

CHAPTER V - JIMMY LANDS ONE.

Miss Elizabeth Compton sat in the dimly lighted library upon a deep-cushioned, tapestried sofa. She was not alone, yet although there were many comfortable chairs in the large room, and the sofa was an exceptionally long one, she and her companion occupied but little more space than would have comfortably accommodated a single individual.

"Stop it, Harold," she admonished. "I utterly loathe being mauled."

"But I can't help it, dear. It seems so absolutely wonderful! I can't believe it--that you are really mine."

"But I'm not--yet!" exclaimed the girl.

"There are a lot of formalities and bridesmaids and ministers and things that have got to be taken into consideration before I am yours. And anyway there is no necessity for musing me up so. You might as well know now as later that I utterly loathe this cave-man stuff. And really, Harold, there is nothing about your appearance that suggests a cave-man, which is probably one reason that I like you."

"Like me?" exclaimed the young man. "I thought you loved me."

"I have to like you in order to love you, don't I?" she parried. "And one certainly has to like the man she is going to marry."

"Well," grumbled Mr. Bince, "you might be more enthusiastic about it."

"I prefer," explained the girl, "to be loved decorously. I do not care to be pawed or clawed or crumpled. After we have been married for fifteen or twenty years and are really well acquainted--"

"Possibly you will permit me to kiss you," Bince finished for her.

"Don't be silly, Harold," she retorted. "You have kissed me so much now that my hair is all down, and my face must be a sight. Lips are what you are supposed to kiss with--you don't have to kiss with your hands."

"Possibly I was a little bit rough. I am sorry," apologized the young man. "But when a fellow has just been told by the sweetest girl in the world that she will marry him, it's enough to make him a little bit crazy."

"Not at all," rejoined Miss Compton. "We should never forget the stratum of society to which we belong, and what we owe to the maintenance of the position we hold. My father has always impressed upon me the fact that gentlemen or gentlewomen are always gentle-folk under any and all circumstances and conditions. I distinctly recall his remark about one of his friends, whom he greatly admired, to this effect: that he always got drunk like a gentleman. Therefore we should do everything as gentle-folk should do things, and when we make love we should make love like gentlefolk, and not like hod-carriers or cavemen."

"Yes," said the young man; "I'll try to remember."

It was a little after nine o'clock when Harold Bince arose to leave.

"I'll drive you home," volunteered the girl. "Just wait, and I'll have Barry bring the roadster around."

"I thought we should always do the things that gentle-folk should do," said Bince, grinning, after being seated safely in the car. They had turned out of the driveway into Lincoln Parkway.

"What do you mean?" asked Elizabeth.

"Is it perfectly proper for young ladies to drive around the streets of a big city alone after dark?"

"But I'm not alone," she said.

"You will be after you leave me at home."

"Oh, well, I'm different."

"And I'm glad that you are!" exclaimed Bince fervently. "I wouldn't love you if you were like the ordinary run."

Bince lived at one of the down-town clubs, and after depositing him there and parting with a decorous handclasp the girl turned her machine and headed north for home. At Erie Street came a sudden loud hissing of escaping air.

"Darn!" exclaimed Miss Elizabeth Compton as she drew in beside the curb and stopped. Although she knew perfectly well that one of the tires was punctured,

she got out and walked around in front as though in search of the cause of the disturbance, and sure enough, there it was, flat as a pancake, the left front tire.

There was an extra wheel on the rear of the roadster, but it was heavy and cumbersome, and the girl knew from experience what a dirty job changing a wheel is. She had just about decided to drive home on the rim, when a young man crossed the walk from Erie Street and joined her in her doleful appraisal of the punctured casing.

"Can I help you any?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Thank you," she replied, "but I think I'll drive home on it as it is. They can change it there."

"It looks like a new casing," he said. "It would be too bad to ruin it. If you have a spare I will be very glad to change it for you," and without waiting for her acquiescence he stripped off his coat, rolled up his shirt-sleeves, and dove under the seat for the jack.

Elizabeth Compton was about to protest, but there was something about the way in which the stranger went at the job that indicated that he would probably finish it if he wished to, in spite of any arguments she could advance to the contrary. As he worked she talked with him, discovering not only that he was a rather nice person to look at, but that he was equally nice to talk to.

She could not help but notice that his clothes were rather badly wrinkled and that his shoes were dusty and well worn; for when he kneeled in the street to operate the jack the sole of one shoe was revealed beneath the light of an adjacent arc, and she saw that it was badly worn. Evidently he was a poor young man.

She had observed these things almost unconsciously, and yet they made their impression upon her, so that when he had finished she recalled them, and was emboldened thereby to offer him a bill in payment for his services. He refused, as she had almost expected him to do, for while his clothes and his shoes suggested that he might accept a gratuity, his voice and his manner belied them.

