

**THE  
STOLEN CHRISTMAS**

**By June Winton**

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directly or indirectly to actual persons or events is  
purely coincidental.

for Hayley

# THE STOLEN CHRISTMAS

It all began on Christmas Eve in the year 1944, in a little house in Christmas Street, in a small town called Gillingham, in Kent. Tom and Tilly Jenkins, an elderly couple, were making plans for Christmas Day when Mrs Jenkins stopped suddenly.

“What was that?” she exclaimed as there was a faint rustling at the front door.

They looked out of the window, but it was dark outside as all the lamps were blacked out because of the war.

“Sounds like a cat,” said Mr Jenkins, as a faint mewling sound reached them. His wife hurried to open the front door.

“Oh my word!” she exclaimed. “Tom! Tom! Come and see.”

Mr Jenkins rushed outside and gasped in amazement. There, in his wife’s safe arms, was a tiny baby wrapped in a blue blanket.

“Quick, Tom,” she cried. “Look up the road, see if you can find anyone!”

Mr Jenkins rushed out in his slippers and ran this way and that, and up and down the alleyway, but could not see anything.

“It’s no good,” he puffed when he got back. “Whoever left him there has gone.”

It was late at night now, and the Jenkins did not have a telephone and neither did their neighbours.

“We can’t disturb folk on Christmas Eve,” Tilly murmured, gazing into the little boy’s face. “Let’s keep him for Christmas Day; we’ll call the police afterwards.”

And so the little boy found a warm and loving home and, this being during the dark days of the war, and after a good word being put in by the vicar, the Jenkins were allowed to keep the baby as their own.

“What shall we call him?” Mrs Jenkins asked.

“If I’d had a son, I would have called him John,” said Tom.

“John Jenkins,” smiled his wife. “But no, I’m sure that one day his mother will come to find him.”

So, as was the custom with children found abandoned, they gave him the name of the street where he was found, and that was how the little boy came to be called “John Christmas”.

John was a lucky boy, for his two guardians were devoted to him, showing him as much love and kindness as any child could want. Mr Jenkins was a carpenter by trade and worked in the local dockyard during the day. In the evenings and at weekends he would pursue his

favourite hobby, which was making wooden toys.

John loved following his father around, and as he grew older he also wanted to learn how to make things with wood. Mr Jenkins' speciality was carving wooden rocking horses, as well as the ancient and mysterious art of making carousel horses for fairground rides. Travellers came from far and wide with broken old horses that needed new manes or tails, or were missing an ear or two. In no time at all they would be as good as new or even better, gleaming and freshly painted. Sometimes the fairground people paid for their work in kind; with toffee apples and candyfloss, and once even with goldfish. His father would smile and say to John:

“Money isn't everything, you know. One day they may do us a good turn.”

It was no surprise when Johnny left school at a young age and became an apprentice carpenter, working with his father. When Tom Jenkins retired, John would help out in his workshop, carving and painting their beautiful wooden horses. But, sadly, by the time he was only 20 years old, both John's adoptive parents had passed away. He still lived in their old house, and carried on making wooden toys, but now he often felt lonely as he worked by himself. It was not very long after, therefore, that John started going out with a local girl called Alice, and within a short time they were

married. John and Alice were very happy together, and before a year had passed the new husband was busy carving a rocking cradle for their newborn son.

Now, from the day that David was born he had an attitude. He had the loudest cry of any baby in the street and demanded attention night and day from his sleepless parents. As he grew older he could not be tempted to eat anything that he did not like, and would often scream to get his own way. Perhaps little brothers and sisters could have taught him not to be selfish, but David was an only child.

Things did not improve when he went to school, as the exasperated teachers would write in his reports. As a result he had very few friends and was teased about his name.

“I’ll have the last laugh,” David would say through gritted teeth. Somehow you knew that he meant it.

As David grew up, he had no interest in his father’s business of making wooden toys, and said that it was “sissy”. He was secretly embarrassed by the parade of colourful fairground characters that would turn up on his father’s doorstep clutching pieces of broken wood. This was despite the fact that when he visited a fair he never had to pay for any of the rides, and was given as much popcorn and candy floss as he could eat. In fact,

David saw this as a money-making opportunity; selling goldfish to the boys at school and charging them for toffee apples and candyfloss.

