

Trousering the Elves

"What?! You mean I spent my summer sewing these new trousers and jackets for your elves and only now do you tell me you haven't put on the name-tapes?" Mrs Claus was righteously angry. "Three days to go to Christmas Eve, and you stand there, looking pathetic! Do you seriously expect me to help you? Oh no, Mr Claus, sir, you can think again, sir!" And with that, Mrs Claus stormed out triumphantly, put on her woolly hat and thick gloves, to set off for the nearest village for a litre of mulled wine and a good natter with her friends. It was seven leagues to the nearest village in the Far North, and the litre of mulled wine tended to become two or three litres. And maybe a plate or two of spiced biscuits. Followed by a couple of days' shopping.

Mr Claus was not going to see her again in a hurry. He sighed loudly. No one came scurrying to ask what was wrong. This was quite usual when Mr Claus had an argument with Mrs Claus. It took a considerable amount of sighing before anyone dared put their heads above the parapet. He sighed loudly for about five minutes.

The first to appear was Old Butterbreaks. This was the most ancient elf, hard of hearing, poor of eye and with a tendency to fall asleep as Christmas Eve approached.

"What's that you say, eh? Eh?" he demanded.

Santa Claus sighed loudly, more for the benefit of Old Butterbreaks' hearing than for anything else.

"Oh, just Mrs C. getting upset again for no good reason, Old B. Nothing for you to worry about."

Crowding in behind Old Butterbreaks came all the other elves. The usual plan was for them to send him in ahead, as a sort of decoy, to soak up any angry comments from Santa. Then the rest of them would sneak in, assured of not being hit on the head by a boot hurled in wrath or a sack of presents sent sky-high.

Santa sighed again a couple of times. "Well, colleagues, I've done it this time. Got you all these nice new clothes and forgot to put labels in. Suppose I'll have to sit down myself and burn the midnight oil, eh?" He looked round hopefully: surely *someone* would volunteer to help him out?

The elves shuffled their feet, stared at the ceiling. Those at the back started a slow drift out of Santa's office. It was, after all, the Christmas Party for the workers tonight. Those at the front of the crowd mumbled apologies and gradually pushed their way out. Old Butterbreaks had a grand excuse - his old hands were so gnarled and shaky he could not hold a needle and thread if his life depended on it. Luckily, it never did.

Ho hum. Nothing else for it. Santa sat in his ancient leather armchair, placed a bottle of malt whisky at his elbow; the pile of elves clothes and boots at his feet; needles, threads, name-tapes and ink on the work-table; and set to work. The clock on the wall ticked slowly and sonorously into the night. Seven o'clock passed. Eight o'clock. Nine o'clock: the level in the whisky bottle dropped visibly: there were some interesting difficulties in threading the needle. Ten o'clock: the whisky bottle was half-empty: Santa Claus' head lolled back and he fell asleep, snoring. At eleven o'clock he was awakened by the distant shouts of drunken elves finishing their party - a snowball fight was in full swing under the

silvery moon. By one o'clock in the morning, it was all done. All the nice new jackets had name-tapes sewn in, all the trousers were clearly marked with the names of their owners, all the smart shiny black boots had an elf's name printed in ink inside. Santa sighed; more in satisfaction this time; had the very last drop in the whisky bottle as a night-cap; and promptly fell asleep in his large armchair.

It was a long tradition in the Far North that, when Christmas Eve arrived and the last sacks were to be packed and the sleigh loaded up, the elves should be given a present from Santa Claus. This year, Mrs Claus had very sensibly decided that all the elves should get new clothes and boots. It was seventy years since they had had new clothes, and some trousers were now more patch than trouser, some boots more glue than stitching. So she had spent the long summer evenings - and when you live that far north, the long summer evenings last well into the following morning - in sewing together the new trousers, cutting the new jackets and stitching the new boots.

Mrs Claus had returned late in the night of the 22nd with a shocking headache, a grumpy look on her face, and a pile of shopping which she threw on the kitchen table, under Santa's very nose, with a smug look of victory all over her face.

"You labelled those clothes yet, Mr Claus?" she demanded.

"Yes dear," said Santa meekly.

"Done it well, Mr Claus?"

"Yes dear"

"Should I inspect them?"

"If you want to, dear"

"Well - I can't be bothered. It's been a long hard three days' night. I'm going to bed."

Christmas Eve in the morning and all the elves lined up. Mr and Mrs Claus stood and handed out the presents.

"A new jacket for you, Plumduff Doolittle... a new pair of boots, Stilton Portman... a pair of trousers to replace your old ones, Master Goldenapple..."

I have to tell you that there are eighty-eight elves in the Far North, if you did not know already. So handing out the presents was a long and arduous business. But it was not long before Santa began to realise something was not quite right. As he was handing a pair of trousers to the twentieth elf, he could hear complaints from those who had already collected theirs:

"These ones aren't mine - they're too short!"

"This boot is sopping with ink - and what's this?! An ink-bottle in the toe-cap! Yeuch!"

"You must have got mine, Laurence Longshanks - see, your knees are coming out the bottom of the legs."

Worse was to come. By the time the fortieth elf had been served, Santa could hear:

"Look - if you give me your trousers, and I give you my jacket, then we should both be happy..."

"Some idiot's sewn up the collar - I can't get my head into this ..."

"No, these are *my* boots. No, I don't care *what* it says inside, they're not your size. Look at the state of my old boots - far worse than yours. I've had these for

a hundred and eighteen years, you've only had yours for ninety-three. So they're mine!"

"No, they're mine!"

"No, mine!"

Santa began to hum festive carols in a rich baritone to try to drown out the noise of complaint, so that his wife would not hear. But by the time the sixtieth elf had been served, there was no concealing from Mrs Claus the full extent of the disaster.

Mrs Claus was no amateur at this game. She did not shout or stamp her feet. She simply cocked an eyebrow at Santa and asked most matter-of-factly, "Done it well, Mr Claus?"

Santa's upper lip quivered and he said nothing. And as the eighty-eighth elf hobbled off with a pair of boots which were clearly far too small for him, Santa Claus burst into tears.

"ImsorryImsorryImsorry," he bubbled, his nose red as a reindeer's. "I don't know what went wrong, I thought I had done it all right, I sat up until four o'clock in the morning doing it, honest I did, I'm sorry!"

Mrs Claus just stood and looked at him, saying nothing, until her husband went on...

"Er well, it was at least one o'clock, and I can't think what went wrong...". And on...

"Well, maybe I did have a small nip of whisky - it was a cold night. But that can't have got me muddled..." And on...

"Um, perhaps it was two whiskies, now I come to think of it. But someone must have jumbled up the name-tags..." And on...

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry!"

It only took Mrs Claus an hour to sort of the mess. She stood all the elves in two long lines by descending girth and began to pair off trousers against legs, jackets against chest-sizes, boots against feet. Name-tags were swapped, boots re-marked. All in all, everyone was trousered, booted, jacketed and happy. Everyone except Mr Claus, who was ashamed of himself. And rightly so, Mr Claus.