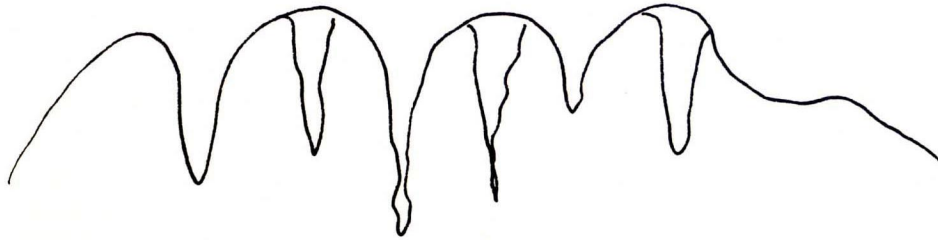


A VERY MORAL
CHRISTMAS STORY





A VERY MORAL CHRISTMAS STORY

The PM Saga, Book 5:

The Fantasy Strikes Back

by

Susan Kirby

"It's not easy being Ambassador to the North Pole," PM lamented, stretching her dainty paw to tickle Alabaster Eggshell's ermine tummy. "The last trip had to be the worst. Hey, hand me some tinsel, this spot on the tree looks bare. The worst! I spent three days in Rome getting my tail tweaked. In Monte Carlo someone mistook me for a dyed fox stole. I tell you, it does not become a legend most to be checked in a coatroom. Thank goodness I had my American Express card with me to convince them who I was."

It was a week before Christmas, and PM had spent the previous year traipsing from country to country, spreading her message of Christmas joy and love. She had not minded that terribly--after all, it was her purpose in life--but the too-frequent nights in out-of-the-way motels and the too-infrequent trips to see her family, Mr. and Mrs. Claus--and especially the new love-of-her-life, Alabaster--had



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taken their toll. She was finally home, resting, recuperating, helping audition fledgling sleigh pullers, and practicing her new routine--a tap dance to 'Star of the East' and an uptempo disco arrangement of 'We Wish You A Merry Christmas.'

Alabaster stopped work on his studies to hand PM some ornaments. While she had traveled the world, the prodigal monster* had gone back to school and obtained his law degree, adding an LL.D. to his five Ph.D.'s. The bar exams were coming up in January, and Alabaster was anxious to be prepared. But he was happy PM had returned--his silver mane glistened only when he was with her.

"I'm so glad you're back," he said, leaning over to kiss his grape-toned girlfriend. "Santa told me he's getting more concerned each time you go. The mood of the world right now isn't conducive to peace and good will."

"That's why my work is so important," PM sighed. "What's that you're working on?" she asked, craning her neck.

"As you know, I've been clerking for Monster, Monster, Monster & Monster, Esqs. It seems that James Watt wants to lease the oil rights to Christmas Monsterland National Park to TEXXONCO. We're fighting it--Christmas tree destruction and all that. Watt has claimed we're part of Alaska, but we've insisted we're annexed to the North Pole, and therefore our glaciers are sacred. Our slogan is, 'We May Be Chilled, But We Won't Be Drilled.'"

"Who owns TEXXONCO, or should I ask?" grimaced PM, stringing cranberries.

"SEGWAC, of course. Peppermint Paunch discovered that, by the way. Monsters Et Al., Esqs. have hired him as the firm's detective."

As if on cue, Peppermint Paunch knocked on the cave entrance, sustaining massive injury to his paw.

**For Alabaster's life history, as well as the first four books of PM's saga, please contact the author.*

"When will I learn to use the bell? Did I hear my name? If it isn't the cupid-struck Christmas couple! Cousin Eggplant, nice to see you back!"

"Welcome, pouchy Pinkerton," PM greeted. "So you've been investigating the Society for the Elimination of Good Will and Christmas. Are they stronger than ever?"

"Stronger--and more devious!" Paunch nodded.

"oH-oH! oH-oH!" came a cry from the cavern mouth.

