

CHAPTER XI - CHRISTMAS EVE.

It was Christmas Eve. Elizabeth Compton and Harriet Holden were completing the rounds of their friends' homes with Christmas remembrances--a custom that they had continued since childhood. The last parcel had been delivered upon the South Side, and they were now being driven north on Michigan Boulevard toward home. Elizabeth directed the chauffeur to turn over Van Buren to State, which at this season of the year was almost alive with belated Christmas shoppers and those other thousands who always seize upon the slightest pretext for a celebration.

It was a noisy, joyous crowd whose spirit, harmonizing with the bright lights and the gay shop windows, infected all who came within its influence. As the car moved slowly northward along the world's greatest retail street the girls leaned forward to watch the passing through the windows.

"Isn't it wonderful," exclaimed Harriet, "what a transformation a few lights make? Who would ever think of State Street as a fairy-land? And yet, if you half close your eyes the hallucination is complete. Even the people who by daylight are shoddy and care-worn take on an appearance of romance and gaiety, and the tawdry colored lights are the scintillant gems of the garden of a fairy prince."

"Don't!" Elizabeth pleaded. "The city night always affects me. It makes me want to do something adventurous, and on Christmas Eve it is even worse. If you keep on like that I shall soon be telling David to drive us up and down State Street all night."

"I wish we didn't have to go home right away," said Harriet. "I feel like doing something devilish."

"Well, let's!" exclaimed Elizabeth.

"Do something devilish?" inquired Harriet. "What, for instance?"

"Oh, 'most anything that we shouldn't do," replied Elizabeth, "and there isn't anything that we could do down here alone that we should do."

They both laughed. "I have it!" exclaimed Elizabeth suddenly. "We'll be utterly abandoned--we'll have supper at Feinheimer's without an escort."

Harriet cast a horrified glance at her companion. "Why, Elizabeth Compton," she cried, "you wouldn't dare. You know you wouldn't dare!"

"Do you dare me?" asked the other.

"But suppose some one should see us?" argued Harriet. "Your father would never forgive us."

"If we see any one in Feinheimer's who knows us," argued Elizabeth shrewdly, "they will be just as glad to forget it as we. And anyway it will do it no harm. I shall have David stay right outside the door so that if I call him he can come. I don't know what I would do without David. He is a sort of Rock of Ages and Gibraltar all in one."

Through the speaking-tube Elizabeth directed David to drive to Feinheimer's, and, whatever David may have thought of the order, he gave no outward indication of it.

Christmas Eve at Feinheimer's is, or was, a riot of unconfined hilarity, although the code of ethics of the place was on a higher plane than that which governed the Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve patrons of so-called respectable restaurants, where a woman is not safe from insult even though she be properly escorted, while in Feinheimer's a woman with an escort was studiously avoided by the other celebrators unless she chose to join with them. As there was only one class of women who came to Feinheimer's at night without escort, the male habitues had no difficulty in determining who they might approach and who they might not.

Jimmy Torrance was as busy as a cranberry merchant. He had four tables to attend to, and while the amount of food he served grew more and more negligible as the evening progressed, his trips to the bar were exceedingly frequent. One of his tables had been vacated for a few minutes when, upon his return from the bar with a round of drinks for Steve Murray and his party he saw that two women had entered and were occupying his fourth table. Their backs were toward him, and he gave them but little attention other than to note that they were unescorted and to immediately catalogue them accordingly. Having distributed Steve Murray's order, Jimmy turned toward his new patrons, and, laying a menu card before each, he stood between them waiting for their order.

"What shall we take?" asked Elizabeth of Harriet. Then: "What have you that's good?" and she looked up at the waiter.

Jimmy prided himself upon self-control, and his serving at Feinheimer's had still further schooled him in the repression of any outward indication of his emotions. For, as most men of his class, he had a well-defined conception of what constituted a perfect waiter, one of the requisites being utter indifference to any of the affairs of his patrons outside of those things which actually pertained to his duties as a servitor; but in this instance Jimmy realized that he had come very close to revealing the astonishment which he felt on seeing this girl in Feinheimer's and unescorted.

