

Pat Hobby, Putative Father, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

Most writers look like writers whether they want to or not. It is hard to say why—for they model their exteriors whimsically on Wall Street brokers, cattle kings or English explorers—but they all turn out looking like writers, as definitely typed as “The Public” or “The Profiteers” in the cartoons.

Pat Hobby was the exception. He did not look like a writer. And only in one corner of the Republic could he have been identified as a member of the entertainment world. Even there the first guess would have been that he was an extra down on his luck, or a bit player who specialized in the sort of father who should never come home. But a writer he was: he had collaborated in over two dozen moving picture scripts, most of them, it must be admitted, prior to 1929.

A writer? He had a desk in the Writers' Building at the studio; he had pencils, paper, a secretary, paper clips, a pad for office memoranda. And he sat in an overstuffed chair, his eyes not so very bloodshot taking in the morning's Reporter.

“I got to get to work,” he told Miss Raudenbush at eleven. And again at twelve:

“I got to get to work.”

At quarter to one, he began to feel hungry—up to this point every move, or rather every moment, was in the writer's tradition. Even to the faint irritation that no one had annoyed him, no one had bothered him, no one had interfered with the long empty dream which constituted his average day.

He was about to accuse his secretary of staring at him when the welcome interruption came. A studio guide tapped at his door and brought him a note from his boss, Jack Berners:

Dear Pat:

Please take some time off and show these people around the lot.

Jack

“My God!” Pat exclaimed. “How can I be expected to get anything done and show people around the lot at the same time. Who are they?” he demanded of the guide.

“I don't know. One of them seems to be kind of coloured. He looks like the extras they had at Paramount for Bengal Lancer. He can't speak English. The other—”

Pat was putting on his coat to see for himself.

“Will you be wanting me this afternoon?” asked Miss Raudenbush.

He looked at her with infinite reproach and went out in front of the Writers' Building.

The visitors were there. The sultry person was tall and of a fine carriage, dressed in excellent English clothes except for a turban. The

other was a youth of fifteen, quite light of hue. He also wore a turban with beautifully cut jodhpurs and riding coat.

They bowed formally.

"Hear you want to go on some sets," said Pat, "You friends of Jack Berners?"

"Acquaintances," said the youth. "May I present you to my uncle: Sir Singrim Dak Raj."

Probably, thought Pat, the company was cooking up a Bengal Lancers, and this man would play the heavy who owned the Khyber Pass. Maybe they'd put Pat on it—at three-fifty a week. Why not? He knew how to write that stuff:

Beautiful Long Shot. The Gorge. Show Tribesman firing from behind rocks.

Medium Shot. Tribesman hit by bullet making nose dive over high rock.
(use stunt man)

Medium Long Shot. The Valley. British troops wheeling out cannon.

"You going to be long in Hollywood?" he asked shrewdly.

"My uncle doesn't speak English," said the youth in a measured voice. "We are here only a few days. You see—I am your putative son."

II

"—And I would very much like to see Bonita Granville," continued the youth. "I find she has been borrowed by your studio."

They had been walking toward the production office and it took Pat a minute to grasp what the young man had said.

"You're my what?" he asked.

"Your putative son," said the young man, in a sort of sing-song. "Legally I am the son and heir of the Rajah Dak Raj Indore. But I was born John Brown Hobby."

"Yes?" said Pat. "Go on! What's this?"

"My mother was Delia Brown. You married her in 1926. And she divorced you in 1927 when I was a few months old. Later she took me to India, where she married my present legal father."

"Oh," said Pat. They had reached the production office. "You want to see Bonita Granville."

"Yes," said John Hobby Indore. "If it is convenient."

Pat looked at the shooting schedule on the wall.

"It may be," he said heavily. "We can go and see."

As they started toward Stage 4, he exploded.

"What do you mean, 'my potato son'? I'm glad to see you and all that, but say, are you really the kid Delia had in 1926?"

"Putatively," John Indore said. "At that time you and she were legally married."

He turned to his uncle and spoke rapidly in Hindustani, whereupon the latter bent forward, looked with cold examination upon Pat and threw up his shoulders without comment. The whole business was making Pat vaguely uncomfortable.

When he pointed out the commissary, John wanted to stop there "to buy his uncle a hot dog". It seemed that Sir Singrim had conceived a passion for them at the World's Fair in New York, whence they had just come. They were taking ship for Madras tomorrow.

"—whether or not," said John, sombrely. "I get to see Bonita Granville. I do not care if I meet her. I am too young for her. She is already an old woman by our standards. But I'd like to see her."

It was one of those bad days for showing people around. Only one of the directors shooting today was an old timer, on whom Pat could count for a welcome—and at the door of that stage he received word that the star kept blowing up in his lines and had demanded that the set be cleared.

In desperation he took his charges out to the back lot and walked them past the false fronts of ships and cities and village streets, and medieval gates—a sight in which the boy showed a certain interest but which Sir Singrim found disappointing. Each time that Pat led them around behind to demonstrate that it was all phony Sir Singrim's expression would change to disappointment and faint contempt.

"What's he say?" Pat asked his offspring, after Sir Singrim had walked eagerly into a Fifth Avenue jewellery store, to find nothing but carpenter's rubble inside.

"He is the third richest man in India," said John. "He is disgusted. He says he will never enjoy an American picture again. He says he will buy one of our picture companies in India and make every set as solid as the Taj Mahal. He thinks perhaps the actresses just have a false front too, and that's why you won't let us see them."

The first sentence had rung a sort of carillon in Pat's head. If there was anything he liked it was a good piece of money—not this miserable, uncertain two-fifty a week which purchased his freedom.

