

By
Geo. Barr
McCutcheon

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A Fool and His Money

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS INSTALLMENTS.

In the opening installments of "A Fool and His Money," Geo. Barr McCutcheon's charming novel, we learn of John Bellamy Smart, the young man who is telling this story. He has just written his first novel, and at the same time has fallen heir to an immense fortune left him by his uncle. Smart takes a trip on the River Danube. He discovers an ancient castle, which he purchases from an Austrian count. With his secretary, Poopendyke, he takes possession. It is supposed to be tenanted only by the caretaker and his family, the Schmicks. Later Smart finds a woman who is in possession of a wing of the castle that is barred to him. She grants a brief interview, but refuses to leave. The servants appear to be in league with her, and Smart is in a quandary. Later he meets her and is captivated by her wit and beauty. He finds that she is divorced from a worthless and scheming Austrian Count, who was awarded the custody of the lady's child. The Count demands a million dollars from his rich American father-in-law, when she would give it up. The mother abducts the child and selects the castle as a hiding place. Smart fears trouble with the authorities, but decides to assist the fair divorcee, although she warns him of the danger. A number of visitors makes it difficult to keep secret the presence of the Countess in the castle. One guest, familiar with the castle, almost comes upon Smart and the Countess unaware. The woman escapes—but slams a door behind her. The visitor suspects Smart of an intrigue with the wife of his valet. Finally the party leaves and Smart is relieved.

"DO YOU MEAN to say, Countess, that—"

"It has all been quite satisfactorily attended to through Mr. Poopendyke," she said. "He consulted me before definitely engaging any one, Mr. Smart, and I referred him to my lawyers in Vienna. I do hope Hawkins and Blatchford and Henri, the chef, are quite satisfactory to you. They were recently employed by some one in the British embassy at—"

"Pray rest easy, Countess," I managed to say, interrupting out of consideration for Hawkes and Blatchford, who, I thought, might feel uncomfortable at hearing themselves discussed so impersonally. "Everything is most satisfactory. I did not realize that I had you to thank for my present mental and gastronomic comfort. You have surrounded me with diadems."

Hawkes and Blatchford very gravely and in unison said: "Thank you, sir."

"And now let us talk about something else," she said complacently, as if the project of getting the rest of her family into the castle were already off her mind. "I can't tell you how much I enjoyed your last book, Mr. Smart. It is so exciting. Why do you call it 'The Fairest of the Fair'?"

"Because my publisher insisted on substituting that title for the one I had chosen myself. I'll admit that it doesn't fit the story, my dear Countess, but what is an author to do when his publisher announces that he has a beautiful head of a girl he wants to put on the cover and that the title must fit the cover, so to speak?"

"But I don't consider it a beautiful head, Mr. Smart. A very flashy blonde with all the earmarks of having posed in the chorus between the days when she posed for your artist. And your heroine has very dark hair in the book. Why did they make her a blonde on the cover?"

"Because they didn't happen to have anything but blonde pictures in stock," said I, cheerfully. "A little thing like that doesn't matter, when it comes to literature, my dear Countess. It isn't the hair that counts. It's the hat."

"But I should think it would confuse the reader," she insisted. "The last picture in the book has her withinky black hair, while in all the others she is quite blonde."

"A really intelligent reader doesn't have to be told that the artist changed his model before he got to the last picture," said I, and I am quite confident she didn't hear me grate my teeth.

"But the critics must have noticed the error and commented upon it."

"My dear Countess, the critics never see the last picture in a book. They are much too clever for that."

She pondered. "I suppose they must get horribly sick of all the books they have to read."

"And they never have a chance to experience the delicious period of convalescence that persons with less chronic afflictions have to look forward to," said I, very gently. "They go from one disease to another, poor chap."

"I once knew an author at Newport who said he hated every critic on earth," she said.

"I should think he might," said I, without hesitation. It was not until the next afternoon that she got the full significance of the remark.

As I never encourage any one who seeks to discuss my stories with me, being a modest chap with a flaw in my vanity, she abandoned the subject after a few ineffectual attempts to find out how I get my plots, how I write my books, and how I keep from losing my mind.

"Would you be entertained by a real mystery?" she asked, leaning toward me with a gleam of excitement in her eyes. Very promptly I said I should be. We were having our coffee. Hawkes and Blatchford had left the

room. "Well, tradition says that one of the old barons buried a vast treasure in the cellar of this—"

"Stop!" I commanded, shaking my head. "Haven't I just said that I don't want to talk about literature? Buried treasure is the very worst form of literature."

