

The widow with the Midas touch...

Famous misers

By James Hollidge

Mrs Sarah Scollard had a genius for finance that brought her 10 million dollars.

Yet her miser's heart would not let her use butter, encouraged her to filch soap from hotel bedrooms and tempted her to appropriate coins from jackpots when she played poker.



Born Sarah Peterson in San Francisco in 1858, she was a stenographer when she met and became the mistress of "Hecla" Jim Smith, a Western carpenter who struck it rich with the discovery of the famous Hecla copper mine in Idaho.

They lived happily together for many years, and on his deathbed in 1907 "Hecla" Jim married his then middle-aged paramour. He left her 400,000 dollars.

The widowed Mrs. Smith took the money to Chicago and plunged into speculation in stocks, shares, real estate, the commodity market and poker with some of the biggest professional gamblers and crooks of the day.

She soon pyramided her capital into millions—particularly during World War I, when a pile of shares she held in one of "Hecla" Jim's old copper mines rocketed from a few cents to 27 dollars each.

She took to carrying 10,000-dollar bills round with her—sewn in her clothing. About her house she concealed 800,000 dollars in 1,000-dollar bills.

At a high-class poker school Mrs. Smith met a handsome, professional gambler, George F. Scollard.

He paid her court and even divorced his own young and pretty wife in 1925 so he could marry her.

With Scollard she toured Europe—carrying a black valise wherever she went that contained 8,000,000 dollars in cash and securities.

Accompanying them as secretary-companion under a false name was Scollard's former wife.

Scollard was still in love with the younger woman.

They expected to remarry as soon as time caught up with Scollard's doddering new spouse and enjoy together the wealth he inherited from her.

Back from Europe, Mrs. Scollard, with her husband and bogus secretary, took off on a South American cruise.

The voyage proceeded uneventfully until Mrs. Scollard surprised her husband making love to her secretary.

Outraged, she threatened divorce as soon as she returned to the United States.

Scollard and his first wife divorced his wife in due course so he could marry her.

In one year, 1929, Mrs. Scollard gave Brown 755,000 dollars in gifts and fees for financial advice. Vainly bankers tried to warn her of Brown's reputation as a business shark. Her only reaction was to close her accounts.

Brown then frightened the old woman with stories that income-tax authorities were on her trail. He persuaded her to flee.

For several years Brown spirited Mrs. Scollard about the country from one hotel to another—all the while gradually mulching her of vast wealth with phony business deals.

Card cheat

At 59 Mrs. Smith married again. She gave her new husband, San Francisco jeweller R. T. Wilbur, a wedding present of 50,000 dollars.

The marriage lasted only a year. In the divorce proceedings Wilbur said he could not stand his wife's "thrill mania."

She would not let him eat butter, which she called a "needless extravagance," and kept the household in soap with stealings from hotels when she travelled.

All her spare time was occupied with poker playing. She forced Wilbur into games with her and cheated by "rattling" dimes and quarters from the pots.

Back in Chicago, where she made her headquarters, Mrs. Sarah Smith (as she still called herself) accumulated more than 10 million dollars. Her misery habits developed and she began to distrust banks.

She gambled in millions, yet stole dimes

disembarked at the next port, Buenos Aires. They raced back overland and beat the millionaires home to Chicago.

When she duly arrived, the house had been turned upside down. Scollard and his love had fled to Canada and 684 of the concealed 1,000-dollar bills were missing.

Mrs. Scollard divorced her errant husband. She also started legal proceedings but saw neither Scollard nor her money again.

Tax fear

The loss set her off on an economy campaign. She sold her house and moved into a single room in a ramshackle hotel. For safety's sake she put some of her money back into a number of banks.

In 1927 romance again entered her life. She met bulky, bearded real estate operator Reese Brown when she answered an advertisement about some Kentucky land he was selling.

Before long, the wily Brown talked himself into a position as her business manager. He showered attentions on her—sending her baskets of roses, providing a limousine to drive her about and promising to

Lost fortune

In 1932 Mrs. Scollard moved to Canada—and disappeared. A year later U.S. Income Tax authorities pounced on Brown himself and began an investigation.

They questioned him about Mrs. Scollard and the moneys he got from her. He produced a silver urn engraved: "The ashes of Sarah Smith. Died Montreal, Canada, June 24, 1932."

That was the end of the widow Midas. Of her vast millions she had only about 75,000 dollars left when she died.

Brown apparently got most of Mrs. Scollard's hoard—but had managed to keep within the law.

He was compelled to disgorge 1,000,000 dollars for income-tax, but was still on the right side.

Then on January 27, 1934, Reese Brown was killed in a car accident—and all the miser wealth he had schemed so hard to get went for nothing.

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