PM turned to Al: "It's Clyde Elf. He always blows his Ho-Ho's when he's excited. In here, Clyde!" she called, as the green-clad munchkin scrambled in, waving a scroll.

"PM! PM! Santa sent me flying, Rudolph's outside. He, I mean Santa, wants you now, all of you! Help, hO dear, hO dear! Look at this, hO my, hO my!"

Clyde pushed the paper to PM, then passed out, panting on the pavement.

PM peered at the document, Alabaster and Peppermint agog over her shoulder.

Then she gave quick, quiet instructions. "Pick up Clyde and tell Rudolph to fly him back to the North Pole! I'll take the three of us to Santa's house. There's no time to lose!"

Once Clyde was safely tucked in the waiting sleigh, PM teletransported herself, Alabaster, and Peppermint Paunch to the Arctic Circle.

* * *

"Santa, how could this happen?" PM asked as Santa Claus poured hot chocolate for the group sitting around the fire. Mrs. Santa rocked back and forth, back and forth in her chair, paled by worry and motion sickness.

"PM, your last trip to the United States in June caused panic in SEGWAC. They saw how well you were received, and began lobbying in Congress. The result is this resolution:

"Whereas, Santa Claus is a pagan idol;

"Whereas, he promotes communism and socialism;

"Whereas, he seduces little children to write to him and love him above their God, country, and apple pie;

"Whereas, Santa Claus has been known to engage in flagrant acts of criminality;

"Whereas, Santa Claus has blatantly discriminated in his practices;

"Whereas, Santa's yearly activities disrupt business and therefore jeopardize the economy of the U.S. of A.;

"Whereas, said Santa Claus has appointed an ambassador of questionable values and morality; and

"Whereas, Mrs. Santa Claus has advocated the disruption of home and family,

"BE IT RESOLVED:

"That should the sleigh of said Santa Claus be detected flying over the U.S., by telescope, radar, or AWAC, the U.S. will use whatever means necessary-- B-1 bomber, anti-missile missile, or neutron bomb--to blow said Santa Claus to smithereens."

Santa finished reading, removed his glasses and slowly massaged his brows. Mrs. Santa sniffled as PM, Paunch, and Alabaster wiped the tears from their eyes.

"Has this been passed?" asked Alabaster.

"Not yet. The hearings have been set for December 24th. I've been subpoenaed to appear before the joint House Un-Christmas Activities Committee."

"My goodness," said Paunch. "Who's behind all this?"

"Representative Jerry Falldownthewell, you know, the minister who's also head of the Purity Plurality. He's quite zealous--he's convinced he knows the TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS. SEGWAC has been donating money to his church and congressional campaigns, and has convinced Falldownthewell that I am anti-Christmas. I'm not sure how to stop them. Already anyone who has a white beard or red suit has been subpoenaed to testify. All my helpers are frightened. They're worried what will happen to them--guilt by association with me! So I've called you here to help me. Maybe if we put our heads together, we'll come up with something."

"But Santa, can't you just go there and testify? I'm sure you'd convince the House that you are as much Christmas as anything or anyone around," suggested Alabaster.

"Sure, we'll all go and vouch for you," ventured Paunch.

"I can't go," Santa finally said, the chuckle completely absent from his voice. "Or, I should say, if I went I probably couldn't convince them."

"Why not?" cried PM, paws atremble. "Everyone loves you!"

"Everyone loves me who believes in me," Santa agreed. "But I have no existence for those who do not believe I exist or do not care for what I stand for--love, good will, charity, and the innocent hearts of little children. To those who believe in me, truly believe, I am as they imagine me--St. Nicholas, St. Nick, Santa, Kris Kringle. But to those who deny me, I'm just an ordinary old man."

"Pardon me, Mr. Claus," Alabaster interjected. "This is all rather existential, and somewhat of a shock. Obviously, you exist!"

"At the stroke of midnight on Christmas Day," Mrs. Claus broke in, "and all day Christmas--that's the only time Santa and I are visible to all. And then only if they truly open their eyes or catch our reflection in a young child's eyes."

