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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. 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. 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 he would give it up. The mother abducts the child and selects the castle as a hiding place. Smart fears trouble with the authorities, but consents to assist the fair divorcee.

"AND FIND me here?" she completed gloomily.

"And take the child away from you," I made haste to explain.

A fierce light flamed in her eyes. "I should—kill—some one before that could happen," she cried out, clenching her hands.

"I—I beg of you, madam, don't work yourself into a—state," I implored, in considerable trepidation. "Nothing like that can happen, believe me, I—"

"Oh, what do you know about it?" she exclaimed, with most unnecessary vehemence, I thought. "He wants the child and—well, you can see why he wants her, can't you? He is making the most desperate efforts to recover her. Max says the newspapers are full of the—scandal. They are depicting me as a brainless, law-defying American without sense of love, honor or respect. I don't mind that, however. It is to be expected. They all describe the Count as a long-suffering, honorable, dreadfully maltreated person, and are doing what they can to help him in the prosecution of the search. My mother, who is in Paris, is being shadowed; my two big brothers are being watched; my lawyers in Vienna are being trailed everywhere—oh, it is really a most dreadful thing. But—but I will not give her up! She is mine. He doesn't love her. He doesn't love me. He doesn't love anything in the world but himself and his cigarettes. I know, for I've paid for his cigarettes for nearly three years. He has actually ridiculed me in court circles, he has defamed me, snubbed me, humiliated me, cursed me. You cannot imagine what it has been like. Once he struck me in—"

"Struck you!" I cried.

"—in the presence of his sister and her husband. But I must not distress you with sordid details. Suffice it to say, I turned at last like the proverbial worm. I applied for a divorce ten months ago. It was granted, provisionally as I say. He is a degenerate. He was unfaithful to me in every sense of the word. But in spite of all that, the court in granting me the separation, took occasion to placate national honor by giving him the child during the year, pending the final disposition of the case. Of course, everything depends on father's attitude in respect to the money. You see what I mean? A month ago I heard from friends in Vienna that he was shamefully neglecting our—my baby, so I took this awful, this perfectly bizarre way of getting her out of his hands. Possession is nine points in the law, you see. I—"

"Alas!" interrupted I, shaking my head. "There is more than one way to look at the law. I'm afraid you have got yourself into a serious—er—pickle."

"I don't care," she said defiantly.

"It is the law's fault for not prohibiting such marriages as ours. Oh, I know I must seem awfully foolish and idiotic to you, but—but it's too late now to back out, isn't it?"

I did not mean to say it, but I did—and I said it with some conviction: "It is! You must be protected."

"Thank you, thank you!" she cried, clasping and unclasping her little hands. I found myself wondering if the brute had dared to strike her on that soft, pink cheek.

Suddenly a horrible thought struck me with stunning force.

"Don't tell me that your—your husband is the man who owned this castle up to a week ago," I cried. "Count James Hohendahl?"

She shook her head. "No. He is not the man." Seeing that I waited for her to go on, she resumed: "I know Count James quite well, however. He is my husband's closest friend."

"Good heaven," said I, in quick alarm. "That complicates matters, doesn't it? He may come here at any time."

"It isn't likely, Mr. Smart. To be perfectly honest with you, I waited until I heard you had bought the castle before coming here myself. We were in hiding at the house of a friend in Linz up to a week ago. I did not think it right or fair to subject them to the notoriety or the peril that was sure to follow if the officers took it into their heads to look for me there. The day you bought the castle, I decided that it was the safest place for me to stay until the danger blows over, or until father can arrange to smuggle me out of this awful country. That very night we were brought here in a motor. Dear old Conrad and Mrs. Schmick took me in. They have been perfectly adorable, all of them."

"May I enquire, madam," said I stiffly, "how you came to select my abode as your hiding place?"

