

HOME AND FARM MAGAZINE SECTION SERIAL.

A Fool and His Money--By George Barr McCutcheon

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"BROKE in rashly. 'If you please, Mr. Titus, be good enough to keep your temper. I have no desire to appear harsh and arbitrary, but I can see that it is necessary to speak plainly. There isn't anything in the world I will not do to help you and the Countess in this unfortunate business, Mrs. Titus. I hope you believe me when I say as much. I am your friend; I want to be yours if you will let me. But I reserve the right to say what shall be and what shall not be done as long as you are under my roof. Just a moment, Mr. Titus. I think we are quite agreed that your sister is to depart from here on the fourteenth of the month. I am to be her escort, so to speak, for a considerable distance, in company with Mr. Bangs. Well, it must be clearly understood that not one of you is to show his or her face outside these walls until after that journey is over. That's plain-speaking, isn't it?"

"I shall go where I please, and I'll go to the town today," roared Collingcraft, getting no further for the reason that his mother, seeing that I was desperately in earnest, gave vent to a little cry of alarm and clutched her big son by the shoulder. She begged him to listen to reason!

"Reason!" he gasped.

"If you—or any of you—put a foot outside these walls," I declared, "you will not be allowed to re-enter. That's flat!"

"By crick!" I felt in fervent admiration from the look of Jasper, Jr. I glanced at his beaming, astonished face. He positively was grinning! "Good for you! You're a wonder, Mr. Smart! By crick! And you're dead right. We're darn fools!"

"Jasper!" gasped Mrs. Titus.

"Good for you, Jasper!" I cried warmly, and took the hand he proffered.

"Collingcraft, please take me to my room," murmured the mother. "I—I feel faint. Send for Aline. Ask Mr. Bangs to come to me at once."

I bowed stiffly. "I am sorry, Mrs. Titus, to have been so harsh, so assertive."

She held up both hands. "I never was so spoken to in all my life, Mr. Smart. I shall not forget it to my dying day."

She walked away from me, her pretty head held high and her chin suspiciously quivering. Collingcraft hastened after her, but not without giving me a stare in which rage and wonder struggled for the mastery. I ran my hand over my moist brow.

"Gee!" said Jasper, Jr. "You've coked her all right, all right." He followed me into the study and I couldn't get rid of him for hours.

Later in the forenoon the Countess, with a queer little smile on her lips, told me that her mother, considered me the most wonderful, the most forceful character she had ever encountered. I brightened up at that.

But Collingcraft was not yet through with me.

CHAPTER XVII.

I See to the Bottom of Things.

He sought me out just before luncheon. I was in the courtyard, listening patiently to Jasper, Jr.'s theories and suggestions concerning the restoration of the entire facade of the castle, and what he'd do if he were in my place. Strange to say, I was considerably entertained; he was not at all offensive, on the contrary, he offered his ideas in a pleasantly ingenious way, always supplementing them with some such salve as: "Don't you think so, Mr. Smart?" or "I'm sure you have thought of it yourself!" or "Isn't that your idea, too?" or "You've done wonders with the joint, old man!"

Collingcraft came directly up to where we were standing. There was trouble in his eye.

"See here, Mr. Smart," he began sternly. "I've got something to say to you, and I'm not the sort to put it off. I appreciate what you've done for Aline and all that sort of thing, but your manner today has been intolerable, and we've got to come to an understanding."

I eyed him closely. "I suppose you're about to suggest that one of the other of us must—evacuate—get out, so to speak," said I.

"Don't talk rubbish. You've got my mother hawking her eyes out upstairs, and wishing she were dead. You've got to come off this high horse of yours. You've got to apologise to her, and damned quick, at that. Understand?"

"Nothing will give me greater joy than to offer her my most abject apology," Mr. Titus, unless it would be her unqualified forgiveness."

"You'll have to withdraw everything you said."

"I'll withdraw everything except my ultimatum in respect to her putting a foot outside these walls. That still stands."

