

THE CHRONICLER'S TALES

Or, The PM Saga, Book XII

by Susan Kirby

The stories you are about to read are true. Your chronicler presents them for your holiday edification with no little embarrassment to her own ego, as she was not always at her best during the described doings. Due to the lack of time between the beginning of the events described and the publication date, this epic is presented as it was penned (or pecked, depending) at various points along the way.

ONE CALORIE PER WORD

It was December, Christmas Eve, a dark and stormy morning (as reported by the Weather Channel; I don't have the best view of the world around me from the West 76th Street hovel I call home). A TV dinner bubbled menacingly in the oven, a can of liquid refreshment was at my side, and I had snatched a few moments of personal time to play a computer game. I was feeling pretty pleased with myself--I'd finished this year's Christmas story and had faxed it to the North Pole just a few minutes earlier. I'm a writer, you see, and that's my job--to report on the goings-on in Christmas Monsterland. It's what I do. It's who I am.

BOING!

BOING! again.

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I was no longer alone. I whirled around. (I can do that. I've got a swivel chair. All writers have swivel chairs. That's me--I'm a writer. It's what I do. It's who I am.)

Where was I? Ah, yes . . . BOING! . . . BOING! . . . whirled around . . .

"Merry jumpin' Christmas!" shrieked I. "I wish you'd warn me before just poppin' in like that."

"We was sent to fetch ya," the teeny white-with-a-blue-mane critter said, charging at me.

"Who sent you?" I grunted as the first projectile pounced hard on my gut. (Writers have guts. Not stomachs, not laps, but guts. And I'm a writer. It's what I do. Who I am.)

Then a diminutive lilac and red ball of furry fuzz leapt on my shoulder and snuggled against me. "Mom sent us," the urchin explained.

I was suspicious. "PM sent you to fetch me? Not that I think you're lying, but are you *sure* she knows you're here? You're not playing holiday hooky again, are you?"

I was right to be suspicious. The two wee progeny of Purple Monster and her husband Alabaster Eggshell were basically good kids. But ever since they had discovered their teletransportation talents, they tended to pop off whenever they got bored with the Christmas chores assigned to them. It was not beyond the realm of imagination that this foray was such an escape.

I grabbed the blue-maned one, Lapis Lazuli they call him, squeezed him and smacked him on the face. (Writers don't hug and kiss--too tepid. And I'm a writer . . . as you can tell.) He winced, as young ones do, and scampered off my lap (oops, gut) to play with Brewster, the Maine bear who hibernates on my couch come wintertime.

"Mom said somethin' 'bout a contact," stated Geranium Amethyst, the micro red-maned Monster.

"Yeah. Anyway, what new computer games you got? I wanna play," little Lapis exclaimed.

"Whoa, there, little feller," I cried, deflecting him as he once again aimed for my gut (whew, got it right). He scooted around me and stared at the computer screen. "Hey, what's with the terminal?"

Geranium was pawing through a book I had discarded on the floor. "Mom said we gotta come right back. They gotta navigate your contact."



An alarm went off in my brain. "Sure she didn't say renegotiate my contract?" I ventured, a foreboding itch inching up my spine.

"Yes, that's what Mom said. Geranium, you never get anything right," Lapis declared with a bit of a stomp.

"Oh yeah? And who set the coordinates when we were gonna teletransport to the

San Diego Zoo, Lap? T'wasn't me that landed us in Siberia."

"I got us to the Zoo eventually."

"Yeah, in a tree! We hadda slide down Geoffrey Giraffe's neck to get to the ground."

I was worried, real worried, so worried that I let the mini-Monsters bicker as I chewed on this piece of information. It had slipped into the deeper recesses of my brain that, according to my current agreement with the Clauses, I had just wrapped up my final Christmas story. And the clause I had most suppressed was the review provision, through which my efforts to disseminate the biography of PM and her life as lead-sleigh puller and North Pole ambassador would be raked over the proverbial coals. We writers are sensitive--we don't like to be criticized, cribbed, or second-guessed.

"Hey, Ms. Chronicler," interrupted my thoughts, combined with sharp tugs on my left and right earlobes. "We gotta go," yelled the twins in stereo.

"Okay," I muttered. I knew there was no avoiding it. The time of reckoning was at hand. I shut down the computer and turned off the stove. The TV dinner could wait. Grabbing my coat and scarf--it would be cold where I was going--I picked up my portable PC (we writers have portable computers; we never leave home without 'em) and dowsed the lights.

"Do you have the coordinates?" I inquired, with hope, of my two travel companions.

"Yeah. Dad wrote him down. Lapis has 'em," assured Geranium.

"No! He gave 'em to you!"

"Uh-oh," I quivered.

"No sweat," bragged Lapis. "I can get us there blindfolded."

With Geranium on my right shoulder, and Lapis on my left, I drew a deep breath and closed my eyes to prepare for the teletransport.

BOING!!!

When I opened my eyes again, I was in the cozy living room of Santa's residence at the North Pole. The room smelled faintly of cinnamon and spruce, frankincense and myrrh. They were all there--Santa and Mrs. C. (does she have a first name?), Alabaster and the pulchritudinous Purple Monster, Clyde Elf and Elvira Fernhat, Relicta and Dove Carrion, Rudolph and Peppermint Paunch--and they all were staring at me. The fat man



broke the ice (that's a metaphor; writers use metaphors. And sometimes an apt cliché. I'm a writer . . .).

"Welcome, dear Chronicler," St. Nick greeted.

"Hi there," I answered, with a small wave. "Long time no see."

PM was tweaking the mane of her young son. "What took you so long?" she scolded. "I told you to come right back."

"I suppose you're wondering why we brought you here," Mrs. Claus kindly continued, gazing me-wise.

"Nah. I figured it out. It's contract time. So dig out the papers, and I'll send 'em to my agent. I've gotta get back to work. I'm a writer. It's what I do. So let's get to it."

I overheard an exchange between PM and Geranium. "What's wrong with her?" the magenta Mom queried. "Did something go wrong in the teletransport?"

"No, she was already acting weird when we got there," Geranium replied.

"Ms. Storyteller," Alabaster said, "as Christmas Monsterland counsel and legal advisor to the North Pole, perhaps I should remind you of the original contract. After the twelfth story--for the Twelve Days of Christmas---"

"Yeah, and don't forget I threw in the poem about Mrs. C.'s trek the second year, no extra charge. Gratis (we writers use Latin words sometimes), to make it a baker's dozen," I countered, sensing that this was not going to be a smooth negotiation.

"Yes, granted, and appreciated," nodded Mrs. Santa.



"After the twelfth story," Alabaster resumed, "your contract specifies a review. That's why you're here."

