A COMPLETE NOVEL EACH WEEK IN THE EVENING WORLD

# A FOOL AND HIS MONEY

*The Exploits of a New Yorker Who Hunted Trouble in Europe*

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John Smart, a young New York novelist, inherits a big fortune from an uncle who has always designed him a fool. Acting on impulse, Smart buys the Schloss Rothhoefen, a feudal castle on the Danube, and settles there with Poopendyke, his secretary, and a retinue of servants. He finds that one wing of the castle is locked. The old caretaker, Schmick, says the keys are lost. Smart sees a gloriously beautiful woman looking from a window of the locked and supposedly deserted wing. He fails into talk with her and finds she knows all about him and that Schmick is secretly supplying her with food. Smart asks for an interview by daylight. She promises the interview for the following day but breaks the appointment. Smart, enraged, summons a corps of workmen and orders them to break down the locked doors. They hasten to obey the strange order.

## CHAPTER IV.

(Continued.)

### I Meet the Foe and Fall.

AT 2 o'clock the last door in the east ante-chamber gave way before our resolute advance, and I stood victorious and dusty in the recess at the top of the last stairway. Beyond the twentieth century barriers of a thirteenth century archway lay the goal we sought. I hesitated briefly before drawing them out and taking the final plunge. As a matter of fact, I was beginning to feel ashamed of myself. Suppose that she really had a headache! What an uncouth, pusillanimous brute I——

Just then, even as my hand fell upon the curtains, they were snatched aside and I found myself staring into the vivid, uplifted face of the lady who had defied me and would continue to do so if my suddenly active perceptions counted for anything.

I saw nothing but the dark, indignant, imperious eyes. They fairly withered me.

"I beg your pardon," I began, and then discovered that I was not wearing a cap. It was most disconcerting.

"So you would come," she said, very coldly and very levelly.

"It—it was necessary, madam," I replied as best I could. "You defied me. I think you should have appreciated my position—my motives—er—my"——

"Well, now that you are here, Mr. Smart, may I be so bold as to inquire what you are going to do about it?"

I reflected. "I think, if you don't mind, I'll come in and sit down. That was a deuce of a rap I got across the toes. I am sure to be a great deal more lenient and agreeable if I'm asked to come in and see you. Incidentally, I thought I'd step up to inquire how your headache is getting on. Better, I hope?"

She turned her face away. I suspected a smile.

"If you choose to bang your old castle to pieces in order to satisfy a masculine curiosity, Mr. Smart, I have nothing more to say," she said, facing me again—still ominously, to my despair.

Confound it all, she was such a slim, helpless little thing—and all alone against a mob of burly ruffians!

"You are a most unreasonable man," she said, throwing open a small door at the end of the hall. "I am terribly disappointed in you. You looked to be so nice and sensible and amiable."

But I was dumb. I stood just inside the door of the most remarkable apartment it has ever been my good fortune to look upon. My senses reeled. Was I awake? Was this a part of the bleak, sinister, weather-wracked castle in which I was striving so hard to find a comfortable corner?

"Well?" she demanded relentlessly.

"By the Lord Harry," I began, finding my tongue only to lose it again. My bewilderment increased, and for an excellent reason.

The room was completely furnished, bedecked and rendered habitable by a hundred and one articles that were mysteriously missing from my side of the castle. Rugs, tapestries, curtains of the rarest quality; chairs, couches, and cushions; tables, cabinets and chests that would have caused the eyes of the most conservative collector of antiques to bulge with—not wonder—but greed; stands, pedestals, brasses, bronzes, porcelains—but why enumerate? On the massive oaken centre table stood the priceless silver vase we had missed on the second day of our occupancy, and it was filled with fresh yellow roses. I sniffed. Their fragrance filled the room.

And so complete had been the rifling of my rooms by the devoted vandals in their efforts to make this lady cozy and comfortable that they did not overlook a silver-framed photograph of my dear mother! Her sweet face met my gaze as it swept the mantelpiece, beneath which a coal fire crackled merrily. I am not quite sure, but I think I repeated "by the Lord Harry" once if not twice before I caught myself up.

I tried to smile. "How—how cozy you are here," I said.

"You couldn't expect me to live in this awful place without some of the comforts and conveniences of life, Mr. Smart," she said defiantly.

"Certainly not," I said, promptly. "I am sure that you will excuse me, however, if I gloat. I was afraid we had lost all these things. You've no idea how relieved I am to find them all safe and sound in my—in their proper place. I was beginning to distrust the Schmicks. Now I am convinced of their integrity."

