

By
Geo. Barr
McCutcheon

HOME AND FARM MAGAZINE SECTION SERIAL.

Copyright, 1913,
By Geo. Barr
McCutcheon.

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, Poppendyke, 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 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.

THERE was a Russian baron (the man who had to be kneaded) the last syllable of whose name was vitch, the first five evading me in a perpetual chase up and down the alphabet. For brevity's sake, I'll call him Umovitch. The French valet's master was a Viennese gentleman of twenty-six or eight (I heard), but who looked forty. I found myself wondering how dear, puritanic, little Elsie Hazzard could have fallen in with two such unamiable wrecks as these fellows appeared to be at first sight.

The Austrian's name was Pless. He was a plain mister. The more I saw of him the first afternoon the more I wondered at George Hazzard's carelessness. Then there were two very bright and charming Americans, the Billy Smiths. He was connected with the American Embassy at Vienna, and I liked him from the start. You could tell that he was the sort of a chap who is bound to get on in the world by simply looking at his wife. The man who could win the love and support of such an attractive creature must of necessity have qualifications to spare. She was very beautiful and very clever. Somehow the unforgettable resplendency of my erstwhile typist (who married the jeweler's clerk) faded into a pale, ineffective drab when opposed to the charms of Mrs. Betty Billy Smith. (They all called her Betty Billy.)

After luncheon I got Elsie off in a corner and plied her with questions concerning her friends. The Billy Smiths were easily accounted for. They belonged to the most exclusive set in New York and Newport. He had an incomprehensible lot of money and a taste for the diplomatic service. Some day he would be an ambassador. The Baron was in the Russian embassy and was really a very nice boy.

"Boy!" I exclaimed. "He is not more than thirty," said she. "You wouldn't call that old." There was nothing I could say to that and still be a perfect host. But to you I declare that he wasn't a day under fifty. How blind women can be! Or is silly the word?

From where we sat the figure of Mr. Pless was plainly visible in the loggia. He was alone, leaning against the low wall and looking down upon the river. He puffed idly at a cigarette. His coal black hair grew very sleek on his smallish head and his shoulders were rather high, as if pinched upward by a tendency to defy a weak spine.

"And this Mr. Pless, who is he?" Elsie was looking at the rakish young man with a pitying expression in her tender blue eyes.

"Poor fellow," she sighed. "He is in great trouble, John. We hoped that if we got him off here where it is quiet he might be able to forget— Oh, but I am not supposed to tell you a word of

the story! We are all sworn to secrecy. It was only on that condition that he consented to come with us."

"Indeed!" She hesitated, uncomfortably placed between two duties. She owed one to him and one to me.

"It is only fair, John, that you should know that Pless is not his real name," she said, lowering her voice. "But, of course, we stand sponsor for him, so it is all right."

"Your word is sufficient, Elsie." She seemed to be debating some inward question. The next I knew she moved a little closer to me.

"His life is a—tragedy," she whispered. "His heart is broken, I firmly believe. Oh!"

The Billy Smiths came up. Elsie proceeded to withdraw into herself.

"We were speaking of Mr. Pless," said I. "He has a broken heart."

The newcomers looked hard at poor Elsie.

"Broken fiddle-sticks," said Billy Smith, nudging Elsie until she made room for him beside her on the long couch. I promptly made room for Betty Billy.

"We ought to tell John just a little about him," said Elsie defensively. "It is due him, Billy."

"But don't tell him the fellow's heart is broken. That's rot."

"It isn't rot," said his wife. "Wouldn't your heart be broken?"

He crossed his legs comfortably.

"Wouldn't it?" repeated Betty Billy.

"Not if it were as porous as his. You can't break a sponge, my dear."

"What happened to it?" I inquired, mildly interested.

"Women," said Billy impressively.

"Then it's easily patched," said I.

"Like cures like."

"You don't understand, John," said Elsie gravely. "He was married to a beautiful—"

"Now, Elsie, you're telling," cautioned Betty Billy.

