

Pat Hobby's Secret, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

Distress in Hollywood is endemic and always acute. Scarcely an executive but is being gnawed at by some insoluble problem and in a democratic way he will let you in on it, with no charge. The problem, be it one of health or of production, is faced courageously and with groans at from one to five thousand a week. That's how pictures are made.

"But this one has got me down," said Mr Banizon, "—because how did the artillery shell get in the trunk of Claudette Colbert or Betty Field or whoever we decide to use? We got to explain it so the audience will believe it."

He was in the office of Louie the studio bookie and his present audience also included Pat Hobby, venerable script-stooge of forty-nine. Mr Banizon did not expect a suggestion from either of them but he had been talking aloud to himself about the problem for a week now and was unable to stop.

"Who's your writer on it?" asked Louie.

"R. Parke Woll," said Banizon indignantly. "First I buy this opening from another writer, see. A grand notion but only a notion. Then I call in R. Parke Woll, the playwright, and we meet a couple of times and develop it. Then when we get the end in sight, his agent horns in and says he won't let Woll talk any more unless I give him a contract—eight weeks at \$3,000! And all I need him for is one more day!"

The sum brought a glitter into Pat's old eyes. Ten years ago he had camped beatifically in range of such a salary—now he was lucky to get a few weeks at \$250. His inflamed and burnt over talent had failed to produce a second growth.

"The worse part of it is that Woll told me the ending," continued the producer.

"Then what are you waiting for?" demanded Pat. "You don't need to pay him a cent."

"I forgot it!" groaned Mr Banizon. "Two phones were ringing at once in my office—one from a working director. And while I was talking Woll had to run along. Now I can't remember it and I can't get him back."

Perversely Pat Hobby's sense of justice was with the producer, not the writer. Banizon had almost outsmarted Woll and then been cheated by a tough break. And now the playwright, with the insolence of an Eastern snob, was holding him up for twenty-four grand. What with the European market gone. What with the war.

"Now he's on a big bat," said Banizon. "I know because I got a man tailing him. It's enough to drive you nuts—here I got the whole story except the pay-off. What good is it to me like that?"

"If he's drunk maybe he'd spill it," suggested Louie practically.

"Not to me," said Mr Banizon. "I thought of it but he would recognize my face."

Having reached the end of his current blind alley, Mr Banizon picked a horse in the third and one in the seventh and prepared to depart.

"I got an idea," said Pat.

Mr Banizon looked suspiciously at the red old eyes.

"I got no time to hear it now," he said.

"I'm not selling anything," Pat reassured him. "I got a deal almost ready over at Paramount. But once I worked with this R. Parke Woll and maybe I could find what you want to know."

He and Mr Banizon went out of the office together and walked slowly across the lot. An hour later, for an advance consideration of fifty dollars, Pat was employed to discover how a live artillery shell got into Claudette Colbert's trunk or Betty Field's trunk or whosoever's trunk it should be.

## II

The swath which R. Parke Woll was now cutting through the City of the Angels would have attracted no special notice in the twenties; in the fearful forties it rang out like laughter in church. He was easy to follow: his absence had been requested from two hotels but he had settled down into a routine where he carried his sleeping quarters in his elbow. A small but alert band of rats and weasels were furnishing him moral support in his journey—a journey which Pat caught up with at two a.m. in Conk's Old Fashioned Bar.

Conk's Bar was haughtier than its name, boasting cigarette girls and a doorman-bouncer named Smith who had once stayed a full hour with Tarzan White. Mr Smith was an embittered man who expressed himself by goosing the patrons on their way in and out and this was Pat's introduction. When he recovered himself he discovered R. Parke Woll in a mixed company around a table, and sauntered up with an air of surprise.

"Hello, good looking," he said to Woll. "Remember me—Pat Hobby?"

R. Parke Woll brought him with difficulty into focus, turning his head first on one side then on the other, letting it sink, snap up and then lash forward like a cobra taking a candid snapshot. Evidently it recorded for he said:

"Pat Hobby! Sit down and wha'll you have. Genlemen, this is Pat Hobby—best left-handed writer in Hollywood. Pat h'are you?"

Pat sat down, amid suspicious looks from a dozen predatory eyes. Was Pat an old friend sent to get the playwright home?

Pat saw this and waited until a half-hour later when he found himself alone with Woll in the washroom.

"Listen Parke, Banizon is having you followed," he said. "I don't know why he's doing it. Louie at the studio tipped me off."

"You don't know why?" cried Parke. "Well, I know why. I got something he wants—that's why!"

"You owe him money?"

"Owe him money. Why that—he owes ME money! He owes me for three long, hard conferences—I outlined a whole damn picture for him." His vague finger tapped his forehead in several places. "What he wants is in here."

An hour passed at the turbulent orgiastic table. Pat waited—and then inevitably in the slow, limited cycle of the lush, Woll's mind returned to the subject.

"The funny thing is I told him who put the shell in the trunk and why. And then the Master Mind forgot."

Pat had an inspiration.

"But his secretary remembered."

"She did?" Woll was flabbergasted. "Secretary—don't remember secretary."