"Of course, Mr. Smart, I shall pay you for everything—down to the smallest trifle—when the time comes for me to leave this place. I have kept strict account of"——

She turned away, with a beaten droop of the proud little head, and again I was shamed.

"I will sit down if you'll let me," said I, feeling that I wouldn't appear so gigantic if I was sitting.

"Please do. The chairs all belong to you."

"I'm sorry you put it in that way. They are yours as long as you choose to—to occupy a furnished apartment here."

"I have been very selfish, and cattish, and inconsiderate, Mr. Smart. You see, I'm a spoilt child. I've always had my own way in everything. You must look upon me as a very horrid, sneaking, conspiring person, and I—I really think you ought to turn me out."

Facing me once more she said: "If you will sit down, Mr. Smart, and be patient and generous with me, I shall try to explain everything.

"I am here, Mr. Smart, because it is the last place in the world where my husband would be likely to look for me."

"Your husband? Look for you?"

"Yes. I shall be quite frank with you. My husband and I have separated. A provisional divorce was granted, however, just seven months ago. The final decree cannot be issued for one year."

"But why should you hide from him?"

"The—the court gave him the custody of our child during the probationary year. I—I have run away with her. They are looking for me everywhere. That is why I came here. Do you understand?"

I was stunned. "Then, I take it, the court granted him the divorce and not you," I said, experiencing a sudden chill about the heart. "You were deprived of the child, I see. Dear me!"

"You are mistaken," she said, a flash in her eyes. "It was an Austrian court. The Count—my husband, I should say—is an Austrian subject. His interests must be protected." She said this with a sneer on her pretty lips. "You see, my father, knowing him now for what he really is, has refused to pay over to him something like a million dollars, still due for the marriage settlement. The Count contends that it is a just and legal debt and the court supports him to this extent: The child is to be his until the debt is cleared up, or something to that effect. I really don't understand the legal complications involved. Perhaps it were better if I did."

"I see," said I, scornful in spite of myself. "One of those happy international marriages where a bride is thrown in for good measure with a couple of millions. Won't we ever learn!"

"That's it precisely," she said, with the utmost calmness and candor. "American dollars and an American girl in exchange for a title, a lot of debts and a ruined life."

"And they always turn out just this way. What a lot of blithering fools we have in the land of the free and the home of the knave!"

"My father objected to the whole arrangement from the first, so you must not speak of him as a knave," she protested. "He doesn't like counts and such things."

"I don't see that it helps matters. I can hardly substitute the word 'brave' for the one I used," said I, trying to conceal my disgust.

"Please don't misunderstand me, Mr. Smart," she said haughtily. "I am not asking for pity. I made my bed and I shall lie in it. The only thing I ask of you is—well, kindness."

She seemed to falter again, and once more I was at her feet, figuratively speaking.

"You are in distress, in dread of something, madam," I cried. "Consider me your friend."

She shook her head ruefully. "You poor man! You don't know what you are in for, I fear. Wait till I have told you everything. Three weeks ago I laid myself liable to imprisonment and heaven knows what else by abducting my little girl. That is really what it comes to—abduction. The court has ordered my arrest, and all sorts of police persons are searching high and low for me. Now don't you see your peril? If they find me here, you will be in a dreadful predicament. You will be charged with criminal complicity, or whatever it is called, and—oh, it will be dreadfully unpleasant for you, Mr. Smart."

"Pray do not consider my position at all," I managed to say, with a resolute assumption of gallantry. "I—I shall be perfectly able to look out for myself—that is, to explain everything if it should come to the worst." I could not help adding, however: "I certainly hope, however, that they don't get on to your trail and"—— I stopped in confusion.

"And find me here?" she completed gloomily.

"And take the child away from you," I made haste to explain.

A fierce light flamed in her eyes. "I should—kill—some one before that could happen," she cried out, clenching her hands.

