

A Patriotic Short, F. Scott Fitzgerald

Pat Hobby, the writer and the Man, had his great success in Hollywood during what Irvin Cobb refers to as "the mosaic swimming-pool age—just before the era when they had to have a shin-bone of St Sebastian for a clutch lever".

Mr Cobb no doubt exaggerates, for when Pat had his pool in those fat days of silent pictures, it was entirely cement, unless you should count the cracks where the water stubbornly sought its own level through the mud.

"But it was a pool," he assured himself one afternoon more than a decade later. Though he was now more than grateful for this small chore he had assigned him by producer Berners—one week at two-fifty—all the insolence of office could not take that memory away.

He had been called in to the studio to work upon a humble short. It was based on the career of General Fitzhugh Lee, who fought for the Confederacy and later for the U.S.A. against Spain—so it would offend neither North nor South. And in the recent conference Pat had tried to cooperate.

"I was thinking—" he suggested to Jack Berners, "—that it might be a good thing if we could give it a Jewish touch."

"What do you mean?" demanded Jack Berners quickly.

"Well, I thought—the way things are and all, it would be a sort of good thing to show that there were a number of Jews in it too."

"In what?"

"In the Civil War." Quickly he reviewed his meagre history. "They were, weren't they?"

"Naturally," said Berners, with some impatience. "I suppose everybody was except the Quakers."

"Well, my idea was that we could have this Fitzhugh Lee in love with a Jewish girl. He's going to be shot at curfew so she grabs a church bell—"

Jack Berners leaned forward earnestly.

"Say, Pat, you want this job, don't you? Well, I told you the story. You got the first script. If you thought up this tripe to please me you're losing your grip."

Was that a way to treat a man who had once owned a pool which had been talked about by—

That was how he happened to be thinking about his long-lost swimming pool as he entered the shorts department. He was remembering a certain day over a decade ago in all its details, how he had arrived at the studio in his car driven by a Filipino in uniform; the deferential bow of the guard at the gate which had admitted car and all to the lot, his ascent to that long-lost office which had a room for the secretary and was really a director's office...

His reverie was broken off by the voice of Ben Brown, head of the shorts department, who walked him into his own chambers.

"Jack Berners just phoned me," he said. "We don't want any new angles, Pat. We've got a good story. Fitzhugh Lee was a dashing cavalry commander. He was a nephew of Robert E. Lee and we want to show him at Appomattox, pretty bitter and all that. And then show how he became reconciled—we'll have to be careful because Virginia is swarming with Lees—and how he finally accepts a U.S. commission from President McKinley—"

Pat's mind darted back again into the past. The President—that was the magic word that had gone around that morning many years ago. The President of the United States was going to make a visit to the lot. Everyone had been agog about it—it seemed to mark a new era in pictures, because a President of the United States had never visited a studio before. The executives of the company were all dressed up—from a window of his long-lost Beverly Hills house Pat had seen Mr. Maranda, whose mansion was next door to him, bustle down his walk in a cutaway coat at nine o'clock, and had known that something was up. He thought maybe it was clergy, but when he reached the lot he had found it was the President of the United States himself who was coming...

"Clean up the stuff about Spain," Ben Brown was saying. "The guy that wrote it was a red and he's got all the Spanish officers with ants in their pants. Fix up that."

In the office assigned him Pat looked at the script of True to Two Flags. The first scene showed General Fitzhugh Lee at the head of his cavalry receiving word that Petersburg had been evacuated. In the script Lee took the blow in pantomime, but Pat was getting two-fifty a week—so, casually and without effort, he wrote in one of his favourite lines:

LEE: (to his officers)

Well, what are you standing here gawking for? DO something!

6. Medium Shot. Officers pepping up, slapping each other on back, etc.

Dissolve to:

To what? Pat's mind dissolved once more into the glamorous past. On that happy day in the twenties his phone had rung at about noon. It had been Mr Maranda.

"Pat, the President is lunching in the private dining-room. Doug Fairbanks can't come so there's a place empty and anyhow we think there ought to be one writer there."

His memory of the luncheon was palpitant with glamour. The Great Man had asked some questions about pictures and had told a joke and Pat had laughed and laughed with the others—all of them solid men together—rich, happy and successful.

Afterwards the President was to go on some sets and see some scenes taken and still later he was going to Mr Maranda's house to meet some of the women stars at tea. Pat was not invited to that party but he went home early anyhow and from his veranda saw the cortege drive up, with Mr Maranda beside the President in the back seat. Ah, he was proud of pictures then—of his position in them—of the President of the happy country where he was born...

Returning to reality Pat looked down at the script of True to Two Flags and wrote slowly and thoughtfully: Insert: A calendar—with the years plainly marked and the sheets blowing off in cold wind, to show Fitzhugh Lee—growing older and older.

His labours had made him thirsty—not for water, but he knew better than to take anything else his first day on the job. He got up and went out into the hall and along the corridor to the water-cooler.

As he walked he slipped back into his reverie.

That had been a lovely California afternoon, so Mr Maranda had taken his exalted guest and the coterie of stars into his garden, which adjoined Pat's garden. Pat had gone out his back door and followed a low privet hedge keeping out of sight—and then accidentally had come face to face with the Presidential party.

The President had smiled and nodded. Mr Maranda smiled and nodded.

"You met Mr Hobby at lunch," Mr Maranda said to the President. "He's one of our writers."

"Oh, yes," said the President. "You write the pictures."

"Yes, I do," said Pat.

The President glanced over into Pat's property.

"I suppose," he said, "that you get lots of inspiration sitting by the side of that fine pool."

"Yes," said Pat. "Yes, I do."

..Pat filled his cup at the cooler. Down the hall there was a group approaching—Jack Berners, Ben Brown, and several other executives, and with them a girl to whom they were very attentive and deferential. He recognized her face—she was the girl of the year, the It Girl, the Oomph Girl, the Glamour Girl, the girl for whose services every studio was in violent competition.

Pat lingered over his drink. He had seen many phonies break in and break out again, but this girl was the real thing, someone to stir every pulse in the nation. He felt his own heart beat faster. Finally, as the procession drew near, he put down the cup, dabbed at his hair with his hand and took a step out into the corridor.

The girl looked at him—he looked at the girl. Then she took one arm of Jack Berners' and one of Ben Brown's and suddenly the party seemed to walk right through him—so that he had to take a step back against the wall.

An instant later Jack Berners turned around and said back to him, "Hello, Pat." And then some of the others threw half-glances around but no one else spoke, so interested were they in the girl.

In his office, Pat looked at the scene, where President McKinley offers a United States commission to Fitzhugh Lee. Suddenly he gritted his teeth and bore down on his pencil as he wrote:

LEE

Mr President, you can take your commission and go straight to hell.

Then he bent down over his desk, his shoulders shaking as he thought of that happy day when he had had a swimming pool.

Note:

This is the version that was published in Esquire magazine (December 1940). There exists a final version of this text that Scott Fitzgerald sent to Arnold Gindrich (Esquire editor) too late to make changes in the set.