

Pat Hobby Does his Bit, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

In order to borrow money gracefully one must choose the time and place. It is a difficult business, for example, when the borrower is cockeyed, or has measles, or a conspicuous shiner. One could continue indefinitely but the inauspicious occasions can be catalogued as one—it is exceedingly difficult to borrow money when one needs it.

Pat Hobby found it difficult in the case of an actor on a set during the shooting of a moving picture. It was about the stiffest chore he had ever undertaken but he was doing it to save his car. To a sordidly commercial glance the jalopy would not have seemed worth saving but, because of Hollywood's great distances, it was an indispensable tool of the writer's trade.

"The finance company—" explained Pat, but Gyp McCarthy interrupted.

"I got some business in this next take. You want me to blow up on it?"

"I only need twenty," persisted Pat. "I can't get jobs if I have to hang around my bedroom."

"You'd save money that way—you don't get jobs anymore."

This was cruelly correct. But working or not Pat liked to pass his days in or near a studio. He had reached a dolorous and precarious forty-nine with nothing else to do.

"I got a rewrite job promised for next week," he lied.

"Oh, nuts to you," said Gyp. "You better get off the set before Hilliard sees you."

Pat glanced nervously toward the group by the camera—then he played his trump card.

"Once—" he said,—"once I paid for you to have a baby."

"Sure you did!" said Gyp wrathfully. "That was sixteen years ago. And where is it now—it's in jail for running over an old lady without a licence."

"Well I paid for it," said Pat. "Two hundred smackers."

"That's nothing to what it cost me. Would I be stunting at my age if I had dough to lend? Would I be working at all?"

From somewhere in the darkness an assistant director issued an order:

"Ready to go!"

Pat spoke quickly.

"All right," he said. "Five bucks."

"No."

"All right then," Pat's red-rimmed eyes tightened. "I'm going to stand over there and put the hex on you while you say your line."

"Oh, for God's sake!" said Gyp uneasily. "Listen, I'll give you five. It's in my coat over there. Here, I'll get it."

He dashed from the set and Pat heaved a sigh of relief. Maybe Louie, the studio bookie, would let him have ten more.

Again the assistant director's voice:

"Quiet!... We'll take it now!... Lights!"

The glare stabbed into Pat's eyes, blinding him. He took a step the wrong way—then back. Six other people were in the take—a gangster's hide-out—and it seemed that each was in his way.

"All right... Roll 'em... We're turning!"

In his panic Pat had stepped behind a flat which would effectually conceal him. While the actors played their scene he stood there trembling a little, his back hunched—quite unaware that it was a "trolley shot", that the camera, moving forward on its track, was almost upon him.

"You by the window—hey you, GYP! hands up."

Like a man in a dream Pat raised his hands—only then did he realize that he was looking directly into a great black lens—in an instant it also included the English leading woman, who ran past him and jumped out the window. After an interminable second Pat heard the order "Cut."

Then he rushed blindly through a property door, around a corner, tripping over a cable, recovering himself and tearing for the entrance. He heard footsteps running behind him and increased his gait, but in the doorway itself he was overtaken and turned defensively.

It was the English actress.

"Hurry up!" she cried. "That finishes my work. I'm flying home to England."

As she scrambled into her waiting limousine she threw back a last irrelevant remark. "I'm catching a New York plane in an hour."

Who cares! Pat thought bitterly, as he scurried away.

He was unaware that her repatriation was to change the course of his life.

II

And he did not have the five—he feared that this particular five was forever out of range. Other means must be found to keep the wolf from the two doors of his coupe. Pat left the lot with despair in his heart, stopping only momentarily to get gas for the car and gin for himself, possibly the last of many drinks they had had together.

Next morning he awoke with an aggravated problem. For once he did not want to go to the studio. It was not merely Gyp McCarthy he feared—it was the whole corporate might of a moving picture company, nay of an

industry. Actually to have interfered with the shooting of a movie was somehow a major delinquency, compared to which expensive fumbblings on the part of producers or writers went comparatively unpunished.

On the other hand zero hour for the car was the day after tomorrow and Louie, the studio bookie, seemed positively the last resource and a poor one at that.

