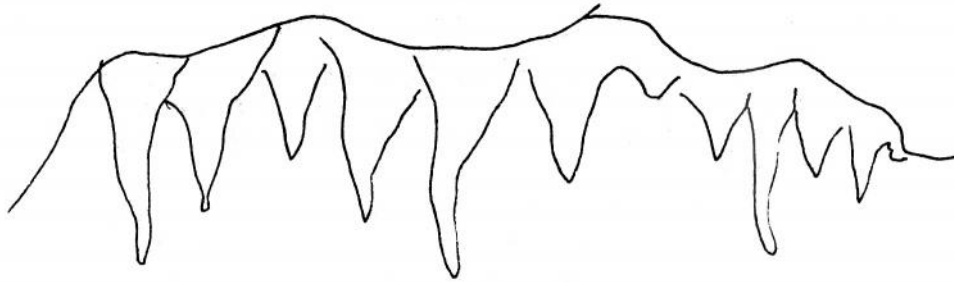


THE PARABLE OF THE
LOST CHRISTMAS
MONSTERS





THE PARABLE OF THE LOST CHRISTMAS MONSTERS

The PM Saga, Book X

by Susan Kirby

"Ping-pang, pop-pung-PONG!"

Maraschino Monster ducked as puffed projectiles pelted the floor around her. "Hey! Watch what you're doing!" she yelled over the noise of the vacuum cleaner, then sucked up the errant efflux. Flipping off the sweeper, she followed her nose into the kitchen, finding her daughter PM* attempting in vain to control an overflow of exploding kernels.

"Not again, dear," Maraschino scolded.

"Fp-pf-cr-cr-chomp, gulp," the mauvette muncher muttered, then swallowed. "Just one bowl," she declared.

"PM, popcorn proved perfect when you were a postpartum purple progenitor, but it's almost twelve months since you gave birth!"

"Ah Ma--I'll quit after this."

Maraschino scooped a paw-full of popcorn. "That's what you promised last January. It was March before you stopped, and June before you lost enough weight to get back in your harness. Remember our saying: Too many batches bathed in butter ..."

"... botches a beautiful bod," PM sing-songed. "But Mommmm, I always eat when I'm nervous."

**For the uninitiated, PM--Purple Monster--is a Christmas Monster, North Pole Ambassador, and Santa's lead sleigh-puller. Although complete sets of her life story--as chronicled by this writer--are rare, last year's "A Christmas Soap Opera" contains a brief biography of our heroine, her friends and family. Please request a copy from the author.*

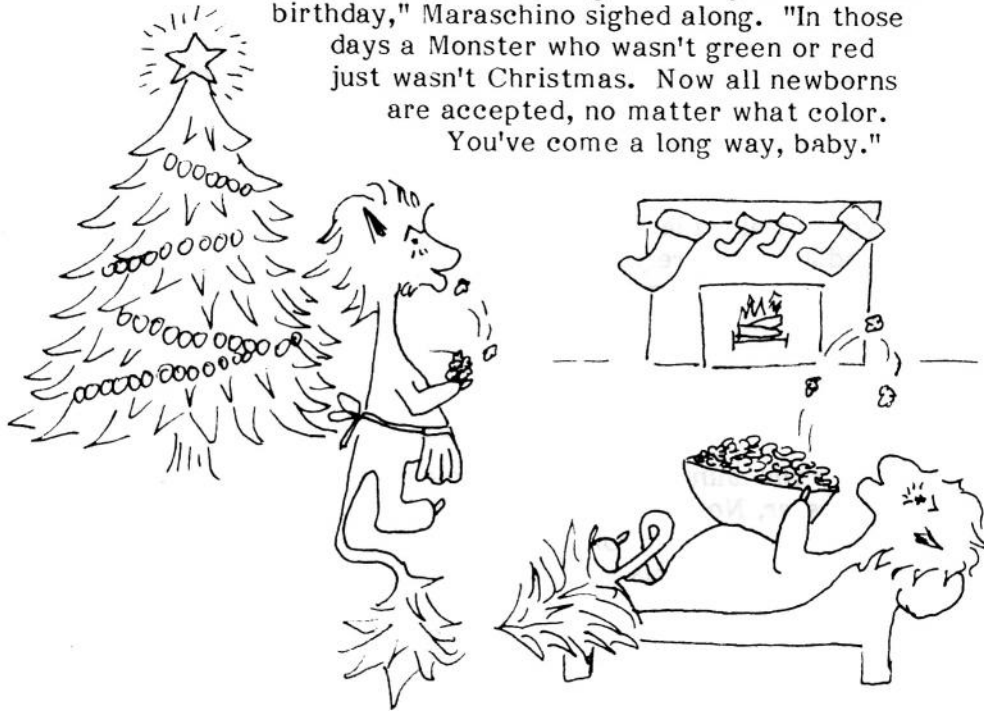
Copyright © 1987 by Susan Kirby

"I know, dear. Tomorrow's Christmas Eve--my newest grandchildren's first birthday, and your return to the front of Santa's sleigh. Maybe hostessing THE READING OF THE STORY tomorrow is too much for you."

"Cr-cr-un-un-ch, chomp, chomp," PM argued, shaking her magenta mane. "No, I want to do it. Alabaster and I know what an honor it is to have THE READING in our happy home." The early afternoon snack now devoured, Maraschino and PM returned to the living room for a final inspection.

"Thanks so much for your help. What a change from this morning!" PM remarked with domestic satisfaction. Only hours before the domicile had been littered with the far-flung flotsam and jettisoned jetsam of her toddler twins. Now the cave glimmered in the glittering light of the fir tree, festively festooned, ornamented, and tinselled. Moisture welled in PM's eyes when she faced the fireplace. Two new stockings, lovingly embroidered by Alabaster's mother, were hung on the mantel with care--the teeny white one's blue stitching announced "Lapis Snowflake," the tiny lavender one's red needlework proclaimed "Geranium Amethyst." PM inhaled deeply and sighed with content.