"How do I explain?" Santa continued. "One day, one beautiful glorious day, someone somewhere imagined us, and we *became*--me, Mrs. Claus, the elves, the reindeer, the workshop, the candy canes. We have no memory of birth, childhood, or parents. We just *were*. And as long as people get strength from our being, we are. SEGWAC knows that. I think this is a diabolical assassination



plot. Take away belief, and we'll just ... fade away!"

"Oh no!" gasped the fuchsia-furred PM. "Never! We won't let it happen. Let me see if I understand--if you testify, only those who already believe in you will recognize you. All the others ..."

"Will try to throw me in the booby hatch, along with those claiming to be Napoleon, Alexander the Great, and," Santa sighed sadly, "Richard Nixon."

"No one's *that* crazy!" guffawed Paunch.

"Pipe down, Peppermint," PM pointedly ordered. "We're serious. Santa, why don't *I* testify for you. I'll just explain that you're too busy making Christmas presents ..."

"SEGWAC thought of that. They found an old wino with a white beard, dressed him in crimson velvet, and he's claiming he's Santa. And since he's human, everyone can see *him*, whether they truly believe in *me* or not." Santa looked glum, the feisty twinkle gone from his eyes.

"That imitation Santa is horrible," moaned Mrs. Claus. "I saw him on the 6:00 news last night. He shakes when he laughs like a bowl full of rice pudding, and his 'Mer-r-r-r-ry Christmas!' lacks resonance. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear."

PM stared at Paunch, then Alabaster. She knew the Clauses were dependent on her to help solve their problem. She was not about to let them down. She nibbled on a sugarplum and gazed into the flickering flames. Partly hypnotized, she concentrated her psychic energies on finding a solution. She thought and thought, and then thought some more.

After what seemed like hours her eyes snapped open.

"I just might have a plan."

All heads turned to her.

"Here's my idea ..."

* * *

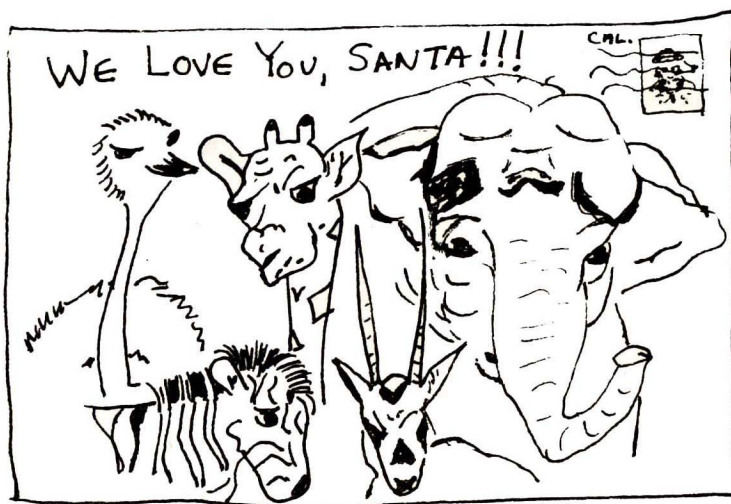
The remainder of the week was filled with activity. Work continued on the toys and cookies. "No sense in the rest of the world missing out on Christmas," Mrs. Santa declared firmly, "whether or not the U.S. wants us." She supervised the elves as they tied the ribbons, and directed the reindeer as they carefully packed the sleigh.

Telegrams and cards were coming in from long-time friends. PM read the card from the giraffes she'd stayed with the previous year: "We'll stick our necks out for you!" and the one from Freudinella Jung: "Those Representatives' libidos should be lobotomized!" But the saddest letters were from the children, who expressed their nightmares of explosions and the loss of their favorite fantasy. Several of the notes were tearstained, first by the tiny tots and then by the Christmas Crew.

"We will win," PM vowed, and set her allies to work. Alabaster was appointed Counsel for the North Pole. Peppermint Paunch was gathering evidence. Clyde Elf, slightly disheveled from hitting the eggnog more than usual, acted as messenger. They were going to be prepared.

