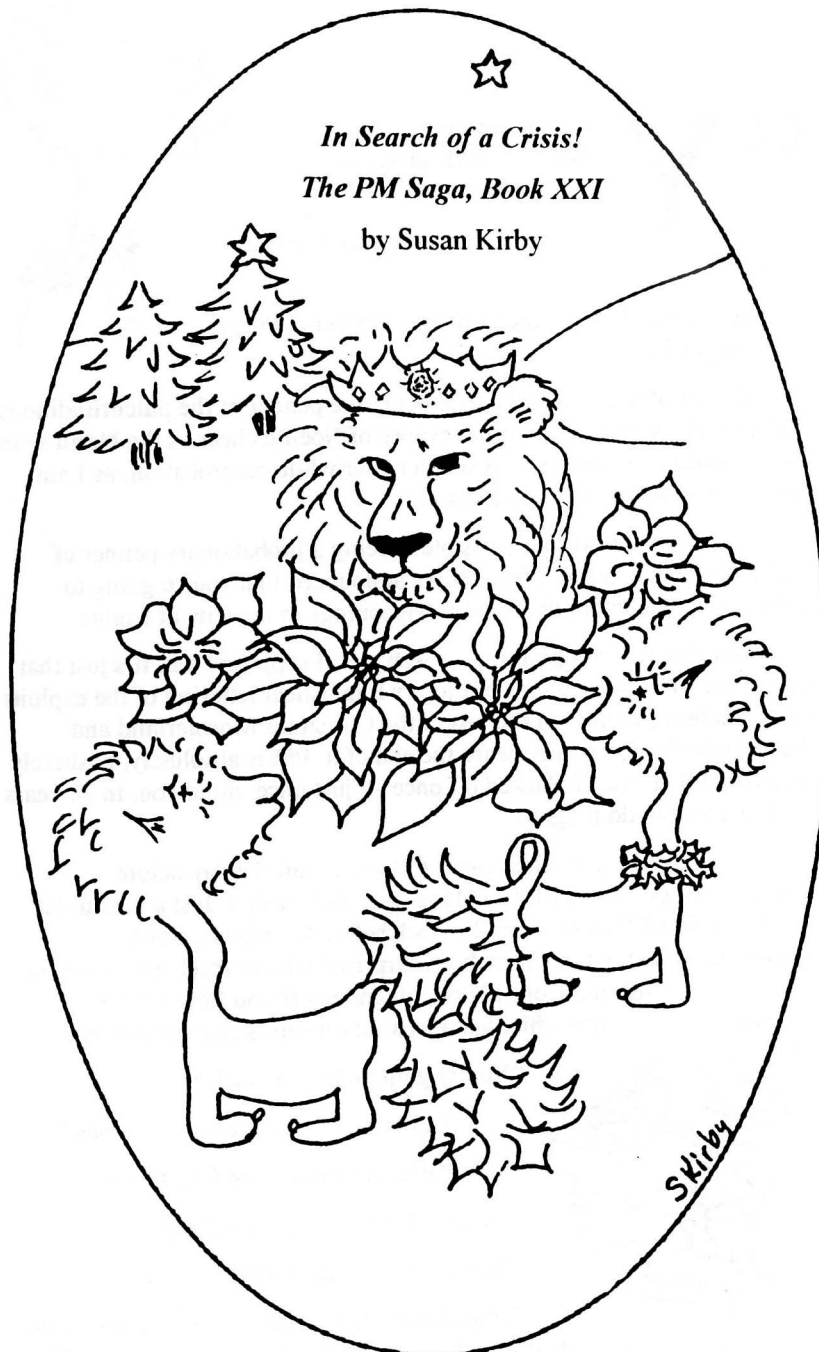




A ROARING GOOD CHRISTMAS



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“You’re going *where*,
when?!?!?” PM screeched
through the phone.

It’s not easy being a Christmas
Chronicler.

It’s certainly not a piece of fruitcake being Purple
Monster’s Christmas Chronicler.

In fact, it’s downright putrid being the penner of the pulchritudinous
PM’s yearly parables of her purveyance of Noëllic cheer as the North Pole
Ambassador and Santa’s lead sleigh puller while on probation, as I am
after being fired then rehired last year.

But what is next to impossible is being a probationary penner of
PM’s peripatetic jaunts when you’ve announced that you’re going to
spend the week before the holiday happenings in the City of Lights.

Not that I’m complaining — well, yes, I suppose I am. It’s just that
ever since I missed one year of literary linguistical lettering of the exploits
of the fuchsia furball and the rest of the Christmas Monsterland and
North Pole Crew, I’ve not heard the end of it. PM is absolutely, positively
convinced that since I slacked off once — just once, mind you, in 23 years
— I’m going to do it again.

So I suppose that when I sent PM an E-mail the day before
Thanksgiving (“Dear PM, Gobble gobble, and all that. Just a note to let
you know that I’ll be in Paris the week before Christmas. Love,
Chronicler”), I shouldn’t have been surprised when I received an almost
instantaneous phone call and my friend flew off the
proverbial handle (what proverb’s that handle in?).



“You’re going *where*, *when?!?!?*”

“To Paris. A week before Christmas.”

“Paris? A week before Christmas?”

“I just said that,” I replied calmly.

“How can you?” she hollered.

“I buy a plane ticket, make a hotel reservation,
board the aircraft and fly there,” I instructed. “Then

the plane lands, I get my luggage, take a taxi to the Left Bank, then I check in. Then I . . .”

What followed is definitely not publishable. As all Dear Readers should know by now, I’m not literarily licensed to purvey licentious, prurient, pornographic, vulgar, vicious or threatening language in these stories. Let’s just say I held the phone at arm’s length while the diatribe droned on and on and on. (I have a tape of it, should I be subpoenaed. One thing we’ve learned this year is that good friends wear wires.)

“Didn’t your experience two years ago teach you *anything*?” PM whined (an unusually unpleasant sound). “If you plan too many trips before Christmas, you fail to produce a chronicle, you get upset, I get upset, Santa gets upset, you get fired, I try to write the story, you get rehired, and then you go on probation — that means you’re supposed to behave yourself. You promised that would never happen again.”

“I’m abjectly sorry if my promise was misleading. While I did say I would continue to write your histories, or histrionics, as the case may be, it depends on what the meaning of the word ‘write’ is.”

I admit PM had a point. It was not a particularly propitious time to patter off to Paris — not during the week I would normally be pounding out the annual Saga on my personal PC.

