## The Buyer from Cactus City

O. Henry

It is well that hay fever and colds do not obtain in the healthful vicinity of Cactus City, Texas, for the dry goods emporium of Navarro & Platt, situated there, is not to be sneezed at.

Twenty thousand people in Cactus City scatter their silver coin with liberal hands for the things that their hearts desire. The bulk of this semiprecious metal goes to Navarro & Platt. Their huge brick building covers enough ground to graze a dozen head of sheep. You can buy of them a rattlesnake-skin necktie, an automobile or an eighty-five dollar, latest style, ladies’ tan coat in twenty different shades. Navarro & Platt first introduced pennies west of the Colorado River. They had been ranchmen with business heads, who saw that the world did not necessarily have to cease its revolutions after free grass went out.

Every Spring, Navarro, senior partner, fifty-five, half Spanish, cosmopolitan, able, polished, had “gone on” to New York to buy goods. This year he shied at taking up the long trail. He was undoubtedly growing older; and he looked at his watch several times a day before the hour came for his siesta.

“John,” he said, to his junior partner, “you shall go on this year to buy the goods.”

Platt looked tired.

“I’m told,” said he, “that New York is a plumb dead town; but I’ll go. I can take a whirl in San Antone for a few days on my way and have some fun.”

Two weeks later a man in a Texas full dress suit—black frock coat, broad-brimmed soft white hat, and lay-down collar 3-4 inch high, with black, wrought iron necktie—entered the wholesale cloak and suit establishment of Zizzbaum & Son, on lower Broadway.

Old Zizzbaum had the eye of an osprey, the memory of an elephant and a mind that unfolded from him in three movements like the puzzle of the carpenter’s rule. He rolled to the front like a brunette polar bear, and shook Platt’s hand.

“And how is the good Mr. Navarro in Texas?” he said. “The trip was too long for him this year, so? We welcome Mr. Platt instead.”

“A bull’s eye,” said Platt, “and I’d give forty acres of unirrigated Pecos County land to know how you did it.”

“I knew,” grinned Zizzbaum, “just as I know that the rainfall in El Paso for the year was 28.5 inches, or an increase of 15 inches, and that therefore Navarro & Platt will buy a $15,000 stock of suits this spring instead of $10,000, as in a dry year. But that will be to-morrow. There is first a cigar in my private office that will remove from your mouth the taste of the ones you smuggle across the Rio Grande and like—because they are smuggled.”

It was late in the afternoon and business for the day had ended, Zizzbaum left Platt with a half-smoked cigar, and came out of the private office to Son, who was arranging his diamond scarfpin before a mirror, ready to leave.

“Abey,” he said, “you will have to take Mr. Platt around to-night and show him things. They are customers for ten years. Mr. Navarro and I we played chess every moment of spare time when he came. That is good, but Mr. Platt is a young man and this is his first visit to New York. He should amuse easily.”

“All right,” said Abey, screwing the guard tightly on his pin. “I’ll take him on. After he’s seen the Flatiron and the head waiter at the Hotel Astor and heard the phonograph play ‘Under the Old Apple Tree’ it’ll be half past ten, and Mr. Texas will be ready to roll up in his blanket. I’ve got a supper engagement at 11:30, but he’ll be all to the Mrs. Winslow before then.”

The next morning at 10 Platt walked into the store ready to do business. He had a bunch of hyacinths pinned on his lapel. Zizzbaum himself waited on him. Navarro & Platt were good customers, and never failed to take their discount for cash.

“And what did you think of our little town?” asked Zizzbaum, with the fatuous smile of the Manhattanite.

“I shouldn’t care to live in it,” said the Texan. “Your son and I knocked around quite a little last night. You’ve got good water, but Cactus City is better lit up.”

“We’ve got a few lights on Broadway, don’t you think, Mr. Platt?”

“And a good many shadows,” said Platt. “I think I like your horses best. I haven’t seen a crow-bait since I’ve been in town.”

