

HOME AND FARM MAGAZINE SECTION SERIAL.

By
Geo. Barr
McCutcheon

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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, 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. Smart takes a trip on the River Danube. He discovers an ancient castle, which he purchases from an Austrian count. With his secretary, Poopendyk, he takes possession. It 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 meets her and is captivated by her wit and beauty. 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, almost comes upon Smart and the Countess unawares. The woman escapes—but slams a door behind her. The visitor suspects Smart of an intrigue with the wife of his valet. Finally the party leaves and Smart is relieved.

"BY THE WAY," said I, "I have had no word from our mutual friends. Have you seen them?"

Mr. Pless stiffened. His face grew perceptibly.

"I regret to inform you, Mr. Smart, that our relations are not quite as friendly as they once were. I have reasons to suspect that Mr. Smith has been working against me for the past two or three days, to such an extent, I may say, that the Ambassador now declines to advise your government to grant us certain privileges we had hoped to secure without trouble. In short, we have just heard that he will not ask the United States to consider anything in the shape of an extradition if the Countess is apprehended in her own country. Up to yesterday we felt confident that he would advise your State Department to turn the child over to our representatives in case she is to be found there. There has been underhand work going on, and Mr. Smith is at the bottom of it. He wantonly insulted me the day we left Rothhoefen. I have challenged him, but he— he committed the most diabolical breach of etiquette by threatening to kick my friend the Baron out of his rooms when he waited upon him yesterday morning."

With difficulty I restrained a desire to shout the single word: "Good!" I was proud of Billy Smith. Controlling my exultation, I merely said: "Perfectly diabolical! Perfectly!"

"I have no doubt, however, should our Minister make a formal demand upon your Secretary of State, the cause of justice would be sustained. It is a clear case of abduction, as you so forcibly declare in the interviews, Mr. Smart. I cannot adequately express my gratification for the stand you have taken. Will you be offended if I add that it was rather unexpected? I had the feeling that you were against me, that you did not like me."

I smiled deprecatingly. "As I seldom read the newspapers, I am not quite sure that they have done justice to my real feelings in the matter."

The lawyer sitting directly opposite to me, was watching my face intently. "They quoted you rather freely, sir," said he. Instinctively I felt that here was a wily person whom it would be difficult to deceive. "The Count is to be congratulated upon having the good will of so distinguished a gentleman as John Bellamy Smart. It will carry great weight, believe me."

"Oh, you will find to your sorrow that I cut a very small figure in national politics," said I. "Pray do not deceive yourselves."

"May I offer you a brandy and soda?" asked Mr. Pless, tapping sharply on the table top with his seal ring. Instantly his French valet, still bearing faint traces of the drubbing he had sustained at Britton's hands, appeared in the bedchamber door.

"Thank you, no," I made haste to say. "I am on the water wagon."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Pless in perplexity.

"I am not drinking, Mr. Pless," I explained.

"Sorry," said he, and curtly dismissed the man. I had a notion that the great lawyer looked a trifle disappointed. "I fancy you are wondering why I sent for you, Mr. Smart."

"I am."

"Am I to assume that the newspapers were correct in stating that you mean to support my cause with—I may say, to the full extent of your powers?"

"It depends on circumstances, Mr. Pless."

"Circumstances?" He eyed me rather coldly as if to say, "What right have you to suggest circumstances?"

"Perhaps I should have said that it depends somewhat on what my powers represent."

He crossed his slender legs comfortably and looked at me with a queer little tilt of his left eyebrow, but with an unsmiling visage. He was too cocksure of himself to grant me even so much as an ingratiating smile. Was not I a glory-seeking American and he one of the glorious? It would be doing me a favour to let me help him.

"I trust you will understand, Mr. Smart, that I do not ask a favour of you, but rather put myself under a certain obligation for the time being. You have become a landowner in this country, and as such, you should ally yourself with the representative people of our land. It is not an easy matter for a foreigner to plant himself in our midst, to to speak—as a mushroom—and expect to thrive on limited favors. I can be of assistance to you. My position, as you doubtless know, is rather a superior one in the capital. An unfortunate marriage has not lessened the power that I possess as a birthright nor the esteem in which I am held throughout Europe. The disgraceful methods employed by my former wife in securing a divorce are well known to you, I take it, and I am gratified to observe that you frown upon them. I suppose you know the whole story?"

"I think I do," said I, quietly. I have never known such consummate self-assurance as the fellow displayed.

"Then you are aware that her father has defaulted under the terms of an ante-nuptial agreement. There is still due me, under the contract, a round million of your exceedingly useful dollars."

"With the interest to be added," said the lawyer, thumping on the chair-arm with his fingers something after the fashion my mother always employs in computing a simple sum in addition.

"Certainly," said Mr. Pless, sharply. "Mr. Smart understands that quite clearly. Mr. Schemansky. It isn't necessary to enlighten him."

The lawyer cleared his throat. I knew him at once for a slyster. Mr. Pless continued, addressing me.