"I'll tell you," he said with sudden decision. "We'll try Stage 4, and peek at Bonita Granville."

Stage 4 was double locked and barred, for the day—the director hated visitors, and it was a process stage besides. "Process" was a generic name for trick photography in which every studio competed with other studios, and lived in terror of spies. More specifically it meant that a projecting machine threw a moving background upon a transparent screen. On the other side of the screen, a scene was played and recorded against this moving background. The projector on one side of the screen and the camera on the other were so synchronized that the result could show a star standing on his head before an indifferent crowd on 42nd Street—a real crowd and a real star—and the poor eye could only conclude that it was being deluded and never quite guess how.

Pat tried to explain this to John, but John was peering for Bonita Granville from behind the great mass of coiled ropes and pails where they hid. They had not got there by the front entrance, but by a little side door for technicians that Pat knew.

Wearied by the long jaunt over the back lot, Pat took a pint flask from his hip and offered it to Sir Singrim who declined. He did not offer it to John.

"Stunt your growth," he said solemnly, taking a long pull.

"I do not want any," said John with dignity.

He was suddenly alert. He had spotted an idol more glamorous than Siva not twenty feet away—her back, her profile, her voice. Then she moved off.

Watching his face, Pat was rather touched.

"We can go nearer," he said. "We might get to that ballroom set. They're not using it—they got covers on the furniture."

On tip toe they started, Pat in the lead, then Sir Singrim, then John. As they moved softly forward Pat heard the word "Lights" and stopped in his tracks. Then, as a blinding white glow struck at their eyes and the voice shouted "Quiet! We're rolling!" Pat began to run, followed quickly through the white silence by the others.

The silence did not endure.

"CUT!" screamed a voice, "What the living, blazing hell!"

From the director's angle something had happened on the screen which, for the moment, was inexplicable. Three gigantic silhouettes, two with huge Indian turbans, had danced across what was intended to be a New England harbour—they had blundered into the line of the process shot. Prince John Indore had not only seen Bonita Granville—he had acted in the same picture. His silhouetted foot seemed to pass miraculously through her blonde young head.

III

They sat for some time in the guard-room before word could be gotten to Jack Berners, who was off the lot. So there was leisure for talk. This consisted of a longish harangue from Sir Singrim to John, which the latter—modifying its tone if not its words—translated to Pat.

"My uncle says his brother wanted to do something for you. He thought perhaps if you were a great writer he might invite you to come to his kingdom and write his life."

"I never claimed to be—"

"My uncle says you are an ignominious writer—in your own land you permitted him to be touched by those dogs of the policemen."

"Aw—bananas," muttered Pat uncomfortably.

"He says my mother always wished you well. But now she is a high and sacred lady and should never see you again. He says we will go to our chambers in the Ambassador Hotel and meditate and pray and let you know what we decide."

When they were released, and the two moguls were escorted apologetically to their car by a studio yes-man, it seemed to Pat that it had been pretty well decided already. He was angry. For the sake of getting his son a peek at Miss Granville, he had quite possibly lost his job—though he didn't really think so. Or rather he was pretty sure that when his week was up he would have lost it anyhow. But though it was a pretty bad break he remembered most clearly from the afternoon that Sir Singrim was "the third richest man in India", and after dinner at a bar on La Cienega he decided to go down to the Ambassador Hotel and find out the result of the prayer and meditation.

It was early dark of a September evening. The Ambassador was full of memories to Pat—the Coconut Grove in the great days, when directors found pretty girls in the afternoon and made stars of them by night. There was some activity in front of the door and Pat watched it idly. Such a quantity of baggage he had seldom seen, even in the train of Gloria Swanson or Joan Crawford. Then he started as he saw two or three men in turbans moving around among the baggage. So—they were running out on him.

Sir Singrim Dak Raj and his nephew Prince John, both pulling on gloves as if at a command, appeared at the door, as Pat stepped forward out of the darkness.

"Taking a powder, eh?" he said. "Say, when you get back there, tell them that one American could lick—"

"I have left a note for you," said Prince John, turning from his Uncle's side. "I say, you WERE nice this afternoon and it really was too bad."

"Yes, it was," agreed Pat.

"But we are providing for you," John said. "After our prayers we decided that you will receive fifty sovereigns a month—two hundred and fifty dollars—for the rest of your natural life."

"What will I have to do for it?" questioned Pat suspiciously.

"It will only be withdrawn in case—"

John leaned and whispered in Pat's ear, and relief crept into Pat's eyes. The condition had nothing to do with drink and blondes, really nothing to do with him at all.

John began to get in the limousine.

"Goodbye, putative father," he said, almost with affection.

Pat stood looking after him.

"Goodbye son," he said. He stood watching the limousine go out of sight. Then he turned away—feeling like—like Stella Dallas. There were tears in his eyes.

Potato Father—whatever that meant. After some consideration he added to himself: it's better than not being a father at all.

IV

He awoke late next afternoon with a happy hangover—the cause of which he could not determine until young John's voice seemed to spring into his ears, repeating: "Fifty sovereigns a month, with just one condition—that it be withdrawn in case of war, when all revenues of our state will revert to the British Empire."

With a cry Pat sprang to the door. No Los Angeles Times lay against it, no Examiner—only Toddy's Daily Form Sheet. He searched the orange pages frantically. Below the form sheets, the past performances, the endless oracles for endless racetracks, his eye was caught by a one-inch item:

LONDON. SEPTEMBER 3RD. ON THIS MORNING'S DECLARATION BY CHAMBERLAIN, DOUGIE CABLES "ENGLAND TO WIN. FRANCE TO PLACE. RUSSIA TO SHOW".