John Christmas felt sad that his only son showed no interest in carpentry. But, as David grew, it became obvious that his lack of skill with his hands was more than made up for by a brilliant mind. He had a photographic memory, and loved studying books of all kinds. As a result, he passed all his exams with excellent grades. Both Alice and John were thrilled when David gained his scholarship to go to university to study law.

“I wonder who David gets it from?” John would sometimes think quietly to himself.

At university, David studied very hard, determined to be a successful businessman and to learn all the wrangles and loopholes of the law. After four years away from home, John and Alice were delighted when David paid them a visit.

“I’m going to set up a toy firm called ‘The Father Christmas Company’, he told them, “and I’ll sell your horses to people all over the country.”

John smiled.

“I’d like that, son,” he said. “You’ve never taken much of an interest in my work before.”

“Oh, Dad, this is just the beginning!” David exclaimed. “I’ve just got so many plans.”

So, David was as good as his word, and set up and patented the name of his new company. People in London were prepared to pay fancy prices for beautiful hand-made rocking horses, or a pretty carousel horse for the garden, and the Christmas family prospered.

About this time, David married a girl called Penelope whom he had met at university. She was a pretty young thing but not really ready to settle down, and also liked a lot of attention. They had a baby named Christopher, but David was too busy travelling the country selling his goods to notice that Penelope was unhappy.

Christopher's grandparents were thrilled with the new addition to the family, often ending up looking after him while David was away. Christopher looked a lot like his grandad used to, with his shock of ginger hair. The pair were very close, and Chris used to follow John around everywhere, watching him at work.

John could see that Penelope was unhappy at being left on her own while David was away, and even said to him:

“Money isn't everything, son. That's one of life's great lessons. Don't learn it the hard way.”

But, one day, when Chris was only nine years old, David found a letter on the breakfast table.

“Dear David, I'm sorry but I have to go away. I

don't want to be tied down any more. Please look after Chris and tell him I love him.”

From what David could discover, his wife had boarded an aeroplane to Australia and was staying with some relatives. Of course, her young husband was very unhappy at being left, but there was Christopher to consider. Soon afterwards, David took his son, with all his things, to his grandparents. John and Alice very willingly agreed to bring Christopher up.

Meanwhile, David turned all his attention to work, and spent hours in his office calculating and making plans on how to earn more money. He started seeing his old friends from university, and one of them gave him an idea. Not content with having The Father Christmas Company, he also took out copyrights on the name “Santa Claus”. What this meant, his friend explained to him, was that anything that mentioned the words “Christmas”, “Father Christmas”, or “Santa Claus”, was now liable to pay him a copyright fee.

At first, nobody realised how important this was, but as the autumn came along and Christmas items started appearing in the shops, everyone was in for a big shock. Anything that mentioned the word “Christmas” suddenly was liable to pay ten per cent of its value to The Father Christmas Company. When some people took David Christmas to court about it, they lost their

case.

After that, David hired two henchmen, nicknamed “Pete the Creep” and “Doug the Thug”, to scour all the shops and confiscate items which did not bear the authentic Father Christmas Company logo. Pete was a particularly nasty, large, tattooed, skinhead-like character, whereas Doug was more weaselly, spotty, and greasy in appearance. How they loved their jobs, snatching decorations out of people’s hands and confiscating barrow-loads of Christmas puddings from the shops. And, as Christmas got nearer, they even had the nerve to confiscate a whole shipment of Christmas trees from Norway, including the one that is sent by the Norwegian Government every year to stand in Trafalgar Square! Of course, the whole country was in uproar, but it seemed as if the company had every right to do these things, unless somebody overturned the decision in the courts.

The only way that people could get around the situation was to advertise items in a different way. For example “lights that you may wish to decorate a tree with on the 25<sup>th</sup> December”, or “cards with a jolly message of season’s greetings”. There was by now a huge shortage of Christmas trees, all languishing in warehouses up and down the country, which had been seized by the customs authorities on behalf of The Father Christmas

Company. This often resulted in people having no tree at all for Christmas, or just a few twigs so small that the poor Christmas fairy had nothing to stand on. The worst thing of all was that now all letters addressed to “Father Christmas” went straight to The Father Christmas Company, where they opened them and tried to sell the child’s parents expensive toys from their catalogue.

