

HOME AND FARM MAGAZINE SECTION SERIAL.

By
Geo. Barr
McCutcheon

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A Fool and His Money

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS
INSTALLMENTS.

In the opening instalments of "A Fool and His Money," Geo. Barr McCutcheon's charming novel, serial rights for which have been specially obtained for the Home and Farm Magazine Section, 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. After a visit to London, Smart takes a trip on the River Danube. After finding an old-world town, he discovers an ancient castle, which he purchases from an Austrian count. With his secretary, Poopendyke, he takes possession of the immense structure, which 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, especially as she has been seen by some of the party, who are suspicious but have failed to identify her. One guest, familiar with 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.

HAD the somewhat valueless satisfaction of knowing a blessed sight more about the matter than he and all of his blood hounds put together. I could well afford to laugh, but under the extremely harassing conditions it was far from possible for me to get fat. As a matter of fact, it seemed to me that I was growing thinner. Mrs. Betty Billy Smith, toward the end of her visit, dolefully—almost tearfully—remarked upon my haggard appearance. She was very nice about it, too. I liked her immensely.

It did not require half an eye to see that she was thoroughly sick of the baron and Mr. Pless. She was really quite uncivil to them toward the end.

At last there came a day of deliverance. The guests were departing and I can truthfully say that I was speeding them.

Elsie Hazzard took me off to a remote corner, where a little later on Betty Billy and the two husbands found us.

"John, will you ever forgive me?" she said very soberly. "I swear to you I hadn't the faintest idea what it—"

"Please, please, Elsie," I broke in warmly; "don't abuse yourself in my presence, fully understand everything. At least, nearly everything. What I can't understand, for the life of me, is this: how did you happen to pick up two such consummate bounders as these fellows are?"

"Alas, John," said she, shaking her head, "a woman never knows much about a man until she has lived a week in the same house with him. Now you are a perfect angel."

"You've always said that," said I. "You did not have to live in the same house with me to find it out, did you?"

She ignored the question. "I shall never, never forgive myself for this awful week, John. We've talked it all over among ourselves. We are ashamed—oh, so terribly ashamed. If you can ever like us again after—"

"Like you!" I cried, taking her by the shoulders. "Why, Elsie Hazzard, I have never liked you and George half so much as I like you now. You two and the Smiths stand out like Gibraltars in my esteem. I adore all of you. I shan't be happy again until I know that you four—and no more—are coming back to Schloss Rothsofen for an indefinite stay. Good Lord, how happy we shall be!"

I said it with a great deal of feeling. The tears rushed into her eyes.

"You are a dear, John," she sighed. "You'll come?"

"In a minute," said she with vehemence, a genuine American girl once more.

"Just as soon as those pesky workmen are out of the place, I'll drop you a line," said I, immeasurably exalted.

"But I draw the line at noblemen."

"Don't worry," she said, setting her nice little white teeth. "I draw it too. Never again! Never!"

It occurred to me that here was an excellent opening for a bit of missionary work. Very pointedly I said to her: "I fancy you are willing to admit now that she wasn't such a simpleton for leaving him."

She went so far as to shudder, all the time regarding me with dilated eyes. "I can't imagine anything more dreadful than being that man's wife, John."

"Then why won't you admit that you are sorry for her? Why won't you be a little just to her?"

She looked at me sharply. "Do you know her?"

"Not by a long shot," I replied hastily, and with considerable truthfulness.

"Why are you so keen to have me take sides with her?"

"Because I did, the instant I saw that infernal cad."

She pursed her lips. It was hard for her to surrender.

"Out with it, Elsie," I commanded.

"You know you've been wrong about that poor little girl. I can tell by the look in your eyes that you have switched over completely in the last four days, and so has Betty Billy."

"I can't forgive her for marrying him in the first place," she said stubbornly.

"But I think she was justified in leaving him. As I know him now, I don't see how she endured it as long as she did. Yes, I am sorry for her. She is a dear girl and she has had a—"

"I'll say it, my dear: a hell of a time."

"Thank you."

"And I daresay you now think she did right in taking the child, too," I persisted.

"I—I hope she gets safely away with little Rosemary, back to God's country as we are prone to call it. Oh, by the way, John, I don't see why I should feel bound to keep that wretch's secret any longer. He has treated us like dogs. He doesn't deserve—"

"Hold on! You're not thinking of telling me his name, are you?"

"Don't you want to know it? Don't you care to hear that you've been entertaining the most talked of, the most interesting—"

"No, I don't!"

"Don't you care to hear who it was that he married and how many millions he got from—"

"No, I don't."

"And why not?"

"Well," said I, judiciously, "in the first place I like the mystery of it all.

In the second place, I don't want to know anything more about this fellow than I already know. He is enough of a horror to me, as it is, God knows, without giving a name to him. I prefer to think of him as Mr. Pless. If you don't mind, Elsie, I'll try to eradicate him thoroughly from my system as Pless before I take him on in any other form of evil. No, I don't want to know his name at present, nor do I care a hang who it was he married. Silly notion, I suppose, but I mean what I say."

She looked at me in wonder for a moment and then shook her head as if considering me quite hopeless. "You are an odd thing, John. God left something out when He fashioned you. I'm just dying to tell you all about them, and you won't let me."

