

On The Trail of Pat Hobby, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

The day was dark from the outset, and a California fog crept everywhere. It had followed Pat in his headlong, hatless flight across the city. His destination, his refuge, was the studio, where he was not employed but which had been home to him for twenty years.

Was it his imagination or did the policeman at the gate give him and his pass an especially long look? It might be the lack of a hat—Hollywood was full of hatless men but Pat felt marked, especially as there had been no opportunity to part his thin grey hair.

In the Writers' Building he went into the lavatory. Then he remembered: by some inspired ukase from above, all mirrors had been removed from the Writers' Building a year ago.

Across the hall he saw Bee McIlvaine's door ajar, and discerned her plump person.

"Bee, can you loan me your compact box?" he asked.

Bee looked at him suspiciously, then frowned and dug it from her purse.

"You on the lot?" she inquired.

"Will be next week," he prophesied. He put the compact on her desk and bent over it with his comb. "Why won't they put mirrors back in the johnnies? Do they think writers would look at themselves all day?"

"Remember when they took out the couches?" said Bee. "In nineteen thirty-two. And they put them back in thirty-four."

"I worked at home," said Pat feelingly.

Finished with her mirror he wondered if she were good for a loan—enough to buy a hat and something to eat. Bee must have seen the look in his eyes for she forestalled him.

"The Finns got all my money," she said, "and I'm worried about my job. Either my picture starts tomorrow or it's going to be shelved. We haven't even got a title."

She handed him a mimeographed bulletin from the scenario department and Pat glanced at the headline.

TO ALL DEPARTMENTS
TITLE WANTED—FIFTY DOLLARS REWARD
SUMMARY FOLLOWS

"I could use fifty," Pat said. "What's it about?"

"It's written there. It's about a lot of stuff that goes on in tourist cabins."

Pat started and looked at her wild-eyed. He had thought to be safe here behind the guarded gates but news travelled fast. This was a friendly or

perhaps not so friendly warning. He must move on. He was a hunted man now, with nowhere to lay his hatless head.

"I don't know anything about that," he mumbled and walked hastily from the room.

II

Just inside the door of the commissary Pat looked around. There was no guardian except the girl at the cigarette stand but obtaining another person's hat was subject to one complication: it was hard to judge the size by a cursory glance, while the sight of a man trying on several hats in a check room was unavoidably suspicious.

Personal taste also obtruded itself. Pat was beguiled by a green fedora with a sprightly feather but it was too readily identifiable. This was also true of a fine white Stetson for the open spaces. Finally he decided on a sturdy grey Homburg which looked as if it would give him good service. With trembling hands he put it on. It fitted. He walked out—in painful, interminable slow motion.

His confidence was partly restored in the next hour by the fact that no one he encountered made references to tourists' cabins. It had been a lean three months for Pat. He had regarded his job as night clerk for the Selecto Tourists Cabins as a mere fill-in, never to be mentioned to his friends. But when the police squad came this morning they held up the raid long enough to assure Pat, or Don Smith as he called himself, that he would be wanted as a witness. The story of his escape lies in the realm of melodrama, how he went out a side door, bought a half pint of what he so desperately needed at the corner drug-store, hitchhiked his way across the great city, going limp at the sight of traffic cops and only breathing free when he saw the studio's high-flown sign.

After a call on Louie, the studio bookie, whose great patron he once had been, he dropped in on Jack Berners. He had no idea to submit, but he caught Jack in a hurried moment flying off to a producers' conference and was unexpectedly invited to step in and wait for his return.

The office was rich and comfortable. There were no letters worth reading on the desk, but there were a decanter and glasses in a cupboard and presently he lay down on a big soft couch and fell asleep.

He was awakened by Berners' return, in high indignation.

"Of all the damn nonsense! We get a hurry call—heads of all departments. One man is late and we wait for him. He comes in and gets a bawling out for wasting thousands of dollars worth of time. Then what do you suppose: Mr Marcus has lost his favourite hat!"

Pat failed to associate the fact with himself.

"All the department heads stop production!" continued Berners. "Two thousand people look for a grey Homburg hat!" He sank despairingly into a chair, "I can't talk to you today, Pat. By four o'clock, I've got to get a title to a picture about a tourist camp. Got an idea?"

"No," said Pat. "No."

"Well, go up to Bee McIlvaine's office and help her figure something out. There's fifty dollars in it."

In a daze Pat wandered to the door.

"Hey," said Berners, "don't forget your hat."

III

Feeling the effects of his day outside the law, and of a tumbler full of Berners' brandy, Pat sat in Bee McIlvaine's office.

"We've got to get a title," said Bee gloomily.

She handed Pat the mimeograph offering fifty dollars reward and put a pencil in his hand. Pat stared at the paper unseeingly.

"How about it?" she asked. "Who's got a title?"

There was a long silence.

"Test Pilot's been used, hasn't it?" he said with a vague tone.

"Wake up! This isn't about aviation."

"Well, I was just thinking it was a good title."

"So's The Birth of a Nation."

"But not for this picture," Pat muttered. "Birth of a Nation wouldn't suit this picture."

"Are you ribbing me?" demanded Bee. "Or are you losing your mind? This is serious."

"Sure—I know." Feebly he scrawled words at the bottom of the page. "I've had a couple of drinks that's all. My head'll clear up in a minute. I'm trying to think what have been the most successful titles. The trouble is they've all been used, like It Happened One Night."

Bee looked at him uneasily. He was having trouble keeping his eyes open and she did not want him to pass out in her office. After a minute she called Jack Berners.

"Could you possibly come up? I've got some title ideas."

Jack arrived with a sheaf of suggestions sent in from here and there in the studio, but digging through them yielded no ore.

"How about it, Pat? Got anything?"

Pat braced himself to an effort.

"I like It Happened One Morning," he said—then looked desperately at his scrawl on the mimeograph paper, "or else—Grand Motel."

Berners smiled.

"Grand Motel," he repeated. "By God! I think you've got something. Grand Motel."

"I said Grand Hotel," said Pat.

"No, you didn't. You said Grand Motel—and for my money it wins the fifty."

"I've got to go lie down," announced Pat. "I feel sick."

"There's an empty office across the way. That's a funny idea Pat, Grand Motel—or else Motel Clerk. How do you like that?"

As the fugitive quickened his step out the door Bee pressed the hat into his hands.

"Good work, old timer," she said.

Pat seized Mr Marcus' hat, and stood holding it there like a bowl of soup.

"Feel-better-now," he mumbled after a moment. "Be back for the money."

And carrying his burden he shambled toward the lavatory.