



A USEFUL GADGET

Laurence had in fact gone to sleep when told, that Christmas Eve. This was unusual. But, once the note and refreshments had been set out for Santa Claus, and the stocking hung up, there was not much left to do except go to bed, switch out the light, and lie listening for the sound of Santa's sleigh. And after a while, Laurence drifted off to sleep.

Sometime, in the middle of the night (more precisely at fourteen minutes past twelve, on Laurence's illuminated clock), there came a commotion from somewhere outside. Laurence woke up and listened: it appeared to be an argument. There was a deep gruff voice and some other coughing noises and sounds like hooves stamping. Laurence quietly got out of bed and looked out of the window. There was nothing to be seen. But there was definitely an argument going on out there. It seemed to be from above, from the flat roof of their house. Laurence looked more carefully and could just see, reflected in the window of the house over the road and illuminated by the moon riding high in the sky, the figures of a large fat man and some animals with antlers, standing on the roof of his own house.

Laurence put on his slippers and his dressing gown. He crept out on to the landing. There was a trap-door leading out on to the roof. As quietly as he could, he got out the ladder, climbed up and opened the trap-door. The cold night air flooded in.

"How could you come out without even a map!?" Santa was saying, "What on earth do you think you were doing?"

"Well, it's not my fault," said one of the reindeer, tossing its head, "I think Basher and Banshee should have known where we were going."

"I should have known?" gasped another reindeer, "Well, that's nice! That's really nice. You were the one, Fixum, who got the top marks in navigation at the Reindeer Academy!"

"So? And what about Comma here, she - "

"Now, listen all of you," broke in Santa. "Everyone is to blame here - Fixum should have known where to go and hasn't even got a compass; Basher and Banshee should have checked for a map before we left; and I should have made sure you were properly trained before we set off. I don't know what's been going on these past few days - everyone has been more excitable than usual and more than enough people seem to be annoyed with me this year. But there's no point standing here arguing. We've got this whole sleigh full of presents to deliver, and time is getting on. What are we going to do? Anyone any ideas?"

There was a deep silence.

Laurence coughed politely. Everyone looked round, somewhat surprised to see a little head poking out of the trap-door.

"Hello, young man," said Santa in his special deep Santa tones, "And what are you doing out of bed?"

"Well, sir," said Laurence, stepping out on to the roof, "You woke me up with your argument, so I thought I would see what was happening."

"See?" said one of the reindeer, "That's all your fault, Fixum! Getting us all here without knowing where to go next!"

"Now, quiet, all of you!" shouted Santa Claus, exasperated. "There's no time for this. If there was time, I would have you all back to the North Pole and I would have Dasher and Dancer and the rest of them out! At least then we'd get the job finished"

This threat at last made the reindeer fall silent.

"If you need any help, sir," said Laurence timidly, "I'd be happy to..."

"Well, now, son, that's very kind of you. But I don't know that you can - unless you have a map of the town?"

"Got one!" Laurence vanished down the ladder again and emerged less than a minute later with a street-map. He had put on a scarf and round his neck he had a compass.

"Ho ho ho!" shouted Santa gleefully, "A map *and* a compass! A most useful gadget, a compass. Now we're back in business! So, where did I put that list of addresses...? Panter, you had it last - hand it over here! Now, let's see: the next house to go to is in John O'Groats Avenue. Any idea where that is, my boy?"

Santa looked at Laurence hopefully.

"Yes, that's the next street round the corner here."

"Ho ho ho! Now we're cooking!" Santa cheered up visibly, and smacked the nearest reindeer on the bottom happily. "What's your name, my boy?"

"Laurence, sir."

"Um, I don't suppose you'd care to...?"

Laurence did not need to be asked twice. Pulling his scarf more tightly round his neck, he jumped up on the sleigh beside Santa Claus, spread the map on his lap and gave out directions. As Santa read out each address, Laurence successfully guided them to the correct house, waited while Santa dropped things down the chimney - no time for clambering down and up, and certainly no time to stop for biscuits and whisky (although Santa kept himself warm with brandy from his flask) - then on to the next on the list. Laurence did wonder why some of the presents were so peculiar - some barking, others screaming like seagulls, some sticky and wet. But he was too polite to ask the obvious questions; and Santa seemed a little confused too. So, round the streets they went, Laurence map-reading, the reindeer doing their very best to get things right, Santa working hard. And when all the streets in the town were done, Laurence used his compass to get them over the farms and cottages in the countryside, doing so well that even Fixum re-gained some of his confidence and managed to guide them on the tricky bits with hills and woods. And Basher and Banshee felt much better and the ride got less wobbly as the night went on. And Comma and Cooper even felt happy enough to lead the entire team in community singing as they glided across the night-sky to the next house.

And when the last sack was empty and the last present delivered, Santa drove back to Laurence's roof-top and set the sleigh down gently. He helped Laurence out from under a pile of empty sacks which had been keeping him warm.

"Well, young sir, you've helped me out of a real problem. Thank you very much indeed! Here's your map back."

Laurence got down from the sleigh and turned to wave goodbye. Basher coughed and said something to Banshee who whispered to Panter who nudged Fixum who poked Comma who kicked Cooper who muttered to Bomber who winked at Bixum who whispered to Santa.

"Oh my goodness, yes!" exclaimed Santa worried, "Oh dear, what on earth can we do...? How will we ever get back home?"

Laurence smiled and took the useful gadget from around his neck. "I think Fixum can probably use this, sir" He handed the compass to the navigating reindeer.

"Ho ho ho!" said Santa. "Thank you, young man. A useful gadget indeed. I'll be sure to bring it back next year."