"I—I beg of you, madam, don't work yourself into a—a state," I implored, in considerable trepidation. "Nothing like that can happen, believe me. I"——

"Oh, what do you know about it?" she exclaimed, with most unnecessary vehemence, I thought. "He wants the child and—and—well, you can see why he wants her, can't you? He is making the most desperate efforts to recover her. Max says the newspapers are full of the—the scandal. They are depicting me as a brainless, law-defying American without sense of love, honor or respect. I don't mind that, however. It is to be expected. They all describe the Count as a long-suffering, honorable, dreadfully maltreated person and are doing what they can to help him in the prosecution of the search. My mother, who is in Paris, is being shadowed; my two big brothers are being watched; my lawyers in Vienna are being trailed everywhere—oh, it is really a most dreadful thing. But—but I will not give her up! She is mine. He doesn't love her. He doesn't love me. He doesn't love anything in the world but himself and his cigarettes. I know, for I've paid for his cigarettes for nearly three years. He has actually ridiculed me in court circles, he has defamed me, snubbed me, humiliated me, cursed me. You cannot imagine what it has been like. Once he struck me in"——

"Struck you!" I cried.

"—in the presence of his sister and her husband. But I must not distress you with sordid details. Suffice it to say, I turned at last like the proverbial worm. I applied for a divorce ten months ago. It was granted, provisionally, as I say. He is a degenerate. He was unfaithful to me in every sense of the word. But in spite of all that, the court in granting me the separation took occasion to placate national honor by giving him the child during the year, pending the final disposition of the case. Of course, everything depends on father's attitude in respect to the money. You see what I mean? A month ago I heard from friends in Vienna that he was shamefully neglecting our—my baby, so I took this awful, this perfectly bizarre way of getting her out of his hands. Possession is nine points in the law, you see. I"——

"Alas!" interrupted I, shaking my head. "There is more than one way to look at the law. I'm afraid you have got yourself into a serious—er—pickle."

"I don't care," she said defiantly. "It is the law's fault for not prohibiting such marriages as ours. Oh, I know I must seem awfully foolish and idiotic to you, but—but it's too late now to back out, isn't it?"

I did not mean to say it, but I did—and I said it with some conviction: "It is! You must be protected."

"Thank you, thank you!" she cried, clasping and unclasping her little hands. I found myself wondering if the brute had dared to strike her on that soft, pink cheek!

Suddenly a horrible thought struck me with stunning force.

"Don't tell me that your—your husband is the man who owned this castle up to a week ago," I cried. "Count James Hohendahl?"

She shook her head. "No. He is not the man." Seeing that I waited for her to go on, she resumed: "I know Count James quite well, however. He is my husband's closest friend."

"Good heaven," said I, in quick alarm. "That complicates matters, doesn't it? He may come here at any time."

"It isn't likely, Mr. Smart. To be perfectly honest with you, I waited until I heard you had bought the castle before coming here myself. We were in hiding at the house of a friend in Linz up to a week ago. I did not think it right or fair to subject them to the notoriety or the peril that was sure to follow if the officers took it into their heads to look for me there. The day you bought the castle I decided that it was the safest place for me to stay until the danger blows over, or until father can arrange to smuggle me out of this awful country. That very night we were brought here in a motor. Dear old Conrad and Mrs. Schmick took me in. They have been perfectly adorable, all of them."

"May I inquire, madam," said I stiffly, "how you came to select my abode as your hiding place?"

"Oh, I have forgotten to tell you that we lived here one whole summer just after we were married. Count Hohendahl let us have the castle for our—our honeymoon. He was here a great deal of the time. All sorts of horrid, nasty, snobbish people were here to help us enjoy our honeymoon. I shall never forget that dreadful summer. My only friends were the Schmicks. Every one else ignored and despised me, and they all borrowed, won or stole money from me. I was compelled to play bridge for atrociously high stakes without knowing one card from the other. But, as I say, the Schmicks loved me. You see they were in the family ages and ages ago before I was born."

"The family? What family?"

"The Rothhoefen family. Haven't they told you that my great-grandmother was a Rothhoefen? No? Well, she was. I belong to the third generation of American-born descendants. Doesn't it simplify matters, knowing this?"

"Immensely," said I, in something of a daze.

"And so I came here, Mr. Smart, where hundreds of my ancestors spent their honeymoon, most of them perhaps as unhappy as I, and where I knew a fellow countryman was to live for a while in order to get a plot for a new story. You see, I thought I might be a great help to you in the shape of suggestion."

"I'd rather not tell you my name, Mr. Smart. It really can't matter, you know. I've thought it all out very carefully, and I've decided that it is not best for you to know. You see, if you don't know who it is you are sheltering the courts can't hold you to account. You will be quite innocent of deliberately contriving to defeat the law. No, I shall not tell you my name, nor my husband's, nor my father's. If you'd like to know, however, I will tell you my baby's name. She's two years old and I think she'll like you to call her Rosemary."

"Rosemary," I repeated. "And what am I to call you?"