"Oh, I have forgotten to tell you that we lived here one whole summer just after we were married. Count Hohendahl let us have the castle for our—our honeymoon. He was here a great deal of the time. All sorts of horrid, nasty, snobbish people were here to help us enjoy our honeymoon. I shall never forget that dreadful summer. My only friends were the Schmicks. Every one else ignored and despised me, and they all borrowed, won or stole money from me. I was compelled to play bridge for atrociously high stakes without knowing one card from the other. But, as I say, the Schmicks loved me. You see they were in the family ages and ages before I was born."

"The family? What family?"

"The Rothhoefen family. Haven't they told you that my great-grandmother was a Rothhoefen? No! Well, she was. I belong to the third generation of American-born descendants. Doesn't it simplify matters, knowing this?"

"Immensely," said I, in something of a daze.

"And so I came here, Mr. Smart, where hundreds of my ancestors spent their honeymoons, most of them perhaps as unhappily as I, and where I knew a fellow-countryman was to live for awhile in order to get a plot for a new story. You see, I thought I might be a great help to you in the shape of suggestion."

She smiled very warmly, and I thought it a very neat way of putting it. Naturally it would be quite impossible to put her out after hearing that she had already put herself out to some extent in order to assist me.

"I can supply the villain for your story if you need one, and I can give you oceans of ideas about noblemen. I am sorry that I can't give you a nice, sweet heroine. People hate heroines after they are married and live unhappily. You—"

"The public taste is changing," I interrupted quickly. "Unhappy marriages are so common nowadays that the women who go into 'em are always heroines. People like to read about suffering and anguish among the rich, too. Besides, you are a Countess. That puts you near the first rank among heroines. Don't you think it would be proper at this point to tell me who you are?"

She regarded me steadfastly for a moment, and then shook her head.

"I'd rather not tell you my name, Mr. Smart. It really can't matter, you know. I've thought it all out very carefully, and I've decided that it is not best for you to know. You see if you don't know who it is you are sheltering, the courts can't hold you to account. You will be quite innocent of deliberately contriving to defeat the law. No, I shall not tell you my name, nor my husband's, nor my father's. If you'd like to know, however, I will tell you my baby's name. She's two years old, and I think she'll like you to call her Rosemary."

By this time I was quite hypnotized by this charming, confident trespasser upon my physical—and I was about to say my moral estate. Never have I known a more complacent violator of all the proprieties of law and order as she appeared to be. She was a revelation; more than that, she was an inspiration. What a courageous, independent, fascinating little buccaneer she was. Her overwhelming confidence in herself, despite the occasional lapse into despair, staggered me. I couldn't help being impressed. If I had had any thought of ejecting her, bag and baggage, from my castle, it had been completely knocked out of my head and I was left, you might say, in a position which gave me no other alternative than to consider myself a humble instrument in the furthering of her ends, whether I would or no. It was most amazing. Superior to the feeling of scorn I naturally felt for her and her kind—the fools who make international beds and find them filled with thorns—there was the delicious sensation of being able to rise above my prejudices and become a willing conspirator against that despot, Common Sense.

She was very sure of herself, that was plain; and I am positive that she was equally sure of me. It isn't altogether flattering, either, to feel that a woman is so sure of you that there isn't any doubt concerning her estimate of your offensive strength. Somehow one feels an absence of physical attractiveness.

"Rosemary," I repeated. "And what am I to call you?"

"Even my enemies call me Countess," she said coldly.

"Oh," said I, more respectfully. "I see. When am I to have the pleasure of meeting the less particular Rosemary?"

"I didn't mean to be horrid," she said plaintively. "Please overlook it, Mr. Smart. If you are very, very quiet I think you may see her now. She is asleep."

"I may frighten her if she awakes," I said in haste, remembering my antipathy to babies.

Nevertheless I was led through a couple of bare, unfurnished rooms into a sunny, perfectly adorable nursery. A nursemaid—English, at a glance—arose from her seat in the window and held a cautious finger to her lips. In the middle of a bed that would have accommodated an entire family, was the sleeping Rosemary—a tiny, rosy cheeked, yellow haired atom bounded on four sides by yards of mattress.