If Jimmy was schooled in self-control, Elizabeth Compton was equally so. She recognized the waiter immediately, but not even by a movement of an eyelid did she betray the fact; which may possibly be accounted for by the fact that it meant little more to her than as though she had chanced to see the same street-sweeper several times in succession, although after he had left with their order she asked Harriet if she, too, had recognized him.

"Immediately," replied her friend. "It doesn't seem possible that such a good-looking chap should be occupying such a menial position."

"There must be something wrong with him," rejoined Elizabeth; "probably utterly inefficient."

"Or he may have some vice," suggested Harriet.

"He doesn't look it," said Elizabeth. "He looks too utterly healthy for that. We've seen some of these drug addicts in our own set, as you may readily recall. No, I shouldn't say that he was that."

"I suppose the poor fellow has never had an opportunity," said Harriet. "He has a good face, his eyes and forehead indicate intelligence, and his jaw is strong and aggressive. Probably, though, he was raised in poverty and knows nothing better than what he is doing now. It is too bad that some of these poor creatures couldn't have the advantages of higher education."

"Yes," said Elizabeth, "it is too bad. Take a man like that; with a college education he could attain almost any degree of success he chose."

"He certainly could," agreed Harriet; and then suddenly: "Why, what's the matter, Elizabeth? Your face is perfectly scarlet."

The other girl tapped the floor with the toe of one boot impatiently.

"That horrid creature at the next table just winked at me," she said disgustedly.

Harriet looked about in the direction her companion had indicated, to see a large, overdressed man staring at them. There was a smirk on his face, and as Harriet caught his eye she saw him rise and, to her horror, realized that he was advancing toward their table.

He stopped in front of them with his huge hands resting on the edge of their table and looked down at Elizabeth.

"Hello, kiddo!" he said. "What are you going to drink?"

Elizabeth gave the man one look such as would utterly have frozen a male from her own stratum of society, but it had as little effect upon Steve Murray's self-assurance as the cork from a popgun would have on the armored sides of a rhinoceros.

"All right," said the man, "what's the use of asking? There's only one thing when Steve Murray buys. Here, waiter," he yelled, pounding on the table. The nearest waiter, who chanced not to be Jimmy, who was then in the kitchen, came hurriedly forward. "Open up some wine," commanded Murray. "Come on, boys! Bring your chairs over here," he continued, addressing his companions; "let's have a little party."

Elizabeth Compton rose.

"You will oblige me," she said, "by leaving our table."

Steve Murray laughed uproariously. He had dropped into a chair next to hers.

"That's great!" he cried. "I guess you don't know who I am, kiddo. You won't cop off anything better in this joint than Steve Murray. Come on--let's be friends. That's a good girl," and before Elizabeth realized the man's intentions he had seized her wrist and pulled her down into his lap.

It was this scene that broke upon Jimmy's view as he emerged from the kitchen with a laden tray. He saw Steve Murray seize the girl, and he saw her struggling to free herself, and then there was a mighty crash as Jimmy dropped the tray of steaming food upon the floor and ran quickly forward.

Murray was endeavoring to draw the girl's lips to his as Jimmy's hand shot between their faces and pushed that of the man away. With his free arm he encircled the girl's body and attempted to draw her from her assailant.

"Cut it, Murray!" he commanded in a low tone of voice. "She isn't your sort."

"Who the hell are you?" cried the labor leader, releasing the girl and rising to his feet. "Get the hell out of here, you dirty hash-slinger! Any girl in this place belongs to me if I want her. There don't only one kind come in here without an escort, or with one, either, for that matter. You get back on your job, where you belong," and the man pressed forward trying to push Jimmy aside and lay hands on Elizabeth again.

Jimmy did not strike him then. He merely placed the palm of one hand against the man's breast and pushed him backward, but with such force that, striking a chair, Steve Murray fell backward and sprawled upon the floor. Scrambling to his feet, he rushed Jimmy like a mad bull.

