



THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON AND OTHER STORIES

It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it
was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire.

—F. S. Fitzgerald

F. S. Fitzgerald

F. S. Fitzgerald (1896—1940) was an American fiction writer, known as a notable member of the “Lost Generation” of the 1920s. Fitzgerald is now widely regarded as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century. His masterworks include *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Tender Is the Night*.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button and Other Stories is a collection of eleven short stories by F. S. Fitzgerald. It includes one of his better-known short stories, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button." In these masterfully crafted gems, Fitzgerald brings the society of the "Jazz Age" to life, showcasing the many gifts of one of our most popular writers.



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AND OTHER STORIES

F. S. Fitzgerald

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HEAD AND SHOULDERS

I

In 1915 Horace Tarbox was thirteen years old. In that year he took the examinations for entrance to Princeton University and received the Grade A—excellent—in Cæsar, Cicero, Vergil, Xenophon, Homer, Algebra, Plane Geometry, Solid Geometry, and Chemistry.

Two years later while George M. Cohan was composing “Over There,” Horace was leading the sophomore class by several lengths and digging out theses on “The Syllogism as an Obsolete Scholastic Form,” and during the battle of Château-Thierry he was sitting at his desk deciding whether or not to wait until his seventeenth birthday before beginning his series of essays on “The Pragmatic Bias of the New Realists.”

After a while some newsboy told him that the war was over, and he was glad, because it meant that Peat Brothers, publishers, would get out their new edition of “Spinoza’s Improvement of the Understanding.” Wars were all very well in their way, made young men self-reliant or something but Horace felt that he could never forgive the President for allowing a brass band to play under his window the night of the false armistice, causing him to leave three important sentences out of his thesis on “German Idealism.”

The next year he went up to Yale to take his degree as Master of Arts.

He was seventeen then, tall and slender, with near-sighted gray eyes and an air of keeping himself utterly detached from the mere words he let drop.

“I never feel as though I’m talking to him,” expostulated Professor Dillinger to a sympathetic colleague. “He makes me feel as though I were talking to his representative. I always expect him to say: ‘Well, I’ll ask

myself and find out.' ”

And then, just as nonchalantly as though Horace Tarbox had been Mr. Beef the butcher or Mr. Hat the haberdasher, life reached in, seized him, handled him, stretched him, and unrolled him like a piece of Irish lace on a Saturday-afternoon bargain-counter.

To move in the literary fashion I should say that this was all because when way back in colonial days the hardy pioneers had come to a bald place in Connecticut and asked of each other, “Now, what shall we build here?” the hardiest one among ’em had answered: “Let’s build a town where theatrical managers can try out musical comedies!” How afterward they founded Yale College there, to try the musical comedies on, is a story every one knows. At any rate one December, “Home James” opened at the Shubert, and all the students encored Marcia Meadow, who sang a song about the Blundering Blimp in the first act and did a shaky, shivery, celebrated dance in the last.

Marcia was nineteen. She didn’t have wings, but audiences agreed generally that she didn’t need them. She was a blonde by natural pigment, and she wore no paint on the streets at high noon. Outside of that she was no better than most women.

It was Charlie Moon who promised her five thousand Pall Malls if she would pay a call on Horace Tarbox, prodigy extraordinary. Charlie was a senior in Sheffield, and he and Horace were first cousins. They liked and pitied each other.

Horace had been particularly busy that night. The failure of the Frenchman Laurier to appreciate the significance of the new realists was preying on his mind. In fact, his only reaction to a low, clear-cut rap at his study was to make him speculate as to whether any rap would have actual existence without an ear there to hear it. He fancied he was verging more and more toward pragmatism. But at that moment, though he did not know it, he was verging with astounding rapidity toward something quite different.

The rap sounded—three seconds leaked by—the rap sounded.

“Come in,” muttered Horace automatically.

He heard the door open and then close, but, bent over his book in the

big armchair before the fire, he did not look up.

"Leave it on the bed in the other room," he said absently.

"Leave what on the bed in the other room?"

Marcia Meadow had to talk her songs, but her speaking voice was like byplay on a harp.

"The laundry."

"I can't."

Horace stirred impatiently in his chair.

"Why can't you?"

"Why, because I haven't got it."

"Hm!" he replied testily. "Suppose you go back and get it."

Across the fire from Horace was another easy-chair. He was accustomed to change to it in the course of an evening by way of exercise and variety. One chair he called Berkeley, the other he called Hume. He suddenly heard a sound as of a rustling, diaphanous form sinking into Hume. He glanced up.

