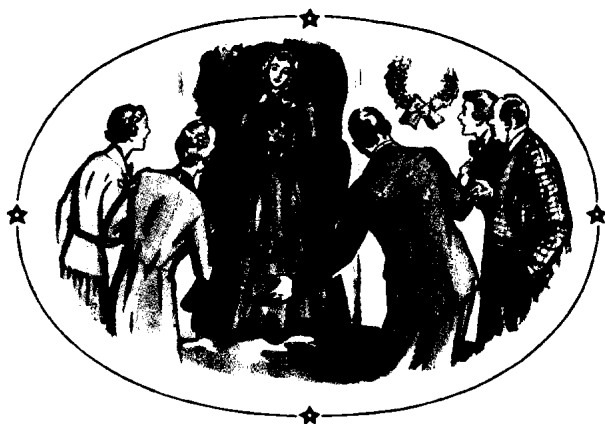




# HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

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BY  
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Illustrated by David Hendrickson

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LLOYD C. DOUGLAS

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

WHITE BANNERS

GREEN LIGHT

PRECIOUS JEOPARDY

FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES

MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION



*The old Clayton house, which for many years had drowed lonesomely through the holiday season, was crowded to capacity on Christmas night.*



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# FIRST CHAPTER

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## CHAPTER ONE

SNUGGLING her finely modeled Clayton nose into the saddle of a platinum pince-nez, Mrs. Eldridge slit open the bulky envelope with her unused butter-spreader and muttered, 'Nan will be up to something.'

Jason peered dutifully over the top of his crackling paper but noting his wife's absorption promptly drew in his periscope and submerged again into the editorials. 'Doubtless,' he mumbled, for no reason at all, it being well known that he liked Nan and often commented on her good sense.

'My talented sister,' reported Gertrude, after a few moments of busy silence, 'is now in the process of doing something I have feared for years. Listen to this, please. It's pretty dreadful.'

Submissively folding the paper, Jason exhaled a sigh that puffed his cheeks, furtively peeked at his watch, and indicated that he was ready to receive the bad news.

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'We Claytons,' continued Gertrude, in a grossly overdone imitation of her schoolma'am sister's didactic manner, 'are all going home for Christmas. Several days of it. We are to recover our childhood. Popcorn and maple taffy, evergreen and tinsel, holly and candles, sleds and snow-fights, songs and shouts, roast goose and a bad cold ——'

'Followed, perhaps, by pneumonia,' assisted Jason, in the same key.

'It's no joking matter. You were never there in the winter.' Gertrude shuddered. 'I can't think of anything I'd rather not do.'

'Sounds quite jolly to me.' Jason pushed his cup across the table and gave signs of becoming actively interested. 'Might be a lot of fun. I'm willing to go if you want to.'

'Thanks,' crisply. 'You're not invited. None of the in-laws. No children. Just the five of us Claytons, happily skipping about through the old house as when we were little. Nan's notion of a grand time. She never grew up. It will be a ghastly bore.'

'Why do it, then?' inquired Jason, reasonably

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enough, he thought. 'You're not really obliged to, are you?'

Gertrude Clayton Eldridge meditated for a moment with pursed lips and narrowed eyes, then slowly nodded a reluctant affirmative. By the terms of their parents' will, to which they had all agreed heartily, Nan, youngest of the family, had inherited the old home. Living in Detroit, Nan could run out there occasionally and see to things. It was expected that she would find a tenant for the farm and enjoy whatever income was to be had. Instead, she had put old Timmie Ruggles and his sister Ellen into the house as care-takers.

'As you know,' explained Gertrude, 'Nan has gone to a great deal of bother and expense to keep

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the old home intact. For years she has been coaxing us to meet her there in the summer. We've always made excuses. Now she's determined on a family reunion, this Christmas. There's her letter. Read it.'

Jason fumbled through the pages.

'Nan says you haven't all been together for nine years. Has it really been that long, Gertrude?'

'I'm afraid so. Not since Mother died. I suppose we all ought to be ashamed.'

'Umm — doubtless,' agreed Jason pre-occupiedly. 'She says here that Jim has consented to come.'

'That's just it. Jim never could arrange his affairs, and we couldn't have a family reunion without him. Either he wasn't able to leave Chicago because of some important business, or there were guests expected out in Winnetka. The rest of us never needed an excuse. Jim's was sufficient. Now, as you see, Nan has wangled a promise out of him, Madge having planned to spend the holidays in England with her sister.'

'But how about Claire?' wondered Jason. 'Surely she won't be able to leave Doc and the

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boys in Louisville to look after themselves on Christmas.'

'You'll come to that presently. Claire's boys are spending the holidays at their fraternity house, rehearsing for the student opera. No — Nan is going through with it this time. Has her heart set on it. Says we're all to be children again. Meaning, I suppose, that she'll expect us to act like a lot of half-wits.'

'I think,' drawled Jason, in his best legal manner, 'that your jocular brother Fred — I see he's coming all the way from San Diego — might be able to play that rôle without any make-up.'

'Yes, there will be marbles in the soup,' predicted Gertrude gravely, 'and hickory nuts in the beds. All that sort of thing.'

'I recall the dead frog we slept with on our honeymoon,' said Jason, aware that he was stirring the embers of an ancient debate.

'You brought that all on yourself,' growled Gertrude, 'trying to be urbane with your new relatives in the country. Told the youngster you'd never had a good look at a frog; so, he ——'

'Very obliging fellow, your brother. Well —

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it's clear enough you'll have to go. It wouldn't be sporting of you to refuse, and spoil the fun by your absence. They will depend on you to be the life of the party.'

Mrs. Eldridge stiffened slightly and reminded her husband that he was rarely at his best when attempting to be funny, which made him laugh. Sobering instantly to match her dour mood, Jason remarked, practically, 'We'll consider that settled, then. Miriam and I will be expected to fend for ourselves, eh?'

'No. That's another thing. Miriam has been hinting again that she would like to spend the holidays in Atlanta with Doris. You remember she wanted to, last year, and we wouldn't give her up.'

Jason remembered and thought they should let the child go. Both she and her roommate would be out of college by another Christmas. 'Quite proper,' he assented. 'That leaves everybody taken care of — but me.' He drew a brief sigh of resignation, implying that he stood ready to suffer for the pleasure of his loved ones. 'But no matter about that,' he added courageously. 'I suppose I could run down to Bermuda for a week.'

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‘Now wouldn’t that be just too bad!’ Gertrude accented each syllable with a peckish little nod. ‘The poor dear has to go away down to ugly old Bermuda while his pampered wife is having great fun wading snow to her knees.’

‘Oh — there’ll be a path, doubtless,’ chuckled Jason. He glanced at his watch. ‘May I go now, darling? I’ve a hard day ahead of me at the office.’

‘That’s good,’ murmured Gertrude absently. ‘You might ask one of your minions to make a reservation for me on The Wolverine for the twenty-second. We’re supposed to assemble on the twenty-third. Met by a bobsled at Wimple.’ She winced; then grinned a little. ‘Fred will not have seen any snow for a long time. He’ll probably freeze his ears.’

Jason said he hoped so. ‘And James — I fancy he hasn’t been cold for years. A heater in his limousine — and all that.’

‘It will be pretty hard on him, I’m afraid. Dear, dear! How that luxury-loving old thing will enjoy standing in line waiting his turn at the bath.’

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‘There is a bath, then? I’d forgotten. I must go now. Good-by, sweetheart.’ He tipped back her head, caressed a graying curl at her temple with protective fingers, and received the customary pat on the back of his hand.

‘Take care of yourself today,’ said Gertrude.





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## SECOND CHAPTER

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