How dull and dreary the country’s high streets in towns and cities looked, in the dark, wet winter without Christmas lights and pretty decorations lighting up the shop windows. And the parents and children looked forlorn as they began to realise that Christmas this year did not exist. It had been stolen!

Meanwhile, David Christmas, who was by now richer than he ever imagined, received a curt message to visit his father. John and Christopher stood squarely facing David, who somehow could not look either of them in the eye.

“Son, I never thought I’d say this, but I’m ashamed of you! You’ve made the lights go out all over the country, and you’ve ruined Christmas for everyone!”

“But I’m doing this for all of us - to make our future secure.”

“If the lights had been on in 1944, perhaps they would have found my mother!” John stormed. “I’m not selling you any more of my horses, and I want nothing

more to do with you unless you come to your senses.”

There was an awkward silence.

“Sorry, Dad, but I think you’d better go,” said Christopher.

David turned and left without saying anything, but there was a tear running down his face.

Christopher looked worriedly at his grandad. “Are you really going to stop making your horses?”

“On no, I’m just not selling them to your father. My old dad wouldn’t have wanted me to stop.”

He suddenly looked away into the distance, as if listening for his own father’s advice. Then he snatched up his bag of tools and headed straight for the workshop. Soon, banging and hammering could be heard in earnest, for all the world as if John was working harder than ever.

“Oh Nan, what are we going to do?” Christopher asked, as she gave him a hug.

Alice paused thoughtfully.

“Well, perhaps you ought to write a letter to Father Christmas. After all, do you think he realises what is going on?”

“Yes, yes, that’s a good idea!” Christopher replied. And then, “Oh no... Dad’s company now gets sent all the letters addressed to Father Christmas, doesn’t it?”

“Oh dear, I suppose it does,” she answered, and thought carefully. “But, if you were to send a letter inside a special company envelope, and addressed it to the North Pole, they wouldn’t dare to open it then.”

Christopher smiled.

“You know, Nan, I think you are as clever as my father,” he laughed.

“Cleverer!” she replied. “Because David is being far too clever for his own good.”

All was not well in Father Christmas Land. There were only eight weeks to go until Christmas, and so far only a handful of children’s letters had been received. And these had been addressed most strangely, such as “to The Furry Fat Man”, and “to The Self-Employed Gift Giver”. The Council of Elders called a meeting. This council consisted mostly of retired Father Christmases, and the current holder of the title was not very popular with some of the older members due to his “trendy” ideas. Nicholas, who was Father Christmas number 76, could trace his lineage right back to the very first one. But he was not quite fat enough, his beard not long enough, and he preferred his electric snowmobile to a sleigh pulled by reindeer.

This council meeting was a very sombre affair. All the elders wore their full Santa regalia, and the

council chairman even wore his official helmet complete with reindeer antlers on each side.

“You and your new fangled ways!” shouted the oldest ex-Father Christmas. “Look at this tiny pile of letters. Why, the children don’t even believe in us any more!”

“Perhaps we should be on the Internet,” Father Christmas replied.

At this there was the sound of shocked gasps.

“All right, I was joking,” he laughed nervously. There was a stony silence.

Father Christmas reached into his one of his deep pockets and pulled out Christopher’s letter, written neatly on Father Christmas Company headed notepaper.

“Actually, I wanted to read you this.” He cleared his throat. “URGENT. Dear Father Christmas, please help us! My father has stolen Christmas. We need your help to get it back. Love,” (and here he paused for effect) “Christopher CHRISTMAS”.

At first there was a great intake of breath, then suddenly everyone began talking at once.

“I knew it!” shouted Father Christmas n°. 73. “Another family is trying to take us over.”

Finally the chairman spoke.

“This is very serious, everyone. We have been so busy arguing amongst ourselves that we never noticed

anything was wrong until it was too late. The only thing we can do is send one of us,” here they all turned and looked at n°. 76, “to go to England and find out what is really happening.”

“I agree,” Father Christmas replied, “and that duty must be mine. All I ask for is back-up if required, and for the reindeer and sleigh to be ready in case they are needed at a moment’s notice. Oh, and of course, I’d like to take Polar with me.”

Polar was his large, fluffy, white dog who had a great sense of direction.

“Agreed!” All the ex Father Christmases stood up and held their ancient chimney brushes in the air.

