pardon, sir," spoke up the secretary, who had been lingering near the door; "Mr. Jones is in Chicago."

"What's he doing there?" demanded Cyrus Girard in astonishment.

"He went out to handle the matter of those silver shipments. There wasn't anyone else who knew much about it, and Mr. Galt thought—"

"Never mind what Mr. Galt thought," broke in Girard impatiently. "Mr. Jones is no longer employed by this concern. When he gets back from Chicago pay him off and let him go." He nodded curtly. "That's all."

The secretary bowed and went out. Girard turned to Parrish and Van Buren with an angry light in his eyes.

"Well, that finishes him," he said determinedly. "Any young man who won't even attempt to obey my orders doesn't deserve a good chance." He sat down and began drumming with his fingers on the arm of his chair.

"All right, Parrish, let's hear what you've been doing with your leisure hours."

Parrish smiled ingratiatingly.

"Mr. Girard," he began, "I've had a bully time. I've been traveling."

"Traveling where? The Adirondacks? Canada?"

"No, sir. I've been to Europe."

Cyrus Girard sat up.

"I spent five days going over and five days coming back. That left me two days in London and a run over to Paris by aeroplane to spend the night. I saw Westminster Abbey, the Tower of London and the Louvre, and spent an afternoon at Versailles. On the boat I kept in wonderful condition—swam, played deck tennis, walked five miles every day, met some interesting people and found time to read. I came back after the greatest two weeks of my life, feeling fine and knowing more about my own country since I

had something to compare it with. That, sir, is how I spent my leisure time and that's how I intend to spend my leisure time after I'm retired."

Girard leaned back thoughtfully in his chair.

"Well, Parrish, that isn't half bad," he said. "I don't know but what the idea appeals to me—take a run over there for the sea voyage and a glimpse of the London Stock Ex—I mean the Tower of London. Yes, sir, you've put an idea in my head." He turned to the other young man, who during this recital had been shifting uneasily in his chair. "Now, Van Buren, let's hear how you took your ease."

"I thought over the travel idea," burst out Van Buren excitedly, "and I decided against it. A man of sixty doesn't want to spend his time running back and forth between the capitals of Europe. It might fill up a year or so, but that's all. No, sir, the main thing is to have some strong interest—and especially one that'll be for the public good, because when a man gets along in years he wants to feel that he's leaving the world better for having lived in it. So I worked out a plan—it's for a historical and archaeological endowment center, a thing that'd change the whole face of public education, a thing that any man would be interested in giving his time and money to. I've spent my whole two weeks working out the plan in detail, and let me tell you it'd be nothing but play work—just suited to the last years of an active man's life. It's been fascinating, Mr. Girard. I've learned more from doing it than I ever knew before—and I don't think I ever had a happier two weeks in my life."

When he had finished, Cyrus Girard nodded his head up and down many times in an approving and yet somehow dissatisfied way.

"Found an institute, eh?" he muttered aloud. "Well, I've always thought that maybe I'd do that some day—but I never figured on running it myself. My talents aren't much in that line. Still, it's certainly worth thinking over."

He got restlessly to his feet and began walking up and down the carpet, the dissatisfied expression deepening on his face. Several times he took out his watch and looked at it as if hoping that perhaps Jones had not gone to Chicago after all, but would appear in a few moments with a plan nearer his heart.

"What's the matter with me?" he said to himself unhappily. "When I say a thing I'm used to going through with it. I must be getting old."

Try as he might, however, he found himself unable to decide. Several times he stopped in his walk and fixed his glance first on one and then on the other of the two young men, trying to pick out some attractive characteristic to which he could cling and make his choice. But after several of these glances their faces seemed to blur together and he couldn't tell one from the other. They were twins who had told him the same story—of carrying the stock exchange by aeroplane to London and making it into a moving-picture show.

"I'm sorry, boys," he said haltingly. "I promised I'd decide this morning, and I will, but it means a whole lot to me and you'll have to give me a little time."

They both nodded, fixing their glances on the carpet to avoid encountering his distraught eyes.

Suddenly he stopped by the table and picking up the telephone called the general manager's office.

"Say, Galt," he shouted into the mouthpiece, "you sure you sent Jones to Chicago?"

