

Fun in an Artist's Studio, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

This was back in 1938 when few people except the Germans knew that they had already won their war in Europe. People still cared about art and tried to make it out of everything from old clothes to orange peel and that was how the Princess Dignanni found Pat. She wanted to make art out of him.

"No, not you, Mr. DeTinc," she said, "I can't paint you. You are a very standardized product, Mr. DeTinc."

Mr. DeTinc, who was a power in pictures and had even been photographed with Mr. Duchman, the Secret Sin specialist, stepped smoothly out of the way. He was not offended—in his whole life Mr. DeTinc had never been offended—but especially not now, for the Princess did not want to paint Clark Gable or Spencer Rooney or Vivien Leigh either.

She saw Pat in the commissary and found he was a writer, and asked that he be invited to Mr. DeTinc's party. The Princess was a pretty woman born in Boston, Massachusetts and Pat was forty-nine with red-rimmed eyes and a soft purr of whiskey on his breath.

"You write scenarios, Mr. Hobby?"

"I help," said Pat. "Takes more than one person to prepare a script."

He was flattered by this attention and not a little suspicious. It was only because his supervisor was a nervous wreck that he happened to have a job at all. His supervisor had forgotten a week ago that he had hired Pat, and when Pat was spotted in the commissary and told he was wanted at Mr. DeTinc's house, the writer had passed a mauvais quart d'heure. It did not even look like the kind of party that Pat had known in his prosperous days. There was not so much as a drunk passed out in the downstairs toilet.

"I imagine scenario writing is very well-paid," said the Princess.

Pat glanced around to see who was within hearing. Mr. DeTinc had withdrawn his huge bulk somewhat, but one of his apparently independent eyes seemed fixed glittering on Pat.

"Very well paid," said Pat—and he added in a lower voice, "—if you can get it."

The Princess seemed to understand and lowered her voice too.

"You mean writers have trouble getting work?"

He nodded.

"Too many of 'em get in these unions." He raised his voice a little for Mr. DeTinc's benefit. "They're all Reds, most of these writers."

The Princess nodded.

"Will you turn your face a little to the light?" she said politely.
"There, that's fine. You won't mind coming to my studio tomorrow, will you? Just to pose for me an hour?"

He scrutinized her again.

"Naked?" he asked cautiously.

"Oh, no," she averred. "Just the head."

Mr. DeTinc moved nearer and nodded.

"You ought to go. Princess Dignanni is going to paint some of the biggest stars here. Going to paint Jack Benny and Baby Sandy and Hedy Lamarr—isn't that a fact, Princess?"

The artist didn't answer. She was a pretty good portrait painter and she knew just how good she was and just how much of it was her title. She was hesitating between her several manners—Picasso's rose period with a flash of Boldini, or straight Reginald Marsh. But she knew what she was going to call it. She was going to call it Hollywood and Vine.

II

In spite of the reassurance that he would be clothed Pat approached the rendezvous with uneasiness. In his young and impressionable years he had looked through a peep-hole into a machine where two dozen postcards slapped before his eyes in sequence. The story unfolded was Fun in an Artist's Studio. Even now with the strip tease a legalized municipal project, he was a little shocked at the remembrance, and when he presented himself next day at the Princess' bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel it would not have surprised him if she had met him in a turkish towel. He was disappointed. She wore a smock and her black hair was brushed straight back like a boy's.

Pat had stopped off for a couple of drinks on the way, but his first words: "How'ya Duchess?" failed to set a jovial note for the occasion.

"Well, Mr. Hobby," she said coolly, "it's nice of you to spare me an afternoon."

"We don't work too hard in Hollywood," he assured her. "Everything is 'Manana'—in Spanish that means tomorrow."

She led him forthwith into a rear apartment where an easel stood on a square of canvas by the window. There was a couch and they sat down.

"I want to get used to you for a minute," she said. "Did you ever pose before?"

"Do I look that way?" He winked, and when she smiled he felt better and asked: "You haven't got a drink around, have you?"

The Princess hesitated. She had wanted him to look as if he needed one. Compromising, she went to the ice box and fixed him a small highball. She returned to find that he had taken off his coat and tie and lay informally upon the couch.

"That is better," the Princess said. "That shirt you're wearing. I think they make them for Hollywood—like the special prints they make for Ceylon and Guatemala. Now drink this and we'll get to work."

"Why don't you have a drink too and make it friendly?" Pat suggested.

"I had one in the pantry," she lied.

"Married woman?" he asked.

"I have been married. Now would you mind sitting on this stool?"

Reluctantly Pat got up, took down the highball, somewhat thwarted by the thin taste, and moved to the stool.

"Now sit very still," she said.