The very next day, Father Christmas began his journey across the frozen wastes of Iceland and the North Sea, heading south. The driver was his brother Erik, Santa n°. 75, and beside him sat a large white dog wearing a sleigh-bell collar. By the time they had flown over the Scottish mountains and followed the Pennines south it was late afternoon.

“We don’t want to attract too much attention at this time of day,” said Nick. “It’s a good thing I’m not wearing my Christmas clothes. Drop me off in a field by that railway station and I’ll travel by train the rest of the way.”

The sleigh came down to earth in a place near

Boxhill in Surrey, from where only half a dozen reports of unidentified flying objects had been made to New Scotland Yard.

At 6.30 p.m. a train pulled into Waterloo Station, where Father Christmas and Polar got out. There seemed to be hundreds of people rushing back and forth, and in London the sight of an unshaven old man carrying a sack and being followed by a dog barely raised a glance. Once outside the station, Santa paused.

“To the West End, Polar,” he ordered.

Polar sniffed the air carefully and then barked, pulling on his lead. He was a very special dog who had an inbuilt sense of direction. An icy wind began to blow as they headed towards the subway underneath Waterloo Bridge. As they reached the middle of the subway Nicholas stopped and looked in astonishment. Under the pillars supporting the bridge were rows of blankets and cardboard boxes. In the centre space there was quite a large fire burning on a stack of old wooden pallets, and huddled round were a group of people trying to keep warm.

Polar barked in excitement, and several people turned their heads and stared. One man moved towards them.

“Can I help you, old man?” he asked. The question was not unfriendly.

“Well, I was looking for a place to stay tonight,” Santa replied. “Would you mind if we joined you?”

“Welcome to Cardboard City,” the younger man joked. “Don’t cause any trouble and you’ll be welcome here.”

Polar wagged his tail and then pulled Santa towards an old woman sitting in the corner.

“Would your lovely dog like one of my sausages?” she asked.

Polar barked again and shook his sleigh bells, his tail wagging.

Santa laughed. “I think that means yes!” he replied.

“I’ve got some spare blankets if you are staying the night,” the lady continued. “Would you like them?”

“How kind,” he answered. “My name is Nick, may I ask yours?”

“Mary,” she smiled. “Pleased to meet you, Nick.”

Polar barked.

“And this is Polar,” Santa continued. The dog licked Mary’s hand and she laughed.

“Pleased to meet you, too, Polar.”

So Father Christmas and Polar spent their first night sleeping rough in London, but the fire helped to keep them all warm.

The next day, they got up early and decided to continue on to the West End. This was one of the main shopping areas, and crowds of people loved to visit it at Christmas time. When Mary heard of Santa's plans, she said:

"You're a stranger here, aren't you? Why don't I come along and show you around - I've been living on these streets for 50 years."

Father Christmas looked shocked.

"Dear me, that's not good," he shook his head. "Well, Mary, I'd be delighted to have some company."

After a hot breakfast, Father Christmas, Mary and Polar set off. At first they explored the big department stores along Oxford Street. Father Christmas could not believe what he saw - no lights to decorate the streets and no glittering Christmas displays in the windows. Instead, each shop displayed a similar message:

"Sorry, no Santa's grotto this year"; and "Father Christmases need not apply".

He tutted out loud, and asked Mary if she knew what was wrong.

"I don't really know," she answered. "I've never seen London like this at Christmas before."

"No, neither have I," Father Christmas replied.

"Oh - I thought this was your first visit," said

Mary. "So why are you over here, anyway?"

Santa coughed. "Just sight-seeing, you could say," he replied. "I've always wanted to see Trafalgar Square; I don't suppose we could go there next?"

Before very long they were standing by Nelson's Column.

"What's this!" Father Christmas roared. "The London landmark has gone!"

Mary looked puzzled. "But this is Nelson's column."

"I mean the Christmas tree!"

Where the tree once stood was a sign that read, "Confiscated by The Father Christmas Company until further notice".

Santa looked very worried. "Oh dear! How am I supposed to know where I am without that to guide me?"

He was so shocked that he sat down on the edge of a water fountain. Mary joined him.

"I've never cared much for Christmas anyway," she sniffed. "It's not my cup of tea."

"Why not?" Father Christmas asked. "Don't you have any family?"

Mary paused. She did not think she should tell her life story to a complete stranger, but on the other hand she would probably never see him again.