"So much has changed since your own first birthday," Maraschino sighed along. "In those days a Monster who wasn't green or red just wasn't Christmas. Now all newborns are accepted, no matter what color. You've come a long way, baby."



PM stretched out on the settee. "What a year this has been! You warned me--a Monster's first twelve months are the worst. And I've had to cope with two enfants terrible!"

Their commiseration was cut short by the chiming of the telephone.

"Lilting Lilac," PM heard her adored Alabaster across the arctic wire, "have you seen the kids?"

PM's heart thudded, then sank. "Aren't they with you at the North Pole?"

"They were. Until seconds ago. We finished band practice, then Relicta offered to show the twins where her planet used to be. Our darling duo peered through Santa's Celestron C14 telescope at Orion's Belt, then skewed the scope to scan the sky. They stared for a time, then Lapis yelled out 'green cheese' and Geranium giggled with glee. I scolded them and shooed them away. When I looked to see if any damage had been done, what I saw through the eyepiece I couldn't believe!" He paused for breath.

"What? What?" screamed PM.

"The twins! There they were, merry as you please, having milk and cookies with the Man In The Moon!"

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. I blinked. When I blinked again, I saw the Man, two empty plates and glasses, but no kids! Vanished!"

"Where are they now?"

"How should I know? It's your fault, PM. This didn't come from my side of the family."

"How in Christmas Monsterland was I to know they'd inherit my teletransportation powers!" howled PM. "Or that they would be able to use them so early?" She began to bawl.

Alabaster apologized fiber-optically. "I'm sorry, plum puddin', I didn't mean it. I'm just worried. Who knows where they'll turn up next?"

PM was now sobbing hysterically. Maraschino grabbed the phone, having surmised the nature of the calamity from PM's end of the conversation. "Al, have Rudolph fly you here at once. I'll contact Cousin Paunch. We'll find the missing moppets."

As she hung up the receiver there was a knock at the cave entrance. "Some day I'll learn to use the bell," Paunch resolved, rubbing his scraped paw. He sauntered to the TV and turned it on. "Didn't know you were a stage mom, PM. But the kids sure are cute." In the middle of the screen was ALF (the TV alien), conversing with PM's progeny.

"How did you get here?" the astonished ALF was asking.

"We just thunk it and we're here," chortled Geranium.

"Precocious pixies," the furry alien grunted, then drooled, "you don't happen to be cats?"

"No, we're Crizmuss Monsers," chirped Lapis cherubically.

Then the twins disappeared.

"Uh-oh," PM wailed, wringing her paws. "They've gone back to Hollywood. Oh why did I take them to that television studio?" The memory of another Christmas character* lured and almost irrevocably lost to the clutches of Celebritydumb increased her anxiety.

While Maraschino was explaining the situation to Peppermint, Alabaster and his search party stomped in. Clyde Elf, Elvira Fernhat, Rudolph, Relicta (the Extra Terrestrial Intergalactic Traveler), and Relicta's husband Dove flicked snow off their caps, antlers, and antennae. Alabaster silently hugged his wife.

"O what are we going to do?" Clyde Elf inquired.

"O what are we going to do? O what are we going to do?" reduplicated Rudolph.

"I just said that," castigated Clyde.

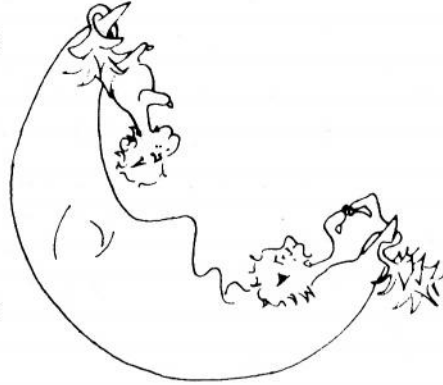
PM by now--though anxious, bereft, disquieted, woebegone, fear-stricken, fretful, frustrated, and frightened--had switched her brain to automatic functioning. "They can't go anywhere they haven't seen before. They have to visualize their destination in order to set the coordinates."

"We should never have taken them with us on our Thanksgiving junket," Alabaster moaned. "They weren't old enough. The sin of parental pride--we just had to show them

*See "The Prodigal Elf," Book VII of The PM Saga.

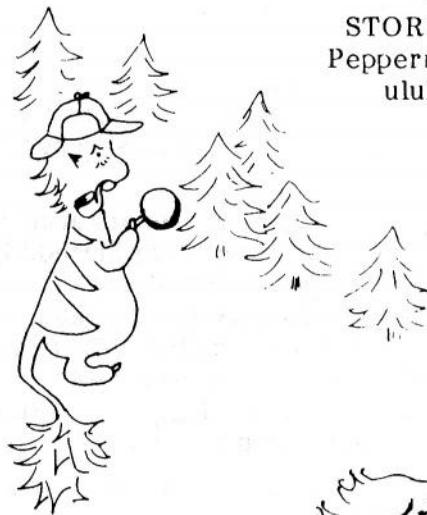
off to the People while we spread the Christmas message across the United States!"

"How did they ever develop the power so fast?" P.M. wondered worriedly. "I didn't have it until I was lead sleighpuller. I guess I was slow. I never dreamed they'd have this ability before their first birthday, before ... before ..."



"THE READING OF THE STORY," P.M., Maraschino, Peppermint, and Alabaster ululated in unison.

"Before they learned what it takes to be true Christmas Monsters," appended Maraschino.



"Boo hoo, boo hoo," boo-hoed the distraught mulberry mother, gnashing her teeth. "My itty-bitsy ones OUT THERE, alone, unprotected ..."



Alabaster imagined the worst. "OUT THERE, they can be ..." He arrested the thought. Visions of dreadful possibilities flooded Maraschino's heart. "My grandbabies can be c-c-c ... I can't say it. I must call Spruce. Oh dear, oh dear."

"What can happen to them?" queried Rudolph.

Alabaster tried to explain. "Rudy, here, in Christmas Monsterland and the North Pole, we are safe ... the magic of love and Christmas protects us."

