

Pat Hobby's Christmas Wish, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

It was Christmas Eve in the studio. by eleven o'clock in the morning, Santa Claus had called on most of the huge population according to each one's deserts.

Sumptuous gifts from producers to stars, and from agents to producers arrived at offices and studio bungalows; on every stage one heard of the roguish gifts of casts to directors or directors to casts; champagne had gone out from publicity office to the press. And tips of fifties, tens and fives from producers, directors and writers fell like manna upon the white collar class.

In this sort of transaction there were exceptions. Pat Hobby, for example, who knew the game from twenty years' experience, had had the idea of getting rid of his secretary the day before. They were sending over a new one any minute but she would scarcely expect a present the first day.

Waiting for her, he walked the corridor, glancing into open offices for signs of life. He stopped to chat with Joe Hopper from the scenario department.

"Not like the old days," he mourned. "Then there was a bottle on every desk."

"There're a few around."

"Not many." Pat sighed. "And afterwards we'd run a picture—made up out of cutting-room scraps."

"I've heard. All the suppressed stuff," said Hopper.

Pat nodded, his eyes glistening.

"Oh, it was juicy. You darned near ripped your guts laughing—

He broke off as the sight of a woman, pad in hand, entering his office down the hall recalled him to the sorry present.

"Gooddorf has me working over the holiday," he complained bitterly.

"I wouldn't do it."

"I wouldn't either except my four weeks are up next Friday, and if I bucked him he wouldn't extend me."

As he turned away Hopper knew that Pat was not being extended anyhow. He had been hired to script an old-fashioned horse-opera and the boys who were "writing behind him" that is working over his stuff—said that all of it was old and some didn't make sense.

"I'm Miss Kagle," said Pat's new secretary.

She was about thirty-six, handsome, faded, tired, efficient. She went to the typewriter, examined it, sat down and burst into sobs.

Pat started. Self-control, from below anyhow, was the rule around here. Wasn't it bad enough to be working on Christmas Eve? Well less bad than not working at all. He walked over and shut the door—someone might suspect him of insulting the girl.

"Cheer up," he advised her. "This is Christmas."

Her burst of emotion had died away. She sat upright now, choking and wiping her eyes.

"Nothing's as bad as it seems," he assured her unconvincingly. "What's it, anyhow? They going to lay you off?"

She shook her head, did a snuffle to end sniffles, and opened her note book.

"Who you been working for?"

She answered between suddenly gritted teeth.

"Mr. Harry Gooddorf."

Pat widened his permanently bloodshot eyes. Now he remembered he had seen her in Harry's outer office.

"Since 1921. Eighteen years. And yesterday he sent me back to the department. He said I depressed him—I reminded him he was getting on." Her face was grim. "That isn't the way he talked after hours eighteen years ago."

"Yeah, he was a skirt chaser then." said Pat.

"I should have done something then when I had the chance."

Pat felt righteous stirrings.

"Breach of promise? That's no angle!"

"But I had something to clinch it. Something bigger than breach of promise. I still have too. But then, you see, I thought I was in love with him." She brooded for a moment. "Do you want to dictate something now?"

Pat remembered his job and opened a script.

"It's an insert," he began. "Scene 114 A."

Pat paced the office.

"Ext. Long Shot of the Plains," he decreed. "Buck and Mexicans approaching the hyacenda."

"The what?"

"The hyacenda—the ranch house." He looked at her reproachfully. "114 B. Two Shot: Buck and Pedro. Buck: 'The dirty son-of-a-bitch. I'll tear his guts out!'"

Miss Kagle looked up, startled.

"You want me to write that down?"

"Sure."

"It won't get by."

"I'm writing this. Of course, it won't get by. But if I put 'you rat' the scene won't have any force."

"But won't somebody have to change it to 'you rat'?"

He glared at her—he didn't want to change secretaries every day.

"Harry Gooddorf can worry about that."

"Are you working for Mr. Gooddorf?" Miss Kagle asked in alarm.

"Until he throws me out."

"I shouldn't have said—"

"Don't worry," he assured her. "He's no pal of mine anymore. Not at three-fifty a week, when I used to get two thousand ... Where was I?"

He paced the floor again, repeating his last line aloud with relish. But now it seemed to apply not to a personage of the story but to Harry Gooddorf. Suddenly he stood still, lost in thought. "Say, what is it you got on him? You know where the body is buried?"

"That's too true to be funny."

"He knock somebody off?"

"Mr Hobby, I'm sorry I ever opened my mouth."

"Just call me Pat. What's your first name?"

"Helen."

"Married?"

"Not now."

"Well, listen Helen: What do you say we have dinner?"

