

By
Geo. Barr
McCutcheon

Copyright, 1913,
By Geo. Barr
McCutcheon.

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, 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.

CHAPTER XIV.

I Am Forced Into Being a Hero.

MY HUMBLEST apologies, dear reader, if I have led you to suspect that I want to be looked upon as a hero. Far from patting myself on the back or holding my chin a little higher because of the set-to in my baronial hall, I confess to a feeling of shame. In my study, where the efficient Blatchford put arnica and bandages on my swollen knuckles, I solemnly declared in the presence of those who attended the clinic—my entire establishment was there to see that I had the proper attention and to tell me how happy they were that it wasn't any worse!—I said, I declared to all of them that I was an unmitigated fool and underserving of the slightest mead of praise.

They insisted upon making a hero of me, and might have succeeded, had not the incomparable Britton made the discovery that the Count's revolver was not loaded! Still, they vociferated, I could not have known that at the time of the encounter, nor was it at all likely that the Count knew it himself.

I confess to an inward and shameless glory, however, in the realization that I had been able to punch the head of the man who had lived with and abused that lovely creature upstairs. He had struck her on more than one occasion, I had it from her own lips. Far worse than that, he had kissed her! But of course I had not knocked him down for that. I did it because it was simpler than being knocked down myself.

The worst feature of the whole unhappy business was the effect it was likely to have upon my commonly pacific nature. Heretofore I had avoided physical encounters, not because I was afraid of the result, but because I hate brutal, unscientific manifestations of strength. Now, to my surprise, I found that it was a ridiculously easy matter to knock a man down and end the squabble in short order, thereby escaping a great deal in the shape of disgusting recriminations, and coming off victorious with nothing more vital in the way of wounds than a couple of bruised knuckles. (No doubt, with practice, one could even avoid having his knuckles barked.)

Was it not probable, therefore, that my habitual tendency to turn away wrath with a soft answer might suffer a more or less sanguinary shock? Now that I had found out how simple it was, would I not be satisfied to let my good right hand settle disputes for me—with uniform certainty and despatch? Heaven is my witness that I have no desire to be regarded as a brawler. I hope that it may never fall to my lot to again knock a man down. But if it should be necessary, I also wish to record the hope that the man may be a husband who has mistreated his wife.

In the course of Blatchford's ministrations I was regaled with eloquent descriptions of the manner in which my late adversary took his departure from the castle. He went forth vowing vengeance, calling down upon my head all the maledictions he could lay his tongue to, and darkly threatening to have me driven out of the country. I was not to expect a call from his seconds. He would not submit his friends to the indignities they were sure to encounter at the hands of a barbarian of my type. But, just the same, I would hear from him. I would regret the day, etc., etc.

I had forgotten Mr. Bangs, the lawyer. Sitting alone in my study, late in the afternoon, smoking a solitary pipe of peace, I remembered him—the man with the top button off. What had become of him? His presence (or, accurately, his absence) suddenly loomed up before me as the forerunner of an unwelcome invasion of my preserves. He was, no doubt, a sort of advance agent for the Titus family and its immediate ramifications.

Just as I was on the point of starting out to make inquiries concerning him, there came to my ears the sound of tapping on the back of Red Ludwig's portrait. Not until then did it occur to me that I had been waiting for two hours for that simple manifestation of interest and curiosity from the regions above. I rushed over and rapped resoundingly upon Ludwig's pudgy knee. The next instant there was a click and then the secret door swung open, revealing the eager, concerned face of my neighbor.

"What has happened?" she cried. I lifted her out of the frame. Her gaze fell upon the bandaged fist.

"Mr. Bangs spoke of a pistol. Don't tell me that he—he shot you!"

I held up my swollen hand rather proudly. It smelled vilely of arnica.

"This wound was self-inflicted, my dear Countess," I said, thrilled by her expression of concern. "I had the exquisite pleasure—and pain—of knocking your former husband down."

"Oh, splendid!" she cried, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "Mr. Bangs was rather hazy about it, and he would not let me risk telephoning. You knocked Maris down!"

"Emphatically," said I.

She mused. "I think it is the first time it has ever happened to him. How—how did he like it?"

