

Nick Noel, Private Detective
Christmas Capers
by Frank Long

Spring had sprung and summer had come, bringing heat, humidity and smog to Orange County. But on this fourth day of July we were experiencing a warm, sunny, almost smog free day. I was in my office, reorganizing some of the cases in my files, while my receptionist, Vern, was out running errands. The name she was born with is Veronica, but for some forgotten reason, I just call her Vern. I was just finishing up when a UPS delivery person popped through my door. She handed me a package, then plopping down her clipboard said, "Sign here." I did as I was told. Picking up her clipboard, she left, quietly closing the door behind her.

I looked down at the package on my desk. It was wrapped in what appeared to be animal skin and bound with thin leather straps. Embroidered in what looked like cat gut was, "Nick Noel, PI". That was it for an address. Below my name were the words, "To be delivered the fourth day of July at precisely 7:50 pm." I glanced at my watch, and to the credit of the UPS delivery system, it was exactly 7:50 pm. Taking my PI skills one step farther, I checked the Star Trek calendar hanging on the wall (next to my Private Investigator's License) and sure enough, it was the 4th of July.

I was about to open the package when Vern stepped through the office door. With her long red hair backlit by the hallway light she was a stunning vision! Measuring in at 5'9", slender and with a face that could rival any face on the cover of any fashion magazine, she could be a runway model. But she seems to be happy answering my phone, filing my files, keeping my office efficiently organized and putting up with me.

She came over to the front of the desk and sat down in one of the two client's chairs. Looking at the package on the desk with her emerald-green eyes she asked, "What on Earth have you got there, Nick?"

"This was just delivered by UPS."

I untied the leather straps and unfolded the animal skin revealing a stone tablet. Lying on the tablet was a small key. I picked up the key, looked it over. It was just an ordinary key, so I put it down and turned my attention back to the stone tablet. Lettering had been chiseled on its rough surface which said, "Nick, I need your help again. Be on the roof at 8:00 tonight. Bring Veronica." It was signed, "Santa".

"Here, take a look at this." I turned the tablet around so she could read it. "It looks like it was made by some caveman. But that's Santa's handwriting, or chiseling as it were. I have no idea what it means." I looked at Vern and said, "It appears that Santa Claus once again needs our help!"

Before we go any further, let me introduce myself and tell you how I first met Santa Claus. My name is Nick Noel. While my chosen profession involves an electric guitar, a wall of amplifiers and adoring fans, what I actually am is a private detective. I am 41 years old, of average height, average weight, average brown hair, average brown eyes and a face that is, well, quite average. In other words, no James Bond am I. However, all this average-ness comes in quite handy in the detective business and has helped me solve many a case.

As for knowing Santa Claus, here is how it all started....

I was sitting in my office listening to the rain tapping on the window like so many tiny soggy drummers begging to be let in from the cold, dank night. It was Christmas Eve, California style; rainy. Whoever said it never rains in sunny California must be in real estate. On my desk was an empty bottle of cider and a plate of cookie crumbs (gingerbread), a gift from Vern. She had gone to her parents in Garden Grove to spend the holidays leaving me to celebrate on my own. As I sat with my feet propped up on the desk and reading my name through the glass in the door, **IP ,leoN kciN**, a shadow appeared, obscuring

my name. Being Christmas Eve I hardly expected a visitor (although the way business had been lately, any visitor was unexpected). Suddenly the shadow knocked.

"Come on in," I said. The door creaked open and the shadow entered, slowly changing from a silhouette into a fat little man in a red suit. The outfit was bisected by a wide black belt and had boots of the same black leather. White fur, matching his full white beard, was used as trimming. On top of his head was a red cap with the same white trim and a small bell that tinkled at the tip. The overall effect was quite jolly. Only his eyes betrayed his jovial presence, they were full of melancholy.

"You Nick Noel, the private investigator?" asked my visitor.

"That's what it says on the door... sometimes," I told him. "Please have a seat. I'd offer you some cider or cookies, but..." I pointed to the remains of Vern's gift.

He nodded a quick nod and sat in the chair facing my desk. Taking off his hat he said, "My name's Claus, Santa Claus."

"What can I do for you this evening Mr. Claus?"

"Please, call me Santa." He pulled out a long, curved pipe from his suit and lit it. Once the pipe was properly emitting spiraling curls of fragrant smoke, he continued. "I need you to find something for me Mr. Noel."

"Please, call me Nick. What seems to be missing?"