Zizzbaum led him up stairs to show the samples of suits.

“Ask Miss Asher to come,” he said to a clerk.

Miss Asher came, and Platt, of Navarro & Platt, felt for the first time the wonderful bright light of romance and glory descend upon him. He stood still as a granite cliff above the cañon of the Colorado, with his wide-open eyes fixed upon her. She noticed his look and flushed a little, which was contrary to her custom.

Miss Asher was the crack model of Zizzbaum & Son. She was of the blond type known as “medium,” and her measurements even went the required 38-25-42 standard a little better. She had been at Zizzbaum’s two years, and knew her business. Her eye was bright, but cool; and had she chosen to match her gaze against the optic of the famed basilisk, that fabulous monster’s gaze would have wavered and softened first. Incidentally, she knew buyers.

“Now, Mr. Platt,” said Zizzbaum, “I want you to see these princess gowns in the light shades. They will be the thing in your climate. This first, if you please, Miss Asher.”

Swiftly in and out of the dressing-room the prize model flew, each time wearing a new costume and looking more stunning with every change. She posed with absolute self-possession before the stricken buyer, who stood, tongue-tied and motionless, while Zizzbaum orated oilily of the styles. On the model’s face was her faint, impersonal professional smile that seemed to cover something like weariness or contempt.

When the display was over Platt seemed to hesitate. Zizzbaum was a little anxious, thinking that his customer might be inclined to try elsewhere. But Platt was only looking over in his mind the best building sites in Cactus City, trying to select one on which to build a house for his wife-to-be—who was just then in the dressing-room taking off an evening gown of lavender and tulle.

“Take your time, Mr. Platt,” said Zizzbaum. “Think it over to-night. You won’t find anybody else meet our prices on goods like these. I’m afraid you’re having a dull time in New York, Mr. Platt. A young man like you—of course, you miss the society of the ladies. Wouldn’t you like a nice young lady to take out to dinner this evening? Miss Asher, now, is a very nice young lady; she will make it agreeable for you.”

“Why, she doesn’t know me,” said Platt, wonderingly. “She doesn’t know anything about me. Would she go? I’m not acquainted with her.”

“Would she go?” repeated Zizzbaum, with uplifted eyebrows. “Sure, she would go. I will introduce you. Sure, she would go.”

He called Miss Asher loudly.

She came, calm and slightly contemptuous, in her white shirt waist and plain black skirt.

“Mr. Platt would like the pleasure of your company to dinner this evening,” said Zizzbaum, walking away.

“Sure,” said Miss Asher, looking at the ceiling. “I’d be much pleased. Nine-eleven West Twentieth street. What time?”

“Say seven o’clock.”

“All right, but please don’t come ahead of time. I room with a school teacher, and she doesn’t allow any gentlemen to call in the room. There isn’t any parlor, so you’ll have to wait in the hall. I’ll be ready.”

At half past seven Platt and Miss Asher sat at a table in a Broadway restaurant. She was dressed in a plain, filmy black. Platt didn’t know that it was all a part of her day’s work.

With the unobtrusive aid of a good waiter he managed to order a respectable dinner, minus the usual Broadway preliminaries.

Miss Asher flashed upon him a dazzling smile.

“Mayn’t I have something to drink?” she asked.

“Why, certainly,” said Platt. “Anything you want.”

“A dry Martini,” she said to the waiter.

When it was brought and set before her Platt reached over and took it away.

“What is this?” he asked.

“A cocktail, of course.”

“I thought it was some kind of tea you ordered. This is liquor. You can’t drink this. What is your first name?”

“To my intimate friends,” said Miss Asher, freezingly, “it is ‘Helen.’”

“Listen, Helen,” said Platt, leaning over the table. “For many years every time the spring flowers blossomed out on the prairies I got to thinking of somebody that I’d never seen or heard of. I knew it was you the minute I saw you yesterday. I’m going back home to-morrow, and you’re going with me. I know it, for I saw it in your eyes when you first looked at me. You needn’t kick, for you’ve got to fall into line. Here’s a little trick I picked out for you on my way over.”