“Used to have,” she sighed heavily. “I had a baby boy once, when I was young.” Mary looked very sad. “I couldn’t keep him so I had to give him away.”

“Please, go on,” said Santa kindly.

“To top it all, it was Christmas time when I lost him. To a couple in Christmas Street! I came to London to look for his father, and I’ve been here ever since.”

Santa gave Mary a hug.

“Sorry to hear that, Mary.” Suddenly Polar wagged his tail and barked. Santa paused thoughtfully for a moment, and then patted one of his deep pockets. “Would that be Christmas Street in Gillingham, Kent?”

Mary gasped and looked at him in amazement. “Who are you really?” she asked. “And what are you doing here?”

“Please, sit down next to me Mary, I’ve got something to tell you,” Santa replied.

The next morning, Santa, Mary and Polar set off bright and early from the station on a train bound for Gillingham. Mary looked almost unrecognisable after a little bit of shopping; she was clean and tidy and wore a new suit topped off with a perky green hat (courtesy of Father Christmas). Santa himself looked very smart, wearing a green velvet coat and knee length boots.

Even Polar had dressed for the occasion, wearing a green ribbon around his neck. One hour later, they were standing outside Gillingham station, and Santa was just about to hail a taxi when Mary stopped him.

“It’s all right,” she smiled. “I remember how to get there.”

Polar barked his approval.

A short while later the three of them arrived at the Christmas family doorstep. Grandmother opened the door, and after listening in surprise to Santa’s request, called out:

“Christopher! There’s someone to see you.”

“Hello Christopher, I received your letter,” smiled Father Christmas, reaching into one of his pockets and pulling out a small brown envelope with Chris’s unmistakable writing on it.

“What? Are you really... is it really you?”

“Of course,” came the reply. “And I’ve come to ask for your help.”

Christopher, for once completely speechless, showed Father Christmas, Mary and Polar into the front room.

“Well, Christopher, thank you very much for your letter. It seems that things are worse than I thought, and I’ve got a very important question to ask you. It would be a great help if you could tell me what has

happened to the tree that used to stand in Trafalgar Square.”

At first, Chris was so excited that he couldn't think straight, but then he said, “Oh yes; it's been confiscated and kept with a lot of other Christmas trees, at my dad's warehouse in Chatham Dockyard.”

“That's wonderful!” Father Christmas replied. “Now, Christopher, I wonder if you could show me where, exactly. You see, I need it to be standing in Trafalgar Square with all its lights on, to guide me on my sleigh.”

Just then, John Christmas came into the room looking flushed and very excited. The men shook hands. Mary gave a loud gasp.

“Grandad!” Christopher shouted. “Have you still got the keys to Dad's warehouse in the dockyard?”

“Yes, I think so,” he murmured. He was looking strangely at Mary, who was staring at him.

“All right, we'll sort this out later,” Father Christmas smiled. “First things first. Mr Christmas,” he held Mary's arm, “would you like to have a private word with my friend Mary, here? She is longing to speak to you.”

“Oooh, I can't believe it,” Mary squealed, and with that she followed John through the house and into the garden. When next Mrs Christmas looked out she

saw John and Mary in each other's arms, hugging.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

John looked up, still holding Mary tightly.

"Alice," he said quietly, "this is my mother."

Later that evening, when things had calmed down a little, they all had tea and sat around talking. Chris told Santa about his father and The Father Christmas Company.

"I thought I had heard the name before." Santa rubbed his beard thoughtfully. "Don't you make those beautiful toy horses?"

John stood up and looked very pleased.

"Yes," he answered. "Would you like to come and have a look in my workshop?"

"I'd be delighted!" Santa replied.

John led the way, closely followed by a very excited Christopher. At last he was going to see what was hidden in the shed. He could hardly wait for the wooden doors to open. As they swung back Christopher peered inside, but it was dark and all he could see were mysterious shapes in the gloom. John reached inside and pressed a switch. Suddenly the sound of fairground music filled the air, and then rows of pretty white and yellow lights lit up. A whirring sound got louder and louder, and they all looked on in absolute amazement. There, whizzing round faster and faster, was the most

beautiful carousel in the world. There were two rows of horses, one decorated in silver, the next in gold, and each hoof was delicately picked out in gold or silver leaf. They sparkled and gleamed as they spun around, and seemed to be almost flying through the air, faster and faster.

