

HOME AND FARM MAGAZINE SECTION SERIAL.

A Fool and His Money--By George Barr McCutcheon

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"I HAVE never seen a wet hen, but I should say, on a guess, that she's a good bit like one. Perhaps when she's thoroughly dried out she may not be so bad, but—" He drew a long, deep breath. "But, upon my word of honor, she was the limit last night. Of course one couldn't expect her to be exactly gracious, with her hair plastered over her face and her hat soaked and her clothes soaked, but there was really no excuse for some of the things she said to me. I shall overlook them for your sake and for the Countess's." He was painfully red in the face.

"The conditions, Fred," I said, "were scarcely conducive to polite conversation." "But, hang it all, I was as wet as a wasp," he exploded, so violently that I saw his soul must have been tried to the utmost. "We must try to make the best of it," I said. "It will not be for long." The thought of it somehow sent my heart back to its lowest level.

He was dum and silent for a few minutes. Then he said, as if the thought had been on his mind for some hours: "She isn't a day over forty-five. It doesn't seem possible, with a six-foot son twenty-six years old."

Grimly I explained, "They marry quite young when it's for money, Fred." "I suppose that's it," he sighed. "I fancy she's handsome, too, when she hasn't been rained upon."

We were half way up the slope when he announced nervously that all of my dry clothing was in the closet off my bedroom and could not be got at under any circumstance.

"But," he said, "I have laid out my best frock coat and trousers for you, and a complete change of linen. You are quite welcome to anything I possess, Mr. Smart. I think if you take a couple of rolls at the bottom of the trousers, they'll be presentable. The coat may be a little long for you, but—"

My loud laughter cut him short. "It's the best I could do," he said in an aggrieved voice.

I had a secret hope that the Countess would be in the courtyard to welcome me, but I was disappointed. Old Gretel met me and went over me, as if I was not already sufficiently moist. The chef came running out to say that breakfast would be ready for me when I desired it. Blatchford felt of my coat sleeve and told me that I was quite wet. Hawkes had two large, steaming toddies waiting for us in the vestibule, apparently fearing that we could get no farther without the aid of a stimulant. But there was no sign of a single Titus.

Later I ventured forth in Popenody's best suit of clothes—the one he uses when he passes the plate on Sundays in far-away Yonkers. It smelled of moth-balls, but it was gloriously dry, so why care! We sneaked down the corridor past my own bedroom door and stole into the study.

Just inside the door, I stopped in amazement. The Countess was sound asleep in my big armchair, a forlorn but lovely thing in a slink pelisse. Her rumpled brown hair nestled in the angle of the chair, her hands drooped listlessly at her sides, dark lashes lay upon the soft white cheeks. Her lips were parted ever so slightly, and her bosom rose and fell in the long swell of perfect repose.

Popenody clutched me by the arm and drew me toward the door, or I might have stood there transfixed for heaven knows how long.

"She's asleep," he whispered. "It was the second time in twelve hours that some one had intimated that I was blind."

CHAPTER XVI

I Indulge in Plain Language.

The door creaked villainously. The gaunt, ecclesiastical tails of my borrowed frock coat were on the verge of being safely outside with me when she cried out. Whereupon I swiftly transposed myself, and stuck my head through the half-open door.

"Oh, it's you!" she cried, in a quavery voice. She was leaning forward in the chair, her eyes wide open and eager.

I advanced into the room. A look of doubt sprang into her face. She stared for a moment and then rather pitiously rubbed her eyes.

"Yes, it is I," said I, spreading my arms in such a way that my hands emerged from the confines of Popenody's sleeves. (Upon my word, I had no idea that he was so much longer than I!) "It is still I, Countess, despite the shrinkage."

"The shrinkage?" she murmured, slowly sliding out of the chair. As she unbent her cramped legs, she made a little grimace of pain, but smiled as she limped toward me, her hand extended.

"Yes, I always shrink when I get wet," I explained, resorting to facetiousness.

Then I bent over her hand and kissed it. As I neglected to release it at once, the cuff of Popenody's best coat slid down over our two hands, completely enveloping them. It was too much for me to stand, I squeezed her hand with painful fervor, and then released it in trepidation.

"Popenody goes to church in it," I said vaguely, leaving her to guess what it was that Popenody went to church in, or, perhaps, knowing what I meant, how I happened to be in it for the time being. "You've been crying!"

Her eyes were red and suspiciously moist. As she met my concerned gaze, a wavering, whimsical smile crept into her face.