PM concurred. "That's true. Christmas Monsterland is a fantasy world--events happen here as imagination wills. But OUT THERE is reality. Once we venture OUT THERE, we are vulnerable to the vagaries of Human nature and the unpredictability of Human life. If the Society for the Elimination of Good Will and Christmas captures the twins, I shudder to think what will happen. Our two tadpoles are so impressionable."

Relicta proposed a positive possibility. "Perhaps the itinerant imps will tire, and their instinct will return them here. Why not wait for them to blink themselves to hearth and home?"

"It's not that simple," Alabaster answered, anguished. "Young Monsters, until one full year of age, are incredibly inquisitive, acquisitive, active, bright, curious, and imaginative. They learn many things very rapidly, and the more stimulated, the more energy they exhibit. These are their endearing qualities. However, pre-one-year-old Monsters are also exceptionally, excruciatingly, nauseatingly narcissistic and selfish. They don't change until ..."

Once again the Christmas Monster quartet chorused, "THE READING OF THE STORY."

"Oh dear," Dove deduced, "that truly makes them fair game for SEGWAC."

PM was pacing pathetically. "Should SEGWAC get hold of them--before the bond of family is firmly set, before they truly know what love is, our offspring can be ... corrupted."

"Dove," Maraschino turned to the cape-clad convert to Christmashood, "I know talking to your father is painful, but perhaps you could ... maybe ... discover if he knows anything."

Dove nodded. "I'll visit Dad. I won't let on the twins are missing. But I know Father--if SEGWAC's aware of their

escapades, he'll be sure to hurl the news at me before he slams the door." With a whirl of the spaceship he and Relicta set off.

Alabaster and PM were busy pouring over the list of the twins' favorite places from their last trip OUT THERE. The most likely locations were checked off, areas assigned, and duties delegated. Maraschino was to remain in the cave, in case the tots beamed home. Spruce (PM's father) would watch at the maternal grandparents' home, another locale favored by the twins. Al's parents, awaiting word at the Eggshell estate, were notified to alert Christmas Monsterland.

Rudolph tested the radar and prepared for departure. Elvira kissed PM, then Al. "We'll refuel at the North Pole and brief the Clauses on the plan," Clyde called out.

"If you see our gadabout gamins, try to split them up," PM instructed as the sleigh gained speed. "They can't go as far if they're not holding paws."

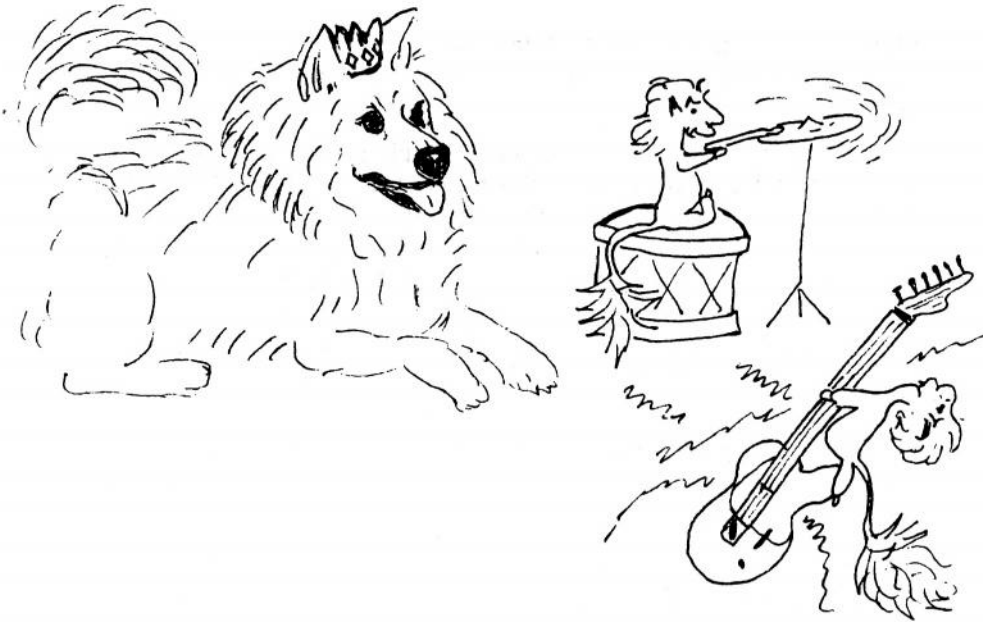
After a tender tail link with her mother for strength, PM teletransported herself, Alabaster, and Peppermint Paunch to New York City.

The North Pole contingent jingled Santa's sled into the familiar Maine sleighport. Princess Olga, the regal Samoyed ruler of the Kingdom of Jackman, snow-mobiled out to meet them.

"Message received on my computer," Olga hallooed. "You just missed them. I was doing the mixdown for the 'Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives Christmas Album' when the twins materialized. The peripatetic pups, with nary a 'by your leave,' proceeded to the recording studio, pounded on the piano, banged the timbales, and screeched a high note on the electric guitar which darn near deafened me. Unruly urchins."

"Your highness," Elvira bowed, then vowed, "this year's Christmas story will explain their behavior--I hope. Did they hint their next stop?"

"Woof! Well, Geranium chattered, 'Over hill, over dale, over park, over pale, we do wander everywhere.' Lapis followed this truncated excerpt with, 'We'll put a girdle round



the earth in forty seconds.' I was about to correct the quotes when, ARF!, Geranium tweaked my tail and they disappeared."

Rudolph radioed the North Pole communications center and relayed the news. Mrs. Santa sent a message to Peppermint Paunch to phone the workshop.

PM and her search party were retracing the Thanksgiving Day parade route when Peppermint's beeper bonged. He dialed the 800 number.

Alabaster and PM stared up and down Central Park West. "It was about here," PM pointed to the place, "Geranium used the peashooter to puncture Superman's arm."

"Right. And there's where Lapis tripped Betty Boop so she fell on her noggin," Al reminisced. "It'll take two rock concerts to pay for the damages."

The red-striped sleuth returned and repeated Rudolph's report. "'Tis Greek to me," the perplexed Paunch opined.