“Wow!!” Christopher yelled.

“Merry Christmas, Grandson!” cried John.

Before you knew it, they had all clambered onto the horses and were soon spinning around, with John at the controls and Polar barking excitedly.

“This is wonderful!” cried Father Christmas. “I’d like you to supply me with more of these.”

“Wheee,” cried Mary, as her hat went flying off into next door’s garden.

Chris and Alice laughed as they spun round too.

And so ended the most magical day that John and Christopher could remember. Of course, Alice insisted that all the guests, including Polar, must stay with them for as long as they wanted.

The next morning, Grandad, Alice and Christopher took Father Christmas, Mary and Polar to the warehouse where the giant Norwegian pine tree was being kept. With trembling hands, John opened the lock and pulled the doors open. Inside, it was like an

Aladdin's cave. Christmas trees were piled right up to the roof on one side of the warehouse; the other side was full of Christmas lights, decorations and tinsel, and in the middle stood a mountain of Christmas food. Saddest of all, in a corner lay a huge pile of toys and games.

Father Christmas bristled with anger. "They have got no right to take these things. Christmas belongs to everyone."

Polar ran to the back of the warehouse and began to bark. On the ground lay an enormous pine tree with a thick, long trunk and with lots of bushy branches.

"Here it is!" cried Christopher. "Dad showed it to me."

They all gathered round to stare at the fallen tree.

"It is most important that I get this tree back to Trafalgar Square before Christmas Eve," Santa said. "And it must have lights on. The streets in London are narrow and winding, and I use this tree as my guide."

"But how can we do that?" asked John.

Father Christmas scratched his beard thoughtfully. "Hmmm. Normally I would think of using the reindeer, but this job would be too dangerous. The tree is very long and there are lots of tall buildings to negotiate on the way. And of course, it's dark as there are no illuminations this year. No, that's out of the

question. Perhaps we could take it by boat?"

John suddenly had an idea.

"I might know some people who could help."

Later that evening John made urgent phone calls to his fairground friends. "Yes, Saturday night, Trafalgar Square," and, "Of course, flame throwers welcome."

Finally, Father Christmas rang home.

"Put the flyers on standby," he ordered.

Saturday came and they all gathered around the warehouse in Chatham Dockyard. John and Santa had tied thick metal chains around the trunk of the tree and, by using the tractor in the shed, had laid the smaller trees underneath to help roll it out. The others helped to make a pathway. Polar barked helpfully when he thought they were doing something right.

"He can sense they are coming," said Father Christmas. "I'll need to take him along to help guide us."

Suddenly, Polar ran outside and began barking at the sky, wagging his tail. At first Christopher could not see anything except for the night sky, and the jingling noise he could hear was that of Polar's sleighbell collar. This noise, however, got louder and louder and then - with a sudden whoosh - above their heads appeared the hooves of eight reindeer followed by a white sleigh, which circled around them once before coming in to

land.

“Ahoy there, Erik!” Father Christmas cried.

“Whooaaa, steady team,” the driver ordered.

“Good journey?”

“Yes, it’s a clear night and the wind is in the right direction. Are you ready, Brother?”

“Most certainly! The tree is chained up and ready to heave,” replied Nick.

“Then hook it on to the sleigh and guide us out!”

With a mighty heave the eight reindeer pulled the magnificent pine out of the warehouse. It rolled off the smaller trees and onto the top of ten long toboggans that had been joined to the sleigh.

“You see,” laughed Erik. “The reindeer do have their uses!”

Finally the men were satisfied that all was secure. Father Christmas went over to the small group of people and shook their hands.

“I’ve got to go now and give Erik a hand. Thank you all very much for your help. John, is everything ready?”

“Yes, from Blackheath, every mile until Trafalgar Square,” he said proudly.

“That’s wonderful, just what was needed. I must go now, but I hope to see you all there on Sunday!”

“Yes!” they all chorused.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world!” Mary said.

“Come on, boy,” he called his dog, who looked at Christopher and hesitated just for a moment before jumping into the sleigh with the two Santas.

Santa n°. 75 shook the reins and yodelled into the air. With that the deer tightened the slack reins and pulled, slowly at first, and then seemed to step off the dock wall and into thin air. At first the tree hung down and looked as if it was going to fall, but then Nick leaned over the back of the sleigh and pulled something tight. Then they climbed into the sky and circled once before shooting off into the distance at great speed. Within two minutes they were gone.

