

Three Acts of Music, F. Scott Fitzgerald

They could hardly hear it for awhile. It was a slow gleam of pale blue and creamy pink. Then there was a tall room where there were many young people and finally they began to feel it and hear it.

What were they—no. This is about music.

He went to the band-stand; the piano player let him lean over his shoulder to read:

"From No, No, Nanette by Vincent Youmans."

"Thank you," he said, "I'd like to drop something in the horn but when an interne has a dollar bill and two coins in the world he might get married instead."

"Never mind, doctor. That's about what I had when I got married last winter."

When he came back to the table she said:

"Did you find out who wrote that thing?"

"No! When do we go from here?"

"When they stop playing 'Tea for Two.'"

Later as she came out of the women's dressing room, she asked the man: "Who played it?"

"My God, how do I know. The band played it."

It dripped out the door now:

Tea ... two

Two ... tea

"We can never get married. I'm not even a nurse yet."

"Well, let's kill the idea—let's spend the rest of our lives going around and listening to tunes. What did you say that writer's name was?"

"What did you say? You went over and looked, didn't you?"

"Didn't you," he corrected her.

"You're so swell all the time."

"Well, at least I found out who wrote it."

"Who?"

"Somebody named Vincent Youmans."

She hummed it over:

And you ...

... for me

And me...  
... for you  
Al-o-o-n-n...

Their arms went about each other for a moment in the corridor outside the red room.

"If you lost the dollar bill and the other nickel I'd still marry you," she said.

This is now years later but there was still music. There was "All Alone" and "Remember" and "Always" and "Blue Skies" and "How About Me." He was back from Vienna but it didn't seem to matter so much as it had before.

"Wait in here a moment," she said outside the operating room. "Turn on the radio if you want to."

"You've got mighty important, haven't you?"

He turned on:

Re-mem-ber the night  
the night you said-

"Are you high-hatting me?" she inquired, "or did medicine begin and end in Vienna?"

"No it didn't," he said humbly. "I'm impressed—evidently you can supervise the resident or the surgeons—"

"I've got an operation of Doctor Menafee's coming in and there's a tonsillectomy that's got to be postponed. I'm a working girl. I'm supervising the operating room."

"But you'll go out with me tonight—won't you? We'll get them to play 'All Alone.'"

She paused, regarding him.

"Yes, I've been all alone for a lot of time now. I'm somebody— you don't seem to realize it. Say who is this Berlin anyhow? He was a singer in a dive, wasn't he? My brother ran a roadhouse and he gave me money to get started with. But I thought I was away from all that. Who is this Irving Berlin? I hear he's just married a society girl—"

"He's just married—"

She had to go: "Excuse me. I've got to fire an interne before this gets going."

"I was an interne once. I understand."

They were out at last. She was making three thousand a year now and he was still being of a conservative old Vermont family.

"This Irving Berlin now. Is he happy with this Mackay girl? Those songs don't sound—"

"I guess he is. The point is how happy are you?"

"Oh, we discussed that so long ago. What do I matter? I matter in a big way—but when I was a little country girl your family decided—

"Not you," she said at the alarm in his eyes. "I know you never did."

"I knew something else about you. I knew three things—that you were a Yonkers' girl—and didn't pronounce the language like I did—"

"And that I wanted to marry you. Let's forget it. Your friend Mr. Berlin can talk better than we can. Listen to him."

"I'm listening."

"No. But listen, I mean."

Not for just a year but—

"Why do you say my friend Mr. Berlin? I never saw the guy."

"I thought maybe you'd met him in Vienna in all these years."

"I never saw him."

"He married the girl—didn't he?"

"What are you crying about?"

"I'm not crying. I just said he married the girl—didn't he? Isn't that all right to say? When you've come so far—when—"

"You are crying," he said.

"No, I'm not. Honest. It's this work. It wears down your eyes. Let's dance."

—o—ver—head

They were playing.

Blue skies o—  
—ver head

She looked up out of his arms suddenly.

"Do you suppose they're happy?"

"Who?"

"Irving Berlin and the Mackay girl?"

