

The Hustler

Written by Sydney Carroll and Robert Rossen
Based on the novel by Walter Tevis

Main Characters

Eddie Felson

A pool player and, on occasion, a “hustler.” As a pool player he is of champion class. As a hustler, he frequents bars where, by concealing his real skill, he can tempt amateurs to play him for high stakes. Eddie’s obsession is to challenge the reigning champion of pool, the great Minnesota Fats. Having collected a stake of a couple of thousand dollars, Eddie and his partner have driven their old car all the way from Oakland in California to challenge Fats in a famous Mid-Western establishment, Ames Pool hall.

Charlie

Eddie’s partner, his friend and manager of his finances, which frequently means his accomplice in the confidence trick of a hustle. Charlie is considerably older than Eddie and is clearly devoted to the younger man, but he has reached an age where his goal is simply to win enough money to buy a small pool hall of his own where he can add to his income as a bookmaker. Charlie is, in this sense, one of life’s losers, having adjusted himself to very limited ambitions.

Minnesota Fats

The champion. A complete professional, he takes enormous pride in his skills and, as the master, has some respect for his young challenger. He is not, however, as independent a spirit as Eddie because of his association with...

Bert Gordon

A professional gambler. He makes money betting on his own skills at poker. He bets on the horses, but also makes wagers on pool games, bankrolling Fats for a major cut of the champion’s winnings. Without skills of his own, Bert is an exploiter of the talents of other men. Winning is everything, as far as Bert is concerned. His relationship with Eddie has some slightly perverse overtones. He needs to “own” the younger man.

Sarah

A sensitive and intelligent young woman who falls in love with Eddie. She is lame, and her physical handicap is in some senses the visible symbol of other psychological handicaps. She is desperately insecure, has a drinking problem and a slightly pathetic habit of telling very innocent lies about herself, her background and her loneliness. She has, however, few illusions about Eddie, and recognises at once the malicious and dangerous streak in Bert. In her self-hatred and self-pity, she is the epitome of the loser.

1) GAS STATION, A SMALL TOWN

EDDIE and CHARLIE, driving an old Packard, stop at the gas station. A repair will take thirty minutes. CHARLIE goes ahead into the bar. EDDIE follows.

The BARTENDER starts up a conversation. CHARLIE explains they are passing through on their way to Pittsburgh, to a druggist sales convention. EDDIE is a star salesman, going to get an award. He sold seventeen thousand dollars' worth of drugs. They buy the BARTENDER a drink and decide to wait out the mid-day heat before driving on. EDDIE suggests to CHARLIE they play a couple of games of pool. EDDIE seems to have lost money to CHARLIE before.

Later. EDDIE is a little drunk by now. He has lost seventy bucks to CHARLIE. Some of the townsfolk are sitting round, watching the game. EDDIE makes an obviously lucky shot and, on the strength of it, offers to make a twenty-dollar bet with CHARLIE that he can't repeat it. CHARLIE refuses because EDDIE is drunk. He tries to get EDDIE to quit and leave. EDDIE, belligerent, repeats his offer. The BARTENDER, certain that EDDIE is incapably drunk, offers to take the bet and is taunted by EDDIE into raising the stake. Another BYSTANDER also offers to wager money, but EDDIE, unsteady on his feet, insists he wants to bet with the BARTENDER. The BARMAN takes the money out of the till. Abruptly sober, EDDIE makes the almost impossible shot with ease and reaches for the money.

Outside in the car, EDDIE tosses the wallet to CHARLIE so that he can count their winnings. The con game is clearly a routine.

2) AMES POOL HALL

EDDIE and CHARLIE enter the huge pool hall. It is empty. Two hangers-on, BIG JOHN and PREACHER, watch the strangers with suspicion. EDDIE comments on the atmosphere: "Like a church, the Church of the Good Hustler." No bar? "No," says the cashier. "No bar, no pinball machines, no bowling alleys. Just pool. Nothing else. This is Ames, mister."

EDDIE starts to play. The hangers-on are impressed. They ask his name. Eddie Felson? EDDIE admits that's him. Sure, he's come to challenge Minnesota Fats. BIG JOHN offers advice to CHARLIE: "Take your boy home. Nobody has ever beaten Minnesota Fats." EDDIE, confident, asks where Fats can be found. "Don't worry. He's here every night. He'll find you," says BIG JOHN.

