**‘YOU OWE ME!’**

 Two friends are challenged to provide Christmas presents

 for a family who don’t believe in Jesus.

 by Veronica Heley

‘You owe me!’ A forefinger poked Leo in the chest. He recoiled but, since he was a big man and sitting well back in his chair at the cafe, he couldn’t escape. What made it worse was that the child was standing beside them, taking it all in. It was, well, humiliating.

 ‘You owe me plenty!’

Leo experienced a slight sense of guilt.

 Leo and his friend Bruce had indeed been responsible for this man’s suffering a loss of income. The fact that that income had been acquired by the man and his family by way of shoplifting, was another matter. Or was it?

 Again the forefinger prodded Leo’s chest. ‘You and your capitalist friends eat and drink what you fancy, you don’t have to pay rent because you’ve inherited your house, you take luxury holidays and send your children to private schools. You never have to worry about where the next meal is to come from or how to pay the rent . . . and you have the nerve to prevent me from picking up a bit of this and that to pay the bills!’

 Leo’s friend Bruce arrived and dropped into the chair next to him. ‘Hi, Leo.’ He looked at the man, frowned, and said, ‘Hello! I know you, don’t I?’

 ‘You should, seeing that you and your friends have got me banned from the shopping centre!’

 Bruce was an almost-retired accountant, bald and brown. He was amused by the thief’s effrontery, remembering how he and Leo had watched and trapped the shoplifters at work. The man, the woman and the child had worked as a team. The man or the woman stole the goods and handed them to the child . . . who took them away and gave them to the other adult in the team. Meanwhile the original shoplifter walked away and could not be challenged because he or she no longer had the goods on them.

Bruce said, ‘Has your case come up in court yet?’

 The man grinned. ‘Seeing that it was our first offence, we were given a slap on the wrist and told not to do it again.’

Bruce shook his head. ‘You mean, the first time you’ve been caught? We know you’d done it before.’ Bruce signalled to the waitress and asked Leo, ‘What are you having? Hot chocolate? It’s cold enough.’

 Big Leo said, ‘Remember my diet? The wife would kill me. I’ll have a latte.’

 Corin, the third member of the team which had caught the shoplifters, came into the cafe and looked around for a seat. Corin had a round face that looked as if it were always ready to laugh, but in repose he looked anxious. Seeing Bruce and Leo, he said, ‘May I join you?’

 Bruce and Leo would have preferred to have their coffee in peace, since Corin had made fun of them for holding family values and . . . gasp! . . . for being Christians, but they were polite enough to murmur, ‘Please do.’

 Since the thief had failed to gain Bruce and Leo’s sympathy, he turned his attention to Corin. ‘You owe me. You shut off our income.’

Corin laughed, sinking into a chair around the table. ‘All right, I’ll spring to a coffee for you. And something for your daughter, perhaps?’

The man said to the waitress, ‘I’ll have a full English breakfast, and so will my daughter. These gentlemen will pay.’

Corin’s smile faded, and his eyes half-closed. ‘You’ve got a nerve!’ But then he nodded to the waitress. ‘Well, all right, we’ll foot the bill this once.’

Bruce frowned and opened his mouth as if to object, but closed it again. Leo threw up his hands but nodded to the waitress. ‘All right.’

‘I suppose,’ said the man, pulling up chairs for himself and the girl to join the circle, ‘you feel that by standing us something to eat in the run-up to Christmas, you’ve wiped out your debt to us.’

Bruce steepled his fingers. ‘Personally, no. You stole. You got caught. I don’t see any signs that you are sorry for what you did, and for all I know you may still be at it.’

‘Not I,’ said the man, smiling to reveal a gold tooth. ‘Pure as driven snow, me.’

Was he lying? Probably.

‘But,’ said the thief, ‘is it right to make the child suffer as a consequence of your actions? I promised to give her an X-box for Christmas, and you’ve made that impossible. So what do you say to that?’

Corin flapped his hand lazily, ‘It’s nothing to do with us.’

Big Leo bounced in his chair. ‘Go out and get a job.’

‘I’m on full disability. A whiplash injury. Can’t lift or stretch, and in constant pain.’

He didn’t look as if he were in constant pain. He looked well-fed, well-shod and healthy. A fine example of a man.

The girl, however, did look thin. Her eyes seemed too large for her face and her hair was dull and lifeless.

