

By
Geo. Barr
McCutcheon

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A Fool and His Money

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS INSTALLMENTS.

In the opening instalments 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, Poopendyke, he takes possession of the immense structure, which 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 is captivated by the wit and beauty of the mysterious lady and no longer urges her departure.

BUT I was dumb. I stood just inside the door of the most remarkable apartment it has ever been my good fortune to look upon. My senses reeled. Was I awake? Was this a part of the bleak, sinister, weather-racked castle in which I was striving so hard to find a comfortable corner?

"Well?" she demanded relentlessly.

"By the Lord Harry," I began, finding my tongue only to lose it again. My bewilderment increased, and for an excellent reason.

The room was completely furnished, bedecked and rendered habitable by an hundred and one articles that were mysteriously missing from my side of the castle. Rugs, tapestries, curtains of the rarest quality; chairs, couches, and cushions; tables, cabinets and chests that would have caused the eyes of the most conservative collector of antiques to bulge with—not wonder—but greed; stands, pedestals, brasses, bronzes, porcelains—but why enumerate? On the massive oak table stood the priceless silver vase we had missed on the second day of our occupancy, and it was filled with fresh yellow roses. I sniffed. Their fragrance filled the room.

And so complete had been the rifling of my rooms by the devoted vandals in their efforts to make this lady cosy and comfortable that they did not overlook a silver-framed photograph of my dear mother! Her sweet face met my gaze as it swept the mantel-piece, beneath which a coal fire crackled merrily. I am not quite sure, but I think I repeated "by the Lord Harry" once if not twice before I caught myself up.

I tried to smile. "How—how cosy you are here," I said.

"You couldn't expect me to live in this awful place without some of the comforts and conveniences of life, Mr. Smart," she said defiantly.

"Certainly not," I said, promptly. "I am sure that you will excuse me, however, if I gloat. I was afraid we had lost all these things. You've no idea how relieved I am to find them all safe and sound in my—in their proper place. I was beginning to distrust the Schmicks. Now I am convinced of their integrity."

"I suppose you mean to be sarcastic."

"Sarcasm at any price, madam, would be worse than useless, I am sure."

Crossing to the fireplace, I selected a lump of coal from the scuttle and examined it with great care. She watched me curiously.

"Do you recognize it?" she asked.

"I do," said I, looking up. "It has been in our family for generations. My favorite chunk, believe me. Still, I part with it cheerfully." Thereupon I tossed it into the fire. "Don't be shocked! I shan't miss it. We have coals to burn, madam!"

She looked me soberly for a moment. There was something hurt and wistful in her dark eyes.

"Of course, Mr. Smart, I shall pay you for everything—down to the smallest trifle—when the time comes for me to leave this place. I have kept strict account of—"

She turned away, with a beaten droop of the proud little head, and again I was ashamed. Never have I felt so grotesquely out of proportion with myself as at that moment. My stature seemed to increase from an even six feet to something like twelve, and my bulk became elephantine. She was so slender, so lissom, so weak, and I so gargantuan, so gorilla-like, so heavy-handed! And I had come gaily up to crush her! What a fine figure of a man I was!

She did not complete the sentence, but walked slowly towards the window. I had a faint glimpse of a dainty lace handkerchief fiercely clutched in a little hand.

By nature I am a chivalrous, even gallant. You may have reason to doubt it, but it is quite true. As I've never had a chance to be chivalrous except in my dreams or my imagination, I made haste to seize this opportunity before it was too late.

"Madam," I said, with considerable feeling. "I have behaved like a downright rotter today. I do not know who you are, nor why you are here, but I assure you it is of no real consequence if you will but condescend to overlook my insufferable—"

She turned towards me. The wistful, appealing look still lingered in her eyes. The soft red nether lip seemed a bit tremulous.

"I am an intruder," she interrupted, smiling faintly. "You have every right to put me out of your—your home, Mr. Smart. I was a horrid pig to deprive you of all your nice comfortable chairs and—"

"I—I haven't missed them."

"Don't you ever sit down?"

"I will sit down if you'll let me," said I, feeling that I wouldn't appear quite so gigantic if I was sitting.

"Please do. The chairs all belong to you."

"I'm sorry you put it in that way. They are yours as long as you choose to occupy a furnished apartment here."

"I have been very selfish, and childish, and inconsiderate, Mr. Smart. You see, I'm a spoilt child. I've always had my own way in everything. You must look upon me as a very horrid, sneaking conspiring, person, and I—I really think you ought to turn me out."

She came a few steps nearer. Under the circumstances I could not sit down. So I stood towering above her, but somehow going through a process of physical and mental shrinkage the longer I remained confronting her.

Suddenly it was revealed to me that she was the loveliest woman I had ever seen in all my life! How could I have been so slow in grasping this great, bewildering truth! The prettiest woman I had ever looked upon! Of course I had known it from the first instant that I looked into her eyes, but I must have been existing in a state of stupefaction up to this illuminating moment.

I am afraid that I stared.

"Turn you out?" I cried. "Turn you out of this delightful room after you've had so much trouble getting it into shape? Never!"

"Oh, you don't know how I've imposed upon you!" she cried plaintively. "You don't know how I've robbed you, and bothered you—"

"Yes, I do," said I promptly. "I know all about it. You've been stealing my coals, my milk, my ice, my potatoes, my servants, my sleep and—here I gave a comprehensive sweep of my hand—"everything in sight. And you've made us walk on tip-toe to keep from waking the baby, and—"I stopped suddenly. "By the way, whose baby is it? Not yours, I'm sure."

