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HOME AND FARM MAGAZINE SECTION SERIAL

A Fool and His Money

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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, Poopendyke, 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. One guest, familiar with 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. The Count turns up again and asks for a loan of money, but is refused.

I CANNOT explain why, but at the slightest unusual sound that morning, I found myself shooting an involuntary glance at the imperturbable features of Ludwig the Red. Sometimes I stopped in the middle of a sentence, to look and to listen rather more intently than seemed absolutely necessary, and on each occasion I was obliged to begin the sentence all over again, because, for the life of me, I couldn't remember what it was I had set out to say in dictation. Poopendyke had an air of patient tolerance about him that irritated me intensely. More than once I thought I detected him in the act of suppressing a smile.

At eleven o'clock, Blatchford came to the door. His ordinarily stoical features bore signs of a great, though subdued excitement. I had a fleeting glimpse of Britton in the distance, — a sort of passing shadow, as it were.

"A note for you, sir, if you please," said he. He was holding the salver almost on a level with his nose. It seemed to me that he was looking at it out of the corner of his eye.

My heart—my incomprehensible heart—gave a leap that sent the blood rushing to my face. He advanced, not with his usual supposing tread but with a sprightliness that pleased me vastly. I took the little pearl grey envelope from the salver, and carelessly glanced at the superscription. There was a curious ringing in my ears.

"Thank you, Blatchford; that will do."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but there is to be an answer."

"Oh," said I. I had the feeling that at least fifty eyes were upon me, although I am bound to admit that both Poopendyke and the footman were actively engaged in looking in another direction.

I tore open the envelope.

"Have you deserted me entirely? Won't you please come and see me! Thanks for the violets, but I can't talk to violets, you know. Please come up for luncheon."

I managed to dash off a brief note in a fairly nonchalant manner. Blatchford almost committed the unpardonable crime of slamming the door behind him, he was in such a hurry to be off with the message.

Then I went over and stood above Mr. Poopendyke.

"Mr. Poopendyke," said I slowly, darkly, "what do you know about those violets?"

He quailed. "I hope you don't mind, Mr. Smart, it's all right. I put one of your cards in, so that there couldn't be any mistake."

CHAPTER XIII.

I Visit and Am Visited.

HALFWAY up the windings stairways, I paused in some astonishment. It had just occurred to me that I was going up the steps two at a time and that my heart was beating like mad.

I reflected. Here was I racing along like a schoolboy, and wherefor? What occasion was there for such unseemly haste? In the first place, it was now but a few minutes after eleven, and she had asked me for luncheon; there was no getting around that. At best luncheon was two hours off. So why was I galloping like this. The series of self-inflicted questions found me utterly unprepared; I couldn't get at them intelligently; I was befuddled. I progressed more slowly, more deliberately, finally coming to a full stop in a sitting posture in one of the window casements, where I lighted a cigarette and proceeded to thresh the thing out in my mind before going any farther.

The fundamental problem was this: why was I breaking my neck to get to her before Blatchford had time to deliver my response to her appealing little note? It was something of a facer, and it set me to wondering. Why was I so eager? Could it be possible that there was anything in the speculation of my servants? I recalled the sensation of supreme delight that shot through me when I received her note, but after that a queer sort of oblivion seems to have surrounded me, from which I was but now emerging in a timely struggle for self-control. There was something really startling about it, after all.

I profess to be a steady, level-headed, prosaic sort of person, and this surprising reversion to extreme youthfulness rather staggered me. In fact it brought a cold chill of suspicion into existence. Grown-up men do not, as a rule, fly off the head unless confronted by some prodigious emotion, such as terror, grief or guilt. And yet here was I going into a perfect rampage of rapture over a simple, unconventional communication from a lady whom I had known for less than a month and for whom I had no real feeling of sympathy whatever. The chill of suspicion continued to increase.

If it had been a cigar that I was smoking it would have gone out through neglect. A cigarette goes on forever and smells.