“Hurrah!” Christopher shouted. “They’ve done it! They’ve done it!”

Everybody hugged each other.

“It must be magic,” Alice smiled, and Mary said, “I’m not dreaming, am I?”

They all laughed happily before walking back home. When they arrived John put on the television.

“We must watch the news,” he told them.

Sure enough, the ten o’clock bulletin had a newsflash.

*“We are getting reports of a large traffic jam stretching from Blackheath to central London. Simon, what can you see?”*

*Well this is really most amazing. It seems to be some sort of industrial action. There are hundreds of fairground rides parked in the middle of the roads, fully working, with lights on and music playing. Even the jugglers are throwing burning torches into the air.*

*Extraordinary! Do the travellers give any reason for this?*

*Yes, they said, and I quote, they are 'waiting for Father Christmas'.*

*Well, clearly they must be planning to block the roads for the next few weeks! Are the police doing anything to help, Simon?*

*Yes they are, Tim. I can see the lights from a police helicopter passing overhead and - oh no, oh my goodness! It can't be...!*

*Simon? Simon! Er hum... we seem to have lost transmission for the moment. We'll bring you up to date if we hear anything further."*

Everyone in the Christmas household screamed and cheered.

"They're going to do it!" Christopher shouted. "Christmas is going to be saved!"

The next morning, David Christmas looked at his Sunday papers. On the front cover was a beautiful Christmas tree, all lit up, standing in the middle of Trafalgar Square, and underneath was an obviously

made-up story about flying reindeer delivering it. He picked up the phone.

“Pete, I want both of you down to Trafalgar Square now to tell me what is going on. Someone is trying to make a monkey out of me.”

When they arrived they found an amazing scene. Flamethrowers and jugglers with lighted batons were performing in the square, alongside fairground rides and children’s roundabouts. Everywhere was thronging with crowds enjoying the lights and music. Surrounding the tree in Trafalgar Square was a huge Salvation Army band, and a large crowd of onlookers were singing carols and mobbing a man who, well frankly, looked like Father Christmas signing autographs.

Pete and Doug made their way towards him.

“So you are the one responsible for all this,” Pete snarled threateningly. “What’s your name?”

Polar growled quietly.

“My name is Father Christmas, and I am pleased to say that I have returned the tree to its rightful owners, the public,” he replied.

At this a large cheer went up from the crowd.

“Well, we’ll just have to take it right back!” snarled Doug.

At that, all the singing and music playing stopped.

“You cannot steal the tree any more than you can steal Christmas!” answered Santa.

“We’ll see about that!” Pete retorted, walking towards the tree. Suddenly, a large group of people who had earlier been singing carols circled the tree and joined hands.

Pete stopped in his tracks and turned round.

“We’ll see you in court!” he snapped.

“No, I’ll see you in court for stealing my good name!” Santa replied.

Suddenly Christopher rushed forward.

“Stop! Stop this!”

Doug and Pete moved away.

“Tell Dad I let him take the tree. This is the real Father Christmas!”

At that, a crowd of photographers appeared and began taking snaps. A couple of reporters also tried asking Santa and Christopher questions.

Pete and Doug knew that this time they had lost, and they slunk back home to their boss.

And so it was that the case of Father Christmas v. The Father Christmas Company came to court. The judges decided that, as there were only three weeks until Christmas Day, it was in the public interest to settle the dispute as quickly as possible.

Lying on a hot beach somewhere in the

Antipodes, a young woman took off the newspaper shielding her face. She read the article and reached for her mobile phone.

“Claire, could you book me the next flight to London, please? Yes, it’s urgent!”

The day of the court case arrived. Santa, wearing his full Christmas regalia, looked magnificent. Mary looked just like anybody else’s granny dressed up for a wedding. Johnny and Alice looked smart in matching suits as they went inside to watch the case, while Christopher was left outside in charge of Polar.

A huge throng of people were queuing up to watch the proceedings, and the atmosphere was just like a party, with some people carrying banners and balloons saying things like, “Good Luck from the Christmas Card Association”, and “We Love You Santa”. Santa himself was mobbed and cheered just like a film star when he climbed the steps into court. David Christmas was booed as he went in with his lawyers. Inside, Mary sat with Alice and John in the front row. Eventually there was a hush as the Clerk of the Court entered.