Santa sat silently puffing on his pipe for a moment, looked me in the eyes and said, "My sack."

Being a PI, I started putting everything together. White beard, red suit, Christmas Eve, Santa Claus, sack... "Hey, you're Santa Claus!"

"Took you long enough. Look, maybe I should..." he was getting up as if to leave.

"No wait!" I cried. I just couldn't let this client get away. This might end up being a big case. With all the composure I could muster, I said, "All I meant was that, well... ah, gee, you're Santa Claus!" There went my composure.

"We've established that. Now, I've got a very busy night ahead of me..."

"Wow, is your sleigh on the roof? Is Rudolph here too? Way cool!" I had lost it. I was six years old again, sitting on Santa's lap at The Broadway, tugging on his beard to see if it was real.

Slowly, Santa pulled a small silver flask from his suit pocket and said, "I think you need a swig of this."

Taking the proffered flask, I couldn't help but think 'Santa, a lush?' I unscrewed the top, put the container to my lips, tilted, then sipped. My mind was saying whiskey, but my taste buds were yelling "Cider!" This was Santa Claus after all, of course he would be packing cider. But it did the trick. My mind was clear, I was ready to work. "Okay, do you have any ideas who might have taken your sack? Have you misplaced it? Did you forget to pick it up from the cleaners?"

"No, no and... the cleaners?" Santa answered/questioned.

"Just looking into all the corners. Is there anyone who would want to make you look bad? Miss anybody's house last year? How about your staff? Any disgruntled employees?" I asked. After taking one more swig from the flask, I handed it back.

"I was told of a 'Little Red Wagon' painter, 3rd class, that was not happy in his work. But one of my elves?"

"In my line of work, everybody's a suspect. What's this painter's name?"

"Barsnood Bellyup," Santa Claus reluctantly told me.

Now I had a name to work with, but no motive. I also had a need for a drink and some food. It was time to head for Fred's. "Meet me back here in an hour," I told my client, then went out the door and closed it. Now the glass read, **Nick Noel, PI**. Go figure.

FRED'S BAR & GRILL is no different than any other greasy spoon joint in any other city, in any other state, except that Fred makes the best grilled cheese sandwiches on the planet. He also has the best beer (root beer, that is) on tap.

I burst through the door, strode over to "my stool" at the counter, sat down and called out, "Fred, beer and cheese!"

But it wasn't Fred who came out of the kitchen, it was Bob, his partner. He was wiping his hands on a towel that had "Paradise Motel" embroidered on it and an unlit cigar butt firmly clenched in his teeth.

"Oh, it's you Bob," I said, "Where's Fred?"

"He and Veronica are at her parents doin' the Christmas thing." I was beginning to think that maybe I should have gone to Garden Grove too.

"Okay, how 'bout that beer and cheese?"

"You got a case? Only time you go for Fred's grilled cheese is when you got cash. You do have cash, right, or do you want me to-"

"Put it on my tab," I finished for him, "I've got a case."

"Beer and cheese it is!" As Bob disappeared into the kitchen I grabbed a napkin and began to make a list of what information I had.

1. Santa Claus was sitting in my office, missing his sack.
2. A suspect by the name of Barsnood Bellyup.
3. Both my receptionist and my cook abandoned me on Christmas Eve.
4. Why did the name on my door keep changing?
5. I was hungry, where was my sandwich?

As I sat realizing I had no real information, Bob returned with my order. I took a huge gulp of root beer, let out a short belch, wiped my mouth with my napkin (smearing my list) then dug into one of Fred's wondrous grilled cheese sandwiches. I sat chewing, waiting for that bliss that always comes with each bite, but nothing happened! No bliss! I took another bite, nada, zip, nothing! Then I had it, I'd solved the case! After downing the rest of the root beer I called over my shoulder as I headed out the door, sandwich in hand, "Gotta run, Bob. Thanks, and Merry Christmas!"

I was running down the street yelling "Merry Christmas, Bedford Falls! Merry Christmas, you old building and loan!" Then suddenly it came to me. It wasn't snowing, this wasn't Bedford Falls there was no angel named Clarence and I wasn't Jimmy Stewart. What a night!

I burst through my office door (ignoring what it said) and found Santa sitting where I had left him, quietly smoking his pipe. "Let's go," I told him, "we've got work to do!"

When we made it to the street I asked, "What house would you be visiting right now?"

