

The Homes of the Stars, F. Scott Fitzgerald

Beneath a great striped umbrella at the side of a boulevard in a Hollywood heat wave, sat a man. His name was Gus Venske (no relation to the runner) and he wore magenta pants, cerise shoes and a sport article from Vine Street which resembled nothing so much as a cerulean blue pajama top.

Gus Venske was not a freak nor were his clothes at all extraordinary for his time and place. He had a profession—on a pole beside the umbrella was a placard:

VISIT THE HOMES OF THE STARS

Business was bad or Gus would not have hailed the unprosperous man who stood in the street beside a panting, steaming car, anxiously watching its efforts to cool.

"Hey fella," said Gus, without much hope. "Wanna visit the homes of the stars?"

The red-rimmed eyes of the watcher turned from the automobile and looked superciliously upon Gus.

"I'm IN pictures," said the man, "I'm in 'em myself."

"Actor?"

"No. Writer."

Pat Hobby turned back to his car, which was whistling like a peanut wagon. He had told the truth—or what was once the truth. Often in the old days his name had flashed on the screen for the few seconds allotted to authorship, but for the past five years his services had been less and less in demand.

Presently Gus Venske shut up shop for lunch by putting his folders and maps into a briefcase and walking off with it under his arm. As the sun grew hotter moment by moment, Pat Hobby took refuge under the faint protection of the umbrella and inspected a soiled folder which had been dropped by Mr Venske. If Pat had not been down to his last fourteen cents he would have telephoned a garage for aid—as it was, he could only wait.

After a while a limousine with a Missouri licence drew to rest beside him. Behind the chauffeur sat a little white moustached man and a large woman with a small dog. They conversed for a moment—then, in a rather shamefaced way, the woman leaned out and addressed Pat.

"What stars? homes can you visit?" she asked.

It took a moment for this to sink in.

"I mean can we go to Robert Taylor's home and Clark Gable's and Shirley Temple's—"

"I guess you can if you can get in," said Pat.

"Because—" continued the woman, "—if we could go to the very best homes, the most exclusive—we would be prepared to pay more than your regular price."

Light dawned upon Pat. Here together were suckers and smackers. Here was that dearest of Hollywood dreams—the angle. If one got the right angle it meant meals at the Brown Derby, long nights with bottles and girls, a new tyre for his old car. And here was an angle fairly thrusting itself at him.

He rose and went to the side of the limousine.

"Sure. Maybe I could fix it." As he spoke he felt a pang of doubt. "Would you be able to pay in advance?"

The couple exchanged a look.

"Suppose we gave you five dollars now," the woman said, "and five dollars if we can visit Clark Gable's home or somebody like that."

Once upon a time such a thing would have been so easy. In his salad days when Pat had twelve or fifteen writing credits a year, he could have called up many people who would have said, "Sure, Pat, if it means anything to you." But now he could only think of a handful who really recognized him and spoke to him around the lots—Melvyn Douglas and Robert Young and Ronald Colman and Young Doug. Those he had known best had retired or passed away.

And he did not know except vaguely where the new stars lived, but he had noticed that on the folder were typewritten several dozen names and addresses with pencilled checks after each.

"Of course you can't be sure anybody's at home," he said, "they might be working in the studios."

"We understand that." The lady glanced at Pat's car, glanced away. "We'd better go in our motor."

"Sure."

Pat got up in front with the chauffeur—trying to think fast. The actor who spoke to him most pleasantly was Ronald Colman—they had never exchanged more than conventional salutations but he might pretend that he was calling to interest Colman in a story.

Better still, Colman was probably not at home and Pat might wangle his clients an inside glimpse of the house. Then the process might be repeated at Robert Young's house and Young Doug's and Melvyn Douglas'. By that time the lady would have forgotten Gable and the afternoon would be over.

He looked at Ronald Colman's address on the folder and gave the direction to the chauffeur.

"We know a woman who had her picture taken with George Brent," said the lady as they started off, "Mrs Horace J. Ives, Jr."

"She's our neighbour," said her husband. "She lives at 372 Rose Drive in Kansas City. And we live at 327."

"She had her picture taken with George Brent. We always wondered if she had to pay for it. Of course I don't know that I'd want to go so far as THAT. I don't know what they'd say back home."

"I don't think we want to go as far as all that," agreed her husband.

"Where are we going first?" asked the lady, cosily.

"Well, I had a couple calls to pay anyhow," said Pat. "I got to see Ronald Colman about something."

"Oh, he's one of my favourites. Do you know him well?"

"Oh yes," said Pat, "I'm not in this business regularly. I'm just doing it today for a friend. I'm a writer."

Sure in the knowledge that not so much as a trio of picture writers were known to the public he named himself as the author of several recent successes.

"That's very interesting," said the man, "I knew a writer once—this Upton Sinclair or Sinclair Lewis. Not a bad fellow even if he was a socialist."

"Why aren't you writing a picture now?" asked the lady.

"Well, you see we're on strike," Pat invented. "We got a thing called the Screen Playwriters' Guild and we're on strike."

"Oh." His clients stared with suspicion at this emissary of Stalin in the front seat of their car.

"What are you striking for?" asked the man uneasily.

Pat's political development was rudimentary. He hesitated.

"Oh, better living conditions," he said finally, "free pencils and paper, I don't know—it's all in the Wagner Act." After a moment he added vaguely, "Recognize Finland."

"I didn't know writers had unions," said the man. "Well, if you're on strike who writes the movies?"

"The producers," said Pat bitterly. "That's why they're so lousy."

"Well, that's what I would call an odd state of things."

They came in sight of Ronald Colman's house and Pat swallowed uneasily. A shining new roadster sat out in front.

