

The Substitute Shopper

by Edna A. Collamore

EDMUND DUSTAN, age forty-two (Dustan & Pierce, manufacturing chemists), was a personable bachelor of the safe and sane variety, with a carefully framed code of behavior which he was punctilious to a degree in observing.

This code demanded, among other sacrifices, that each Christmas he journey from New York to a small New England town which a less polite person might have comprehensively described as a beastly hole, and there partake of a Christmas dinner that was festive only in intention, and exchange holiday greetings with a score or more of suffering kinsfolk.

Mr. Dustan never suspected that his own formal manner was the chief contributing cause to the general deadliness of the family gathering. He was at heart fond of seeing people enjoy themselves, but his precise exterior never betrayed this secret, and he was quite ignorant of the art of inaugurating an era of joviality.

Other members of the clan, holding Edmund's financial and moral solidity in deep respect, felt compelled to comport themselves in his presence with unusual discretion, lest Edmund be shocked or distressed, and to the most unnatural quiet and decorum they condemned their offspring.

As a preliminary to his annual excursion, Mr. Dustan was in the habit of devoting December 14 (a date he had arbitrarily selected as appropriate) to a shopping expedition, that he might provide himself with a supply of neat parcels containing suitable, and singularly uninteresting presents. When he discovered on the 13th of December that his business affairs demanded that he proceed immediately to Atlanta, and remain there till the 21st, a rearrangement of his schedule seemed inevitable.

"I should not wish to rush madly about, trying to make numerous Christmas purchases before train time," meditated Mr. Dustan, "nor do I think it proper to leave the matter until my return. As for shopping outside of New York, that may be done, but is contrary to my inclination and habits. I must delegate some suitable person to attend to this shopping for me."

Mr. Dustan's further meditations developed the idea that the suitable person was one James Keene, an obscure chemist in Mr. Dustan's employ, who owed his position to the fact that he was born and bred in the very town whither Mr. Dustan journeyed for the Christmas festivities. Yes, James Keene knew all the members of the Dustan clan, some in fact, some by repute. He knew their

ages, manner of life, approximate incomes, and moreover, he would perform his task with the extremely painstaking conscientiousness that was his most notable characteristic.

Mr. Dustan wrote a list of names and addresses, annotated it with conservative suggestions, placed it in an envelope with a sum of money large enough to satisfy his generous, though not extravagant instincts, and then wrote a brief note asking his stenographer to give the envelope to Jas. Keene, with the request that he attend to Mr. Dustan's Christmas shopping, and send the gifts to the recipients in due season.

In the employ of Mr. Dustan was another person named Keene, a vivid, vibrant office boy, answering to the baptismal name of Joseph. Although he was Mr. James Keene's nephew he did not resemble him in the least. He differed from him widely in ideals, taste, and experience. To put it briefly, he was a horse of *quite* another color.

Mr. Dustan's stenographer had never made the acquaintance of the quiet and obscure Mr. James Keene but with Joseph Keene, who was always very much in evidence, she was entirely familiar. "Jas.," said Mr. Dustan's careful writing. "Jas. is a mistake, he meant Jos." concluded the stenographer, a most indefensible conclusion.

Joseph Keene accepted the commission with delight. He loved to spend money. He fancied his own taste extremely. He patted the roll of bills, and set forth with the purpose of getting the money's worth to the uttermost penny, in color, glitter, and show.

The list was long; it began, "Mrs. Sarah Dustan, books." Mrs. Dustan was ninety-one. Her grandson was in the habit of providing her with beautifully bound volumes of religious platitudes. Joseph Keene's literary tendencies never had taken that direction. He selected books by the simple method of examining the frontispiece. Simple love clinches he

discarded in favor of illustrations promising vigorous and unceasing action.

"Mrs. Alfred Dustan, something in crystal," Joseph allowed the clerk to choose some handsome liqueur glasses, because he needed to devote a great deal of time to the next item, "Alfred Dustan, classic Victor records." Joseph interpreted classic to mean classy.

"John Dustan, slippers and socks. Violet silk hose and up-to-the-minute dancing pumps made Joseph sigh in ecstasy.

"Paul Dustan, cravats," Joseph wallowed in color.

Through the long list he sailed gaily, jubilant with success. He bought two pictures that did not lack punch, whatever else they may have lacked. He bought feminine trinkets galore—a green and yellow parasol, with a gold-and-purple parrot on the handle was one triumph, a gold cigarette case which he ordered engraved and filled with monogrammed cigarettes, was another.

At the end of the list came, "Mrs. Marian Andrews, flowers." Perhaps by this time Joseph's color hunger had been surfeited, and so the sight of hundreds of bloated, top-heavy red roses caused a slight nausea. At any rate he ordered from the florist's display a whole bush of delicate, fragrant white lilacs for the last named recipient of Mr. Dustan's bounty.

The antepandial gathering of the Dustan clan was marked by vivacious questioning and conjecture as to the probable cause of the psychological change in Mr. Edmund Dustan.

"Dance-mad, that's what he is," volunteered Uncle Alfred, the host. "He sent me some of the snappiest new records you ever heard. We'll put back the rugs to-night and give them a try-out. I don't believe he's half so stiff as you folks have always made out."

"Sure thing. Look at my purple silk socks, and gassy pumps," corroborated old Uncle

John, proudly extending his nether limbs for public inspection. "I didn't suppose that he remembered that I could shake a leg with any of them twenty years ago. They say nobody in New York is too old to dance and, by gum, I'll show him to-night that I ain't either."