Santa seemed to check some inner map, looked at me and said, "Why, Veronica's parents in Garden Grove!" So we hopped into his sleigh (yeah, Rudolph was there too!) and flew off to save Christmas! Cool!!!

It had stopped raining and the view of Orange County was beautiful. But before I could fully enjoy the sights, we were bouncing onto a roof. We got out of the sleigh, took one look at the chimney, then climbed down a tree in the front of the house. I knocked on the door and when it opened, there was Vern, just staring at Santa as we pushed past her.

Everybody was there, Vern, Fred and, of course, Vern's parents, Doris and Hank. They were all staring dumbfoundedly at Santa and me (well, mostly at Santa).

"Is that, is that..?" stuttered Vern.

"Are you really, ah... him?" asked Fred.

Doris and Hank just stood gawking (they never say much anyway).

"Everyone, this is Santa Claus," I said. "Santa, this is-" But before I could finish the introductions, something or someone, came crashing through the picture window in the living room, sending pieces of glass flying like so much Christmas snow. And what to our wondering eyes should appear, but a Little Red Wagon, a little elf and a large sack full of toys.

"Barsnood Bellyup?" I asked.

"How ever did you know?" queried Santa.

"It was easy! Fred makes the finest grilled cheese sandwiches in the world."

"Huh?" said Santa Claus

"Huh?" said Vern.

"Huh?" said Fred, "oh, and thanks!"

"Huh?" said Barsnood Bellyup.

Doris and Hank remained mute.

"The grilled cheese Bob cooked for me, as good as it was, just wasn't Fred's grilled cheese and then it hit me. Barsnood here just wanted to be more than a 'Little Red Wagon' painter, 3rd class. He wanted to be like the big guy himself! So he took Santa's sack, loaded up a 'Little Red Wagon' and started delivering presents. But how did you know where to go?" I asked Barsnood.

"I Xeroxed the boss's list," he confessed.

"Ho, ho, ho!" roared Santa, "So you just wanted to be like me. Tell you what, you've been a loyal painter for many a Christmas, it's about time I promoted you. From now on you will be my assistant. I'm not as nimble or as quick as I used to be, I could use some help! How 'bout it, Barsnood?"

So they packed up Santa's sack, Barsnood's wagon and headed off to finish the night's work. As the sleigh was disappearing into the clouds, I could hear Santa Claus saying to Barsnood Bellyup, "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

That was last Christmas and now it is summer and it appears Santa (and possibly Christmas) is once again in trouble!

I looked at my watch, it was 7:56. Santa wanted us on the roof at 8:00 so we took the stairs that led to the roof. When we came out into the night we could hear firecrackers exploding and see bottle rockets being sent into the cooling evening air. As we were watching a fireworks show beginning in a park downtown, we heard what sounded like hoof beats behind us. It was Santa's sleigh, complete with all eight reindeer and my old buddy Rudolph in the lead. But the sleigh was empty of Santa or of elves. I walked over to Rudolph and asked, "What's going on? Where's Barsnood? Where's Santa?"

The deer, with his nose so bright, just snorted and shook his antlers. I asked Rudolph if Vern and I should get into the sleigh and he began nodding his head up and down vigorously with the rhythmical tone of dozens of jingling sleigh bells.

No sooner had we climbed aboard, the reindeer galloped off the edge of the building and we began to soar into the night. At the same time, fireworks from all over Orange County were being set off in a fantastic display of dazzling pyrotechnics illuminating the sky.

"Nice touch, Santa," I said. As Rudolph, and the rest of his team, flew us over Disneyland, Vern and I watched the fireworks exploding, like so many novae, all around us.

We watched the last of the fireworks glow fade as we climbed higher into the night. When the last ember blinked out, we turned to see nothing but black night and shining stars. Suddenly, the stars disappeared and were replaced by a glimmering cloud of swirling pastels. The choreography of color seemed to be energized by small shimmering bursts of pure white light.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the cloud dissipated. Again, we were in blackest night with brilliant stars all around us. I peered over the side of the sleigh only to see more night and stars. When I looked up again, we saw a green metallic sign that looked like a freeway sign. As we got closer, words became readable. White reflecting letters spelled out, "The North Pole". It was followed by a group of signs, some of which said, "Santa's Workshop Ahead", "The Paint Shop Up This Way", "Reindeers' Stable Down Here" and "Shipping/Receiving Over There".