Later. Punctually, at 8 o'clock, MINNESOTA FATS makes a ritual entrance. He is an obvious champion. EDDIE and FATS introduce themselves, each knowing the reputation of the other. Two hundred dollars a game! EDDIE breaks, apparently leaving nothing on the table for FATS to pocket. "You left enough," says Fats, and begins to clear the table. Watching, EDDIE clearly idolizes his rival. "That old fat man, he's great!"

Later still. EDDIE has a particularly difficult shot. The large crowd is tense. EDDIE makes the shot. The crowd claps. FATS joins in the applause.

Two more bridge scenes. FATS dominates the play now.

One-thirty in the morning. As they watch, CHARLIE advises EDDIE to quit. FATS is too good. EDDIE insists he knows he can take FATS. Confidant, EDDIE moves into the lead, telling FATS, “I dreamed of this game, Fat Man. I dreamed of this game every night on the road. You know this is my table, man. I own it.”

Two-thirty in the morning. EDDIE is winning, the crowd on his side now. CHARLIE tells him that they are about a thousand dollars ahead, EDDIE, triumphant, suggests that they now play a thousand dollars a game. FATS hesitates. Then he sends PREACHER for some whisky and accepts the challenge. EDDIE orders a bottle of rye. They take off their coats now.

Having bought the liquor in the outer bar, PREACHER slips through a door into a back room. Here a poker game is in progress. PREACHER approaches a man wearing a conservative business suit and dark glasses. In contrast to the other players at the table, he is sipping a glass of milk. This is BERT GORDON. PREACHER whispers in his ear. Cashing in his chips, BERT leaves the game to follow PREACHER.

Back in the pool hall. Early morning. CHARLIE is chain-smoking. FATS is tired and misses a shot. BERT watches EDDIE.

Eight in the morning. Both men drinking. BERT, betting against EDDIE, is paying CHARLIE.

EDDIE finds BERT irritating. EDDIE and CHARLIE have won eleven thousand dollars lay now. CHARLIE wants to call it quits. EDDIE says the game is not over till FATS says it’s over, FATS, deliberately provoked by EDDIE, doesn’t answer.

EDDIE realizes that it is BERT who makes the decision whether FATS will continue or not. EDDIE confronts BERT. “Stay with this kid,” BERT advises FATS. “He’s a loser.” EDDIE is stung. “What did he say?”

Night again. They have been playing twenty-five hours straight. EDDIE and CHARLIE are eighteen thousand dollars ahead. CHARLIE wants to stop the game. EDDIE is now drunk and objectionable, insisting that the game is stopped only when FATS admits he’s beaten. EDDIE and CHARLIE quarrel. EDDIE suggests that CHARLIE leave the winnings and go home. “Okay, be a damn fool,” says CHARLIE.

Later. FATS is shooting, now winning, EDDIE is asleep. Even BERT is dozing. CHARLIE wakes EDDIE to inform him that they are still losing. All they have left is two hundred dollars. “The game’s over,” announces FATS. EDDIE pleads. “Fats, look I got about two hundred dollars here. You can’t run out on me.” FATS pays the stake money to BERT, saying, “You watch me.” He leaves. EDDIE is exhausted and physically collapses onto the floor.

3) CHEAP HOTEL ROOM

CHARLIE asleep in the next bed. EDDIE leaves him some money as he packs his things and whispers, "I'm sorry, Charlie."

4) BUS STATION

EDDIE puts his baggage in a coin-operated locker. In the coffee shop he talks to SARAH, who is waiting for a bus. EDDIE orders coffee before slipping off to sleep. SARAH prevents the WAITRESS from waking him and pays for his coffee. When EDDIE wakes, the WAITRESS tells him, "It was paid for by the lady."

5) BAR

Later. EDDIE discovers SARAH in a booth. She's drinking. He joins her and they resume their conversation. Did she miss the bus? SARAH admits she wasn't waiting for a bus. She lives a few blocks away, an insomniac who drinks alone in the early hours. She used to be an actress, now she goes to college two days a week. "What do you do on other days?" "I drink." SARAH announces that she is getting sleepy. EDDIE offers to walk her home. As she gets up, she stumbles. "It's alright. I'm not drunk... I'm lame." EDDIE realizes that she is slightly crippled. Uncomfortable, he follows her. En route to her apartment they pass a liquor store. EDDIE goes inside, reappearing with a bottle. Outside her front door he makes a pass at her. "Why me?" she asks. He kisses her. "No," she says. "You're too hungry." EDDIE gives her the bottle and walks away.