"It has been a disgustingly wet night," she said. "Oh, you don't know how happy I am to see you standing here once more, safe and sound, and—and amiable. I expected you to shiver and growl and—"

"On a bright, glorious, sunshiny morning like this?" I cried. "Never! I prefer to be graciously reluctant. Our troubles are behind us."

"How good you are." After a moment's careful scrutiny of my face: "I can see the traces of very black thoughts, Mr. Smart,—and recent ones."

"They were black until I came into this room," I confessed. "Now they are rosulated."

She bent her slender body a little toward me and the red seemed to leap back into her lips as if propelled by magic. Resolutely I put my awkward, ungainly arms behind my back, and straightened my figure. I was curiously impressed by the discovery that I was very, very tall and she very much smaller than my memory recorded. Of course I had no means of knowing that she was in bedroom slippers and not in the customary high-heeled boots that gave her an inch and a half of false stature.

"Your mother is here," I remarked hurriedly.

She glanced toward my bedroom door.

"Oh, what a night!" she sighed. "I did

all that I could to keep her out of your bed. It was useless, I did cry. Mr. Smart. I know you must hate all of us."

I laughed. "Love thy neighbor as thyself," I quoted. "You are my neighbor, Countess; don't forget that. And it so happens that your mother is also my neighbor at present, and your brothers too. Have you any cousins and aunts?"

"I can't understand how any one can be so good-natured as you," she sighed.

The crown of her head was on a level with my shoulder. Her eyes were lowered; a faint line of distress grew between them. For a minute I stared down at the brown crest of her head, an almost ungovernable impulse pounding away at my sense of discretion. I do take credit unto myself for being strong enough to resist that opportunity to make an everlasting idiot of myself. I knew, even then, that if a similar attack ever came upon me again I should not be able to withstand it. It was too much to expect of mortal man. Angels might survive the test, but not wingless man.

All this time she was staring rather pensively at the second button from the top of Popenody's coat, and so prolonged and earnest was her gaze that I looked down in some concern at the same time permitting myself to make a nervous, jerky and quite involuntary digital examination of the aforesaid button. She looked up with a nervous little laugh.

"I shall have to sew one on right there for poor Mr. Popenody," she said, poking her finger into the empty buttonhole. "You dear bachelors!"

Then she turned swiftly away from me, and slipped over to the big armchair, from the depths of which she fished a small velvet bag. Looking over her shoulder, she smiled at me.

"Please look the other way," she said. Without waiting for me to do so, she took out a little gold box, a powder puff, and a stick of lip rouge. Crossing to the small Florentine mirror that hung near my desk, she proceeded, before my startled eyes, to repair the slight—and to me unnoticeable—damage that had been done to her complexion before the sun came up.

"Woman works in a mysterious way, my friend," she wenders to perform," she paraphrased calmly.

"No matter how transcendently beautiful woman may be, she always does that sort of thing to herself. I take it," said I.

"She does," said the Countess with conviction. She surveyed herself critically. "There! And now I am ready to accept an invitation to breakfast. I am disgustingly hungry."

"And so am I!" I cried with enthusiasm. "Hurry! You shall eat Popenody's breakfast, just to penalise him for failing in his duties as host during my unavoidable—"

"Quite impossible," she said. "He has already eaten it."

"He has?"

"At half-past six, I believe. He announced at that ungodly hour that if he couldn't have his coffee the first thing in the morning he would be in for a headache all day. He suggested that I take a little nap and have breakfast with you—if you succeeded in surviving the night."

"Oh, I see," said I slowly. "He knew all the time that you were snapping in that chair, eh?"

"You shall not scold him!"

"I shall do even worse than that. I shall pension him for life."

She appeared thoughtful. A little frown of annoyance clouded her brow.

"He promised faithfully to arouse me the instant you were sighted on the opposite side of the river. I made him stand in the window with a field glass. No, on second thought, I shall scold him. If he had come to the door and shouted, you wouldn't have caught me in this odious dressing-gown, Helene."

"It is most fascinating," I cried. "Adorable! I love slimy, pink things. They're so intimate. And Popenody knows it, bless his ingenuous old soul."

I surprised a queer little gleam of inquiry in her eyes. It flickered for a second and died out.

"Do you really consider him an ingenuous old soul?" she asked. And I thought there was something rather metallic in her voice. I might have replied with intelligence if she had given me a chance, but for some reason she chose to drop the subject. "You must be famished, and I am dying to hear about your experiences. You must not omit a single detail."

There came a gentle, discreet knocking on the half-open door. I started, somewhat guiltily.

"Come!"

Blatchford poked his irreproachable visage through the aperture and then gravely swung the door wide open.

"Breakfast is served, sir—your ladyship. I beg pardon."

