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A Fool and His Money

CHAPTER I

I MAKE NO EFFORT TO DEFEND MYSELF.

I AM quite sure it was my Uncle Rilas who said that I was a fool. If memory serves me well he relieved himself of that conviction in the presence of my mother—whose brother he was—at a time when I was least competent to acknowledge his wisdom and most arrogant in asserting my own. I was a freshman in college: a fact—or condition, perhaps—which should serve as an excuse for both of us. I possessed another uncle, incidentally, and while I am now convinced that he must have felt as Uncle Rilas did about it, he was one of those who suffer in silence. The nearest he ever got to openly resenting me as a freshman was when he admitted, as if it were a crime, that he too had been in college and knew less when he came away than when he entered. Which is a mild way of putting it, I am sure, considering the fact that he remained there for 23 years as a distinguished member of the faculty.

I assume, therefore, that it was Uncle Rilas who orally convicted me, an assumption justified to some extent by putting me and two together after the poor old gentleman was laid away for his long sleep. He had been very emphatic in his belief that a fool and his money are soon parted. Up to the time of his death I had been in no way qualified to dispute this ancient theory. In theory, no doubt, I was the kind of a fool he referred to, but in practice I was quite an untried novice. It is very hard for even a fool to part with something he hasn't got. True, I parted with the little I had at college with noteworthy promptness about the middle of each term, but that could hardly have been called a fair test for the adage. Not until Uncle Rilas died and left me all of his money was I able to demonstrate that only dead men and fools part with it. The distinction lies in the capacity for enjoyment while the sensation lasts. Dead men part with it because they have to, fools because they want to.

In any event, Uncle Rilas did not leave me his money until my freshman days were far behind me, wherein lies the solace that he may have outgrown an opinion while I was going through the same process. At 23 I confessed that all freshmen were insufferable, and immediately afterward took my degree and went out into the world to convince it that seniors are by no means adolescent. Having successfully passed the age of reason, I too felt myself successfully qualified to look with scorn upon all creatures employed in the business of getting an education. There were times when I wondered how on earth I could have stooped so low as to be a freshman. I still have the disquieting fear that my uncle did not modify his opinion of me until I was thoroughly over being a senior. You will note that I do not say he changed his opinion. Modify is the word.

His original opinion of me, as a freshman, of course—was uttered when I, at the age of 18, picked out my walk in life, so to speak. After considering everything, I decided to be a literary man. A novelist or a playwright. I hadn't much of a choice between the two, or perhaps a journalist. Being a journalist, of course, was preliminary; a sort of makeshift. At any rate, I was going to be a writer. My Uncle Rilas, a hard headed customer who had read Scott as a boy and the Wall Street news as a man—without being misled by either—was scornful. He said that I would outgrow it, there was some consolation in that. He even admitted that when he was 17 he wanted to be an actor. There you are, said he! I declared there was a great difference between being an actor and being a writer. Only handsome men can be actors, while I—well, by nature I was doomed to be nothing more engaging than a novelist, who doesn't have to spoil an illusion by showing himself in public.

Besides, I argued, novelists make a great deal of money, and playwrights too, for that matter. He said in reply that an ordinarily vigorous washerwoman could make more money than the average novelist, and she always had a stocking without a hole to keep it in, which was more to the point.

Now that I come to think of it, it was Uncle Rilas who oracularly prejudged me, and not Uncle John, who was by way of being a sort of literary

chap himself and therefore lamentably unqualified to guide me in any course whatsoever, especially as he had all he could do to keep his own wolf at bay without encouraging mine, and who, besides teaching good English, loved it wisely and too well. I think Uncle Rilas would have held Uncle John up to me as an example—a scarecrow, you might say—if it hadn't been for the fact that he loved him in spite of his English. He must have loved me in spite of mine.

My mother felt in her heart that I ought to be a doctor or a preacher, but she wasn't mean; she was positive I could succeed as a writer if I set my mind to it. She was also sure that I could be president of the United States or perhaps even a bishop. We were Episcopalian.

When I was 27 my first short story appeared in a magazine of considerable weight, due to its advertising pages, but my Uncle Rilas didn't read it until I had convinced him that the honorarium amounted to three hundred dollars. Even then I was obliged to promise him a glimpse of the check when I got it. Somewhat belated, it came in the course of three or four months with a rather tart letter in which I was given to understand that it wasn't quite the thing to pester a great publishing house with queries of the kind I had been so persistent in propounding. But at last Uncle Rilas saw the check and was properly impressed. He took back what he had said about the washerwoman, but gave me a little further advice concerning the stocking.

In course of time my first novel appeared. It was a love story. Uncle Rilas read the first five chapters and then skipped over to the last page. Then he began it all over again and sat up nearly all night to finish it. The next day he called it "trash" but invited me to have luncheon with him at the Metropolitan Club and rather noisily introduced me to a few old cronies of his, who were not sufficiently interested in me to enquire what my name was—a trifling detail he had overlooked in presenting me as his nephew—but who did ask me to have a drink.

A month later he died. He left me a fortune, which was all the more staggering in view of the circumstance that he had seen me named for my Uncle John and not for him.

