

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 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, Popenky, 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, whom 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 unaware. 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.

"All HUSBANDS are bad," I said. "But some are more pre-eminently evil than others. I am not finding fault with Tarnoway as a husband. He did just what was expected of him. He did what he set out to do. He isn't to be blamed for living up to his creed. There are bad husbands in America, and bad wives. But they went into the same blindly, most of them. They didn't find out their mistake until after the marriage. The same statement applies to husbands and wives the world over. I hold a brief only against the marriage wherein the contracting parties, their families, their friends, their enemies, their bankers and their creditors know beforehand that it's a business proposition and not a sacred compact. But we've gone into all this before. Why take it up again?"

"But there are many happy marriages between American girls and foreign noblemen—dozens of them that I could mention."

"I grant you that. I know of a few myself. But I think if you will reflect for a moment you'll find that money had no place in the covenant. They married because they loved one another. The noblemen in such cases are real noblemen, and their American wives are real wives. There are no Count Tarnoways among them. My blood curdles when I think of you being married to a man of the Tarnoway type. It is that sort of a marriage that I reprobate."

"The big and tall kind?" she said, and her eyes fell. The color had faded from her cheeks.

"Yes. The premeditated murder type."

She looked up after a moment. There was a bleak expression in her eyes.

"Will you believe me if I say to you that I went into it blindly?"

"Good heavens, my soul, I am sure of it," I cried earnestly. "You had never been in love. You did not know."

"I have told you that I believed myself to be in love with Maria. Doesn't—doesn't that help matters a little bit?"

I looked away. The hurt, appealing look was in her eyes. It had come at last, and upon my soul, I was as little prepared to repel it as when I entered the room hours ago after having lived in fear of it for hours before that. I looked away because I knew that I should do something rash if I were to lose my head for an instant.

She was like an unhappy pleading child. I solemnly affirm that it was tender-heartedness that moved me in this crucial instant. What man could have felt otherwise?

I assumed a coldly impersonal tone. "Not a single editorial in any of these papers holds you responsible for what happened in New York," I said.

She began to collect the scattered newspaper clippings and the type-written transcriptions. I gathered up those in the corner and laid them in her lap. Her fingers trembled a little.

"Throw them in the fireplace, please," she said in a low voice. "I kept them only for the purpose of showing them to you. Oh, how I hate, how I loathe it all!"

When I came back from the fireplace, she was lying back in the big, comfortable chair, a careless, whimsical smile on her lips. She was as serene as if she had never known what it was to have a heart-pang or an instant of regret in all her life. I could not understand that side of her.

"And now I have some pleasant news for you," she said. "My mother will be here on Thursday. You will not like her, of course, because you are already prejudiced, but I know she will like you."

I knew I should hate her mother, but of course it would not do to say so.

"Next Thursday?" I inquired. She nodded her head. "I hope she will like me," I added, feeling that it was necessary.

"Indeed!" The Collingrath family was one of the oldest and most exclusive in New York. I had a vague recollection of hearing one of my fastidious friends at home say that it must have been a bitter blow to the Collingraths when, as an expedient, she married the vulgarly rich Jasper Titus, then of St. Paul, Minnesota. It had been a clear case of marrying the money, not the man. Allice's marriage, therefore, was due to hereditary cold-bloodedness and not to coarseness. "A fine old name, Countess."

"Time suggests itself, therefore it has come to be our family name," she said, with her satiric smile. "You will like my father. He loves me more than any one else in the world—more than all the world. He is making the great fight for me, Mr. Smart. He would buy off the Count tomorrow if I would permit him to do. Of late I have been thinking very seriously of suggesting it to him. It would be the simplest way out of our troubles, wouldn't it? A million is nothing to my father."

"Nothing at all, I submit, in view of the fact that it may be the means of saving you from a term in prison for abducting Rosemary?"

She paled. "Do you really think they would put me in prison?"

"Unquestionably," I pronounced emphatically.

"Oh, dear!" she murmured.

"But they can't lock you up until they've caught you," said I reassuringly. "And I will see to it that they do not catch you."