"Of course he will have to pay this money before his daughter may even hope to gain from me the right to share the custody of our little girl, who loves me devotedly. When the debt is fully liquidated, I may consent to an arrangement by which she shall have the child part of the time at least."

"It seems to me she has the upper hand of you at present, however," I said, not without secret satisfaction. "She may be in America by this time."

"I think not," said he. "Every steamship has been watched for days, and we are quite positive she has not sailed. There is the possibility, however, that she may have been taken by motor to some out-of-the-way place where she will await the chance to slip away by means of a specially chartered ship. It is this very thing that we are seeking to prevent. I do not hesitate to admit that if she once gets the child to New York, we may expect serious difficulty in obtaining our rights. I humbly confess that I have not the means to fight her in a land where her father's millions count for so much. I am a poor man. My estates are heavily involved through litigation started by my forbears. You understand my position?" He said it with a rather pathetic twist of his lips.

"I understand that you received a million in cash at the time of the wedding," said I. "What has become of all that?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Can you expect me to indulge an extravagant wife, who seeks to become a social queen, and still save anything out of a paltry million?"

"Oh, I see. This is a new phase of the matter that hasn't been revealed to me. It was she who spent the million."

"After a fashion, yes," said he, without a spark of shame. "The chateau was in rather a dilapidated condition, and she insisted on its restoration. It was also necessary to spend a great deal of money in the effort to secure for herself a certain position in society. My own position was not sufficient for her. She wanted to improve upon it, I might say. We entertained a great deal, and lavishly. She was accustomed to gratifying every taste and whim that money could purchase. Naturally, it was not long before we were hard pressed for funds. I went to New York a year ago and put the matter clearly before her father. He met me with another proposition which rather disgusted me. I am a man who believes in fair dealing. If I have an obligation I meet it. Isn't that true, Mr. Schemansky?"

"It is," said the lawyer.

"Her father revoked his original plan and suggested an alternative. He proposed to put the million in trust for his granddaughter, our Rosemary—a name, sir, that I abominate and which was given to her after my wife had stalked for weeks—the interest to be paid to his daughter until the child reached the age of twenty-one. Of course, I could not accept such an arrangement. It—"

"Acting on my advice—for I was present at the interview—the Count emphatically declined to entertain—"

"Never mind, Schemansky," broke in the Count petulantly. "What is the use of going to all that?" He appeared to reflect for a moment. "Will you be good enough to leave the room for awhile, Mr. Schemansky? I think, Mr. Smart and I can safely manage a friendly compact without your assistance. Eh, Mr. Smart?"

I couldn't feel sorry for Schemansky. He hadn't the backbone of an angleworm. If I were a lawyer and a client of mine were to speak to me as Pless spoke to him, I firmly believe I should have had at least a fair sprinkling of his blood upon my hands.

"I beg of you, Count, to observe caution and—"

"If you please, sir!" cut in the Count, with the austerity that makes the continental nobleman what he is.

"If you require my services, you will find me in the—"

"Not in the hall, I trust," said his client in a most insulting way.

Schemansky left the room without so much as a glance at me. He struck me as a man who knew his place better than any mental I've ever seen. I particularly noticed that not even his ears were red.

"Rather rough way to handle a lawyer, it strikes me," I said. "Isn't he any good?"

"He is as good as the best of them," said the Count, lighting his fourth or fifth cigarette. "I have no patience with the way

they muddle matters by always talking law, law, law! If it were left to me, I should dismiss the whole lot of them and depend entirely upon my common-sense. If it hadn't been for the lawyers, I am convinced that all this trouble could have been avoided, or at least amicably adjusted out of court. But I am saddled with half a dozen of them, simply because two or three banks and as many private interests are inclined to be officious. They claim that my interests are theirs, but I doubt it, by Jove, I do. They're a blood-sucking lot, these bankers. But I sha'n't bore you with trivialities. Now here is the situation in a word. It is quite impossible for me to prosecute the search for my child without financial assistance from outside sources. My funds are practically exhausted and the banks refuse to extend my credit. You have publicly declared yourself to be my friend and well-wisher. I have asked you to come here tonight, Mr. Smart, to put you to the real test, so to speak. I want one hundred thousand dollars for six months."

While I was prepared in a sense for the request, the brazenness with which he put it up to me took my breath away. I am afraid that the degage manner in which he paid compliment to my affluence was too much for me. I blinked my eyes rapidly for a second or two and then allowed them settle into a stare of perplexity.

"Really, Mr. Pless," I mumbled in direct contrast to his sangfroid, "you—you surprise me."

He laughed quietly, almost reassuringly, as he leaned forward in his chair the better to study my face. "I hope you do not think that I expect you to produce so much ready money tonight, Mr. Smart. Oh, no! Any time within the next few days will be satisfactory. Take your time, sir. I appreciate that it requires time to arrange for the—"

I held up my hand with a rather lofty air. "Was it one hundred and fifty thousand that you mentioned or—"

"That was the amount," said he, a sudden glitter in his eyes.