“I have to go,” I tried to explain calmly. “I just have to. There is an opera to hear, a ballet to see and a new modern dance work to contemplate. Plus a Vinnie Van G. exhibition at the Musée D’Orsay, and the Rue de Rivoli to shop on and the Louvre and . . . and . . . and, well, it’s Paris! There’s really no bad time to go there.”

“Unless,” PM not so gently reminded me, “you are a Christmas Chronicler!” She slammed down the phone.

As I said, it’s not easy being a Christmas Chronicler.

On Thanksgiving Day morning, I anticipated with a touch of dread the magical mauvette minister of peace and love’s materialization in my six-foot-by-six-foot West 76th Street hovel. She arrived in less than the best of moods, bringing her entourage of Clyde Elf, Elvira Fernhat, Peppermint Paunch, Alabaster Eggshell and Lapis Snowflake and Geranium Amethyst. (PM can do that, you know. She just visualizes where she’s going, tweaks her tail, and teletransports herself OUT HERE whenever she wants. And she can BOING other Christmas Characters with her if she so pleases.)

“Happy Thanksgiving, Chronicler,” greeted Lapis and Geranium with their usual enthusiasm, reflecting none of the displeasure that permeated PM’s demeanor. The almost-12-year-old Monsters are always excited to

accompany their parents and Santa on the Christmas Monsterland float at the yearly Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. They also look forward to the pre-parade hot cocoa I serve before I head off to my job at a major New York daily newspaper.

Lapis booted up my computer to check out my software and scan for viruses, while Geranium took inventory of the newest additions to the Teddy Bear collection (the one from Las Vegas is particularly fuzzily fine, with just the right amount of "attitude").

However, the adults in the Crew were less than warm.

Clyde carried a copy of my contract, and waved it in my face. "oH, oH, Chronicler, what do you think you're doing? You signed a new contract at the beginning of this year agreeing to write a Christmas Chronicle for 3 calories a word. Are you breaking that contract?"



"I *do* plan to write a Christmas story."

"When?" growled PM.

"There are three days between the time I get back from Paris until I leave for St. Louis. How 'bout then?"

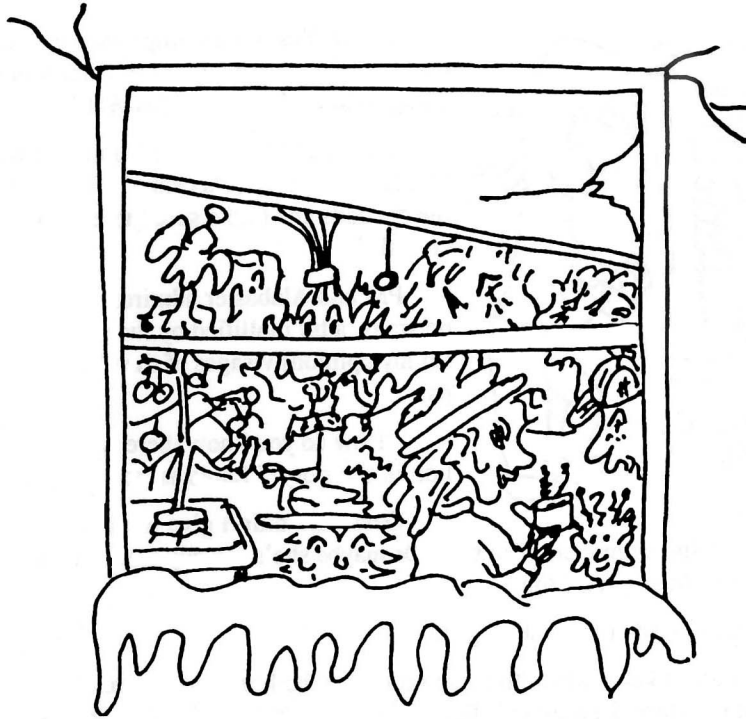
Clyde was jumping up and down, endangering the architecture of the art-book towers I'd constructed in front of the table that held my about-to-be-decorated faux fir.

Alabaster restrained his wife, who was preparing to launch a projectile at my head. "Chronicler, that's simply not enough time," he complained. "How can you do my purple paramour the justice she deserves in so short a time?"

Peppermint, the striated Sherlock who had been examining the Levy pen-and-ink drawing now gloriously framed above the Jemisin print and below the Bush greyhounds, asked, "Why not start now and get it done before you leave? I deduce that would be a better solution."

The knock on my door interrupted my reply. Relicta, the ET-IT (Extra-Terrestrial Intergalactic Traveler), arrived with her former-SEGWACian hubby, Dove Carrion, and their almost 7-year-old daughter, Crystal Camellia. Before their annual serving of the Salvation Army Thanksgiving dinner, they always stop by to greet PM et al. and catch up a bit. The trio squeezed into the hovel/gallery, which had now reached critical mass.

"I'm booked solid until I leave," I explained after a warm greeting. "I have appointments at the paper, tickets to the Philharmonic, tickets to Alvin Ailey, Carnegie Hall engagements, a trip to Philadelphia to see the Delacroix exhibition, not to mention book projects and other word processing to do to



keep my wonderful clients happy and my bank account in black ink. Just can't manage to begin until I get back."

Clyde snorted, "Totally irresponsible! We'll sue! We'll sue!"

The elf, who was probably hyperagitated because of his new assignment to solve the North Pole's Y2K problem, glowered a more vivid shade of chartreuse than usual.

"Now, now," I tried to soothe the ruffled feelings of those crammed into my living room as I handed out the hot chocolate and freshly baked chocolate-chip cookies (actually half-baked, since my oven is falling apart), "why are you all so worried? Haven't I already designed, printed and started to paint the cover? Look!" I showed them the work-in-progress. "I began this in October — a record in advance preparation for all the years of Christmas chronicling. This despite my American Ballet Theater tickets, my trip to Boston to see the Monet show, a wonderful visit from Judy with a junket to Washington to see the V.G. exhibition there, and Dr. Arké's sojourn here just last week and our wanderings to 'Footloose' and the fairy painting show at the Frick. Doesn't this show I'm committed?"

Relicta, always amazed at my continued inability to comprehend the importance of my duties to Christmastime, suggested, "Perhaps you should be



committed. Yes, we are impressed by the cover. Although we fail to see when you're going to have the time to *finish* it!"

Dove was perusing the leonine mane that graced the cover's center. "Where will the doodads go? Make sure there are lots of crystals."

PM and Alabaster admired their portraits, a bit mollified by the well-drawn (in my opinion) visages of the Christmas pair.