Nerving himself with an unpalatable snack from the bottom of the bottle, he went to the studio at ten with his coat collar turned up and his hat pulled low over his ears. He knew a sort of underground railway through the make-up department and the commissary kitchen which might get him to Louie's suite unobserved.

Two studio policemen seized him as he rounded the corner by the barber shop.

"Hey, I got a pass!" he protested, "Good for a week—signed by Jack Berners."

"Mr Berners specially wants to see you."

Here it was then—he would be barred from the lot.

"We could sue you!" cried Jack Berners. "But we couldn't recover."

"What's one take?" demanded Pat. "You can use another."

"No we can't—the camera jammed. And this morning Lily Keatts took a plane to England. She thought she was through."

"Cut the scene," suggested Pat—and then on inspiration, "I bet I could fix it for you."

"You fixed it, all right!" Berners assured him. "If there was any way to fix it back I wouldn't have sent for you."

He paused, looked speculatively at Pat. His buzzer sounded and a secretary's voice said "Mr Hilliard".

"Send him in."

George Hilliard was a huge man and the glance he bent upon Pat was not kindly. But there was some other element besides anger in it and Pat squirmed doubtfully as the two men regarded him with almost impersonal curiosity—as if he were a candidate for a cannibal's frying pan.

"Well, goodbye," he suggested uneasily.

"What do you think, George?" demanded Berners.

"Well—" said Hilliard, hesitantly, "we could black out a couple of teeth."

Pat rose hurriedly and took a step toward the door, but Hilliard seized him and faced him around.

"Let's hear you talk," he said.

"You can't beat me up," Pat clamoured. "You knock my teeth out and I'll sue you."

There was a pause.

"What do you think?" demanded Berners.

"He can't talk," said Hilliard.

"You damn right I can talk!" said Pat.

"We can dub three or four lines," continued Hilliard, "and nobody'll know the difference. Half the guys you get to play rats can't talk. The point is this one's got the physique and the camera will pull it out of his face too."

Berners nodded.

"All right, Pat—you're an actor. You've got to play the part this McCarthy had. Only a couple of scenes but they're important. You'll have papers to sign with the Guild and Central Casting and you can report for work this afternoon."

"What is this!" Pat demanded. "I'm no ham—" Remembering that Hilliard had once been a leading man he recoiled from this attitude: "I'm a writer."

"The character you play is called 'The Rat'," continued Berners. He explained why it was necessary for Pat to continue his impromptu appearance of yesterday. The scenes which included Miss Keatts had been shot first, so that she could fulfil an English engagement. But in the filling out of the skeleton it was necessary to show how the gangsters reached their hide-out, and what they did after Miss Keatts dove from the window. Having irrevocably appeared in the shot with Miss Keatts, Pat must appear in half a dozen other shots, to be taken in the next few days.

"What kind of jack is it?" Pat inquired.

"We were paying McCarthy fifty a day—wait a minute Pat—but I thought I'd pay you your last writing price, two-fifty for the week."

"How about my reputation?" objected Pat.

"I won't answer that one," said Berners. "But if Benchley can act and Don Stewart and Lewis and Wilder and Woollcott, I guess it won't ruin you."

Pat drew a long breath.

"Can you let me have fifty on account," he asked, "because really I earned that yester—"

"If you got what you earned yesterday you'd be in a hospital. And you're not going on any bat. Here's ten dollars and that's all you see for a week."

"How about my car—"

"To hell with your car."

"The Rat" was the die-hard of the gang who were engaged in sabotage for an unidentified government of N-zis. His speeches were simplicity itself—Pat had written their like many times. "Don't finish him till the Brain comes"; "Let's get out of here"; "Fella, you're going out feet first." Pat found it pleasant—mostly waiting around as in all picture work—and he hoped it might lead to other openings in this line. He was sorry that the job was so short.

His last scene was on location. He knew "The Rat" was to touch off an explosion in which he himself was killed but Pat had watched such scenes and was certain he would be in no slightest danger. Out on the back lot he was mildly curious when they measured him around the waist and chest.

"Making a dummy?" he asked.

"Not exactly," the prop man said. "This thing is all made but it was for Gyp McCarthy and I want to see if it'll fit you."

"Does it?"

"Just exactly."

"What is it?"

"Well—it's a sort of protector."

A slight draught of uneasiness blew in Pat's mind.

"Protector for what? Against the explosion?"