"Even my enemies call me Countess," she said coldly.

"Oh," said I, more respectfully. "I see. When am I to have the pleasure of meeting the less particular Rosemary?"

"I didn't mean to be horrid," she said plaintively. "Please overlook it, Mr. Smart. If you are very, very quiet I think you may see her now. She is asleep."

"I may frighten her if she awakes," I said in haste, remembering my antipathy to babies.

Nevertheless I was led through a couple of bare, unfurnished rooms into a sunny, perfectly adorable nursery. A nursemaid—English, at a glance—arose from her seat in the window and held a cautious finger to her lips. In the middle of a bed that would have accommodated an entire family, was the sleeping Rosemary—a tiny, rosy-cheeked, yellow haired atom bounded on four sides by yards of mattress.

I stood over her timorously and stared. The Countess put one knee upon the mattress and, leaning far over, kissed a little paw. I blinked, like a confounded booby.

Then we stole out of the room.

I offered her everything that the castle afforded in the way of loyalty and luxury.

"And we'll have a telephone in the main hall before the end of a week," I concluded beamingly.

Her face clouded. "Oh, I'd much rather have it in my hallway, if you don't mind. You see, I can't very well go downstairs every time I want to use the phone, and it will be a nuisance sending for me when I'm wanted."

I promised to put the instrument in her hall, and not to have an extension to my rooms for fear of creating suspicion. Also the electric bell system was to be put in just as she wanted it to be. And a lot of other things that do not seem to come to mind at this moment.

I left in a daze at half-past 3 to send Britton up with all the late novels and magazines and a big box of my special cigarettes.

## CHAPTER V.

### I Discuss Matrimony.

POOPENDYKE and I tried to do a little work that evening, but neither of us seemed quite capable of concentration.

"They will yank us all up for aiding and abetting," he proclaimed, trying to focus his eyes on the shorthand book he was fumbling.

"You wouldn't have me turn her over to the law, would you?" I demanded crossly. "Please don't forget that we are Americans."

"I don't," said he. "That's what worries me most of all."

"Well," said I loftily, "we'll see."

I lay awake half the night morbidly berating the American father who is so afraid of his wife that he lets her bully him into sacrificing their joint flesh and blood upon the altar of social ambition. She had said that her father was opposed to the match from the beginning. Then why, in the name of heaven, wasn't he man enough to put a stop to it?

The next morning I set my laborers to work putting guest rooms into shape for the coming of the Hazzards and the four friends who were to be with them for the week as my guests. They were to arrive on the next day but one, which gave me ample time to consult a furniture dealer. I would have to buy at least six new beds and everything else with which to comfortably equip as many bed chambers.

At twelve I climbed the tortuous stairs leading to the Countess's apartments. She opened the door herself in response to my rapping.

"I neglected to mention yesterday that I am expecting a houseful of guests in a day or two," I said, after she had given me a very cordial greeting.

"Guests?" she cried in dismay. "Oh, dear! Can't you put them off?"

"I have hopes that they won't be able to stand the workmen banging around all day," I confessed, somewhat guiltily.

"Women in the party?"

"Two, I believe. Both married and qualified to express opinions."

"They will be sure to nose me out," she said ruefully. "Women are dreadful nosers."

"Don't worry," I said. "We'll get a lot of new padlocks for the doors downstairs and you'll be as safe as can be, if you'll only keep quiet."

"But I don't see why I should be made to mope here all day and all night like a sick cat, holding my hand over Rosemary's mouth when she wants to cry and muzzling poor Jinko so that he"——

"My dear Countess," I interrupted sternly, "you should not forget that these other guests of mine are invited here."

"I'll try to be nice and sensible, and I will be as still as a mouse all the time they're here. But you must promise to come up every day and give me the gossip. You can steal up, can't you? Surreptitiously?"

"I've been trying to recall all of the notable marriages we had in New York three years ago," said I. "You don't seem to fit in with any of the international affairs I can bring to mind."

"You promised you wouldn't bother about that, Mr. Smart," she said severely.

"Of course you were married in New York?"

"In a very nice church just off Fifth avenue, if that will help you any," she said.

"Stranger things have happened than that you should patch up your difficulties and go back to live with your husband."

She uttered a little cry of revulsion. The dreamy light died in her eyes and she transfixed me with a look of indignation.

"How dare you suggest such a thing! How dare you speak to me in that way! You—I ought to order you out of this room and never—never"——

My luminous smile checked the outburst.