After ten minutes of serious, undisturbed consideration of the matter, I came to the final conclusion that it was not love but pity that had driven me to such abnormal activity.

It was nonsense to even argue the point.

Having thoroughly settled the matter to my own satisfaction and relief, I acknowledged a feeling of shame for having been so precipitous. I shudder to think of the look she would have given me if I had burst in upon her while in the throes of that extraordinary seizure. Obviously I had lost my wits. Now I had them once more, I knew what to do with them. First of all, I would wait until one o'clock before presenting myself for luncheon. Clearly that was the thing to do. Secondly, I would wait on this side of the castle instead of returning to my own rooms, thereby avoiding a very unpleasant gauntlet. Luckily I had profited by the discussion in the servants' quarters and was not wearing a three days' growth of beard. Moreover, I had taken considerable pains in dressing that morning. Evidently a presentiment.

For an hour and a half by my watch, but five or six by my nerves, I paced the lonely, sequestered halls in the lower regions of the castle. Two or three times I was sure that my watch had stopped, the hands seemed so stationary. The third time I tried to wind it, I broke the mainspring, but as it was nearly one o'clock not much harm was done.

That one little sentence, "Have you deserted me?" grew to be a voluminous indictment. I could think of nothing else. There was something ineffably sad and pathetic about it. Had she been unhappy because of my beastly behavior? Was her poor little heart sore over my incomprehensible conduct. Perhaps she had cried through sheer loneliness — But no! It would never do for me to even think of her in tears. I remembered having detected tears in her lovely eyes early in our acquaintance and the sight of them—or the sensation, if you please—quite unmanned me.

At last I approached her door. Upon my soul, my legs were trembling! I experienced a silly sensation of fear. A new problem confronted me: what was I to say to her? Following close upon this came another and even graver question: what would she say to me? Suppose she were to look at me with hurt, reproachful eyes and speak to me with a little quaver in her voice as she held out her hand to me timidly—what then? What would become of me? By Jove, the answer that flashed through my whole body almost deprived me of reason!

I hesitated, then, plucking up my courage and putting all silly questions behind me, I rapped resoundingly upon the door.

The excellent Hawkes opened it! I started back in dismay. He stood aside impressively.

"Mr. Smart!" he announced. Damm it all!

I caught sight of the Countess. She was arranging some flowers on the table. Blatchford was placing the knives and forks. Helen Marie Louise Antoinette stood beside her mistress holding a box of flowers in her hands.

What was it that I had been thinking out there in those gloomy halls? That she would greet me with a pathetic, hurt look and . . .

"Good morning!" she cried gaily. Hurt. Pathetic! She was radiant! "So glad to see you again. Hawkes has told me how busy you've been." She dried her hands on the abbreviated apron of Helen Marie Louise Antoinette and then quite composedly extended one for me to shake.

I bowed low over it. "Awfully, awfully busy," I murmured. Was it relief at finding her so happy and unconcerned that swept through me? I am morally, but shamelessly certain it wasn't!

"Don't you think the roses are lovely in that old silver bowl?"

"Exquisite."

"Blatchford found it in the plate vault," she said, standing off to admire the effect. "Do you mind if I go on arranging them?" she asked, and without waiting for an answer resumed her employment.

"Bon jour, m'sieur," said Helen Marie Louise Antoinette over her mistress' shoulder. One never knows whether a French maid is polite or merely spiteful.

"It seems ages since I saw you last," said the Countess in a matter-of-fact tone, jiggling a rose into position and then standing off to study the effect, her head cocked prettily at an angle of inquiry.

It suddenly occurred to me that she got on very well without me during the ages. The discovery irritated me. She was not behaving at all as I had expected. This cool, even casual reception certainly was not in keeping with my idea of what it ought to have been. "But Mr. Poopendyke has been awfully kind. He has given me all the news."

Poopendyke! Had he been visiting her without my knowledge or—was I about to say consent!

"There hasn't been a great deal of news,"

I said.

