

A short story
Wordlength: 4340

A TASTE OF VICTORY

She shifted on the hard wooden bench, then sprang up. “Is that clock right?” she demanded.

His gaze lingered on the crowd flooding from the gate till the murmuring stream with its iridescent gilt of twinkling packages had diminished to a trickle, then rose to the station clock. *Merry Christmas – SPRR* proclaimed shiny red letters on a green tinsel strip circling its face. He glanced at it and then at his watch, but when he replied he confined himself to smugly confirming its authority.

“I guess it is, all right – it’s a railroad clock!”

“Well they’re late. Their train is late!” She snapped out the words from between compressed lips, glaring at him.

“Look, people pour into San Francisco on Christmas Eve, and sometimes the tracks get clogged.” He paused. “It’s not *my* fault, you know.”

“Mother wanted me there at six,” she continued tensely. She paced about nervously and sat down, looking toward the gates. “She wanted me to help put the final touches on things for tonight. Now here it is, six-twenty; I’ll be nearly an hour late. If you hadn’t insisted on my coming with you to meet your parents...!”

“Dad said he’d like us both to meet him and Mom,” he said in a for-the-hundredth-time tone. “And I didn’t want to disappoint him on that too.”

She gave a short, dry laugh. “Oh. ‘Didn’t want’? Why don’t you just admit you were afraid to? My goodness, when you thought the traffic would delay us...!” She paused. “And I don’t see why. He’s just the mildest thing.”

“I am *not* afraid of Dad,” he said heatedly, not-hearing her last remark. “But I didn’t feel like explaining to him that his son’s wife has to jump whenever her mother and father tell her

to. And I don't see why you do – you're nineteen years old, you're married, and you do not *have* to—“

“I do not ‘jump whenever Mother tells me to’. It was just a simple little request she made, and since she's going through all this trouble to have a family party, the least I could have done was to—“

“Well who wanted her to have it?” he vehemently interrupted. A short distance away a middle-aged woman whose hatchet face reminded him of his mother-in-law's looked up and stared at him, and he lowered his voice to a hiss. “Who wanted it? We were supposed to spend Christmas with *my* parents this year. I didn't want to go to your parents' lousy party. Mom and Dad didn't want to. So who wanted it?”

“All right Charles!” she hissed back. “You *know* we discussed it and we agreed that since we'd gone down to Salinas to spend Thanksgiving, we'd spend Christmas here with my parents. Now you *know* we did!”

“Oh yes,” he said, voice charged with irony. “Oh, yes. We ‘discussed’ it. After all the plans were made and it was an accomplished fact, we discussed it. Just what choice did I have but to agree? What was I supposed to do, tell your mother we were going to Salinas anyway?”

As if the nature of this proposal were so aberrant as to leave one bereft of speech, he lapsed into silence while he brooded that his life seemed always to be arranged by Edith's mother and fath—well, he amended, it was more her dictatorial mother's doing; her father wasn't such a bad guy. Witty and affable – a lot like his own father. And like his father – the comparison, often kindled, would flame till its fuel was spent – able to humiliate with a few coldly scornful words when he got sore. It was just like, he thought, his smothered resentment perhaps making him careless of the precision of his adjectives, having a new father. He shivered in a vagrant draft and coincidentally wondered if Mr. Phillips would be sore at him tonight over Edith's being late. But it wasn't his fault, he thought defensively.

“Dad must be sore enough at me,” he continued now, only partially for Edith's benefit, “for letting him and Mom down, and I can't blame him. I feel like I have, though...” His voice rose querulously as his interior audience changed. “...though I don't know what I could have done, once your mother butted in and started ordering u—ordering *you*, around.”

She ran to take up the battle on a new field, one treacherous with hidden mines and cached ammunition supplies, a terrain with which both were intimately familiar, yet which never failed to hold surprises: “Why do you *always* have to be criticizing my parents? You

ought to be *grateful* to them: we wouldn't have *anything* if it weren't for them." She sniffed. "Certainly not if we'd had to depend on your parents, I'll tell you that!"

"My parents can't help it they're not rich, Edith! When we got married Dad was on the verge of bankruptcy – he couldn't do anything for us. He's been working like hell for two years just to keep even with his debts. Why do you think he had a heart attack? – it was the strain, that's why! How could we have expected anything from him?"