"How should I know whether they're happy? I tell you I never knew them—never saw them."

A moment later she whispered:

"We all knew them."

This story is about tunes. Perhaps the tunes swing the people or the people the tunes. Anyhow:

"We'll never do it," he remarked with some finality.

"Smoke gets in your eyes," said the music.

"Why?"

"Because we're too old. You wouldn't want to anyhow—you've got that job at Duke's hospital."

"I just got it."

"Well, you've just got it. And it's going to pay you four thousand."

"That's probably half what you make."

"You mean you want to try it anyhow?"

When your heart's on fire

"No. I guess you're right. It's too late."

"—Too late for what?"

"Just too late—like you told me."

"But I didn't mean it."

"You were right though... Be quiet:

Lovely  
to look at  
Romantic to know

"You're all those things in the song," he said passionately.

"What? Lovely to look at and all that? You should have told me that fifteen years ago. Now I'm superintendent of a woman's hospital." She added: "And I'm still a woman." Then she added: "But I'm not the woman you knew any more. I'm another woman."

—lovely to look at, the orchestra repeated.

"Yes, I was lovely to look at when I was nothing—when I couldn't even talk plain—"

"I never knew—"

"Oh let's not go over it. Listen to what they're playing."

"It's called 'Lovely to Look At.'"

"Who's it by?"

"A man named Jerome Kern."

"Did you meet him when you went back to Europe the second time? Is he a friend of yours?"

"I never saw him. What gives you the impression I met all these big shots? I'm a doctor. Not a musician."

She wondered about her own bitterness.

"I suppose because all those years I met nobody," she said finally. "Sure, I once saw Doctor Kelly at a distance. But here I am—because I got good at my job."

"And here I am, because—"

"You'll always be wonderful to me. What did you say this man's name was?"

"Kern. And I didn't say it was. I said it is."

"That's the way you used to talk to me. And now both of us are fat and—sort of middle-aged. We never had much. Did we?"

"It wasn't my fault."

"It wasn't anybody's fault. It was just meant to be like that. Let's dance. That's a good tune. What did you say was this man's name?"

"Kern."

They  
asked me how I  
knew—ew—ew—

"We've had all that anyhow, haven't we?" she asked him. "All those people—that Youmans, that Berlin, that Kern. They must have been through hell to be able to write like that. And we sort of listened to them, didn't we?"

"But my God, that's so little—" he began but her mood changed and she said:

"Let's not say anything about it. It was all we had—everything we'll ever know about life. What were their names—you knew their names."

"Their names were—"

"Didn't you ever know any of them in that fifteen years around Europe?"

"I never saw one of them."

"Well, I never will." She hesitated before the wide horizon of how she might have lived. How she might have married this man, borne him children, died for him—of how she had lived out of sordid poverty and education—into power—and spinsterhood. And she cared not a damn for her man any more because he had never gone off with her. But she wondered how these composers had lived. Youmans and Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern and she thought that if any of their wives turned up in this hospital she would try to make them happy.

Comments

The story was written in Baltimore in February 1936. Arnold Gingrich, the editor of Esquire, has reported how this story was written to cover the advances that had been made to Fitzgerald:

I said that just to satisfy the auditors, and to be able to say that a script—perhaps needing some revision—had been received on such and such a date so the account wouldn't look like all going out and nothing coming in, Scott should write three purported articles simply saying why he couldn't write. I suggested that he put down anything that came into his head, as automatic writing in the Gertrude Stein manner, or that, if even that were beyond his powers of concentration, he simply copy out the same couple of sentences over and over, often enough to fill eight or ten pages, if only to say I can't write stories about young love for The Saturday Evening Post.

I also hoped that there might be a therapeutic value in writing these three non-articles, in that the mere writing about why he couldn't write might in itself prime the pump enough to get him started writing again. Actually that's what happened. The first three articles were: "The Crack-Up," "Pasting It Together," and "Handle With Care"; and then along came a fourth, although the series as such was finished, called "Three Acts of Music" (The Armchair Esquire, 1958).