

THE MAGIC GARDEN OF
THE CHRISTMAS STAR



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The PM Saga, Book XV
by Susan Kirby



For Leonard R. Harris

*My friend and mentor. If not for him, the
first story would still be in a file drawer,
and Mrs. Claus would be covered with suet.
Because of him, you were spared
outrageous grammatical errors and were
treated to some of the cleverest lines of
these sagas. He is greatly missed.*



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The annual Christmas story has been cancelled.

I'm sorry. Circumstances beyond my control have dictated the postponement until further notice of publication of the penned parable of PM.*

It's not my fault. I had prodded myself to put off procrastinating this year and get a head start on the story. By Thanksgiving I had read the complete set of sagas and was anticipating this year's Crisis with glee.

Then everything collapsed on Turkey Day. I was shoveling out my humble hovel, arranging an environment conducive to creativity. I was also frantically clearing space for the Christmas Crew's arrival after the parade. I had just jettisoned fifty empty bags of Pop-Secret popcorn and was tying up back issues of *The New York Times* for recycling, awash in nostalgia over "Nixon Resigns" and "Men Walk on Moon," when the beep of the computer alerted me to an incoming North Pole missive.

Ah, poetry in modem, I mused as a message meandered across my terminal, accompanied by "Carol of the Bells" on the speaker:



*PM (or Purple Monster, according to her birth certificate) is a Christmas Monster, Santa's lead sleigh puller, and the North Pole Ambassador of Good Will and Christmas. Her life story 'til now, as well as the biographies of her husband, Alabaster Eggshell, their 6-year-old twins, Lapis Snowflake and Geranium Amethyst, and other Christmas characters, are detailed in *The PM Saga*, Books I-XIV. *A Reader's Guide to Christmas Monsterland* is available from the Chronicler.

Your Christmas tales of PM's past
Have given us a thrill
And rendered joy to countless folk -
We hope they always will.

Three years ago, as you recalled,
Your contract did expire.
You ask for further recompense
If we do you rehire.

We don't dispute how puny was
Your former salary:
For each and every word you wrote,
A mere one calorie.

And we heard your plaintive claim
Of dire financial need.
The fee you ask we do not find
A sign of massive greed.

You pitch two calories per word
For our consideration,
With bonuses to be bestowed
For grand alliteration.

Yes, we concur, your printing costs
Are not too much to seek.
But times are tough for us this year;
Our purse has sprung a leak.

We've tallied up the ledger sheet
Of what we've sold and bought.
This year we can afford to pay
You nada, zero, naught.

Your eyes deceive you not, dear Scribe.
We wish it were a joke.
For if we could, we'd give you more,
But Santa Claus is broke.

Merry Christmas, Love, Santa and Mrs. C.

The computer beeped a discordant "I'm Gettin' Nuthin' for
Christmas," then the screen went blank.

The North Pole broke? No way!

No pay? What does Santa think I am? A free-lance writer? I am, but
why take the prefix literally? There's no way I can chronicle this year's
Christmas happenings without the small recompense of bon-bons and
marzipan I've received in the past.

I was still budgetarily disoriented when the doorbell rang, announcing
the arrival of PM and the holiday helpers.

What a glum gang was grouped at my door. PM, though seemingly
unaffected by her previous year's transcendental teletransportation
discombobulation, was pensive, not her usual ebullient self. Alabaster's



silver mane looked tarnished, and Peppermint Paunch, normally effusive, was uncharacteristically morose.

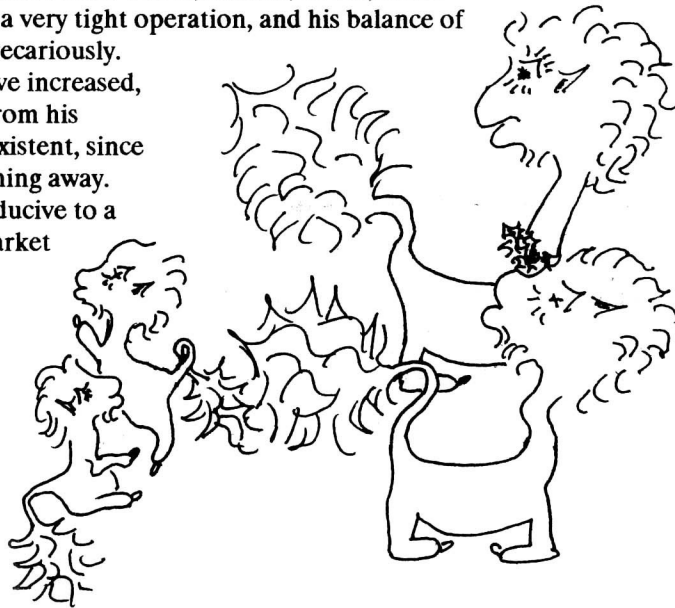
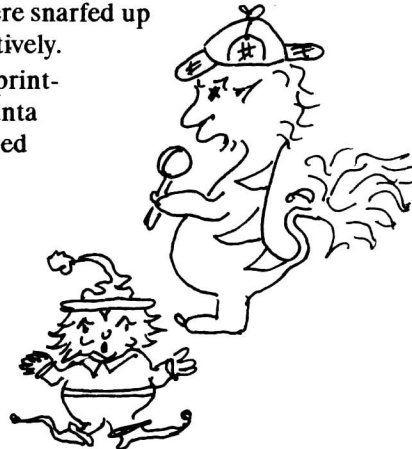
Clyde Elf, Rudolph, and Elvira Fernhat were lethargic and listless. Even Lapis Snowflake and Geranium Amethyst were not as chipper as usual as they began to play my computer games. I offered cookies and hot cocoa, which were snarfed up appreciatively.