To my surprise her eyes filled with tears.

"Yes. She is my baby, Mr. Smart."

My face fell. "Oh!" said I, and got no further for a moment or two. "I—I—please don't tell me you are married!"

"What would you think of me if I were to tell you I'm not?" she cried indignantly.

"I beg your pardon," I stammered, blushing to the roots of my hair.

"Stupid ass!" I muttered.

Crossing to the fireplace, she stood looking down into the coals for a long

time, while I remained where I was, an awkward, gauche spectator, conscious of having put my clumsiest foot into my mouth every time I opened it and wondering whether I could now safely get it out again without further disaster.

Her back was toward me. She was dressed in a dainty, pinkish house gown—or maybe it was light blue. At any rate it was a very pretty gown and she was wonderfully graceful in it. Ordinarily in my fiction I am quite clever at describing gowns that do not exist; but when it comes to telling what a real woman is wearing, I am not only as vague as a savage, but painfully stupid about colors. Still, I think it was pink. I recall the way her soft brown hair grew above the slender neck, and the lovely white skin; the smooth, delicate contour of her half-averted cheek and the firm little chin with the trembling red lips above it; the shapely back and shoulders and the graceful curves of her hips, suggestive of a secret perfection. She was taller than I had thought at first sight, or was it that I seemed to be getting smaller myself? A hasty bit of comparison placed her height at five feet six, using my own as something to go by. She couldn't have been a day over twenty-two. But she had a baby!

Facing me once more she said: "If you will sit down, Mr. Smart, and be patient and generous with me, I shall try to explain everything. You have a right to demand it of me, and I shall feel more comfortable after it is done."

I drew up a chair beside the table and sat down. She sank gracefully into another, facing me. A delicate frown appeared on her brow.

"Doubtless you are very much puzzled by my presence in this gloomy old castle. You have been asking yourself a thousand questions about me, and you have been shocked by my outrageous impositions upon your good nature. I confess I have been shockingly impudent and—"

"Pardon me; you are the only sauce I've had for an excessively bad bargain."

"Please do not interrupt me," she said coldly. "I am here, Mr. Smart, because it is the last place in the world where my husband would be likely to look for me."

"Your husband? Look for you?"

"Yes. I shall be quite frank with you. My husband and I have separated. A provisional divorce was granted, however, just seven months ago. The final decree cannot be issued for one year."

"But why should you hide from him?"

"The—the court gave him the custody of our child during the probationary year. I—I have run away with her. They are looking for me everywhere. That is why I came here. Do you understand?"

I was stunned. "Then, I take it, the court granted him the divorce and not you," I said, experiencing a sudden chill about the heart. "You were deprived of the child, I see. Dear me!"

"You are mistaken," she said, a flash in her eyes. "It was an Austrian court. The Count—my husband, I should say—is an Austrian subject. His interests must be protected." She said this with a sneer on her pretty lips. "You see, my father, knowing him now for what he really is, has refused to pay over to him something like a million dollars, still due for the marriage settlement. The Count contends that it is a just and legal debt and the court supports him to this extent—the child is to be his until the

debt is cleared up, or something to that effect. I really don't understand the legal complications involved. Perhaps it were better if I did."

"I see," said I, scornful in spite of myself. "One of those happy international marriages where a bride is thrown in for good measure with a couple of millions. Won't we ever learn!"

"That's it precisely," she said, with the utmost calmness and candour. "American dollars and an American girl in exchange for a title, a lot of debts and a ruined life."

"And they always turn out just this way. What a lot of blithering fools we have in the land of the free and the home of the knave!"

"My father objected to the whole arrangement from the first, so you must not speak of him as a knave," she protested. "He doesn't like Counts and such things."

"I don't see that it helps matters. I can hardly substitute the word 'brave' for the one I used," said I, trying to conceal my disgust.

"Please don't misunderstand me, Mr. Smart," she said laughingly. "I am not asking for pity. I made my bed and I shall lie in it. The only thing I ask of you is—well, kindness."

She seemed to falter again, and once more I was at her feet, figuratively speaking.

"You are in distress, in dread of something, madam," I cried. "Consider me your friend."

She shook her head ruefully. "You poor man! You don't know what you are in for, I fear. Wait till I have told you everything. Three weeks ago, I laid myself liable to imprisonment and heaven knows what else by abducting my little girl. That is really what it comes to—abduction. The court has ordered my arrest, and all sorts of police persons are searching high and low for me. Now don't you see your peril? If they find me here, you will be in a dreadful predicament. You will be charged with criminal complicity, or whatever it is called, and—Oh, it will be frightfully unpleasant for you, Mr. Smart."

My expression must have convicted me. She couldn't help seeing the dismay in my face. So she went on, quite humbly.

"Of course you have but to act at once and all may be well for you. I—I will go if you—if you command me to—"

I struck my knee forcibly. "What do you take me for, madam? Hang the consequences! If you feel that you are safe here—that is, comparatively safe—stay!"

"It will be terrible if you get into trouble with the law," she murmured in distress. "I—I really don't know what might happen to you." Still her eyes brightened. Like all the rest of her ilk, she was selfish.

I tried to laugh, but it was a dismal failure. After all, wasn't it likely to prove a most unpleasant matter? I felt the chill moisture breaking out on my forehead.

"Pray do not consider my position at all," I managed to say, with a resolute assumption of gallantry. "I—I shall be perfectly able to look out for myself—that is, to explain everything if it should come to the worst." I could not help adding, however; "I certainly hope, however, that they don't get on to your trail and—" I stopped in confusion.

(To Be Continued.)

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