

## His Christmas Caller

By Anna S. Richardson

THE store fairly radiated the Christmas spirit. Crimson bells swung from every chandelier. Hopes of evergreen draped all the shelving. The counters were strewn with Christmas cards, booklets and favors.

The man who had dropped in to buy lead points for his pocket pencil remained to pore over a stack of gift books bound in rare leather. Then he heard the voice. After that only his gaze was on the books. His interest was concentrated on the possessor of the voice.

"But you said such things were in great demand around the holidays, and



"I SHOULD LIKE TO TAKE A LOOK AT THOSE CARDS."

I have taken infinite pains with these. Please, please tell me what is wrong with them."

There was a note of tragedy in the rich contralto tones which, together with a beseeching glance from wonderful violet eyes, put to rout the rules and regulations of the astute buyer of Christmas novelties. His was a smart shop, and he had never vouchsafed explanation to struggling young artists whose work he declined to sell on commission, but now he picked up the little packets of plate and score cards, gay with holly, Santa Claus heads, etc.

"Let me explain," he said. "These are not novelties. They are the same style of cards used in the past twenty years, with the same decorations. Women who can afford to pay the prices demanded for hand painted novelties want something new. See this poinsettia blossom—not painted on a card, but cut in the shape of the blossom itself—and this funny, bulging stocking, overflowing with faces of pretty girls, for a bachelor. They are catchy, the sort of things my customers want. Your work is neat, but not novel."

"Thank you," the girl said bravely. "I understand now, and it is too late for me to try my hand at novelties. But perhaps you will keep my cards, and I—well, your novelties might not go around, and then perhaps some late customer might buy mine after all."

"Certainly. I will be glad to keep them in reserve. Your name and address—oh, yes, I remember—Miss Sylvia Leigh, the Grant studios. I will do my best for you."

Nevertheless as the girl slipped through the door he opened a deep drawer under the counter and dropped the cards out of sight. It would never do to display those old fashioned bits of pasteboard among the novelties which appealed to his fashionable trade. And then very suddenly the man who had been engrossed in leather bound gift books stepped up to the counter.

"One minute, please. I should like to take a look at those cards you just bought from the young lady."

The astonished manager of the store glanced from the well-groomed man with fine brown eyes and iron gray hair to the more expensive novelties in the showcase.

"The ones you just bought from the young lady," repeated the customer serenely.

"Certainly," responded the manager. "Just what my sister would like—conservative sort of woman my sister is—don't go in for newfangled ideas. I'll take those—three dozens. Not enough! Do you suppose the girl could do two dozen more by the day before Christmas? If she can, send 'em to me, James Macy, at Marquette. I'll take these with me."

And almost before he could realize what had happened the manager was actually gaping, open mouthed, after this eccentric customer whose sister was to give a dinner party of sixty covers on Christmas day and intrusted the buying of such important articles as dinner favors to an obviously inexperienced bachelor brother.

Christmas eve was frosty and starlit. James Macy, coming home from his office, smiled somewhat grimly at the holiday preparations made.

Holly and evergreens there were in plenty about wreaths with massive

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bows of satin ribbon, a bowl filled with scarlet poinsettia blooms, and on one table an orderly stack of parcels evidently sent by express, mail and messenger to the popular but elusive bachelor, for elusive he was dubbed by matchmaking mothers.

"A young lady to see you, sir," remarked his man impassively.

James Macy took the card. "Miss Sylvia Leigh," ran its legend. She came to him, looking taller than the day in the shop, for her head was held high.

"You will pardon my coming here on Christmas eve and unchaperoned. I could not leave town without seeing you." The violet eyes had turned almost black; the contralto voice was a bit too even in its tones.

"I am honored," replied James Macy gravely, and he offered her a chair, which she declined with a wave of her gloved hand.

"It was hard enough to know that the man who bought my foolish little paintings did it through a sense of pity, but to learn that he was also the man who wrecked my mother's life—that was too much. I have come to return your money and ask the return of my cards if you have not already destroyed them."

"My dear girl," expostulated the man, who had turned strangely white.

"Please do not interrupt me," continued the girl passionately. "My mother's brother—perhaps you remember him—Henry Johnson, is here. He went to the shop and found out where my cards had gone and— Oh, it is such a miserable little farce to you, a successful man! I thought I could be an artist. They told me so at home. Against uncle's wishes I came here to make my little fight and failed. When you bought those things I thought perhaps—but uncle, who wanted me to go home, sifted the story to the bottom and found—you. I am going home with him tonight."

"Miss Leigh, I want to beg a favor of you. This is Christmas eve, and I am a lonely, desolate man. If ever the Christmas message of peace and good will means anything it is tonight, and I want your good will. Those little Christmas cards you painted are the only touch of real Christmas that has come into my life—and I want to keep them—and tell you why I want to keep them. Will you be seated?"

"You say I wrecked your mother's life. Well, then, know that hers was not long. My season of regret and penitence has lasted longer than you have lived. I loved your mother, but I did not understand her. I went out into the world to make a fortune, not for myself, but for her, and I thought that the fortune must come first and love's dream afterward. With women it is different. The dream must come first—the fortune is a secondary consideration. Your mother (God bless her memory) thought I had forgotten—that I did not care—and so she pushed me out of my life and into your

father's.

"But she had you. I had nothing, nothing but money and the memory of one happy summer of her life. I never expected to know what peace and happiness meant again until that day in the store, when your eyes, your voice—I thought it was the other Sylvia, my Sylvia, come to life. And I bought those cards because you painted them."

"And now you come to me in anger and take from me my one Christmas



"I AM HONORED," REPLIED JAMES MACY

happiness—the work of your hands. Sylvia, Sylvia, haven't I paid my debt of repentance? Can you not extend forgiveness—Christmas forgiveness—in your mother's name?"

Sylvia turned toward the door.

"I must go now. We are leaving on the 9 o'clock train. Uncle is waiting for me downstairs in a cab. We are going home."

"Home?" The man echoed the word mechanically, dully.

The girl hesitated, then held out her hand.

"Yes, back to dear old Hestonville. Why don't you come too? Why don't you run out tomorrow—for dinner?"

"Sylvia, child, do you mean it? Do you understand that if I come it will be to see you?"

Bravely the violet eyes were raised to meet the searching look in the brown ones.

"Is it peace and good will for me, Sylvia?"

"Yes—and merry Christmas if you come tomorrow."

## AN INVITATION TO LADIES WHO SHOP

The true shoppers--that exclusive portion of the community to whom it is our desire to cater--are respectfully requested to call and inspect and price our full and complete line of useful Xmas Gifts. They are arriving and being placed on display. You and your friends are welcome

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