Post-prandial, I presented PM with a print-out of the distressing doggerel. "What is Santa trying to tell me?" I asked. "Have I been fired before I've been rehired?"

"No," PM assured me. "Santa – and I – would very much like you to distribute my saga this year. But things are exceptionally bad at the North Pole, and Santa is exceedingly sad. He's had to lay off almost everyone in Christmas Monsterland and the North Pole."

"But why?"

Alabaster answered. "PM's brother, Viridian, audited Santa's books. The result: debits, zillions; assets, none. Santa operates a very tight operation, and his balance of trade teeters precariously. His imports have increased, while income from his exports is nonexistent, since he gives everything away. This is not conducive to a healthy free-market economy."



"Imports? I thought Santa had everything he needed at the North Pole."

"In the old days, when my grandmother worked there," Elvira explained, "everything was made from raw materials – wood from old Christmas trees for the toy soldiers and scavenged used clothing for the rag dolls. Now, those just won't do."

"Yeah," chirped in Clyde, "the toys for today are so sophisticated. We have to import computer chips for the Nintendo games and polyurethane for the stuffed Teddy bears."

"Mrs. C. uses reindeer milk for the fudge," Rudolph blinked, "but we still have to truck in hay. The sugar bill for candy canes would finance a third world country."

"But how has Santa managed until now?" I inquired incredulously, amazed that what I had taken for granted – a self-sufficient Santa Claus – was an illusion.

PM answered. "Licensing fees. Mr. Claus charges for commercial use of his image, and Mrs. Claus gets royalties for her recipe books. Up to now it was enough. But something happened this year."

"What?"

Peppermint provided a partial explanation. "Santa's accounts receivable are delinquent. Normally he borrows against savings, and he's never had any problem."

"So what's different this year?"

"The S. & L. debacle, for one thing," elucidated Alabaster. "Santa had his Christmas Club account in one of the banks that wasn't too big to fail. And since he's considered a charitable organization, and a 'foreign' one at that, he's last on the list for getting his money back, if he ever does."

"I suspect you're not telling me something," I said. "I sense a more sinister situation."

"Yep, the Society for the Elimination of Good Will and Christmas has perpetrated a fiendish plot," Paunch confirmed. "We discovered it when Santa applied for a loan. He was turned down, and then all his credit cards were cut off. I did some detecting and discovered that Virus Carrion, SEGWAC's technology expert—"

"And Viper Carrion's brother," I appended.

"Yes, that villainous uncle of Parasite and Dove got into the TRW records and tinkered with Santa's file. Now the North Pole credit rating is zilch."

"How nefarious!" I commented. "SEGWAC has succeeded in creating the perfect Crisis – a financial one! Oh, if only I could help – but Santa's credit crimp coincides with my credit crunch. My charge cards are full. If I try to use them, red lights flash and sirens blare throughout the department

store. And if I put my bank card in the cash machine, the computer laughs hysterically."

"SEGWAC has hurt us where everyone (with the possible exception of politicians, corporate executives and surgeons) has been hurt – in the pocketbook! With Santa's pockets empty, production at the Pole has dried up. We've run out of everything. Most of the toys are unfinished. The workbenches are silent. The elves are on half rations, and Dr. Arké worries that the reindeer, if no bark is found, will soon suffer from malnutrition." PM was on the verge of tears.

"I lost my job," Elvira confessed. "I was willing to work for nothing, until the Crisis passed, but Mrs. Claus has stopped baking cookies, so there's nothing for me to do. I was in charge of computer recipes."

"I'm still compiling lists of Naughties & Nices," Clyde contributed, "but the phone company is about to cut off our lines, so I won't be able to take outside input for much longer. With the presents shortage, I've had to pare the Nice list and ration the stocking stuffers."

"What about Christmas Monsterland?" I asked, reluctant to hear the reply.

"Christmas Monsterland is dependent on the North Pole for survival," answered Alabaster. "As Santa's economy goes, so goes ours."



"I'm down to two scoops of ice cream a day," Peppermint Paunch pouted. "I'm losing weight, and it's put me in a ferociously foul mood."

"Everyone's so upset by the economy that Pimento Poppy and Freudinella Jung are providing therapy overtime. But they're not getting paid either, so they've begun analyzing each other," said PM.



Alabaster nuzzled the neck of his amaranth amour, then sighed. "It looks like there will be no new Christmas Monsters next year. As you've detailed previously, for a Christmas Day Super Snerkle to result in baby Christmas Monsters the following Christmas Eve, a mother-to-be must consume large quantities of chocolates and champagne. But C.M. is C.&C.-less, so we can snerkle but not conceive. PM and I had talked of adding another little Monster to the family, but for now we must content ourselves with zero population growth." PM patted his paw in comfort.

"PM," I asked uneasily, "what of you?"

"My ambassadorial duties have been curtailed. We can't afford the hotel rooms. After today's parade, I won't be making guest appearances until the concert. Santa's kept me on as lead sleigh puller, but with such a light load, he's fired six flyers. Rosette's been grounded."

