

The Storyteller

A TASTE OF SOCIETY

(Concluded from last week.)

Dale stood behind his chair—he had not been playing at all, having assumed the attitude of mentor to his friend before the game began. Macey looked up and saw him exchanging glances with the man opposite. Dale's look had meant, 'Do not be too hard on him; he is my friend; he is green.' At least Macey so interpreted it. While he felt a passing impulse of gratitude to Dale in that he was loyal, he was disgusted at the idea which thrust itself upon his mind—that he had fallen into a nest of gamblers. At the same time he became conscious of oaths, loud voices, and snarling imprecations at the other tables. The punch bowl had been replenished; it stood within easy reaching distance of all the players, who had recourse to it frequently. The atmosphere reeked of tobacco and hot whiskey. The dealer began to rake in the chips, preparatory to another game; but Macey rose.

'I will play no more,' he said. 'It is late and I must be going.'

'It is not much after one,' said Dale. 'The game is only beginning to get exciting. I was just about to take a hand.'

'Take mine, then!' said Macey, throwing a ten-dollar gold piece on the table—the amount of his losses. 'I have no more money, and must bid you all good-evening.'

'No, no!' cried the others; while one of them added, 'Dale will make you a loan. Don't go.'

'Certainly, you can have all you want,' observed Dale—rather coldly, Macey thought—as he stepped forward to the chair his friend had vacated.

'Thanks!' said Macey. 'I have no desire to play, even if Dale lends you twenty?'

'Under no consideration,' rejoined Macey, lifting his eyes in time to intercept an exchange of glances between two of the players. 'I would stand to lose in any case,' he continued rather sharply, 'as I am no match for such old hands.'

'Some people cannot bear adversity,' said one of the men with a sneer; 'especially when it reaches up into the tens.'

He placed strong emphasis on the last word. A smile went round the table—in which, however, Dale did not join. Nothing could have exceeded the insolent manner of the others.

'To lose one ten is far more than I can afford in any way, least of all at gambling,' said Macey nonchalantly; though he had calculated the effect of his words before uttering them.

'What do you mean, sir?' asked the sneering one.

'I mean what I say—always,' replied Macey. 'Playing for money is gambling, which, I have heard, generally goes hand in hand with cheating. I have never before played for money, and, so help me God, I never will again!'

'There is no occasion for heroics, Macey,' said Dale. 'Simply drop it, and we'll go.'

'Just as you please,' answered Macey. 'I am going presently, but I do not wish to take you from your friends.'

'Wait!—I shall be ready in a moment,' said Dale.

The other men rose, and, with Dale, drew a little to one side. As Macey stepped forward to the window he heard the clink of money. They were probably settling their accounts.

At both of the other tables the noise had grown less; but the faces of the men—all little more than boys—were flushed and sodden. From the window he could look down into the supper tent. Strains of music came from the ballroom—a languorous, voluptuous rhythm that sickened brain and heart, as he stood in the cool night air, resting his fevered cheek against the window-frame. Through the fumes of smoke filling the room in which he was, the crouching forms of the half-intoxicated players looked like animals black and bestial.

The broad flaps of the supper tent beneath the window were open to their full width, fastened back by heavy cords, to give entrance and egress to the crowd passing in and out for ices and champagne. Inside they were singing rollicking 'rag-time' songs—young men and girls; and Macey could see them dancing around the small circular tables whereon lay the debris of the feast which had looked so tempting and dainty two hours before.

As he gazed a couple came skipping down the aisle between the tables, to the accompaniment of whistling and a violent clapping of hands. The girl was dressed in silk of creamy white; her dark hair, falling almost on her shoulders in careless disorder, needed but a crown of grape leaves to complete the resemblance to the Barchante whom she emulated in the wild dance. Her companion, a large, red-faced, red-haired man, with difficulty kept time and step to her mad performance. There was neither grace nor agility in his remarkable movements; but the girl, holding up her long skirts with one hand, deftly balanced a brimming glass of champagne on the palm of the other, as she came swiftly along, beneath the blinding glare of the electric lamps above her head. They reached the open door of the tent, and then, with a sudden wild shriek, which sounded to Macey like the demoniac laughter of an abandoned soul, she threw the contents of the crystal goblet into her companion's face.

Macey paused to see no more. Turning from the window, he walked quietly to where Dale, just about to separate from the others, was buttoning his coat.

'I am going,' he said curtly.

'And so am I,' replied Dale, joining him immediately.

They left the room together, and, hurrying down the stairs, were soon on the sidewalk.

'I suppose I should have said good-night to the hostess,' remarked Macey, after they had taken a few steps into the cool, bracing night, now verging on the dawn.

'One never does,' rejoined Dale, who was accustomed to the manners of 'society.' It is bad form when there is a mob. Everyone is more or less muddled or cross at this time of night, anyhow. But I say, Macey,' he added, after a pause, 'why did you make that insinuation to-night—for it was an insinuation?' It was in very bad taste.

'Not any more so than all the rest that went on there,' said Macey.

'What do you mean, boy? It was positively fresh of you to tell them you could not afford to lose ten dollars at a little game of cards. Those fellows will only laugh at you. They're all swells, you know.'

'Swell-heads, I should call them, in each and every sense of the word, Dale,' said Macey bluntly. 'I see now where all your money goes. The game is not worth the candle, Dale. Stop while you can. I have had my first and last sip of "society champagne" to-night, and it has been well worth the ten dollars I left on the table. It seems to me now that I shall never get the taste out of my mouth.'

'You're a queer one, Macey!' said Dale. 'You had enough attention from Charlotte in the early part of the evening to turn any other young fellow's head. To be sure, she gave you the cold shoulder later for her Englishman; but, really, no woman would have done anything else.'

'They are welcome to each other,' said Macey heartily; and Dale knew that he meant what he said.

The two friends had come to the corner where their ways separated, and so parted with a brief 'Good-night!' After that time their lives seldom converged.

Dawn was breaking when Macey entered his own rooms. How sweet and clean and wholesome and delightful they seemed after the scenes he had lately left behind! Hastily divesting himself of his evening raiment, he donned a comfortable dressing-gown, lit a cigar, and, going over to his desk, opened one of the little drawers, from which he took the picture of a fair young girl, innocent, lovely, yet thoughtful and full of character. Pressing the lips to the pure white forehead again and again, he placed it in front of him; and then, late—or early—as it was, he sat down and wrote a long letter to—Margaret.—'Ave Maria.'

AFTER MANY DAYS

The forester and his wife had just returned from a visit to Berlin, where their nephew had been ordained a few days before. Prosperity had crowned the labors of these worthy people. They had only one drop of bitterness in their cup of happiness: it was their misfortune never to have been blessed with a son.

'What joy to have a son a priest!' exclaimed the forester's wife for the twentieth time, as she sat with her husband in the garden on this pleasant afternoon. 'We could have paid for his education; he would have been our offering to the Lord; and, who knows, perhaps in time he might even have come to serve the altar here in our own village?'