"Splendid!" I cried. "You convince me that it can never happen."

"You spoke of him as my husband," she said. "He is not my husband. Please be good enough to remember that."

"It will be easy, I assure you. May I therefore venture the hope that if you ever decide to marry again you'll give some deserving American a chance to make you his queen? You'll find it better than being a countess, I believe."

"I shall never marry, Mr. Smart," she said with decision. "Never, never again will I get into a mess that is so hard to get out of. I can say this to you because I've heard you are a bachelor. You can't take offense."

"I fondly hope to die a bachelor," said I with humility.

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At dinner that evening I asked Poopendyke point blank if he could call to mind a marriage in New York society that might fit the principals in this puzzling case.

He hemmed and hawed and appeared to be greatly confused.

"Really, sir, I—I—really, I"——

"You make it a point to read all of the society news," I explained, "and you are a great hand for remembering names and faces. Think hard."

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Smart, I do remember this particular marriage very clearly," said he, looking down at his plate.

"You do?" I shouted eagerly. The new footman stared. "Splendid! Tell me, who is she—or was she?"

My secretary looked me steadily in the eye.

"I'm sorry, sir, but—but I can't do it. I promised her this morning I wouldn't let it be dragged out of me with red hot tongs."

## CHAPTER VI.

### I Receive Visitors.

THE east wing of the castle was as still as a mouse on the day my house party arrived.

And yet I trembled. My secret seemed to be safely planted, but what would the harvest be? I knew I should watch those upper windows with hypnotic seal, and listen with straining ears for the inevitable squall of a child or the bark of a dog. My brain ran riot with incipient subterfuges, excuses, apologies and lies with which my position was to be sustained.

There would not be a minute during the week to come when I would be perfectly free to call my soul my own, and as for nerves! well, with good luck they might endure the strain.

Elsie Hazzard presented me to her friends and, with lordly generosity, I presented the castle to them. Her husband, Dr. George, thanked me for saving all their lives and then, feeling a draft, turned up his coat collar and informed me that we'd all die if I didn't have the cracks stopped up. He seemed unnecessarily testy about it.

There was a Russian baron, the last syllable of whose name was vitch, the first five evading me in a perpetual chase up and down the alphabet. For brevity's sake, I'll call him Umovitch. Then there was a Viennese gentleman of twenty-six or eight (I heard), but who looked forty. I found myself wondering how dear, puritanic, little Elsie Hazzard could have fallen in with two such unmistable wrecks as these fellows appeared to be at first sight.

The Austrian's name was Pless. He was a plain mister. The more I saw of him the first afternoon the more I wondered at George Hazzard's carelessness. Then there were two very bright and charming Americans, the Billy Smiths. He was connected with the American Embassy at Vienna, and I liked him from the start. They called his wife "Betty Billy."

After luncheon I got Elsie off in a corner and plied her with questions concerning her friends. The Billy Smiths were easily accounted for. They belonged to the most exclusive set in New York and Newport. He had an incomprehensible lot of money and a taste for the diplomatic service. Some day he would be an Ambassador. The Baron was in the Russian Embassy and was really a very nice boy.

"Boy?" I exclaimed.

"He is not more than thirty," said she. "You wouldn't call that old." There was nothing I could say to that and still be a perfect host. But to you I declare that he wasn't a day under fifty. How blind women can be! Or is silly the word?

From where we sat the figure of Mr. Pless was plainly visible in the loggia. He was alone, leaning against the low wall and looking down upon the river. He puffed idly at a cigarette. His coal black hair grew very sleek on his smallish head and his shoulders were rather high, as if pinched upward by a tendency to defy a weak spine.

"And this Mr. Pless, who is he?"

Elsie was looking at the rakish young man with a pitying expression in her tender blue eyes.

"Poor fellow," she sighed. "He is in great trouble, John. We hoped that if we got him off here where it is quiet he might be able to forget. Oh, but I am not supposed to tell you a word of the story! We are all sworn to secrecy. It was only on that condition that he consented to come with us."

"Indeed!"

She hesitated, uncomfortably placed between two duties. She owed one to him and one to me.

"It is only fair, John, that you should know that Pless is not his real name," she said, lowering her voice. "But, of course, we stand sponsor for him, so it is all right."

"Your word is sufficient, Elsie."

"His life is a—a tragedy," she whispered. "His heart is broken, I firmly believe. Oh!"

The Billy Smiths came up. Elsie proceeded to withdraw into herself.

"We were speaking of Mr. Pless," said I. "He has a broken heart."

