

Christmas Charity

By Mary Graham Bonner

HORACE had always loved Hilda. In the old days they had written letters to Santa Claus together. For they had been children together and Hilda was only eleven when Horace first proposed to her.

Hilda promised to marry Horace when she grew up if he'd give her plenty of hot buttered popcorn and Christmas candy elephants in the meantime. It was a strain on Horace's slender allowance and it was not always easy to get candy elephants, but he succeeded on the whole.

There was something so nice about Hilda. She never made remarks as some girls did, and men too, for that matter, which were so annoying.

When she rang up on the telephone she did not say "Guess who's talking, now, just guess," and disguise her voice. She always considered whether a person might not very easily be busy, and so did not have what some considered a little joke.

There were some kinds of people Horace couldn't endure. There were those who said, for example: "If the lightning is going to strike you, it's going to strike you. It's absurd to say you're afraid of it."

Then there were those who would say in answer to a query about the temperature of the ocean and its condition for swimming:

"The water? Why, the water's wet." And then—expected him to laugh.

There were those who would say "How come," and expected to be put in a bright class, as though they'd said something startlingly original.

Then there were those who sent picture postcards of foreign places when

they really posted them from New York and Chicago and Seattle and Hohokus, New Jersey, and hoped that they could fool the receiver of the postcards that these cards had not been at one time gifts to them.

And he did dislike those who would say to him after he had had his last year's suit nicely sponged and pressed, "How that has worn! It has certainly done you good service, and it doesn't look bad at that!"

But especially he disliked and felt as though he could almost choke those who were given to telling others to count their blessings, while they moaned and groaned and whined and whispered themselves at all times and about all things.

These were his special aversions, but Hilda was different. Hilda never jarred. Hilda was always sweet. Though Hilda did not, or had not as yet agreed to, marry him, and he had asked her many a time.

The second time Horace had proposed had been when Hilda was sixteen and they were sitting out the supper dance at one of the Christmas holiday parties. Horace was two years older than Hilda.

"I couldn't marry you," Hilda had said, "as you are really nothing but a child. I need a man more my own mental equal."

"But you're two years younger than I am," Horace had protested. "True," Hilda had admitted, "but a woman is always so much older than a man." Hilda called herself a woman from the time she was sixteen until she was twenty-one.

Again and again Horace proposed. Hilda always put him off, but she always seemed to come back to him after each worrisome flirtation. Persistence and devotion were Horace's strong points, and every Christmas as he took her the yellow rosebuds, which was his choice of a Christmas bouquet, he proposed anew. It was Horace's annual declaration!

Hilda loved the flowers—the rosebuds were always so pretty and Horace had so much taste. Always in the center was a spray of holly, and they were tied with gay red ribbon. And



Hilda Always Put Him Off.

Hilda cared for Horace, too. But not enough, not quite enough.

When Hilda was twenty-five she almost yielded. Someone had that day asked Hilda her age. She had candidly admitted she was twenty-five.

Later in the afternoon she had heard that "if Hilda admitted to twenty-five she must at least be thirty-two." Hilda felt old then, discouraged. But she didn't quite accept Horace.

From then on Hilda's age was very uncertain. Horace was fearful, lest at first Hilda drop a year every year.

She could never claim eighteen, or even twenty, even though she was very young in appearance, bafflingly so.

Hilda had been thirty for the past three years now, and still Horace was around, admiring her, loving her, more and more all the time.

But the strain had almost been too much. Horace had loved Hilda a very long time. Hilda had taken a long time alone to become thirty. He would ask her once more to marry him, then he would go away, never to return he told himself dramatically.

"Hilda," he said to her as he gave her the Christmas bouquet for the well, he wouldn't keep track of the number of times even in his mind—I've told you how it is. I must know finally, tonight. I can't bear this any longer.

"Won't you marry me, my darling? Right away, without any more waiting? Can't we start out the new year together?"

"Can't we—my darling?"

And at last Horace knew bliss. Shyly, sweetly, clingingly, and with such slow yielding awakening Hilda was in his arms, and as she lifted her lips to his she murmured:

"And you'll take care of me, won't you, Horace? And always be good to me? For I'm only a child, Horace dear, and I mustn't, I mustn't ever be disillusioned."

And Horace was filled with Christmas charity. He did not tell her of the time—a good many years back

now—when she had told him he was too young for her!

For one thing, he was too happy. And for another—he didn't think ages amounted to anything anyway. Everyone was as old or as young as they wanted to be!

Besides, at last Hilda had consented to marry him. He could afford Christmas cheer and a great and wonderful happiness.

Rubbing It In.

"In Europe they tell Americans by their smooth faces." "Well, I started to say it, but won't." "What?" "That they can also tell some of them by their smooth tongues."—Florida Times-Union.

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