

Christmas Re-union

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‘I cannot explain what exactly it is about him; but I don’t like your Mr Clarence Love, and I’m sorry you ever asked him to say.’

Thus Richard Dreyton to his wife Elinor on the morning of Christmas Eve.

‘But one must remember the children, Richard. You know what marvellous presents he gives them.’

‘Much too marvellous. He spoils them. Yet you’ll have noticed that none of them likes him. Children have a wonderful intuition in regard to the character of grown-ups.’

‘What on earth are you hinting about his character? He’s a very nice man.’

Dreyton shuffled off his slippers in front of the study fire and began putting on his boots.

‘I wonder, darling, whether you noticed his face just now, at breakfast, when he opened that letter with the Australian stamps on?’

‘Yes; he did seem a bit upset; but not more so than you when you get my dressmaker’s bill!’

Mrs Dreyton accompanied this sally with a playful pat on her husband’s back as he leant forward to do up his laces.

‘Well, Elinor, all that I can say is that there’s something very fishy about his antipodean history. At five-and-twenty, he left England a penniless young man and, heigh presto! he returns a stinking plutocrat at twenty-eight. And how? What he’s told you doesn’t altogether tally with what he’s told me; but, cutting out the differences, his main story is that he duly contacted old Nelson Joy, his maternal uncle, whom he went out to join, and that they went off together, prospecting for gold. They struck it handsomely; and then the poor old uncle gets a heart-stroke or paralysis, or something, in the bush, and bids Clarence leave him there to do and get out himself before the food gives out. Arrived back in Sydney, Clarence produces a will under which he is the sole beneficiary, gets the Court to presume old Joy’s death, and bunks back here with the loot.’

Mrs Dreyton frowned. ‘I can see nothing wrong or suspicious about the story,’ she said, ‘but only in your telling of it.’

‘No! No! In *his* telling of it. He never gets the details quite the same twice running, and I’m certain that he gave a different topography to their prospecting expedition this year from what he did last. It’s my belief that he did the uncle in, poor old chapt!’

‘Don’t be so absurd, Richard; and please remember that he’s our guest, and that we must be hospitable: especially at Christmas. Which reminds me: on your way to the office, would you mind looking in at Harridge’s and making sure that they haven’t forgotten our order for their Santa Claus tomorrow? He’s to be here at seven; then to go on to the Simpsons at seven-thirty, and to end up at the Joneses at eight. It’s lucky our getting three households to share the expenses: Harridge’s charge each of us only half their catalogued fee. If they could possibly send us the same Father Christmas as last year it would be splendid. The children adored him. Don’t forget to say, too, that he will find all the crackers, hats, musical toys and presents inside the big chest in the hall. Just the same as last year. What should we do nowadays without the big stores? One goes to them for everything.’