"Is she pretty?" I asked, yielding a little.

"She is lovely. We've been really quite hateful about her, Betty and I. Down in our hearts we like her. She was a spoiled child, of course, and all that sort of thing, but heaven knows she's been pretty thoroughly made over in a new crucible. We used to feel terribly sorry for her, even while we were deriding her for the fool she had

made of herself in marrying him. I've seen her hundreds of times driving about alone in Vienna, where they spent two winters, a really pathetic figure, scorned not only by her husband but by every one else. He made it clear to his world that she was not to be inflected upon it by any unnecessary act of his. She came to see Betty and me occasionally; always bright and proud and full of spirit, but we could see the wounds in her poor little heart no matter how hard she tried to hide them. I tell you, John, they like us as women but they despise us as wives. It will always be the same with them. They won't let us into their charmed circle. Thank God, I am married to an American. He must respect me whether he wants to or not."

"Poor little beggar," said I, without thinking of how it would sound to her; "she has had her fling, and she has paid well for it."

"If her stingy old father, who permitted her to get into the scrape, would come up like a man and pay what he ought to pay, there would be no more pother about this business. He hasn't lived up to his bargain. The—Mr. Pless has squandered the first million and now he wants the balance due him. A trade's a trade, John. The old man ought to pay up. He went into it with his eyes open, and I haven't an atom of sympathy for him. You have read that book of Mrs. Burnett's, haven't you?—'The Shuttle?'"

Well, there you are. This is but another example of what fools American parents can be when they get bees in their bonnets."

She seemed to be accusing me!

"I hope she gets away safely with the kiddie," said I, non-committally.

"Heaven knows where she is. Maybe she's as safe as a bug in a rug."

"I shouldn't be surprised," said I.

The Billy Smiths and George Hazzard came up at this juncture. Elsie at once proceeded to go into a long series of conjectures as to the probable whereabouts of Mr. Pless's former wife and their child. I was immensely gratified to find that they were now undivided in their estimate of Mr. Pless and firmly allied on the side of the missing countess.

I gathered from their remarks that the young woman's mother and brothers were still in Paris, where their every movement was being watched by secret agents. They were awaiting the arrival from New York of the father of the countess, after which they were to come to Vienna for the purpose of making a determined fight for the daughter's absolute freedom and the custody of the child.

Somehow this news gave me a strange feeling of apprehension, a sensation that later on was to be amply justified.

I daresay an historian less punctilious about the truth than I propose to be, would, at this stage of the narrative, insert a whopping lie for the sake of effect, or "action," or "heart interest," as such things are called in the present world of letters. He would enliven his tale by making Mr. Pless do something sensational while he was about it, such as yanking his erstwhile companion out of her place of hiding by the hair of her head, or kicking down all the barricades about the place, or fighting a duel with me, or—well, there is no end of things he might do for the sake of a "situation." But I am a person of veracity and the truth is in me. Mr. Pless did none of these interesting things, so why should I say that he did?

He went away with the others at half-past eleven, and that was the end of his first visit to my domain. For fear that you, kind reader, may be disappointed, I make haste to assure you that he was to come again.

Of course there was more or less turmoil and—I might say disaffection—attending his departure. He raised Cain with my servants because they did this and that when they shouldn't have done either; he (and the amiable baron) took me to task for having neglected to book compartments for them in the Orient Express; he insisted upon having a luncheon put up in a tea basket and taken to the railway station by Britton, and he saw to it personally that three or four bottles of my best wine were neatly packed in with the rest. He said

three or four, but Britton is firm in his belief that there was nearer a dozen, judging by the weight.

He also contrived to have Mr. Poopendyke purchase first-class railway tickets for him and the baron, and then forgot to settle for them. It amounted to something like four hundred and fifty kronen, if I remember correctly. He took away eleven hundred and sixty-five dollars of my money, besides, generally acquired at roulette, and I dread to think of what he and the baron took out of my four friends at auction bridge.

I will say this for him: he was the smartest aristocrat I've ever known.

Need I add that the Hazzards and the Smiths traveled second-class?

"Well, thank the Lord!" said I, as the ferry put off with the party, leaving me alone on the little landing. The rotten timbers seemed to echo the sentiment. At the top of the step all the Schmicks were saying it, too; in the butler's pantry it was also being said, a score of workmen were grunting it; and the windlass that drew me up the hill was screaming it in wild, discordant glee. I repeated it once more when Britton returned from town and assured me that they had not missed the train.

"That's what I'd like to say, sir," said he.

"Well, say it," said I. And he said it so vociferously that I knew it must have been heard in the remotest corners of heaven.

The merry song of the hammer and the sweet rasp of the saw greeted my delighted ear as I entered the castle. Men were singing and whistling for all they were worth; the air was full of music. It was not until the grand transformation scene in the pantomime when all that has been gloom and despondency gives way to the flash of an eye to elysian splendour and dazzling gaiety. 'Pon my soul, I never felt so exuberant in all my life. The once nerve-racking clangour was like the soothing strains of an invisible orchestra to my delighted senses. Ha! ha! What a merry old world it is, after all!

Nearing my study, I heard an almost forgotten noise—the blithe, incessant crackle of a typewriting machine. Never have I heard one rattle so rapidly or with such utter garrulousness.

(To be continued.)

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