"Okay, so tell me how wonderful I am, throw me the papers, and let me get to it. But let me start by telling you straight out that my agent said I got a raw deal last time. If you average out the payments of sugarplums, gingerbread cookies, fruitcake, and candy canes, I've been getting less than one calorie per word. My agent says to hold out for a minimum--yes, a *minimum*--of two calories!"

"Perhaps that aspect of our discussion is a bit premature," Alabaster replied.

"And let me remind you I made a major 640K-expanded-to-1-MB-RAM, 12-MHz, 3.3-DOS, 40-MB-hard-disk, VGA-color-monitor, two-floppy-disk-drive, 300-DPI-laser, state-of-the-art-typesetting Capital Investment this year, including the requisite software--" (writers also use technical terms to insinuate we know what we're talking about; we also use a lot of hyphens, and throw in an occasional semicolon for effect).

"We are duly impressed by the excellence of your equipment," PM proffered. "However--"

"Hey, I gotta live! We writers have a lot of overhead, and these chronologies have put a crimp on my credit cards! You all didn't hesitate to help out Siku and Putu, your two whale friends, when they tarried too long with you for that extra cup of hot chocolate in October and missed their exit. Writers are also an endangered species. I'm a writer . . ."

"Why does she sound like a bad Chekhov?" queried Relicta. Elvira's quizzical look prompted Relicta's explanation: "You know, Nina's 'I am a seagull . . .'? Forget it."

I glared at the alien. "Hey, do I make fun of what you do?"

There was a stunned silence. The group around me was exchanging puzzled looks. My paranoia pushed in. I was right when I reckoned that the time of reckoning was at hand.

"Are you all out to get me? I thought you guys were my friends. Is it because of politics? Are you all reactionary? So I quipped after the election that the Dukakis states should secede and form the United Liberal States of America. No big deal. And speaking of the election, have you done anything about the Republicans' theft of my coinage? 'The L word' is mine---check page 16 of last year's offering if you don't believe me--and I really think you should write a letter or somethin' to protest."

Clyde Elf looked confused. "I thought the 'L' word was Love? Why should you object to their talking about love?"

"Because they decided it meant Liberal, and turned it into a dirty word," Relicta explained.

"It sure made me see red," rallied Rudolph.

"We're not allowed to use dirty words," Lapis interjected.

"Hey, it's the royalties that matter here," I asserted.

"Shhhh!" Santa shushed. "We're straying off course, gang. Let's try to stick to the issue, since my pack is only half-stuffed and I've got a ride to

take tonight. Ms. Chronicler, I did not lodge a complaint simply because I stay out of national politics. We are nonpartisan up here; we search for a more global perspective--nay, in deference to Relicta, let's say a cosmic consciousness."

The vibrations in the room just didn't feel right. I was drowning here, and I groped for straws to keep me afloat. "Hey, why the third degree? Has Jerry Falldownthewell started another letter-writing campaign? I've got it! He's convinced you to replace me with a more conservative writer. Have you been talking to William F. Buckley? Margaret Thatcher? Wait a minute--you want Jeane Kirkpatrick to write these stories? You think she'll get you more exposure! Yeah, I see it now. I get you a little recognition, and you want to aim for the big time, the multi-billion dollar spin-offs, the license fees. Go ahead, dump me. But let me tell you somethin'. I might not have the circulation figures you want, but I'll swear by my demographics. I've got quality readers!" I was sweating now, my voice shrill. I swallowed hard.

The rotund one in the red suit cleared his throat. "Ms. Chronicler, calm down--please. Rest assured that when we summoned you, our original intention was a purely pro forma review, followed by a hearty 'Ho, ho, well done,' a new contract, our thanks and congratulations, and a Christmas Eve toast to the future. But just before your arrival I received the telephoned facsimile transmission of this year's proposed episode. Thus the extended evaluation, for I believe the submission merits discussion."

"Why? Just cross a few t's, dot a few i's, change a few which's to that's, undangle the participles, connect the infinitives, and I'll send it out. I don't want to keep you."

"This must be settled first. Clyde," directed Mr. S. to his newly appointed Manager of North Pole Information Systems, "would you hand our guest the copy you made of the story? Since I'm the only one who's had a chance to peruse it, it might be helpful for the others if our Storyteller read it out loud."

I swallowed hard again, took the manuscript, and began to deliver my rendition of:

A CHRISTMAS DIRGE

Parasite Carrion was alive: to begin with. Let there be no question whatever about that.

I knew he was alive? Of course I knew. I had written about him for the past three episodes, and he had visited my apartment as recently as last year when he attended the pre-summit-meeting meeting.

Now, it is a fact, that there is nothing at all particular about the doorbell on my front door, except that during the Christmas season it is surrounded by a wreath, with a large red bow tied securely to the bottom. It is also a fact that I had seen it just eighty-seven seconds previously when leaving to throw out the trash. And let it be borne in mind that I had not bestowed one thought on Parasite, not since my last mention of him in the draft I was

preparing of *A Reader's Guide to Christmas Monsterland*. So then let any woman explain to me, if she can, how it happened that I, returning to my door and having inserted my key in the lock, saw in that doorbell button, without its undergoing any intermediate process of change, not a button, but Parasite's face.

As I looked fixedly at this phenomenon, it was a doorbell again. So I turned the key sturdily, walked in, and closed the door with a bang. I double-locked myself in, which is a New York custom, and walked through the six feet of my two-and-a-half rooms to see that all was all right. All was right. Nobody under the bed; nobody in the closet; not even Guido the Mafia Rat, who had shared my digs last winter until evicted for nonpayment of rent. Quite satisfied, I put on my bathrobe and frayed house slippers and sat on the couch next to the radiator to take my gruel, which on the night in question consisted of leftover Velveeta Shells and Cheese Dinner.

It was nearing Christmas and I was intent on finishing this year's episode of the PM Saga. I paced the room, and after several turns sat down again, discouraged by the lack of both inspiration and exercise. As I threw my head back on the sofa, my glance happened to fall on the front door. With great astonishment, and with a strange, inexplicable dread, I sensed that I would hear the doorbell ring. Then I heard the doorbell ring. It rang so softly at the outset that it scarcely made a sound; but soon it rang out loudly.

I threw open the door (not a smart thing to do in New York without peeping through the peephole), and he passed through the door and into the room.

He was well dressed. A Ralph Lauren suit and Gucci shoes. Around his face was wrapped a cashmere scarf. When he took it off, the distinguishing mole became visible.

"I know you! Parasite Carrion, how now!" I said. "What do you want of me?"

"Not much!" (Parasite's voice, no doubt about it.)

"Mercy," I said. "Why do you trouble me?"

"Woman of the fantasy mind!" replied Carrion, "do you believe in me or not?"