"It appeared to prostrate him."

She smiled understandingly. "I am glad you did it, Mr. Smart."

"If I remember correctly, you once said that he had struck you, Countess."

Her face flushed. "Yes. On three separate occasions he struck me in the face with his open hand. I—I testified to that effect at the trial. Every one seemed to look upon it

as a joke. He swore that they were—were love pats."

"I hope his lack of discrimination will not lead him to believe that I was delivering a love pat," said I, firmly.

"Now, tell me everything that happened," she said, seating herself in my big armchair. Her feet failed to touch the floor. She was wearing the little tan pumps.

When I came to that part of the story where I accused Tarnowsky of duplicity in connection with the frescoes, she betrayed intense excitement.

"Of course it was all a bluff on my part," I explained.

"But you were nearer the truth than you thought," she said, compressing her lips. After a moment she went on: "Count Hohendahl sold the originals over three years ago. I was here with Maris at the time of the transaction and when the paintings were removed. Maris acted as an intermediary in the deal. Hohendahl received two hundred thousand dollars for the paintings, but they were worth it. I have reason to believe that Maris had a fourth of the amount for his commission. So, you see, you were right in your surmise."

"The infernal rascal! Where are the originals, Countess?"

"They are in my father's villa at Newport," she said. "I intended speaking of this to you before, but I was afraid your pride would be hurt. Of course, I should have spoken if it came to the point where you really considered having those forgeries restored."

"Your father bought them?"

"Yes. While we were spending our honeymoon here in Schloss Rothsofen, Mr. Smart," she said. Her face was very pale.

I could see that the dark associations filled her mind, and abruptly finished my tale without further reference to the paintings.

"He will challenge you," she said nervously. "I am so sorry to have placed you in this dreadful position, Mr. Smart. I shall never forgive myself for—"

"You are in no way concerned in what happened today," I interrupted. "It was a purely personal affair. Moreover, he will not challenge me."

"He has fought three duels," she said. "He is not a physical coward." Her dark eyes were full of dread.

I hesitated. "Would you be vitally interested in the outcome of such an affair?" I asked. My voice was strangely husky.

"Oh, how can you ask!"

"I mean, on Rosemary's account," I stammered. "He—he is her father, you see. It would mean—"

"I was not thinking of the danger to him, Mr. Smart," she said simply.

"But can't you see how dreadful it would be if I were to kill Rosemary's father?" I cried, completely forgetting myself. "Can't you see?"

A slow flush mounted to her brow. "That is precisely what I was thinking, Mr. Smart. It would be—unspeakably dreadful!"

I stood over her. My heart was pounding heavily. She must have seen the peril that lay in my eyes, for she suddenly slipped out of the chair and faced me, that flush dying in her cheek, leaving it as pale as ivory.

"You must not say anything more, Mr. Smart," she said gently.

A bitter smile came to my lips, and I drew back with a sickening sense of realization. There was nothing more to be said. But I now thoroughly understood one thing: I was in love with her!

I am something of a philosopher. I submit that my attitude at the time of my defeat at the hands of the jeweller's clerk proves the point conclusively. If I failed at that time to inspire feelings of love in the breast of a giddy stenographer, what right had I to expect anything better from the beautiful Countess Tarnowsky, whose aspirations left nothing to the imagination? While she was prone to chat without visible restraint at this significantly trying moment, I, being a philosopher, remained silent and thoughtful. Quite before I knew it, I was myself again—a steady, self-reliant person who could make the best of a situation, who could take his medicine like a man. Luckily, the medicine was not so bitter as it might have been if I had made a vulgar, impassioned display of my emotions. Thank heaven, I had that to be thankful for.

She was speaking of the buttonless lawyer, Mr. Bangs. "He is waiting to see you this evening, Mr. Smart, to discuss ways and means of getting my mother and brothers into the castle without discovery by the spies who are undoubtedly watching their every move."

I drew in another long, deep breath. "It seems to me that the thing cannot be done. The risk is tremendous. Why not head her off?"

"Head her off! You do not know my mother, Mr. Smart. She has made up her mind that her place is here with me, and there isn't anything in the world that can head her off, as you say."