"Well," said Elsie doggedly, "I'm determined to tell this much: His name isn't Pless. His wife got a divorce from him, and now she has taken their child and run off with it and they can't find—what's the matter?"

My eyes were almost popping from my head.

"Is—is he a count?" I cried.

Billy Smith regarded me speculatively. "I daresay Mr. Smart has read all about the affair in the newspapers. They've had nothing else lately. I won't say he is a count, and I won't say he isn't. We're bound by a deep, dark, sinister oath, sealed with blood."

"The poor fellow is almost distracted. Really, Mr. Smart, we planned this little visit here simply in order to—to take him out of himself for a while. It has been such a tragedy for him. He worshipped the child." It was Mrs. Billy who spoke.

"And the mother made way with him?" I queried, resorting to a suddenly acquired cunning.

"It is a girl," said Elsie in a loud whisper. "The loveliest girl. The mother appeared in Vienna about three weeks or a month ago and—whiff! Off goes the child. Abducted—kidnapped! And the court had granted him the custody of the child. That's what makes it so terrible. If she is caught anywhere in Europe—well, I don't know what may happen to her. It is just such silly acts as this that make American girls the laughing stocks of the whole world. I give you my word I am almost ashamed to have people point me out and say: 'There goes an American. Pooh!'"

To my disgust, the three of them refused to enlighten me further as to the history, identity or character of either Mr. or Mrs. Pless, but of course I knew that I was entertaining under my roof, by the most extraordinary coincidence, the Count and Countess of Something- or-other, who were at war, and the child they were fighting for with motives of an entirely different nature.

Right or wrong, my sympathies were with the refugee in the lonely east wing. I was all the more determined now to shield her as far as it lay in my power to do so, and to defend her if the worst were to happen.

Mr. Pless openly made love to Elsie and the Baron openly made love to Betty Billy. Being a sort of noncommittal bachelor, I ranged myself with the two abandoned husbands, and we had quite a reckless time of it, talking with uninterrupted devilishness about the growth of American dentistry in European capitals, the way one has his nails manicured in Germany, the upset price of hothouse strawberries and sundry other topics of similar piquancy. Elsie invited all of us to a welsh rarebit party she was giving at eleven-thirty, and then they got to work at the bridge table.

It was absolutely necessary for the Countess to know that her ex-husband was in the castle. I would have to manage in some way to see her before the evening was over. The least carelessness, the smallest slip might prove the undoing of both of us. On an excuse of letters to write I left my guests.

Ten minutes later I was sneaking up the interminable stairways in the sepulchral east wing. Mr. Poopendyke stood guard below at the padlocked doors, holding the keys.

Sorrowful timorously I knocked at the Countess's door.

The Countess's French maid peered out at me.

"Madame has request me to inform m'sieur that she knows the Count is here, and will you be so good as to call to-morrow morning. She has gone to bed."

"What? She knows he's here? Who brought the information?"

"The bountiful Max, m'sieur. He bring it with dejeuner, again with dinner, and but now with the hot water, m'sieur."

When I reached the room where the guests were assembled I found Mr. Pless and the Baron Umovitch engaged in an acrimonious dispute over a question of bridge etiquette. Suddenly Mr. Pless threw his cards down and left the table, without a word of apology to the two ladies, who looked more hurt than appalled.

He said he was going to bed, but I noticed that he took himself off in the direction of the moonlit loggia. We were still discussing his defection in subdued tones—with the exception of the irate baron—when he re-entered the room. The expression on his face was mocking, even accusing. Directing his words to me, he uttered a lazy indictment.

"Are there real spirits in your castle, Mr. Smart, or have you flesh and blood mediums who roam about in white night dresses to study the moods of the moon from the dizziest ramparts?"

Confound his insolence! He winked at me!

## CHAPTER VII.

### I Resort to Diplomacy.

"MY DEAR COUNTESS," said I the next morning, "while I am willing to admit that all you say is true, there still remains the unhappy fact that you were very near to upsetting everything last night. Mr. Pless saw you quite plainly. The moon was very full, you'll remember. Fortunately he was too far away from your window to recognise you. Think how easy it might"——

"But I've told you twice that I held my hand over Jinko's nose and he just couldn't bark, Mr. Smart. You are really most unreasonable about it. The dog had to have a breath of fresh air."

"And now will you be good enough to tell me who I am?" she asked after a few minutes. "That is, who am I supposed to be?"

