

white hands were loaded with rings. Miss Vandokkum, tall, slight, and lively, wore a gown of white silk with opal ornaments.

Both ladies received Macey with marked cordiality. Dale appeared to be very much at home with them; and to this Macey attributed his reception, entirely unaware that he made quite a distinguished figure in the rooms, which contained but a sprinkling of men. Introductions followed. Dale was kind; yet the novice shrank back after a while from the throng, preferring rather to be a spectator than a participant. Everything was novel, strange, fascinating, and yet repelling. The lights, the perfume, the flowers, the buzz of voices, the sound of subdued, affected laughter, the endless platitudes and nothings of conversation which went on around him, made him realise that he was in a new atmosphere, almost in a foreign world.

Dale and he had become separated. He was leaning against a pillar, half in the shadow of a crimson velvet curtain, when he heard a pleasant female voice at his elbow, and became aware that Miss Vandokkum was tapping him on the arm with her fan. He turned and bowed, his face flushing, a little thrill of masculine vanity agitating his veins as he realised that his young hostess must have sought him with deliberation. A moment before he had caught her eye for an instant, as she stood surrounded by admirers at the other end of the room. She at once slowly made her way out of the circle, traversing several corridors and an ante-room until she had reached him in his secluded corner. Now she placed her hand upon his arm, looking up smilingly into his face as she said:

'I saw that you were looking lonely here, Mr. Macey, and thought I would come and take a little turn with you in the conservatory. It is so very warm in these rooms.'

Murmuring his pleasure, and hiding his embarrassment under the mask of steady gray eyes and firmly cut lips—which were his inheritance from ancestors who had sat in high places when those of the girl beside him were building dykes in the Low Countries—Macey began to pilot a way through the crowded apartments.

There were many comments as the couple now passed close to the male wallflowers fringing the outer rows of tightly wedged dowagers who sat quite oblivious of their charges, lost to view in the surging throng. From the men came such remarks as the following:

'Arthur, who is that cad with the Vandokkum?'

'Some new fellow she has fished into her net. She'll drop him as she does everybody else after two or three evenings. She's a rare one for sensations.'

'Aye, indeed! Who is he, anyway? An importation?'

'Blamed if I know! Likely as not!'

'You're mistaken,' observed another youth. 'He's nothing but a cad—a sort of medical student. Dale brought in to-night. (Charlotte isn't going to throw herself away on a specimen like that so long as coal is way up high. You know the anthracite man has the inside track there.'

'She's not a bad lot, though. Mighty good-hearted is Lady Charlotte.'

With the dowagers it ran thus:

'What an aristocratic-looking man! Who is he?'

'I cannot tell you. Good-looking, but young, don't you think?'

'Yes, two or three years younger than she is.'

'She makes up well, though. Her vivacity takes from her years.'

'She has measured the situation—thought it all out. She made a picture of herself and that youth promenading through the rooms before she took a step. She is an actress, don't you think so?'

'Well—perhaps. If it amuses her, it doesn't matter.'

'He struts along like a young peacock. Probably thinks himself the admired of all admirers. I wish my Albert had his assurance!'

Meanwhile, unconscious of criticism, Macey, with Miss Vandokkum leaning lightly on his arm, reached the conservatory, where, in the twilight of softly modulated electric lamps, several couples were already seated. His companion led the way to a pretty tinkling fountain behind a palm tree, where a small wicker settee invited them to rest. The subdued light, the plash of falling water, the flower-laden atmosphere, the attractive upraised face of his companion, her pretty sallies, her bewitching smiles—each and all laid their concentrated spell upon him. He breathed and spoke in a dream, in a dream. For that one short half-hour he forgot that Margaret was in existence.

'They are going to supper,' said Miss Vandokkum. 'Will you take me down?'

'With pleasure,' answered Macey, shaking off the mysterious spell that encompassed him.

As he rose to his feet, his companion suddenly appeared to him to be singularly unattractive. He wondered what he could have found charming in those deep eyes, outlined with dark blue rings which showed through the rouge and powder with which her cheeks were covered; in the disheveled hair, already out of curl and falling in thin, straight strands on her neck; in the tiresome small talk with which the half-hour had been filled. The voice of the fountain had become disagreeably monotonous; the atmosphere, warm and perfumed, fairly sickened him. He longed for a breath of fresh air.

Once more Miss Vandokkum placed her hand upon his arm, directing him by another entrance to the tent several steps below the level of the conservatory, where a hundred tables were decorated and laid for supper.

II.

Every one was in high spirits, and the champagne flowed freely. Early in the feast Miss Vandokkum had been appropriated by a late arrival—a bloated, pompous looking man with bright red hair and freckled skin. It soon became bruited about, filtering to the ears of Macey, that the newcomer was the Earl of Bentlington, who for some time had been a suitor for her hand. He had lately been absent, and had unexpectedly returned for the fag-end of the function.

(Charlotte had left Macey without the slightest apology; he had turned to speak to her, and she was gone. Yet her departure had been rather welcome to this extraordinary young man. The reaction had been permanent; it was only politeness which kept him at her side. Presently he caught glimpses of her at the other end of the room, where she sat on a kind of raised dais, with the Earl paying court, while a number of satellites lingered near.)

After she left him he made no effort to attach himself to anyone else, but looked around for Dale. He was not in sight. Macey felt weary and at length resolved to go home. Having made his way through the crowd of bare shoulders, he found himself in the hall, and began to ascend the stairs on his way to the dressing-room. A door opened on the first corridor and Dale came out.

'Ah!' he said. 'Not going home?'

'Yes,' replied Macey. 'Where have you been?'

'Just in there,' said Dale, pointing to the room he had left. 'We are having a little game. Won't you join us?'

'Pachre?' said Macey, who knew no other.

'No; a little poker. You have played it, of course?'

'No; but I don't mind waiting for you a while longer. Don't dreadfully weary down there.'

'Wait a moment. I was about to ring for more punch.'

He stepped to the bell, which was answered almost immediately by a black boy. Dale gave the order, turned about, and Macey followed him into the room from which he had come. Though the night was exceedingly warm, Dale carefully closed the door behind him. Macey could discern, through the dense cloud of cigar smoke which filled the place the figures of several young men seated at card tables. One was lying on a lounge in the corner, another stood looking out of the large bay window facing the garden; a third walked about puffing at a cigar.

'Come on, fellows,' said Dale. 'Mr. Macey will take a hand. He is a friend of mine, and a right good fellow.'

Macey thought this rather a novel form of introduction, but the other men seemed to consider it the proper thing. They came forward at once, but without any more acknowledgment of what had taken place than if Macey had been a machine. Dale brought forward a table with cards and chips.

'What is it to be?' inquired Macey.

'Poker. We'll show you,' said Dale, with a significant glance at the others, which Macey did not observe.

They sat down and began to play, Dale making the explanations. Macey was apt to learn and soon became interested. They played quietly—Macey winning at first, much to his surprise and satisfaction. The stakes were small, but after a while they began to increase them, and from this time Macey lost. The game now grew exciting. Suddenly Macey realised that he was constantly losing, and he made a mental calculation, resolving that after a certain limit had been reached he would stop.

(To be concluded next week.)

For Children's Hacking Cough at Night,
Woods' Great Peppermint Cure. 1s 6d.

Enlargements and Oil Paintings

DONE FROM
ANY PHOTOGRAPH.

N.Z. FINE ART STUDIO
Cathedral Square, Christchurch.