"Some of the kids at school have been mean to us," Lapis piped in from his perch on my swivel chair. "They said that Mommy still has a job only because she's purple – that Santa was just filling a quota."

I was incensed. "Your mother is lead sleigh puller and North Pole Ambassador for one reason only – because she's the best." It wasn't so long ago, I thought, remembering PM's formative years, that the heliotropic heroine had faced the wounding taunts of prejudice. "Don't forget that. People, and I guess Christmas Monsters too, have a need to cast blame whenever economic conditions deteriorate," I said sadly. "And too often they blame fur or skin color."

There was a pause in the proceedings, and I proffered more cookies.

"So what's everyone doing to get by?" I asked, after reseating myself.

"Some of the elves applied for jobs at Macy's," Clyde reported. "They would have given the money to Santa. But the store rejected them – too short to reach the registers. Discriminatory, if you ask me."



"What's an unemployed elf to do? Or a discharged reindeer?" Rudolph asked. "I've picked up some darkroom work here and there, but it's not been enough."

"Why not ask for aid?" I suggested.

"Santa says no way," PM replied. "He feels there are more pressing needs – like the homeless and the sick, the hungry in the Soviet Disunion and the Haitian refugees. Santa knows his loyal supporters would give if they could, but so many OUT HERE are in distress that he hasn't the heart to ask for further sacrifice."

"Oh woe!" I moaned. "Will SEGWAC succeed in ruining Christmas for everyone? That devilish organization has sure caused havoc in the world this year. This recession has driven me to depression. And President Bush's solution is to shop in Penney's for tube socks. Bah, humbug!"

"Chronicler, write my story," PM pleaded. "SEGWAC will triumph if you don't expose their diabolical deeds!"

"I'm a writer. It's what I do. Who I am. I'll write, all right," I replied. "But a writer lives not on words alone. I require sustenance. Sans the calories I had counted on from the story, I'm left with little to eat. Even if I produce an epic, how will I distribute it? Do you know how much it costs? Layouts, offset fees, cover charges, stamps, and sparkle aplenty? Had I not just spent mucho dollars for surgical maintenance of essential body parts, I might have been able to scrape up the minimum. But I'm underinsured and underemployed. The only gifts I can give my family this year are framed copies of my X-rays. My coffer is bare. SEGWAC may finally defeat the First Amendment – freedom of the press works only if you can afford the press. I fear this year's fable may falter at the gate of free enterprise."

"Maybe something will happen," PM said. "Don't accept defeat."

"Why not?" I mumbled. "As I explained to Santa, rather elegantly and with great pathos and perspicuity, but to no avail, your biography won't be read unless I receive remuneration."

What a dejected PM and crestfallen crew left my hovel that day to return to Christmasland. (How am I ever going to explain to Mom that, once again, PM has gobbled her Godivas? I'd hidden them in the back of the fridge, but the fuchsia-furred chocaholic spotted the golden box and I couldn't deny her entreating drool.)

I jotted notes in my journal the next few weeks, in case some answer was found. But December 23 found me despondent, for it was too late to torture my turgid prose into some semblance of a semi-lucid plot, and time had run out to publish it. I hadn't even spoken to PM since the North Pole phones were cut off a week before for nonpayment.

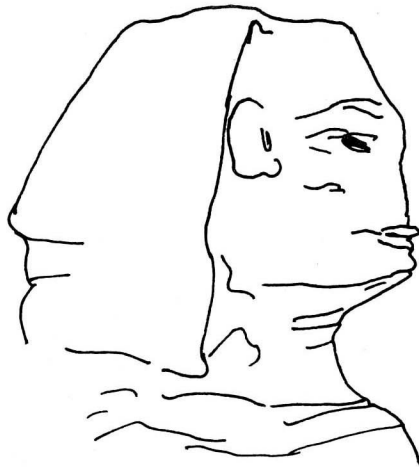
What a shame! If I had been able to compose a story and send it to my readers, they would have found it one of the best ever, for it has been a momentous year.

If there could be a story, which unfortunately there wouldn't be, but if there were, it would describe how my sister Kathy and I attended *Les Misérables* on the night the air war began in the Persian Gulf, and the poignancy of Jean Valjean's "Bring Him Home." And how I stayed up all night that night, eyes glued to CNN, as bombs exploded over Baghdad. And how the country rejoiced when the war ended and our soldiers returned home from the Saudi sands.

If there could be a story, my tale would tell about my sister Becky's and my trip to Israel, and how history whispered to us. I'd proffer a paragraph about the Holy Land, of floating on the Dead Sea, dipping fingers in the Jordan River, and standing on the shores of Galilee; of treading on the ancient stones of Jerusalem, and touching the Wailing Wall and the rock in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. I'd write of peering at Gethsemane, and wandering through Capernaum and Caesarea, following the footsteps of Jesus and Paul.

I'd describe past merging with present when a modern dance company performed on the ruins of a Roman amphitheater in Bet Shean. And how I spoke with Russian immigrants on the patio of a house in Nazareth, while inside veterinarians listened to talk of medicine. And of the three beautiful girls in Tel Aviv, and how we played Mozart, the piano tinkling above the tiny room where just months before our host family, in gas masks, had sought shelter from whizzing Scuds.