"She came in," ventured Pat uneasily.

"Well then by God he's got to pay me or I'll sue him."

"Banizon says he's got a better idea."

"The hell he has. My idea was a pip. Listen—"

He spoke for two minutes.

"You like it?" he demanded. He looked at Pat for applause—then he must have seen something in Pat's eye that he was not intended to see. "Why you little skunk," he cried. "You've talked to Banizon—he sent you here."

Pat rose and tore like a rabbit for the door. He would have been out into the street before Woll could overtake him had it not been for the intervention of Mr Smith, the doorman.

"Where you going?" he demanded, catching Pat by his lapels.

"Hold him!" cried Woll, coming up. He aimed a blow at Pat which missed and landed full in Mr Smith's mouth.

It has been mentioned that Mr Smith was an embittered as well as a powerful man. He dropped Pat, picked up R. Parke Woll by crotch and shoulder, held him high and then in one gigantic pound brought his body down against the floor. Three minutes later Woll was dead.

### III

Except in great scandals like the Arbuckle case the industry protects its own—and the industry included Pat, however intermittently. He was let out of prison next morning without bail, wanted only as a material witness. If anything, the publicity was advantageous—for the first time in a year his name appeared in the trade journals. Moreover he was now the only living man who knew how the shell got into Claudette Colbert's (or Betty Field's) trunk.

"When can you come up and see me?" said Mr Banizon.

"After the inquest tomorrow," said Pat enjoying himself. "I feel kind of shaken—it gave me an earache."

That too indicated power. Only those who were "in" could speak of their health and be listened to.

"Woll really did tell you?" questioned Banizon.

"He told me," said Pat. "And it's worth more than fifty smackers. I'm going to get me a new agent and bring him to your office."

"I tell you a better plan." said Banizon hastily, "I'll get you on the payroll. Four weeks at your regular price."

"What's my price?" demanded Pat gloomily. "I've drawn everything from four thousand to zero." And he added ambiguously, "As Shakespeare says, 'Every man has his price.'"

The attendant rodents of R. Parke Woll had vanished with their small plunder into convenient rat holes, leaving as the defendant Mr Smith, and, as witnesses, Pat and two frightened cigarette girls. Mr Smith's defence was that he had been attacked. At the inquest one cigarette girl agreed with him—one condemned him for unnecessary roughness. Pat Hobby's turn was next, but before his name was called he started as a voice spoke to him from behind.

"You talk against my husband and I'll twist your tongue out by the roots."

A huge dinosaur of a woman, fully six feet tall and broad in proportion, was leaning forward against his chair.

"Pat Hobby, step forward please... now Mr Hobby tell us exactly what happened."

The eyes of Mr Smith were fixed balefully on his and he felt the eyes of the bouncer's mate reaching in for his tongue through the back of his head. He was full of natural hesitation.

"I don't know exactly," he said, and then with quick inspiration, "All I know is everything went white!"

"WHAT?"

"That's the way it was. I saw white. Just like some guys see red or black I saw white."

There was some consultation among the authorities.

"Well, what happened from when you came into the restaurant—up to the time you saw white?"

"Well—" said Pat fighting for time. "It was all kind of that way. I came and sat down and then it began to go black."

"You mean white."

"Black AND white."

There was a general titter.

"Witness dismissed. Defendant remanded for trial."

What was a little joking to endure when the stakes were so high—all that night a mountainous Amazon pursued him through his dreams and he needed a strong drink before appearing at Mr Banizon's office next morning. He was accompanied by one of the few Hollywood agents who had not yet taken him on and shaken him off.

"A flat sum of five hundred," offered Banizon. "Or four weeks at two-fifty to work on another picture."

"How bad do you want this?" asked the agent. "My client seems to think it's worth three thousand."

"Of my own money?" cried Banizon. "And it isn't even HIS idea. Now that Woll is dead it's in the Public Remains."

"Not quite," said the agent. "I think like you do that ideas are sort of in the air. They belong to whoever's got them at the time—like balloons."

"Well, how much?" asked Mr Banizon fearfully. "How do I know he's got the idea?"

The agent turned to Pat.

"Shall we let him find out—for a thousand dollars?"

After a moment Pat nodded. Something was bothering him.

"All right," said Banizon. "This strain is driving me nuts. One thousand."

There was silence.

"Spill it Pat," said the agent.

Still no word from Pat. They waited. When Pat spoke at last his voice seemed to come from afar.

"Everything's white," he gasped.

"WHAT?"

"I can't help it—everything has gone white. I can see it—white. I remember going into the joint but after that it all goes white."

For a moment they thought he was holding out. Then the agent realized that Pat actually had drawn a psychological blank. The secret of R. Parke Woll was safe forever. Too late Pat realized that a thousand dollars was slipping away and tried desperately to recover.

"I remember, I remember! It was put in by some Nazi dictator."

"Maybe the girl put it in the trunk herself," said Banizon ironically. "For her bracelet."

For many years Mr Banizon would be somewhat gnawed by this insoluble problem. And as he glowered at Pat he wished that writers could be

dispensed with altogether. If only ideas could be plucked from the inexpensive air!