"But surely you see the danger!"

"I do. I have tried to stop her. Mr. Bangs has tried to stop her. So has father. But she is coming. We must arrange something."

I was pacing the floor in front of her. She had resumed her place in the chair.

"My deepest regret, Countess, lies in the fact that our little visits will be—well, at an end. Our delightful little suppers and—"

"Oh, but think of the comfort it will be to you, not having me on your mind all of

the time. I shall not be lonesome, I shall not be afraid, I shall not be forever annoying you with selfish demands upon your good nature. You will have time to write without interruption. It will be for the best."

"No," said I, positively. "They were jolly parties, and I shall miss them."

She looked away quickly. "And, if all goes well, I shall soon be safely on my way to America. Then you will be rid of me completely."

I was startled. "You mean that there is a plan afoot to—smuggle you out of the country?"

"Yes. And I fear I shall have to trouble you again when it comes to that. You must help me, Mr. Smart."

I nodded slowly. Help her to get away? I hadn't thought of that lately. The prospect left me rather cold and sick.

"I'll do all that I can, Countess."

She smiled faintly, but I was certain that I detected a challenge—a rather unkind challenge—in her eyes. "You will come to see me in New York, of course."

I shook my head. "I am afraid we are counting our chickens before they're hatched. One or the other of us may be in jail for the next few years."

"Heavens!"

"But I'll come to see you in New York. If you'll let me," I cried, trying to repair the damage I had done. "I was jesting when I spoke of jail."

Her brow was puckered in thought. "It has just occurred to me, my dear friend, that even if I do get safely away, you will be left here to face the consequences. When it becomes known that you sheltered me, the authorities may make it extremely uncomfortable for you."

"I'm not worrying about that."

"Just the same, it is something to worry about," she said, seriously. "Now, here is what I have had in mind for a long, long time. Why don't you come with me when I leave? That will be the safest plan."

"You are not in earnest!"

"Assuredly. The plan is something like this: I am to be taken by slow stages, overland, to a small Mediterranean port. One of a half-dozen American yachts now cruising the sea will be ready to pick me up. Doesn't it seem simple?"

"It seems simple enough," said I. "But there are a lot of 'ifs' between here and the little port you hope to reach. It will not be an easy matter to manage the successful flight of a party as large as yours will be."

"Oh," she cried. "I shall be quite alone, except for Rosemary and Blake—and Mr. Bangs."

"But your mother! You can't leave her here."

"You will have to smuggle her out of the castle a day or two in advance. It is all thought out, Mr. Smart."

"By Jove!" I exclaimed, with more irrepressibility than I intended to show. "If I succeed in doing all that is expected of me, I certainly will be entitled to more than an invitation to come and see you in New York."

She arose and laid her fingers upon my bandaged hand. The reckless light had died out of her eyes.

"I have thought that out, too, Mr. Smart," she said, quietly. "And now, good-bye. You will come up to see Mr. Bangs tonight?"

Considerably mystified by her remark, I said I would come, and then assisted her through the opening in the wall. She smiled back at me as the portrait swung into place.

What did she mean? Was it possible that she meant to have old man Titus reward me in a pecuniary way? The very thought of such a thing caused me to double up my fist—my recently discovered fist!—and to swear softly under my breath. After a few moments I was conscious of a fierce pain in the back of my hand.

Bangs was a shrewd little Englishman. As I shook hands with him—using my left hand with a superfluous apology—I glanced at the top of his waistcoat. There was no button missing.

"The Countess sewed it on for me," he said drily, reading my thoughts.

I stayed late with them, discussing plans. He had strongly advised against any attempt on Mr. Titus' part to enter her daughter's hiding place, but had been overruled. I conceived the notion, too, that he was a very strong-minded man. What then must have been the strength of Mrs. Titus' resolution to overcome the objections he put in her way!