There'd be a deft mention of our flight to Egypt and the majesty of the Sphinx and pyramids at Giza. I'd drop names from ages ago – Cheops and Khafre, Unus and Zozer, Cleopatra, Nefertiti, and Tutankhamun. I'd tell of the multitude of people, and Kerdasa Street, the market on the way to Saqqarah where we shopped 'til we dropped. I would not fail to record the constant cacophony of car horns in Cairo, where drivers steer with one hand honking, while waving the other out the window, shooing away oncoming cars, and where traffic lights are like Christmas lights – for decorative purposes only.

If there were a story, there would be a line about trucking cross-country in a U-Haul, delivering my younger sibling to a converted pig farm in Milwaukee. And one about my Dallas sister's successes with Danny's dressage schooling. I would have made a point of mentioning St. Louis and Marshall, Mo., and beloved aunts and too-infrequently seen cousins, and I would have tossed in a few words about merrily malling with a girlhood chum. Ah, I'd have said, how wonderful it was to make new friends and spend time with old ones, and how I mourn the loss of the best friend one could ever have.

Would there be pithy political comments? Probably. A snide chastisement of the Keating 5 for their part in the banking scandal, which the next generation will still be paying for, and the Thomas 52 (those senators in that bastion of male supremacy who voted for the Judge – I've kept a list). I would refer to "Iago" Simpson and Arlen "Ghost of Steven King" Specter, and Anita Hill (I believed her).

I regret that my readers will be deprived of these descriptions, and that the cancellation of the story will leave PM's faithful followers with nothing more to read than George Bush's lips and hips. The dastardly and devious meddlings of SEGWAC have indefinitely delayed divulging the Christmas characters' dazzling doings, and I despair that the details of this dissertation will dwell forever as encoded data on a double-density disk (whew, worthy of a five-calorie bonus, if I do say so myself).

BOING!! PM popped in.

"Chronicler," said she, "come with me!"

"Are you here for the Night Before the Night Before Christmas Charity Concert? Great!" I greeted.

"Yes, but that's not where we going. Relicta needs your help!"

"Is it time?"

(That's another thing I would have mentioned if there were a story this year, which there won't be. Relicta hasn't yet had her offspring. The extra-terrestrial intergalactic traveler had anticipated delivery in August, based on her belief that the human genes would determine the time. But it didn't work out that way. As Relicta explained it to me, her species has a gestation period of thirteen months. So she's about to pop.)

"Not yet," PM answered the query I made before my explanatory digression. "But she's close. SEGWAC is even closer. They've been stalking her! We fear they'll try to harm her or kidnap her."

"No more hostages!" I said. "What can I do?"

PM grabbed the pillow from my sofa. "You'll need this. You're going to be the decoy."

"Where are we going?"

"To the Salvation Army!" The mauvette Monster marched me out the door, barely allowing me a moment to grab my laptop computer (a writer never leaves home without it).

After trading two dollars and change of my last four bucks for tokens at the subway booth, we took the train downtown. (If there were a story, I wonder, would my readers believe that no one glanced twice at a grape-furred beastie and a woman in a red-velour-and-fake-fur Santa suit? Of course they would. This is the Big Apple.)

PM had been right to worry. There were devious denizens lurking around the Salvation Army building when we got there. Inside we found Relicta, who I noted was as big as a house, no, a mansion – I'm not kidding! – serving lunch to the homeless and the poor. When she spotted us she waved us into the kitchen.

"Dove's parked the spaceship on the roof of Madison Square Garden," she informed me with a hug. "PM took him up this afternoon to get it, since I'm in no condition to teletransport with her. My dear husband is a novice at the controls, but he got the vehicle down here, along with the band members and equipment. After the concert I'm going back with the group, to await the birth of our baby."

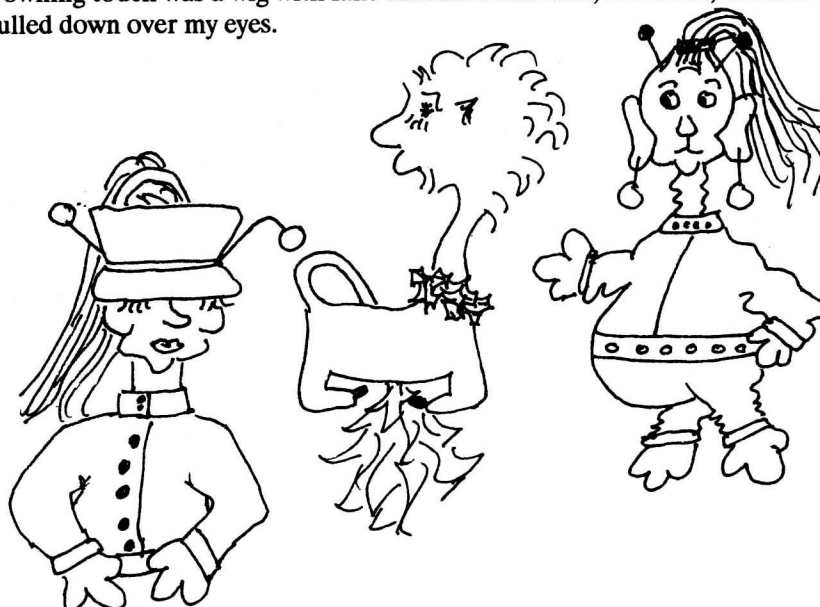
"So what do you want me to do?" I asked.