"I beg to differ with you."

"You may beg till you're black in the face," said I coolly.

He swallowed hard. His face twitched, and his hands were clenched.

"You are pretty much of a snicker, Mr. Smart," he said, between his teeth. "I'm sorry my sister has fallen into your hands. The worst of it is, she seems satisfied with everything you do. Good Lord! What she can see in you is beyond my comprehension. Protection! Why, you couldn't protect her from the assault of a chicken!"

"Are you trying to insult me, Mr. Titus?"

"You couldn't resent it if I were. There never was an author with enough moral backbone to—"

"Wait! You are her brother. I don't want to have trouble with you. But if you keep on in this strain, Mr. Titus, I shall be compelled to threaten you soundly."

He fairly gasped. "Th—threaten me!" he choked out. Then he advanced.

Much to his surprise—and, strangely enough, not to my own—I failed to retreat. Instead, I extended my left fist with considerable abruptness and precision and he landed on his back.

I experienced a sensation of unholy joy. Up to that moment I had wondered whether I could do it with my left hand.

I looked at Jasper, Jr. He was staring at me in utter bewilderment.

"Good Lord! You—you've knocked him down!"

"I didn't think I could do it," said I lazily.

He sprang to his brother's side, and assisted him to a sitting posture.

"Right to the jaw," shouted Jasper, with a strange enthusiasm.

"Left," corrected him.

Collingcraft stared about him in a stupid, vacant fashion for a moment, and then allowed his glazed eyes to rest upon me. He sat rather limply. I thought.

"Are you hurt, Colly?" cried Jasper, Jr.

A sleeky grin, more of surprise than shame, stole over Collingcraft's face. He put his hand to his jaw; then to the back of his head.

"By Jove!" he murmured. "I—I didn't think he'd hit in him. Let me get up!"

Jasper, Jr. was discreet. "Better let well enough alone, old—"

"I intend to," said Collingcraft, as he struggled to his feet.

For a moment he faced me, uncertainly.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Titus," said I calmly.

"You—you are a wonder," fell from his lips. "I'm not every day, Mr. Smart. I've boxed a good deal in my time, but—by Jove, I never had a toll like that!"

He turned abruptly and left us. We followed him slowly toward the steps. At the

bottom he stopped and faced me again.

"You're a better man than I thought," he said. "If you'll bury the hatchet, so will I."

I take back what I said to you, not because I'm afraid of you, but because I respect you. What say? Will you shake hands?"

The surly, arrogant expression was gone from his face. In its place was a puzzled, somewhat inquiring look.

"No hard feeling on my part," I cried gladly. We shook hands. Jasper, Jr. slapped me on the back. "It's a most distressing, atavistic habit I'm getting into, knocking people down without rhyme or reason."

"I dare say you had reason," muttered Collingcraft. "I got what was coming to me."

An eager light crept into his handsome eyes. "By Jove, we can get in some corking work with the gloves while I'm here. I box quite a bit at home, and I miss it traveling about like this. What say to a half-hour or so every day? I have the gloves in one of my trunks. I'm getting horribly seedy. I need stirring up."

"Charmed, I'm sure," I said, assuming an enthusiasm I did not feel. Put on the gloves with this strapping, skillful boxer? No! If I was firmly resolved to stop while my record was good. In a scientific clash with the gloves he would soon find out what a miserable duffer I was.

"And Jappy, here, is no slouch. He's as shifty as the dickens."

"The shifter the better," said I, with great aplomb. Jasper, Jr., stuck out his chest modestly, and said: "Oh, piffle, Colly. But just the same I hadn't the least doubt in my mind that Jasper could 'put it all over me.' It was a rather sickening admission, though strictly private."

We made our way to my study, where I mildly suggested that we refrain from mentioning our little encounter to Mrs. Titus or the Countess. I thought Collingcraft was especially pleased with the idea. We swore secrecy.