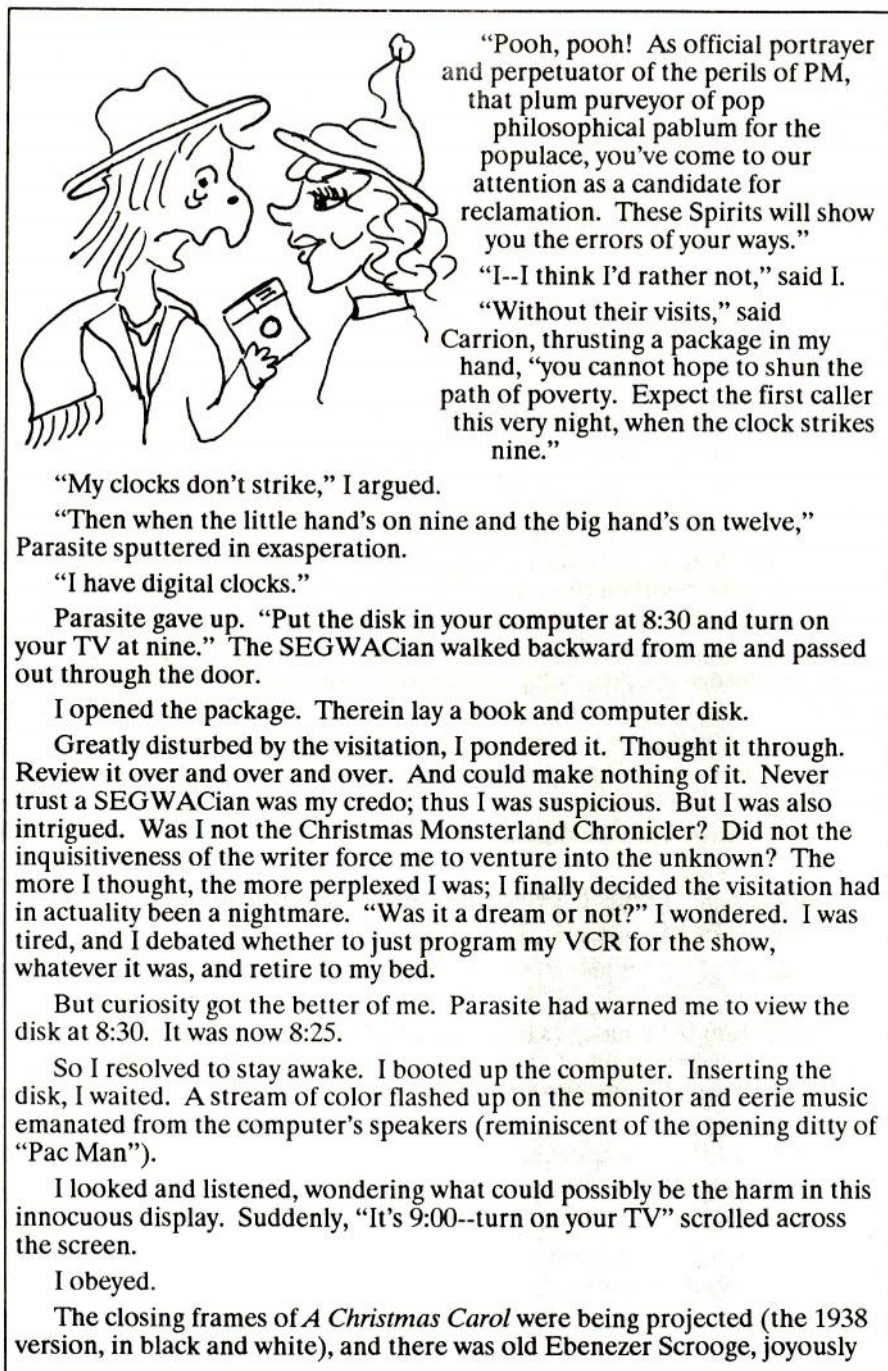
"I do," said I. "I must. I know that SEGWACians walk the earth, but why do they come to me? And you're so well-garbed, unlike last year, when your family wasn't doing so well."

"I wear the wardrobe I obtained this year," replied the visitor. "I stole it, piece by piece . . . But enough. I'm here to warn you. You will be soon visited by Three Spirits."

"As in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*?" I asked, surprised.

"Bah, hogwash!" phlegmed Parasite. "Dickens was a sentimental jerk. You'll get the real poop."

"But why me?" I asked. "I have endeavored to honor Christmas in my heart, and to keep it there all the year."



enjoying the holiday season after his conversion. "I could have taped this," I mumbled to myself. Then Ebenezer's face turned into the camera. "Ms. Storyteller, pay attention. I am the Ghost of Christmas Past."

"You can't fool me! You're Ebenezer Scrooge." I reached for the channel changer.

"Would you so soon turn off, with grubby hand, the rest of my story?"

"The movie's over. Tiny Tim's blessed us and you're now celluloid history. What business makes you tarry to talk to me?"

"Your welfare!" Scrooge intoned.

"I'm not on Welfare," I stated.

"Your reclamation, then. Come with me!"

"But I'm not dressed."

"Tough."

"Well--are we going to revisit my childhood, so I can witness the wonderful memories of my Christmases past?" I asked, beginning to look forward to the prospect.

"Bah, hogwash. I'm the Ghost of *My* Christmas Past, not Yours. Put your nose to that television, and you shall witness the true outcome of my life."

I did as bid, and WHOOSH!, I was in London of the mid-eighteen hundreds, in the Scrooge & Marley counting-house. Bob Cratchit sat in front of a roaring fire, copying letters. The door to Scrooge's office was closed.

"This is what comes of hanging out with Spirits," Scrooge informed me. "Notice Cratchit's new wardrobe. He did quite well with the raise I gave him. And he did even better after embezzling half of my wealth!"

Then Ebenezer and I stood side by side in his office. "My *former* office," said Scrooge, correcting my thought. In the chair behind the desk, stacking gold coins, sat Fred, Scrooge's nephew.

"He's the head of Scrooge & Marley now," Ebenezer explained.

"How nice! You brought him into the firm. What familial love."

"Familial betrayal! My time grows short. Quick!" And we were in another scene and place: Bedlam. There, chained to a wall, crouched a pathetic figure. "Look closely!" Scrooge commanded. "That is how I spent my last days."

And indeed I saw that the figure was Ebenezer, broken and defeated.

"That's what comes of Christmas cheer!" Ebenezer's Ghost scowled. "My devoted nephew, afraid I'd give away his inheritance before I had the courtesy to die, had me committed. T'wasn't difficult. He bid me repeat my Christmas tale, declaring a fondness for it. However, he neglected to mention the coppers hidden in the other room. After the third Ghost, they led me away in a strait-waistcoat."