He, too, had thought it all out. Everybody seems to have thought everything out with a single exception—myself. His plan was not a bad one. Mrs. Titus and her sons were to enter the castle under cover of night, and I was to meet them in an automobile at a town some fifteen kilometers away, where they would leave the train while their watchers were asleep, and bring them overland to Schloss Rothsofen. They would be accompanied by a single lady's maid and no luggage. A chartered motor boat would meet us up the river a few miles, and—well, it looked very simple! All that was required of me was a willingness to address her as "Mother" and her sons as "brothers" in case there were any questions asked.

This was Tuesday. They were coming on Thursday, and the train reached the station mentioned at half-past twelve at night. So you will see it was a jolly arrangement.

I put Mr. Bangs up in my best guest chamber, and, be it said to my credit, the Countess did not have to suggest it to me. As we said good night to her on the little landing at the top of the stairs, she took my bandaged paw between her two little hands and said:

"You will soon be rid of me forever, Mr. Smart. Will you bear with me patiently for a little while longer?" There was a plaintive, appealing note in her voice. She seemed strangely subdued.

"I can bear with you much easier than I can bear the thought of being rid of you," I said in a very low voice. She pressed my clumsy hand fiercely, and I felt no pain.

"You have been too good to me," she said in a very small voice. "Some day, when I am out of all this trouble, I may be able to tell you how much I appreciate all you have done for me."

An almost irresistible—I was about to say ungovernable—impulse to seize her in my arms came over me, but I conquered it and rushed after Mr. Bangs, as blind as a bat and reeling for a dozen steps or more. It was a most extraordinary feeling.

I found myself wondering if passion had that effect on all men. If this was an illustration of what a real passionate love could do to a sensible, level-headed person, then what, in heaven's name, was the emotion I had characterized as love during my placid courtship of the faintly remembered typewriter! There had been no such blinding, staggering sensation as this. No thoughts of physical contact with my former inamorata had left me weak and trembling and dazed as I was at this historic moment.

Bangs was chattering in his gibb English fashion as we descended to my study, but I did not hear half that he said. He looked surprised at two or three of the answers I made to his questions, and I am sure there were several of them that I didn't respond to at all. He must have thought me an unmannerly person.

One remark of his brought me rather sharply to my senses. I seemed capable of grasping its awful significance when all the others had gone by without notice.

"If all goes well," he was saying, "she should be safely away from here on the fourteenth. That leaves less than ten days more, sir, under your hospitable roof."

"Less than ten days," I repeated. This was the fifth of the month. "If all goes well, less than ten days."

Again I passed a sleepless night. A feeling of the utmost loneliness and desolation grew up within me. Less than ten days! And then she would be "safely away" from me. She and Rosemary! There was a single ray of brightness in the gloom that shrouded my thoughts—she had urged me to fly away with her. She did not want to leave me behind to face the perils after she was safely out of them. God bless her for thinking of that!

But of course what little common sense and judgment I had left within me told me that such a course was entirely out of the question. I could not go away with her. I could do no more than to see her safely on her way to the queer little port on the east coast of Italy. Then I should return to my bleak, joyless castle—to my sepulchre—and suffer all the torments of the damned for days and weeks until word came that she was actually safe on the other side of the Atlantic.

What courage, what pluck she had! Criminal. No, a thousand times, no! She was claiming her own, her dearest own. The devil must have been in the people who set themselves up as judges to condemn her for fighting so bravely for that which God had given her. Curse them all! . . . I fear that my thoughts became more and more maudlin as the interminable night went on.

Always they came back to the sickening realization that I was to lose her in ten days, and that my castle would be like a tomb.

Of course the Hassards and the Billy Smiths were possible panaceas, but what could they bring to ease the pangs of a secret nostalgia? Nothing but their own blissful contentment, their own happiness to make my loneliness seem all the more horrible by contrast. Would it not be better for me to face it alone! Would it not be better to live the life of a hermit?

She came to visit me at 12 o'clock the next day. I was alone in the study. Poopendyke was showing Mr. Bangs over the castle.

She was dressed in a gown of some soft gray material, and there was a bunch of violets at her girdle.

(To Be Continued.)

STENOGRAPHERS WANTED

Good Salaries :: Rapid Promotion

You can learn by mail. Write today for full information. SUCCESS SHORT HAND SCHOOL, Liberty Bldg., Seattle, Wash.
Opposite Postoffice.