"I've always been regarded as a peaceful, harmless grub," I explained, still somewhat bewildered by the feat I had performed, and considerably shaken by the fear that I was degenerating into a positive ruffian.

"You will believe me, I hope, when I declare that I was merely acting in self-defense when I—"

He actually laughed. "Don't apologise. He could not resist the impulse to blurt out once more: 'By Jove, I didn't think you could do it.'"

"With my left hand, too," I said wonderingly. Catching myself up, I hastily changed the subject.

A little later on, as Collingcraft left the room, a shy feeling of his jaw, Jasper, Jr., whispered to me excitedly: "You've got him eating out of your hand, old top."

Things were coming to a pretty pass, said I to myself when I was all alone. It certainly is a pretty pass when one knocks down the ex-husband and the brother of the woman he loves, and quite without the least suspicion of an inherited pugacity.

I had a little note from the Countess that afternoon, ceremoniously delivered by Helene Marie Louise Antoinette. It read as follows: "Would Collingcraft be so good to turn when you laid him low this morning. He is tiresomely interested in his prowess as a boxer, or a boxer, or whatever it is in athletic parlance. He has been like a lamb all afternoon and he really can't get over the way you whacked him. (Is what the world.) At first he was as mum as could be about it, but I think he really felt relieved when I told him I had seen the whole affair from a window in my hall. You see it gave him a chance to explain how you got in the whack, and I have been obliged to listen to intermittent lectures on the many art of self-defense all afternoon, first from him, then from Jappy. I have a headache, and no means of defense. He admits that he deserved it, but I am not surprised. Colly is a sporting chap. He hasn't a mean drop of blood in his body. You have made a friend of him. So please don't feel that I hold a grudge against you for what you did. The funny part of it all is that mamma quite agrees with him. She says he deserved it! Mamma is wonderful, really, when it comes to a pinch. She has given up all thought of 'putting a foot outside the castle.' Can you have lunched with us to-morrow? Would it be too much trouble if we were to have it in the loggia? I am just mad to get out-of-doors if only for an hour or two in that walled-in spot. Mr. Poopen-dyke has been perfectly lovely. He came up this morning to tell me that you haven't sneezed at all and there isn't the remotest chance now that you will have a cold. It seems he was afraid you might. You must have a very rugged constitution. Britton told Blake that most men would have died from exposure if they had been put in your place. How good you are to me."

"P. S.—I may come down to see you this evening."

I shall skip over the rather uninteresting events of the next two or three days. Nothing of consequence happened, unless you are willing to consider important two perfectly blissful nights of sleep on my part. Also, I had the pleasure of taking the Countess "out walking" in my courtyard, to use a colloquialism; once in the warm, sweet sunshine, again beneath the glow of a radiant moon. She had not been outside the castle walls, literally, in more than five weeks, and the color leaped back into her cheeks with a rush that delighted me. I may mention in passing that I paid particular attention to her suggestion concerning my dilapidated, gone-to-seed garden, although I had been bored to extinction by Jasper, Jr. when he undertook to enlighten me horticulturally. She agreed to come forth every day and assist me in building the poor thing up; propping it, so to speak.

As for Mrs. Titus, that really engaging lady made life so easy for me that I wondered why I had ever been apprehensive. She was quite wonderful when it came to a pinch. I began to understand a good many things about her, chief among them being her unvoiced theories on matrimony. While she did not actually commit herself, I had no difficulty in ascertaining that, from her point of view, marriages are not made in heaven, and that a properly arranged divorce is a great deal less terrestrial than it is commonly supposed to be. She believed matrimony as a trial and divorce as a reward, or something to that effect.

My opinion seemed to carry considerable weight with her. For a day or two after our somewhat sanguinary encounter, she was prone to start—even to jump slightly—when I addressed myself to her with unintentional directness. She soon got over that, however.

