

HOME AND FARM MAGAZINE SECTION SERIAL

By
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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, serial rights for which have been specially obtained for the Home and Farm Magazine Section, 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. He is 35 years of age.

After a visit to London, Smart takes a trip on the River Danube. After finding an old-world town, he discovers an ancient castle, which he purchases from its owner, the Count. With his secretary, Poppendyke, he takes possession of the immense structure, which is supposed to be tenanted only by the caretaker and his family, the Schmicks. To Smart's amazement, the first night, he hears the cry of a baby.

Looking out at a balcony one night Smart sees the white figure of a woman silhouetted. He immediately begins a hunt for Schmick, the caretaker, to solve the mystery of who the woman may be. With the Schmicks he endeavors to break down a heavily barred door into that section of the castle, but fails. Smart learns that souvenir hunters from New York are demanding to buy the castle heirlooms. Smart's visitors demand to buy the curiosities of the castle although he assures them time and time again they are not on sale. They think he is holding out for a higher price. The would-be buyers are insulting, and are roughly ejected from the castle. Smart discovers a woman's face at an upper window. He is too much interested to attend to his correspondence, as is desired by his secretary. Smart determines to solve the mystery of the east wing of the castle and enters a window by means of a ladder. He is blocked by a stout door on which is pinned a note reading: "Please keep out. This is private property."

HAVE no patience with the so-called eccentricity of genius. It is merely an excuse for unkempt hair, dirty finger-nails, unpolished boots, open plaques, bad manners and a tendency to forget pecuniary obligations, to say nothing of such trifles as besottedness, vulgarity and the superior knack of knowing how to avoid making suitable provision for one's wife and children. All the shabby shortcomings in the character of an author, artist or actor are blithely charged to genius, and we are content to let it go at that for fear that other people may think we don't know any better. As for myself, I may be foolish and inconsequential, but heaven will bear witness that I am not mean enough to call myself a genius.

So we will call it stupidity that put me where I might be rained upon at any moment, or permanently interrupted by a bolt of lightning. (There were low mutterings of thunder behind the hills, and faint flashes as if a monstrous giant had paused to light his pipe on the evil, wind-swept peaks of the Caucasus mountains.)

I was scribbling away in serene contempt for the physical world, when there came to my ears a sound that gave me a greater shock than any streak of lightning could have produced and yet left sufficient life in me to appreciate the sensation of being electrified.

A woman's voice, speaking to me out of the darkness and from some point quite near at hand! Indeed, I could have sworn it was almost at my elbow; she might have been peering over my shoulder to read my thoughts.

"I beg your pardon, but would you mind doing me a slight favor?"

Those were the words, uttered in a clear, sweet, perfectly confident voice, as of one who never asked for favors, but exacted them.

I looked about me, blinking, utterly bewildered. No one was to be seen. She laughed. Without really meaning to do so, I also laughed—nervously, of course.

"Can't you see me?" she asked. I looked intently at the spot from which the sound seemed to come—a perfectly solid stone block less than three feet from my right shoulder. It must have been very amusing. She laughed again. I flushed resentfully.

"Where are you?" I cried out rather tartly.

"I can see you quite plainly, and you are very ugly when you cowl, sir. Are you scowling at me?"

"I don't know," I replied truthfully,

still searching for her. "Does it seem so to you?"

"Yes."

"Then I must be looking in the right direction," I cried impolitely. "You must be—Ah!"

My straining eyes had located a small, oblong blotch in the curve of the tower not more than twenty feet from where I stood, and on a direct line with my balcony. True, I could not at first see a face but as my eyes grew a little more accustomed to the darkness, I fancied I could distinguish a shadow that might pass for one.

"I didn't know that little window was there," I cried, puzzled.

"It isn't," she said. "It is a secret-loop-hole, and it isn't here except in times of great duress. See! I can close it." The oblong blotch abruptly disappeared, only to reappear an instant later. I was beginning to understand. Of course it was in the beleaguered east wing! "I hope I didn't startle you a moment ago."

I resolved to be very stiff and formal about it. "May I enquire, madam, what you are doing in my house—my castle?"

"You may."

"Well," said I, seeing the point, "what are you doing here?"

"I am living here," she answered distinctly.

"So I perceive," said I, rather too distinctly.

"And I have come down to ask a simple, tiny little favor of you, Mr. Smart," she resumed.

"You know my name?" I cried, surprised.

"I am reading your last book—Are you going?"

"Just a moment, please," I called out, struck by a splendid idea. Reaching inside the window I grasped the lantern and brought its rays to bear upon the—perfectly blank wall! I stared open-mouthed and unbelieving. "Good heaven! Have I been dreaming all this?" I cried aloud.

