

No Harm Trying, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

Pat Hobby's apartment lay athwart a delicatessen shop on Wilshire Boulevard. And there lay Pat himself, surrounded by his books—the Motion Picture Almanac of 1928 and Barton's Track Guide, 1939—by his pictures, authentically signed photographs of Mabel Normand and Barbara LaMarr (who, being deceased, had no value in the pawn-shops)—and by his dogs in their cracked leather oxfords, perched on the arm of a slanting settee.

Pat was at "the end of his resources"—though this term is too ominous to describe a fairly usual condition in his life. He was an old-timer in pictures; he had once known sumptuous living, but for the past ten years jobs had been hard to hold—harder to hold than glasses.

"Think of it," he often mourned. "Only a writer—at forty-nine."

All this afternoon he had turned the pages of The Times and The Examiner for an idea. Though he did not intend to compose a motion picture from this idea, he needed it to get him inside a studio. If you had nothing to submit it was increasingly difficult to pass the gate. But though these two newspapers, together with Life, were the sources most commonly combed for "originals," they yielded him nothing this afternoon. There were wars, a fire in Topanga Canyon, press releases from the studios, municipal corruptions, and always the redeeming deeds of "The Trojuns," but Pat found nothing that competed in human interest with the betting page.

—If I could get out to Santa Anita, he thought—I could maybe get an idea about the nags.

This cheering idea was interrupted by his landlord, from the delicatessen store below.

"I told you I wouldn't deliver any more messages," said Nick, "and STILL I won't. But Mr. Carl Le Vigne is telephoning in person from the studio and wants you should go over right away."

The prospect of a job did something to Pat. It anesthetized the crumbled, struggling remnants of his manhood, and inoculated him instead with a bland, easygoing confidence. The set speeches and attitudes of success returned to him. His manner as he winked at a studio policeman, stopped to chat with Louie, the bookie, and presented himself to Mr. Le Vigne's secretary, indicated that he had been engaged with momentous tasks in other parts of the globe. By saluting Le Vigne with a facetious "Hel-LO Captain!" he behaved almost as an equal, a trusted lieutenant who had never really been away.

"Pat, your wife's in the hospital," Le Vigne said. "It'll probably be in the papers this afternoon."

Pat started.

"My wife?" he said. "What wife?"

"Estelle. She tried to cut her wrists."

"Estelle!" Pat exclaimed. "You mean ESTELLE? Say, I was only married to her three weeks!"

"She was the best girl you ever had," said Le Vigne grimly.

"I haven't even heard of her for ten years."

"You're hearing about her now. They called all the studios trying to locate you."

"I had nothing to do with it."

"I know—she's only been here a week. She had a run of hard luck wherever it was she lived—New Orleans? Husband died, child died, no money..."

Pat breathed easier. They weren't trying to hang anything on him.

"Anyhow she'll live," Le Vigne reassured him superfluously, "—and she was the best script girl on the lot once. We'd like to take care of her. We thought the way was give you a job. Not exactly a job, because I know you're not up to it." He glanced into Pat's red-rimmed eyes. "More of a sinecure."

Pat became uneasy. He didn't recognize the word, but "sin" disturbed him and "cure" brought a whole flood of unpleasant memories.

"You're on the payroll at two-fifty a week for three weeks," said Le Vigne, "—but one-fifty of that goes to the hospital for your wife's bill."

"But we're divorced!" Pat protested. "No Mexican stuff either. I've been married since, and so has—"

"Take it or leave it. You can have an office here, and if anything you can do comes up we'll let you know."

"I never worked for a hundred a week."

"We're not asking you to work. If you want you can stay home."

Pat reversed his field.

"Oh, I'll work," he said quickly. "You dig me up a good story and I'll show you whether I can work or not."

Le Vigne wrote something on a slip of paper.

"All right. They'll find you an office."

Outside Pat looked at the memorandum.

"Mrs. John Devlin," it read, "Good Samaritan Hospital."

The very words irritated him.

"Good Samaritan!" he exclaimed. "Good gyp joint! One hundred and fifty bucks a week!"

II

Pat had been given many a charity job but this was the first one that made him feel ashamed. He did not mind not EARN-ing his salary, but not

getting it was another matter. And he wondered if other people on the lot who were obviously doing nothing, were being fairly paid for it. There were, for example, a number of beautiful young ladies who walked aloof as stars, and whom Pat took for stock girls, until Eric, the callboy, told him they were imports from Vienna and Budapest, not yet cast for pictures. Did half their pay checks go to keep husbands they had only had for three weeks!

The loveliest of these was Lizzette Starheim, a violet-eyed little blonde with an ill-concealed air of disillusion. Pat saw her alone at tea almost every afternoon in the commissary—and made her acquaintance one day by simply sliding into a chair opposite.

"Hello, Lizzette," he said. "I'm Pat Hobby, the writer."

"Oh, hel-LO!"

She flashed such a dazzling smile that for a moment he thought she must have heard of him.

"When they going to cast you?" he demanded.

"I don't know." Her accent was faint and poignant.

"Don't let them give you the run-around. Not with a face like yours." Her beauty roused a rusty eloquence. "Sometimes they just keep you under contract till your teeth fall out, because you look too much like their big star."