"I—I am depending on you entirely, Mr. Smart," she said anxiously. "Some day I may be in a position to repay you for all the kindness—"

"Please, please!"

"—and all the risk you are taking for me," she completed. "You see, you haven't the excuse any longer that you don't know my name and story. You are liable to be arrested yourself for—"

There came a sharp rapping on the door at this instant—a rather imperative, sinister rapping, if one were to judge by the way we started and the way we looked at each other. We laughed nervously.

"Goodness! You'd think Sherlock Holmes himself was at the door," she cried. "See who it is, please."

I went to the door. Popenky was there. He was visibly excited.

"Can you come down at once, Mr. Smart?" he said in a voice not meant to reach the ears of the Countess.

"What's up?" I questioned sharply.

"The fig, I'm afraid," he whispered sentimentally. Popenky, being a stenographer, never wasted words. He would have made a fine playwright.

"Good Lord! Detectives?"

"No, Count Tarnoway and a stranger."

"Impossible!"

The Countess, alarmed by our manner, quickly crossed the room.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"The Count is downstairs," I said.

"Don't be alarmed. Nothing can happen. You—"

She laughed. "Oh, is that all? My dear Mr. Smart, he has come to see you about the frescoes."

"But I have insulted him!"

"Not permanently," she said. "I know him too well. He is like a lark. He has given you time to reflect and therefore to regret your action of the other night. Go down and see him."

Popenky volunteered further information. "There is also a man down there—a cheap-looking person—who says he must see the Countess Tarnoway at once."

"A middle-aged man with the upper button of his waistcoat off!" she asked sharply.

"I—I can't say as to the button."

"I am expecting one of my lawyers. It must be he. He is to have a button off."

"I'll look him over again," said Popenky.

Do. And be careful not to let the Count catch a glimpse of him. That would be fatal.

"No danger of that. He went at once to old Conrad's room."

"Good! I had a note from him this morning. Mr. Smart. He is Mr. Bangs of New York."

"May I inquire, Countess, how you manage to have letters delivered to you here? Isn't it extremely dangerous to have them go through the mails?"

"They are all directed to the Schmicks," she explained. "They are passed on to me. Now go and see the Count. Don't lead him any money."

"I shall probably kick him off the cliff," I said, with a sneer.

She laid her hand upon my arm. "Be careful," she said very earnestly. "For my sake."

Popenky had already started down the stairs. I raised her hand to my lips. When I rushed away, carrying myself for a fool, an outrage, a presumptuous blunder.

My recollection for set had brought a swift flash of anger to her cheek. I saw it quite plainly as she lowered her head and drew back into the shadow of the curtain. Bounded! That is what I was for taking advantage of her simple trust in me. Strange to say, she came to the head of the stairs and watched me until I was out of sight in the hall below.

The Count was waiting for me in the loggia. It was quite warm and he fanned himself lazily with his broad straw hat. As I approached, he tossed his cigarette over the wall and hastened to meet me. There was a quaint different smile on his lips.

"It is good to see you again, old fellow," he said, with an amiability that surprised me. "I was afraid you might hold a grievance against me. You Americans are queer chaps, you know. Our little bit of the other evening, you understand. Stupid way for two grown-up men to behave, wasn't it? Of course, the explanation is simple. We had been drinking. Men do silly things in their cups."

"Condemnation assured! I had not touched a drop of anything that night."

"I assure you, Count Tarnoway, the little bit, as you are pleased to call it, was of no consequence. I had quite forgotten that it occurred. Sorry you reminded me of it."

The irony was wasted, however. "My dear fellow, shall we not shake hands?"

There was something irresistibly winning about him, as I've said before. Something boyish, ingenuous, charming—what you will—that went far toward accounting for many things that you who have never seen him may consider incomprehensible.

A certain wiriness took possession of me. I could well afford to temperize. We shook hands with what seemed to be genuine fervor.