We were discussing Aline's unfortunate venture into the state of matrimony and I, feeling temporarily august and superior, managed to say the wrong thing and in doing so not myself in a position from which I could not recede without loss of dignity. If my memory serves me correctly I remarked, with some asperity, that marriages of that kind never turned out well for any one except the bridegroom.

She looked at me coldly. "I am afraid, Mr. Smart, that you have been putting some very bad notions into my daughter's head," she said.

"Bad notions?" I murmured.

"She has developed certain pronounced and rather extraordinary views concerning

the nobility as the result of your—ah—argument. I may say."

"I'm very sorry. I know one or two exceedingly nice noblemen, and I've no doubt there are a great many more. She must have misunderstood me. I wasn't running down the nobility, Mrs. Titus. I was merely questioning the advisability of elevating it in the way the Americans sometimes do."

"You did not put it so adroitly in discussing the practice with Aline," she said quickly. "Granted that her own marriage was a mistake—a dreadful mistake,—it does not follow that all international matches are failures. I would just as soon be unhappily married to a duke as to a dry-goods merchant, Mr. Smart."

"But not at the same price, Mrs. Titus," I remarked.

She smiled. "A husband is dear at any price."

"I shouldn't put it just that way," I protested. "A good American husband is a necessity. Not a luxury."

"Well, to go back to what I started to say, Aline is very bitter about matrimony as viewed from my point of view. I am sorry to say I attribute her attitude to your excellent counselling."

"You flatter me. I was under the impression she took her lessons of Tarnowsky."

"Granted. But Tarnowsky was unfit. Why tar all of them with the same stick? There are good noblemen, you'll admit."

"But they don't need rehabilitation."

"Aline, I fear, will never risk another experiment. It's rather calamitous, isn't it? When one stops to consider her youth, beauty and all the happiness there may be—"

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Titus, but I think your fears are groundless."

"What do you mean?"

"The Countess will marry again. I am not betraying a secret, because she has intimated as much to my secretary as well as to me. I take it that as soon as this unhappy affair is settled, she will be free to reveal the true state of her feelings toward—"

I stopped, somewhat dismayed by my garrulous turn, she fairly snapped.

"I don't know," I replied truthfully—and, I fear, luxuriously.

"Good heaven!" she cried, starting up from the bench on which we were sitting in the loggia. There was a queer expression in her eyes. "Haven't—haven't she ever hinted at—hasn't she mentioned any one at all?"

"Not to me."

Mrs. Titus was animated. I could see that very plainly. A thoughtful frown appeared on her smooth brow, and a gleam of anxiety sprang into her eyes.

"I am sure that she has had no opportunity to—"

She did not complete the sentence, in which there was a primary note of perplexity and wonder.

It galled me to discover that she did not even so much as take me into consideration.

"You mean since the—er—divorce?" I inquired.

"She has been in seclusion all of the time. She has seen no man,—that is to say, no man for whom she could possibly entertain—"

But, of course, you are mistaken in your impression, Mr. Smart. There is absolutely nothing in what you say."

"A former sweetheart, antedating her marriage," I suggested hopefully.

"She has no sweetheart. Of that I am positive," said she with conviction.

"She must have had an army of admirers. They were legion after her marriage. I may be pardoned for reminding you."

She started. "It is a very never mentioned Lord Amherdale to you?" she asked.

"Amherdale?" I repeated, with a queer sinking of the heart. "No, Mrs. Titus. An Englishman?"

She was mistress of herself once more. In a very delicate manner she informed me that his lordship, a most attractive and honorable young Englishman, had been one of Aline's warmest friends at the time of the divorce proceedings. But, of course, there was nothing in that! They had been good friends for years, nothing more, and he was a perfect dear.

But she couldn't fool me. I could see that there was something working at the back of her mind, but whether she was distressed or gratified I was not by way of knowing.

"I've never heard her mention Lord Amherdale," said I.