"No, Elizabethan—sort of. From Shakespeare," PM grimaced. "The twins audited one of my acting classes. Let's flash over to 72nd Street."

The room where PM had enjoyed and endured the exhilarations and tribulations of training in Bardian technique was now dark and deserted, empty chairs facing a bare stage. "They've been here," PM declared, picking up a battered paperback from the floor. "One of my scripts--'A Midwinter Eve's Phantasmagoria' (one of Will's early folios). My half-pint hams must have pinched it from my bookcase."

Peppermint discovered a tape recorder, the power still on. He rewound the tape and pushed "play." Lapis's voice intoned: "Ill met by moonlight, proud Geranium." Geranium picked up the cue: "What, jealous brother mine! Fairies, skip hence."

"They must have heard you rehearsing," Alabaster grinned.

"Not quite the lines, but a feel for iambic pentameter," critiqued his thespian spouse.

The tape rattled on with brief swatches of decimated dialogue. Finally Lapis rang out, "What llama? A roan, a crop-ear, is it not? That roan shall be my throne. Well, I will back him straight. O Cam'lopardus! A giraffe! a giraffe! my kingdom for a giraffe!"

"THE ZOO!" PM, Alabaster, and Peppermint exclaimed, and quickly called Mrs. Claus.

Clyde, Elvira, and Rudolph were on their way to Disneyland when they received the zoo clue. They quickly rerouted the sleigh to San Diego.

Clyde gamboled over to the giraffe enclosure. "Geoffrey!" he called up, "have you seen PM's kids?"

"Oh yes, indeedy. The grape-furred brat kicked me in the shin," Geoffrey groaned, indicating a bruised spot on his tibia.

"Where'd they go?" Rudolph pleaded imploringly, but the giraffe only growled, "Wretched whelps."

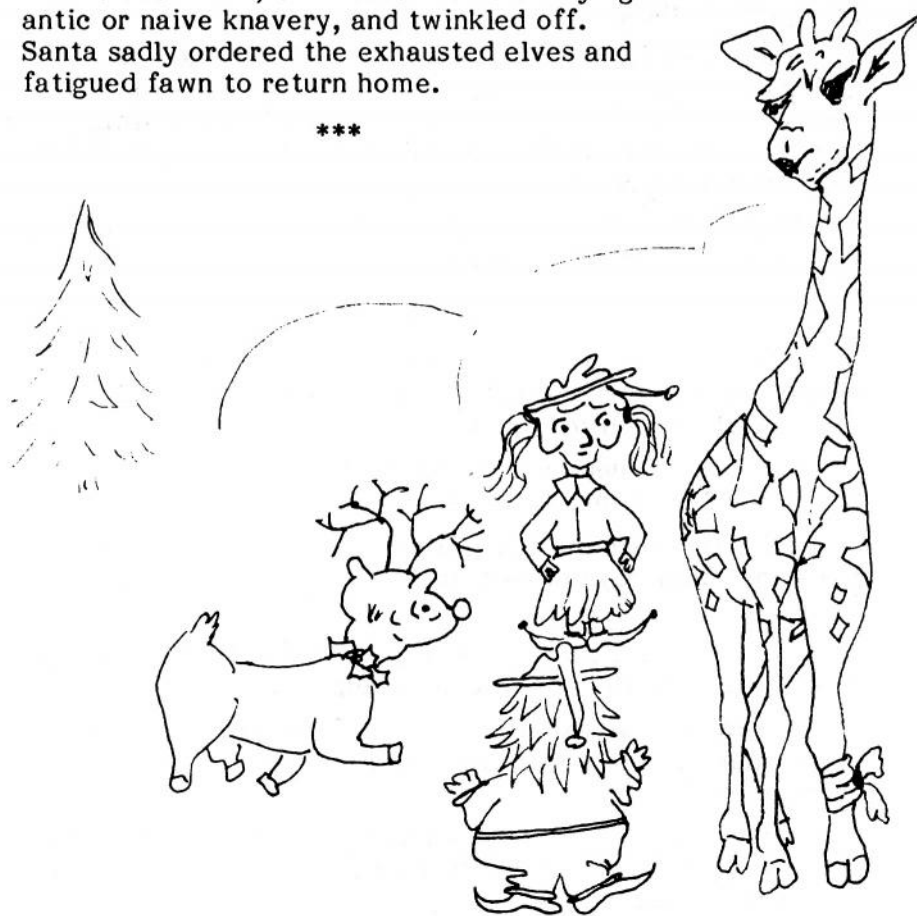
Elvira tried to explain. "Think of them as mischievous caterpillars about to metamorphose into beneficent butterflies."

"More like grubs transmogrifying into dung beetles," Geoffrey grumbled, but he stretched his head in the direction of the guanacos.

The grazing pen was empty save for a full-size picture of Alabaster Eggshell and a note explaining that more information could be obtained by consulting "My Life in the Zoo: Five Years as an 'Alpaca?'" Underneath, scribbled in purple and blue crayon, was the addition: "BY OUR DADDY. SIGNED L. AND G."

"I just love the story of how PM and Alabaster met," Elvira swooned, gazing wistfully at Clyde, "it's so romantic." As always, the object of her affections ignored her.

A thorough survey of the rest of the grounds yielded no further sign of the twins. With deepening despondency, the North Pole search party pressed on, reporting to Mrs. Claus from Colorado, Kansas, Texas, Missouri, Illinois, and Pennsylvania. The word was always the same: the twin Monsters had dropped in on the friendly and beloved Folk, committed some annoying antic or naive knavery, and twinkled off. Santa sadly ordered the exhausted elves and fatigued fawn to return home.



Dove and Relicta traversed a maze of shadowy streets and murky alleys, finally descending the dank stairwell to the vestibule of SEGWAC's U.S. headquarters. The Carrion family, sans Dove, had been evicted from their posh digs early in January, following their failed effort to destroy PM and Christmas Monsterland. They were now ensconced in this more diminutive and dilapidated dwelling, much to the chagrin of the elder Carrion.