"Oh no," she said distressfully.

"Oh yes!" he assured her. "I'm telling YOU. Why don't you go to another company and get borrowed? Have you thought of that idea?"

"I think it's wonderful."

He intended to go further into the subject but Miss Starheim looked at her watch and got up.

"I must go now, Mr.—"

"Hobby. Pat Hobby."

Pat joined Dutch Waggoner, the director, who was shooting dice with a waitress at another table.

"Between pictures, Dutch?"

"Between pictures hell!" said Dutch. "I haven't done a picture for six months and my contract's got six months to run. I'm trying to break it. Who was the little blonde?"

Afterwards, back in his office, Pat discussed these encounters with Eric the callboy.

"All signed up and no place to go," said Eric. "Look at this Jeff Manfred, now—an associate producer! Sits in his office and sends notes to the big shots—and I carry back word they're in Palm Springs. It breaks my heart. Yesterday he put his head on his desk and boo-hoo'd."

"What's the answer?" asked Pat.

"Change management," suggested Eric, darkly. "Shake-up coming."

"Who's going to the top?" Pat asked, with scarcely concealed excitement.

"Nobody knows," said Eric. "But wouldn't I like to land uphill! Boy! I want a writer's job. I got three ideas so new they're wet behind the ears."

"It's no life at all," Pat assured him with conviction. "I'd trade with you right now."

In the hall next day he intercepted Jeff Manfred who walked with the unconvincing hurry of one without a destination.

"What's the rush, Jeff?" Pat demanded, falling into step.

"Reading some scripts," Jeff panted without conviction.

Pat drew him unwillingly into his office.

"Jeff, have you heard about the shake-up?"

"Listen now, Pat—" Jeff looked nervously at the walls. "What shake-up?" he demanded.

"I heard that this Harmon Shaver is going to be the new boss," ventured Pat, "Wall Street control."

"Harmon Shaver!" Jeff scoffed. "He doesn't know anything about pictures—he's just a money man. He wanders around like a lost soul." Jeff sat back and considered. "Still—if you're RIGHT, he'd be a man you could get to." He turned mournful eyes on Pat. "I haven't been able to see Le Vigne or Barnes or Bill Behrer for a month. Can't get an assignment, can't get an actor, can't get a story." He broke off. "I've thought of drumming up something on my own. Got any ideas?"

"Have I?" said Pat. "I got three ideas so new they're wet behind the ears."

"Who for?"

"Lizzette Starheim," said Pat, "with Dutch Waggoner directing—see?"

III

"I'm with you all a hundred per cent," said Harmon Shaver. "This is the most encouraging experience I've had in pictures." He had a bright bond-salesman's chuckle. "By God, it reminds me of a circus we got up when I was a boy."

They had come to his office inconspicuously like conspirators—Jeff Manfred, Waggoner, Miss Starheim and Pat Hobby.

"You like the idea, Miss Starheim?" Shaver continued.

"I think it's wonderful."

"And you, Mr. Waggoner?"

"I've heard only the general line," said Waggoner with director's caution, "but it seems to have the old emotional socko." He winked at Pat. "I didn't know this old tramp had it in him."

Pat glowed with pride. Jeff Manfred, though he was elated, was less sanguine.

"It's important nobody talks," he said nervously. "The Big Boys would find some way of killing it. In a week, when we've got the script done we'll go to them."

"I agree," said Shaver. "They have run the studio so long that—well, I don't trust my own secretaries—I sent them to the races this afternoon."

Back in Pat's office Eric, the callboy, was waiting. He did not know that he was the hinge upon which swung a great affair.

"You like the stuff, eh?" he asked eagerly.

"Pretty good," said Pat with calculated indifference.

"You said you'd pay more for the next batch."

"Have a heart!" Pat was aggrieved. "How many callboys get seventy-five a week?"

"How many callboys can write?"

Pat considered. Out of the two hundred a week Jeff Manfred was advancing from his own pocket, he had naturally awarded himself a commission of sixty per cent.

"I'll make it a hundred," he said. "Now check yourself off the lot and meet me in front of Benny's bar."

At the hospital, Estelle Hobby Devlin sat up in bed, overwhelmed by the unexpected visit.

"I'm glad you came, Pat," she said, "you've been very kind. Did you get my note?"

"Forget it," Pat said gruffly. He had never liked this wife. She had loved him too much—until she found suddenly that he was a poor lover. In her presence he felt inferior.

"I got a guy outside," he said.

"What for?"

"I thought maybe you had nothing to do and you might want to pay me back for all this jack—"

He waved his hand around the bare hospital room.

"You were a swell script girl once. Do you think if I got a typewriter you could put some good stuff into continuity?"

"Why—yes. I suppose I could."

"It's a secret. We can't trust anybody at the studio."

"All right," she said.

"I'll send this kid in with the stuff. I got a conference."

"All right—and—oh Pat—come and see me again."

"Sure, I'll come."

But he knew he wouldn't. He didn't like sickrooms—he lived in one himself. From now on he was done with poverty and failure. He admired strength—he was taking Lizzette Starheim to a wrestling match that night.