Her eyes narrowed slightly. Had I but known, the mere fact that the Countess had not spoken of his lordship provided her experienced mother with an excellent reason for believing that there was something between them. She abruptly brought the conversation to a close and left me, saying that she was off for her beauty nap.

Aline, I soon became a prey to certain disquieting thoughts. Summed up, they resolved themselves into a condition of certainty which admitted of but one aspect: the charming Countess was in love with Amherdale. And the shocking part of it all was that she was in love with him prior to her separation from Tarnowsky! I felt a cold perspiration start out all over my body at this condition of fact. I set upon me. He was the man; he had been the man from the beginning. My heart was like lead for the rest of the day, and, very curiously, for a leaden thing it was subject to pain.

Just before dinner, Britton, after inspecting me at the corner of his eye for some time, advised me to try a little brandy.

"You look seedy, sir," he said with concern in his voice. "A cold setting in, perhaps, sir?"

I tried the brandy, but not because I thought I was taking a cold. Somehow it warmed me up. There is virtue in good spirits.

The Countess was abroad very early the next morning. I discovered her in the courtyard, giving directions to Max and Rodolph who were doing some spading in the garden. She looked very bright and fresh and enticing in the light of an early moon, and I was not only pleased but astonished, having been led to believe all my life that a woman, no matter how pretty she may be, appears at her worst when the day is young.

I joined her at once. She gave me a gay, accusing smile.

"What have you been saying to mother?" she demanded, as she shook hands with me. "I thought you were to be trusted."

I flushed uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, Countess. I—I didn't know it was a secret."

She looked at me somewhat quizzically for a moment. Then she laughed softly. "It is a secret."

"I have—I haven't got you into bad odor with home—I haven't!" she said sweetly.

"Oh, dear me, no! I'm not in the least worried over what mother may think. I shall do as I please, so there's the end of it."

I swallowed something that seemed to be sticking in my throat. "Then it is true that you are going to marry?"

"Quite," she said sweetly.

"I'm silent for a moment. 'Well, I'm—I'm glad to know it in time.' I said rather more gruffly than was necessary."

She smiled too merrily, I thought. "You must not tell any one else about it, however."

"I can promise that," I said, a sudden rage

in my soul. "Devils could not drag it out of me. Rest easy."

It occurred to me afterwards that she laughed rather jerkily, you might say un- easily. At any rate, she turned away and began speaking to Max.

"Have you had your breakfast?" I asked stupidly.

"No."

"Neither have I. Will you join me?"

"Isn't it getting to be a habit?"

"Breakfast or—?"

"Breakfast and me."

"I confess, my dear Countess, that I like you for breakfast," I said gallantly.

"That is a real tribute," she said demurely, and took her place beside me. Together we crossed the courtyard.

On the steps Collingcraft Titus was standing. I uttered an audible groan and winced as if in dire pain.

"What is it?" she cried quickly.

"Rheumatism," I announced, carefully raising my right arm and affecting an expression of torture. I am not a physical coward, kind reader. The fact that young Mr. Titus carried in his hands a set of formidable looking boxing-gloves did not frighten me. Heaven knows, if it would give him any pleasure to slam me about with a pair of gloves, I am not without manliness and pluck enough to endure physical pain and mental humiliation. It was diplomacy, cunning, astuteness,—whatever you may choose to call it,—that stood between me and a friendly encounter with him. Two minutes' time would serve to convince him that he was my master, and then where would I be? Where would be the prestige I had gained? Where my record as a conqueror? "I must have caught cold in my arms and shoulders," I went on, making worse faces than before as I moved the afflicted parts experimentally.

"There!" she exclaimed ruefully. "I knew you would catch cold. Men always do. I'm so sorry."

"It's nothing," I made haste to explain. "That is, nothing serious. I'll get rid of it in no time at all." I calculated for a minute. "A week or ten days at the most. Good morning, Collingcraft."

"Morning. Hello, sis, well!" He dangled the gloves before my eyes.

My disappointment was quite pathetic. "Tell him," I said to the Countess.

