

The Storyteller

A TASTE OF SOCIETY

I.

'Edward, I wish I had the entrée to the society you frequent,' said Charles Macey to his friend and erstwhile college mate, who had dropped in, as was his custom, on the way to an evening reception. Handsome and faultlessly attired, the young man bore about him an air of prosperity and ease with himself and others that had suddenly appealed to the tired student stretched wearily upon the lounge after a laborious day.

Edward Dale glanced hastily about the comfortable, homelike room, as he answered with a smile:

'It is the easiest thing in the world, Macey, if you want to try it. But I fancied you did not go in for that sort of thing. You have the best quarters and the "homiest" room of any one I know. Fellows in ordinary lodgings, like myself, can appreciate the comforts of a place like this. I don't believe you can.'

'Oh, yes, I can!' said Macey. 'I know myself to be very fortunate in being taken care of as I am by my old nurse and friend, Hannah. She is the best cook that ever lived, I believe, and she makes these pleasant rooms a piece of home to me—having lived in the family so many years before she came to keep house for her brother. But I get tired of everything sometimes; and seeing you come in now and then as you do, ready for an evening out, makes me long occasionally for that world to which you seem to belong.'

'"Seem to belong" is good,' laughed his friend. 'It is true, I only seem to belong—I do not really form an integral part of it. A hanger-on to the skirts of it, I yet deserve some pleasure, which may later result in profit to my career. I always have that in view; and I really enjoy it, besides.'

'How profit?' asked Macey. 'By reason of the acquaintances you may make, perhaps?'

'Yes; and—I'm not such a bad-looking fellow, am I? There are heiresses, you know, Charles.'

'To be had for the asking?'

'Well, not exactly that; but one never can tell. Pretty girls sometimes fall in love with impecunious fellows like myself.'

'You call yourself impecunious with a salary of three thousand a year! I wish I were sure of half of it for the next five or six years. I would—'

'What would you do?'

'Well, never mind. I certainly would not be looking around for an heiress.'

'What is three thousand a year, after all? I spend nearly all of it.'

'I'm surprised to hear that. You have no bad habits; you do not live luxuriously.'

'I certainly do not. These rooms of yours seem a paradise to me, Macey. Nevertheless, I save little or nothing. But you were saying you would like to have the entrée to the society I frequent? Are you serious?'

Macey reflected a moment.

'To a certain extent, yes; but the wish must die at birth. I have no means of attaining it.'

'All that is necessary is a dress suit, a good appearance, good manners, and an introduction to some one from some one else. That can all be managed without any trouble.'

'The dress suit is in the wardrobe,' answered Macey. 'I have never worn it since the day of my graduation, two years ago. It may be out of style,' he added gaily. 'In that case there would be no hope for me, I suppose. As to the rest—I will leave you to judge, Dale.'

'Cela va sans dire,' said his friend. 'Now, there are the Vandokkums, rich as Croesus—the old gentleman; a very good sort, too; and Charlotte is a pearl.'

'A pearl!' echoed Macey, as there flashed before his mental vision the picture of a lovely, gentle girl in a country town not 300 miles distant—his pearl, his Margaret, as he had fondly called her for more years than any one but himself knew; the prize he coveted, the goal of all his dreams. Then his thoughts came back to time and place, and he asked: 'Is she very beautiful?'

'Oh, yes, very—after a large, grand fashion, such as few women ever attain! She is a jolly good companion, too.'

'Oh!' said Macey, a little nonplussed. He could not associate his ideal of a pearl with anything but gentleness and modest loveliness. And it did not seem right to him that Dale should have called Miss Vandokkum by her first name: it savored too much of

familiarity. From which it will be seen that his walks had indeed lain far outside the pale of what is called *le haut monde*. In other words, the denizens thereof, if they had been privileged to read his thoughts, would have called him 'fresh' or 'green,' or by some other equally descriptive and expressive word known to their nomenclature.

'I imagine the dress suit will do,' said Dale, looking at his watch. 'But I must be going. It is nearly ten, and I am due at the Bordens. Nice girls, those Bordens; stunners you might call them. Well, old fellow, shall I get you a card for the Vandokkums on the 25th? Say the word and it is yours.'

A wave of revulsion had swept over Macey. Somehow the dazzle and glamor had vanished. Dale's flip-pant remarks jarred and disgusted him. His nature was refined almost to a fault.

'I don't know,' he said slowly. 'It doesn't matter much either way, Dale. I do not belong, and never will belong.'

'And never wish to belong to that world'—why don't you finish, Macey? interrupted his friend, with a light laugh.

'I might, perhaps, if you hadn't taken the words out of my mouth,' said Macey. 'But I don't wish to be a prig, either. Get me a card, if it is not too much trouble, Dale.'

'Very well. It will not be any trouble. Young men are at a premium in society these days. Seriously, Macey, it ought to be a good thing for you. Au revoir! It will be all right.'

After Dale had gone Macey rose, went to his desk, and wrote a long letter to his intended wife. Its contents did not abound in fulsome endearments, but every line breathed an affection founded on deep respect and profound esteem—the result of a friendship and comradeship deepening into pure and unselfish love.

A few days after this Macey received a card of invitation to the Vandokkums; and that same evening Dale paid him a short visit, on his way to a lawn fete given by one of the fashionable set of which, he said, he was rapidly becoming 'quite to the manner born.'

Macey appeared more indifferent than Dale had expected to the honor which he had desired, and which his friend had solicited.

'I don't know what stuff I am made of, to tell the truth, Dale,' he said. 'A glimpse of the fashionable world may fascinate me, you know, to the extent of bringing me on my knees to the goddess as soon as I have tasted the sweetness of her smiles. Never having been tempted, I cannot answer for the consequences. And I am here for solid work, not to fritter away my time.'

He spoke half in jest, half in earnest; and Dale 'read between the lines.'

'Come along and taste, notwithstanding,' said his friend. 'A dash of champagne is exhilarating; it braces one. You will be all the better for it. It will bring you in touch with people and things of the moment. To delve into books day and night is only half to live. And I will answer for it that you have too much character to allow yourself to be blown hither and thither by every wind of change. Many a young fellow would give his eyes to be invited to the Vandokkums.'

Macey laughed. 'I'll be ready,' he said. 'Call for me as you go up. I'll share the cab.'

At ten o'clock on the important evening the two young men were set down at the door of the brilliantly lighted house, where a stream of people in front of them were filling the corridor and mounting the broad staircase, the balustrades of which were almost hidden beneath trailing vines and sprays of flowers. When they descended from the dressing room, it was with great difficulty that they made their way to the hostess and her daughter, who stood beneath a gorgeous electric chandelier of various colored lights, in a bower of roses and jasmine—the arched entrance to a large conservatory in the rear.

The first impression made on Macey was one of revulsion. Glance where he would, his eyes rested on a profusion of bare necks, without, in many cases, even the pretence of sleeves; though now and then could be seen a line of ribbon or velvet, or a ruching of tulle, by which he supposed the gown was kept on the shoulders.

Mrs. Vandokkum, a large, handsome woman of middle age, was attired in a black shimmering gown, the corsage of which—and there was very little of it—made Macey think of a tight-fitting coat of mail, as it sparkled and shone under the heavy jet trimmings which completely covered it. Her white hair, piled like a miniature tower on top of her head, was surmounted by an aigrette of magnificent diamonds. She wore a diamond necklace about her throat, and both of her fat,