I have never seen him stand so faultlessly rigid. As we passed him on the way out a mean desire came over me to tread on his toes, just as an experiment. I wondered if he would change expression. But somehow I felt that he would say "Thank you, sir," and there would be no satisfaction in knowing that he had had all his pains for nothing.

I shall never forget that enchanted breakfast—never! Not that I can recall even vaguely what we had to eat, or who served it, or how much of the naked truth I related to her in describing the events of the night; I can only declare that it was a singularly light-hearted affair.

At half-past 1 o'clock I was received by Mrs. Titus in my own study. The Countess came down from her eerie abode to officiate at the ceremonial function—if it may be so styled—and I was agreeably surprised to find my new guest in a most amiable frame of mind. True, she looked me over with what seemed to me an unnecessarily and perfectly frank stare of curiosity, but, on sober reflection, I did not hold it against her. I was still draped in Popenody's garments.

At first sight I suppose she couldn't quite help putting me down as one of those literary freaks who typify intellect without intelligence.

As for her two sons, they made no effort to disguise their amazement. (I have a shocking notion that the vowel u might be substituted for the a in that word without loss of integrity!)

The elder of the two young men, Collingcraft Titus, who, being in the business with his father in New York, was permitted to travel most of the time, was taller than I, and an extremely handsome chap to boot. He was 26. The younger, Jasper, Jr., was 19, short and slight of build, with the merriest eyes I've ever seen. I didn't in the least mind the grin he bestowed upon me—and preserved with staunch fidelity throughout the whole interview—but I resented the supercilious, lordly scorn of his elder brother.

Jasper, I learned, was enduring a protracted leave of absence from Yale; the hiatus between his freshman and sophomore years already covered a period of 16 months, and he had a tutor who appreciated the buttry side of his crust.

Mrs. Titus, after thanking me warmly—

and I think sincerely—for all that I had done for Althea, apologized in a perfunctory sort of way for having kept me out of my bed all night, and hoped that I wouldn't catch cold or have an attack of rheumatism. I soon awoke to the fact that she was in the habit of centralizing attention. The usually volatile Countess became subdued and repressed in her presence; the big son and the little one were respectfully quiescent; I confess to a certain embarrassment myself.

She was a handsome woman with a young figure, a good complexion, clear eyes, wavy brown hair, and a rich, low voice perfectly modulated. No doubt she was nearing 50, but 35 would have been your guess, provided you were a bachelor. A bachelor learns something about women every day of his life, but not so much that he cannot be surprised the day after.

I endeavored to set her mind at rest by politely reminding her that I couldn't have slept in the bed any way, having been out all night, and she smilingly assured me that it was a relief to find a literary man who wasn't forever saying flat, stupid things.

I took them over the castle—that is, a part of the castle. Mrs. Titus wouldn't climb stairs. She confessed to hanting, but drew the line at anything more exhausting. I fear I was too palpably relieved when she declined to go higher than the second story. "It isn't necessary, Mr. Smart," she said sweetly, "to go into the history of the wretched Rothbofers, as a Cook's interpreter might do. You see, I know the castle quite well—and I have had all the late news from my daughter."

"Of course," I agreed. "Stupid of me not to remember that you are descended from—" "Mother isn't half as stuck up about it as you might think, Mr. Smart," interrupted Jasper, Jr., glibly. "She prefers to let people think her ancestors were Dutch instead of merely German. Dutch ancestors are the proper thing in New York."

"Jaspie," said his mother severely, "how often must I caution you not to speak of New-York as Jew York. Some day you will say it to a Jew. One can't be too careful. Heaven alone knows when one is in the presence of a Jew in these days."

"Oh, I'm not Hebraic," said I quickly. "My ancestors were Dutch. They came over with the original skin grafters."

She looked puzzled for a moment. The Countess laughed. Then Jasper saw the point. Collingcraft was the last to see it, and then it was too late for him to smile.

We had tea in the loggia and I dined with the family in the Countess's apartment at 8 that night. I think Mrs. Titus was rather favorably impressed when she beheld me in my own raiment. Britton had smoothed out my evening clothes until they almost shone, and I managed to carry myself with unusual buoyancy.

Everything went very well that evening. We were all in fine humor and the dinner was an excellent one. I perpetrated but one unhappy blunder. I asked Mrs. Titus if she knew the Riley-Werkheimers and the Rockworths in New York.

"Visually," she said succinctly and I made haste to change the subject. The Countess looked amused, and Collingcraft said something about it being more than likely that we did not have any mutual acquaintances in New York. His sister came to my rescue with a very amusing and exaggerated account of my experience with the Riley-Werkheimers and Rockworths. Jasper was enthusiastic. Something told me that I was going to like him.