"How do you know there will be a lion in the story?" Lapis asked.

Geranium didn't give me time to answer. "She's prescient. I'm sure. Or maybe she's already started the story, and wants to surprise Mom?"

All looked at me. I shrugged.

"I don't know where the inspiration for the lion came from. Nor have I started the story, I assure you. Remember, there's one thing missing — a *Crisis!* As all of you are perfectly well aware, a crisisless Christmas makes for happy holidays but lousy literature." I looked at PM. "You are concerned that I won't have time to write your Saga. But you are the *heroine!* You have to do something *heroic!* If there's a *Crisis!*, let me know. I'll make a note of it. I'll start the story whenever you give me a *plot!* I'll have my laptop with me. I am a writer, you know, it's what I do, who I am. And a writer never leaves home without her keyboard and CPU."

PM sputtered, "It's up to *you* to provide the *Crisis!* And to me to solve it!"

"Nope," I countered. "Check the contract." Clyde held it out. "See there — I negotiated a clause that said I wasn't required to be creative, but only to be the amanuensis of the travails of the amaranth North Pole Ambassador. I record, I report. You dictate the story, and I'll peck it onto a 1.44MB floppy."

PM glared at her hubby. "You let her get this into the contract?"

Alabaster (who has a Law degree, plus Ph.D.'s in, among others, Psychology, Sociology, Chemistry, Physics and English Literature) just winced. "She wouldn't sign without it. As you remember, my damson dame, you tried to write your own Saga last year, failed miserably, and begged her to come back. She had us over a barrel."

PM grumped, "You've really put me in a spot, Chron. You provide a cover with a lion on the front — which to my mind has absolutely nothing to do with Christmas — and then expect me to solve a problem that we don't yet have? That's a bit unreasonable."

"It's your life I'm chronicling," I reminded her. "Live it. Meanwhile, I'm going to work now. And then I'm gonna start packing."



Crystal Camellia gave me a kiss on the cheek and whispered, "You'd better paint PM's and Alabaster's manes soon, though. They're going to notice if they're not acrylicked."

*

The following days before my flight, I was bombarded with multiple messages of PM's Yuletide doings:

Fax: "Rehearsed for Night Before the Night Before Christmas charity concert. Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives [the Christmas Monsterland band] has an exceptional new program, with laser lights, and new songs by Spruce."

Phone call: "I taught the class for young Monster sleigh pullers today. Carmine Poppy continues to show the most promise, and I'm sure Santa will not hesitate to choose her this year to fill the spot of Ruby Rouge, who married last year and did the champagne and chocolate and Super Snerkling thing and is now expecting her first little Monster on Christmas Eve."

E-mail: "Santa called a meeting of the elves and rallied them to frenetic hammering and tapping, in preparation for this year's sack filling. Mrs. C. busy with the cookie thing. Rudolph blinking merrily."

Snail mail: "Quick trip to Israel to see progress of latest peace conference. Said hello to friends for you. They ask why you don't write. So do I."



Fed Ex: "Helped light the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree. Most beautiful one yet. Checked out the Saks and Lord & Taylor windows before helping Relicta and Dove deliver presents to needy children."

U.P.S.: "Here's a box of Godiva's to replace the one in your fridge that I took at Thanksgiving — I was going to leave an I.O.U., but you know how upset I was. Hope your Mom likes them."

(I must note that the box enclosed lacked the caramels and nougats — sorry, Mom.)

Express Mail: "Alabaster and I had a big fight last night. Could be the *Crisis!*? He wanted to snerkle, but I had to rest for my performance as the Lilac Fairy at the State Theater tonight."

Courier (Penelope Pigeon, who roosts outside my hovel): "Visited Freudinella Jung, my psychoanalyst, and Pimento Poppy, my child psychologist, for a double session. She says I mustn't repress my rage. He says I should snerkle more."

I dutifully squished all of these messages meant to nudge me, prod me, harass me, goad me into beginning PM's tale into a file, which I put in my suitcase. The muse for my annual scribblings had only provided the same-old, same-old, day in and day out. No *Crisis!* So I zipped my suitcase and headed for the airport, no closer to having an epic to epistle than before.



Like I said, it's not easy being a Christmas Chronicler.

*

On arrival at CDG I collected my luggage and taxied to the hotel and checked in. There was a fax awaiting me — "Bienvenue, mon ami." (PM speaks — with no accent — and writes perfect French. I, on the other hand, cannot make my "merci" nor my "bon jour" understandable, despite my best efforts, and can only count to five before I switch to German, which I don't speak either, by the way, so don't understand this phenomenon at all — "une, deux, trois, quatre, cinq, sechs, sieben, acht, neun, zehn." I confuse myself. Go figure.)

After a brief nap, I visited Notre Dame, where I lighted a candle for friends and family and stared at the rose window for inspiration. Nada.

That night, I looked out the window at La Pregrille, watching the tourists and Parisians bustling along. I dipped the little fork in the escargot shell and prepared to chomp into my first cholesterol rush when I thought I caught a vivid violet reflection out of the corner of my eye. I assumed I was imagining things and dipped some bread in the garlic butter.



My second day, at the Musée D'Orsay, in line for the *Millet-Van Gogh* exhibition. I was flicking my Bic when a breeze blew out the flame. "You're in the wrong line," a fuzzy-coated female whispered in my ear. Yep, it was PM, doffing her jaunty beret. "See, the sign says 'Sans réservations' and you belong in the 'Avec réservations' line."

"What are you doing here?" I asked, pleased to see her. It's much more fun to see an exhibition with a friend.



"I'm on my way to Siberia to pick up Donner and Blitzen, who are visiting their cousin," she informed me, guiding me into the correct queue. "Just popped by to see if you've started the story yet."

"Any *Crisis!* yet?"

"Nope."

"Then nope."

She snarled and was gone.

I did have a twinge of guilt, but forgot it as I pondered the Millets that inspired V.G. and then gawked at Vincent's reinterpretation. Oh my, how he could show the atoms vibrating in every molecule. His sun scorched, his laborers ached with pain.

I checked out the rest of the D'Orsay. Heading out of the permanent Vinnie collection into the next room, I espied a portrait labeled "La Ambadress du N.P." and there was a likeness of PM, by Renoir. But PM wasn't even a glimmer of a Christmas Critter when Renoir painted, so no, couldn't be. I looked again — not PM, not even a close likeness, and the sign said "Mme. Alphonse Daudet." Yep. Ascendant guilt about not starting the story.