"Heck no! The explosion is phony—just a process shot. This is something else."

"What is it?" persisted Pat. "If I got to be protected against something I got a right to know what it is."

Near the false front of a warehouse a battery of cameras were getting into position. George Hilliard came suddenly out of a group and toward Pat and putting his arm on his shoulder steered him toward the actors' dressing tent. Once inside he handed Pat a flask.

"Have a drink, old man."

Pat took a long pull.

"There's a bit of business, Pat," Hilliard said, "needs some new costuming. I'll explain it while they dress you."

Pat was divested of coat and vest, his trousers were loosened and in an instant a hinged iron doublet was fastened about his middle, extending from his armpits to his crotch very much like a plaster cast.

"This is the very finest strongest iron, Pat," Hilliard assured him. "The very best in tensile strength and resistance. It was built in Pittsburgh."

Pat suddenly resisted the attempts of two dressers to pull his trousers up over the thing and to slip on his coat and vest.

"What's it for?" he demanded, arms flailing. "I want to know. You're not going to shoot at me if that's what--"

"No shooting."

"Then what IS it? I'm no stunt man--"

"You signed a contract just like McCarthy's to do anything within reason-- and our lawyers have certified this."

"What IS it?" Pat's mouth was dry.

"It's an automobile."

"You're going to hit me with an automobile."

"Give me a chance to tell you," begged Hilliard. "Nobody's going to hit you. The auto's going to pass over you, that's all. This case is so strong--"

"Oh no!" said Pat. "Oh no!" He tore at the iron corselet. "Not on your--"

George Hilliard pinioned his arms firmly.

"Pat, you almost wrecked this picture once--you're not going to do it again. Be a man."

"That's what I'm going to be. You're not going to squash me out flat like that extra last month."

He broke off. Behind Hilliard he saw a face he knew--a hateful and dreaded face--that of the collector for the North Hollywood Finance and Loan Company. Over in the parking lot stood his coupe, faithful pal and servant since 1934, companion of his misfortunes, his only certain home.

"Either you fill your contract," said George Hilliard, "--or you're out of pictures for keeps."

The man from the finance company had taken a step forward. Pat turned to Hilliard.

"Will you loan me--" he faltered, "--will you advance me twenty-five dollars?"

"Sure," said Hilliard.

Pat spoke fiercely to the credit man:

"You hear that? You'll get your money, but if this thing breaks, my death'll be on your head."

The next few minutes passed in a dream. He heard Hilliard's last instructions as they walked from the tent. Pat was to be lying in a shallow ditch to touch off the dynamite--and then the hero would drive the car slowly across his middle. Pat listened dimly. A picture of himself, cracked like an egg by the factory wall, lay a-thwart his mind.

He picked up the torch and lay down in the ditch. Afar off he heard the call "Quiet", then Hilliard's voice and the noise of the car warming up.

"Action!" called someone. There was the sound of the car growing nearer—louder. And then Pat Hobby knew no more.

IV

When he awoke it was dark and quiet. For some moments he failed to recognize his whereabouts. Then he saw that stars were out in the California sky and that he was somewhere alone—no—he was held tight in someone's arms. But the arms were of iron and he realized that he was still in the metallic casing. And then it all came back to him—up to the moment when he heard the approach of the car.

As far as he could determine he was unhurt—but why out here and alone?

He struggled to get up but found it was impossible and after a horrified moment he let out a cry for help. For five minutes he called out at intervals until finally a voice came from far away; and assistance arrived in the form of a studio policeman.

"What is it fella? A drop too much?"

"Hell no," cried Pat. "I was in the shooting this afternoon. It was a lousy trick to go off and leave me in this ditch."

"They must have forgot you in the excitement."

"Forgot me! I was the excitement. If you don't believe me then feel what I got on!"

The cop helped him to his feet.

"They was upset," he explained. "A star don't break his leg every day."

"What's that? Did something happen?"

"Well, as I heard, he was supposed to drive the car at a bump and the car turned over and broke his leg. They had to stop shooting and they're all kind of gloomy."

"And they leave me inside this—this stove. How do I get it off tonight? How'm I going to drive my car?"

But for all his rage Pat felt a certain fierce pride. He was something in this set-up—someone to be reckoned with after years of neglect. He had managed to hold up the picture once more.