* * *

The hearing was set for 5:00 Christmas Eve. SEGWAC persuaded Falldownthewell to delay the holiday recess by convincing him that nothing was more urgent



than ridding America of the Red-garbed Menace. SEGWAC was quite aware that should Santa and his helpers appear to testify, the time differences would eliminate the hero's appearance in at least part of the world.

PM and her contingent teletransported directly into the hearing room, preventing an outside ambush by SEGWAC. Television cameras were rolling as the group materialized, and their entrance caused quite a stir.

"Daddy, that's PM, and ..." exclaimed a small boy sitting next to Representative Falldownthewell on the platform.

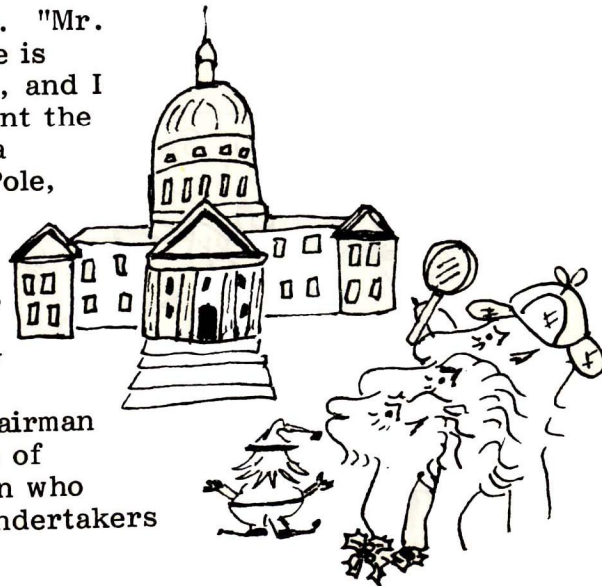
"Shut up, son," explained Falldownthewell. "Children should be seen and not heard." He rapped his gavel several times as PM took a seat at a front table, surrounded by her party.

"Order! Order! Welcome, Miss Monster," said the Chairman. "We did not know you were going to grace us with your purple presence. I'm sure you know Mr. Claus, at the next table."

PM glanced to her left. The St. Nick-pretender sneered through his tarnished silver whiskers and nodded.

Alabaster rose. "Mr. Chairman, my name is Alabaster Eggshell, and I am here to represent the good name of Santa Claus, the North Pole, and Christmas Monsterland."

"Mr. Eggshell, as you can see, Mr. Claus is amply represented by counsel." The Chairman pointed to a group of five black-clad men who looked more like undertakers than attorneys.



"Mr Chairman, the witnesses I have brought with me will testify that the gentleman sitting there is *not*, I repeat *not*, Santa Claus." There was a murmur throughout the room.

"Mr Eggshell, you're out of order. We will hear your testimony later. To business--the Committee calls Mrs. Claus."

A woman in a plunging florid sequined gown, looking like a cross between Joan Crawford and Mata Hari, took a seat before the microphone.

"You understand that you are under oath?" Fall-downthewell asked, as the siren cracked her bubble gum. "Now Mrs. Claus, it has been charged that you have broken up families, and destroyed the health of Americans everywhere. How do you answer that?"

"Guilty," the hussy gurgled. "While Santa was delivering presents, I romped through the snow with the man of the house. I make candy that rots little kids' teeth, and my cookies have high cholesterol."

"Thank you, Mrs. Claus. Our next witness, Mr. Santa Claus, alias St. Nick, alias Jelly Belly."

The pseudo-Santa took the microphone and the oath.

"Mr. Claus," began the Chairman, "you're charged with being a false idol. How do you plead?"

"Guilty. I have promoted myself through greeting cards, statues, and pagan songs, and have set myself up to be worshipped."

"And spreading communism and socialism?"