The waitress returned, without any food. ‘The manager says he’d like you to settle the bill before you eat.’

‘What!’ Corin started to laugh. ‘Well, you can’t blame him for that, I suppose. You’ve built yourself something of a reputation around here, my friend!’

Leo had had enough. He heaved himself to his feet, saying, ‘Don’t look at me. I’m not paying for this man’s food. Waitress, cancel my order. I’ll have a coffee somewhere else. Coming, Bruce?’ He stumped off down the road without looking back.

Bruce also got to his feet. He handed a note to the waitress. ‘Here’s a tenner. See the child gets something to eat, will you?’ And he went off after Leo.

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Leo let himself into the flat, and called out, ‘Yoohoo! I’m home!’

 ‘You’re early.’ His wife Dora looked up from the Christmas catalogue she’d been studying. ‘Didn’t Bruce turn up?’

 ‘We had a quick coffee, not in the usual place. You remember I told you about the shoplifting family? Well, the man accosted us, said we owed him a Christmas present for his daughter. And then, would you believe! He tried to con us into buying him and the girl some breakfast. Corin was there, too. He seemed to think we ought to do something for them but, as I said to Bruce later, “What can we do?”’

 ‘Can’t the man work?’

 ‘He says he’s got whiplash, total disability. I don’t believe him. He moves easily enough and he hasn’t the look of someone who’s in pain. Of all the bare-faced shysters . . .! He had the nerve to say we’re well off, so we owe him a living! When I think how we struggled to make ends meet when we were first married!’

Dora remembered. ‘I used to mix bread crumbs into a small portion of mince to make the meals go further, and turn the old sheets sides to middle.’

 ‘You remember our old banger of a car? I spent most of my life with my head under the bonnet, trying to keep it going. And it wasn’t till I got promotion that we could afford to put in some central heating.’

 They both laughed. ‘Happy days,’ she said.

 ‘We managed.’ He gave her a hug, and she put her hand up to his cheek and patted it.

 She sighed. ‘Youngsters. They don’t know they’re born. They see we’re comfortably off after years of hard work and think they deserve the same level of comfort, now. But they don’t want to go through the lean times as we had to do.’ She picked up the catalogue she’d been studying. ‘Shall we buy an artificial Christmas tree this year?’

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Bruce put his key in the lock of the door, and took the shopping through to the kitchen. His pretty wife Sally was there, twisting foliage into a Christmas wreath for the front door. She lifted her face for a kiss. ‘Back early?’

 ‘Mm. The shoplifting family turned up. The man is on total disability. He says. He looks healthy enough but the little girl looks peaky.’

 ‘How old is she?’

 ‘Ten? About that. The man wanted us to subsidise his Christmas present for the girl, and to buy them breakfast. Leo stormed off in a huff—’

 ‘But *you* paid for their breakfast?’

 ‘I left money for the girl to have something to eat.’

 ‘And now you’re wondering how you can help them.’ Sally sat back with a sigh. ‘What school does she go to? She can get free school meals, can’t she? If he’s on total disability, they must be getting all sorts of aid and possibly compensation as well. They should have enough to live on. Didn’t you say there were three of them? What about the mother?’

 ‘She wasn’t there. I hope that means she’s got a job. Whatever they’ve got coming in, he doesn’t think it’s enough.’ Bruce started to put his purchases away. ‘Part of me says that it’s nothing to do with us, that they’ve chosen that life and it’s their own fault if they go back to shoplifting. I hate it that they involved the child, but what can we do? I suppose the parents will eventually end up in jail, and the child will be taken into care.’

The doorbell rang. Bruce was stowing packets in the freezer so Sally said, ‘I’ll go.’

She opened the door and although she’d never met the man, guessed who he was. ‘You’re Corin, who stopped the shoplifting?’

 ‘What?’ said Corin. ‘Is your husband at home? I wanted a word—’

 ‘About the child.’

 Corin frowned. ‘Yes, but—’

 ‘Come in,’ said Bruce, appearing behind Sally. ‘I was half expecting you.’

 ‘I suppose,’ said Corin, with a mean smile, ‘that, being a Christian, you prayed that I’d turn up, whereas I was just passing by and thought—’

‘I’ll make some coffee,’ said Sally, ushering Corin into the sitting-room. Quietly, to Bruce, she said, ‘He’s a much-troubled man.’

Bruce sighed. Hadn’t he enough to think about without being lumbered with Corin, who denied even possessing a soul?