II

On the afternoon of Christmas Day he was still trying to get the secret out of her. They had the studio almost to themselves—only a skeleton staff of technical men dotted the walks and the commissary. They had exchanged Christmas presents. Pat gave her a five dollar bill, Helen bought him a white linen handkerchief. Very well he could remember the day when many dozen such handkerchiefs had been his Christmas harvest.

The script was progressing at a snail's pace but their friendship had considerably ripened. Her secret, he considered, was a very valuable asset, and he wondered how many careers had turned on just such an asset. Some, he felt sure, had been thus raised to affluence. Why, it was almost as good as being in the family, and he pictured an imaginary conversation with Harry Gooddorf.

"Harry, it's this way. I don't think my experience is being made use of. It's the young squirts who ought to do the writing—I ought to do more supervising."

"Or—?"

"Or else," said Pat firmly.

He was in the midst of his day dream when Harry Gooddorf unexpectedly walked in.

"Merry Christmas, Pat," he said jovially. His smile was less robust when he saw Helen, "Oh, hello Helen—didn't know you and Pat had got together. I sent you a remembrance over to the script department."

"You shouldn't have done that."

Harry turned swiftly to Pat.

"The boss is on my neck," he said. "I've got to have a finished script Thursday."

"Well, here I am," said Pat. "You'll have it. Did I ever fail you?"

"Usually," said Harry. "Usually."

He seemed about to add more when a call boy entered with an envelope and handed it to Helen Kagle—whereupon Harry turned and hurried out.

"He'd better get out!" burst forth Miss Kagle, after opening the envelope. "Ten bucks—just ten bucks—from an executive—after eighteen years."

It was Pat's chance. Sitting on her desk he told her his plan.

"It's soft jobs for you and me," he said. "You the head of a script department, me an associate producer. We're on the gravy train for life—no more writing—no more pounding the keys. We might even—we might even—if things go good we could get married."

She hesitated a long time. When she put a fresh sheet in the typewriter Pat feared he had lost.

"I can write it from memory," she said. "This was a letter he typed himself on February 3rd, 1921. He sealed it and gave it to me to mail—but there was a blonde he was interested in, and I wondered why he should be so secret about a letter."

Helen had been typing as she talked, and now she handed Pat a note.

To Will Bronson  
First National Studios  
Personal  
Dear Bill:

We killed Taylor. We should have cracked down on him sooner. So why not shut up.  
Yours, Harry.

Pat stared at it stunned.

"Get it?" Helen said. "On February 1st, 1921, somebody knocked off William Desmond Taylor, the director. And they've never found out who."

III

For eighteen years she had kept the original note, envelope and all. She had sent only a copy to Bronson, tracing Harry Gooddorf's signature.

"Baby, we're set!" said Pat. "I always thought it was a girl got Taylor."

He was so elated that he opened a drawer and brought forth a half-pint of whiskey. Then, with an afterthought, he demanded:

"Is it in a safe place?"

"You bet it is. He'd never guess where."

"Baby, we've got him!"

Cash, cars, girls, swimming pools swam in a glittering montage before Pat's eye.

He folded the note, put it in his pocket, took another drink and reached for his hat.

"You going to see him now?" Helen demanded in some alarm. "Hey, wait till I get off the lot. / don't want to get murdered."

"Don't worry! Listen I'll meet you in 'The Muncherie' at Fifth and La Brea—in one hour."

As he walked to Gooddorf's office he decided to mention no facts or names within the walls of the studio. Back in the brief period when he had headed a scenario department Pat had conceived a plan to put a dictaphone in every writer's office. Thus their loyalty to the studio executives could be checked several times a day.

The idea had been laughed at. But later, when he had been "reduced back to a writer," he often wondered if his plan was secretly followed. Perhaps some indiscreet remark of his own was responsible for the doghouse where he had been interred for the past decade. So it was with the idea of concealed dictaphones in mind, dictaphones which could be turned on by the pressure of a toe, that he entered Harry Gooddorf's office.

"Harry—" he chose his words carefully, "do you remember the night of February 1st, 1921?"

Somewhat flabbergasted, Gooddorf leaned back in his swivel chair.

"What?"

"Try and think. It's something very important to you."

Pat's expression as he watched his friend was that of an anxious undertaker.

"February 1st, 1921." Gooddorf mused. "No. How could I remember? You think I keep a diary? I don't even know where I was then."

"You were right here in Hollywood."

"Probably. If you know, tell me."

"You'll remember."

"Let's see. I came out to the coast in sixteen. I was with Biograph till 1920. Was I making some comedies? That's it. I was making a piece called Knuckleduster—on location."

"You weren't always on location. You were in town February 1st."