We soon came to the last sign, "The Claus' House Just A Bit Further". The sleigh went just a bit further and as we looked below us we could see a snow covered cottage with two figures standing outside the front door. We circled once, then landed with a short spray of snow and gently glided to a stop in front of the cottage. We got off the sleigh as the two figures approached us. One was white haired, wore glasses and an apron, the other was a pretty little elf wearing a dress of browns and greens.

"Welcome to The North Pole," said the taller of the two, "I'm Mrs. Claus."

"Mrs. Claus!" I said, as I extended my hand to shake hers, "How good it is to meet you. My name is..."

"Nick Noel," Mrs. Claus said, as she took my hand into her warm embrace, "the charming young man who helped my husband save Christmas last year. And this must be the lovely Veronica. Santa was very much taken by you, my dear."

Vern said, "Thank you," and then promptly began to blush.

"And this," Mrs. Claus continued, "is Bendalia Bellyup, Barsnood's new bride!" I bent over, took Bendalia's petite hand and said, "Very pleased to meet you. That Barsnood is sure a lucky little imp," I paused to look her over, "because I've never seen an elf as pretty as you."

Bendalia said, "Thank you," and then promptly began to blush.

I straightened up, turned to Mrs. Claus and asked, "Speaking of that little rascal Barsnood is he here? Is Santa here? Do you know why he sent for us?"

Mrs. Claus put her arm through Vern and my arms, began walking us to the cottage door, and said, "You look cold and hungry. Come inside, let's get you warmed up and fed, and I will try to answer all of your questions."

We were sitting next to a roaring fire in the den of the cottage, sipping hot cider and nibbling on freshly baked cookies. Mrs. Claus handed me a small book with the monogram, "BB", embossed in gold lettering on the front cover. Inside were scribbled notes and hand drawn sketches of a device of some kind. She had also given me an engraved stone tablet, similar to the one UPS had delivered to me earlier in the day. The tablet read, "My Dearest Wife, Please do not worry about Barsnood and myself, but we seem to have gotten ourselves into quite a mess. I have sent for Nick Noel. Please assist him as best you can. Your Loving Husband."

As I was flipping through the book, Mrs. Claus said, "The message was delivered this morning, by UPS, and how that young lady found her way here, I'll never know. But I'm sure Mr. Claus had something to do with it." She poured us all another cup of cider, made sure our plates had the required amount of cookies, then continued,

"I knew those two were up to no good, working all night down in Barsnood's workshop. When I went to see if they were ready for breakfast this morning, they were gone! The elves and I looked everywhere, but they were not to be found. As soon as we came back from our search, UPS arrived with the package. That's when I decided to do some snooping in the workshop. I found the book you're holding, which looks like Barsnood's note book, on a table inside the workshop, but can't make heads nor tails of it."

"Where is this workshop, Mrs. Claus?" I asked.

"Down that staircase," responded Mrs. Claus, pointing with her cookie.

I excused myself and with the book and tablet in hand, left the ladies by the fire place, to find and inspect the workshop. I headed down the stairs that Mrs. Claus had pointed out. At the end of the steps was a door with the same gold embossed BB that was on the book in my hand. The knob was unlocked and turned easily, letting the door swing open on well-oiled hinges. The room looked like any other workshop, except everything was sized to match an elf. I roamed about the room for a few minutes looking in cabinets, shelves, and drawers, peeking under tables and in corners, but could find nothing of interest.

Then I spied a door that I failed to notice when I first came in. On the face of the door, brass lettering spelled, "STORAGE". I tried the knob, but it was locked. I then remembered the key that had come with Santa's message, pulled it from my pocket, inserted it into the lock, turned it, and was rewarded with a soft click. I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

In the middle of this new room, was a wooden construction about four feet wide and three feet deep. Wires, cables, coils, blinking lights, tubes, levers, dials, spinning wheels, and other such

paraphernalia, were attached here, there, and everywhere on the surface of the six foot high contraption. Installed, in what I guessed to be the front, was a rather plain looking door, with two small round windows, one above the other, at what looked like human and elf eye levels. The finishing touch was a very festive, ornate, and colorful paint job that could only be accomplished by the hand of an elf in one of Santa's paint shops. On the door could be seen a highly polished brass plate that was mounted between the two windows. I walked up to the mechanism and stared in wonder at what was etched into the brass sign. It said, "Bellyup & Claus, Inc." and below that was, "Time Machine #2".

"Time machine?" I asked myself.

"Number two?" I asked the time machine (it didn't answer).