"I suppose you are wondering what brings me here," he said, as we started toward the entrance to the loggia, his arm through mine. "I do not forget a promise," Mr. Smart. You may remember that I agreed to fetch a man from Munchen to look over your fine old frescoes and to give you an estimate. Well, he is here, the very best man in Europe,

"I am sure I am greatly indebted to you, Count," I said, "but after thinking it over I've—"

"Don't say that you have already engaged some one to do the work," he cried in horror. "My dear fellow, don't tell me that! You are certain to make a dreadful mistake if you listen to any one but Schwartzmuller. He is the best word in restorations. He is the best bet, as you would say in New York. Any one else will make a botch of the work. You will curse the day you—"

I checked him. "I have virtually decided to let the whole matter go over until next spring. However, I shall be happy to have Mr. Schwartzmuller's opinion. We may be able to plan ahead."

A look of disappointment flitted across his face. The suggestion of hard old age crept into his features for a second and then disappeared.

"Delays are dangerous," he said. "My judgment is that those gorgeous paintings will disintegrate more during the coming winter than in all the years gone by. They are at the critical stage. If not preserved now—well, I cannot bear to think of the consequences. Ah, here is Herr Schwartzmuller."

Just inside the door, we came upon a pompous yet servile German who could not by any means have been mistaken for anything but the last word in restoration. I have never seen any one in my life whose appearance suggested a more complete state of rehabilitation. His frock coat was new, it had the unfading smell of new wool freshly dyed; his shoes were painfully new; his gloves were new; his silk hat was resplendently new; his fat jaw was shaved to a luminous pink; his gorgeous mustache was twisted up at the ends to such a degree that when he smiled the points wavered in front of his eyes, causing him to blink with astonishment. He was indignantly dressed up for the occasion. My critical eye, however, discovered a pair of well-worn striped trousers badly abraded, slightly frayed at the bottom and inclined to lag outward at the knee. Perhaps I should have said that he was dressed up from the knee.

"This is the great Herr Schwartzmuller, of the Imperial galleries in Munchen," said the Count, introducing us.

The stranger bowed very profoundly and at the same time extracted a business card from the tall pocket of his coat. This he delivered to me with a smile which seemed to invite me to participate in a great and serious secret—the secret of treacherable standing as an art expert and connoisseur. I confess to a mistaken impression concerning him up to the moment he handed me his shiny business card. My suspicions had set him down as a confederate of Count Tarnoway, a spy, a secret agent or whatever you choose to consider one who is employed in furthering a secret purpose. But the business card removed my doubts and misgivings. It stamped him for what he really was—there is no mistaking a German who hands you his business card. He deserves all possible chance for discomfiture.

In three languages the card announced that he was "August Schwartzmuller, of the Imperial galleries, Munchen, Zumppe & Schwartzmuller, proprietors, Restorations & specialties." There was much more, but I did not have time to read all of it. Moreover, the card was a trifle soiled, as if it had been used before. There could be no doubt as to his genuineness. He was an art expert.

For ten minutes I allowed them to expatiate on the perils of procrastination in the treatment of rare old canvasses and pigments, and then, having formulated my plan, I bluntly inquired what the cost would be. It appears that Herr Schwartzmuller had examined the frescoes no longer than six months before the arrival of a New York gentleman, Count Hohendahl, had tried to buy them. He was unable to do so because of the Count's name.

"I should say," he said, "a hundred and fifty thousand marks."

"That's a lot of money," said the Count, his eyes upward and toward the vast dumb of the hall. "I'll put it out in yards and loaves."

The Count was watching me with an eager light in his eyes. He looked away as I shot a quick glance at his face. The whole matter became as clear as day to me. He was to receive a handsome commission if the contract was awarded. No doubt his share would be at least half of the amount stipulated. I had reason to believe that the work could be performed at a profit for less than half the figure mentioned by the German.

"Nearly forty thousand dollars, in other words," said I reflectively.

"They are worth ten times that amount, sir," said the expert gravely.

I smiled skeptically. The Count took instant alarm. He realized that I was not such a fool as I looked, perhaps.

"Hohendahl was once offered two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, Mr. Smart," he said.