Dove squeezed Relicta's hand, and after a brief prayer hefted a skull-shaped knocker and let it clank. Viper Carrion yanked open the portal. "Vulture. Come to gloat at your old man's humiliation?"

"No, we're here for our annual attempt at reconciliation. And please, Dad, my name's Dove now." The son proffered a present to his pater.

"Bah!" Viper batted the box away. "Who's the antennae'd adventuress?"

"You've met my wife Relicta, Father. We're very happy."

"Don't you dare curse in my presence!" Viper hissed venomously. "Still doing that damn do-gooder work?"

"The Salvation Army? Yes sir."

"You're no son of mine," Carrion Sr. snarled and slammed the door, bruising Dove's protruding proboscis.

The disheartened son was rubbing his nose when gnarled fingers squeezed his carotid artery. After his vision cleared Dove hailed his accoster. "Merry Christmas, Para."

"No need to insult me, Vultch," Parasite Carrion retorted. "What brings my twerpy twin to our neck of the ghetto?"

"Friendly visit. What have you been up to?"

"No help from you, but Dad and I have been working our way back



down into SEGWAC's bad graces. Dad's been to Washington, Denmark, and Israel, and I've just returned from Iran, Nicaragua, and Switzerland. Y'might say we've had our 'arms' full, ha! ha! Haven't had so much fun since Watergate."

Dove asked his next question as innocently as possible. "Any other news?"

Parasite sneered a snide sneer. "Nothing you'd be interested in." He slithered across the threshold, then twisted to leer lewdly at Relicta. "Unless you'd consider it news that PM's gargoylish gremlins are OUT HERE, wreaking havoc. Rest assured--SEGWAC has an evil eye out for them." He cackled diabolically and slammed the door.

"Oh dear," Relicta gasped. "They know."

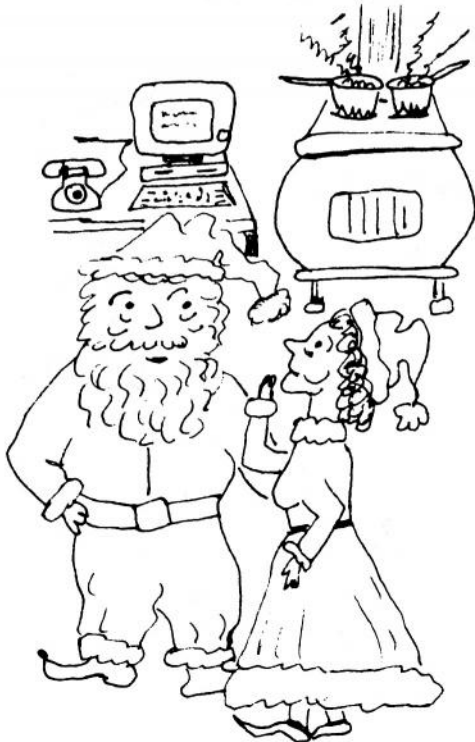
"Yes," sighed Dove, rubbing his nose again. "We'll report to the North Pole then zip over to Salvation Army headquarters."

Mrs. Santa took the message, passed it on to Alabaster, then furtively stirred the fudge on the stove. Santa put his arm around his wife's waist. "Why don't you rest, dear?" he suggested. "This worrying must be wearing you out."

"No, no, I must keep busy," Mrs. C. insisted. "I still have my job to do. Christmas must carry on, even if ... even if ..."

"What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?" Santa cited softly. "Have faith, dear. The twins will be all right."

Mrs. Claus continued cooking, her ear cocked for bulletins emanating from the computer printer, CB radio, telephone, and TV.



"SEGWAC's on the prowl," Alabaster agonized when he rejoined his wife and Peppermint Paunch in front of the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree. "It's one hour to Christmas Eve. We're running out of time."

"And out of places to look," added Paunch. "The kids could be anywhere. Thank goodness Aunt Maraschino and Cousin Cerise didn't take them on their trip to Australia!"

"From the reports we've been getting, a Tasmanian devil would have been no match for our menacing minxes," Al joked. But his tone was tremulous and his laughter hollow.

PM nuzzled her ermine husband's nape. "Our lost ones will be found," she assured him. "They're nearby. I know. Mother's instinct."

Peppermint, magnifying glass in paw, was examining a mustache smeared on a poster of Mayor Koch. "They've been here!" he detected. "Recently--the fingerpaint's still wet." He raised his glass to a shiny smudge on the Mayor's head. "Oh no, SEGWAC's been here too. I recognize the slime." With increased urgency the trio marched down Fifth Avenue.

Atop the Empire State Building PM tried to telepath a message to her wayward whippersnappers. Just as she was depleting her last reservoir of psychic energy, Penelope Pigeon swooped in front of her and perched on Paunch's pate.

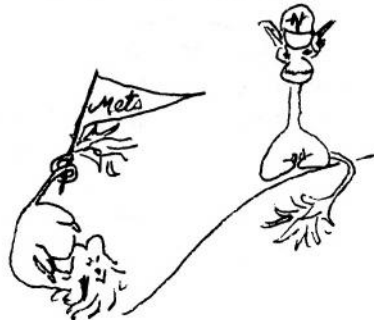
"Hey gang," the cosmopolitan cushat cooed, "I just saw your two cheeky chicks."

"Where?" "Where?" "Where?"

"Shea Stadium. Lapis was sporting a Mets cap, yodeling 'baseball like it oughta be' while Geranium turned somersaults on the pitcher's mound. I tried to grab them, but Lapis pulled out one of my feathers and blur-blur-blur, away they went. PM, we must have a heart-to-heart about how you're raising your kids."

"Later," PM promised. "Did they say where they were headed?"

"Geranium said something like 'Beam me up, Scotty.'"



"STAR TREK IV!" jubilated Alabaster. "They've gone to the movies!"

Peppermint flipped to The New York Times movie listings, and with renewed excitement the Christmas Monsterland gang rushed uptown, Penelope flying alongside.

"Sounds like their power is waning," puffed PM. "They're fading now, instead of blinking. I hope we reach them soon-- before SEGWAC does."