"I think Uncle Edmund has gone crazy," put in Estelle, the pertest of the nieces. "He sent Aunt Martha a cigarette case. H-m, Aunt Martha!"

"That is hardly a reason why you should doubt his sanity," remarked Martha, coldly. "In fact, I consider this the most thoughtful gift he has ever given me. He remembers how I am obliged to smoke cubeb cigarettes on account of my asthma. There were some others in the case—I imagine the proprietor of the shop put them in to make it look complete. For my part I think it is much more neat and proper to keep cigarettes in a real case than in a candy box under the bureau." She spoke with silencing distinctness.

"He sent me a lovely set of little crystal glasses, just for grape juice," said Mrs. Alfred Dustan.

"For grape juice," echoed her son admiringly.

"I think he's in love," announced Ethel, the sweetly sentimental high school girl. "He's picked out the darlingest gifts for us girls this year—real Christmasy things, the kind nobody would ever buy for herself—and his presents before have been so—well, stodgy. I think love is opening his eyes to what a woman really needs."

"Oh, bubbles!" squealed one of the younger Dustans.

The older members looked inquiringly at each other, as if wondering if there were something in that suggestion. Everybody carefully refrained from looking at Mrs. Marian Andrews, who flushed delicately under this absence of scrutiny.

Mrs. Andrews was hardly a family

connection, but in her girlhood, and later in her widowhood, she had made her home with a cousin who was one of the in-laws, and was a welcome guest at family parties.

Her marriage was believed to be the reason why Edmund was a bachelor. Her widowhood was considered to open a door of opportunity that the family hoped he would enter. As a matter of fact, he had essayed to enter, but found the door firmly closed. Mrs. Marian liked Edmund, and respected him. Oh, yes, indeed! But some way he hardly seemed malleable, responsive, human enough to make an agreeable husband. But if he were in love with some other woman who only wanted his money and wouldn't be good to him—really, that would not do at all.

"What did he send you, Mrs. Andrews?" asked Estelle, mischievously.

"Flowers, these," replied Mrs. Andrews graciously, touching a spray of white lilacs.

"Oh, how sweet!" cried Ethel, "the lilac means 'my first love,' doesn't it?"

"Really, I couldn't say," remarked Mrs. Andrews, rising. "Let's put on a record while we are waiting for the others." For there are occasions when one must do something.

They did try one.

The hilarious music filled the hall as Mr. Edmund Dustan entered. How unusually gay they sound, he thought. Mrs. Alfred Dustan accompanied him up-stairs that he might pay his respects to Mme. Sarah, the matriarch of the clan. *Madame* was absorbed in a book. She kept her fingers in the place as she greeted her grandson.

"I can hardly tear myself away from your gift," she exclaimed. "Every one of those books is so interesting looking—this reminds me of one I was very fond of in youth, 'The Mysteries of Udolpho.' I had begun to think there were no such books nowadays, most of those you have sent before have seemed rather uneventful. And those chocolate bonbons—I

am fond of chocolate. I know old ladies are supposed to prefer peppermint—a flavor I detest. You were kind to take such pains to please your old grandmother, Edmund.”

She pulled him toward her with her free hand, and pressed her tremulous old lips against his cheek. He left her room with a mist before his eyes, and a large question mark protruding from his skull.

A bevy of laughing girls and boys surrounded him. “Oh, Uncle Edmund, my parasol is a love,” “And my vanity bag,” “Those cravats are corking, notice this one,” “Sportiest pictures I ever saw, I’m crazy about them,” “Oh, can you teach us the dance that goes with the last record we played?”

In this new atmosphere of youthful appreciation, Mr. Edmund Dustan visibly expanded. Though his brain now bristled with question marks at the sight of the remarkable array of meretricious atrocities he was said to have presented, his tongue betrayed him not. He bided his time.

“Uncle Edmund,” whispered Ethel twining her arm in his to hold him back from the others as they passed along the hall, “I had to tell Mrs. Andrews what those white lilacs meant that you sent her.”

“Indeed!” said the stupefied Edmund.

“I think it’s the sweetest kind of proposal I ever heard of—sending her the flower that means my first love. But it would have spoiled

everything if she hadn’t understood, so I told her.”

“And what did she say?” he murmured.

“Nothing. But I caught her in the library looking up the language of flowers in a dictionary, to see if I was right. She blushed like anything when she saw me.”

“Indeed!” said Edmund again. At this moment they were at the arched doorway of the old-fashioned parlor, and, catching a glimpse of the mistletoe over his head, he absent-mindedly kissed his silly little niece.

The road down-hill is known to be excessively slippery. Soon afterward he caught and kissed Aunt Martha. The house was filled with astounding hilarity.

Later in the evening, in a secluded corner, he dared to touch a spray of lilac, and look into the beautiful eyes of Mrs. Marian Andrews.

“You seem a different man this evening,” she said, with averted gaze.

“But the same loyal love you have always known,” whispered Mr. Dustan, a trifle awkwardly. Then he gasped with delight, the lady had lifted to her smiling lips a bit of lilac bloom.

Although it was perfectly indefensible for a stenographer to suppose that Mr. Dustan would write Jas. when he meant Jos., the error did not cause a poor working girl to lose her position.