He sat silent as she worked. It was three o'clock. They were running the third race at Santa Anita and he had ten bucks on the nose. That made sixty he owed Louie, the studio bookie, and Louie stood determinedly beside Mm at the pay window every Thursday. This dame had good legs under the easel—her red lips pleased him and the way her bare arms moved as she worked. Once upon a time he wouldn't have looked at a woman over twenty-five, unless it was a secretary right in the office with him. But the kids you saw around now were snooty—always talking about calling the police.

"Please sit still, Mr. Hobby."

"What say we knock off," he suggested. "This work makes you thirsty."

The Princess had been painting half an hour. Now she stopped and stared at him a moment.

"Mr. Hobby, you were loaned me by Mr. DeTinc. Why don't you act just as if you were working over at the studio? I'll be through in another half-hour."

"What do I get out of it?" he demanded, "I'm no poser—I'm a writer."

"Your studio salary has not stopped," she said, resuming her work. "What does it matter if Mr. DeTinc wants you to do this?"

"It's different. You're a dame. I've got my self-respect to think of."

"What do you expect me to do—flirt with you?"

"No—that's old stuff. But I thought we could sit around and have a drink."

"Perhaps later," she said, and then: "Is this harder work than the studio? Am I so difficult to look at?"

"I don't mind looking at you but why couldn't we sit on the sofa?"

"You don't sit on the sofa at the studio."

"Sure you do. Listen, if you tried all the doors in the Writers' Building you'd find a lot of them locked and don't you forget it."

She stepped back and squinted at him.

"Locked? To be undisturbed?" She put down her brush. "I'll get you a drink."

When she returned she stopped for a moment in the doorway—Pat had removed his shirt and stood rather sheepishly in the middle of the floor holding it toward her.

"Here's that shirt," he said. "You can have it. I know where I can get a lot more."

For a moment longer she regarded him; then she took the shirt and put it on the sofa.

"Sit down and let me finish," she said. As he hesitated she added, "Then we'll have a drink together."

"When'll that be?"

"Fifteen minutes."

She worked quickly—several times she was content with the lower face—several times she deliberated and started over. Something that she had seen in the commissary was missing.

"Been an artist a long time?" Pat asked.

"Many years."

"Been around artists' studios a lot?"

"Quite a lot—I've had my own studios."

"I guess a lot goes on around those studios. Did you ever—"

He hesitated.

"Ever what?" she queried.

"Did you ever paint a naked man?"

"Don't talk for one minute, please." She paused with brush uplifted, seemed to listen, then made a swift stroke and looked doubtfully at the result.

"Do you know you're difficult to paint?" she said, laying down the brush.

"I don't like this posing around," he admitted. "Let's call it a day." He stood up. "Why don't you—why don't you slip into something so you'll be comfortable?"

The Princess smiled. She would tell her friends this story—it would sort of go with the picture, if the picture was any good, which she now doubted.

"You ought to revise your methods," she said. "Do you have much success with this approach?"

Pat lit a cigarette and sat down.

"If you were eighteen, see, I'd give you that line about being nuts about you."

"But why any line at all?"

"Oh, come off it!" he advised her. "You wanted to paint me, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, when a dame wants to paint a guy—" Pat reached down and undid his shoe strings, kicked his shoes onto the floor, put his stockinged feet on the couch. "—when a dame wants to see a guy about something or a guy wants to see a dame, there's a payoff, see."

The Princess sighed. "Well I seem to be trapped," she said. "But it makes it rather difficult when a dame just wants to paint a guy."

"When a dame wants to paint a guy—" Pat half closed his eyes, nodded and flapped his hands expressively. As his thumbs went suddenly toward his suspenders, she spoke in a louder voice.

"Officer!"

There was a sound behind Pat. He turned to see a young man in khaki with shining black gloves, standing in the door.

"Officer, this man is an employee of Mr. DeTinc's. Mr. DeTinc lent him to me for the afternoon."

The policeman looked at the staring image of guilt upon the couch.

"Get fresh?" he inquired.

"I don't want to prefer charges—I called the desk to be on the safe side. He was to pose for me in the nude and now he refuses." She walked casually to her easel. "Mr. Hobby, why don't you stop this mock-modesty—you'll find a turkish towel in the bathroom."

Pat reached stupidly for his shoes. Somehow it flashed into his mind that they were running the eighth race at Santa Anita —

"Shake it up, you," said the cop. "You heard what the lady said."

Pat stood up vaguely and fixed a long poignant look on the Princess.

"You told me—" he said hoarsely, "you wanted to paint—"

"You told me I meant something else. Hurry please. And officer, there's a drink in the pantry."

..A few minutes later as Pat sat shivering in the center of the room his memory went back to those peep-shows of his youth—though at the moment he could see little resemblance. He was grateful at least for the turkish towel, even now failing to realize that the Princess was not interested in his shattered frame but in his face.

It wore the exact expression that had wooed her in the commissary, the expression of Hollywood and Vine, the other self of Mr. DeTinc—and she worked fast while there was still light enough to paint by.