PM filled me in. "Pretend to be Relicta long enough to fool SEGWAC so we can get her out of here and over to Eighth Avenue. As long as they think she's still here, they won't look too closely at anyone else leaving."

"But I look nothing like her! I'm too tall," I argued.

"Slouch," ordered PM.

Relicta shed her maternity Salvation Army outfit, revealing her midasmetal spacesuit (fortunately the stuff stretches) underneath. I donned the drab apparel, which wasn't a bad fit because of Relicta's now-large size. PM stuffed the pillow under my jacket, and I put on the alien's gloves, wondering how she ever coped with only three digits per hand. The crowning touch was a wig with fake antennae attached, and a hat, which I pulled down over my eyes.



Relicta and I faced each other. "Well," PM said, "it will have to do." PM and I watched as the ET IT stepped into a garbage bag and was hefted on the shoulders of two of her homeless friends.

"They're going to take her out the back way, to a garbage truck they've borrowed, then drive her to the concert hall," PM explained. "When you can get away, join us there."

When I get away? If I get away, I worried. But I handed the shopping bag with my computer to PM and followed her back into the dining hall. "Let's make this look good," the Christmas Monster said.

"I'll see you later at the concert," PM called out to me as she headed out the front door. I (trying to be Relicta-like) bent over to slice turkey and spoon cranberry sauce, slumping my shoulders. When I peeked out occasionally from under the hat brim, I glimpsed malevolent black-garbed figures circling my station.

I'd been serving about ten minutes when, mid-dispensing of the mashed potatoes, I smelled a stench lurking next to me.

"Relicta, let's-s-s-s go hear the band," I heard, and from the corner of my eye I saw Dove. Then I snuck another look. Something about the eyes was wrong.

"In a minute," I mumbled, mimicking Relicta's foreign accent to the best of my ability.

"Now, wifey."

I stood straight and look at him. He recognized me as I had recognized him.

"Chronicler! But . . ."

"Yes, Parasite, it is I!" I cried. "Or me! Whichever. Once again, we've foiled your feeble plot. You've had plastic surgery, I see. Your mole is gone."

"For my image," the SEGWACian twin brother of the ex-SEGWACian Dove replied. "I'm going to run for office. I'm thinking about changing my name to Ernes-s-s-s-t Earl. I've been s-s-s-saved."

One can repent, but a still-hissing SEGWACian is not a reformed SEGWACian, and Parasite couldn't hide his s-s-s-s's. "I don't believe you," I declared, brandishing a ladle.

"Where's-s-s Relicta?" Parasite menaced.

"I'll never tell!" I cried.

"Then you'll do just as well," Parasite smirked with a sinister sneer, grabbing my arm. "We'll just pretend we're D-d-dove and Relicta, and nobody will stop us. If I can't ruin my brother's life, I'll mess-s-s-s up this-s-s year's-s-s ins-s-sipid s-s-saga."

I was about to tell him there wasn't going to be a story this year, but figured it wouldn't do any good when I saw Anaconda Adder crawl out from a hole. The slithering SEGWACian snaked to my other side, and the two yanked me toward the front door and out onto the litter-strewn sidewalk. Although sunlight still shown overhead, the SEGWACian shadows darkened and dankened 14th Street.

"Take that! You fiendish ghoul!" A cry came from behind, and PM propelled herself purposefully at Parasite and pounded his pate with my portable PC.

"And that too!" Alabaster's voice. He was tearing off Anaconda's hood, tripping him with his tail. While the two SEGWACians staggered, we began to run.





"How dare Chris-s-s-tmas-s-s-s critters-s-s-s be so devious-s-s-s?" Parasite shrieked behind us.

"Know you not we *fight* for truth, justice, and the Christmas way?" laughed PM, and we loped uptown.

"I thought you'd gone!" I panted.

"And leave you? Never, partner!" PM puffed. "If we hurry, we'll be in time for the concert. You'll take Relicta's place at the synthesizer. She's preprogrammed it, and Lapis and Geranium are there to feed you cues."

I huffed along, struggling to keep up while pulling off the S.A. uniform and discarding the pillow in a flurry of feathers. After ten blocks we power-walked (I don't jog), convinced we'd lost the SEGWACians.

We reached 33d Street, Al opened the stage door, and we barely had time to catch our breath before the announcer announced, "And now, the group you've all been waiting for, Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives!"

PM trotted out and smiled at the cheering crowd. "What a joy it is to be back again – this time in body as well as spirit!" she shouted, with reference to her metaphysical appearance of last year. "We bring you greetings from Christmas Monsterland . . . the North Pole . . . and Santa Claus! He's sent you a message: Keep up your Christmas cheer! There may be deficits in the gift department and money may be tight, but as we've said so many times before, Christmas isn't wrapping paper and ribbons, it's a state of mind! That state will be sublime if you remember the L-word – *LOVE*! Now, let's celebrate the season and rock 'n' roll!"

And at my post behind the synthesizer, I pushed the button for the sleigh bells. Alabaster crash the cymbals, Elvira twanged her guitar, and the band began to play. PM bounced into a tour en l'air, grand jeté into a split, grabbed the microphone, and sang out the opening bars of Peppermint's reggae arrangement of "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear."

PM's melodic magenta mezzo warble wafted to the rafters. Her magnetic stage presence enchanted the crowd as she reached out and kissed the cheeks of her adoring fans.