In his younger days Murray had been a boiler-maker, and he still retained most of his great strength. He was a veritable mountain of a man, and now in the throes of a berserker rage he was a formidable opponent. His face was white and his lips were drawn back tightly, exposing his teeth in a bestial snarl as he charged at Jimmy. His great arms and huge hands beat to the right and left like enormous flails, one blow from which might seemingly have felled an ox.

Torrance had stood for a moment with an arm still around the girl; but as Murray rose to his feet he pushed her gently behind him, and then as the man was upon him Jimmy ducked easily under the other's clumsy left and swung a heavy right hook to his jaw. As Murray staggered to the impact of the blow Jimmy reached him again quickly and easily with a left to the nose, from which a crimson burst spattered over the waiter and his victim. Murray went backward and would have fallen but for the fact he came in contact with one of his friends, and then he was at Jimmy again.

By this time waiters and patrons were crowding forward from all parts of the room, and Feinheimer, shrieking at the top of his voice, was endeavoring to worm his fat, toadlike body through the cordon of excited spectators. The proprietor reached the scene of carnage just in time to see Jimmy plant a lovely left on the point of Murray's jaw.

The big man tottered drunkenly for an instant, his knees sagged, and, as Jimmy stood in readiness for any eventuality, the other crashed heavily to the floor.

Towering above the others in the room suddenly came a big young fellow shouldering his way through the crowd, a young man in the uniform of a chauffeur. Elizabeth saw him before he discovered her.

"Oh David!" she cried. "Quick! Quick! Take us out of here!"

As the chauffeur reached her side and took in the scene he jerked his head toward Jimmy. "Did any one hurt you miss?"

"No, no!" she cried. "This man was very kind. Just get us out of here, David, as quickly as you can." And, turning to Jimmy: "How can I ever repay you? If it hadn't been for you--oh, I hate to think what would have happened. Come out to the car and give David your name and address, and I will send you something tomorrow."

"Oh, that's all right," said Jimmy. "You just get out of here as quick as you can. If the police happened to look in now you might be held as a witness."

"How utterly horrible!" exclaimed Elizabeth. "Come, David! Come, Harriet!" David making a way for her, she started for the door.

Harriet paused long enough to extend her hand to Jimmy. "It was wonderfully brave of you," she said. "We could never do enough to repay you. My name is Harriet Holden," and she gave him an address on Lake Shore Drive. "If you will come Monday morning about ten o'clock," she said, "I am sure that there is something we can do for you. If you want a better position," she half suggested, "I know my father could help, although he must never know about this to-night."

"Thanks," said Jimmy, smiling. "It's awfully good of you, but you must hurry now. There goes your friend."

Feinheimer stood as one dazed, looking down at the bulk of his friend and associate.

"Mein Gott!" he cried. "What kind of a place you think I run, young man?" He turned angrily on Jimmy. "What you think I hire you for? To beat up my best customer?"

"He got what was coming to him," said a soft feminine voice at Jimmy's elbow. The man looked to see Little Eva standing at his side. "I didn't think anybody could do that to Murray," she continued. "Lord, but it was pretty. He's had it coming to him ever since I've known him, but the big stiff had everybody around this joint buffaloed. He got away with anything he started."

Feinheimer looked at Little Eva disgustedly.

"He's my best customer," he cried, "and a bum waiter comes along and beats him up just when he is trying to have a little innocent sport on Christmas Eve. You take off your apron, young man, and get your time. I won't have no rough stuff in Feinheimer's."

Jimmy shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

"Shouldn't I wait to see if I can't do something more for Mr. Murray?" he suggested.

"You get out of here!" cried Feinheimer, "Get out of here or I'll call the police."

Jimmy laughed and took off his apron as he walked back to the servants' coat-room. As he emerged again and crossed through the dining-room he saw that Murray had regained consciousness and was sitting at a table wiping the blood from his face with a wet napkin. As Murray's eyes fell upon his late antagonist he half rose from his chair and shook his fist at Jimmy.

"I'll get you for this, young feller!" he yelled. "I'll get you yet, and don't you forget it."

"You just had me," Jimmy called back; "but it didn't seem to make you very happy."

He could still hear Murray fuming and cursing as he passed out into the barroom, at the front of which was Feinheimer's office.