6) FLOPHOUSE

Eddie books in for one night only, paying in advance. He retrieves his bag from the coin-operated locker.

Later. Eddie trying to hustle pool in bars. They saw him play Minnesota Fats and know who he is. In another bar he makes a few dollars.

7) BUS STATION

EDDIE is drinking in the empty coffee shop. Presently, SARAH appears. She approaches him. Neither speaks. He puts his arm around her waist and takes the bottle. EDDIE leads her out.

8) SARAH'S APARTMENT

Eddie in his underclothes is in the bed, Sarah in her robe. "Eddie, look. I've got troubles, and I think maybe you've got troubles. Maybe it would be better if we just leave each other alone." EDDIE shakes his head. "I have my things over at the hotel. I'll bring them over later." He kisses her with tenderness.

Later. SARAH buys food at the neighboring grocery store. She seems happy. Back in her apartment SARAH finds EDDIE. Where has she been? At school.

A love scene. They are finding out about each other. SARAH studies the pool cue. EDDIE wants to know where she gets the money for groceries. "From a rich old man who used to be my lover," she tells him.

A knock at the door. It is CHARLIE, who wants EDDIE to go back on the road again. "What kind of life have you got here? Scuffling around the small rooms picking up eight, ten bucks a day." They could even take "Eddie's girl" along. EDDIE reveals his obsession: he's going to get enough together to beat Fats. EDDIE discovers that CHARLIE has money, some of the money they won. CHARLIE insists that it was only his percentage, 25% of the winnings. EDDIE is furious. With that he could have beaten Fats. Savagely, EDDIE tells CHARLIE he's nothing but small time. He would keep EDDIE hustling till he has won enough to buy a little pool hall, then say goodbye to him. Brutally, he rejects his friend "Lay down and die by yourself. Don't take me with you."

SARAH is witness to the scene and distressed by it. As CHARLIE leaves them, EDDIE comments, "Boy! Everybody wants a piece of me!" SARAH pours herself a stiff drink.

9) SARAH'S APARTMENT

Later. SARAH is drunk. EDDIE cleans up the room, angry. He goes out for a while. Later still, EDDIE discovers her typing. He reads what she has written. "What is that supposed to mean? 'We have a contract of depravity. All we have to do is pull the blinds down.'" They quarrel. "We're strangers," says SARAH. "What happens when the liquor and the money run out, Eddie? You told Charlie to lay down and die. Will you say that to me too?" EDDIE's retort: "You'll find yourself another rich old lover." "That's right," she replies, "and I'm sure you'll help me." He slaps her face. "You waiting for me to cry?" she asks.

10) JOHNNIE'S BAR

EDDIE joins a poker game in which BERT is playing. BERT is drinking milk, as earlier. After the game, at the bar, BERT orders whiskey. They discuss the game with Fats. BERT explains EDDIE's failure: "Everybody's got talent. I got talent. You think you can play big money straight pool, or poker, for forty straight hours on nothing but talent? You think they call Minnesota Fats the best in the country just because he's got talent? No... Minnesota Fats has got more character in one finger than you've got in your whole skinny body. Eddie, you're a born loser. You got drunk. That's the best excuse in the world for losing. No trouble losing when you got a good excuse. Winning! That can be a heavy load on your back too. You can drop that load too when you feel sorry for yourself. All you gotta do is learn to feel sorry for yourself. A sport enjoyed by all, especially born losers." When EDDIE starts to walk away, BERT stops him with a proposition. BERT will back EDDIE for seventy-five percent of the money if EDDIE wins. EDDIE turns him down. BERT warns him: "Walk into the wrong kind of place and they'll eat you alive."

11) WATERFRONT

Searching for a pool hall where he is not known, EDDIE enters a waterfront bar and introduces himself to a group of young men. One of them is a younger pool shark. The YOUNG MAN is insolent. Irked, EDDIE proposes ten bucks a game and wins with insulting ease. The onlookers, including losers, now recognize Eddie as a shark. Led by TURK, a bully, they drag EDDIE in the men's washroom and beat him up.

12) SARAH'S APARTMENT

EDDIE comes back to her. He is crying. They have broken his thumbs. She embraces him.

