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The Gambler's Fine Art

"The greatest art of an actor," said the gray-haired, young-looking man, "lies according to some dramatic writer whose name I do not recall, in being slow without appearing to be slow. That is, it is essential to his success on the stage that he shall be alert and prompt in all that he does or says, and shall never allow the action of the piece to drag, but he must be careful to allow the audience time to grasp and appreciate every detail, no matter how small it may be, and this he cannot do if he hastens his action from one point to another.

"The idea, though it is interesting enough of itself, has no particular bearing on draw poker that I know of, but it does suggest another thought that it has a great deal to do with the game. It is that the art of the gambler lies in being quick without seeming to be quick.

"Possibly, that does not apply strictly to a square game among friends, but it is a strong point with professionals who play with much more consideration of the profits than of the punctilio of the game. It is not necessary to be quick in betting, or in scanning the hands, or in deciding on the wisdom of a bluff or a call, but when it comes to noticing tell-tale signs of an antagonist's play the eye must be as quick as electricity, and in the manipulation of cards if any undue advantage is sought the fingers must move as rapidly as light. But the appearance of haste is fatal.

"There was a game played in the room back of the bar in the main hotel of one of the Mississippi river towns a good many years ago that showed me the necessity of this quickness in three or four ways, and I've never forgotten it. I don't know how it is out there nowadays, but then gambling was carried on as openly as drinking was done in the barrooms, and nobody thought of barring the entrance to a cardroom.

"And more than that, the open cardroom was relied on, just as the barroom was to supply its share of the profits of running the hotel. There was not even the pretence of concealment.

"In this particular room there was a faro lay-out, and half a dozen round tables with the regulation baize cover and the slot for the kitty. Roulette had not been introduced out there and faro was the only bank game that was played, but at the round tables you would see different games in progress almost every evening, though poker was the favorite then, as it has been ever since.

"There were only four men in the game I spoke of, and it was easy to tell at the first glance that one of them was a professional gambler. I have known a good many in my time that could not be told by their appearance.

"They would pass readily enough for business or professional men, but there is a certain type of gambler who advertises his calling, whether intentionally or not, by every detail of his get-up, and this was one of them. I heard him called Bradford, so I suppose that was his name. He was a fairly good looking man, though rather too fat, and was possibly 40 years old.

"There was a much older man playing, a thin, dyspeptic-looking chap whom I recognized as the leading storekeeper of the town. He was a heavy player at times, and I had seen him win largely and lose largely on different occasions, without seeming to care very much which way the luck ran.

"He was fairly well off and played, I think, for the excitement of play rather than for the money. His name was Phillips.

"The other two were younger, one of them being hardly more than a boy. He was tall and well set up, though, and looked as if he might have been a college graduate from the east somewhere.

"He had not the western habit of speech and his dress was that of a city man, so I set him down for a stranger who might be travelling on business or for pleasure. His companion, who was less polished in appearance, called him Joe and Joe called him Bill, but what their other names were I didn't learn.

"Bill was a veen-looking fellow who might have been anything from a horse-trainer to a real estate agent, but who had an unmistakably sporty air. It wasn't that you wouldn't take him for a professional but you would not be surprised to see him with professionals.

"They were playing a stiff game, though not extraordinarily heavy as the play went in that room. By looking on I soon found that the white

chips were a quarter, the reds a dollar and the blues five. There were a few yellow chips on the table as well and altogether I should think there was not far from a thousand dollars in sight.

"It may have been a table stake game, but I didn't see anybody call for a show while I was a spectator, and there was no indication of a limit, so I suppose it was the usual open up game of the place.

"It was evident enough that the two younger men, if they were not professionals were, at least, well accustomed to the professional game. There was not a trace of the amateur in their play, and the very way they handled the cards was enough to prove to me that they knew what they were about.

"It was hard, though, to make up my mind, at first, that they were professional gamblers, for the younger man, Joe, looked not only too young but too innocent for the business. Afterward I did not think he looked so innocent.

"Joe sat on Bradford's right, and Bill sat on his right, so that Bill had the age when Phillips dealt. From curiosity I watched the dealing closely, for, as an onlooker, I have frequently detected crooked play when the men in the game have failed to see it, and it is always more or less exciting to watch a crooked game, especially out west, where a crooked game means a sure fight if it is detected.

"Did I ever expose the trickster? Well, hardly. I'm not fond of fighting at any time, and I certainly never made such a fool of myself as to butt into another man's game whether it was straight or crooked. My theory is that a man who plays poker with professionals knows what he is up against, or if he doesn't he is too big a fool to take chances for.

"It is no concern of mine whether he wins or loses, and if I cared at all it would have to be a pretty serious consideration that would make me pick a quarrel with somebody else in his behalf when a quarrel would probably mean a shooting scrape.

"I mistrusted Bradford from the first, simply because I knew he was a professional, and I believed any professional will cheat at poker if he can do it and thinks he will not be caught, but I freely admit that I saw nothing wrong for a time. Then, all of a sudden I thought he was stacking the cards, but I couldn't be positive.

"Whether Joe noticed what I did or not, I can't say, but when Bradford passed him the deck for a cut, he took it in both hands and gave it two riffles. Then he handed it back to Bradford without a word.

"Naturally, everybody looked at him inquiringly, and Bradford looked the hardest, but Joe gave no sign of knowing that he had done anything unusual, but on the contrary, sat as expressionless as a barber's pole, waiting. After a little pause, Bradford asked, very softly—almost under his breath, in fact—

"What did you do that for?"