"Oh," said I uneasily, "you are really nobody. You are Britton's wife."

"What! Does Britton know it?"

"Yes," said I, with a wry smile. "He took a mean advantage of me in the presence of George Hazzard not an hour ago, and asked for a raise in wages on account of his wife's illness. It seems that you are an invalid."

"I hope he hasn't forgotten the baby in his calculations."

"He hasn't, you may be sure. He has named the baby after me."

"And now tell me all about—Mr. Pless. How is he looking? Does he appear to be unhappy?"

"He appears to be somewhat sentimental and preoccupied. He gazes at the moon and bites his nails."

"I—I wish I could have a peep at him some time without being"——

"For heaven's sake, don't even consider such a thing," I cried in alarm.

"Just a little peek, Mr. Smart," she pleaded.

"No!" said I firmly.

"Very well," she said resignedly, fixing me with hurt eyes. "I'm sorry you'll go back to him, after all," I said angrily. "Women are all alike. They"——

"Just because I want to see how unhappy he is, and enjoy myself a little, you say horrid things to me," she cried, almost pathetically. "You treat me very badly."

"There is a great deal at stake," said I. "The peril is—well, it's enormous. I am having the devil's own time heading off a scheme they've got for exploring the entire castle. Your hus—your ex-husband says he knows of a secret door opening into this part of the"——

She sprang to her feet with a sharp cry of alarm.

"Heavens! I—I forgot about that! There is a secret panel and—heaven save us!—it opens directly into my bedroom!" Her eyes were very wide and full of consternation. She gripped my arm. "Come! Be quick! We must pile something heavy against it, or nail it up, or—do something."

She fairly dragged me out into the corridor.

At last we came to the broad hall at the top of the main staircase. Almost directly in front of us loomed the great padlocked doors leading to the other wing. Passing them like the wind she led the way to the farthermost end of the hall. Light from the big, paneless windows overlooking the river came streaming into the vast corridor, and I could see doors ahead to the right and the left of us.

"Your bedroom?" I managed to gasp, uttering a belated question that should have been asked five or six flights higher up at a time when I was better qualified to voice it. "What the dickens is it doing down here?"

She did not reply, but, turning to the left, threw open a door and disappeared into the room beyond. I followed ruthlessly, but stopped just over the threshold to catch my breath in astonishment.

I was in "my lady's bed chamber." The immense Gothic bed stood on its dais, imposing in its isolation. Three or four very modern innovation trunks loomed like minarets against the opposite walls, half-open; one's imagination might have been excused if it conjured up sentries who stood ready to pop out of the trunks to scare one half to death. Some of my most precious rugs adorned the floor, but the windows were absolutely undraped.

"Don't stand there gaping," she cried in a shrill whisper, starting across the room only to turn aside with a sharp exclamation. "That stupid Helene!" she cried, flushing warmly. Catching up a heap of tumbled garments, mostly white, from a chair, she recklessly hurled them behind the bed. "This is the mirror—the middle one. It opens by means of a spring. There is a small hole in the wall behind it and then there is still another secret door beyond that, a thick iron one with the sixth Baron Rothhoefen's portrait on the outer side of it. The canvas swings open. We must"——

I was beginning to get my bearings.

"The sixth baron? Old Ludwig the Red?"

"The very one."

"Then, by Jove, he is in my study! You don't mean to say"——

"Please don't stop to talk," she cried impatiently, looking about in a distracted manner, "but for goodness' sake get something to put against this mirror."

My mind worked rapidly. The only object in the room heavy enough to serve as a barricade was the bed, and it was too heavy for me to move, I feared. I suggested it, of course, involuntarily lowering my voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

"Pull it over, quick!" she commanded promptly.

"Perhaps I'd better run out and get Max and Ru"——

"If my hus—if Mr. Pless should open that secret door from the other side, Mr. Smart, it will be very embarrassing for you and me, let"——

I put my shoulder to the huge, creaky bed and shoved. There were no castors.

By means of great straining I got the heavy bed over against the mirror.

"Will you forgive me if I submit that you sleep quite a distance from home?" I remarked with justifiable irony. "Why the duece, don't you stay on the upper floors?"

"Because I am mortally afraid," she said with a little shudder. "You've no idea how lonely, how spooky it is up there at the dead hour of night. I couldn't sleep. After the third night I had my things moved down here, where I could at least feel that there were strong men within—you might say arm's length of me. I'm—I'm shockingly timid."