My real troubles began the next day—and at a rather unseasonable hour, of 3 o'clock in the morning. Collingcraft came down the hall in a bath-gown and slippers, banged on my bedroom door, and wanted to know why the devil he couldn't have hot water for his bath. He was too full-blooded, and all that sort of thing, he said, to take a cold plunge. Moreover, he wasn't used to taking his tub in a tin-cup. (That was his sarcastic way of referring to my portable, handy bath-tub.) I asked him why he didn't ring for Britton, and he said he did, but that Britton was assisting Jasper in a wild chase for a bat which had got into the lad's room during the night.

"Thank your lucky stars it didn't get into mother's room," he said surlily. I silently thanked them.

He made such a row about his tub that I had to give him the pall of hot water Britton had placed in my bedroom, preparatory to my own bath.

At breakfast Jasper complained about the bats. He couldn't for the life of him see why I didn't have screens in the windows.

Later on Mrs. Titus, who had coffee and toast in her room, joined us in the loggia and announced that the coffee was stone cold. Moreover, she did not like the guest-chamber into which she had been moved by order of the Countess. It was too huge for a bed-chamber and the iron window shutters creaked all night long.

"But don't you love the view you have of the Danube?" I queried, rather mournfully.

"I don't sit in the window all night, Mr. Smart," she said tartly.

I at once insisted on her resuming possession of my bedroom, and promptly had all of my things moved into the one she had occupied during the night. When the Countess heard of this arrangement she was most indignant. She got me off in a corner and cruelly informed me that I hadn't the vestige of a backbone. She must have said something to her mother, too, for when evening came around I had to move back into my own room. Mrs. Titus sweetly assuring me that under no consideration would she consent to impose upon my good nature and hospitality to such an extent, etc., etc.

During the day, at odd times, Collingcraft made lofty suggestions in regard to what could be done with the place to make it more or less inhabitable, and Jasper, who, by the way, I was beginning to fear I should not like after all—said he'd just like to have a whack at the thing himself. First thing he'd do would be to turn some of those old, unused rooms into squash and racquet courts, and he'd also put in a swimming-pool and a hot-water plan.

Later in the afternoon, I stole far up into the eastern tower to visit my adorable friend Rosemary. We played house together on the nursery floor and I soon got over my feeling of depression. But even in play I was made to realize that I was not the master of the house. She ruled me with the utmost despotism, but I didn't mind. She permitted me to sin honey from that running place in her little neck and managed to call me Taker. My heart grew warm and soft again under the spell of her.

The Countess watched us at play from her seat by the window. She was strangely still and pensive. I had the feeling that she was watching me all the time, and that there was a shadow of anxiety in her lovely eyes. She smiled at our pranks, and yet there was something sad in the smile.

I was young again, with Rosemary, and full of glee. She took me out of myself, I forgot the three Tituses and with them many of my woes. Here was a cure for the blues; this was little kiddie of the unspeakable Tarnowsky!

I lay awake for hours that night, but when I finally went to sleep—and heaven knows I needed it!—it was with the soporific resolution to put my house right

in order the very next day. I would be polite about it, but very firm. The Titus family, admitting the Countess and Rosemary was to be favored with an ultimatum from which there could be no appeal. John Bellamy Smart had decided—with Morpheus smoothing out the wrinkles of perplexity—that he would be master in his own house.

My high resolve flattened itself out a little after the sound sleep I had, and I make no doubt I should have wavered sadly in my purpose had not a crisis arisen to shape my course for me in a rather emphatic way.

Shortly after breakfast Mrs. Titus came downstairs very smartly, gowned for the street. She announced that she was going into the town for an hour or two and asked me to have one of the Schmicks ferry her across the river. There was a famous antique shop there—memory of other days—and she wanted to browse a while in search of bric-a-brac and bonanzas.

I looked at her, earnest. I recognized the crisis, but for a moment was unable to marshal my powers of resistance. Nothing, my consternation, she calmly assured me, that there wouldn't be the least danger of detection, as she was going to be heavily veiled and very cautious.

"My dear Mrs. Titus," I murmured in my dismay. "It isn't to be considered. I am sure you won't persist in this when I tell you that Tarnowsky's agents are sure to see you and—"

She laughed. "Tarnowsky's agents! Why should they be here?"