With the twins pointing out cues to me, we changed pace and launched into a heavy metal version of the "Coventry Carol," then switched gears again and ended with a balladic "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," the diminutive hart taking center stage. The applause was deafening when we ended our set.



Our bows could be but brief, for Dove and Relicta were waiting. We grabbed the instruments and rushed to the roof.

"We'll meet you at the ice pyramid," PM called out as she faced north and twitched her tail to teletransport away Al, Rudolph, Peppermint, and the Paunchettes. Lapis and Geranium linked tails and BOING!!ed off behind them.

The departing sun had left a crimson sky hovering above the Hudson River. "We shouldn't have waited this long," Dove fretted nervously. "We should have left hours ago," he complained as he stuffed the equipment, Clyde, Elvira, and me into the crowded spaceship. Relicta looked a bit pale, stretched out on the electronic keyboard, a base drum supporting her head.

Whirling and twitching, in fits and starts, Dove managed to steer the crowded spaceship through the World Trade Center towers and guide it into the clouds. I once again turned green and longed for Dramamine as the rotating craft gained altitude.

"How are you doing, my alien Achates?" I asked, after the spinning stopped and we were cruising on automatic pilot.

"It won't be long now," replied Relicta, shifting uncomfortably.

"Oh no," I argued. "I don't know anything about birthing extraterrestrials!"

"It's not that close, I hope. But I will be giving birth in orbit when it's time. Where I came from, my species gave birth upside down. Earth's gravity makes that too difficult. Dove tried to teach me yoga, but I kept toppling over. After we drop you off and pick up PM's mom – Maraschino's going to midwife – we'll take off again to await labor."

*



As we approached the border of Christmas Monsterland and the North Pole I glimpsed the tip of the ice pyramid that Dove and Relicta call home when not saving souls in New York City. I'd forgotten how beautiful it was. It glowed in the twilight and shimmered in the setting sun. Dove landed the spaceship precariously close to the portal, barely missing PM and the gang gathered outside. We hurried to unload the equipment, for Relicta, who was

crying turquoise tears and whimpering "It's time, Dove, it's time," was anxious to depart.

Peripat Penguin waddled out to take the bass guitar and amplifier from me. When I went for another speaker, I asked PM, "What's he doing here? Last time I saw him was in the Central Park Zoo."

"Peripat was recruited as maitre d' of Cafe Le Grandé Snerklé earlier this year," PM whispered, "but since the menu evaporated, he was let go. Dove has hired him to watch this place, for a few fish a day."

I carried the last microphone into the pyramid. Once inside the structure I gasped again at how many crystals Dove had collected for meditation purposes.

"Hurry, everyone! Hurry!" Dove shouted, tripping over me and tugging at Maraschino's tail. The frantic father-to-be failed to close the front door as he rushed out to the ship, and as the golden orbiter began to whirl in takeoff, the crystals that had been inside were sucked outside, scattering over the glacier. The spaceship ascended just as the Christmas Star began to rise.

Peripat bent to pick up the fallen stones when what to our wondering eyes did appear – in the light of the Christmas Star prised through the ice pyramid – but a garden.

And not just any garden – a crystal garden! Amethyst asters and citrine chrysanthemums cascaded over the frosty snow, followed by tourmaline tulips, and ruby roses with thorns of gold, platinum, and silver. Up sprouted aquamarine azaleas and opal orchids, joined by onyx-eyed sapphire Susans with stems of jade. Diamond daisies dallied in the starlight and emerald anemones effloresced alongside jasper jasmine. Quartz carnations and zircon zinnias unfurled their petals beside garnet gardenias, vying for attention with the beryl blooms of daffodils, dahlias, poppies, and pansies, and topaz freesias and silica poinsettias. No sooner had we eyed one flower than another appeared, more magnificent than the last.

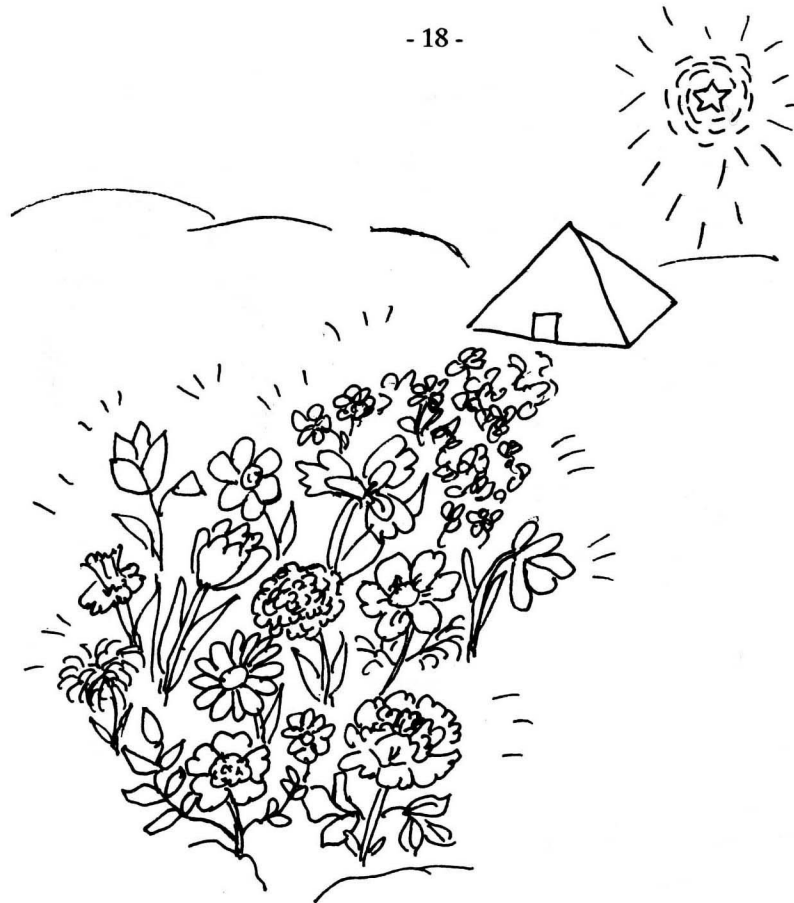
"Oh my!" breathed PM. "How wondrous! Mr. and Mrs. C. should see this!" And she blinked off, leaving us to marvel at the mystical posies.