"Well," said Marcia with the sweet smile she used in Act Two ("Oh, so the Duke liked my dancing!"), "Well, Omar Khayyam, here I am beside you singing in the wilderness."

Horace stared at her dazedly. The momentary suspicion came to him that she existed there only as a phantom of his imagination. Women didn't come into men's rooms and sink into men's Humes. Women brought laundry and took your seat in the street-car and married you later on when you were old enough to know fetters.

This woman had clearly materialized out of Hume. The very froth of her brown gauzy dress was art emanation from Hume's leather arm there! If he looked long enough he would see Hume right through her and then he would be alone again in the room. He passed his fist across his eyes. He really must take up those trapeze exercises again.

"For Pete's sake, don't look so critical!" objected the emanation pleasantly. "I feel as if you were going to wish me away with that patent dome of yours. And then there wouldn't be anything left of me except my shadow in your eyes."

Horace coughed. Coughing was one of his two gestures. When he

talked you forgot he had a body at all. It was like hearing a phonograph record by a singer who had been dead a long time.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I want them letters," whined Marcia melodramatically—"them letters of mine you bought from my grandsire in 1881."

Horace considered.

"I haven't got your letters," he said evenly. "I am only seventeen years old. My father was not born until March 3, 1879. You evidently have me confused with some one else."

"You're only seventeen?" repeated March suspiciously.

"Only seventeen."

"I knew a girl," said Marcia reminiscently, "who went on the twenty-three when she was sixteen. She was so stuck on herself that she could never say 'sixteen' without putting the 'only' before it. We got to calling her 'Only Jessie.' And she's just where she was when she started—only worse. 'Only' is a bad habit, Omar—it sounds like an alibi."

"My name is not Omar."

"I know," agreed Marcia, nodding—"your name's Horace. I just call you Omar because you remind me of a smoked cigarette."

"And I haven't your letters. I doubt if I've ever met your grandfather. In fact, I think it very improbable that you yourself were alive in 1881."

Marcia stared at him in wonder.

"Me—1881? Why sure! I was second-line stuff when the Florodora Sextette was still in the convent. I was the original nurse to Mrs. Sol Smith's Juliette. Why, Omar, I was a canteen singer during the War of 1812."

Horace's mind made a sudden successful leap, and he grinned.

"Did Charlie Moon put you up to this?"

Marcia regarded him inscrutably.

"Who's Charlie Moon?"

"Small—wide nostrils—big ears."

She grew several inches and sniffed.

"I'm not in the habit of noticing my friends' nostrils."

"Then it was Charlie?"

Marcia bit her lip—and then yawned. “Oh, let’s change the subject, Omar. I’ll pull a snore in this chair in a minute.”

“Yes,” replied Horace gravely, “Hume has often been considered soporific.”

“Who’s your friend—and will he die?”

Then of a sudden Horace Tarbox rose slenderly and began to pace the room with his hands in his pockets. This was his other gesture.

“I don’t care for this,” he said as if he were talking to himself—“at all. Not that I mind your being here—I don’t. You’re quite a pretty little thing, but I don’t like Charlie Moon’s sending you up here. Am I a laboratory experiment on which the janitors as well as the chemists can make experiments? Is my intellectual development humorous in any way? Do I look like the pictures of the little Boston boy in the comic magazines? Has that callow ass, Moon, with his eternal tales about his week in Paris, any right to—”

“No,” interrupted Marcia emphatically. “And you’re a sweet boy. Come here and kiss me.”

Horace stopped quickly in front of her.

“Why do you want me to kiss you?” he asked intently. “Do you just go round kissing people?”

“Why, yes,” admitted Marcia, unruffled. “At’s all life is. Just going round kissing people.”

“Well,” replied Horace emphatically, “I must say your ideas are horribly garbled! In the first place life isn’t just that, and in the second place I won’t kiss you. It might get to be a habit and I can’t get rid of habits. This year I’ve got in the habit of lolling in bed until seven-thirty.”

Marcia nodded understandingly.

“Do you ever have any fun?” she asked.

“What do you mean by fun?”

“See here,” said Marcia sternly, “I like you, Omar, but I wish you’d talk as if you had a line on what you were saying. You sound as if you were gargling a lot of words in your mouth and lost a bet every time you spilled a few. I asked you if you ever had any fun.”

Horace shook his head.

"Later, perhaps," he answered. "You see I'm a plan. I'm an experiment. I don't say that I don't get tired of it sometimes—I do. Yet—oh, I can't explain! But what you and Charlie Moon call fun wouldn't be fun to me."

"Please explain."