"Here's my coop," Penelope fluttered as they passed West 76th Street. "I'll send up my flock up for a look-see. By the way, Al--you're gonna have to get Lapis a new cap. No one pulls my feather and gets away with it."

The movie theatre was empty, but Alabaster spied a World Series pennant on a front row seat. PM discovered pieces of white-and-lavender-fur-covered Milk Duds and followed the trail up the aisle. "We've got the scent!" shouted Peppermint, and the troop tracked the twins toward Columbus Avenue.

In the entranceway to the Museum of Natural History they fell upon two inky-garbed muggers crouching over a curled-up bag lady. "Cease and desist, cruel SEGWACians!" PM uttered in indignation and launched herself at the bad guys. Daunted by the mettle of the mulberry missile, the malefactors scuttled and scurried away. PM knelt beside the shivering old woman and spoke with her.

"I'll call Relicta. She'll find this lady a bed for tonight at the Shelter," asserted Al. "Then we'll keep looking."

"Yes, please call. But no need to search further," PM purred with relief. "Thanks to Miss Charity, our rambling rascals are safe and sound."

And sure enough, wrapped in the woman's ragged coat and nestled snug in her arms were the two chocolate-faced miniature Monsters, snoring peacefully. PM gently lifted Lapis, who was clutching a stuffed dinosaur. The tot raised a groggy eyelid, peeped at his mother's teary face, said "Uh-oh," and fell blissfully back to sleep. Peppermint cradled Geranium while Alabaster helped the old woman to her feet. "Thank you, Miss Charity," the grateful father said as he wrapped the lady's coat around her shoulders and guided her



to the sidewalk. The Christmas Monsters and the homeless woman huddled together on the curb, sharing their warmth, until Relicta and Dove arrived.

"And when they hath found them, they layeth them on their shoulders, rejoicing," Dove paraphrased as he escorted Miss Charity into his warm van. "And when they cometh home, they calleth together their friends and neighbors, saying unto them ..."

PM completed the verse, "Rejoice with us, for we have found our sheep which were lost."

At the stroke of midnight, PM, Al, Peppermint, and the truant twins returned to Christmas Monsterland.

Christmas Eve afternoon PM and Al's abode was chock-full of Christmas creatures. All the family and friends of the Monster yearlings (five total, including Lapis and Geranium) were present for the great occasion. The harried parents herded the young Monsters into the center of the cave, PM and Al careful to keep the twins separated lest they join forces for another journey.

A loud "Ho-ho-ho!" heralded the entrance of Santa and his entourage. The quintet of one-year-olds surrounded jolly

St. Nick, tugging on his beard and pulling at his sack. Santa merrily pulled up a pouf in front of the fireplace, set down his bag, and reached inside. Five dolls emerged and were handed out, one to each tiny toddler.

The youngsters grabbed the proffered gifts, stared at them, then started to cry, a cacophony of caterwauling wails that reverberated from stalactite to stalagmite. "It's ugly!" bellowed Geranium, holding her rag doll by its foot and thumping its yarn-topped head on the floor. Lapis screamed, "Mine's gross!" and chucked his across the room. PM retrieved the toy, raising her brows with maternal understanding.

Mr. and Mrs. Claus wordlessly watched the screaming, ranting, raving, whimpering, simpering, snuffling, and sniffing little ones abuse their presents. They exchanged a smile when the tap-tap-tap of an approaching cane was heard over the din. Great-great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd, known affectionately in Christmas Monsterland as the Old Monster, had arrived. The Old Monster nodded to his North Pole friends and lowered himself into the vacant armchair in front of the fire.

"Hr-r-r-mp," Great-great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd cleared his throat. "Young Monsters," he began, clutching a worn leatherbound book in his wrinkled paws, "gather 'round and shush your ornery muzzles. You hold them toys tightly, whiles I reads you this here story." And since he had a magical presence about him, and since the parents of the five soon-to-be-initiated-into-Christmas-Monsterhood little Monsters had anchored the tots to the ground with a firmly placed paw on each head, the one-year-olds shut up and listened.



THE DOLL WITH THE SAD EYES

Once upon a time, long befores history even, there was a vast, chillingly cold place up north. It had no boundaries, just stretched on and on. This place was called Monsterland, and was inhabited by a bunch of beasties known as Monsters. These was my ancestors and your ancestors, quite nasty creatures with no carin' or concern about them.

Now these critters had every terrible trait one could imagine, and no redeemin' ones. They was also incapable of bein' badly injured or of ... this may be a new word for you, they was incapable of dyin'. So they constantly bickered, beatin' and pummelin' the heck out of each other, but no one could ever win. You'd knock one of them varmints down and he'd just get right up again and knock you down. Them was real unpleasant times, and them was real unpleasant Monsters.

Throughout the centuries, nay, throughout the millenia, they battled and fought, fought and battled, 'til they'd separated into two factions, those who'd turned red with rage, and those that were green with envy. The Red Monsters took over the east side of Monsterland and proceeded to whup the Green ones to the west side. Then they erected a high fence between 'em.



One day, can't say zactly when 'cause we didn't have calendars, POOF!--an old geezer in a red suit, his mate, a whole mess of teeny-weeny green-garbed leprechauns, a herd of caribou, a sled, and a workshop just appeared where that fence had been.

The Old Monster winked at Santa Claus, who returned the wink, remembering vividly that time so long ago.

It irked the heck out of the Green Monsters and the Red Monsters that some intruder had just plunked himself down in the middle of their feudin'. They forgot their own squabblin' for a while and set about peltin' this white-whiskered gent with every sharp and blunt instrument they could lay their paws on. But these attacks was met with a smile, and everythin' thrown at the old codger or his crew bounced right off.

Unable to evict this usurper by force, the Monsters sent representatives—one from Green Monsterland, one from Red Monsterland—to confront the trespasser. Jade Green (my papa) and Madder Red met in the center of the old dude's house, glared at one another, then glowered at the grizzled gaffer.

"Who is you?" demanded Jade.