I studied the ceiling with a calculating squint, as if trying to approximate my balance in bank. He watched me closely, almost breathlessly. At last, unable to control his eagerness, he said:

"At the usual rate of interest, you understand."

"Certainly," I said, and resumed my calculations. He got the impression that I was annoyed by the interruption.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

"What security can you give, Mr. Pless?" I demanded in a very business-like way.

"Oh, you Americans!" he cried, his face beaming with premature relief. "You will pin us down, I see. I do not wonder that you are so rich. I shall give you my personal note, Mr. Smart, for the amount, secured by a mortgage—a supplementary mortgage—on the Chateau Tarnowsky."

Tarnowsky! Now I remembered everything. Tarnowsky! The name struck my memory like a blow. What a stupid dolt I had been! The whole world had rung wedding bells for the marriage of the Count Marie Tarnowsky, scion of one of the greatest Hungarian houses, and Aline, the nineteen-year-old daughter of Gwendolen and Jasper Titus, of New York, Newport, Tuxedo, Hot Springs, Palm Beach and so forth. Jasper Titus, the banker and railway magnate, whose name as well as his hand was to be seen in every great financial movement of the last two decades!

What a fool I was not to recall a marriage that had been not only on the lips of every man, woman and child in the States but on mine in particular, for I had bitterly execrated the deliverance into bondage of this young girl of whose beauty and charm I had heard so much.

The whole spectacular travesty came back to me with a rush, as I sat there in the presence of the only man who had ever been known to get the better of Jasper Titus in a trade. I remembered with some vividness my scornful attitude toward the newspapers of the metropolis, all of which fairly slushed over with the news of the great event weeks beforehand and weeks afterward. I was not the only man who said harsh things about Jasper Titus in those days. I was but one of the multitude.

I also recalled my scathing comments at the time of the divorce proceedings. They were too caustic to be repeated here. It is only necessary to state that the proceedings came near to putting two friendly nations into very bad temper. Statesmen and diplomats were drawn into the mess, and jingo congressmen on our side of the water introduced sensational bills bearing specifically upon the international marriage market. Newspaper humorists stood together as one man in advocating a revision of the tariff upward on all foreign purchases coming under the head of the sons of old masters. As I have said before, I did not follow the course of the nasty squabble very closely, and was quite indifferent as to the result. I have a vague recollection of some one telling me that a divorce had been granted, but that is all. There was also something said about a child.

My pleasant little mystery had come to a sharp and rather depressing end. The lovely Countess about whom I had cast the veil of secrecy was no other than the much-discussed Aline Titus and Mr. Pless the expensive Count Tarnowsky. Cold, hard facts took the place of indulgent fancies. The dream was over. I was sorry to have it end. A joyous enthusiasm had attended me while I worked in the dark; now a dreary reality stared me in the face. The sparkle was gone. Is there anything so sad as a glass of champagne when it has gone flat and lifeless.

My cogitations were brief. The Count, after waiting for a minute or two to let me grasp the full importance of the sacrifice he was ready to make in order to secure me against personal loss, blandly announced that there were but two mortgages on the chateau, whereas nearly every other place of the kind within his knowledge had three as many.

"You wish me to accept a third mortgage on the place?" I inquired, pursing my lips.

"The Chateau is worth at least a million," he said earnestly. "But why worry about that, Mr. Smart? My personal note is all that is necessary. The matter of a mortgage is merely incidental. I believe it is considered business-like by you Americans, so I stand quite ready to abide by your habits. I shall soon be in possession of a million in any event, so you are quite safe in advancing me any amount up to—"

"Just a moment, Count," I interrupted, leaning forward in my chair. "May I inquire where and from whom you received the impression that I am a rich man?"

He laughed easily. "One who indulges a whim, Mr. Smart, is always rich. Schloss Rothhoefen condemns you to the purgatory of Croesus."

"Croesus would be a poor man in these days," said I. "If he lived in New York he would be wondering where his next meal was to come from. You have made a very poor guess as to my wealth. I am not a rich man."

He eyed me coldly. "Have you suddenly discovered the fact, sir?"

"What do you mean?"

"I suggest a way in which you can be of assistance to me, and you hesitate. How am I to have it, sir?"

His infernal air of superiority aggravated me. "You may take it just as you please, Mr. Pless."

"I beg you to remember that I am Count Tarnowsky. Mr.—"

I arose. "The gist of the matter is this: you want to borrow one hundred and fifty thousand dollars of me. That is—"

He hastened to correct me. "I do not call it borrowing when one gives ample security for the amount involved."

"What is your idea of borrowing, may I ask?"

"Borrowing is the same thing as asking a favor according to our conception of the transaction. I am not asking a favor of you, sir. Far from it. I am offering you an opportunity to put a certain amount of money out at a high rate of interest."

(To Be Continued.)

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