"Spirit!" said I in a broken voice, "remove me from this place."

"I told you these were shadows of the things that have been," said Ebenezer's Ghost. "That they are what they are, do not blame me! The only solace I have is that Bob Cratchit beat the wits out of Fred with Tiny Tim's crutch, and took off with the remainder of the Scrooge fortune. His descendants are in real estate in New York now, I believe."

"Remove me!" I exclaimed. "I cannot bear it!"

I was conscious of exhaustion--and, then, of being back at my desk, my head dented on the keyboard on which it had fallen. I sank into a heavy sleep.

I was awakened in the middle of a slight wheeze, and sat up. The television was still on. I heard a voice say, "Spin the wheel," and then I saw her. She was looking at the camera, looking at me, and I heard her voice. "I am the Ghostess of Christmas Present," she said.

"Oh, Vanna," I exhaled. Indeed it was she, reveling in a revealing taffeta dress resplendent with ruffles and ruffles and more ruffles. She smiled her Vaseline smile.

"You have seen the like of me before!" exclaimed Vanna.

"Unfortunately," I sighed. "What do you want with me?"

"I am here to show you the world as it is, not as you would like it to be."

And she turned around several letters on the game board.

"R _ A _ _ Y _ _ S _ _ G," I viewed. "Let's get on with this."

"Guess the puzzle, or we can't."

"I don't wanna play," I pouted petulantly.

"You must, or we'll be here all night, and you'll never get your story written."

"All right, all right. Z."

"Sorry."

"Let's see, is there a U?"

"Ooooh, too bad."

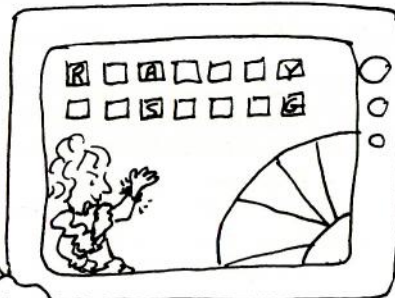
"How about T?"

She clapped her hands and turned the letters. Now it read,

"R _ A _ _ T Y T _ S T _ _ G."

"E," I guessed.

She applauded again, and turned two letters.



"REALITY TESTING," I solved.

Vanna applauded again, and in a flutter of a ruffle I was transported through the TV set and into Macy's, where crowded, harried shoppers were mauling the merchandise, and the sales clerks (when they could be found) were snarling gruffly as they rang up sale after sale. "Hey, I was here first," one woman cried, elbowing an old lady aside. "Like hell you were," the biddy responded with a thrust of her cane. As they wrestled, a man edged by them to a clerk, who closed the cash register and turned away. "Hey, where are you going?" "I'm on a break," he said. "Next counter."

Vanna pulled out a sheet of paper and read from it. "See how much good Dickens's story has done to change the world, or how much good your own pathetic parables have accomplished."

I shrugged. "New York at Christmas does get a little hassled. No big deal."

Vanna did her famous turn, showing off her dress. Now invisible, we passed through the plastic marble walls into the Fifth Avenue penthouse of Dollar Don Trumpcard. "You missed the real point of Dickens's tale," grinned the Ghostess.

"What, that wealth breeds despair?" quoted I from the novel in question.

"Hogwash. Look around you."

Big deal. On deck at the Trumpcards was a holiday party. The guests, bedecked in finery and furs, mingled and jingled their jewels. "Do these people appear to you to be despaired?" She grabbed a goblet of champagne and gulped it down. "Scrooge's error was in not knowing how to enjoy his wealth."

"What about the camel, the eye of the needle, heaven, and the rich man?" I asked, alluding to a famous prophecy.

Vanna consulted her notes. "The Trumpcards and their pack are not heathens. They give to the needy, to the full tax-deductible extent allowable. They're covered. Do they have less chance of redemption than you, with your lower-middle-class morality?"

"Well," I stammered, recalling that I was no Mother Teresa.

Vanna swirled once more, and we were on the street, passing the homeless seeking shelter in doorways and warmth over subway grates. "Do these poor souls have more Christmas cheer? Face it--'tis better to be miserable and rich than miserable and poor."

One more twirl and we were at Rockefeller Center, in front of the Christmas tree.

"Look at these people," Vanna spoke. "These are the masses you strive to reach with--" she consulted her notes again, "--with the ponderous pontification and insipid sermonic satire of your seasonal sagas. Do you really believe they want to read what you write? No! They seek not women of letters, but crave women who turn letters. They demand not competence,

but Dan Quayle. They prefer the escapism of drugs purchased on the corner to the 'enlightenment' of your fatalistic fables. Face the facts, come into the twentieth century. You're out of the mainstream."

"But if they were exposed to quality, the people would seek it the more," I feebly protested.

"What hollow have you been hiding in? This is a shallow world. They are incapable of differentiating between heroes and hooligans, between art and hype. Does not the media extend equal exposure, with no distinction? How else can you account for the fact that I, with no talent or training, was cast in a major TV movie?"

I could offer no reply, as this was indeed one of the unanswerable questions of the universe.

Vanna spoke again. "This is a world where bibliopolic windows display Joan Collins's novel, not to mention my own attempted autobiography. The current best-seller list contains books about vampires and the CIA, Lee Iacocca and Barry Goldwater."

"Joseph Campbell's on that same list," I argued. "Two books. He's quality."

"He's dead," the Ghostess countered. "Fat lot of good his royalty checks are doing him. The painful reality is that the public does not want to read or hear the liberal drivel in which you preach of sacrifice and caring, loving and giving. They desire dice and slice stories. They want women clad in shredded lingerie pursued by homicidal maniacs bent on gory disfiguration. How quickly these people turn off thoughtful debates on issues and events! How quickly they switch on Geraldo and Morton Downey, Jr., with their forums for prejudice and perversity."

The Ghostess took a deep breath. This was more dialogue than had passed through those pearly teeth in some time. She continued, after again glimpsing her cue cards. "You are a terribly slow learner. Witness the recent election. The flag was waved and the Pledge of Allegiance was recited. But allegiance to what? A national debt in the trillions? A country increasingly falling behind in trade and technology? Where were debates on the future of the nation, the future of children, where the country will be in ten years, twenty years, thirty years? Symbols suppressed substance. That's the world for which you ought to write. Those are the real readers, even if they only read one book a year. Please them, and you've got it made!"

And with that she freshened her lipstick, batted her eyelashes, and disappeared.

Once again I was in my living room. The clock flickered twelve. I looked around me, and lifting my eyelids beheld a solemn Phantom, shrouded in a deep dark garment which (*oops, that*) concealed its head.

