

By
Geo. Barr
McCutcheon

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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 dangers. 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.

WELL, then, we'll look at it in that light. I am not in a position to invest so much money at this time. To be perfectly frank with you, I haven't the money lying loose."

"Suppose that I were to say that any time inside the next three or four weeks would be satisfactory to me," said he, as if he were granting me a favor. "Please be seated, Mr. Smart." He glanced at his watch. "I have ordered a light supper to be sent up at ten o'clock. We can—"

"Thank you. I fear it is impossible for me to remain."

"I shall be disappointed. However, another time, if not tonight, I trust. And now to come to the point. May I depend upon you to help me at this trying period? A few thousand will be sufficient for present needs, and the balance may go over a few weeks without seriously inconveniencing me. If we can come to some sort of an understanding tonight, my attorney will be happy to meet you tomorrow at any time and place you may suggest."

I actually was staggered. Upon my word it was almost as if he were dunning me and magnanimously consenting to give me an extension of time if I could see my way clear to let him have something on account. My choler was rising.

"I may as well tell you first as last, Count Tarnowsky, that I cannot let you have the money. It is quite impossible. In the first place, I haven't the amount to spare; in the second—"

"Enough, sir," he broke in angrily. "I have committed the common error of regarding one of you as a gentleman. Damn me, if I shall ever do so again. There isn't one in the whole of the United States. Will you be good enough, Mr. Smart, to overlook my mistake? I thank you taking the trouble to rush into print in my defence. If you have gained any thing by it, I do not begrudge you the satisfaction you must feel in being heralded as the host of Count Tarnowsky and his friend. You obtained the privilege very cheaply."

"You will do well, sir, to keep a civil tongue in your head," said I, paling with fury.

"I have nothing more to say to you, Mr. Smart," said he contentuously. "Good night, Francois! Conduct Mr. Smart to the corridor."

Francois—or "Franko" as Britton, whose French is very lame, had called him—preceded me to the door. In all my experience, nothing surprised me so much as my ability to leave the room without first kicking Francois' master, or at least telling him what I thought of him. Strangely enough, I did not recover my sense of speech until I was well out into the corridor. Then I deliberately took a gold coin out of my pocket and pressed it into the valet's hand.

"Kindly give that to your master with my compliments," said I, in a voice that was intended to reach Tarnowsky's ear.

"Bon soir, m'sieu," said Francois, with an amiable grin. He watched me descend the stairs and then softly closed the door.

In the office I came upon Mr. Schymansky. "I trust everything is satisfactorily arranged, Mr.—" he began smiling and rubbing his hands. He was so utterly unprepared for the severity of the interruption that the smile was still in process of congealing as I stepped out into the narrow, lily-lighted street.

Max and Rudolph were waiting at the wharf for me. Their excellent arms and broad backs soon drove the light boat across the river. But once during the five or ten minutes of passage did I utter a word, and that word, while wholly involuntary and by no means addressed to my oarsmen, had the remarkable effect of making them row like fury for the remainder of the distance.

Mr. Poopendyke was waiting for me in the court yard. He was carrying a lantern, which he held rather close to my face as if looking for something he dreaded to see. "What the devil is the matter with you?" I demanded irascibly. "What's up! What are you doing out here with a lantern?" "I was rather anxious," he said, a note of relief in his voice. "I feared that something unexpected might have befallen you. Five minutes ago the—Mr. Pless called up the telephone and left a message for you. It rather upset me, sir."

"He did, eh! Well, what did he say?" "He merely commanded me to give you his compliments and to tell you to go to the devil. I told him that you would doubtless be at home a little later on and it would sound very much better if it came from him instead of from me. Whereupon he told me to accompany you, giving rather explicit directions. He appeared to be in a tremendous rage."

I laughed heartily. "I must have got under his confounded skin after all."

"I was a little worried, so I came out with the lantern. One never can tell. Did you come to blows?"

"Blows! What puts that idea into your head!"

"The Countess was listening on the extension wire while he was speaking to me."

She thought it was you calling up and was eager to hear what had happened. It was she who put it into my head. She said you must have given his nose a jolly good pulling or something of the sort. I am extremely sorry, but she heard every word he said, even to the mildest damn."

"It must have had a very familiar sound to her," I said sourly.

"So she informed me."

"Oh, you've seen her, eh!"

"She came down to the secret door a few minutes ago and urged me to set out to meet you. She says she can hardly wait for the news. I was to send you upstairs at once."