That night I managed to get to the Opéra Bastille on time (unlike last year, when I was stuck in the center of the Place de la Bastille and unable to get through the traffic to the theater), and heard "La Veuve joyeuse"

(translation: “Die lustige Witwe” or “The Merry Widow”), with Frederica Von Stade. I must have been hallucinating, I’m sure, because I could have sworn there was a puce cancan dancer in the finale who winked at me before her jump split. By the time I focused my binoculars from my seat in the second row of the first ring, though, she was gone — my vision just isn’t what it used to be. (By the way, did I mention the two topless showgirls who started the scene at Maxim’s, before the sparkler display? No? I suppose I’m not literarily licensed to describe the duo, but oh, those Parisians!)



The Musée Picasso got a visit le lendemain, as did the Marmottan with the great Berthe Morisots, one of my favorite Gauguin still-lives, and the room of Monet water lilies. At the Opéra Bastille, for the Paris Opera Ballet’s performance of *La Bayadere*, I had a third-row seat. I, and the rest of the audience, were quite surprised to see a magenta figure emerge from the orchestra pit before the lights went down and wave at me.

“Any progress?” she asked, in English, thank goodness, so not that many figured out what was said.

I shook my head, and then ignored her. But why did the giant pachyderm that carried Solor across the stage at the beginning of Act II have a lilac tail? And why, in the final “Shades” act, was there a fuchsia-furred ballerina in the sea of white tutus? Either PM — or I — was getting desperate about this year’s Saga.

By Wednesday, still no idea. Even I was getting worried. I headed out to Musée Rodin, thinking perhaps the *Gates of Hell* might inspire a devious SEGWACian threat. Instead, I was just in awe of Rodin’s powerful sculptures (and of course, the Vinnie painting *Le Père Tanguy*, another of my favorites — I have many, many favorites).

That night, while dressing for my last theater performance, I turned on CNN and heard the news that since the weapons inspectors had left Iraq following a very bad report of Baghdad’s compliance with United Nations mandates, preparations were being made to launch an attack. Nevertheless, I still enjoyed a very strange performance: Jiri Kylián’s “One of a Kind,” performed by the Nederlands Dans Theater at the Opéra Garnier. I would have preferred my favorite Kylián piece, *Sinfonietta*, set to Janacek’s music

with heavy horns and galloping rhythms. But the excellent dancers, and an occasional glimpse at the Chagall ceiling above the chandelier, lifted my spirits. Which were then lowered to the depths when I returned to the hotel and turned on the news again. Bombs were dropping in the Mideast. Congress was to debate impeachment. Now here were crises!

However, I prefer imagined crises to real ones.

My last day in the French capital was spent at the Louvre, where I had a chance to revisit the Bruegel *Beggars* and the Bosch *Ship of Fools*. I headed to the Italian paintings to seek some Christmas inspiration, and sought out Leonardo's *Madonna of the Rocks*, to remind me of the real source of the Sagas, and then headed to see *Mona*. I really wasn't surprised to see reflected in the protective glass a mauvette muzzle.

Nor was I amazed, while dining at the Brasserie du Louvre on six more escargots, to hear purred in my ear, "How can you eat those? Don't you know that some of my best friends are snails?"



Do you have any idea what kind of commotion a livid lavender Christmas Monster can cause when she materializes in a Parisian restaurant? People, even in Paris, have a tendency to take note (and this in a city where art lovers with shocking pink hair prowl the galleries on rue Bonaparte).

I just eased out another slug and popped it in my mouth, wiping up the butter with a hunk of baguette.

"How's the story going?" PM prodded.

"Merry Christmas. Bomb Iraq. Merry Christmas. Impeach the President. How are those for crises?"

"Not appropriate. Unless you do a parody."

"Can't impeach Santa. Remember? We did a version of that in *Book 5, A Very Moral Christmas Story*, in which Santa was called before the Un-Christmas Activities Committee by the Purity Plurality. Santa emerged unscathed. Don't think the President will. And I don't want to recycle again. I'm so depressed, don't think I'll write this year."

PM was distraught. I dug into the salmon brochette that had just been delivered. I offered her a delectable nibble, but she declined. "There are always crises going on OUT HERE. But you always manage to write (except that one year)." As if I needed reminding that PM always forgives, but never forgets.

"Look, PM," I said, trying not to talk with my mouth full, but determined

to finish every available bite (except for the cooked carrots and the little corn things, which I was arranging into the shape of a Christmas tree on my plate), “last year’s Saga was so difficult — trying to imagine a world without music. I might have tried to write about a world without art, except I inserted a sentence to that effect last year and it so depressed me that I spent all this year absorbing as much music and art as possible to get over it. That’s part of the reason I returned to Paris this year.”

“But you’ve begun the cover. You’ve started to think about the Saga. You’ve got to finish it.”

When the profiteroles arrived, PM couldn’t resist. Her chin whiskers were soon coated with the hot chocolate sauce that covered the pastry and ice cream. In between gulps of my dessert, she continued, “We’re just going to have to go on a safari.”

“We?” My query took just enough time for PM to spear the last tasty morsel.

“Oui, we.”

“Who?”

“Vous, moi, and the Christmas gang.”

“Moi?”

“Mais oui.”

“May we what? And why?”

PM licked her whiskers. “Look. You’ve put a lion on the cover of this year’s story. That means there’s got to *be* a story. And it has to include a lion. And where are lions? In Africa. And where were you last June? In South Africa. On a safari. So that must have been on your mind. So let’s go to the Sabi Sabi game preserve and find the lion. He’s got to be the key to the *Crisis!*”

The idea intrigued me. The journey to South Africa with Dr. Arké, the North Pole veterinarian, had been incredible. How could I refuse an offer to return?

“When?” I asked.

“After you get back to New York.”

“Why not tomorrow morning?” I asked, generating some enthusiasm. “You could just BOING us there from here, and I won’t have that long plane ride back.”

“Sorry. You bought too much for me to teletransport. Even Relicta couldn’t haul all those art books, bears, baubles, and Baccharat, not to mention

the Limoges and Corneille lithograph, in her spaceship. Besides, you must pay customs duty on all that. And you have to toil one more day at the newspaper, to pay your bills.”



So it was decided that Saturday night we'd leave on the safari.

I finished my Parisian day, viewing the Monet water lilies at the L'Orangerie, a fitting final art splurge, meditating on the Giverny pond and hearing the water and finding the reflected-cloud faces with lily-leaf eyes. And then a last-hours shopping splurge at Galeries Lafayette (its gigantic tree in the center, with the big blue bow, particularly festive) and Au Printemps. One gift for me, one for Mom, one for me, one for Kathy, one for me, one for Becky, one for me, one for Judy. One for me, one for Rachel and Matt.