During the operation of changing the wheel the young man had a good opportunity to appraise the face and figure of the girl, both of which he found entirely to his liking, and when finally she started off, after thanking him, he stood upon the curb watching the car until it disappeared from view.

Slowly he drew from his pocket an envelope which had been addressed and stamped for mailing, and very carefully tore it into small bits which he dropped into the gutter. He could not have told had any one asked him what prompted him to the act. A girl had come into his life for an instant, and had gone out again, doubtless forever, and yet in that instant Jimmy Torrance had taken a new grasp upon his self-esteem.

It might have been the girl, and again it might not have been. He could not tell. Possibly it was the simple little act of refusing the tip she had proffered him. It might have been any one of a dozen little different things, or an accumulation of them all, that had brought back a sudden flood of the old self-confidence and optimism.

"To-morrow," said Jimmy as he climbed into his bed, "I am going to land a job."

And he did. In the department store to the general managership of whose mail-order department he had aspired Jimmy secured a position in the hosiery department at ten dollars a week. The department buyer who had interviewed him asked him what experience he had had with ladies' hosiery.

"About four or five years," replied Jimmy.

"For whom did you work?"

"I was in business for myself," replied the applicant, "both in the West and in the East. I got my first experience in a small town in Nebraska, but I carried on a larger business in the East later."

So they gave Jimmy a trial in a new section of the hosiery department, wherein he was the only male clerk. The buyer had discovered that there was a sufficient proportion of male customers, many of whom displayed evident embarrassment in purchasing hosiery from young ladies, to warrant putting a man clerk in one of the sections for this class of trade.

The fact of the matter was, however, that the astute buyer was never able to determine the wisdom of his plan, since Jimmy's entire time was usually occupied in waiting upon impressionable young ladies. However, inasmuch as it redounded to the profit of the department, the buyer found no fault.

Possibly if Jimmy had been almost any other type of man from what he was, his presence would not have been so flamboyantly noticeable in a hosiery department. His stature, his features, and his bronzed skin, that had lost nothing of its bronze in his month's search for work through the hot summer streets of a big city, were as utterly out of place as would have been the salient characteristics of a chorus-girl in a blacksmith-shop.

For the first week Jimmy was frightfully embarrassed, and to his natural bronze was added an almost continuous flush of mortification from the moment that he entered the department in the morning until he left it at night.

"It is a job, however," he thought, "and ten dollars is better than nothing. I can hang onto it until something better turns up."

With his income now temporarily fixed at the amount of his wages, he was forced to find a less expensive boarding-place, although at the time he had rented his room he had been quite positive that there could not be a cheaper or more undesirable habitat for man. Transportation and other considerations took him to a place on Indiana Avenue near Eighteenth Street, from whence he found he could walk to and from work, thereby saving ten cents a day. "And believe me," he cogitated, "I need the ten."

Jimmy saw little of his fellow roomers. A strange, drab lot he thought them from the occasional glimpses he had had in passings upon the dark stairway and in the gloomy halls. They appeared to be quiet, inoffensive sort of folk, occupied entirely with their own affairs. He had made no friends in the place, not even an acquaintance, nor did he care to. What leisure time he had he devoted to what he now had come to consider as his life work--the answering of blind ads in the Help Wanted columns of one morning and one evening paper--the two mediums which seemed to carry the bulk of such advertising.

For a while he had sought a better position by applying during the noon hour to such places as gave an address close enough to the department store in which he worked to permit him to make the attempt during the forty-five-minute period he was allowed for his lunch.

But he soon discovered that nine-tenths of the positions were filled before he arrived, and that in the few cases where they were not he not only failed of employment, but was usually so delayed that he was late in returning to work after noon.

By replying to blind ads evenings he could take his replies to the two newspaper offices during his lunch hour, thereby losing no great amount of time. Although he never received a reply, he still persisted as he found the attempt held something of a fascination for him, similar probably to that which holds the lottery devotee or the searcher after buried treasure--there was always the chance that he would turn up something big.

And so another month dragged by slowly. His work in the department store disgusted him. It seemed such a silly, futile occupation for a full-grown man, and he was always fearful that the sister or sweetheart or mother of some of his Chicago friends would find him there behind the counter in the hosiery section.

The store was a large one, including many departments, and Jimmy tried to persuade the hosiery buyer to arrange for his transfer to another department where his work would be more in keeping with his sex and appearance.

He rather fancied the automobile accessories line, but the buyer was perfectly satisfied with Jimmy's sales record, and would do nothing to assist in the change. The university heavyweight champion had reached a point where he loathed but one thing more than he did silk hosiery, and that one thing was himself.