"Oh, I know, I know," she said. "I didn't mean it. I was just so *surprised* when they gave us that pathetic toaster for a wedding present...and Daddy said he was amazed your father hadn't given you any cash for our honeymoon. He said he'd thought of giving us just a few hundred dollars but hadn't wanted to offend your father – he'd been sure he would. I was surprised too, when you said your father hadn't given you anything."

"Well...he couldn't. He would have if he could have."

He fell silent, reliving his shame last Christmas when Edith, in front of their assembled relatives, had opened the package and lifted up the toaster, and with false cries of gratitude had placed it among the silver and china wedding gifts her parents had made them.

"Well, well," her father had said, his neutral tone more crushing than an overt sneer, "a toaster."

"And since you've brought up the subject," he now re-opened the quarrel, "I'm sure sick of hearing your father patronize him. Boy, he can't see Dad without reminding him who's rich and who isn't."

"I don't know *why* you keep harping on Daddy's being rich – he has to work to be a successful attorney, you know. You're just entirely too sensitive about money – and you're the only one: your father isn't offended by Daddy."

"Dad doesn't understand cattiness – he likes and respects your father, and he doesn't realize he's being clawed." He took breath to view this construction, then to complete it added, in a vaguely threatening tone "and it's a good thing for your shrimpy father that Dad *doesn't* realize it, too!"

It was her turn to not-hear a remark. "*Clawed!* Daddy has always been perfectly civil. What has he ever said to your father that was so wounding? Just tell me!"

"Well...how about this summer after our trip to Lake Louise? Your father couldn't rub it in enough by dwelling on how expensive the hotel had been, he had to say 'You ought to make that trip, Harry – what are you saving your money for?' – and he knows damned well Dad couldn't afford bridge-toll across the Bay! How about *that?*" Though he smiled

triumphantly as he finished, its suddenly remembered humiliations made him sorry he had recalled the trip.

“Oh Daddy was just—“ She got up. “There they are. Now let’s not stand here and talk for an hour, Charles; let’s get right over to Mother’s and Daddy’s – I’ve been expected forty minutes, and we’re *all* expected there shortly anyway.”

He walked toward his parents. As the crowd from the gate bore them along they were glancing about helplessly and he thought of a TV news shot he’d seen of two people adrift on the wreck of their house, floating rudderless in a flooding river, not understanding the disaster and having nothing to do but to wait till they might be set down, or be drowned. But his shock at seeing his father’s puzzled eyes, his slack mouth, his trudging pace, a shock no less intense for having been felt before in the instant after he had caught – or been caught by – his father off-guard, was utterly forgotten as twenty-one years of memory triumphed over the glimpsed moment of actuality.

Hand extended, he warily approached the fiery-tempered determined-looking man striding toward him. When he spoke, he tried to pump vitality into his voice to match the formidable man’s.

“Dad! Merry Christmas! Good to *see* you!”

His father turned slowly toward him. “Oh; hi, son...merry Christmas.”

He shook hands with his father and kissed his mother.

“Merry Christmas dear. How are you feeling? Is your health good?”

“Fine Mom, just fine,” he said, just as automatically taking their travelling bag from her hand. Edith had lagged behind and she now greeted her in-laws with kisses.

“Well,” his father said, “it’s sure good to be back in the City; I was telling mama I don’t know how long it’s been since we’ve been here...”

“Since July,” Charles’ mother said. “When we were up to see the kids after they came back from Canada. I’m positive because I recall thinking how nice Mr. Phillips was to say he’d paid all their expenses.”

Charles flushed, but told himself his mother was incapable of irony.

“Yeah; well, it could be that long ago, all right,” his father conceded. He turned to Edith. “Well, I guess we have to go over and see your folks this evening, huh Edith?”

“Oh yes. It’s going to be a marvellous party: you’ll meet all my relatives. My cousins from Chicago are in town for it, and uncle Max from North Dakota is here and...” Edith concluded her list with “...it’s going to be simply marvellous.” After a pause she said disingenuously, “We were expected at six, you know. There’ll be just time enough now for

you to clean up and meet everybody before dinner.” She smiled brightly at him. “So don’t you think we should be getting over, Mr. Driscoll?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said vaguely. “Well that sounds nice...all those people. You know, we’d sort of expected you and Charley down this Christmas...”