"Why didn't he accept it?" I asked bluntly. "He sold the whole place to me, contents included, for less than half that amount."

"It was years ago, before he was in such dire straits," he explained quickly. "A terrible suspicion entered my head. I felt myself turn cold. If the frescoes were

genuine they were worth all that Schwartzmuller declared; that being the case why should Hohendahl have let them come to me for practically nothing when there were dozens of collectors who would have paid the full price? I swallowed hard, but managed to control my voice.

"As a matter of fact, Count Tarnoway," I said, resorting to unworthy means, "I have every reason to believe that Hohendahl sold the originals sometime ago, and had them replaced on the ceilings by clever imitations. They are not worth the canvas they are painted on."

He started. I intercepted the swift look of apprehension that passed from him to the stolid Schwartzmuller, whose face turned a shade redder.

"Impossible!" cried Tarnoway sharply.

"By no means impossible," I said calmly, now sure of my ground. "To be perfectly frank with you, I've known from the beginning that they were fakes. Your friend, Count Hohendahl, is wiser than you give him credit for being. He confessed to me at the time our transaction took place that the frescoes were very recent reproductions. The originals, I think, are in London or New York." I saw guilt in the face of Herr Schwartzmuller. His mustaches drooped with the corners of his mouth; he did not seem to be filling out the frock coat quite so completely as when I first beheld him. A shrewd suspicion impelled me to take chances on a direct accusation. I looked straight into the German's eyes and said: "Now that I come to think of it, I am sure he mentioned the name of Schwartzmuller in connection with this—"

"It is not true! It is not true!" roared the expert, without waiting for me to finish. "He lied to you, we—the great firm of Zumppe & Schwartzmuller—we could not be tempted with millions to do such a thing."

I went a step farther in my deductions. Somehow I had grasped the truth—this pair deliberately hoped to swindle me out of forty thousand dollars. They knew the frescoes were imitations and yet they were urging me to spend a huge sum of money in restoring canvases that had been purposely made to look old and filmy in order to deceive a more cautious purchaser than I. But, as I say, I went a step farther and deliberately accused Count Tarnoway.

"Moreover, Count Tarnoway, you are fully aware of all this."

"My dear fellow—"

"I'll not waste words. You are a damned scoundrel!"

He measured the distance with his eye and then sprang swiftly forward, striking blindly at my face.

Schwartzmuller was near the door, looking over his shoulder as he felt for the great brass knob.

"Mein Gott!" he bellowed.

"Stop!" I shouted. "Come back here and take this fellow away with you!"

Tarnoway was sitting up, looking about him in a dazed, bewildered manner. At that moment, Popenky came running down the stairs, attracted by the loud voices. He was followed closely by three or four wide-eyed gladiators who were working on the second floor.

"In the name of heaven, sir!"

"I've bruised my knuckles horribly," was all that I said. I seemed to be in a sort of a daze myself. I had never knocked a man down before in my life. It was an amazingly easy thing to do. I could hardly believe that I had done it.

Tarnoway struggled to his feet and faced me, quivering with rage. I was dumfounded to see that he was not covered with blood. But he was of a light, yellowish green. I could scarcely believe my eyes.

"You shall pay for this!" he cried. The tears rushed to his eyes. "Forward! Beasts! To strike a defenseless man!"

His hand went swiftly to his breast pocket, and an instant later a small revolver flashed into view. It was then that I did another strange and incomprehensible thing. With the utmost coolness I stepped forward and wrested it from his hand. I say strange and incomprehensible for the reason that he was pointing it directly at my breast and yet I had not the slightest sensation of fear. He could have shot me like a dog. I never even thought of that.

"None of that!" I cried sharply. "Now, will you be good enough to get out of this house—and stay out!"

"My seconds will call on you—"

"And they will receive just what you have received. If you or any of your friends presume to trespass on the privacy of these grounds of mine, I'll kick the whole lot of you into the Danube. Hawkes! Either show or lead Count Tarnoway to the gate. As for you, Mr. Schwartzmuller, I shall expect—"

But the last word in restorations had departed.

(To Be Continued.)

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