Soon Santa's sleigh slid to earth and the Clauses rushed to view the scene. "Splendid!" pronounced Santa.

Peppermint bent down, magnifying glass in paw, to get a closer look. "They're real gems!" he determined. "Wouldn't they be worth something?"

"Yeah, Santa," urged Clyde, "let's pick some and see if we can sell them in time to save Christmas."





Santa nodded, and we each gathered a bouquet and placed them in a basket fetched by Peripat.

"Don't take too many," warned Mrs. Claus. "No more than we need. We don't want to destroy the beauty of what's been created here. Art has its own worth, you know."

When a sufficient, but not aesthetically ruinous, quantity of the gems had been collected, PM BOING!!ed away, hoping to find a still-open market.

"What caused it, Santa?" Geranium questioned.

"Why ask why?" Santa replied gently. "Need we have a scientific explanation for everything? Can we not accept that at a certain angle, at a certain time of year and time of night, when the Christmas Star glitters through an ice pyramid, the kaleidoscope of colors created results in this? Need we know what caused it? It could be the atmospheric pressure or the hole in the ozone, perhaps ash from Mount Pinatubo or pollution from the Kuwaiti oil fires, or it could be the midasmetal from Relicta's ship flaked off

by the turbulent takeoff. I don't know why, but here they are, sprouting and flowering, crystal blossoms of gems and jewels. How they sparkle and twinkle, glitter and glow. It's enough that we have them to wow us and woo us and make us gawk and gape and wonder at the beauty of it all!"

PM popped back. We stared at her expectantly.

"They melt," she said sadly. "They're magic, but they're our magic only. When I landed in the Diamond District and peered in the basket, the petals were disappearing into Kool-Aid. I had so hoped . . ."

"Fooley," fussed Paunch. "There was enough cubic zirconia there to keep the Home Shopping Network on the air for the next decade."

I fingered the flower I held in my hand. That was just my luck. No answer here for me. Lotteries and magic gardens. Neither would do me any good.

But I had an idea. "Pick some more," I ordered a bit abruptly, for I had noticed the Christmas Star was setting and the garden was beginning to disappear.

The group obeyed, and just in time, for as the basket was refilled the Christmas Star dropped behind the western berg, and the glacier was once more ice crystals only. But the magic blossoms in the basket still shined and shimmered. "Can we go to the North Pole?" I suggested, for my feet were freezing and my fingers were quickly feeling the effects of escalating frostbite.

PM asked Peripat to radio Dove and let him know where we would be. I joined Santa in his sleigh and we were off.

We left the basket outside to keep cold and hurried into Santa's workshop. Mr. Claus placed a yule log in the fireplace, and soon the workshop was warm and cozy. Mrs. Claus and Clyde made cinnamon-stick tea while I massaged my nose back onto my face.



When all were settled around the hearth, I spoke.

"Tabgha," I said.

"Huh?" asked Clyde, always quick to miss these elusive allusions.

"Tabgha," I repeated. "It's a place I visited in May, near the Sea of Galilee."

"Yes, of course!" Santa said, grasping the significance.

PM was pensive. "Elucidate further, oh Chronicler of mine."

"I was just remembering what was said to have happened there. You'll find the story in Mark 6:34-44, Matthew 14:13-21, and John 6:1-14."

"Right," Mrs. Claus nodded. "I remember it well. It is where one of the miracles was performed by the man whose birth we commemorate." And she quoted, "After these things Jesus went over the sea of Galilee, which is the sea of Tiberias. And a great multitude followed him . . ."

Santa picked up, citing from a second reference: "And when it was evening, his disciples came to him, saying, This is the desert place, and the time is now past; send the multitude away, that they may go into the villages, and buy themselves victuals. But Jesus said unto them, They need not depart; give ye them to eat."

PM continued: "One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, saith unto him, There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?"

Alabaster finished the story: "He said, Bring them thither to me. And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass, and took the five loaves, and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed, and brake, and gave the loaves to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude. And they did all eat, and were filled: and they took up the fragments that remained twelve baskets full. And they that had eaten were about five thousand men, beside women and children."

"What a lovely miracle," sighed Santa, who always gloried in the Scripture. "But I'm not quite sure how this helps, Chronicler."

"Santa," I said, "what makes a miracle? A lot of faith – and a little magic! Would the Christmas Star have created the miracle of the flowers if they weren't intended to save Christmas? As you recall, all of the deus ex machina in my stories ultimately help the holiday. Don't you see? You must have been given the crystal garden by the Christmas Star for a reason."