"I'm Santa Claus, and this is Mrs. Claus," the jolly old man replied, shakin' his belly like it was a tub of strawberry jam or somethin'.

"Where you come from?" commanded Madder.

Ol' Santa pondered that question a bit, then said, "How do I explain? One day, one beautiful, glorious day, someone OUT THERE 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 ... are."

This existential explanation didn't satisfy your furry forefathers. "Whatcha doin' in our territory?" Madder menaced. Jade, not to be out-done, jabbed, "Whatcha here for?"

"I'm here to spread love, good will, charity, and peace to the People of the world," Mr. Claus politely responded. "I'm here to remind the folks OUT THERE of the meaning and spirit of CHRISTMAS."

Since Jade and Madder didn't know the meanin' of them words--love, good will, charity, Christmas, or People for that matter--they wasn't impressed, and away they stomped with a bad-tempered "Beat it buster, or else!" But no matter what them Monsters tried, they couldn't budge the bearded fat man off their property. In fact, Mr. Claus put up a big sign in front which declared "Welcome to the North Pole." There was no mistakin' his intentions: he was gonna stay.

The ol' guy never gave up tryin' to be neighborly. He was always sendin' his elves with mint jelly to Red Monsterland and his reindeer with candy canes to Green Monsterland. But these presents, though voraciously englutted, was never 'preciated. Monsters didn't know the meanin' of "thanks," so ole Kris Kringle never received any.

Year after year Mr. Claus did his work, makin' toys, packin' the sled, takin' off each December 24th and coming back each December 25th, regular as the calendar. But with the increasin' People population, he one day realized he just didn't have enough workers to supply the demand for new toys. He came up with a new strategy: He'd re-cycle the old toys, ones that had been grown out of, lost, or just plain tossed aside. So his helpers began diggin' through trashcans and garbage dumps, brought the broken toys back to the North Pole, and rebuilt them for the next year.

"The rejects, like we got," grouched Lapis. One threatening twitch of the Old Monster's tail was enough to silence the young Monster, and the story continued.

Santa's new system seemed to work. However, somethin' strange was happenin'. Every now and again this one toy returned to the North Pole--a cloth doll with button eyes and a stitched smile. Mrs. C.'d replace the stuffin', make a new dress, and off the doll would go to a new home. But each time the doll came back, Mrs. Santa noticed her cheeks were tearstained, the corners of her mouth needed turnin' up, and her eyes kept gettin' sadder and sadder. It nearly broke that kindly grey-haired lady's heart, so she and Santa decided to interview the tiny toy.



"Little doll," Mrs. Claus said, "you keep comin' back lookin' worse and worse for wear. Tell us about it, maybe we can help."

The doll at first couldn't speak. But after an encouraging nod from the Clauses, she whispered, "I'm sorry. But the children you give me to make me so sad."

"Why?" asked Santa. "Didn't I give you to good little boys and girls? Let me check my list." Clyde's great-great-great grandpappy brought over the record book. "The first

year I gave you to young Prudence. It says here she was a very good girl. How'd she make you unhappy? Didn't she like you?"

"Oh yes!" the doll answered. "She loved me very much, and I loved her. But when I arrived she was very sad. Her puppy had died right before Christmas, and she hugged me so very tight and cried and cried. So I cried and cried too. I did what I could to cheer her up, but I saw that not everyone is merry on Christmas Day."

"Oh dear," said Mr. Claus. "Next you went to Hortense. What happened there?"

"Hortense was wonderful, sir. But he was an orphan and very lonely. He needed me, but he needed a family more."

Santa, Mrs. Santa, and the sad-eyed doll went through the list of the children. One had been abused, one handicapped, another very sick, another poor and hungry. "They all talked to me," the doll explained. "Sometimes I was the only one they could share their troubles with."

One time the doll had been discarded by a spoiled little girl on Christmas Day and was found by a man searchin' for presents for his children. He'd lost his job and was heart-broken he couldn't give his kids anythin'. "That was one of the best homes I ever went to, 'cause I was so much loved. Why, sir," the doll inquired, tryin' ever-so-hard not to sound critical, "did you give me to someone who had so much, and miss the family that had so little?"

Santa sighed, then replied, "That's not an easy question to answer. The child I gave you to needed a friend. All the toys her parents bought her were expensive and fragile, and were not allowed off the shelf. I'd hoped she'd see past your cloth face and hug your heart of gold. You see, that little girl in truth had less of what really matters than the girl you stayed with. But I admit I miss some families--it's so hard to keep track of the homeless, the wanderers." A sniffle crept into his voice.

The doll's biography included so many for whom Christmas was a time of tragedy, pain, and sorrow. For many People, the doll observed, the holiday's glitz and glitter reminded them how lonely they were, how hurt, how hungry. The doll gave all the love she had, and shared all the sadness she could. Now she was tired.

Santa sat silently, lost in thought. Finally he spoke. "Would you be willing to try an experiment? I'd like you to stay with one of our neighboring Monsters for a bit. See what happens."



"Whatever you say, sir," the doll agreed, never one to disobey the wishes of her elders. Santa hitched up the sleigh, drove it west, and rang Jade Green's bell. "I have a gift for your one-year-old," St. Nick announced when Papa opened the door. It was Christmas Eve, just like today. Santa handed the doll with the sad eyes to me, and I took it, shook it, bit its arm, and pulled its straggly hair. "Mr. Green, do me a favor, please," Santa said to my dad. "I want little Smaragd to sleep with this doll. For one month, every night."

"What's in it for me?" Jade asked, always one to make a deal.

Mr. Claus scratched his beard. "If Smaragd does what I ask, and returns the doll to me in a month, I'll give you two cases of candy canes."

"Don't seem like 'nough t'me, makin' a sissy outa my boy for two cases of candy canes."

"So be it," Santa shrugged his shoulders. "I'll go across the way and make the offer to Madder Red." That was a clever, clever move on Kris Kringle's part. The wise ancient knew Jade would be even greener with envy if Madder Red got somethin' he didn't. Papa's paw shook Santa's hand, and I was stuck with that tattered ol' toy.