Confound him, he took that very instant to hold the lantern up to my face again, and caught me grinning like a Cheshire cat.

I hurried to my room and brushed myself up a bit. On my bureau, in a glass of water, there was a white boutonniere, rather clumsily constructed and all ready to be pinned in the lapel of my coat. I confess to a blush. I wish Britton would not be so infernally arduous in his efforts to please me.

The Countess gave a little sigh of relief when I dashed in upon her a few minutes later. She had it all out of me before I had quite recovered my breath after the climb upstairs.

"And so it was I who spent all the money," she mused, with a far-away look in her eyes.

"In trying to be a countess," said I boldly.

She smiled. "Are you hungry?"

"Delightfully," said I.

We sat down at the table. "Now tell me everything all over again," she said.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. POOPENDYKE began to develop a streak of romantic invention—in fact, tomfoolery—a day or two after my experience with Count Tarnowsky in the Rempf Hotel. He is the last person in the world of whom I—or any one else—would suspect silliness of a radical nature.

We were finding it rather difficult to get down to actual, serious work on the book. The plot and the synopsis, of course were quite completely outlined; with ordinary intensity of purpose on my part the tale might have galloped through the introductory chapters with some clarity and decisiveness. But for some reason I lacked the power of concentration or perhaps more properly speaking the power of initiative. I laid it to the hub-bub created by the final effort of the workmen to finish the job of repairing my castle before cold weather set in.

"That isn't it, Mr. Smart," said my secretary dully. We were in the study and my pad of paper was lying idly on my knees. For half an hour I had been trying to think of a handy sentence with which to open the story; the kind of sentence that catches the unwary reader's attention at a glance and makes for interest.

"What is it, then?" I demanded, at once resenting an opinion.

He smiled mysteriously. "You were not thinking of the workmen just now, were you?"

"Certainly," said I, coldly. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing, I suppose," said he resignedly. I hesitated. "Of course it is the work that upsets me. What are you driving at?"

He stared for a long time at the portrait of Ludwig the Red. "Isn't it odd that the Countess, an American, should be descended from the old Rothhoefens? What a small world it is, after all!"

I became wary. "Nothing odd about it to me. We've all got to descend from somebody."

"I dare say. Still it is odd that she should be hiding in the castle of Her ancestors—"

"Not at all, not at all. It just happens to be a handy place. Perfectly natural."

We lapsed into a prolonged spell of silence. I found myself watching him rather combatively, as who would anticipate the move of an adversary.

"Perfect rot," I said, at last, without rhyme or reason.

He grinned. "Nevertheless, it's the general opinion that you are," said he.

I sat up very straight. "What's that?"

"You're in love," said he succinctly. It was like a bomb, and a bomb is the very last thing in succinctness. It comes to the point without palaver or conjecture, and it reduces havoc to a single synonymous syllable.

"You're crazy!" I gasped.

"And the workmen haven't anything at all to do with it," he pronounced emphatically. It was a direct charge. I distinctly felt called upon to refute it. But while I was striving to collect my thoughts he went on, somewhat arbitrarily, I thought: "You don't think we're all blind, do you, Mr. Smart?"

"Wa!" I murmured, a curious dampness assailing me.

"That is to say, Britton, the Schmicks and myself."

"The Schmicks!" It was high time that I should laugh. "Ha! ha! The Schmicks! Good Lord, man—the Schmicks!" It sounded insane even to me, but on my soul, it was all I could think of to say.

"The Schmicks are tickled to death over it," said he. "And so is Britton."

Collecting all the sarcasm that I could command at the instant, I inquired: "And

you, Mr. Poopendyke—are you not tickled?"

"Very," said he.

"Well, I'm not!" said I, savagely. "What does all this nonsense mean. Don't be an ass, Fred."

"Perhaps you don't know it, Mr. Smart, but you are in love," said he so convincingly that I was conscious of an abrupt sinking of the heart. Good heavens! Was he right! Was there anything in this silly twaddle! "You are quite mad about her."

"The deuce you say!" I exclaimed, rather blankly.

"Oh, I've seen it coming. For that matter, so has she. It's as plain as the nose—"

I leaped to my feet, startled. "She. You don't—Has she said anything that leads you to believe—Oh, the deuce! What rot!"

"No use getting angry over it," he said consolingly. "Falling in love is the sort of thing a fellow can't help, you know. It happens without his assistance. It is so easy. Now I was once in love with a girl for two years without really knowing it."