"Very well," she said indignantly. "You will be sorry when you hear I've dug it up and made off with it."

I pricked up my ears. This made a difference. "Are you going to hunt for it yourself?"

"I am," she said resolutely.

"In those dark, dank, grewsome cellars?"

"Certainly."

"Alone?"

"If necessary," she said, looking at me over the edge of the coffee cup.

"Tell me all about it," said I.

"Oh, we shan't find it, of course," said she calmly. I made note of the pronoun. "They've been searching for it for two centuries without success. My—that is, Mr. Pless has spent days down there. He is very hard-up, you know. It would come in very handy for him."

I glowered. "I'm glad he's gone, I don't like the idea of his looking for treasures in my castle."

She gave me a smile for that.

CHAPTER X.

I Agree to Meet the Enemy.

THAT NIGHT I dreamed of going down, down, down into the bowels of the earth after buried treasure, and finding at the end of my hours of travel the countess' mother sitting in bleak splendor on a chest of gold with her feet drawn up and surrounded by an audience of spiders.

For an hour or more after leaving the enchanted rooms near the roof, I lounged in my study, persistently attentive to the portrait of Ludwig the Red, with my ears straining for sounds from the other side of the secret panels. Alas! those panels were many cubits thick and as staunch as the sides of a battleship. But there was a vast satisfaction in knowing that she was there, asleep perhaps, with her brown head pillowed close to the wall but little more than an arm's length from the crimson waistcoat of Ludwig the Red—for he sat rather low like a Chinese god and supported his waistcoat with his knees. A gross, forbidding chap was he! The story was told of him that he could quaff a flagon of ale at a single gulp. Looking at his portrait, one could not help thinking what a pitifully infinitesimal thing a flagon of ale is after all.

Morning came and with a sullen determination to get down to work on my long neglected novel, I went down to breakfast. Everything about the place looked bleak and dreary and as gray as a granite tombstone. Hawkes, who but twelve hours before had seemed the embodiment of life in its most resilient form, now appeared as a drab nemesis with wooden legs and a frozen leer. My coffee was bitter, the peaches were like sponges, the bacon and rolls of uniform soggy and the eggs of a strange liverish hue. I sat there alone, gloomy and depressed, contrasting the hateful sunshine with the soft, witching refuge of twenty-four candles and the light that lies in a woman's eyes.

"A fine morning, sir," said Hawkes in a voice that seemed to come from the grave. It was the first time I had ever heard him speak so dolorously of the morning. Ordinarily he was a pleasant voiced fellow.

"Is it?" said I, and my voice sounded gloomier than his. I was not sure of it, but it seemed to me that he made a movement with his hand as if about to put it to his lips. Seeing that I was regarding him rather fixedly, he allowed it to remain suspended a little above his hip, quite on a line with the

other one. His elbows were crooked at the proper angle I noticed, so I must have been doing him an injustice. He couldn't have had anything disrespectful in mind.

"Send Mr. Poopendyke to me, Hawkes, immediately after I've finished my breakfast."

"Very good, sir. Oh, I beg pardon, sir. I am forgetting, Mr. Poopendyke is out. He asked me to tell you he wouldn't return before eleven."

"Out? What business has he to be out?"

"Well, sir, I mean to say, he's not precisely out, and he isn't just what one would call in. He is up in the—ahem!—the east wing, sir, taking down some correspondence for the—for the lady, sir."

I arose to the occasion. "Quite so, quite so. I had forgotten the appointment."

"Yes, sir, I thought you had."

"Ahem! I daresay Britton will do quite as well. Tell him to—"

"Britton, sir, has gone over to the city for the newspapers. You forget that he goes every morning as soon as he has had his—"

"Yes, yes! Certainly," I said hastily. "The papers. Ha, ha! Quite right."

It was news to me, but it wouldn't do to let him know it. The countess read the papers, I did not. I steadfastly persisted in ignoring the Paris edition of the New York Herald for fear that the delightful mystery might disintegrate, so to speak, before my eyes, or become the commonplace scandal that all the world was enjoying. As it stood now, I had it all to myself—that is to say, the mystery. Mr. Poopendyke reads aloud the baseball scores to me, and nothing else.