"That's right. By giving presents to all children, regardless of social class, I'm advocating a pinko philosophy. If you haven't noticed, my lead reindeer is red nosed!"

"And what about criminality?"

"I have broken into homes, via chimneys, and stolen milk and cookies from little boys and girls."

"Discrimination?"

"I determine who's naughty or nice, thereby denying equal opportunity."

"And the charge of disrupting business, and thus the American way of capitalism?"

"By giving away presents I'm clearly guilty of unfair trade practices. I competed unfairly with toy manufacturers and department stores who sell their merchandise to make a profit."

"Mr. Claus, after so many years, why have you come forth now?"

"I have been saved by the Purity Plurality. They have shown me the error of my ways. If you read my recent article in *Atlantic Monthly*, you will see that I now espouse the wisdom of trickle-down Christmas presents. If you give presents only to the rich, and those who are Pure, they'll have so many that to make some room, they'll have to throw the broken ones out. Then the poor little urchins can rummage through the garbage cans and have the Christmas they deserve."

"Thank you for your candor, Mr. Claus. This Committee will recommend you be sent to the woodshed and then we'll find you a Civil Service job--do you know how to be a Controller?"

"Yes sir, I've had years of flight experience," said the man, trying unsuccessfully to look chastened.

"The Committee now calls Miss Purple Christmas Monster, a/k/a PM."

PM sat in front of the microphone and adjusted her holly wreath.

"Ah'd like to question this witness," drawled a voice from the platform.

"The Chair yields to Senator Tessie Tiller."

"Mizz PM, are you now, or have you ever been, ah Seculah Humanist?"

"Huh?" sputtered PM, staring at her. "Since when has that become a bad thing?"

"Since the Conservatives came back into our rightful place. Please answer mah question."

"Well, ma'am, I've always admitted to being a Humanist, as much as a Christmas Monster can be one. As to Secular, if you're speaking of its 'worldly' meaning, I'm not sure that would be applicable to a Christmas Monsterland resident. I'd prefer to say that I am a Nondenominational Humanist."



"That's all ah needed to heah," Sen. Tiller said, leaning back smugly in her chair.

"I have a few more questions," said the Chairman. "Serious charges have been leveled at you, young lady, primarily that you are Un-Christmas!"

"I deny them, your Committeechairpersonness."

"It alleges here that you have engaged in pre-marital snerkling with one Alabaster Eggshell, whom you brazenly picked up in a bestial bordello."

"We met in the San Diego Zoo, sir! As for snerkling--impossible! I'd never! I'm a Christmas character! But what I do in my own home is my business!"

"Not if we pass the amendment I introduced, young lady. Then we will have control over your body, and the Purity Plurality will tell you what you can and can't do with it."

Peppermint Paunch whispered to Alabaster, "I could tell him where to put his!"

"Your honor," PM said softly, "I am a normal neurotic Christmas Monster, whose sole meaning in life comes from spreading love, understanding, and whatever joy and happiness I can in the world. I have been fortunate enough to work these past few years with the one and only Santa Claus. And Rev. Falldownthewell, that red velour imposter over there is a liar! He isn't the real St. Nick! Normally, at this point in a Christmas story, I would begin my speech on my own view of 'The Meaning of Christmas.' But since it is after 11 P.M., and because I hope all charges will be dropped and the resolution to bomb Santa's sleigh will be defeated in time

for me to slip into my harness to deliver at least a few presents tonight, I ask this Committee to listen to the next witness, Dr. Somnus Tannenbaum."

"I've no objections, if the Committee doesn't."

Alabaster took PM's paw and winked at her as he helped her from the witness chair. Peppermint Paunch then lifted one of the oldest, most decrepit academics, with a scraggly beard and moth-ridden doctoral robes, into the chair. The geriatric's head tilted forward until it banged the microphone, his snores amplified and reverberating. Clyde shook the Professor's shoulders, then helped him sit up.