"It's worth a try," Santa said. "Let's give it a go."

"Give what a go?" clamored Clyde, a step behind the program.

Thereupon we gathered a sample each of what was required to complete the gifts for the Christmas ride. Mrs. Claus placed a cup of sugar on the workbench, and Rudolph piled a clump of hay on the floor. Clyde collected the last two jingle bells, and Elvira put out the remaining computer chip. Peppermint Paunch scooped out a paltry spoonful of ice cream, and

PM carefully removed the last truffle from the refrigerator. Alabaster and Santa consulted the list of parts needed for the Christmas toys and collected what they could. When all was ready and in place on the workbenches, PM fetched the basket.

"A little magic, a touch of faith, and a lot of love," Mrs. Santa proclaimed and lifted the first sparkling blossom. She placed it carefully in the center of the sugar.

"I believe, I believe," I intoned sotto voce.

And lo and behold! The cup became a pint, then a quart, then bushels and barrels of refined cane sugar, spilling onto the floor.

"It works!" I shouted in glee. And the Christmas Crew eagerly placed crystal flowers on the other supplies, and watched and marveled as they multiplied.



"Clyde! Call my helpers back to work!" Santa ordered with pleasure. "We'll not disappoint the children this year. Let's get cracking!"



Christmas Eve dawned, but there would be no sleep at the North Pole. But no one minded, for the promise of joy in young children's faces was enough to keep the workers working. Peppermint loped back to Christmas Monsterland to call the laid-off sleigh pullers back to work. The workshop was humming again, tiny hammers tinkling and little elfin hands hurriedly sewing button eyes on newly stuffed animals. Elvira eagerly booted up her computer and read out measurements as Mrs. Santa whipped and stirred and chopped and blended and Rudolph checked the baking cookies and stoked the fires.

For my part, I radioed Dove to get a progress report ("Not yet," he said, "but soon, we hope.") and told of the bounty the crystal flowers had bestowed. Then, in between stringing cranberries and tying bows, I typed these happenings into my electronic journal and doodled drawings and pondered the events.

Santa's helpers finished their work, and after all the packages were wrapped and ready they found that there were enough supplies left over to get a head start on Christmas 1992. So SEGWAC was foiled again, as we hope it will be every year, for good will and Christmas cheer need not recede in recessions.

But what of the story? Well, I wrote one, and Clyde had just enough paper for me to print out one copy on his laser printer. But it was too late, even if I had the cash, to get it printed in time for Christmas. Such marvelous goings on, and they'd remain a secret.

*

With less than a hour to flight time, Santa loaded the sleigh and Clyde called out the checklist. We were so absorbed in harnessing the Christmas Monsters and checking Rudolph's batteries that we almost missed the shouts of joy emanating from the nearby radio. "Dove to Santa, Dove to Santa, come in please!"

"Santa here, Dove. What's the good word?" the jolly fat man chortled into his CB.

"We're parents! We're parents!"

"Oh what?" shouted PM from her spot at the front of the sleigh.

"Of a beautiful baby girl. We're descending now."

"We'll meet you at the pyramid," Santa cried, clapping his hands. "We want to see her before we head south!"

And off we went, PM singing out "Here Comes Santa Claus" as she lifted up and away. I rode alongside Clyde, rehearsing my request to Dove that he agree to leave his daughter long enough to give me a lift to St. Louis.

Santa landed next to the spaceship, which had just set down a few hundred feet from the pyramid. We rushed to greet a worn-out Maraschino, a dazzled Dove, and the gurgling bundle carried by an exultant but exhausted Relicta.

The baby was truly gorgeous. She had five fingers on each hand and three toes on each foot. She had Dove's soft eyes and Relicta's nose (thank goodness). And on the top of her little nearly bald noggin sprouted tiny wisps of golden hair and two little antenna nodules.



"We've decided to name her Crystal Camellia," Dove announced with pride, "in honor of the miracles – of the garden, and of her birth."

The Christmas folk rejoiced with the new parents, for that is why they exist – to celebrate birth and miracles, those now and of two millennia past.

"Was it a difficult delivery?" I asked Relicta, who nestled the swaddled babe in her arms.

"Not too bad," she said. "The Alexander lessons you suggested really helped. I inverted, released my neck, and with Maraschino's guidance and support, not to mention Dove's stuttering encouragement, our first born arrived."

As we ooh!ed and ahh!ed and clucked and cooed at the newest character in the Christmas chronicles, the Christmas Star rose over the pyramid and, once again, the garden grew on the glacier. This time, we just stared – and wondered.

“Sorry this story won’t be read this year,” I apologized to PM. “It would have been great.”

PM took my hand in her paw and pressed an object into it. “I saved one of these for you,” she said. And when I opened my hand, I held a perfect peridot petunia. “Use it well,” PM advised.



I took it to the spaceship. I reached in my pocket and pulled out my last dollar. I contemplated the wrinkled bill. Then I envisioned the vision of a Christmas without a Christmas saga sent to friends and family.

And I weighed my options. Money beyond counting if I placed the petunia on George’s head. Or a limited edition of the Christmas card and cover (which I would still have to spend hours and hours and hours and hours painting). Should I give myself wealth, or share this story?



*MERRY CHRISTMAS
AND A MIRACULOUS NEW YEAR*