It may not be easy being a Christmas Chronicler, but I have no trouble being a Christmas Shopper! Thank goodness for plastic.

*

I slept most of the way through my flight back to JFK, resting up for the search through the bush for a Christmas *Crisis!* to solve.

Of course, Saturday, which I spent (much jetlagged) watching CNN and postscripting the Op-Ed and editorial pages as each new bit of news came over the TV and wires, was one of the bleakest ever. There have been few days darker in my lifetime than the one in which the President of the United States was impeached.

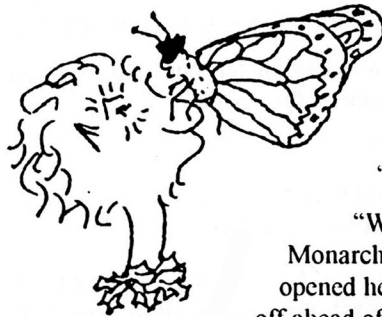
When PM and the gang, suitably attired for the journey, arrived at my hovel, I was in despair.

“SEGWAC has won,” I cried. “The Society for the Elimination of Good Will and Christmas, your nemesis, has finally succeeded, at least halfway. That dastardly group has methodically sapped all the Good Will out of Washington, and most of the Christmas spirit as well.”

PM commiserated, but was not to be deterred. She gave me a Hobson's choice — conveyance in Relicta's whirling golden orb or teletransportation. Did I want my DNA Cuisinarted or sieved? I flipped a South African rand, called heads, and took the spaceship, where I tried to catch a couple minutes' sleep but instead queased and wheezed.

We met at the game preserve. It was the middle of the night, and the

Sabi Sabi Symphony was playing its soft, eery melody. Alabaster commanded a Land Rover (we didn't want to wake the rangers) and Peppermint took the tracker's perch, holding the night light in his paw. Lapis, bearing my *Field Guide to the Mammals of Southern Africa*, turned to the page of pawprints. Everyone took seats — PM, Alabaster, and Clyde in front, Geranium, Lapis, and Relicta in the middle, Dove and Crystal Camellia at the rear — while I focused for a snapshot of the group. Flitting wings fluttered into my depth of field.



"Queen Danaus Plexippus, welcome!" PM gushed a greeting to her friend when the frequent flyer landed on her nose. "I asked her to help," she explained to us. The butterfly dipped her antennae in acknowledgment. "It takes a Monarch to find a monarch."

"We are happy to help," Queen Danaus, Monarch of the Lepitopteran Valley, deigned, then opened her orange, black, and gold wings and took off ahead of the Land Rover.

Alabaster was particularly agitated. As many of you Dear Readers may remember, before PM rescued and later married her silver-maned amore, Al had spent a long time at the San Diego Zoo as an "Alpaca?" (see *The PM Saga: Book 4*). While he had made lots of friends there, the one creature he had avoided was the lion. For the ungulates he shared space with had advised him that lions liked furry morsels, and a white Christmas Monster might be particularly scrumptious.

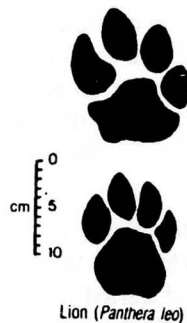
We first encountered a herd of giraffes. A handsome bull ambled over to greet the Crew.

"Geoffrey and Gerald Giraffe sent word you were coming," the giraffe greeted (for those who don't know, the two referred to are cousins — Geoffrey lives in the San Diego Zoo and Gerald in the Bronx Zoo). "By the way, keep the littler critters in between the older ones," he advised. "They'll be less likely to be spotted there, and don't let them move too much."

PM thanked him for the safety tip and asked if he had seen the lion.

"Heard his roar, from that direction," he turned his long neck to the east. "He's around. We're keeping our hooves ready to take off."

Dove, our driver, turned east. Peppermint checked the ground and spotted prints. "A clue, a veritable clue!" he cried and we were off again.



The air was filled with the whoops and giggles of clans of hyenas and the loud howls of wild dogs. Shining his light into the trees, Peppermint spotted a contented leopard, guarding the remains of a newly killed warthog. Alabaster shuddered. "Some of my best friends are warthogs," he moaned. "PM, are you sure this is a good idea?"

PM pondered the situation. "No, but it's the only one I have."



Peppermint's light caught a herd of Burchell's zebras, who nodded their striped heads as we passed. Then the light caught a bachelor herd of impala with their elegant horns, and then a herd of springboks.

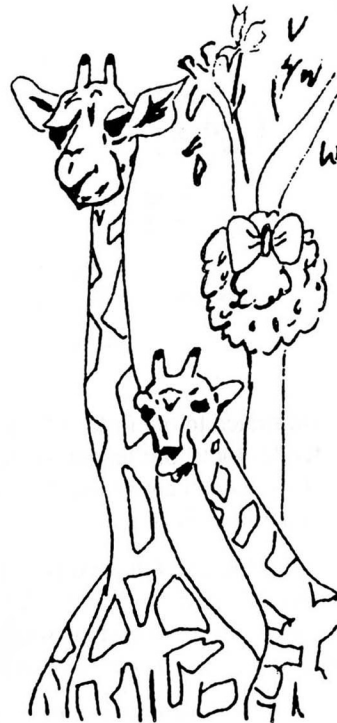
Dove was driving slowly, fortunately, when Peppermint's light reflected off the huge horn of a white rhino standing belligerently in the middle of the road. We stopped. He stared. We stared. He didn't move. We didn't either.

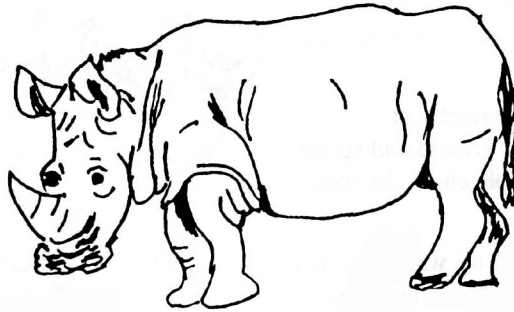
"Do you speak rhino?" PM whispered to Al.

Alabaster snorted a few snorts. The rhino snorted back.

"What did he say?" Geranium whispered.

"Turn right at the next fork. That's where he last saw the lion," Al translated.