"Am I in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come?" asked I. "Are you're going to show me shadows of things that have not happened? Oh, I forgot, you don't speak, if my Dickens is right."

The hood fell off and I beheld the Spirit.

"Fat chance. You know me, I'm Viper Carrion. According to the agreement made last year with Mr. Claus at our Summit, I am forbidden to mug the volunteer Santas and am therefore free to visit you."

I shuddered.

"Let's see how much good your Noëlic noodlings will do you in the Christmas Yet to Come," he said as he whisked me away.

We were still in New York, but I didn't recognize it. It seemed to be daytime, but it was difficult to tell since the buildings rose so high they blocked out the sun.

"What's happened here?" I cried in disbelief.

"Development. Progress. Manhattan is valuable real estate. The city finally belongs to the developers."

"Where's Central Park?" I asked.

"Gone. It's now a four-story parking lot for executive limousines."

I looked around. Each building had one of five names on it: SEGWAC, GREED INC., LAND INC., LIMITED WARRANTY INC., and WEAPONS INC.

"What's happened?"

"Leveraged buyouts. The world now belongs to this corporate quintet."

"All of the world?"

"Of course," he chortled. "Competition was bad for business, so the antitrust laws were abolished. When Third World debt came due, we foreclosed. International investment superceded international boundaries."

"Does everyone work for one of the five?"

"Everyone, with a few exceptions. We'll get to that later."

We passed into a towering grime-encrusted tenement marked SEGWAC NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT, and into a broadcast booth. A beautiful blond-haired man and a beautiful blond-haired woman mouthed platitudes from a teleprompter. "There is now one network," Viper verbalized with vitriolic virulence, "and SEGWAC owns it. We present all the news that's fit to broadcast, based on marketing surveys indicating which stories are least stressful to the viewing public. Thus no item is over four sound bites, there's no bad news, and we guarantee our talking heads to be lovely to look at but intellectually nonthreatening. *And*, we have laugh tracks! We provide tabloid features celebrating the cult of celebrity, and no-brain-drain analyses telling the viewers how well off they are. They believe it because they want to believe it. And we're the only game in town."

"What about The New York Times?"



"Hostile takeover. Oh, it tried to hold out. Then SEGWAC bought out the last remaining advertising agency, and totally ceased placing ads. No revenue equals no newsprint and no ink! No big loss. Ignorance is bliss. Besides, most people can't read anyway. Our educational system insures that the people learn only what is needed to be effective laborers in the marketplace."

"What about freedom of speech?"

"We take the position that everyone is free to talk, but we don't have to listen. We just barricade ourselves behind our boardroom doors. As you know, SEGWAC was an innovator in introducing social blinders. Was it not inevitable we'd also produce social earplugs?"

"What about the Constitution?"

"What Constitution? The ACLU was outlawed by popular demand, and not long afterward the Bill of Rights was abolished, amendment by amendment. Then we rid the country of the Articles, one by one."

"What do you mean?"

"Soon after the '88 election it was determined that if, according to the media, the election was over before people voted, why not just stop voting? For a while the candidates did a one-hour TV commercial each, followed by experts interpreting the messages, followed by a poll. However, the polls cost a lot of money, so we stopped taking them, but claimed that we did."

"Who runs the country now?"

"The five Chief Executive Officers, of course. They are in the process of restructuring the massive debt. I anticipate another merger soon, leaving only three companies."

Sinister and dark, beside me stood Viper. When he turned his hand we were in a trailer park.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"The Savannah River retirement village. When a worker is no longer productive, he is put out to pasture, and nature takes its course. There are two others, near Fernald and Rocky Flats."

"But what of Social Security?"

"What do you think we used to finance those leveraged buyouts?"

"And medical care?"

Viper evoked a menacing grimace. "When insurance costs became prohibitive, the corporations determined it was more cost effective to provide medical care themselves. While in the labor force, you are taken care of. Provided, of course, your disease is acceptable."

"What about the environment?" I cried, for above my head there hung a yellow-green, putrid and pernicious cloud of pollution.

"Environment? Too expensive! We've domed over the cities and put greenhouses over the farmland. Since the mesmerized masses must work

round-the-clock to maintain my lifestyle, holidays have been banned. So no one misses what used to be forests and oceans."

I hesitated to ask. "And what if someone is born who doesn't fit your ideal of a perfect worker?"

"Most everything is genetically engineered these days. Of course there may be mutants, and we have a special community for them. WEAPONS INC. uses that area to test their biological warfare program."

"So there's still war. All is not perfect."

"Hogwash. Arms control is an anathema to a capitalist economy, and what are weapons without war? At one time we did experiment with building weapons and shooting them into space, but when the outer perimeter of the atmosphere filled with space debris we were forced to stop; our communications satellites could no longer communicate. Now a war is scheduled every ten years to deplete the inventory and decrease the surplus population."

"Wars with no reason?"

"There never has been any rational reason for war. We are no longer hypocritical about it. The only guarantee in life is death; therefore we honor that guarantee."

"And what of me?" I inquired from my innate, natural narcissism.

"Come with me," he sneered, and led me to a mountain of waste, walled in by empty beer cans; overrun by treadbare tires and rotting vegetation; choked up with too much litter; vermin, fat with repleted appetite; testimony to the triumph of a disposable society. Viper stood among the mess, and pointed down to One. I advanced toward it trembling. I saw there, sifting through a massive pile of plastic bags, a haggard, hunched harridan.

"Am I that woman who lies upon the garbage?" I cried, upon my knees.

"Yes. You refused to keep in step with the times, and continued those putrid parodies, year after year and year after year after year after year--- Enough! You insisted on meditating on the meaning of Christmasssss" (how that word hissed in his mouth) "instead of merchandising it. For your crime, you were branded on the forehead with an 'L,' the most dreaded of letters, and exiled from the Corporate Community. There is no place in business for iconoclasts."



"But what of Santa Claus and the North Pole? Couldn't he do anything to prevent this from happening?"

"He tried, indeed he did. But how long could my nemesis hold out against the onslaught of the Me Generation? Missster Clausss slowly began

to fade as fewer and fewer believed in him, and one day the ozone hole above the Arctic enlarged so much that Santa and his sleigh were sucked away. Then--drip, drip, drip, Christmas Monsterland melted into the ocean. Soon Christmas itself was a not-so-nostalgic memory!"

I was truly shaken by this news. "PM--gone? Alabaster--gone? Rudolph--gone?" Broken and beaten, I asked my final question. "So then what, without Christmas, is the purpose of existence in this Christmas Yet To Come?"

"Do you not know? I have been trying to show you. It's Power, and Selfishness, and Greed."

"Oh, tell me please that I can sponge away the writing on the wall."