She dropped a long-stemmed rose and waited for me to pick it up.

"Thank you," she said. "Oh, did it prick you?"

"Yes," said I flatly. Then we both gave the closest attention to the end of my thumb while I triumphantly squeezed a tiny drop of blood out of it. I sucked it. The incident was closed. She was no longer interested in the laceration.

"Mr. Poopendyke know how lonely I would be. He telephoned twice a day."

I thought I detected a slight note of pique in her voice. But it was so slight that it was hardly worth while to admit.

"So you thought I had deserted you," I said, and was a little surprised at the gruffness in my voice.

"The violets appealed me," she said, with a smile. For the first time I noticed that she was wearing a large bunch of them. "You will be bankrupt, Mr. Smart, if you keep on buying roses and violets and orchids for me."

So the roses were mine also! I shot a swift glance at the mantelpiece, irresistibly moved by some mysterious force. There were two bowls of orchids there. I couldn't help thinking of the meddling, over-zealous gent that served the hero of Anstey's "Brass Bottle" tale. He was being outdone by my efficacious secretary.

"But they are lovely," she cried, noting the expression in my face and misconstruing it. "You are an angel."

That was the last straw. "I am nothing of the sort," I exclaimed, very hot and uncomfortable.

"You are," was her retort. "There! Isn't it a lovely centre-piece! Now, you must come and see Rosemary. She adores the new elephant you sent to her."

"Ele—" I began, blinking my eyes. "Oh—oh, yes, yes. Ha, ha! the elephant." Good Heavens, had that idiotic Poopendyke started a menagerie in my castle?

I was vastly relieved to find that the elephant was made of felt and not too large to keep Rosemary from wielding it skilfully in an assault upon the hapless Jinko. She had it firmly gripped by the proboscis, and she was shrieking with delight. Jinko was barking in vain-glorious defence. The racket was terrible.

The Countess succeeded in quelling the disturbance, and Rosemary ran up to kiss me. Jinko, who disliked me because I looked like the Count, also ran up, but his object was to bite me. I made up my mind, there and then that if I should ever, by any chance, fall in love with his mistress I would inaugurate the courting period by slaying Jinko.

Rosemary gleefully permitted me to sip honey from that warm little spot on her neck, and I forgot many odious things. As I held her in my arms I experienced a vivid longing to have a child of my own, just like Rosemary.

Our luncheon was not as gay nor as unconventional as others that had preceded it. The Countess vainly tried to make it as sprightly as its predecessors, but gave over in despair in the face of my taciturnity. Her spirits drooped. She became strangely uneasy and, I thought, preoccupied.

"What is on your mind, Countess?" I asked rather gruffly, after a painful silence of some duration.

She regarded me fixedly for a moment. She seemed to be searching my thoughts. "You," she said very succinctly. "Why are you so quiet, so funeral?" I observed a faint tinge of red in her cheeks and an ominous steadiness in her gaze. Was there anger also?

I apologized for my manners, and assured her that my work was responsible. But her moodiness increased. At last, apparently at the end of her resources, she announced that she was tired—that after we had had a cigarette she would ask to be excused, as she wanted to lie down. Would I come to see her the next day?

"But don't think of coming, Mr. Smart," she declared, "if you feel you cannot spare the time away from your work."

I began to feel heartily ashamed of my boorishness. After all, why should I expend my unpleasant humor on her?

"My dear Countess," I exclaimed, displaying a livelier interest than at any time before, "I shall be delighted to come. Permit me to add that my work may go hang."

Her face brightened. "But men must work," she objected.

"Not when women are willing to play," I said.

"Splendid!" she cried. "You are reviving. I feel better. If you are going to be nice, I'll let you stay."

"Thanks, I'll do my best."

She seemed to be weighing something in her mind. Her chin was in her hands, her elbows resting on the edge of the table. She was regarding me with speculative eyes.

"If you don't mind what the servants are saying about us, Mr. Smart, I am quite sure I do not."

