

Say It To Sylvia
A Christmas Story

by ROBERT STEAD

DAVE HOLDEN chose his homestead high up the foothill valley not only for the shelter of surrounding hills and proximity to groves of spruce and lodge-pole pine. He had another reason for retreating so far from civilization. That reason was Sylvia Palmer.

Dave and Sylvia had been pals together down the plains where both were born. They had attended the same school, the same picnics, dances, country concerts. Many a stony night with Sylvia at his side, Dave had driven the prairie trails, none too eager to reach their destination. And Sylvia, too, seemed quite content to dally on the way.

It was true there never had been any formal engagement between them. It hardly seemed necessary. They had "gone together" so long that some time, Dave supposed, when he was in a position to offer her a home, he would tell her so, and Sylvia would say, "All right, Dave. Whenever you are ready."

They she would turn her accepting mood to him, and he would kiss her tenderly and a little differently, now that she was so soon to be his bride. But Dave had not counted on a woman's will—and what comes of it. At eighteen Sylvia, having secured her teacher's certificate, applied for and was accepted by a town school some distance from her home. She was all enthusiasm and excitement over her plunge into the great, self-supporting world.

Dave may have shared her excitement, but not her enthusiasm. He told her so.

"Why, Dave Holden, I'm surprised at you!" Sylvia retorted. "I thought you would be glad to see me get a chance."

"Of course, I want you to have your chance," he explained, "but I'm fixing on fixing a chance for you, too. Dad is paying me a man's wages now. In another year or two I'll be set to take up land of my own, and then—"

"She wanted for him to put something definite into words, but a certain shyness held him back. Anyway, she knew what he meant. She gave him a disengaged hand a grateful squeeze. "That will be fine," she said. "You will make a good farmer, Dave."

"Maybe," he admitted. "And maybe by that time you'll have taken up with one of those town sheiks, and I won't care then whether I go farming, or not."

"Don't you worry over that. I'm not planning on taking up with any town sheik—not with a big boy like Dave Holden running around loose."

But Dave worried, just the same, and by the second term he knew he had occasion for it. Sylvia's talk had turned from crops and country picnics and all things of the land to sport and tennis and particularly one Jack Fulton whose name was often on her lips. Dave had a feeling of being taken at a disadvantage. Instead of watching Sylvia for himself he bluntly charged her with having transferred her affections to Fulton.

"I ain't blaming you," he said, sarcastically. "No doubt he is a very fine fellow. But if I meet him some—"

"He's pretty strong, Dave," Sylvia teased. "Better be careful!"

day perhaps we'll see which is the best man."

"Hi's pretty strong, Dave," Sylvia teased. "Better be careful!"

Whereupon Dave lost his temper altogether. "Maybe I should be careful, and maybe you should be careful, too. What I'm saying is, either you give him up, or I'm through!"

That was too much for the spirited Sylvia. Whether or not she cared for Jack Fulton, she wasn't going to take orders about it from Dave. Dave never had actually asked her to marry him, although she had given him opportunity enough.

"All right, you're through!" she said, and whisked herself out of his presence. Dave had not expected that result, but he had gone too far to retreat. He had thought that Sylvia would bow to his ultimatum. Her curt rejection

hurt his pride more than anything he had thought possible. He felt that he had suddenly lost all faith in human nature, and that life among his old associates would be intolerable. So he drew his wages, gathered up his equipment, and trekked into the foothill country to the very farthest homestead on the map.

He found a place by a mountain stream, cut down spruce logs, and built himself a cabin. When winter set in he began cutting posts and rails for fencing on his farm. To keep from thinking he worked feverishly, early and late. But thoughts would come, in spite of all he could do to stop them. Particularly as the Christmas season drew near his mind would turn to the old farm down on the plains. What ample preparations would be going on in his mother's kitchen! What stacks of food! What happy chatter, even a gift perhaps because of the boy who had left home in a huff and never had written back! And Sylvia! Sylvia would be home now for the Christmas vacation. Perhaps the Fulton fellow would be visiting with her.

Dave turned with a shrug and shoveled more wood into his rusty stove.



"I am Jack Fulton," He said. "Perhaps You Have Heard of Me?"

After all, he told himself, he was not so badly off. He had a cabin and plenty of fuel. He had a dog, and a team of horses, half a dozen yearling calves. . . .

He was taking comfort in such thoughts when suddenly his dog sprang up, barking. Dave was on his feet in an instant, his gun in his hand. Perhaps a deer or a bear had wandered into his little clearing.

At that moment came a knock, something which never before had happened on his cabin door. For a moment Dave hesitated, then swung the door open. The light fell on the figure of a young man.

"Are you Dave Holden?" the stranger inquired.

"Yes. Come in."

The stranger entered. Dave made him comfortable and gave him supper, waiting to hear his mission.

"What are you seated on either side of the hot stove the stranger began. "I am Jack Fulton," he said. "Perhaps you have heard of me?"

Dave's veins seemed to freeze. "What brings you here?" he demanded. "Can't you leave me alone?"

Fulton kept his temper. "No, not under the circumstances. Let me tell you—I will be brief. I am the principal of the school where Miss Palmer teaches. All through the term I have seen she was worried. At last I asked her why. Naturally she was diffident at first, but finally told me. She is wearing her heart out for you."

Dave faced him. "Is this true, and why do you tell me? I thought—"

"Because I am to be married to a little girl of my own at Easter, and I think I know how both of you feel. So I got your location from the homestead officials, and took my Christmas vacation to look you up. I hope you are not annoyed by my interest?"

Dave seized his hand. "And I thought all the time—"

"Never mind what you thought! I've walked in from the nearest rancher's. If you have a team that can travel you can make the railway station by morning, and eat your Christmas turkey at Sylvia Palmer's. I'll stay and look after your cattle. It will be a real holiday for me."

But Dave had both his hands in his. "My friend! I don't know what I can say—"

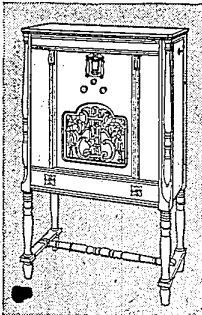
"As it is to Sylvia! I'll give you six days to get back. And bring her with you, or I'll charge you for my time!"

"I'll bring her with me—or you can keep the farm," said Dave, who was already climbing into his heavy overcoat.

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