"It was a challenge, plainly enough, but Joe chose to ignore it.

"Do what? he said, innocently.

"Shuffle the cards? Why, it's anybody's privilege to shuffle, isn't it? You have the last shuffle, of course, when it's your deal, but I only did what the rules allow."

"He was unquestionably right, of course, and Bradford could say no more without leading up to a quarrel, in which either he or Joe would have to raise the question whether he was, or was not suspected of cheating. It looked as if he was, all right, but Joe had not put it in words, and evidently he did not care to raise the discussion, for after a moment more of silence he shuffled them again, and handed them over the second time for the cut. This time Joe cut them in the usual manner, and the game went on.

"Phillips told me afterward that from that moment he distrusted the two younger men.

"I knew all about Bradford," he said, "and I was on the lookout for anything he might do, but I hadn't seen anything in the least suspicious. So it struck me that this young fellow either had some trick of his own in mind, or else he had seen more than I had. If he was so, almighty smart as that, I thought he was probably too strong for me, and I was satisfied that the two strangers were pals."

"His feeling was not strong enough whatever it was, to induce him to quit the game. In fact, I don't know but it increased his interest.

"Certainly, if he was playing for excitement, there seemed to be a fair prospect of his getting it, for all four

players were on their extreme mettle from that moment. Nothing more was said, but you could feel that they had thrown away their scabbards and were fencing with bare blades.

"Then Bill made a series of three plays that all looked like bluffs to me, though he may have had the cards, for he got away with all three pots without a call. First, Bradford opened a jack pot on Joe's deal. Phillips laid down, and Bill raised it \$100.

"It was a \$20 pot and Bradford had opened it for twenty, so the raise was disproportionate, or, at least, it seemed so in contrast to the way they had been playing. Bradford had only one pair, however, and showed down his hand to justify the opening, leaving the pot to Bill.

"On Bradford's deal everybody came in and each man drew three cards. There being \$4 in the pot and Bill having the first say, he bet \$4. Joe stayed. Bradford raised it five. Phillips laid down, and Bill came back with twenty more. The others laid down and he took the pot.

"Phillips won the next pot on his own deal, and the next was another jack, the luck being with Bill's chips. He made it for \$5 and again Bradford opened it for twenty, being the size of the pot and again Bill raised it a hundred, the others staying out.

"I reckon it's another bluff," said Bradford slowly, after he had studied for a minute, "but a pair of queens ain't strong enough for a play." And he showed down his queens.

"He was sore, though, and when almost identically the same thing happened again within the next ten minutes, he stayed for the hundred, took three cards and caught his third jack. Bill stood pat and when Bradford bet a white chip, he put up a white and two yellows, making it fifty more to play.

"Bradford called and Bill showed down three aces, showing that it was no bluff this time, anyhow, but Bradford was sorer than ever, thinking that he had been bluffed three times and had only happened to call at the wrong time.

"It is easy to imagine that the game, from this on, was more strenuous than ever. Phillips had his suspicions, as I said, but whether Bradford suspected anything more than bluffing, I can't say.

"Joe had intimated plainly enough that he suspected Bradford, and I was convinced that whatever Joe thought, Bill thought. Altogether it seemed likely to me that there would be an explosion.

"There wasn't any, but it is almost incredible to me, even now, that there wasn't. If the young fellow called Joe had not mastered the art that I spoke of just now, of being quick without seeming to be quick, he never could have done what

I saw him do without being detected. Even after I saw it I couldn't believe it till the cards proved it.

"He was one of the most deliberate players I ever saw. He never spoke in a hurry. He handled his chips as if he was reluctant to part with them, and he took an unusually long time to scan his hands, and when he dealt he was almost aggravatingly slow. One would have thought, almost, that he was unaccustomed to card playing, only that he made no mistakes so far as he could be seen.

"It was, therefore, natural that I thought I must be mistaken when I saw him pass a card, after the draw, to Bill who took it with a motion as quick as his. The trick was done as cleverly as any piece of legerdemain that I ever saw on the stage, and although it seems impossible for two men to do such a thing without being seen by those who were playing with them, it is a fact that they were not caught. I saw it but of course I said nothing, and the others did not see it.

"It was this way. Joe was dealing and had given Phillips openers for a jack pot. All came in and each man took their cards.

"In the draw the first card Joe took was the ace of hearts. I saw it distinctly and could not be mistaken. Then in a moment, before there was any betting, I saw him slip a card to Bill.

"Phillips bet. Bill raised him. The others laid down and Phillips called. Then Bill showed down three aces and Phillips three queens. And one of the aces was the heart.

"The whole thing was clear enough to me after I had seen it. Joe had intended to deal the ace to Bill, but had placed it just wrong in stacking the cards.

"Finding it in his own hand he had passed it over to Bill, but what Bill did with his sixth card I can't say. He got rid of it somehow as cleverly as he had taken the ace, for his hand held five cards right when he showed it down, but what he did with it nobody could tell. The two were simply phenomenally clever jugglers.

"Of course, Bill took that pot, and equally, of course, the two between them won all the money on the table before the game broke up, but although I watched more closely than ever after I saw that one play, I didn't see anything else that was out of the way, and I know that neither Phillips nor Bradford detected anything, for if they had, there would have been a row, and probably a shooting scrape.

"The two men both left town next morning on a boat that was going down the river and I never saw either of them again, but they proved to me that the great art of a gambler, as I said, lies in being quick without seeming to be quick."

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