In my agony, I caught Viper's claw. It sought to free itself, but I was strong in my entreaty. Viper, stronger yet, fought me.

Then I saw an alteration in Viper's hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a toilet bowl.

Yes! And the toilet was my own. The sink was my own. The bathroom my own. Best of all, the Time before me was my own, to make great changes.

"They are here: I am here," I marveled. "The shadows of the things that would have been, they may be dispelled. I will not be the woman I must have been but for this interview. I will honor Money in my heart, and try to acquire it all year. I will put compounded self-interest before all, and pursue the Profit Principle in all things!"

Wealth bless Us, Every One!

The glazed gazes of the Christmas Crew that greeted the closing words of the story informed me that all was not well.

"Much might be said for minimalism," PM finally commented. "Ms. Chronicler, would you excuse us for a moment?" I was ushered into Santa's study, whereupon I contemplated some clippings which lay on the desk.

What you are about to read is a record of the meeting that was held while I was exiled. I obviously cannot testify personally, since I was not present for most of it, but I have it on good authority that this is an accurate transcription of what transpired.

(Several minutes of uninterrupted shock.)

Relicta: "You're not going to let her send that out, are you?"

Santa: "I can't stop her. Her contract condemns censorship."

Alabaster: "That is not the Chronicler we know and love."

PM: "Obviously. Something dreadful has happened to her."

Rudolph: "Do you think Mike Tyson punched her wits out when she did that Diet Pepsi commercial with him?"

PM: "I doubt it. That was in the spring, and I spoke with her as recently as three days ago. She seemed perfectly normal, for her. I believe we are confronting a more profound phenomenon here. When my biographer first arrived today she sounded like a dime novel. Now she follows with the fractured phrases and strangled syntax of Dickens."

Mrs. Claus: "Revisionist Dickens. I knew Charles Dickens. Charles Dickens was a friend of ours. She's no Charles Dickens. I did indeed catch a quote here and there from Chuck's inspiring tale, but here t'were tumbled and twirled and turned with a terrible twist."

Peppermint: "Geranium, Lapis, when you were in her humble abode, what did you say you saw?"

Geranium: "I saw a paperback with a SEGWAC bookmark stuck in it. Some cheap detective novel."

Lapis: "On the computer I saw a game I'd never seen before, called 'Sven Svengali in the Dungeons of the Demonic Dragons.' I didn't get a chance to play."

PM, Mr. and Mrs. Claus: "Thank goodness."

Peppermint Paunch: "I suspect a SEGWAC plot."

Dove: "I too see the horrid hands of my brother and father in this. Dad was really teed off by the magic ornament the North Pole gave him last year, and was even more humiliated when the Chronicler illustrated the cover with it."

Alabaster: "Hmmm."

PM: "Hmmm???"

Alabaster: "I've been trying to diagnose her malady. My Monsterland medical training leads me to believe she is afflicted with . . . Literary Laryngitis!"

All: "Huh?"

Clyde: "But she can talk. She hasn't lost her voice."

Alabaster: "Not her physical voice, but her written voice, her own style. Based on the evidence Lapis and Geranium saw, I also suspect she's been hypnotized."



PM: "To adapt to the style of whatever she has just read! It does make sense."

Relicta: "Brainwashed!"

Peppermint: "I suggest we test this hypothesis. Master Clyde, please escort our friend in here, and note carefully what she has been reading while sequestered."

(Sound of one pair of shuffling feet, sound of door opening. Sound of four shuffling feet, door closes.)

Santa: "Ms. Storyteller, we would ask you please to discuss with us the thesis of your submitted saga. We feel perhaps it needs some rethinking, since it so closely resembles *A Christmas Carol*, but diverges in certain key aspects."

Me: "They are Two Good Stories. To judge by the book sales, the public likes Dickens better. But if my story lacks popularity, it also lacks exposure. One basis for making a choice is to assess the writers' experience, and then to examine the issues. Mr. Dickens has obviously left some pronounced footprints in the Christmas snows of time. Yet I have had deeper experience in the moods and morays of the '80s. Dickens has committed the immense, overarching sin: he has allowed his literature to become Classic, therefore unread, though much (mis)quoted. Readers can be tolerant of the ritual use of metaphor and simile, but here is the final test: Reflecting the reality of the modern world. Who's likely to do that better? The answer tips a not-so-closely balanced scale--Moi."

Peppermint: "Clyde, what was she reading when you walked in?"

Clyde: "The New York Times's presidential endorsement."

Alabaster: "I rest my case. SEGWAC obviously knew she was susceptible to derivative writing--you remember "The Night Before Christmas" rip-off she distributed the year following PM's debut OUT THERE. But as for a cure for this strange affliction--there's the rub!"

Santa: "Mistress Chronicler, I believe in many ways your perceptions have been skewed, if not skewered. I ask for your further reflection, and I hope you'll agree to adapt your work--change a word or paragraph here or there--the better to serve your pal, PM, and all of Christmas Monsterland."

I now return you to the regularly scheduled narration, as I recorded it, albeit plagiaristically (though be it funny, deem it parodistically.)

THE REQUISITE REFERENCE TO THE REFERENCE BOOK

And it came to pass that I was given another book. And Rudolph, with his nose so bright, said unto Santa, "Speak to us of SEGWAC's purpose in this heinous act, that we might understand its meaning."

And Santa said unto him, "The written word, despite claims to the contrary, is yet powerful. To the villainous Viper, sabotaging PM's historian is tantamount to sabotaging PM, you, me, and all of the North Pole and

Christmas Monsterland. To paraphrase the prophet Sassoon, 'If she don't look good, we don't look good.' Thus it is that Viper seeks to lessen the measure of Christmas joy and love, good will and peace on earth."

Whereupon Lapis uttered, "Forgive me, Santa, but I understand not. Why doth such evil be allowed to exist?"

And Santa pointed to a passage in the book I held, and requested it be read. And I did, quoting Matthew 13:24-30, "The Parable of the Tares."

And when my recitation was done, Geranium said unto her father, "Declare unto us the meaning of 'tares.'"

And Alabaster answered and said, "Tares are a noxious weed thought to be darnel."

And Geranium said further: "Declare unto us the meaning of 'darnel.'"

And Alabaster answered and said, "Beloved child, go in peace and look it up."

And so she did. And it came to pass that Santa called his Crew together for consultation on my future, and I was returned unto the study and given another tome.

MUCH ADO? THEN ALL'S WELL!