"I better go in first," he said. "I mean we wouldn't want to come in on any—on any family scene or anything."

"Does he have family scenes?" asked the lady eagerly.

"Oh, well, you know how people are," said Pat with charity. "I think I ought to see how things are first."

The car stopped. Drawing a long breath Pat got out. At the same moment the door of the house opened and Ronald Colman hurried down the walk. Pat's heart missed a beat as the actor glanced in his direction.

"Hello Pat," he said. Evidently he had no notion that Pat was a caller for he jumped into his car and the sound of his motor drowned out Pat's responses as he drove away.

"Well, he called you 'Pat'," said the woman impressed.

"I guess he was in a hurry," said Pat. "But maybe we could see his house."

He rehearsed a speech going up the walk. He had just spoken to his friend Mr Colman, and received permission to look around.

But the house was shut and locked and there was no answer to the bell. He would have to try Melvyn Douglas whose salutations, on second thought, were a little warmer than Ronald Colman's. At any rate his clients' faith in him was now firmly founded. The "Hello, Pat," rang confidently in their ears; by proxy they were already inside the charmed circle.

"Now let's try Clark Gable's," said the lady. "I'd like to tell Carole Lombard about her hair."

The lese majesty made Pat's stomach wince. Once in a crowd he had met Clark Gable but he had no reason to believe that Mr Gable remembered.

"Well, we could try Melvyn Douglas' first and then Bob Young or else Young Doug. They're all on the way. You see Gable and Lombard live away out in the St Joaquin valley."

"Oh," said the lady, disappointed, "I did want to run up and see their bedroom. Well then, our next choice would be Shirley Temple." She looked at her little dog. "I know that would be Boojie's choice too."

"They're kind of afraid of kidnappers," said Pat.

Ruffled, the man produced his business card and handed it to Pat.

DEERING R. ROBINSON
Vice President and Chairman
of the Board
Robdeer Food Products

"Does THAT sound as if I want to kidnap Shirley Temple?"

"They just have to be sure," said Pat apologetically. "After we go to Melvyn—"

"No—let's see Shirley Temple's now," insisted the woman. "Really! I told you in the first place what I wanted."

Pat hesitated.

"First I'll have to stop in some drugstore and phone about it."

In a drugstore he exchanged some of the five dollars for a half pint of gin and took two long swallows behind a high counter, after which he considered the situation. He could, of course, duck Mr and Mrs Robinson immediately—after all he had produced Ronald Colman, with sound, for their five smackers. On the other hand they just MIGHT catch Miss Temple on her way in or out—and for a pleasant day at Santa Anita tomorrow Pat

needed five smackers more. In the glow of the gin his courage mounted, and returning to the limousine he gave the chauffeur the address.

But approaching the Temple house his spirit quailed as he saw that there was a tall iron fence and an electric gate. And didn't guides have to have a licence?

"Not here," he said quickly to the chauffeur. "I made a mistake. I think it's the next one, or two or three doors further on."

He decided on a large mansion set in an open lawn and stopping the chauffeur got out and walked up to the door. He was temporarily licked but at least he might bring back some story to soften them—say, that Miss Temple had mumps. He could point out her sick-room from the walk.

There was no answer to his ring but he saw that the door was partly ajar. Cautiously he pushed it open. He was staring into a deserted living room on the baronial scale. He listened. There was no one about, no footsteps on the upper floor, no murmur from the kitchen. Pat took another pull at the gin. Then swiftly he hurried back to the limousine.

"She's at the studio," he said quickly. "But if we're quiet we can look at their living-room."

Eagerly the Robinsons and Boojie disembarked and followed him. The living-room might have been Shirley Temple's, might have been one of many in Hollywood. Pat saw a doll in a corner and pointed at it, whereupon Mrs Robinson picked it up, looked at it reverently and showed it to Boojie who sniffed indifferently.

"Could I meet Mrs Temple?" she asked.

"Oh, she's out—nobody's home," Pat said—unwisely.

"Nobody. Oh—then Boojie would so like a wee little peep at her bedroom."

Before he could answer she had run up the stairs. Mr Robinson followed and Pat waited uneasily in the hall, ready to depart at the sound either of an arrival outside or a commotion above.

He finished the bottle, disposed of it politely under a sofa cushion and then deciding that the visit upstairs was tempting fate too far, he went after his clients. On the stairs he heard Mrs Robinson.

"But there's only ONE child's bedroom. I thought Shirley had brothers."

A window on the winding staircase looked upon the street, and glancing out Pat saw a large car drive up to the curb. From it stepped a Hollywood celebrity who, though not one of those pursued by Mrs Robinson, was second to none in prestige and power. It was old Mr Marcus, the producer, for whom Pat Hobby had been press agent twenty years ago.

At this point Pat lost his head. In a flash he pictured an elaborate explanation as to what he was doing here. He would not be forgiven. His occasional weeks in the studio at two-fifty would now disappear altogether and another finis would be written to his almost entirely finished career. He left, impetuously and swiftly—down the stairs, through the kitchen and out the back gate, leaving the Robinsons to their destiny.

Vaguely he was sorry for them as he walked quickly along the next boulevard. He could see Mr Robinson producing his card as the head of Robdeer Food Products. He could see Mr Marcus' scepticism, the arrival of the police, the frisking of Mr and Mrs Robinson.

Probably it would stop there—except that the Robinsons would be furious at him for his imposition. They would tell the police where they had picked him up.

Suddenly he went ricketing down the street, beads of gin breaking out profusely on his forehead. He had left his car beside Gus Venske's umbrella. And now he remembered another recognizing clue and hoped that Ronald Colman didn't know his last name.