Charles tensed.

“Oh I *know*,” Edith said, voice tragic. “We were awfully sorry we couldn’t make it, but Mother was planning this *grand* party, and we *hated* to disappoint her, and after all, there would have been just the four of us at your house, while here there’ll be—“

“Oh well, that’s nothing,” he said hastily, holding up a hand as if to ward off any repetition of the list. “I’m sure this is going to be a very enjoyable evening. And it’s always pleasant to see your folks, Edith. We like your father very much, you know, and your mother is a very pleasant woman too...”

Edith took a step toward the exit. “Well, what do you say we start over? We’ll go in our car—we have a new Ford, you know...”

“Oh?” Charles’ mother said. “A *new* Ford? Really? She looked questioningly at him.

“Yes,” he said, averting his eyes, hoping Edith would not continue. “Yes, we, uh, got it today...”

“It’s our combined Christmas and anniversary present from Mother and Daddy,” Edith explained. “We’re just terribly thrilled with it.”

“Yeah,” Charles agreed, then added “They didn’t even ask if we wanted one,” as if displaying a material fact that proved him unsullied by any onus of obligation.

“Well, that’s nice,” his mother said. “Don’t you think that’s nice, Harry? I mean, her folks giving them a new car and all? And right after furnishing that nice apartment for them, too.”

“Oh, yeah,” his father echoed. “Yeah, that’s real nice. I’d been thinking, in fact, that here in a little while..when things get a little better..we might give you kids a little something too. I’d sort of been thinking of a new car too, but I guess now that Edith’s folks have—“

“Well Dad...” Charles blushed, unable to understand why his father said these things when he knew nobody believed them – when he couldn’t possibly believe them himself.

“You know, it’s not like you have to give us things to...”

“Of course not son. I know that. It’s just that I’d kind of like to do a little something for you kids. Here in awhile things will get a little better, and—“

“Sure Dad.”

But his father relentlessly pursued the thought to its end. “—and then we’ll be able to do more for you kids, like Edith’s folks do.”

There was a moment’s silence. Edith said “Well, shall we start...?”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” his father said. “But first,” He smiled sheepishly. “Well, you know, I think I’d just like a little martini, before we go over. You know, the—your mother doesn’t serve cocktails, Edith, and I just feel..I usually like to have one, about this time of day.” He looked round the waiting room. “There’s Rickey’s over there, in fact,” he said, pointing to a lounge. “We can just go in and have a little snort, and then we’ll be in better shape to go over.” He winked to Charles. “Don’t you think, son?”

Before he could answer his mother said “Oh Harry! You know what the doctor has said. And your heart...”

His father looked worried for a moment, then laughed and patted her cheek. “Now mama. Any doctor will tell you that alcohol in moderation is *good* for the heart. Stimulates it. What do you say to just a little one?”

He was looking at Charles, and Charles glanced at Edith. Her lips were compressed and she was glaring at his father. He was about to say that, actually, perhaps they’d better not, when it occurred to him that his father might interpret demur as fear of keeping the Phillips waiting.

“Sure Dad. Why not?” He turned to Edith and, affecting an easy tone meant to convey, to his father, that, really, being on time to the Phillips’ was not important to him one way or the other, and to Edith and to himself that he was simply indulging his father, acting neither through fear of him nor through fear of whatever he might think of a hesitation, and certainly not through fear that whatever his father might think might be true, said “Come on, Edith, let’s let Dad have his drink. One won’t make us very late.” He falsely smiled at her, willing her not to embarrass him before his father.

She did not reply, but tacitly agreed to presenting a united front to her parents by stepping forward with him into the lounge. It was only as he sighed unnecessarily that he realized he had been holding his breath.

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“Well sir,” his father said as the waiter set four martini cocktails on the glass-topped table round which they were seated, “I think this should be a very pleasant evening. I always enjoy the times I spend with your folks, Edith.” He took a long sip from his drink and held the glass poised near his lips. “You know, your father is really the salt of the earth. Just common as

clay. To talk with him, you wouldn't have any idea he was as rich—as well off as he is. Perfectly natural and unassuming. Yes, I like old Jim fine, don't you son?"