I caught my breath.

"Oh, I understand everything," she cried mischievously, before I could stammer any-

thing in reply. "They are building a delightful romance around us. And why not? Why begrudge them the pleasure? No harm can come of it, you see."

"Certainly no harm," I floundered.

"The gossip is confined to the castle. It will not go any farther. We can afford to laugh in our sleeves, can't we?"

"Ha, ha!" I laughed in a strained effort, but not into my sleeve. "I rejoice to hear you say that you don't mind. No more do I. It's rather jolly."

"Fancy any one thinking we could possibly fall in love with each other," she scoffed. Her eyes were very bright. There was a suggestion of cold water in that remark.

"Yes, just fancy," I agreed.

"Absurd!"

"But, of course, as you say, if they can get any pleasure out of it, why should we object? It's a difficult matter keeping a cook any way."

"Well, we are bosom friends once more, are we not? I am so relieved."

"I suppose Poopendyke told you the—the gossip?"

"Oh, no! I had it from my maid. She is perfectly terrible. All French maids are, Mr. Smart. Beware of French maids! She won't have it any other way than that I am desperately in love with you. Isn't she delicious?"

"Eh!" I gasped.

"And she confides the wonderful secret to every one in the castle, from Rosemary down to Jinko."

"Pon my soul!" I murmured.

"And so now they all are saying that I am in love with you," she laughed. "Isn't it perfectly ludicrous?"

"Perfectly," I said without enthusiasm. My heart sank like lead. Ludicrous! Was that the way it appeared to her? I had a little spirit left. "Quite as ludicrous as the fancy Britton has about me. He is obsessed by the idea that I am in love with you. What do you think of that?"

She started. I thought her eyes narrowed for a second. "Ridiculous," she said, very simply. Then she arose abruptly. "Please ring the bell for Hawkes."

I did so. Hawkes appeared. "Clear the table, Hawkes," she said. "I want you to read all these newspapers clippings. Mr. Smart," she went on, pointing to a bundle on a chair near the window. We crossed the room. "Now that you know who I am, I insist on your reading all that the papers have been saying about me during the past five or six weeks."

I protested, but she was firm. "Every one else in the world has been reading about my affairs, so you must do likewise. No, it isn't necessary to read all of them. I will select the most lurid and the most glowing. You see there are two sides to the case. The papers that father can control are united in defending my action; the European press is just the other way. Sit down, please. I'll hand them to you."

For an hour I sat there in the window absorbing the astonishing history of the Tarnowsky abduction case. I felt rather than observed the intense scrutiny with which she favored me.

At last she tossed the remainder of the bundle unread, into a corner. Her face was aglow with pleasure.

"You've read both sides, and I've watched you—oh, so closely. You don't believe what the papers over here have to say. I saw the scowls when you read the translations that Mr. Poopendyke has typed for me. Now I know that you do not feel so bitterly toward me as you did at first."

I was resolved to make a last determined stand for my original convictions.

"But our own papers, the New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago journals—still voice, in a way, my principal contention in the matter, Countess. They deplore the wretched custom among the idle but ambitious rich that made possible this whole lamentable state of affairs. I mean the custom of getting a title into the family at any cost."

"My dear Mr. Smart," she said seriously, "do you really contend that all of the conjugal unhappiness and unrest of the world is confined to the American girls who marry noblemen? Has it escaped your notice that there are thousands of unhappy marriages and equally happy divorces in America every year in which noblemen do not figure at all? Have you not read of countless cases over there in which conditions are quite similar to those which make the Tarnowsky fiasco so notorious? Are not American women stealing their children from American husbands? Are all American husbands so perfect that Count Tarnowsky would appear black among them? Are there no American men who marry for money, and are there no American girls given in marriage to wealthy suitors of all ages, creeds and habits? Why do you maintain that an unfortunate alliance with a foreign nobleman is any worse than an unhappy marriage with an ordinary American brute? Are there no bad husbands in America?"

(To Be Continued)