"They seem to be everywhere." "I can assure you there is none within fifty miles of Schloss Rothbofer. Our men are in the city. Four of them preceded me. This morning I had Mr. Bangs telephone to the hotel where the chief operative is staying—in the guise of an American tourist, and he does it very cleverly for an Englishman, too,—and he assures me that there is absolutely no danger. Even Mr. Bangs is satisfied."

"I am forced to say that I am by no means satisfied that it is a safe or wise thing to do, Mrs. Titus," I said, with more firmness than I thought I possessed.

She raised her delicate eyebrows in a most exasperating well-bred, admonitory way. "I am quite sure, Mr. Smart, that Dillingham is a perfectly trustworthy detective, and—"

"But why take the slightest risk?"

"It is necessary for me to see Dillingham, that is the long and short of it," she said coldly. "One can't discuss things over a telephone, you know. Mr. Bangs understands. And, by the way, Mr. Smart, I have taken the liberty of calling up the central office of the telephone company to ask if they can run an extension wire to my dressing-room. I hope you do not mind."

"Not in the least. I should have thought of it myself."

"You have so much to think of, poor man. And now will you be good enough to have Hawkes order the man to row me across the river."

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Titus," said I firmly, "but I fear I must declare myself. I cannot permit you to go into the town today."

She was thunderstruck. "Are you in earnest?" she cried, after searching my face rather intently for a moment.

"Unhappily, yes. Will you let me explain?"

"The idea," she exclaimed as she drew herself to her full height and withered me with a look of surpassing scorn. "Am I to regard myself as a prisoner, Mr. Smart?"

"Oh, I beg of you Mrs. Titus—" I began miserably.

"Please answer my question."

Her tone cut me like the lash of a whip. My color rose.

"I do not choose to regard myself as a prisoner. My only object in opposing this absurd—" "I have never known anything so absurd." Two bright red spots appeared in her cheeks. "Your attitude is most extraordinary. However, I shall go to the city this morning, Mr. Smart. Pray give me the credit of having sense enough to— Ah, Collingcraft!"

The two sons approached from the breakfast-room, where they had been enjoying a ten o'clock chop. Collingcraft, noting his mother's attire, accelerated his speed and was soon beside us.

"Going out, Mother?" he inquired, flicking the ash from his cigarette.

"If Mr. Smart will be good enough to withdraw his opposition," she said telly.

He came me a sharp look. "What's up?"

"Mrs. Titus doesn't seem to realize the risk she runs in this."

"Risk? Do you suppose, Mr. Smart, I would jeopardize my daughter's—"

"What's up?" repeated Collingcraft insistently.

"Mr. Smart calmly informs me that I am not to go into the city."

"I don't see that Mr. Smart has anything to say about it," said her son coolly. "If he—"

He paused, glaring.

I looked him squarely in the eye. If he had possessed the acumen of a poodle he would have seen that my Dutch was up.

"One moment, Mr. Titus," I said, setting my jaw. "I have this to say about it. You are guests in my house. We are jointly interested in the effort to protect the Countess Tarnowsky. I consider it to be the height of imprudence for any member of your family to venture into the city, now or at any time during her stay in this castle. I happen to know that Tarnowsky is having me watched for some purpose or other. I don't think he suspects that the Countess is here, but I greatly fear that he believes I am interested in her cause. He suspects me. You have heard of our recent encounter. He knows my position pretty well by this time. Mrs. Titus says that the man Dillingham assures her there is no danger. Well, I can only say that Dillingham is a fool, and I don't suppose having my own safety threatened by—"

"Your safety?" exclaimed he. "I like that! What have you got to be afraid of?"

"You seem to forget that I am harboring a fugitive from justice," I said telly.

Mrs. Titus gasped. "How dare you—"

"The Countess Tarnowsky is wanted by the authorities for kidnapping, and I think you know the facts quite as well as I do. I went on happily. "God knows I am doing my best to protect her. I am risking more than you seem to appreciate. If she is found here, my position isn't likely to be an enviable one. I am not thinking solely of myself, believe me, but after all I contend that I have a right to assert myself in a crisis that may affect me vitally. I trust you will see my position and act accordingly,—with consideration, if nothing else."

Mrs. Titus did not take her eyes off mine while I was speaking. There was an expression of utter amazement in them. No one had ever accused her before in just the way I gathered. She didn't know what to make of it.

"I fear you exaggerate the extent of your peril, Mr. Smart," she said drily. "Of course, I have no desire to put you in jeopardy, but it seems to me—"

"Leaving me out of the case altogether, don't you think it is a bit unfair to the Countess?" I asked in some heat. "She doesn't want to go to jail."

"Jail?" she cried angrily.

"That's no way to speak about—" began Collingcraft furiously.

(To Be Continued.)