“Court please rise,” he said.

The elderly judge followed him in.

As everyone sat back down, Mary gave a loud shriek and stood back up again.

“You can’t be hearing this case. This is your

own son and grandson!”

“Silence!” thundered an official. “Remove that woman!”

First the judge looked astonished. Then he stared at Mary as she was being escorted out of court. Suddenly, he went deathly white and promptly fainted.

“Court adjourned!” called another official. “Would you all please leave by the nearest exit!”

Everyone filed out of the court with stunned looks on their faces, not least of all David Christmas. He thought of the old woman (who was she anyway?) being dragged out of court, of his mother and father looking so concerned and serious, and of course about Christopher, waiting outside alone except for a fat, hairy dog. Where had that dog come from? And what did that woman mean...? Was he the judge’s grandson?!

These thoughts, and many more, were whirling around inside his head. As David emerged into the daylight he was dazzled at first by dozens of flashlights. Rubbing his eyes, he looked for his son and saw something that finally melted his heart. There was Christopher, wrapped in the arms of his mother, Penelope.

“Have you got any comments, Sir?” a reporter asked, putting a microphone to David’s mouth.

“Yes, I have,” he said quietly, but with

determination. "I would like to announce that The Father Christmas Company is being closed down."

There was a loud cheer from some of the crowd.

"All the goods that have been confiscated will either be returned or paid for. Oh yes - and a merry Christmas to everybody! That's all. Thank you."

The waiting crowd applauded loudly and parted to let him reach Christopher and Penelope. When he reached them he opened his arms.

"I'm sorry," he cried. "I'm sorry to both of you..."

Then Christopher, Penny and David all hugged each other, thrilled to be together again.

Mary, meanwhile, was watching from a distance. She saw Johnny and Alice make their way over to Christopher and his parents, to lots more hugging all round. She saw Doug and Pete trying to disappear into the crowd, and she sighed to herself.

"They have all found each other and now they won't want me hanging about." Looking down, she saw Polar was standing in front of her.

"Come with me, Polar, and I'll cook you sausages every night."

But Polar just whined and sat down.

"I think that means 'No'." Father Christmas's voice behind her made Mary jump. "Not leaving so

soon, Mary?"

"Well it's about time I went back to my old mates. It's been lovely to meet you all, but..."

"I won't hear of it," Santa said gently. "There's a big party at the Christmas house tonight and I want you to be there as my guest of honour. After all, you helped save the day."

"Me? I didn't do anything except cause trouble. But dear me, it was easy to recognise Stephen again. Why, he looks just like his father. He was a judge, too."

"Oh don't worry about that, it will all get sorted out - but not if you run away again."

Mary looked doubtful.

"My work here has nearly finished. I must get back home; it's the busiest time of the year. But there's something I'd like you to do for me when I've gone. Won't you come to see me off?"

Mary smiled at him. "Of course I'll come with you." Polar barked. "And Polar, too."

That night the party was in full swing. Alice had hurriedly rustled up some mince pies and sandwiches, and David arranged for lots of food and drink to be delivered. John had invited his fairground friends as a "thank you", and Christopher had great fun showing them his new carousel. David and Penelope looked happy together again.

Meanwhile, Father Christmas was busy preparing for his journey, but he gave Mary some instructions first. All the confiscated food was to be handed out to her homeless friends. Then Johnny and Alice went over to her.

“Mary? I mean, Mother... Alice and I have been talking. Christopher is moving back home with his parents now and, the thing is, we’d love to have you here. Not just for Christmas. We mean we want you to live here. Would you like that?”

For an answer, Mary threw her arms around them both and shouted, “Yes!” before dancing a jig arm-in-arm with them.

Outside, a cold northerly wind sprang up and a sprinkle of white snowflakes fell to the ground. Everyone was so busy enjoying themselves that no one really noticed Father Christmas and Polar leaving the party. The last thing they caught sight of was the sleigh whizzing along into the distant night sky.

Christopher felt a little sad until he found a Christmas card lying on his pillow. He read it out to everybody.

“Father Christmas invites all of the Honorary Christmas Family to visit his home and workshops at the North Pole. (But not for the next two weeks, as I will be very busy.) Ho! Ho! Ho!”

**THE END**