"Oh yeah," Charles muttered, guiltily averting his eyes. "He's swell."

"Yes," his father continued, "Yes, Edith, when we first met your folks – when was that? Over a year ago now, I guess – I told mama 'That Jim Phillips is a prince of a fellow. A prince. And smart, too'. Didn't I, mama?"

Charles' mother nodded assent. "You certainly did, Harry."

"You know he's smart," he explained, "because he's got such a keen sense of humour. Of course, thin-skinned people might be offended by some of the things he says, but, fundamentally, old Jim Phillips is not mean." He paused to take another long sip. When he set the glass down, Charles was mildly surprised to see its contents diminished by half. "And we like your mother, too, Edith. She's a fine woman." He drained the glass. "A fine woman." He glanced about the table. "What do you say to another round?"

"Really, Mr. Driscoll," Edith said, looking at her watch, "I think we ought to be getting over; Mother and Daddy have been expecting us an hour now."

"I don't want another, Harry," Charles' mother said. "And you shouldn't ought to have had that one. Your heart and all, you know..."

His father affected a comical grimace of disgust at these words and turned to him. "How about you, son? You scared to have another?"

He looked sharply at his father. He drained his glass and set it on the table with a defiant clink. "Course not, Dad. I'd like another." He turned and whispered maliciously to Edith "They were just expecting *you* at six anyway, Edith." He smiled, to mask the shame he immediately felt at his treachery.

His father held up a hand and the waiter appeared. "Another round," he said, wagging the hand circularly.

The waiter went off and Edith said "Really, Mr. Driscoll, I didn't want—"

"Now Edith." He giggled. "Charley and I will take care of what you and mama don't drink."

Charles laughed conspiratorially, gazing at his father with admiring eyes. "I guess when you want to do something, the Devil himself can't stop you, huh Dad?"

His father visibly expanded. "That's right, son. I've always felt life was too short to let people push you around in it."

Charles winced. He opened his mouth to state that Edith's parents certainly didn't push *him* around, but on reflecting that he might sound defensive, closed it.

As the waiter set four more glasses on the table Charles father snatched one up and after taking a drink said “How is it, Edith, that your folks never serve liquor? I don’t believe I’ve ever seen so much as a glass of wine at their house.”

“They never have,” Edith said through pursed lips. “They just don’t believe in it, is all.”

“That’s funny,” he observed, sipping. “It just shows to go—*goes to show*—something... well, I don’t have to tell you what I think of your folks, Edith, not by now, anyway. Yet, I’ve always held the opinion that a little drink was good for a man. I’ve often observed that people who didn’t take a little drink now and then were apt to be a little stiff, even a little priggish – although,” he said hastily, “that certainly isn’t true of your folks, Edith.”

“Of course, Mr. Driscoll,” she said distantly.,

“Still...” he took another draught and held an empty glass up to his eye. “Still, I think a little drink might help them relax. Sometimes, they, especially your mother, Edith – and this is no criticism; I’m sure it’s only because she’s nervous and tense – but sometimes she makes you feel a little nervous and tense too, a little out of place – like a turd on the carpet, f’you get me.” He winked to Charles “V’you ever noticed that, son?”

Charles laughed delightedly, then caught himself and glanced uneasily to Edith. “Oh...I don’t know, Dad,” he said ambiguously, hoping his father satisfied that he was not too craven to jeer at his mother-in-law, yet hoping – wishing – Edith might take absence of voiced agreement for gallant defence of her mother’s breeding.

“Yes sir,” his father said, picking up a full glass and tilting it in spite of a moaned “Oh *Harry! Three!*” from his left, “I think probably – don’t get me wrong now, Edith, for I’m sure she’s a good woman – your mother would be helped a *lot*, taking a little drink now and then. Make her a little less stiff, a little less...less..less..*priggish!*” he ended in a burst, clearly pleased by having found the exact word.”

Edith looked down.

Charles squirmed; for a moment he had a vivid mental image of himself juggling three flawed but dearly-purchased crystal bubbles that must shatter at the slightest collision. First Edith’s glittered in the air, and he asked himself anxiously if she thought her mother insulted; if so surely she expected him to reprove his father...he focussed now on his father’s arcing above him, and his pulse raced and his chest tightened as he apprehended his fathers disdain were he to reprove him on his mother-in-law’s account; now his own, the most fragile of all, flashed in the air, as he pondered where his duty lay. The gauge was there; he need only take the instant to pick it up and apply it: what would his father do in his place?