"Positive," said a voice on the other end. "He came in here couple of days ago and said he was half crazy for something to do. I told him it was against orders, but he said he was out of the competition anyhow and we needed somebody who was competent to handle that silver. So I—"

"Well, you shouldn't have done it, see? I wanted to talk to him about something, and you shouldn't have done it."

Clack! He hung up the receiver and resumed his endless pacing up and down the floor. Confound Jones, he thought. Most ungrateful thing he ever heard of after he'd gone to all this trouble for his father's sake. Outrageous! His mind went off on a tangent and he began to wonder whether Jones would handle that business out in Chicago. It was a complicated situation—but then, Jones was a trustworthy fellow. They were all trustworthy fellows. That was the whole trouble.

Again he picked up the telephone. He would call Lola; he felt vaguely that if she wanted to she could help him. The personal element had eluded him here; her opinion would be better than his own.

"I have to ask your pardon, boys," he said unhappily; "I didn't mean there to be all this fuss and delay. But it almost breaks my heart when I think of handing this shop over to anybody at all, and when I try to decide, it all gets dark in my mind." He hesitated. "Have either one of you asked my daughter to marry him?"

"I did," said Parrish; "three weeks ago."

"So did I," confessed Van Buren; "and I still have hopes that she'll change her mind."

Girard wondered if Jones had asked her also. Probably not; he never did anything he was expected to do. He even had the wrong name.

The phone in his hand rang shrilly and with an automatic gesture he picked up the receiver.

"Chicago calling, Mr. Girard."

"I don't want to talk to anybody."

"It's personal. It's Mr. Jones."

"All right," he said, his eyes narrowing. "Put him on."

A series of clicks—then Jones' faintly Southern voice over the wire.

"Mr. Girard?"

"Yeah."

"I've been trying to get you since ten o'clock in order to apologize."

"I should think you would!" exploded Girard. "Maybe you know you're fired."

"I knew I would be," said Jones gloomily. "I guess I must be pretty dumb, Mr. Girard, but I'll tell you the truth—I can't have a good time when I quit work."

"Of course you can't!" snapped Girard. "Nobody can—" He corrected himself. "What I mean is, it isn't an easy matter."

There was a pause at the other end of the line.

"That's exactly the way I feel," came Jones' voice regretfully. "I guess we understand each other, and there's no use my saying any more."

"What do you mean—we understand each other?" shouted Girard. "That's an impertinent remark, young man. We don't understand each other at all."

"That's what I meant," amended Jones; "I don't understand you and you don't understand me. I don't want to quit working, and you—you do."

"Me quit work!" cried Girard, his face reddening. "Say, what are you talking about? Did you say I wanted to quit work?" He shook the telephone up and down violently. "Don't talk back to me, young man! Don't tell me I want to quit! Why—why, I'm not going to quit work at all! Do you hear that? I'm not going to quit work at all!"

The transmitter slipped from his grasp and bounced from the table to the floor. In a minute he was on his knees, groping for it wildly.

"Hello!" he cried. "Hello—hello! Say get Chicago back! I wasn't through!"

The two young men were on their feet. He hung up the receiver and turned to them, his voice husky with emotion.

"I've been an idiot," he said brokenly. "Quit work at sixty! Why—I must have been an idiot! I'm a young man still—I've got twenty good years in front of me! I'd like to see anybody send me home to die!"

The phone rang again and he took up the receiver with fire blazing in his eyes.

"Is this Jones? No, I want Mr. Jones; Rip Jones. He's—he's my partner."
There was a pause. "No, Chicago, that must be another party. I don't know any Mrs. Jones—I want Mr.—"

He broke off and the expression on his face changed slowly. When he spoke again his husky voice had grown suddenly quiet.

"Why—why, Lola—"

Notes

"The Third Casket" was written in Great Neck in March 1924. The Post paid \$1750 for it. After the expiration of the story options with Metropolitan and International, Fitzgerald became virtually a Post author for the next decade. All of his best stories were offered there first, and the Post steadily raised his story price to a peak of \$4000 in 1929. The Post obviously regarded Fitzgerald as a star author. His name regularly appeared on the cover, and his stories were prominently positioned. "Casket" was the lead story in the issue, following a serial.

Like most of the stories Fitzgerald wrote in 1924, "The Third Casket" depends on plot rather than character. Here he adapted an episode from The Merchant of Venice—which Shakespeare had borrowed from somebody else.

"The Third Casket" was tailored to the business values of the Post. The simple message is that work is more rewarding than leisure.