"Well," said Elsie doggedly, "I'm determined to tell this much—his name isn't Pless, his wife got a divorce from him, and now she has taken their child and run off with it and they can't find—what's the matter?"

My eyes were almost popping from my head.

"Is—is he a count?" I cried, so loudly that they all said "sh!" and shot apprehensive glances toward the pseudo Mr. Pless.

"Goodness!" said Elsie in alarm.

"Don't shout, John."

Billy Smith regarded me speculatively. "I daresay Mr. Smart has read all about the affair in the newspapers. They've had nothing else lately. I won't say he is a count, and I won't say he isn't. We're bound by a deep, dark, sinister oath, sealed with blood."

"I haven't seen anything about it in the papers," said I, trying to recover my self-possession which had sustained a most tremendous shock.

"Thank heaven!" cried Elsie devoutly.

"Do you mean to say you won't tell me his name?" I demanded.

Elsie eyed me suspiciously. "Why did you ask if he is a count?"

"I have a vague recollection of hearing some one speak of a count having trouble with his young American wife, divorcee, or something of the sort. A very prominent New York girl, if I'm not mistaken. All very hazy, however. What is his name?"

"John," said Mrs. Hazzard firmly, "you must not ask us to tell you. Won't you please understand?"

"The poor fellow is almost distracted. Really, Mr. Smart, we planned this little visit here simply in order to—to take him out of himself for a while. It has been such a tragedy for him. He worshipped the child." It was Mrs. Billy who spoke.

"And the mother made way with him?" I queried, resorting to a suddenly acquired cunning.

"It is a girl," said Elsie in a loud whisper. "The loveliest girl. The mother appeared in Vienna about three weeks or a month ago and—whiff! Off goes the child. Abducted—kidnaped! And the court had granted him the custody of the child. That's what makes it so terrible. If she is caught anywhere in Europe—well, I don't know what

may happen to her. It is just such silly acts as this that make American girls the laughing stocks of the whole world. I give you my word I am almost ashamed to have people point me out and say: 'There goes an American. Pooh!'"

By this time I had myself pretty well in hand.

"I daresay the mother loved the child, which ought to condone one among her multitude of sins. I take it, of course, that she was entirely to blame for everything that happened."

They at once proceeded to tear the poor little mother to shreds, delicately and with finesse, to be sure, but none the less completely. No doubt they meant to be charitable.

"This is what a silly American nobody gets for trying to be somebody over here just because her father has a trunkful of millions," said Elsie, concluding a rather peevisish estimate of the conjugal effrontery laid at the door of Mr. Pless' late wife.

"Or just because one of these spendthrift foreigners has a title for sale," said Billy Smith sarcastically.

"He was deeply in love with her when they were married," said his wife. "I don't believe it was his fault that they didn't get along well together."

"The truth of the matter is," said Elsie with finality, "she couldn't live up to her estate. She was a drag, a stone about his neck. It was like putting one's waitress at the head of the table and expecting her to make good as a hostess."

"What was her social standing in New York?" I inquired.

"Oh, good enough," said Betty Billy. "She was in the smartest set, if that is a recommendation."

"Then you admit, both of you, that the best of our American girls fall short of being all that is required over here. In other words, they can't hold a candle to the Europeans."

"Not at all," they both said in a flash.

"That's the way it sounds to me." Elsie seemed repentant. "I suppose we are a little hard on the poor thing. She was very young, you see."

"What you mean to say, then, is that she wasn't good enough for Mr. Pless and his coterie?"

"No, not just precisely that," admitted Betty Billy Smith. "She made a bid for him and got him, and my contention is that she should have lived up to the bargain."

"Wasn't he paid in full?" I asked, with a slight sneer.

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't he get his money?"

"I am sure I don't see what money has to do with the case," said Elsie, with dignity. "Mr. Pless is a poor man I've heard. There could not have been very much of a marriage settlement."