He was sickly certain he knew, but he only stared over his father's head as he continued mentally to juggle, feeling he could spare no time, but hoping yet that nothing might come crashing down at his feet.

"In fact," his father said as he drained the third glass, "I think it wouldn't hurt the stiff ol' broad a bit, to unbend once in awhile with a coupl' o' belts." He set it down with a thud, jarring the table. An empty glass teetered and fell to the floor, shivering to fragments there with a soft tinkle. "That's what *I* think," he said, looking at Charles and smiling expectantly.

"Oh *Harry!*", Charles' mother chided. "You broke a *glass!* Now we have to pay for it."

Charles looked away, to Edith. She was gazing at the table, twisting the paper napkin under her glass, folding it, creasing it, unfolding it again. He saw her suddenly as unprotected, abandoned in an alien country, and he felt ashamed of himself and angry with his father.

"Dad..." He licked his lips. "Dad, don't forget, she's Edith's mother..." He cleared his throat, wondering what further he owed it to Edith to say. "And..." he cleared it again, as if the unexpected words that rose in answer had stuck there; he examined them for a false note, fearing his father might hear one and despise him for a cringing toady. But after all, he argued, his father had shot at the wrong target: Why couldn't he have seen through the purring malice of Edith's father? Edith's mother was brusque and chilly, perhaps, but fundamentally she was not cold-hearted. Really, Charles' decided, he owed it as much to Edith's mother as to Edith to correct his father's false impression of her. "...and I like her too. She's not so bad, when you get to know her."

In the silence that followed he heard two small *clinks* like the noise of new chains settling, and he glanced in their direction to see Edith toying nervously with her empty glass. She looked up to smile gratefully at him as, in the corner of an eye, he saw the smile drain from his father's face. He braced himself to withstand the withering scorn of the rebuke.

"Oh, yeah, sure, son," his father mumbled, looking down. "She's a fine woman. I certainly wouldn't want to infer anything contrary to that." He turned to Edith. "If I said anything, Edith, to make you feel bad, well, I'm sure sorry. I wouldn't want to give the impression I don't like your folks."

"That's all right, Mr. Driscoll."

Charles sat back, only half-listening to his father's stumbling apology as he floated in a pool of relief and self-congratulation. How easy it had been! he gloated. And if he could make a man like his father back down, then why should he fear (he could, he realized, afford what had been the too-expensive luxury of owing to his fear, now that he felt the remedy for

it within his grasp) the Phillips...? He dropped the thought spore into his mind, to let it grow there like yeast in a warm culture. He rose, feeling himself inflating under its influence, swelling to a gigantic figure dominating the table. His voice was crisp, sure, as he said “Well Dad, what do you say we get over? We’re pretty late as it is now.”

His father gazed dully up at him. “Oh, yeah, I guess we should, all right.” He called for the check and the party left the table.

Edith and his mother walked on and Charles accompanied his father to the cash register, where they split the check evenly. As they turned away his father caught his step and said “Oh; just a minute son...” He walked back to the counter. “I think I just ought to get some little breath mints here...”

He popped several mints into his mouth. “After all,” he said as they turned away, “we wouldn’t want Edith’s folks to smell liquor on our breaths, would we?” He extended the package.

Charles stared at him. Mechanically he accepted a mint and put it on his tongue. A tingling bittersweetness flooded his mouth. “No..no, Dad, I don’t guess we would...” Hating himself for the test, he ventured “We’re in enough trouble with them now, being late, huh Dad?”

”That’s right, son,” his father said, smiling and winking at him. “But we can always blame *that* on the train!”

Charles tried to smile back, but managed only a grimace as he gazed at his father seeing his furrowed face and grey hair; he looked directly into his father’s eyes. For an instant he fancied he looked through them into his father’s mind to see a ravaged landscape there, a flat strewn with a jumble of uprooted hopes and collapsed dreams, and drifting over all a miasma exhaled by rotted courage. He dropped his eyes and turned guiltily away and gently took his father’s arm to lead him toward the women, feeling as drained of spirit as the shrunken old man shuffling beside him.