When, in disgrace in Santa Claus's eyes
I all alone beweepe my outcast state
And rue the writing of the petard lies
I'd hoisted onto PM and her mate;
To make amends, and please both kith and kin,
A Muse to lure, I'll don a Shakespeare bonnet;
The record to set straight, fain would I pen
A worthier tale of Monsterland in sonnet.
Outrageous though my fortune, SEGWAC's plot
Myself alone imperils; sad to say,
As well you know, a story counts for naught
That threatens not to ruin *your* Christmas Day.
I vow to you, no matter what the price is,
I shall devise somehow a Christmas CRISIS!

A deus ex machina seek I now
To cloud your minds with further gloom and doom.
The Fates are kind! I hear an awful row
Rip through the air from yonder living room.
Your Chronicler's redemption sense I near!
For Clyde, in agitation, cries, "oH-oH"
And in that cry, believe me, readers dear,
Are portents of a winter's tale of woe.
Elvira's echoing scream foreshadows worse;
Then Paunch halloos in my reverb'rate ears,
"Abandon now thy pentametered verse;
"Let Arthur Conan Doyle switch your gears.
"The game's afoot! We'll help the shrieking gnomes
"If you'll play Watson to my Sherlock Holmes!"

THE INFECTIOUS BINARY BIT

In glancing over my notes of the cases in which I have during the last several years studied the methods of my friend Peppermint Paunch, I cannot recall any which presented more singular features than that which was to be associated with the problem of technology run amok.

I followed Peppermint Paunch into the Information Systems room, wherein we encountered an hysterical Clyde, dancing about in desperation. The detective stood silently, his pawnails pressed together, his lids drooping as he listened to the overwrought elf.

"This is awful, the end," the diminutive pixie was screaming.

I had expected to see Peppermint Paunch impatient under this nattering narrative, but he instead puffed on his pipe and said, "Compose yourself. You are upset, Clyde. Do calm down and catch your breath. There is obviously a problem with the records you have been keeping for Mr. Claus. I deduce you've been working on the recipients' file for the upcoming ride."

"Amazing," I remarked. "How did you know? You appeared to read a good deal upon him which was quite invisible to me."

"Not invisible, but unnoticed, Chronicler. You did not know where to look, so you missed the position of the tassel on Mr. Elf's cap. It has fallen in front of his nose, which from experience I have found means he is under extreme stress. Now, of all the files he keeps here, Clyde considers only one to be *truly* important, and that is the record of who's naughty and who's nice. Thus, I conclude, the 'Naughty & Nice' file is the cause of the excitation. Note also that the modem light is flashing, indicating Mr. Elf is hooked into NorPolNet, the only outside data exchange network the North Pole uses. Other files, such as recipes for eggnog, patent specifications for toy soldier production, and the inventory records, require no outside input; only the N&N file needs data from OUT THERE, from Santa's Helpers who send their daily reports."

"He's right, he's right," groaned Clyde, burying his face in his tiny hands and sobbing. "Oh, woe is me. Whatever shall I do?"

"But Paunch," I said, "you still haven't figured out what the catastrophe is."

"I am about to do that now," he replied, and approached the printer, from which was spitting reams and reams of computerized listings. "Oh yes, a sinister hand is at work here," he hummed.

"What?" asked PM, peering over his shoulder.

"See this? And this? and this?" Paunch pointed.

"Oh dear," moaned PM. "I see what you mean."

"What?!?" I exclaimed. "You must tell me, for I shall not be able to conclude my record."

"Ah yes, my friend," said Paunch. "Come see."

And there upon the printed pages I saw one of the most horrifying sights I had ever seen. For there, under the column marked "Naughty/Nice," by each and every name was entered the bold, bold word, "NAUGHTY."

"How detestable," breathed Alabaster. "I've never seen anything like it."

"How can that be?" I asked. "I myself modemed the mailing list for the Christmas Saga, with my own evaluations of the relative qualities of my relatives and friends, just a few seconds following the faxing of my feigned fable. But I swear that when I sent my list, everyone was marked 'NICE,' with but one exception."

"Indubitably," said Paunch. "The only possible explanation for this phenomenon is a problem with the program. Mr. Elf, when last did you gaze upon this file without noting these aberrations?"

"Just before Dr. Storyteller there transmitted her paltry prose."

"Aha!" exclaimed Peppermint. "I think I have the key to the affair now. I do not doubt but a trail of the electronic footprints of this evil infestation will lead us to the source of the infection: the Chronicler's computer."

"Oh no!" I protested. "How could it be? I would not wittingly or willingly commit so dastardly a deed."

"Nonetheless," insisted Paunch, "your PC has played host to the Floppy-disk Flu."

Al	NAUGHTY
Alan	NAUGHTY
Alice	NAUGHTY
Allyne	NAUGHTY
Andrew	NAUGHTY
Arla	NAUGHTY
Art	NAUGHTY
Austin	NAUGHTY
Barbara	NAUGHTY
Barry	NAUGHTY
Becky	NAUGHTY
Bill	NAUGHTY
Bob	NAUGHTY
Bonnie	NAUGHTY
Brian	NAUGHTY
Brock	NAUGHTY
Carl	NAUGHTY
Chad	NAUGHTY
Charles	NAUGHTY
Cheryl	NAUGHTY
Chris	NAUGHTY
Cliff	NAUGHTY
Connie	NAUGHTY
Ciane	NAUGHTY
Dirck	NAUGHTY
Don	NAUGHTY
Earl	NAUGHTY
Ed	NAUGHTY
Ellen	NAUGHTY
Emmett	NAUGHTY
Emma	NAUGHTY
Eric	NAUGHTY
Ethel	NAUGHTY
Eva	NAUGHTY
Frances	NAUGHTY
Frank	NAUGHTY
Gary	NAUGHTY
George	NAUGHTY
Gordon	NAUGHTY
Greg	NAUGHTY
Hattie	NAUGHTY
Heidi	NAUGHTY
Henry	NAUGHTY
Herb	NAUGHTY
Holly	NAUGHTY
Howard	NAUGHTY
Isabella	NAUGHTY
Isabella	NAUGHTY
Jack	NAUGHTY
Jane	NAUGHTY
Jane Ellen	NAUGHTY
Janet	NAUGHTY
Jean	NAUGHTY
Jean Marie	NAUGHTY
Jenny	NAUGHTY
Jerry	NAUGHTY
Jimmy	NAUGHTY
Jodie	NAUGHTY
Joe	NAUGHTY
John	NAUGHTY
Jonathan	NAUGHTY
Judy	NAUGHTY
Julian	NAUGHTY
Karen	NAUGHTY
Kathy	NAUGHTY
Kenney	NAUGHTY
Kevin	NAUGHTY
Larry	NAUGHTY
Leslie	NAUGHTY
Lila	NAUGHTY
Linda	NAUGHTY
Lisa	NAUGHTY
Marilyn	NAUGHTY
Marc	NAUGHTY
Mario	NAUGHTY
Mario	NAUGHTY
Mork	NAUGHTY



Lapis was bouncing up and down. "I *told* you her monitor looked funny."