My gaze fell upon two tiny holes in the wall, exposed to view by the bright light of my lamp. They appeared to be precisely in the center of the spot so recently marked by the elusive oblong. Even as I stared at the holes, a slim object that I at once recognized as a finger protruded from one of them and wiggled at me in a merry but exceedingly irritating manner.

Sensibly I restored the lantern to its place inside the window and waited for the mysterious voice to resume.

"Are you so homely as all that?" I demanded when the shadowy face looked out once more. Very clever of me! I thought.

"I am considered rather good-looking," she replied, serenely. "Please don't do that again. It was very rude of you, Mr. Smart."

"Oh, I've seen something of you before this," I said. "You have long, beautiful brown hair—and a dog."

She was silent.

"I am sure you will pardon me if I very politely ask who you are?" I went on.

"That question takes me back to the favor. Will you be so very, very kind as to cease bothering me, Mr. Smart? It is dreadfully upsetting, don't you know, feeling that at any moment you may rush in and—"

"I like that. In my own castle, too!"

"There is ample room for both of us," she said sharply. "I shan't be here for more than a month or six weeks, and I am sure we can get along very amiably under the same roof for that length of time if you'll only forget that I am here."

"I can't very well do that, madam. You see, we are making extensive repairs about the place and you are proving to be a serious obstacle. I cannot grant your request. It will grieve me enormously if I am compelled to smoke you out, but I fear—"

"Smoke me out!"

"Perhaps with sulphur," I went on resolutely. "It is said to be very effective."

"Surely you will not do anything so horrid."

"Only as a last resort. First, we shall rely on smoke. You will admit that you have no right to poach on my preserves."

"None whatever," she said, rather plaintively.

I can't remember having heard a sweeter voice than hers. Of course, by this time, I was thoroughly convinced that she was a lady—a cultured, high-bred lady—and an American. I was too densely enveloped by the foginess of my own senses at this time, however, to take in this extraordinary feature of the case. Later on, in the seclusion of my study, the full force of it struck me and I marveled.

That plaintive note in her voice served its purpose. My firmness seemed to dissolve, even as I sought to reinforce it by an injection of harshness into my own manner of speech.

"Then you should be willing to vacate my premises or—here is began to show irresolution—or explain yourself."

"Won't you be generous?"

I cleared my throat nervously. How well they know the cracks in a man's armour!

"I am willing to be—amenable to reason. That's all you ought to expect." A fresh idea took root. "Can't we effect a compromise? A trust, or something of the sort? All I ask is that you explain your presence here. I will promise to be as generous as possible under the circumstances."

"Will you give me three days in which to think it over?" she asked, after a long pause.

"No."

"Well, two days?"

"I'll give you until tomorrow afternoon at five, when I shall expect you to receive me in person."

"That is quite impossible."

"But I demand the right to go wherever I please in my own castle. You—"

"If you knew just how circumspect I am obliged to be at present you wouldn't impose such terms, Mr. Smart."

"Oho! Circumspect! That puts a new light on the case. What have you been up to, madam?" I spoke very severely.

She very properly ignored the banality. "If I should write you a nice, agreeable letter, explaining as much as I can, won't you be satisfied?"

"I prefer to have it by word of mouth."

She seemed to be considering. "I will come to this window tomorrow night at this time and—let you know," she said reluctantly.

"Very well," said I. "We'll let it rest till then."

"And, by the way, I have something more to ask of you. Is it quite necessary to have all this pounding and hammering going on in the castle? The noise is dreadful. I don't ask it on my own account, but for the baby. You see, she's quite ill with a fever, Mr. Smart. Perhaps you've heard her crying."

"The baby?" I muttered.

"It is nothing serious, of course. The doctor was here today and he reassured me—"

"A—doctor here today?" I gasped. She laughed once more. Verily, it was a gentle, high-bred laugh.

"Will you please put a stop to the

noise for a day or two?" she asked, very prettily.

"Certainly," said I too surprised to say anything else. "Is—there anything else?"

"Nothing, thank you," she replied. Then: "Good night, Mr. Smart. You are very good."

"Don't forget tomorrow—"

But the oblong aperture disappeared with a sharp click, and I found myself staring at the blank, sphynx-like wall.

Taking up my pad, my pipe and my pencil, and leaving all of my cherished ideas out there in the cruel darkness, never to be recovered—at least not in their original form—I scrambled through the window, painfully scraping my knee in passing—just in time to escape the deluge.

I am sure I should have enjoyed a terrific drenching if she had chosen to subject me to it.

(To Be Continued.)

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