Horace stared at her, started to speak and then, changing his mind, resumed his walk. After an unsuccessful attempt to determine whether or not he was looking at her Marcia smiled at him.

"Please explain."

Horace turned.

"If I do, will you promise to tell Charlie Moon that I wasn't in?"

"Uh-uh."

"Very well, then. Here's my history: I was a 'why' child. I wanted to see the wheels go round. My father was a young economics professor at Princeton. He brought me up on the system of answering every question I asked him to the best of his ability. My response to that gave him the idea of making an experiment in precocity. To aid in the massacre I had ear trouble—seven operations between the ages of nine and twelve. Of course this kept me apart from other boys and made me ripe for forcing. Anyway, while my generation was laboring through Uncle Remus I was honestly enjoying Catullus in the original.

"I passed off my college examinations when I was thirteen because I couldn't help it. My chief associates were professors, and I took a tremendous pride in knowing that I had a fine intelligence, for though I was unusually gifted I was not abnormal in other ways. When I was sixteen I got tired of being a freak; I decided that some one had made a bad mistake. Still as I'd gone that far I concluded to finish it up by taking my degree of Master of Arts. My chief interest in life is the study of modern philosophy. I am a realist of the School of Anton Laurier—with Bergsonian trimmings—and I'll be eighteen years old in two months. That's all."

"Whew!" exclaimed Marcia. "That's enough! You do a neat job with the parts of speech."

"Satisfied?"

"No, you haven't kissed me."

"It's not in my programme," demurred Horace. "Understand that I don't pretend to be above physical things. They have their place, but—"

"Oh, don't be so darned reasonable!"

"I can't help it."

"I hate these slot-machine people."

"I assure you I—" began Horace.

"Oh, shut up!"

"My own rationality—"

"I didn't say anything about your nationality. You're Amuricun, ar'n't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's O.K. with me. I got a notion I want to see you do something that isn't in your highbrow programme. I want to see if a what-ch-call-em with Brazilian trimmings—that thing you said you were—can be a little human."

Horace shook his head again.

"I won't kiss you."

"My life is blighted," muttered Marcia tragically. "I'm a beaten woman. I'll go through life without ever having a kiss with Brazilian trimmings." She sighed. "Anyways, Omar, will you come and see my show?"

"What show?"

"I'm a wicked actress from 'Home James'!"

"Light opera?"

"Yes—at a stretch. One of the characters is a Brazilian rice-planter. That might interest you."

"I saw 'The Bohemian Girl' once," reflected Horace aloud. "I enjoyed it—to some extent—"

"Then you'll come?"

"Well, I'm—I'm—"

"Oh, I know—you've got to run down to Brazil for the week-end."

"Not at all. I'd be delighted to come—"

Marcia clapped her hands.

“Goodyforyou! I’ll mail you a ticket—Thursday night?”

“Why, I—”

“Good! Thursday night it is.”

She stood up and walking close to him laid both hands on his shoulders.

“I like you, Omar. I’m sorry I tried to kid you. I thought you’d be sort of frozen, but you’re a nice boy.”

He eyed her sardonically.

“I’m several thousand generations older than you are.”

“You carry your age well.”

They shook hands gravely.

“My name’s Marcia Meadow,” she said emphatically. “Member it—Marcia Meadow. And I won’t tell Charlie Moon you were in.”

An instant later as she was skimming down the last flight of stairs three at a time she heard a voice call over the upper banister: “Oh, say—”

She stopped and looked up—made out a vague form leaning over.

“Oh, say!” called the prodigy again. “Can you hear me?”

“Here’s your connection Omar.”

“I hope I haven’t given you the impression that I consider kissing intrinsically irrational.”

“Impression? Why, you didn’t even give me the kiss! Never fret—so long.”

Two doors near her opened curiously at the sound of a feminine voice. A tentative cough sounded from above. Gathering her skirts, Marcia dived wildly down the last flight, and was swallowed up in the murky Connecticut air outside.

Up-stairs Horace paced the floor of his study. From time to time he glanced toward Berkeley waiting there in suave dark-red reputability, an open book lying suggestively on his cushions. And then he found that his circuit of the floor was bringing him each time nearer to Hume. There was something about Hume that was strangely and inexpressibly different. The diaphanous form still seemed hovering near, and had Horace sat there he would have felt as if he were sitting on a lady’s lap. And though Horace couldn’t have named the quality of difference, there was such a quality—

quite intangible to the speculative mind, but real, nevertheless. Hume was radiating something that in all the two hundred years of his influence he had never radiated before.

Hume was radiating attar of roses.