Now your Great-great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd was a real cantankerous critter in those days. I tried to get rid of the li'l doll--crammed it in the coal bin and covered it with cinders. But Papa found it and threatened to lock me in the cellar if I didn't obey, so that night I put the doll next to me and went to sleep. Next mornin' I woke up feelin' different. When a neighbor pup beat on me, I whack at him all right, but when I knocked him down I felt worse 'stead of better. After the next night, I began to act strange too. Two of my pals were whackin' each other over the head, an event which usually made me crow with glee. But this day I stuck my neck 'tween 'em and stopped the fight. See, instead of enjoyin' the brawl--here's the kicker--I felt sad.

This continued the rest of the month, gettin' weirder and weirder each day. To speed up this tale, I'll just tell you by the time I made the journey to the North Pole to return the doll I was huggin' it tightly. When I handed it over to St. Nick, I did something no Monster had ever done before. I cried. Real tears. And funny thing, the li'l doll, it didn't look quite as sad as it had when Santa first brung it to me.

When our neighbors caught sight of me luggin' them two crates of candy canes home and got wind of the deal, they rushed to the North Pole to get their share. Santa started handin' out other sad-eyed dolls to their younguns, with the same condition.

Meanwhilst, unknownst to us Green Monsters, Mrs. Kringle had struck the same bargain (only with mint jelly) with Madder Red. Puny Pomegranate Red carried her doll around for a month, same result. Madder's neighbors got dolls and their kids carried 'em around too, and so it went. Slowly Green Monsterland and Red Monsterland began to change. We stopped beatin' each other up, 'cept occasionally, and when we did hit someone, we didn't enjoy it. If we yelled at one another, we saw how bad it made 'em feel and we felt bad too.

One by one we started knockin' on Santa's door just to say "hi," somethin' no self-respectin' Monster would have dreamt of before, and Santa'd tell the story of Christmas. Meanwhile, in Christmas Monsterland, since clawin' and clubbin' wasn't as fun as it used to be, we became a trifle bored. Some Monsters volunteered--yes, volunteered!--to help Santa with his Christmas doin's. Eventually a few of our more coordinated members began climbin' in the harness to haul St. Nick on Christmas Eve. We began callin' ourselves Christmas Monsters, not Red or Green Monsters, since our two warrin' sides weren't warrin' any more.

One day, when I was a youth (a strikin' cuss, if I do say so), I visited Mr. Claus, and who should I see but Pomegranate Red, all grown up. Such a beautiful Monster! My libido being lecherous, I introduced myself, wooed and won that gal. We had the weddin' smack in the center of the North Pole. And during our matin' season, which you all know corresponds with Christmas Day, we, well, we ... might as well say it straight--we snerkled. Tiny Paprika Pistache was born the followin' Christmas Eve, a Green Monster with the handsomest Red

stripes you ever saw. We hoped, for we had discovered what hope meant, that our new-found feelin's would carry over to the next generation. But 'though Paprika was just as bright and smart and cute as could be, he was a terror--greedy, avaricious, and just plain ego-centered. We conjectured, discussin' the situation with Santa, that maybe the first year of development for a Monster was so rapid, intellectually, that the expandin' brain couldn't absorb good manners. It's difficult enough learnin' to stand, given the eccentricity of our anatomy. We also gotta conquer walkin', talkin', readin', and writin', all in our first year. So the following Christmas Eve Pomegranate and I got the doll with the saddest eyes from the North Pole and passed it on to Paprika. Wonder of wonders, it worked! Paprika became a good little Christmas Monster, in even less time than his ma and pa. Thus began the tradition of the Doll with the Sad Eyes, which continues 'til today.

You see, beasties, them there ugly dolls, as you call 'em, are gonna give you somethin' very important in Christmas Monsterland. They're gonna learn you how to love. They're gonna teach you to feel pain--not your own, but the pain of others. They're gonna teach you how to share. And if you learn good, when you return your doll to Santa in a month it won't have such sad eyes, it'll be beautiful, and you'll give it back gladly and with joy, knowin' you've gained what makes a Monster a true Christmas Monster--empathy, love, compassion, and humility.

See, the joy of Christmas is in the givin', not the gettin'. The presents we help Santa deliver are nice, but the greatest gift we can give is the message of Christmas. We Christmas Monsters are lucky. We just go on and on, as long as there's one Person OUT THERE who can imagine us. But People--their lifetime OUT THERE is just an eyeblink in eternity. So if People got real sadness in the Here and Now, we gotta share ourselves and the Spirit of Christmas, let People know they're loved and give 'em hope for the Time to Come.

With that Great-great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd closed his book. Santa leaned over to the Old Monster. "Gets better and better each time you tell it," Santa complimented, slipping him a candy cane. "And works faster and faster," Mrs. Claus added, observing the young Christmas Monsters. The five one-year-olds were holding their dolls with new-found respect. Already Lapis Snowflake was applying a



bandage to his doll's bruised head, and Geranium Amethyst was stroking her doll's hair. One by one the tiny tots climbed into the laps of their parents. They snuggled up, and tentative murmurings were heard: "I love you Mommy." "I love you Daddy." "I'm sorry not everyone can be as happy as we are on Christmas Eve."

The Old Monster surveyed the warm scene with misty eyes. "This is what's really important at Christmas," he pronounced. "Family, friends, faith. My heart's full t'burstin'."

Santa clasped Smaragd's paw, took a sip of eggnog, then consulted his pocketwatch. "Ho! ho! my holiday helpers. It's time. Up, up, and away, PM! Away, Alabaster! Away my Christmas Crew! We have a job to do tonight!"

Maraschino assured her daughter and son-in-law the twins would be well taken care of as Lapis and Geranium, clutching their dolls, were tucked in their cribs. With PM strapped in front, away Santa and the Christmas crew flew.

And the Old Monster was heard to exclaim as they drove out of sight,

**A MERRY AND LOVE-FILLED CHRISTMAS TO YOU ...
AND TO YOU ...
TO YOU ALL!!!!**