It was not long afterward that I made a perfect fool of myself by falling in love. It turned out very badly. I can't imagine what got into me to want to commit bigamy after I had already proclaimed myself to be irrevocably wedded to my profession. Nevertheless I deliberately coveted the experience, and would have attained to it no doubt had it not been for the young woman in the case. She would have none of me, but with considerable independence of spirit and, I must say, noteworthy acumen, elected to wed a splendid looking fellow who clerked in a jeweler's shop in Fifth avenue. They had been engaged for several years, it seems, and my swollen fortune failed to disturb her sense of fidelity. Perhaps you will be interested enough in a girl who could refuse to share a fortune of something like three hundred thousand dollars—not counting me, of course—to let me tell you briefly who and what she was. She was my typist. That is to say, she did piece work for me as I happened to provide substance for her active fingers to work upon when she wasn't typing law briefs in the regular sort of grind. Not only was she an able typist, but she was an exceedingly wholesome, handsome and worthy young woman. I think I came to like her with genuine resolution when I discovered that she could spell my name correctly and had the additional knack of uniting my stray infinitives with stubborn purposefulness as well as the ability to administer my grammar with tact and discretion.

Unfortunately she loved the jeweler's clerk. She tried to convince me, with a sweetness I shall never forget, that she was infinitely better suited to be a jeweler's wife than to be a weight upon the neck of a genius. Moreover, when I foolishly mentioned my snug fortune as an extra inducement, she put me smartly in my place by remarking that fortunes like mine are made in a day while really excellent jeweler's clerks are something like thirty years in the making. Which, I take it, was as much as to say that there is always room for im-

provement in a man. I confess I was somewhat disturbed by one of her gentlest remarks. She seemed to be repeating my Uncle Rilas, although I am quite sure she had never heard of him. She argued that the fortune might take wings and fly away, and then what would be to pay! Of course, it was perfectly clear to me, stupid as I must have been, that she preferred the jeweler's clerk to a fortune.

I was loth to lose her as a typist. The exact point where I appear to have made a fool of myself was when I first took it into my head that I could make something else of her. I not only lost a competent typist, but I lost a great deal of sleep, and had to go abroad for awhile, as men do when they find our unpleasant things about themselves in just that way.

I gave her a wedding present, a very costly and magnificent dining-room set, fondly hoping that the jeweler's clerk would experience a great deal of trouble in living up to it. At first I had thought of a Marie Antoinette bedroom set, but gave it up when I contemplated the cost.

If you will pardon me, I shall not go any further into this lamentable love affair. I submit, in extenuation, that people do not care to be regaled with the heartaches of past affairs; they are only interested in those which appear to be in the process of active development or retrogression. Suffice to say, I was terribly cut up over the way my first serious affair of the heart turned out, and tried my best to hate myself for letting it worry me. Somehow I was able to attribute the fiasco to an inborn sense of shyness that has always made me faint-hearted, dilatory and unaggressive. No doubt if I had gone about it roughshod and fiery I could have played hob with the excellent jeweler's peace of mind, to say the least, but alas! I succeeded only in approaching at a time when there was nothing left for me to do but to start him off in life with a mild handicap in the shape of a dining-room set that would not go with anything else he had in the apartment.

Still, some men, no matter how shy and procrastinating they may be—or reluctant, for that matter—are doomed to have love affairs thrust upon them, as you will perceive if you follow the course of this narrative to the bitter end.

In order that you may know me when you see me struggling through these pages, as one might struggle through a morass on a dark night, I shall take the liberty of describing myself in the best light possible under the circumstances.

I am a tallish sort of person, moderately homely, and not quite 35. I am strong, but not athletic. Whatever physical development I possess was acquired through the ancient and honorable game of golf and in swimming. In both of these sports I am quite proficient. My nose is rather long and inquisitive, and my chin is considered to be singularly firm for one who has no ambition to become a hero. My thatch is abundant and quite black. I understand that my

eyes are green when I affect a green tie, light blue when I put on one of that delicate hue, and curiously yellow when I wear brown about my neck. Not that I really need them, but I wear nose glasses when reading; to save my eyes, of course. I sometimes wear them in public, with a very fetching and imposing black band draping across my expanse of shirt front. I find this to be most effective when sitting in a box at the theater. My tailor is a good one. I shave myself clean with an old-fashioned razor and find it to be quite safe and tractable. My habits are considered rather good, and I sang bass in the glee club. So there you are. Not quite what you could call a lady killer, or even a lady's man, I fancy you'll say.

You will be surprised to learn, however, that secretly I am of a rather romantic, imaginative turn of mind. Since earliest childhood I have consorted with princesses and ladies of high degree,—mentally, of course,—and my bosom companions have been knights of valour and longevity. Nothing could have suited me better than to have been born in a feudal castle a few centuries ago, from which I should have sallied forth in full armour on the slightest provocation and returned in glory when there was no one left in the neighborhood to provoke me.

Even now, as I make this astounding statement, I can't help thinking of that confounded jeweler's clerk.

At 35 I am still unattached and, so far as I can tell, unloved. What more could a sensible, experienced bachelor expect than that? Unless, of course, he aspired to be a monk or a hermit, in which case he reasonably could be sure of himself if not of others.

Last winter in London my mother went to a good bit of trouble to set my cap for a lady who seemed in every way qualified to look after an only son as he should be looked after from a mother's point of view, and I declare to you I had a wretchedly close call of it. My poor mother, thinking it was quite settled, sailed for America, leaving me entirely unprotected, whereupon I succeeded in making my escape. Heavens knows I had no desperate longing to visit Palestine at that particular time, but I journeyed thither without a qualm of regret, and thereby avoided the surrender without love or honor.

(To be Continued Next Week.)

Cleanliness of Cement

A cement trough for the hog lot is one of the greatest little improvements about the farm. It is easy to make, easy to clean, never gets out of order and is readily disinfected. You can build it yourself. Another and better arrangement is to have an automatic watering device with a tank made of galvanized iron, mounted on a sled, and movable from place to place.

Pennsylvania has about 7,500,000 acres of timberland, one-eighth of which is owned by the state. The total value of the state's timber is \$139,000,000.

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