II

On Thursday night Horace Tarbox sat in an aisle seat in the fifth row and witnessed "Home James." Oddly enough he found that he was enjoying himself. The cynical students near him were annoyed at his audible appreciation of time-honored jokes in the Hammerstein tradition. But Horace was waiting with anxiety for Marcia Meadow singing her song about a Jazz-bound Blundering Blimp. When she did appear, radiant under a floppity flower-faced hat, a warm glow settled over him, and when the song was over he did not join in the storm of applause. He felt somewhat numb.

In the intermission after the second act an usher materialized beside him, demanded to know if he were Mr. Tarbox, and then handed him a note written in a round adolescent band. Horace read it in some confusion, while the usher lingered with withering patience in the aisle.

"Dear Omar: After the show I always grow an awful hunger. If you want to satisfy it for me in the Taft Grill just communicate your answer to the big-timber guide that brought this and oblige.

Your friend,
Marcia Meadow."

"Tell her,"—he coughed—"tell her that it will be quite all right. I'll meet her in front of the theatre."

The big-timber guide smiled arrogantly.

"I giss she meant for you to come roun' t' the stage door."

"Where—where is it?"

"Ou'side. Tunayulef. Down ee alley."

“What?”

“Ou’side. Turn to y’ left! Down ee alley!”

The arrogant person withdrew. A freshman behind Horace snickered.

Then half an hour later, sitting in the Taft Grill opposite the hair that was yellow by natural pigment, the prodigy was saying an odd thing.

“Do you have to do that dance in the last act?” he was asking earnestly—“I mean, would they dismiss you if you refused to do it?”

Marcia grinned.

“It’s fun to do it. I like to do it.”

And then Horace came out with a *faux pas*.

“I should think you’d detest it,” he remarked succinctly. “The people behind me were making remarks about your bosom.”

Marcia blushed fiery red.

“I can’t help that,” she said quickly. “The dance to me is only a sort of acrobatic stunt. Lord, it’s hard enough to do! I rub liniment into my shoulders for an hour every night.”

“Do you have—fun while you’re on the stage?”

“Uh-huh—sure! I got in the habit of having people look at me, Omar, and I like it.”

“Hm!” Horace sank into a brownish study.

“How’s the Brazilian trimmings?”

“Hm!” repeated Horace, and then after a pause: “Where does the play go from here?”

“New York.”

“For how long?”

“All depends. Winter—maybe.”

“Oh!”

“Coming up to lay eyes on me, Omar, or aren’t you int’rested? Not as nice here, is it, as it was up in your room? I wish we was there now.”

“I feel idiotic in this place,” confessed Horace, looking round him nervously.

“Too bad! We got along pretty well.”

At this he looked suddenly so melancholy that she changed her tone, and reaching over patted his hand.

“Ever take an actress out to supper before?”

“No,” said Horace miserably, “and I never will again. I don’t know why I came to-night. Here under all these lights and with all these people laughing and chattering I feel completely out of my sphere. I don’t know what to talk to you about.”

“We’ll talk about me. We talked about you last time.”

“Very well.”

“Well, my name really is Meadow, but my first name isn’t Marcia—it’s Veronica. I’m nineteen. Question—how did the girl make her leap to the footlights? Answer—she was born in Passaic, New Jersey, and up to a year ago she got the right to breathe by pushing Nabiscoes in Marcel’s tea-room in Trenton. She started going with a guy named Robbins, a singer in the Trent House cabaret, and he got her to try a song and dance with him one evening. In a month we were filling the supper-room every night. Then we went to New York with meet-my-friend letters thick as a pile of napkins.

“In two days we landed a job at Divinerries’, and I learned to shimmy from a kid at the Palais Royal. We stayed at Divinerries’ six months until one night Peter Boyce Wendell, the columnist, ate his milk-toast there. Next morning a poem about Marvellous Marcia came out in his newspaper, and within two days I had three vaudeville offers and a chance at the “Midnight Frolic”. I wrote Wendell a thank-you letter, and he printed it in his column—said that the style was like Carlyle’s, only more rugged, and that I ought to quit dancing and do North American literature. This got me a coupla more vaudeville offers and a chance as an ingénue in a regular show. I took it—and here I am, Omar.”

When she finished they sat for a moment in silence, she draping the last skeins of a Welsh rabbit on her fork and waiting for him to speak.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said suddenly.

Marcia’s eyes hardened.

“What’s the idea? Am I making you sick?”

“No, but I don’t like it here. I don’t like to be sitting here with you.”

Without another word Marcia signalled for the waiter.

“What’s the check?” she demanded briskly. “My part—the rabbit and