"A mere million to start with," remarked Billy Smith ironically. "It's all gone, my dear Elsie, and I gather that father-in-law locked the trunk you speak of and hid the key. You don't know women as well as I do, Mr. Smart. Both of these charming ladies professed to adore Mr. Pless' wife up to the time the trial for divorce came up. Now they've got their hammers and hat-pins out for her and—"

"That isn't true, Billy Smith," cried Elsie in a fierce whisper. "We stood by her until she disobeyed the mandate—or whatever you call it—of the court. She did steal the child, and you can't deny it."

"Poor little kiddie," said he, and from his tone I gathered that all was not rosy in the life of the infant in this game of battledore and shuttlecock.

To my disgust, the three of them refused to enlighten me further as to the history, identity or character of either Mr. or Mrs. Pless, but of course I knew that I was entertaining under my roof, by the most extraordinary coincidence, the Count and Countess of Something-or-other, who were at war, and the child they were fighting for with motives of an entirely opposite nature.

Right or wrong, my sympathies were with the refugee in the lonely east wing. I was all the more determined now to shield her as far as it lay in my power

to do so, and to defend her if the worst were to happen.

Mr. Pless tossed his cigarette over the railing and sauntered over to join us.

"I suppose you've been discussing the view," he said as he came up. There was a mean smile on his—yes, it was a rather handsome face—and the two ladies started guiltily. The attack on his part was particularly direct when one stops to consider that there wasn't any view to be had from where we were sitting, unless one could call a three-decked plasterer's scaffolding a view.

"We've been discussing the recent improvements about the castle, Mr. Pless," said I with so much directness that I felt Mrs. Billy Smith's arm stiffen and suspected a general tension of nerves from head to foot.

"You shouldn't spoil the place, Mr. Smart," said he, with a careless glance about him.

"Don't ruin the ruins," added Billy Smith, of the diplomatic corps.

"What time do we dine?" asked Mr. Pless, with a suppressed yawn.

"At eight," said Elsie promptly.

We were in the habit of dining at seven-thirty, but I was growing accustomed to the over-riding process, so allowed my dinner hour to be changed without a word.

"I think I'll take a nap," said he. With a languid smile and a little flout of his hand as if dismissing us, he moved languidly off, but stopped after a few steps to say to me: "We'll explore the castle tomorrow, Mr. Smart, if it's just the same to you." He spoke with a very slight accent and in a peculiarly attractive manner. There was charm to the man, I was bound to admit. "I know Schloss Rothhoefen very well. It is an old stamping ground of mine."

"Indeed," said I, affecting surprise.

"I spent a very joyous season here not so many years ago. Hohendahl is a bosom friend."

When he was quite out of hearing, Billy Smith leaned over and said to me: "He spent his honeymoon here, old man. It was the girls' idea to bring him here to assuage the present with memories of the past. Quite a pretty sentiment, eh?"

"It depends on how he spent it," I said significantly. Smith grinned approvingly. Being a diplomat, he sensed my meaning at once.

"It was a lot of money," he said.

At dinner the Russian baron, who examined every particle of food he ate with great care and discrimination, evidently looking for poison, embarrassed me in the usual fashion by asking how I write my books, where I get my plots, and all the rest of the questions that have become so hatefully unanswerable, ending up by blandly enquiring what I had written. This was made especially humiliating by the prefatory remark that he had lived in Washington for five years and had read everything that was worth reading.

If Elsie had been a man I should have kicked her for further confounding me by mentioning the titles of all my books and saying that he surely must have read them, as everybody did, thereby supplying him with the chance to triumphantly say that he'd be hanged if he'd ever heard of any one of them. I shall always console myself with the joyful thought that I couldn't remember his infernal name and would now make it a point never to do so.

Mr. Pless openly made love to Elsie and the Baron openly made love to Betty Billy. Being a sort of non-committal bachelor, I ranged myself with the two abandoned husbands and we had quite a reckless time of it, talking with uninterrupted devilishness about the growth of American dentistry in European capitals, the way one has his nails manicured in Germany, the upset price of hot-house strawberries, the relative merit of French and English bulls, the continued progress of the weather and sundry other topics of similar piquancy.

(To Be Continued.)

Sheep will sometimes eat weeds, but it is generally because they have nothing better.