He flicked a two-carat diamond solitaire ring across the table. Miss Asher flipped it back to him with her fork.

“Don’t get fresh,” she said, severely.

“I’m worth a hundred thousand dollars,” said Platt. “I’ll build you the finest house in West Texas.”

“You can’t buy me, Mr. Buyer,” said Miss Asher, “if you had a hundred million. I didn’t think I’d have to call you down. You didn’t look like the others to me at first, but I see you’re all alike.”

“All who?” asked Platt.

“All you buyers. You think because we girls have to go out to dinner with you or lose our jobs that you’re privileged to say what you please. Well, forget it. I thought you were different from the others, but I see I was mistaken.”

Platt struck his fingers on the table with a gesture of sudden, illuminating satisfaction.

“I’ve got it!” he exclaimed, almost hilariously—“the Nicholson place, over on the north side. There’s a big grove of live oaks and a natural lake. The old house can be pulled down and the new one set further back.”

“Put out your pipe,” said Miss Asher. “I’m sorry to wake you up, but you fellows might as well get wise, once for all, to where you stand. I’m supposed to go to dinner with you and help jolly you along so you’ll trade with old Zizzy, but don’t expect to find me in any of the suits you buy.”

“Do you mean to tell me,” said Platt, “that you go out this way with customers, and they all—they all talk to you like I have?”

“They all make plays,” said Miss Asher. “But I must say that you’ve got ’em beat in one respect. They generally talk diamonds, while you’ve actually dug one up.”

“How long have you been working, Helen?”

“Got my name pat, haven’t you? I’ve been supporting myself for eight years. I was a cash girl and a wrapper and then a shop girl until I was grown, and then I got to be a suit model. Mr. Texas Man, don’t you think a little wine would make this dinner a little less dry?”

“You’re not going to drink wine any more, dear. It’s awful to think how— I’ll come to the store to-morrow and get you. I want you to pick out an automobile before we leave. That’s all we need to buy here.”

“Oh, cut that out. If you knew how sick I am of hearing such talk.”

After the dinner they walked down Broadway and came upon Diana’s little wooded park. The trees caught Platt’s eye at once, and he must turn along under the winding walk beneath them. The lights shone upon two bright tears in the model’s eyes.

“I don’t like that,” said Platt. “What’s the matter?”

“Don’t you mind,” said Miss Asher. “Well, it’s because—well, I didn’t think you were that kind when I first saw you. But you are all like. And now will you take me home, or will I have to call a cop?”

Platt took her to the door of her boarding-house. They stood for a minute in the vestibule. She looked at him with such scorn in her eyes that even his heart of oak began to waver. His arm was half way around her waist, when she struck him a stinging blow on the face with her open hand.

As he stepped back a ring fell from somewhere and bounded on the tiled floor. Platt groped for it and found it.

“Now, take your useless diamond and go, Mr. Buyer,” she said.

“This was the other one—the wedding ring,” said the Texan, holding the smooth gold band on the palm of his hand.

Miss Asher’s eyes blazed upon him in the half darkness.

“Was that what you meant?—did you”—

Somebody opened the door from inside the house.

“Good-night,” said Platt. “I’ll see you at the store to-morrow.”

Miss Asher ran up to her room and shook the school teacher until she sat up in bed ready to scream “Fire!”

“Where is it?” she cried.

“That’s what I want to know,” said the model. “You’ve studied geography, Emma, and you ought to know. Where is a town called Cac—Cac—Carac—Caracas City, I think, they called it?”

“How dare you wake me up for that?” said the school teacher. “Caracas is in Venezuela, of course.”

“What’s it like?”

“Why, it’s principally earthquakes and negroes and monkeys and malarial fever and volcanoes.”

“I don’t care,” said Miss Asher, blithely; “I’m going there to-morrow.”