"And how did you find it out?" I asked, weakly.

"I didn't find it out until she married another chap. Then I knew I'd been in love with her all the time. But's that's neither here nor there. You are heels over head in love with the Countess Tarnowsky and—"

"Shut up, Fred! You're going daffy from reading my books, or absorbing my manuscripts, or—"

"Heaven is my witness, I don't read your books and I merely correct your manuscripts. God knows there is no romance in that! You are in love. Now what are you going to do about it!"

"Do about it!" I demanded.

"You can't go on in this way, you know," he said relentlessly. "She won't—"

"Why, you blithering idiot," I roared, "do you know what you are saying! I'm not in love with anybody. My heart is—"

"But never mind! Now, listen to me, Fred. This nonsense has got to cease. I won't have it. Why, she's already got a husband. She's had all she can stand in the way of hush—"

"Rubbish! She can stand a husband or two more, if you are going to look at it in a literal way. Besides, she hasn't a husband. She's chucked him. Good riddance, too. Now, do you imagine for a single instant that a beautiful, adorable young woman of 23 is going to spend the rest of her life without a man! Not much! She's free to marry again and she will!"

"Admitting that to be true, why should she marry me?"

"I didn't say she was in love with you. I said you were in love with her."

"Oh," I said, and my face fell. "I see." He seemed to be considering something. After a few seconds, he nodded his head decisively. "Yes, I am sure of it. If the right man gets her, she'll make the finest, sweetest wife in the world. She's never had a chance to show what's really in her. She would be adorable, wouldn't she?"

The sudden question caught me unawares. "She would!" I said, with conviction.

"Well," said he, slowly and deliberately, "why don't you set about it, then?"

He was so ridiculous that I thought for the fun of it, I'd humor him.

"Assuming that you are right in regard to my feelings toward her, Fred, what leads you to believe that I would stand a chance of winning her?" It was a silly question, but I declare I hung on his answer with a tenseness that surprised me.

"Why not! You are good looking, a gentleman, a celebrity, and a man. Bless my soul, she could do worse."

"But you forget that I am—let me see—thirty-five and she is but twenty-three."

"To offset that, she has been married and unhappy. That brings her about up to your level, I should say. She's a mother, and that makes you seem a good bit younger. Moreover, she isn't a sod widow. She's a grass widow, and she's got a living example to use as a contrast. Regulation widows sometimes forget the past because it is dim and dead; but, by George, sir, the divorced wife doesn't forget the hard time she's had. She's mighty careful when she goes about it the second time. The other kind has lost her sense of comparison, her standard, so to speak. Her husband may have been a rotter and all that sort of thing, but he's dead and buried and she can't see anything but the good that was in him for the simple reason that it's on his tombstone. But when they're still alive and as bad as ever—well, don't you see it's different."

"It occurs to me she'd be more likely to see the evil in all men and steer clear of them."

"That isn't feminine nature. All women want to be loved. They want to be married. They want to make some man happy."

"I suppose all this is philosophy," I mused, somewhat pleased and mollified.

"But we'll look at it from another point of view. The former Miss Titus set out for a title. She got it. Do you imagine she'll marry a man who has no position— By Jove! That reminds me of something. You are altogether wrong in your reasoning, Fred. With her own lips she declared to me one day that she'd never marry again. There you are!"

He rolled his eyes heavenward.

"They take delight in self-pity," said he.

"You can't believe 'em under oath when they're in that mood."

"Well, granting that she will marry again," said I, rather insistently. "It doesn't follow that her parents will consent to a marriage with any one less than a duke the next time."

"They've had their lesson."

"And she is probably a mercenary creature, after all. She's had a taste of poverty, after a fashion. I imagine—"

"If I know anything about women, the Countess Tarnowsky wants love more than anything else in the world, my friend. She was made to be loved and she knows it. And she hasn't had any of it, except from men who didn't happen to know how to combine love and respect. I'll give you my candid opinion, Mr. John Bellamy Smart. She's in a receptive mood. Strike while the iron is hot. You'll win or my name isn't—"

"Fred Poopendyke, you haven't a grain of sense," I broke in sharply. "Do you suppose, just to oblige you, I'll get myself mixed up in this wretched squabble! Why, she's not really clear of the fellow yet. She's got a good many months to wait before the matter of the child and the final decree—"

(To Be Continued)

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