The rhino slowly nodded his head, hit the ground a couple of times with his right front hoof, and ambled to the side of the road to let us pass.

A vervet monkey pounced on Crystal Camellia's shoulder and the two chattered and chattered happily as our vehicle

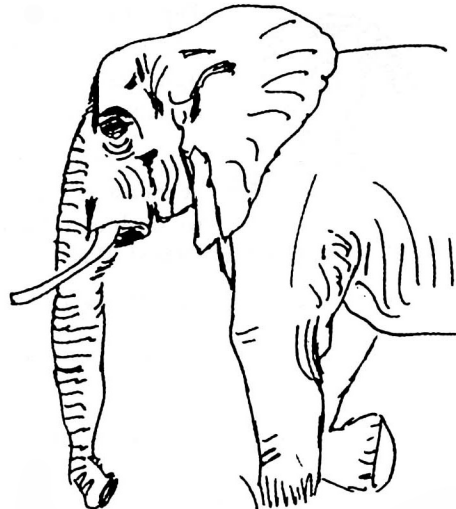
continued to the fork. A huge elephant was pulling up a tree to get at the tender roots, but halted his endeavors to greet us. (Did you know that an adult elephant can eat as much as 300 kilograms per day? Useful information in that *Field Guide*.)

"Queen Danaus was just here, said she'd talked to the hippos in the river and they said Rex had just been down there for a drink. He went thattaway," the elephant pointed his trunk up the right road. Dove had started the engine again when a trio of old male buffaloes ambled into our path.

"I'll take care of them," the elephant said, and took a step toward the largest of the three. They faced each other. The buffalo snorted and pawed the ground, deduced that the elephant was bigger than he was, and backed away, followed by his two buddies.

We passed a watering hole, where we heard a strange chirping sound. "A bird?" asked Lapis, intrigued by the warble.

The light reflected off a tall anthill, and standing on top was a slender feline, with solid spots and "tear marks" on her face. "A cheetah, *Acinonyx jubatus*," Dove reported, stopping for a moment to marvel. "Camellia, Lapis, and Geranium, stay still. You're just the right size for her, although cheetahs usually hunt during the





day." Dove drove on, not wanting to give the lady any ideas about dessert.

It was getting close to dawn when we came upon a herd of agitated wildebeest. Queen Danaus fluttered to PM to advise her.

"A pride of lions took one of their old guys tonight," she said. "Follow that vulture," she indicated upward, "and you'll be near the pride." We did, and soon came upon the last remains of the kill. Jackals and hyenas had finished off most of the carcass, and the vultures were picking the rest.

Peppermint found a paw print to follow and we somberly tracked the trail. As dawn eked its way over the horizon, we reached a small clearing where the pride was resting and digesting. There were nine females and eight cubs. We sat motionless as Queen Danaus went to commune with the young male who lay outside the group.

She returned to report that she'd talked to Prince Leo, who'd told her his Dad was just down the way a bit, sleeping off his dinner and a heavy night of deep breathing.

Alabaster flicked his tail nervously, batting me in the eye. I attempted to comfort him.

"Ranger Ed told us in June that the lion thinks the Land Rover is a big moving rock. If we don't get out of the vehicle, there's no problem. He'll only notice us if he hears a foot on the grass."

Alabaster wasn't much soothed.

In the deep grass we spotted an orange-gold mane shimmering in the rising sun. It was Rex. Queen Danaus approached him and did whatever queens do when they greet fellow royalty. Rex, who'd been basking in the dawn's increasing warmth, raised one eye to stare at the "rock." Queen Danaus waved an antenna at PM, beckoning.

"PM, stay inside!" urged Alabaster. But she opened the door and put one paw carefully on the ground. Rex sat up.

"I can flick my tail and get out of harm's way," she nuzzled assurance to her worried mate, then nibbled his silver mane for good measure.





PM slowly ambled over to meet the King of the Savanna.

"Your Majesty," she bowed low. "I am Purple Monster of Christmas Monsterland. I bring greetings from Santa Claus, ruler of the North Pole."

Rex rose to all four paws and contemplated her, with, we thought, too much gustatory relish.

"Queen Danaus did say you are an Ambassador, and thus should have diplomatic immunity."

PM bowed her head again, her tail relaxing a bit.

"Santa has asked if you would visit him at the Pole," PM continued.

"Ho no, Ho no!" Clyde whispered excitedly to me. "She never said he'd go to the N.P. Elves are gonna look like green gumdrops to him."

"Why?" Rex asked PM.

"Don't know," PM said. "All we know is that you are a part of the

solution to this year's Christmas *Crisis!*, whatever it may be. Santa requests a state visit."

"Who will protect my wives and young'uns while I'm gone?" he growled, sending shivers up Relicta's antennae. The vervet monkey chattered excitedly.

Queen Danaus intervened. "Rex, Prince Leo is fully capable of taking care of them for a short while. You've trained him well, and you often leave him with the pride when you patrol your territory. Remember, this is Christmas!"

Rex was unimpressed. "What am I to Christmas, or Christmas to me? And isn't it cold at the North Pole? Lots of ice? I don't do well in the cold."

"It's warmed by the love and Christmas cheer of Santa and Mrs. C.," PM answered.

"How'll I get there?" Rex snarled.

"I'll teletransport you up there and bring you back. Won't take long at all."

The king nodded. "O.K. Let me just tell my pride where I'll be." And with that he leaned back his head and let out a mighty roar that echoed across the preserve and into Kruger National Park.

PM shouted to our Land Rover. "Meet you at the North Pole!" And she carefully linked tails with Rex, bowed her head to Queen Danaus to take her leave, and with a twinkle and tweak — BOING! the two were gone.

Dove drove speedily back to Relicta's spaceship, let us out, and returned the Land Rover. Lapis and Geranium wanted to link tails and BOING themselves to join their Mom, but Alabaster insisted they ride with him. So it was a very crowded spacecraft that took off, spinning and winding its way upward, only to descend again to return a stowed-away hitchhiking baboon.

*

The North Pole was quiet — too quiet. Not a clink or tinkle, no concatenation of teensy-weensy hammers in the workshop or pawing of reindeer hooves on the permafrost.

Elvira Fernhat tiptoed to the descending door of the spaceship.

"He's with Mr. and Mrs. C.," she pointed to the house. "The rest of the elves are hiding, and Rudolph and the other reindeer have





hurried to graze near the Ice Pyramid on the border of Christmas Monsterland until he's gone."

"Santa won't let anything bad happen here," Dove reassured Elvira. "How many opportunities do we have to entertain such a magnificent beast?"