She leaned a little closer to me. "We all sleep down here," she said confidentially. "We bring Rosemary's little mattress down every night and put it in the bathtub. It is a very good fit and makes quite a nice cradle for her. Helene and Blake sleep just across the hall and we leave the doors wide open. So you see, we're not one bit afraid."

"Um!" said I, judicially. "And so my study is just beyond this mirror, eh? May I enquire how you happen to know that I have my study there?"

"Oh, I peeked in the other day," she said, serene once more.

"The deuce you did!"

"I was quite sure that you were out," she explained. "I opened the picture of Ludwig the Red an inch or two, that's all. You are quite cosy in there, aren't you? I envy you the grand old *chaise longe*."

I wavered, but succeeded in subduing the impulse. "It is the only comfortable piece of furniture I have left in my apartments," said I, with convincing candor.

"You poor man," she said, with her rarest smile. "How fortunate you are that I did not remember the *chaise longe*. You would have been deprived of it, I am quite sure. Of course I couldn't think of robbing you of it now."

"As a matter of fact, I never lie in it," I said, submitting to a once conquered impulse. "If you'd really like to have it I'll see that it is taken up to your rooms at once."

We returned to the corridor. She closed the door softly, a mockery in view of the clatter I had made in shifting the bed and its impediments.

"Listen!" I whispered suddenly, grasping her arm. "Did you hear footsteps in the—— Sh!"

Some one was walking over the stone floor in the lower hall, brisk strides that rang out quite clearly as they drew nearer.

"It is—it is Mr. Pless," she whispered in a panic. "I recognized his tread. As if I could ever forget it! Oh, how I hate him! He"——

"Don't stop here to tell me about it," I cut in sharply. "Make haste! Get up to your rooms and lock yourself in. I'll—I'll stop him. How the deuce did he get into this side of the"——

"Through the dungeons. There is a passage," she whispered, and then she was gone, flying noiselessly up the narrow stairway.

Assuming a nonchalance I certainly did not feel, I descended the stairs. We met in the broad hallway below. Mr. Pless approached slowly, evidently having checked his speed on hearing my footsteps on the stairs.

"Hello," I said agreeably. "How did you get in?"

He surveyed me coolly. "I know the castle from top to bottom, Mr. Smart. To be perfectly frank with you I tried the secret panel in your study but found the opposite door blocked. You have no objection, I trust, to my looking over the castle? It is like home to me."

"Then how did you get in?" I repeated, cringing perceptibly in response to the slam of the distant door.

"By the same means, I daresay, that you employ," said he.

For a moment I was confounded. Then my wits came to the rescue.

"I see. Through the dungeon. You do know the castle well, Mr. Pless."

"It is a cobwebby, unlovely passage," said he, brushing the dirt and cobwebs from his trousers. My own appearance was conspicuously immaculate, but I brushed in unison just the same.

"Gruesome," said I.

"Perhaps you'd rather I didn't disturb Mrs.—Mrs."——

"Britton," said I. "My valet's wife. I don't believe you will disturb her. She's on the top floor, I think."

I started off in the direction of the lower regions. He followed. I manoeuvred with such success that he ultimately took the lead. I hadn't the remotest idea how to get to the confounded dungeons!

It never rains but it pours. Just as we were descending the last flight of stairs before coming to the winding stone steps that led far down into the earth, who but Britton should come blithely up from the posterior regions devoted to servants and their ilk. He was carrying a long pasteboard box. I said something impressive under my breath. Britton, on seeing us, stopped short in his tracks. He put the box behind his back and gazed at me forlornly.

"Ah, Britton," said I, recovering myself most creditably; "going up to see little John Bellamy, I suppose?"

I managed to shoot a covert look at Mr. Pless. He was gazing at the half-hidden box with a perfectly impassive face, and yet I knew that there was a smile about his somewhere.

The miserable box contained roses, I knew, because I had ordered them for Rosemary.

"Yes, sir," said my valet, rigid with uncertainty, "in a way, sir." A bright look flashed into his face. "I'm taking up the wash, Mr. Smart. From the laundry over in the town, sir. It is something dreadful the way they mangle things, sir. Especially ladies' garments. Thank you, sir."

He stood aside to let us pass, the box pinned between him and the wall. Never in my life have I known roses with a more pungent and penetrating odor! Britton seemed to fairly reek with it.

"I like the perfumes the women are using nowadays," said Mr. Pless affably, as we felt our way down the steps.

"Attar of roses," said I, sniffing.

"Umph!" said he.

(To Be Continued.)

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