Alabaster spoke. "Gentlemen, I have the honor to present a renowned North Pole historian and anthropologist, Dr. Tannenbaum, AMP. Although in ill health, he has agreed to testify before you, in the hope of proving that Santa Claus indeed is a worthy symbol of the true spirit of Christmas."

"Hmm, hmmm, yes indeed, I intend to do just that," cackled the wizened witness. "I have studied Santa Claus as long as I can remember, and I've met him myself, yes indeedy I have, and I'll tell you now, that turkey over there ain't him."

The crotchety curmudgeon continued. "Years and years ago, there was this saint--Nicholas was his name, the patron saint of children. According to some legends, he once threw purses of gold into the houses of three poor maidens to serve as their dowries. Well now, the Dutch played around with this guy's name, Sint Nicolas, and somehow or other it got changed to Sintercloes, which turned to Sinterklass or Sante Klass, and then finally became the name of that charming old gadabout most of us know and love as Santa Claus."

"Professor, pahdon me suh, but although this is vehry intuhrestin', what does this have to do with the matter at hand?" interrupted Sen. Tiller.

"I'll tell you. Santa Claus is the descendant of a legend of love of children and giving to the needy, about as Christmas as you can get."

"Professor, your point is well taken," said Falldownthewell. "But our point is that Mr. Claus has drawn the minds of the people away from the TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS, the birth of our Savior, and has concentrated innocent progeny's attention on gifts and presents--temporal things--when their minds should be on the spiritual."

"Harrumph," growled the geezer, and his torso tilted forward slowly until Paunch nudged him awake again. "Do you know your Bible, sir?"

"Of course, Professor."

"There are a couple of verses in the book of St. Matthew, 10 and 11. You must know something about them, I assume."

"Not off the top of my head, sir," Falldownthewell mumbled.

"Tsk, ts. Well, they go something like this. *'When they saw the star they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.'* Do you know who St. Matthew is talking about, Reverend?"

"Of course! The Wise Men."

"So you do know something, you young whelp. You're right. You see, I think Santa Claus likes to think of himself as following the path of these wise men--giving gifts to little children. The wise men didn't ask to see Joseph's tax return, nor did they consider what they gave as welfare. They gave from love. Santa doesn't want to be worshipped. I think he just decided to fill in the gap for children who really tried to be good all year, but whose parents might not have been fat cats enough to buy presents. So he began his rounds, and the rest is history. And with the poor



getting poorer, unemployment up and social services down, this country needs St. Nick more than ever!

"As an authority on things Christmas, let me tell you pristine purists that any guy who's spent his whole existence spreading joy and love is not a subversive! Or evil! My goodness me, Santa loves manglers and 'Silent Night' as well as the next guy, but 'Jingle Bells' has got a nice catchy tune, and mistletoe's a tradition he'd just as soon leave be. And Santa makes children laugh, and urges them to have a conscience and to use their imagination and to have hope. His giving reflects the joy he has at the birth of one child and the birth of all children. Believe, you pompous prudes, that's not bad ..."

"Mr. Committee Chairman," sputtered a SEGWAC shyster. "I hate to interrupt, but it's 11:59. Perhaps you should vote now. We stipulate that the Santa Claus we represent may be a ringer. If so, the true Santa has pulled a fast one and will be sending his sleigh overhead in 60 seconds. If you plan to stop this Red Menace from striking again, you'd better vote now!"

"It's 11:59 and 50 seconds, you naughty boy," snapped the ancient emeritus, and as the Chairman banged his gavel ten times for order, an amazing thing happened. The old professor, at midnight and one second, became visible to all--in the hearing room and across the world via satellite.

"It's Santa, Daddy, it *is*!" screamed the young boy, pulling on his father's sleeve. "I tried to tell you."

"You're right," blinked Falldownthewell.

Those who had recognized Santa when he arrived, but had kept silent, broke into applause. Those who had not believed before now ping-ponged from this glistening man to the imposter, seeing in the twinkle emanating from the real Kris Kringle that the pretender was an evil degenerate. As the SEGWAC clan began sneaking down the aisle, the Chairman said, "My profound apologies, Mr. Claus. It appears we have been duped. I am humbled, and I now believe. If there are no objections from the Committee, all charges are dropped and the resolution is withdrawn."