Corin subsided into a chair. ‘The thing is, we can’t let the child suffer, can we?’

‘You mean, we should give the child an expensive present because her family is not as comfortably off as we are? That’s what the man wants, isn’t it?’

‘Marius, that’s his name. Used to work as a painter and decorator, but can’t lift the ladders nowadays. His wife’s sick. They have a tiny flat nearby in a housing association block. He frets that he can’t support his family.’

‘You bought him breakfast, and he fed you a sob story?’

Corin flushed. ‘You’re making out that he’s a conman. I thought you’d have more Christian charity. The child ought not to be penalised because of what her father may or may not have done, and Christmas is the time for giving presents.’

‘You think that the child is an innocent party and shouldn’t be penalised for her parents’ actions, however wrong they were? But how complicit in them was she? She took part in the shop lifting. If it had not been for her participation, her parents couldn’t have got away with their thefts.’

A shrug. ‘She’s too young to know right from wrong.’

‘You know that’s not true.’

‘Her parents will have taught her that helping them is the right thing to do.’

‘What about at school? If she tried thieving there, what would have happened?’

Corin made an uneasy movement. ‘I suppose she’d have been told it was wrong. Well, yes. But a child of that age would quickly understand that what might be right at home, was wrong at school.’

‘So she would have learned that there are two ways of looking at theft?’

Sally brought in some coffee and handed a cup to Corin, who didn’t even bother to thank her but said, ‘Oh, you’re so much holier than anyone else! For pity’s sake, have some charity! That’s what you Christians are supposed to be all about, isn’t it?’

Bruce said, ‘I can’t think it’s right for the child to believe she should steal in order to get a present.’

Corin almost shouted, ‘The child must not be made to suffer!’

Sally said, in a soft voice, ‘As you were made to suffer, Corin?’

He whirled about. ‘What! What was that you said?’

Sally said, ‘I wondered if you’d been hurt as a child, and that that was why you cared so much about this one.’

‘I don’t care! Not I! Nothing to do with me. I can’t think why I bothered to come here, when your husband is such a tight-wad that he can’t even help a child to a happy Christmas.’

‘Ah,’ said Sally, ‘but what is Christmas really for?’

Bruce sighed. ‘Sally, let me explain. Corin thinks Christmas is a commercial concept, that we give presents merely to keep up with our peer group. He doesn’t think it has anything to do with our gratitude to God for sending Jesus down to earth, or for His showing us the true meaning of love.’

Corin shouted, ‘It’s nothing to do with love!’

Sally put out her hand to touch him. ‘It’s everything to do with love. I’m so, so sorry. I can see you’ve been dreadfully hurt—’

‘How dare you!’ Corin shot out of his chair. He almost ran from the room and banged the front door as he left the house.

Sally said, ‘Oh, the poor man.’

Bruce said, abruptly, ‘I think he’s right to be worried about the child. And the mother is sick? In hospital, perhaps?’

‘What can we do?’

Bruce sighed. ‘Pray for them all, and that includes Corin..’

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On their return from church next Sunday, Bruce and Sally found the thief and his child waiting for them outside their house. The man greeted them with open arms. ‘My friends, I knew you wouldn’t let us down!’

 Bruce frowned. ‘I don’t understand. Did Corin tell you where we lived? And how is your wife?’

 Sally shivered in the cold air. ‘It’s too cold to talk out here. Come on in, both of you, and I’ll get us something hot to drink.’

 Marius made an elaborate gesture of opening the gate for them to pass through. The child hung back, looking paler than ever. She was shivering in a too-thin jacket and bare legs, and her beaten-up trainers didn’t fit well.

 Once inside and with hot drinks served, Bruce asked again, ‘How is your wife?’

 Another expansive gesture. ‘Aye, there’s the rub. She’s not at all well.’

Sally asked the child, ‘What does the doctor say?’

 ‘Mummy’s in hospital, with . . .’ She screwed up her face, as if trying to recall the name of what was wrong with her mother, before saying, ‘with tubes coming out of her.’

Sally was distressed. ‘How long will she be in? Who’s looking after you?’

Marius said, ‘She’ll be out for Christmas, and you nice people are going to make it a special one, aren’t you?’

‘Who’s looking after you both while she’s in hospital?’