We pecked in Santa's window and were relieved to see Rex reclining comfortably on fluffy red and green velvet pillows. Mrs. Claus was serving him a golden bowl of hot apple cider, which Rex was slurping greedily.



Santa spotted our noses pressed against the pane and waved us in. He was shaking like a bowlful of jelly, laughing jollily. "His Majesty was just telling us that he thought my name was Santa C-L-A-W-S and that I must have great nails! Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho!!!"

Rex laughed too, and bared his own claws in glee. Alabaster retreated to what few shadows there were at the Claus house, off in a corner.

PM, who had risen from the guest chair to greet her arriving family and friends, settled herself back down. "Now that we're all here, let's get started," she began.

"Yes," Rex agreed. "So. Why am I here?"



PM turned to me. "So, why is he here, Chronicler?"

All eyes turned to me. I looked around. I was not particularly thrilled at the way Rex was eyeing me, and began to wipe the dew from my forehead. "Why is he here? How should I know?"

Peppermint spoke up. "But of course you know. You put him on the cover. That led to the safari. Now he's here. Why?"

"Why? It's not my fault, really it isn't."

Clyde, hiding behind Lapis and Geranium, whose tails were entwined for a quick getaway should one be necessary, squeaked, "It is your fault. So you gotta tell us why that big-toothed beast is here."



All those expectant eyes, and I really hadn't a clue why we were all sitting up at the North Pole with the lion king.

"Well," I stammered, "I suppose — you see, it's just that when Dr. Arké and I went on the safari in June, we were so amazed by what we saw. And one of the most amazing things we saw was Rex here, and I was so inspired by his majesty that I had to put him on the cover."

Rex nodded to me and licked his lips. So far, so good.

"W-w-well," I stammered again, vamping. "Mr. Rex, Your Majesty, whatever, I live in the United States of America, which is a democracy, or so they say. And I work for a major newspaper. And the news that's been all over the paper and on all the television and radio stations all year has been the sex life of the President of the United States, who many consider the leader of the free world."



Rex chuckled heartily. "Good for him!"

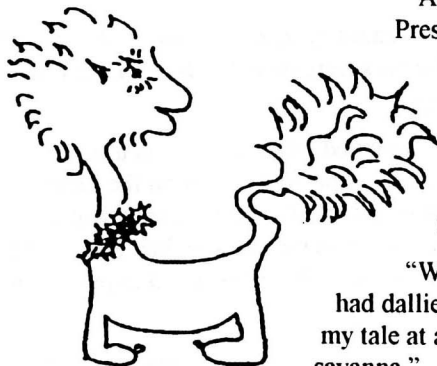
"No," PM corrected. "Bad for him. But continue, Chronicler."

I picked it up again. "Now in the city of Washington, where the President resides, there's been a group of people, known as the Republican far right, who don't like the President. In fact, they hate him. They arranged for this man, called an Independent Counsel, although he's not independent and his counsel is rotten, to delve into every aspect of the President's life, in order to drive him out of office."

"He's actually a SEGWACian," Dove interjected. "I knew him in my old days there as Cousin Asteroid, but he goes by the name Ken Starr now. He's very high up in the Washington branch."

I had suspected as much. I continued. "So this guy, Asteroid, found a woman who knew a woman who had been having some sort of relationship with the President. And the first woman, named Linda, arranged to tape conversations with the second woman, named Monica, to prove that the President had had a dalliance where he dared not dally, given that he was a married man and Monica was a young intern."

Rex nodded, though he appeared not to have the slightest inkling of what I was saying.



"Anyway, Asteroid waited until the President testified in a civil suit that he hadn't dallied with Monica, then pounced on him, spreading his sex life all over the news and calling all his friends and colleagues and acquaintances to testify in front of a grand jury."

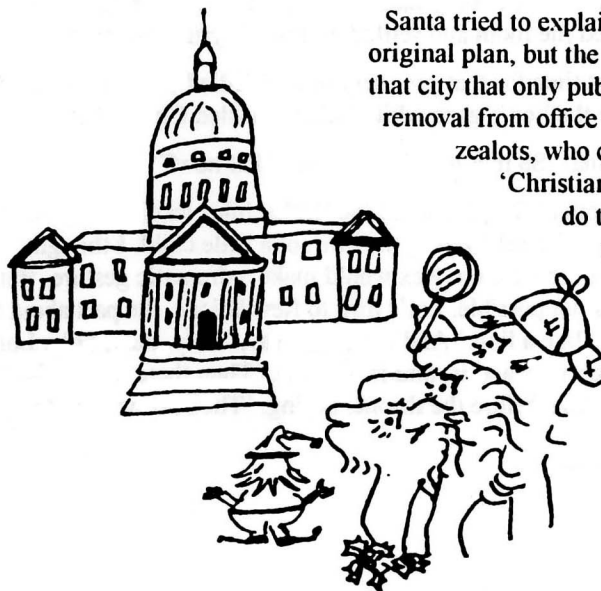
"Why didn't the President just admit he had dallied?" Rex asked, not comprehending my tale at all. "I would have blared it across the savanna."

Santa spoke up. "We're not quite sure, actually. He feared the public would not accept the leader of the U.S.A. having dillied in the Oval Office, I suppose. Or maybe he feared his wife."

"It's beyond me," said Rex. "Perhaps it's in the President's nature to dally. It's certainly in mine. In my Kingdom, catting around is part of my job description! I have a large territory, and have the pleasure of taking care of lots and lots of lionnesses. They do the hunting, I do the dallying. It's exhausting. So why didn't the President just challenge this Asteroid guy? I would have bared my fangs, yelled out my battle cry and gone after any threat to my domain. We'd have seen who was King!"

"Well," I continued, "the President is a human, and humans work out their testosterone battles in a more convoluted way. The President hired lots and lots of lawyers, and Asteroid had lots and lots of lawyers, and they sent those lawyers to do battle in courtrooms. Then after all the courtroom stuff was done, Asteroid sent a report to Congress, which is composed of people elected by the populace. These politicians are supposed to represent the voters' interests. But this Congress took the report and put it out over the Internet, so all could see the President's sex life and laugh and chortle. Then the people held an election and voted out many of the representatives who were going after the President, and it was thought that this sent a message that the people wanted all this silliness to stop. But although Tadpole Grimgrinch, one of the heads of Congress, resigned, those who hated the President continued to push to punish him."

Rex turned to Santa. "So why didn't you just announce you'd drop coals in his stocking this holiday, and end it there?"