"He's all crimped up with rheumatism, Colly," she said. "Put those ugly things away. We're going in to breakfast."

He tossed the gloves into a corner of the vestibule. I felt a little ashamed of my subsistence in the face of his earnest expression of concern.

"Tell you what I'll do," he said warmly. "I know how to rub a fellow's muscles."

"Oh, I have a rub in Britton," said I, hastily. "Thanks, old man. He will work it out of me. Sorry we can't have a go this morning."

The worst of it all was that he insisted, as a matter of personal education, on coming to my room after breakfast to watch the expert maneuvers of Britton in kneading the stiffness out of my muscles. He was looking for new ideas, he explained. I first consulted Britton and then resignedly consented to the demonstration.

To my surprise, Britton was something of an expert. I confess that he almost killed me with those strong, iron-like hands of his. If I was not sore when he began with me, I certainly was when he finished. Collingcraft was most enthusiastic. He said he'd never seen any one manipulate the muscles so scientifically as Britton, and ventured the opinion that he would not have to repeat the operation often. To myself I said that he wouldn't have to repeat it at all.

We began laying our plans for the fourteenth. Communications arrived from Italy, addressed to me, but intended for either the Countess or the rather remote Mr. Bangs, who seemed better qualified to efface himself than any human being I've ever seen. These letters informed us that a yacht—one of three now cruising in the Mediterranean—would call at an appointed port on such and such a day to take her out to sea. Everything was being arranged on the outside for her escape from the continent, and precision seemed to be the watchword.

Of course I couldn't do a stroke of work on my novel. How could I be expected to devote myself to fiction when fact was staring me in the face so engagingly? We led an idle, dolce far niente life in these days, with an underlying touch of anxiety and excitement that increased as the day for her departure drew near. I confess to a sickening sense of depression that could not be shaken off.

Half of my time was spent in playing with Rosemary. She became dearer to me with each succeeding day. I knew I should miss her tremendously. I should even miss Jinky, who didn't like me, but who no longer grieved at me. The castle would be a very gloomy, drear place after they were out of it. I found myself wondering how long I would be able to endure the loneliness. Secretly I cherished the idea of selling the place if I could find a lunatic in the market.

An unexpected diversion came one day when, without warning and figuratively out of a clear sky, the Hammonds and the Billy Smiths swooped down upon me. They had come up the river in the power boat for a final September run, and planned to stop over night with me!

They were the last people in the world whom I could turn away from my door. There might have been a chance to put them up for the night and still avoid disclosures and not circumstances ordered that the Countess and I should be working in the garden at the very moment that brought them pouring at the open gates. Old Count owned the gate in complete ignorance of our presence in the garden. (We happened to be in a somewhat obscure nook and seated upon a stone bench—so he must be held blameless.) The quartet brushed past the old man and I, hearing their chatter, foolishly exposed my self.

I shall not attempt to describe the scene that followed their discovery of the Countess Tarnowsky. He it said, however, to the credit of Elsie and Betty Billy, the startled refugees were fairly smothered in kisses and tears and almost deafened by the shrill, delighted exclamations that fell from their eager lips. I doubt if there ever was such a sensation before!

They brought rather interesting news concerning the Count. It appears that he and the Baron had quarreled and at the time of my friends' departure from Vienna it was pretty generally understood that there would be a duel.

"I never liked the Baron," I said, with a grim smile that could not have been misinterpreted. "But I hope to heavens he isn't killed."

Mrs. Titus sighed. "Tarnowsky is regarded as a wonderful marksman."

"Worse luck!" growled Collingcraft, gloomily, twiddling his thumbs.

"What kind of a shot is the Baron?" asked Jasper, Jr., hopefully.

No one was able to enlighten him, but Billy Smith shook his head dolefully.

"Maris Tarnowsky is a dead shot. He'll pot the Baron sure."

"Hark it all," said I, and then lapsed into a horrified silence.

(To Be Continued.)