"Aye, aye, aye," descended from the dias.

"I do regret," said Falldownthewell to Santa, "that your appearance here has kept you from delivering presents to those countries where Christmas is almost over."

"Never fear! Mrs. Claus--the *real* Mrs. Claus--has had the reins several hours now. She, Rudolph, and the other Christmas Monsters have already put in a good night's work. She's quite a woman, my wife--a working gal and a card-carrying member of NOW. So if you'll assure me that your finger is no longer on the button, I'll be on my way--not that you could have hit my sleigh with your weapons, but you sure would have played havoc with the atmosphere. Excuse me, we've got a sleigh to catch!"

And the joyous Christmas characters gathered around PM, who teletransported them all to the sleigh hovering over the Washington Monument.

"It isn't easy being a myth," Santa commented to Mrs. Claus, dusting the soot off her dress.

"I know, dear, but it's worth it. Those children in Tokyo were quite thrilled, but I'll never get used to the saki and sushi they leave for us."

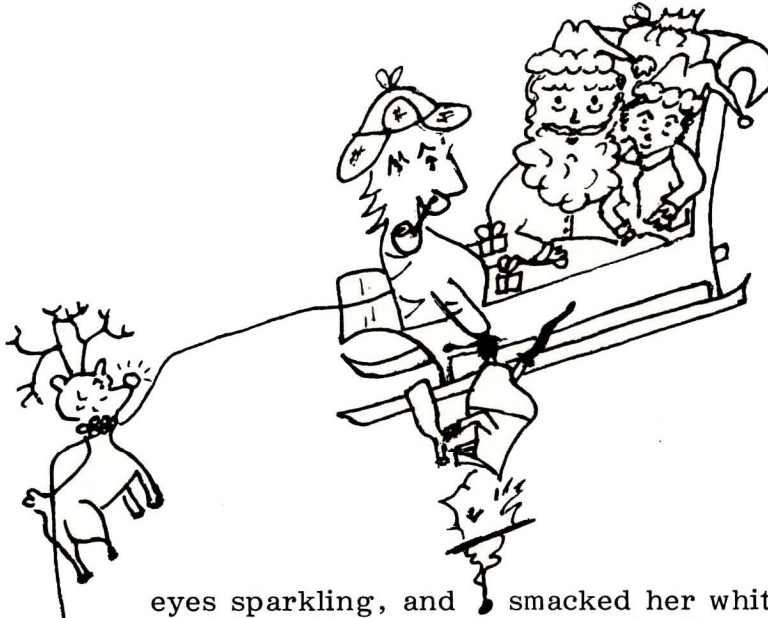
"Wheeee!" cried Clyde, dangling out of the sleigh. "Hey, this is fun! Look gang, the moon--it's glowing!"

"Clyde, you potted pixie, you're upside down! That's Three Mile Island," yelled Peppermint Paunch as he grabbed the elf's leg, preventing a nosedive into the Hershey Chocolate Factory.

PM and Alabaster took the head of the sleigh, relieving the tired team.

"Are you *sure* Christmas characters can't snerkle without benefit of clergy?" asked Alabaster amorously, nuzzling PM's amaranth nape.

"Absolutely not!" grinned PM, unable to keep from giggling, since Alabaster's nose tended to tickle. "My chronicler is not literarily licensed to promote pandering or prurience, licentiousness or lechery. But she is permitted to describe heavy kissing." PM leaned over,



eyes sparkling, and smacked her white Christmas Monster soundly on the lips.

"Hey, you two! Watch where you're going!" Santa laughed from the back of the sleigh as he put his arm around Mrs. Santa and hugged her tenderly. "We almost missed St. Louis!"

Which would have been a very personal loss to this author, who wishes you a

VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS

AND AN

ALL-TIME-HAPPIEST NEW YEAR!!!!!!