Later, EDDIE is unable to use his hands, which are in plaster. He is dependent on SARAH. Later still, SARAH is writing. She looks more attractive, more confident. Some tenderness is developing between them. They bring a picnic lunch to the riverbank. EDDIE tells her about BERT. "Am I a loser?" he asks. EDDIE examines his failures. "I coulda beat that guy. I coulda beat him cold. He never woulda known. But I just had to show 'em. I had to show those creeps and punks what the game is like when it's great, when it's really great. Anything can be great. I don't care. Bricklaying can be great. If a guy knows what he's doing and why." SARAH: "You're not a loser, Eddie. You're a winner. Some men never get to feel that way about anything... I love you, Eddie."

Later, EDDIE returns from the doctor to the apartment with the casts off his hands.

13) JOHNNIE'S BAR

BERT finds EDDIE, comments on the injured hands. EDDIE is now ready to accept BERT's deal. "A twenty-five slice of something big is better than a hundred per cent of nothing." In celebration, EDDIE takes SARAH out to dinner. She is wearing a new dress, a present from EDDIE. EDDIE is also smarter, wearing a collar and tie. After the meal he tells her he is going away for a while. She leaves the restaurant, He runs after her. It has started to rain. Refusing to wait for a taxi, she insists on walking home in the downpour. Back at the apartment she is still in great distress. EDDIE tries to reassure her. He explains that BERT has arranged for him to go to Kentucky to play pool with somebody called FINDLEY. "You're hustling me, Eddie. You never stopped hustling me." EDDIE: "No, I never hustled you. Even when I thought I was. And you know it." She is scared of his leaving. "I made you up, didn't I Eddie? You weren't real. I made you up, like everything else. There was no car crash, Eddie. When I was five I had polio. I never was an actress. The rich old man is my father. He walked out on us when I was seven. He gives me a check every month. That's how he buys his way out of my life. I'm so scared Eddie. I'm scared."

14) STREET

EDDIE brings SARAH out, introducing her to BERT GORDON. She is coming on the trip with them. On the train, BERT is polite to SARAH, but his antagonism is barely concealed. He knows how to make her insecure. Later, BERT explains that they are on their way to meet FINDLEY, a rich gentleman gambler. The plan is for EDDIE to play him for high stakes. FINDLEY, he comments, is a loser, an all-the-way loser. "You happen to be only about one-half loser, one-half winner."

BERT, EDDIE, and SARAH review EDDIE's losing games with Fats. "When Fats went back to the john, he washed his face, cleaned his fingernails, made his mind a blank, combed his hair and came back all ready to go. You were through. You were waiting to get beat. Flattened out on your butt, swimming around in glory, and whisky, and probably deciding how you could lose." SARAH: "What makes you know so much? How do you know what Eddie was thinking?" "I know," says BERT. "I've been there myself. We've all been there, haven't we, Miss Packard?" BERT's needling of SARAH becomes more obvious.

15) BIG HOTEL IN LOUISVILLE

BERT bribes the concierge to get them a suite with adjoining rooms. Upstairs, alone with SARAH, BERT advises her that if they try to cut each other up, it will be bad for everybody, including Eddie. SARAH: "You know what's good for him?" "To win." "For whom and for what?" BERT: "For money, and for glory. Today for me, tomorrow for himself." But SARAH rejects this. "No, there's no tomorrow. Not with you. You own all the tomorrows because you buy them today. And you buy them cheap." BERT: "Nobody has to sell. Listen, ladybird, you're here on a rain check and I know it, so don't make trouble. Live and let live, while you can."

Downstairs. BERT introduces FINDLEY. The challenge is made, the time is set. FINDLEY invites the three of them to a party. FINDLEY and BERT can play later. SARAH is now drinking.

16) FINDLEY'S HOUSE

A big crowd. Much noise, many attractive and available women. Dixieland music. SARAH, watching the dancers, is drinking heavily. BERT studies her lecherously. He whispers something to her that offends her. She throws her drink over him and begins to cry. EDDIE appears. What happened? Nothing, says Bert, just a little too much to drink. Upstairs, SARAH is taken to a bedroom. She has passed out on the bed. EDDIE comes to look at her and walks out again.