"I begin to remember," I said. "It's coming back now. A package was delivered yesterday morning. There was a disk enclosed."

"Describe the messenger," requested Dove, with no small amount of trepidation.

I complied. "Thick glasses magnifying beady eyes, a sniveling aquiline proboscis, dressed in a ratty robe."

"Oh dear," sighed Dove. "You have described my father's brother, Uncle Virus Carrion, head programmer for SEGWAC and a data-processing genius."

Peppermint Paunch summarized the situation. "It's elementary, my dear Chronicler. In loading the disk to play the game, you loaded the computer virus as well. And in transmitting your data, you inadvertently passed on the infectious program, which has steadily, while we were speaking, converted all the NICEs to NAUGHTYs. A clever plan."

"We're ruined," Clyde kept crying.

"Perhaps. But perhaps not," perhapsed Peppermint Paunch. "Elvira, as Assistant Manager of North Pole Information Services, I assume that you are responsible for daily back-ups of data?"

"Oh yes," the female elf exclaimed. "It is standard operating procedure."

"So your records would be current up to the last back-up, correct?"

"Yes. I duplicated the files late last night."

"And how many records today?"

"Only the Chronicler's. She is notoriously delinquent in her data delivery."

"oH yes, oH yes!" Clyde clapped, jumping in ecstatic elfin excitement. "I'll use an antidotal program I've developed, clean the system out, and reload the files. We're saved!"

I for the first time appreciated the potential positives of procrastination.

The happy half-pint halted at the height of his hop. "But there's no time! We'll never get the list printed before Santa's ride!"

"Nonsense," I said. "I'll compose a few macros for you. You'll be spewing out your lists in a jiffy. Then I'll re-input my mailing list, so that Santa will not disappoint my loyal fans. And I vow I'll inoculate my computer when I am once again in my hovel."

It was with a rousing "Hip, hip, hooray!" that Clyde and Elvira supervised the reprint of the resurrected list, the Naughtyies and Nices appearing, appropriately appended. Thus, in the closing hours of Christmas Eve another CRISIS was averted, and Santa's trip was assured success.

My friend Peppermint pulled me aside as Santa checked the list. "Neither Mr. Claus nor I have the heart to tell Clyde that the computer isn't really essential. After all, Santa's been keeping the records in

his head for centuries. But he allows for the value of back-up, should his psychic radar go kaphlooeey."

"So the crisis was not truly a CRISIS?" I inquired with no small tremor of disappointment.

"Not really," concurred PM, consoling me with a proffered gum drop. "Take heart! Your readers will forgive you. If they've gotten this far, they're ripe for denouement."

"The story!" I wailed. "But I'm still afflicted. How will I ever finish the annals before Christmas?" It was true. Despite the resolution of the Christmas CRISIS, there still remained my personal catastrophe.

Paunch strummed his electric guitar, as was his habit when contemplating a particularly vexing problem. He suddenly sprang out of his chair, with the gesture of a Christmas Monster who has made up his mind, and remarked, "I suggest we call in the specialists. Summon them from Christmas Monsterland!"

During the few moments it took before their arrival, I was presented with the collected works of Sigmund Freud, and it was urgently suggested that I access them.

THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIBAL SCHIZOPHRENIA

After a review of my case history, Dr. Freudinella Jung, PM's psychoanalyst, offered a theory: "It ist not only quite possible, but highly probable, that the Chronicler still possesses her own literary voice; *only she does not know that she does, and therefore thinks she does not*. It ist my hypothesis that SEGWAC's hypnotic disk erased from her conscious mind the style she has perfected over the years, and the patient, although full of information and ideas for this year's adventures, vas left with no means to express them. As nature abhors a vacuum, so did her conscious mind strive to fill her literary lacuna, vich she did by absorbing the style of vatever printed material she next encountered. This dyslogistic, if not dysenteric, desecration of the vell-known outpourings of the lions of literature, odious and taboo though it might be, ist understandable in this light."

Pimento Poppy, PM's child psychologist, piped in. "Although more often than not my distinguished colleague insists on laying psychological lapses at the foot of the libido, I agree that the patient's licentiousness, or lack of thereof, should be deemed of no consequence in this instance. Nor is my specialty, sibling rivalry, in this case relevant. This seems to me a good point to remind you of the young elf we took--five years ago--for treatment. For a time previously he had undergone a personality transformation, due to the chemical in his teeny green brain which, when combined with alcohol and



debauchery, resulted in a 180° flip in his personalty. If you recall, the treatment at the time was to counter this flip by turning the patient upside down. It worked. In the present case, it seems reasonable to suppose that a psychoanalytic method be sought to fulfill the purpose of making that which is unconscious in her conscious."

"I concur," concurred Alabaster. "We must seek a treatment to restore to the conscious mind that which was removed--namely, her style."

PM sighed in relief. "It was there all along. The obvious prescription is--" a dramatic breath, for our mauvette minister of Good Will and Christmas is the practitioner par excellence of the pregnant pause, "--that she read the previous eleven issues of *The PM Saga*--silently but rapidly, of course, for we have presents to pack and stockings to stuff."

EPILOGUE

ERROR!! ERROR!! SYSTEM OVERLOAD!! INSUFFICIENT MEMORY!!

Whew. I feel better already. After steeping myself in absorbing eleven years of *The PM Saga*, I am me again and able to take you through the closing moments of Christmas Eve 1988. PM is now strapped in her lead position at the head of Santa's sleigh. Mrs. Claus has loaded up the mistletoe and marzipan. Peppermint Paunch is busily searching for the misplaced battery pack for Rudolph's nose, and Dove and Relicta have returned to Salvation Army headquarters to resume preparations for the yearly Christmas meal. Santa Claus is practicing his "Ho! Ho! Ho! Merrrrrrrry Christmas!" and reviewing the N&N list for the second time (notice I didn't say "checking it twice," which to me indicates at least a partial cure).

My contract negotiations have been postponed until the Christmas contingent returns from their yearly post-ride vacation in the Bermuda triangle. Although this has not exactly been the best of times for me, it has not been the worst (uh-oh, some vestiges of Dickens remain). I am confident that I will make a complete recovery if I follow Alabaster's further prescription: A holiday spent with family and friends, sharing love and good cheer.

Lapis and Geranium are seated on my lap (not gut, thank goodness, but lap). Before they teletransport me home, they want to send to you their special wishes:

"Noël, Noël!" (That's Lapis.)

"God Bless Us, Every One!" (That's Geranium's sense of humor.)

"Merry Christmas!" (PM's just postscripted her wishes, sealed with a special kiss.)

BOING!!!