IV

In his private musings Harmon Shaver referred to the showdown as "the surprise party." He was going to confront Le Vigne with a fait accompli and he gathered his coterie before phoning Le Vigne to come over to his office.

"What for?" demanded Le Vigne. "Couldn't you tell me now—I'm busy as hell."

This arrogance irritated Shaver—who was here to watch over the interests of Eastern stockholders.

"I don't ask much," he said sharply, "I let you fellows laugh at me behind my back and freeze me out of things. But now I've got something and I'd like you to come over."

"All right—all right."

Le Vigne's eyebrows lifted as he saw the members of the new production unit but he said nothing—sprawled into an arm chair with his eyes on the floor and his fingers over his mouth.

Mr. Shaver came around the desk and poured forth words that had been fermenting in him for months. Simmered to its essentials, his protest was: "You would not let me play, but I'm going to play anyhow." Then he nodded to Jeff Manfred—who opened the script and read aloud. This took an hour, and still Le Vigne sat motionless and silent.

"There you are," said Shaver triumphantly. "Unless you've got any objection I think we ought to assign a budget to this proposition and get going. I'll answer to my people."

Le Vigne spoke at last.

"You like it, Miss Starheim?"

"I think it's wonderful."

"What language you going to play it in?"

To everyone's surprise Miss Starheim got to her feet.

"I must go now," she said with her faint poignant accent.

"Sit down and answer me," said Le Vigne. "What language are you playing it in?"

Miss Starheim looked tearful.

"Wenn I gute teachers hätte konnte ich dann thees røle gut spielen," she faltered.

"But you like the script."

She hesitated.

"I think it's wonderful."

Le Vigne turned to the others.

"Miss Starheim has been here eight months," he said. "She's had three teachers. Unless things have changed in the past two weeks she can say just three sentences. She can say, 'How do you do'; she can say, 'I think it's wonderful'; and she can say, 'I must go now.'" Miss Starheim has turned out to be a pinhead—I'm not insulting her because she doesn't know what it means. Anyhow—there's your Star."

He turned to Dutch Waggoner, but Dutch was already on his feet.

"Now Carl—" he said defensively.

"You force me to it," said Le Vigne. "I've trusted drunks up to a point, but I'll be goddam if I'll trust a hophead."

He turned to Harmon Shaver.

"Dutch has been good for exactly one week apiece on his last four pictures. He's all right now but as soon as the heat goes on he reaches for the little white powders. Now Dutch! Don't say anything you'll regret. We're carrying you in HOPES—but you won't get on a stage till we've had a doctor's certificate for a year."

Again he turned to Harmon.

"There's your director. Your supervisor, Jeff Manfred, is here for one reason only—because he's Behrer's wife's cousin. There's nothing against him but he belongs to silent days as much as—as much as—" His eyes fell upon a quavering broken man, "—as much as Pat Hobby."

"What do you mean?" demanded Jeff.

"You trusted Hobby, didn't you? That tells the whole story." He turned back to Shaver. "Jeff's a weeper and a wisher and a dreamer. Mr. Shaver, you have bought a lot of condemned building material."

"Well, I've bought a good story," said Shaver defiantly.

"Yes. That's right. We'll make that story."

"Isn't that something?" demanded Shaver. "With all this secrecy how was I to know about Mr. Waggoner and Miss Starheim? But I do know a good story."

"Yes," said Le Vigne absently. He got up. "Yes—it's a good story... Come along to my office, Pat."

He was already at the door. Pat cast an agonized look at Mr. Shaver as if for support. Then, weakly, he followed.

"Sit down, Pat."

"That Eric's got talent, hasn't he?" said Le Vigne. "He'll go places. How'd you come to dig him up?"

Pat felt the straps of the electric chair being adjusted.

"Oh—I just dug him up. He—came in my office."

"We're putting him on salary," said Le Vigne. "We ought to have some system to give these kids a chance."

He took a call on his Dictograph, then swung back to Pat.

"But how did you ever get mixed up with this goddam Shaver. YOU, Pat—an old-timer like you."

"Well, I thought—"

"Why doesn't he go back East?" continued Le Vigne disgustedly. "Getting all you poops stirred up!"

Blood flowed back into Pat's veins. He recognized his signal, his dog-call.

"Well, I got you a story, didn't I?" he said, with almost a swagger. And he added, "How'd you know about it?"

"I went down to see Estelle in the hospital. She and this kid were working on it. I walked right in on them."

"Oh," said Pat.

"I knew the kid by sight. Now, Pat, tell me this—did Jeff Manfred think you wrote it—or was he in on the racket?"

"Oh God," Pat mourned. "What do I have to answer that for?"

Le Vigne leaned forward intensely.

"Pat, you're sitting over a trap door!" he said with savage eyes. "Do you see how the carpet's cut? I just have to press this button and drop you down to hell! Will you TALK?"

Pat was on his feet, staring wildly at the floor.

"Sure I will!" he cried. He believed it—he believed such things.

"All right," said Le Vigne relaxing. "There's whiskey in the sideboard there. Talk quick and I'll give you another month at two-fifty. I kinda like having you around."