"What is this?" Gooddorf demanded. "The third degree?"

"No—but I've got some information about your doings on that date."

Gooddorf 's face reddened; for a moment it looked as if he were going to throw Pat out of the room—then suddenly he gasped, licked his lips and stared at his desk.

"Oh," he said, and after a minute: "But I don't see what business it is of yours."

"It's the business of every decent man."

"Since when have you been decent?"

"All my life," said Pat. "And, even if I haven't, I never did anything like that."

"My foot!" said Harry contemptuously. "You showing up here with a halo! Anyhow, what's the evidence? You'd think you had a written confession. It's all forgotten long ago."

"Not in the memory of decent men," said Pat. "And as for a written confession—I've got it."

"I doubt you. And I doubt if it would stand in any court. You've been taken in."

"I've seen it," said Pat with growing confidence. "And it's enough to hang you."

"Well, by God if there's any publicity I'll run you out of town."

"You'll run me out of town."

"I don't want any publicity."

"Then I think you'd better come along with me. Without talking to anybody."

"Where are we going?"

"I know a bar where we can be alone."

The Muncherie was in fact deserted, save for the bartender and Helen Kagle who sat at a table, jumpy with alarm. Seeing her, Gooddorf's expression changed to one of infinite reproach.

"This is a hell of a Christmas," he said, "with my family expecting me home an hour ago. I want to know the idea. You say you've got something in my writing."

Pat took the paper from his pocket and read the date aloud. Then he looked up hastily:

"This is just a copy, so don't try and snatch it."

He knew the technique of such scenes as this. When the vogue for Westerns had temporarily subsided he had sweated over many an orgy of crime.

"To William Bronson, Dear Bill: We killed Taylor. We should have cracked down on him sooner. So why not shut up. Yours, Harry."

Pat paused. "You wrote this on February 3rd, 1921."

Silence. Gooddorf turned to Helen Kagle.

"Did you do this? Did I dictate that to you?"

"No," she admitted in an awed voice. "You wrote it yourself. I opened the letter."

"I see. Well, what do you want?"

"Plenty," said Pat, and found himself pleased with the sound of the word.

"What exactly?"

Pat launched into the description of a career suitable to a man of forty-nine. A glowing career. It expanded rapidly in beauty and power during the time it took him to drink three large whiskeys. But one demand he returned to again and again.

He wanted to be made a producer tomorrow.

"Why tomorrow?" demanded Gooddorf. "Can't it wait?"

There were sudden tears in Pat's eyes—real tears.

"This is Christmas," he said. "It's my Christmas wish. I've had a hell of a time. I've waited so long."

Gooddorf got to his feet suddenly.

"Nope," he said. "I won't make you a producer. I couldn't do it in fairness to the company. I'd rather stand trial."

Pat's mouth fell open.

"What? You won't?"

"Not a chance. I'd rather swing."

He turned away, his face set, and started toward the door.

"All right!" Pat called after him. "It's your last chance."

Suddenly he was amazed to see Helen Kagle spring up and run after Gooddorf—try to throw her arms around him.

"Don't worry!" she cried. "I'll tear it up, Harry! It was a joke Harry—" Her voice trailed off rather abruptly. She had discovered that Gooddorf was shaking with laughter.

"What's the joke?" she demanded, growing angry again. "Do you think I haven't got it?"

"Oh, you've got it all right," Gooddorf howled. "You've got it—but it isn't what you think it is."

He came back to the table, sat down and addressed Pat.

"Do you know what I thought that date meant? I thought maybe it was the date Helen and I first fell for each other. That's what I thought. And I thought she was going to raise Cain about it. I thought she was nuts. She's been married twice since then, and so have I."

"That doesn't explain the note," said Pat sternly but with a sinky feeling. "You admit you killed Taylor."

Gooddorf nodded.

"I still think a lot of us did," he said. "We were a wild crowd—Taylor and Bronson and me and half the boys in the big money. So a bunch of us got together in an agreement to go slow. The country was waiting for somebody to hang. We tried to get Taylor to watch his step but he wouldn't. So instead of cracking down on him, we let him 'go the pace.' And some rat shot him—who did it I don't know."

He stood up.

"Like somebody should have cracked down on you, Pat. But you were an amusing guy in those days, and besides we were all too busy."

Pat sniffled suddenly.

"I've been cracked down on," he said. "Plenty."

"But too late," said Gooddorf, and added, "you've probably got a new Christmas wish by now, and I'll grant it to you. I won't say anything about this afternoon."

When he had gone, Pat and Helen sat in silence. Presently Pat took out the note again and looked it over.

"'So why not shut up?'" he read aloud. "He didn't explain that."

"Why not shut up?" Helen said.