Santa tried to explain. "That was my original plan, but the hatred is so vile in that city that only public flogging and removal from office will satisfy the zealots, who call themselves the 'Christian' right. Bah! What do they know about repentance and forgiveness? They just voted to impeach the guy, which means that there will be a trial in the New Year and all this Monica, Monica, Monica stuff will

keep going on and on and on, unless some wise man or men have the courage to stop it. I'm afraid there's not enough coal in Newcastle to fill the stockings of all those that deserve it this year."

"But why does that matter to me?" Rex said. "What do you want me to do about it? Go roam the halls of the U.S. Capitol and devour the bad guys?"

"Oh, what a tummyache you'd get!" Lapis laughed.

Rex growled. "And what does this have to do with Christmas, which Santa explained to me before the rest of you arrived? From what he said, Christmas will come no matter what's going on in one city of the World."



I really hadn't a clue what Rex should, or could, do. "You see, Rex," I pondered, "the man whose birthday we celebrate on December 25 is called the 'King of Kings.' Somehow you, being a king yourself, have a role to play, but I'm not sure what. I do know that in one of the books of prophecies, it is said, 'The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. . . . They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.' "*"

King Rex roared a reverberating roar. "Straw! I'll not eat straw! I'll eat that young calf, believe me. It's my nature. In fact, I'm getting hungry now." And his eyes scanned the room and settled on little Crystal Camellia.

"Maybe it's not time for that prophesy to be fulfilled yet." PM hustled to insert herself before the lion's gaze while Relicta hustled Crystal behind her.

PM turned to me. "So that idea is a no-go. What now?"

I winced. "I thought the part about the 'little child' leading them was relevant, given that we're celebrating the birth of a little child. I thought maybe, in the spirit of the season, Rex would make a dramatic gesture. But nope, suppose that's not possible. Let's turn to Revelations, the part about the four beasts, the first 'like a lion.' And the beasts say, 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.' Then there comes the part about casting the crowns before the throne, saying, 'Thou art worthy, O Lord,

*Isaiah 11:6-9.

to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things.*
Maybe it's Rex's crown that's needed?"

For Rex's golden crown was in truth splendid, with a big diamond set in the center, surrounded by more diminutive diamonds, emeralds, rubies and sapphires. It caught the light of the fire and reflected it around the room, flickering off the ceiling and walls, and bouncing rays of light to collide with the glow of the star atop Santa's tree. Each time Rex shook his mane, the room glittered and glistened.

However, Rex wasn't enthused about the "casting the crown" part either, for he valued his crown very highly. "This crown won't be removed from my mane until I die. I've worn it since my father passed it to me with his last breath, and I intend for Prince Leo to wear it after I'm gone."



(So here we are, with no Christmas *Crisis!* to speak of — although there are plenty of crises OUT THERE. And here is a lion with a crown sitting — or reclining — in Santa's home at the North Pole. Obviously, the dastardly doings in Washington aren't going to be solved by the Christmas Crew + Lion. Nor, unfortunately, are any of the other crises going on in the world.

And SEGWAC, flush with success in the States, is wreaking havoc as fast as possible everywhere else in the world. Is this going to be a Crisisless Christmas, at least in terms of a dramatic rescue at the end? Appears so.)

Rex was restless. When he unwound to his feet, the Christmas Crew scattered to give him room to pace. "So, I suppose I'm through here, right? Sorry I can't be the guy you needed to make things right. It's time to go home now. I'm getting hungry."

Mrs. Santa rose from her rocker. "Are you sure I can't interest you in any of the reindeer's straw? Dasher and Prancer say it's especially tasty this year."

"Reindeer? Do they taste anything like kudu? Or ostrich?" Rex drooled. "I have heard the polar bear is especially delicious. Or how about penguin?"



*Revelation 4:6-11.



PM hastened to interrupt. "Dear me, I suppose it's time to take you back. You have your duties, and we have a concert to prepare for. But I hope you enjoyed our earlier conversation about the meaning of Christmas, and that you don't feel your trip was wasted."

Rex came as close to a smile as a lion can. "Dear Ms. Ambassador, I am who I am, and am not ready to change. But you have shown me some very interesting ideas, and should you ever need help again, pop on down and sing out on the savanna. I'll hear you. Diplomatic immunity, of course!"



The royal regalness turned to me. "Ms. Chronicler, hope you can get to Sabi Sabi again too. Do you think it might help if I stopped off in Washington and gave a great roar?"

I grinned. "Thanks, Your Highness. It might help. They might think it's the voters. Not that they're listening to them these days. But right now they've gone home for the holidays, and wouldn't pay any attention."



Geranium Amethyst snuck up behind her Mom and proffered a silver gift. "I was going to give this brush to my Dad for Christmas, but you look like you might like it. It works real good on manes."

Alabaster smiled with pride as PM handed the package to Rex.

"Thank you, little one," Rex said. And there was perhaps less a glint of hunger than of love when he took the present in his paws.

When PM linked tails with Rex, Peppermint Paunch called to her, "Hurry back, Cuz. We've got another song from Spruce. He's added a rhumba beat to 'Here We Go a Wassailing.' The concert's only hours away."

Alabaster blew a kiss to his wife, and BOING!, she and Rex were gone.





It is only with the slightest regret that I report that there was absolutely no crisis for the Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert. PM sang beautifully, as always, and the crowds cheered wildly. I almost said the crowd *roared*, but after hearing a real roar I'm afraid there's no comparison.

I'm also pleased to report that Santa's sleigh is now packed and ready to go, and Clyde's Naughty & Nice lists have been updated with exactitude. If you've been good, you'll get your presents, I can assure you.

There's been no sign around the North Pole or Christmas Monsterland of Lucifer Trinode, that three-antennaed zapper of the isolator ray, nor of

Dove's father and mother, Viper and Lucretia Carrion, or Parasite, Dove's brother, those dastardly

SEGWACians. Perhaps they figure they've done so well in spreading clouds of gloom and doom that they won't even bother with taking on Santa this year.



I suppose I could blame them for the fact that there's no Christmas *Crisis* this year, but I'll be too

full of joy, having a happy holiday with family and friends, to bemoan whatever literary leanness the lapse might have caused.

For we know that SEGWAC is out there, working very hard to stifle Peace on Earth and Good Will to All. Time enough next year to take them on again — and to find out what special powers Rex may have to help the Christmas Crew.

Maybe it isn't so hard being a Christmas Chronicler.



MERRY CHRISTMAS!

and

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