‘I’m training Lila to look after me, and she’s learning fast. She’s not brilliant with the microwave but she’s mastered the washing-machine, and she’s made it to school most days this week. Lila, show them what you’ve learned about Christmas at school. Sing them the Christmas song. Come on, come on! We haven’t got all day.’

 The child’s voice was thin but she could hold a tune. ‘Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way . . .’

 The man applauded. ‘See? She knows what Christmas is all about.’

 Bruce said, cautiously, ‘Does she know “Away in a Manger?”’

 The girl said, ‘We learned that at school, too. But that’s only a miff. Like Santa Claus.’

 Sally looked startled. ‘Jesus is a myth? Is that what you believe?’

 The child nodded. ‘My friend said. My other friend said that because I’ve been stealing every weekend, I was going to go to hell. But I’m not, am I?’ Tears filled her eyes.

 Marius laughed. ‘What nonsense they do fill children’s minds with nowadays.’ He gave the child a mean look and lifted his hand in menacing fashion. ‘Shut up. As we told the magistrate, we only ever stole that once.’

‘That’s not true, is it?’ said Bruce.

The child put up her hands to protect herself. ‘Don’t hit me! If my mummy were here, she wouldn’t let you hit me!’

‘You stupid little –!’ Marius whacked Lila across the back of her legs. The child flinched. Sally scooped her up out of the man’s reach.

Bruce stood up, mobile phone in hand. ‘That’s it. I’m calling the police!’

The man fled, banging the front door shut behind him.

Sally said, ‘I’m shaking, and so is this poor little mite. Will you look at the bruises on her legs! And oh, she needs a bath and some clean clothes!’

The child buried her face in Sally’s neck and wailed, ‘I want my mummy!’

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Bruce dropped into a chair beside Leo at the cafe, and looked around. He couldn’t see Corin anywhere. Good.

Leo said, ‘How many posting days to Christmas? I always think I’ve posted my cards early enough, and then I find more to send.’

‘You’re coming to us for Christmas day? It will be a mixed bag, as usual. Every year we seem to invite more people who haven’t any family at Christmas.’

‘But not the thief and his family.’

‘I dropped in on the child at her foster placement yesterday. They said you’d been round with a gift for her.’

Leo grinned. ‘I bet you took something nice, too.’

‘Sally chose something. Not an X-box.’ They both laughed.

Leo said, ‘The social worker says they’d been keeping an eye on the child at school. Her mother is still in hospital. Liver damage. Drink. She’s in no condition to look after anyone, not even herself. The prognosis is poor. The man is her partner but no relation to the child.’

‘And he’s disappeared. What a tangle. That poor child.’

‘The foster mother’s one of the best. She’ll give the child a stable background and I suppose she and her husband may adopt the girl eventually. I don’t know what else we can hope for.’

‘We can keep an eye on the child. Visit. Take little presents.’

‘Gold, frankincense and myrrh?’

They smiled, and shook their heads.

‘I hoped I’d find you here.’ Corin, brusque as ever. He clicked his fingers to the waitress. ‘Shall I treat you? Compliments of the Season and all that?’

Leo shook his head. ‘I’ve already ordered, thank you.’

Bruce leaned back in his chair, studying the newcomer. ‘An Americano would be good. Thanks.’

The waitress took the order and disappeared.

Bruce said, ‘Corin, I hear you’ve been visiting our little shoplifter.’

‘Me? What! Why do you say that?’

‘Because when I dropped in on her yesterday, she said you’d offered to buy her an X-box, but—’

‘That cow of a foster parent said it wouldn’t be appropriate. I shan’t go again. So, changing the subject, are you all ready for Christmas? You’ve bought the turkey, ordered the mince pies? Hung up the decorations?’

‘And you? Are you ready for it?’

‘I don’t celebrate Christmas. I shall lock myself away for the season with some good videos and a freezer full of food.’

‘Or,’ said Bruce, slowly, ‘you could join us for Christmas lunch if you wish. Sally and I keep open house that day. Rich or poor, all the lonely people.’

Corin’s colour rose. ‘What makes you think I’m lonely?’ He sprang to his feet, narrowly missing the waitress who was bringing their coffees, and disappeared.

 Leo grunted. ‘I’ll have his coffee, too. Well that was a lucky escape for us about Christmas Day. He’d have been the spectre at the feast.’

 ‘I wonder,’ said Bruce. ‘He might still come.’

 He came.

Veronica Heley’s latest mystery is FALSE WALL, Severn House, December 2015.