I stood over her timorously and stared. The Countess put one knee upon the mattress and, leaning far over, kissed a little paw. I blinked, like a confounded booby.

Then we stole out of the room. "Isn't she adorable?" asked the Countess when we were at a safe distance.

"They all are," I said grudgingly, "when they're asleep."

"You are horrid!"

"By the way," I said sternly, "how does that bedstead happen to be a yard or so lower than any other bed in this entire castle? All the rest of them are so high one has to get into them from a chair."

"Oh," she said complacently, "it was too high for Blake to manage conveniently, so I had Rudolph saw the legs off short."

One of my very finest antique bedsteads! But I didn't even groan.

"You will let me stay on, won't you, Mr. Smart?" she said, when we were at the fireplace again. "I am really so helpless, you know."

I offered her everything that the castle afforded in the way of loyalty and luxury.

"And we'll have a telephone in the main hall before the end of a week," I concluded beamingly.

Her face clouded. "Oh, I'd much rather have it in my hallway, if you don't mind. You see, I can't very well go downstairs every time I want to use the 'phone, and it will be a nuisance sending for me when I'm wanted."

This was rather high-handed, I thought.

"But if no one knows you're here, it seems to me you're not likely to be called."

"You never can tell," she said mysteriously.

I promised to put the instrument in her hall, and not to have an extension to my rooms for fear of creating suspicion. Also the electric bell system was to be put in just as she wanted it to be. And a lot of other things that do not seem to come to mind at this moment.

I left in a daze at half-past three, to send Britton up with all the late novels and magazines, and a big box of my special cigarettes.

CHAPTER VI.

I Discuss Matrimony.

POOPENDYKE and I tried to do a little work that evening, but neither of us seemed quite capable of concentration. We said "I beg pardon" to each other a dozen times or more, following mental lapses, and then gave it up. My ideas failed in consecutiveness, and when I did succeed in hitching two intelligent thoughts together he invariably destroyed the sequence by compelling me to repeat myself, with the result that I became irascible.

We had gone over the events of the day very thoroughly. If anything, he was more alarmed over our predicament than I. He seemed to sense the danger that attended my decision to shelter and protect this cool-headed, rather self-centered young woman at the top of my castle. To me, it was something of a lark; to him, a tragedy. He takes everything seriously, so much so in fact that he gets on my nerves. I wish he were not always looking at things through the little end of the telescope. I like a change, and it is a novelty to sometimes see things through the big end, especially peril.

"They will yank us all up for aiding and abetting," he proclaimed, trying to focus his eyes on the shorthand book he was fumbling.

"You wouldn't have me turn her over to the law, would you?" I demanded crossly. "Please don't forget that we are Americans."

"I don't," said he. "That's what worries me most of all."

"Well," said I loftily, "we'll see."

We were silent for a long time.

"It must be horribly lonely and spooky away up there where she is," I said at last, inadvertently betraying my thoughts. He sniffed.

"Have you a cold?" I demanded, glaring at him.

"No," he said gloomily; "a pre-sentiment."

"Umph!"

Another period of silence. Then: "I wonder if Max—" I stopped short.

"Yes, sir," he said, with wonderful divination. "He did."

"Any message?"

"She sent down word that the new cook is a jewel, but I think she must have been jesting. I've never cared for a man cook myself. I don't like to appear hypercritical, but what did you think of the dinner tonight, sir?"

"I've never tasted better boiled ham in my life, Mr. Poopendyke."

"Ham! That's it, Mr. Smart. But what I'd like to know is this: 'What became of the grouse you ordered for dinner, sir? I happen to know that it was put over the fire at seven—'"

"I sent it up to the countess, with our compliments," said I, peevishly. I think that remark silenced him. At any rate, he got up and left the room.

(To Be Continued.)

Italy will add about one hundred and eighty aeroplanes to its army equipment this year.