It was nearly twelve when my secretary reported to me on this particular morning, and he seemed a trifle hazy as to the results of the games. After he had mumbled something about rain or wet grounds, I coldly enquired: "Mr. Poopendyke, are you employed by me or by that woman upstairs?" I would never have spoken of her as "that woman," believe me, if I had not been in a state of irritation.

He looked positively stunned. "Sir?" he gasped.

I did not repeat the question, but managed to demand rather fiercely:

"Are you?"

"The countess had got dreadfully behind with her work, sir, and I thought you wouldn't mind if I helped her out a bit," he explained nervously.

"Work? What work?"

"Her diary, sir. She is keeping a diary."

"Indeed!"

"It is very interesting, Mr. Smart. Rather beats any novel I've read lately. We—we've brought it quite up to date. I wrote at least three pages about the dinner last night. If I am to believe what she puts into her diary, it must have been a delightful occasion, as the newspapers would say."

I was somewhat mollified. "What did she have to say about it, Fred?" I asked. It always pleased him to be called Fred.

"That would be betraying a confidence," said he. "I will say this much, however: I think I wrote your name fifty times or more in connection with it."

"Rubbish!" said I.

"Not at all!" said he, with agreeable spirit.

A sudden chill came over me. "She isn't figuring on having it published, is she?"

"I can't say as to that," was his disquieting reply. "It wasn't any of my business, so I didn't ask."

"Oh," said I, "I see."

"I think it is safe to assume, however, that it is not meant for publication," said he. "It strikes me as being a bit too personal. There are parts

of it that I don't believe she'd dare to put into print, although she reeled them off to me without so much as a blush. 'Pon my soul, Mr. Smart, I never was so embarrassed in my life. She—"

"Never mind," I interrupted hastily. "Don't tell tales out of school."

He was silent for a moment, fingering his big eye-glasses nervously. "It may please you to know that she thinks you are an exceedingly nice man."

"No, it doesn't!" I roared irascibly. "I'm damned if I like being called an exceedingly nice man."

"They were my words, sir, not hers," he explained desperately. "I was merely putting two and two together—forming an opinion from her manner not from her words. She is very particular to mention everything you do for her, and thanks me if I call her attention to anything she may have forgotten. She certainly appreciates your kindness to the baby."

"That is extremely gratifying," said I acidly.

He hesitated once more. "Of course, you understand that the divorce itself is absolute. It's only the matter of the child that remains unsettled. The—"

I fairly barked at him. "What the devil do you mean by that, sir? What has the divorce got to do with it?"

"A great deal, I should say," said he, with the rare, almost superhuman patience that has made him so valuable to me.

"Upon my soul!" was all that I could say.

Hawkes rapped on the door luckily at that instance.

"The men from the telephone company are here, sir, and the electricians. Where are they to begin, sir?"

"Tell them to wait," said I. Then I hurried to the top of the east wing to ask if she had the least objection to an extension 'phone being placed in my study. She thought it would be very nice, so I returned with instructions for the men to put in three instruments—one in her room, one in mine and one in the butler's pantry. It seemed a very jolly arrangement all 'round. As for the electric bell system, it would speak for itself.

Toward the middle of the afternoon when Mr. Poopendyke and I were hard at work on my synopsis we were startled by a dull, mysterious pounding on the wall hard by. We paused to listen. It was quite impossible to locate the sound, which ceased almost immediately. Our first thought was that the telephone men were drilling a hole through the wall into my study. Then came the sharp rat-a-tat once more. Even as we looked about us in bewilderment, the portly facade of Ludwig the Red moved out of alignment with a heart-rending squeak and a long thin streak of black appeared at the inner edge of the frame, growing wider—and blacker if anything—before our startled eyes.

"Are you at home?" inquired a voice that couldn't by any means have emanated from the chest of Ludwig, even in his mellowest hours.

I leaped to my feet and started across the room with great strides. My secretary's eyes were glued to the magic portrait. His fingers, looking like claws, hung suspended over the keyboard of the typewriter.

"By the Lord Harry!" I cried.

"Yes!"

The secret door swung quietly open, laying Ludwig's face to the wall, and in the aperture stood my amazing neighbor, as lovely a portrait as you'd see in a year's trip through all the galleries in the world. She was smiling down upon us from the slightly elevated position, a charming figure in the very latest Parisian hat and gown. Something gray and black and exceedingly chic. I remember saying to Poopendyke afterwards in response to a question of his:

(To be continued.)