Basement billiards room. The guests are gone and FINDLEY is with EDDIE and BERT. EDDIE has never played billiards before. FINDLEY raises the stakes. BERT uncertain. He didn't ask if Eddie could beat FINDLEY. "I already know he can beat you," he says to FINDLEY. "I asked will he? With Eddie, that's two different things." Later. EDDIE loses. BERT insists they leave. "The night is two thousand dollars old." Angry, EDDIE insists he will gamble with his own money and goes upstairs. SARAH is still unconscious. EDDIE finds her purse and takes money from it. Downstairs, SARAH, sobered up, joins them. EDDIE tells her that he's broke. FINDLEY has beaten him, though only by one point. EDDIE begs BERT to lend him money. SARAH is angered at his begging. He tells her to take a cab back to the hotel. SARAH, in an emotional outburst, denounces BERT to EDDIE. "That's Turk!" (pointing to Bert), "the man who broke your thumbs. Only he's not going to break your thumbs. He'll break your heart, your guts. And for the same reason: because he hates you, because of what you are. Because of what you have and he hasn't." EDDIE, furious, yells at her. "Once and for all, will you get out! Get off my back!" SARAH leaves in tears. BERT backs EDDIE to win. "Go ahead and play him, Eddie, for a thousand dollars a game."

Later. EDDIE has won. FINDLEY pays BERT twelve thousand. As they leave FINDLEY's house, BERT gives EDDIE his three thousand. EDDIE wants to walk home. BERT: "You want me to tell her for you?" "Tell her what?" BERT advises: "You gotta be hard, Eddie."

17) BIG HOTEL IN LOUISVILLE

BERT returns to his own room. He is on edge and pours himself a drink, then knocks on the door to the next room, but enters without waiting for an answer. SARAH has her suitcase packed, a drink in her hand. BERT asks why she's leaving and explains that EDDIE told him to give her some money. SARAH tells him to put the money on the bed. "That's the way it's done, isn't it? And the way you're looking at me, is that the way you look at a man you've just beaten? As if you had just taken his money, and now you want his pride. The aristocratic pleasure of seeing him fall apart. You have to win them all." BERT kisses her, then walks out. After a moment, she follows him into his room. "You got a drink?"

Later. BERT asleep. SARAH next to him. She gets out of the bed and goes into the bathroom. With lipstick, she scrawls across the image of herself in the mirror and the word "Perverted, twisted, crippled."

Later. In the hotel lobby there is a policeman at the desk as Eddie collects his key. Upstairs in the room, police photographers are in the bathroom. BERT tells the police to let EDDIE enter. Shaken, BERT tries to explain. "She came in here, Eddie. She asked me for a drink. I give her one. We had a few more." EDDIE attacks BERT and has to be pulled off by the police.

18) AMES POOL HALL

MINNESOTA FATS reacts as EDDIE enters. BERT is present, watchful of EDDIE, who announces: "I came to play pool, Fats. Three thousand dollars a game, Fats. All you gotta do is beat me the first game and I'm on my way to Oakland." FATS wins the break, leaves very little. EDDIE talks to BERT as he prepares to shoot. "How shall I play that one, Bert? Play it safe? That's the way you always told me to play it. Play the percentage. Well, here we go fast and loose." EDDIE begins to clean up the table. As he plays, he addresses BERT. "You were right, Bert. I mean, it's not enough to have talent. You gotta have character too. Four ball. I sure got character now. I picked it up in a hotel room in Louisville."

Later. EDDIE is winning. FATS knows it. BERT watches. Later still, FATS concedes. The money is paid to EDDIE. Now BERT intervenes: "Eddie, you owe me money." The showdown. "How much? Half? In Louisville, it was seventy-five per cent. What if I don't pay ya, Bert?" "You don't pay me? You gonna get your thumbs broken. And your fingers. And if I want them to, your right arm in three or four places." FATS advises: "Better pay him, Eddie." EDDIE seems to consider it and leads BERT on before denouncing him. "I traded her in on a pool game. But that wouldn't mean anything to you. Because who did you ever care about? Just win, win, you said, 'Win, that's the important thing.' You don't know what winning is, Bert. You're a loser. Because you're dead inside, and you can't live unless you make everything else dead around you. Tell your boys they better kill me, Bert. They

better go all the way with me. Because if they just bust me up, I'll put all those pieces back together, and so help me, so help me God, Bert, I'm gonna come back here and I'm gonna kill you." BERT's bodyguards move defensively, but he discourages them, trying to smile. "Okay... alright. Only don't ever walk into a big-time pool hall again." Leaving, EDDIE salutes FATS. "Fat Man, you shoot a great game of pool." Replies FATS: "So do you, Fast Eddie."

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