"But where on Earth could they...?" I stopped, looked at the machine, then at the book, at the machine once more, took a long look at the stone tablet, then an even longer look at the machine and moaned, "Oh, no!"

I walked out of the storage room, locking the door, then exited the workshop, headed up the stairs, and entered the den where the ladies were still sipping cider by the fire. Mrs. Claus, Veronica, and Bendalia put down their cups and looked up at me with eyes full of expectation. I stood there for a moment not knowing what to say. How can you tell two worried wives that their husbands built a time machine, got inside, turned it on, and are now lost somewhere in time? I started to explain once or twice, but all I could come up with was, "Vern, how do you look in a loin cloth?"

I spent the rest of the morning calming Mrs. Claus and Bendalia down and explaining what had happened to their husbands.

"It appears they've sent themselves back in time. From the look of the tablets we received, my best guess would be the Stone Age." I told them, while Vern kept the hot cider and cookies coming. "It looks like Vern and I will have to go get them and the only way to do that, is to use their time machine!"

Down in the workshop I read Barsnood's note book as Vern gathered items for our trip. After studying the note book and crawling in and around the time machine for about an hour, I came to the conclusion that I might possibly be able to get this thing to work. With this done, Vern and I went upstairs to have dinner. After eating a huge meal (and, of course, some more cider and cookies) Mrs. Claus led us to a couple of bedrooms saying, "You can't start an adventure without a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast. Now get some rest, my dears." She kissed both of us on our foreheads, then went back to the kitchen to help Bendalia with the dishes.

The smell of hot coffee and wonderful breakfast aromas woke me the next morning. Vern was already up by the time I arrived in the kitchen and helping with the morning meal. She picked up an enormous plate of eggs, said, "Good morning," and carried the eggs into the dining room. I hungrily followed. Soaking up the last of my eggs with the last piece of toast, I told Mrs. Claus, "This has been wonderful, but we must be going."

"I've packed some food for all of you, and these," she handed me a red and green tin, "are Santa's favorite cookies."

"He'll be eating them before the day is out," I promised, trying my best to believe it.

The time machine was loaded with the food and cookies Mrs. Claus had packed, along with the items Vern had gathered. I checked to make sure I had Barsnood's note book, the two stone tablets, and the key. I set all the dials, levers, and thingamajigs to what I hoped were the correct settings. I sent Mrs. Claus, Bendalia, and the rest of the elves who had shown up to wish us well, back upstairs. After closing the workshop door I closed and locked the door to the storage room. Vern and I then entered the time machine and closed its door. I double checked the settings on the instrument panel, took a deep breath, and then pushed the doohickey labeled go. Immediately a whistle was blowing, it sounded just like a factory whistle that signals shift changes or lunch. It went on for about eight seconds and stopped. Silence for two or three seconds. A series of little chirp-like beeps, a spring being sprung, the sound of a marble (cat's eye?) being dropped and bouncing a couple of times, then rolling across the floor. Silence for three

or four seconds. A small bump and more silence. After a few more moments of silence, Vern and I both looked at each other and shrugged, then realizing we had been holding our breath the whole time, exhaled with a loud whoosh.

"Are we there?" Vern said in a small voice.

"I don't know," I said in an even smaller one.

We both looked out the windows. We stared for a moment until I broke the silence by saying, "Yikes! The view out the windows was of black space, brilliant stars, the huge disk of a planet, and hundreds of zipping and zooming rocket ships shooting at each other. As we watched, six or seven of the smaller ships swarmed all about one immense ship, firing bolts of searing lances of light. The tiny ships kept up a staccato attack until the larger ship at first imploded and then exploded with such violence, that some of the smaller ships were caught in the fire storm. We had time jumped into the heart of a fierce galactic war. Suddenly one of the ships removed itself from the battle and came down upon us with guns flaring!

I was pushing buttons and pulling levers frantically as we were battered by explosions bursting all around the time machine. Nothing seemed to work, so I proceeded to haphazardly spin a dial here, twist a thingamajig there, and jab at the nearest doohickey I could find. Suddenly the factory whistle was screaming again and then that deafening silence followed by another soft bump.

I looked at Vern and said, "Your turn," and pointed to the door.

She looked through the window and immediately gasped, "It's beautiful!"

I looked out and had to agree. Bright blue skies with billowing white clouds could be seen above a massive stone building. It had Greek features mixed in with Aztec and Mayan, with a touch of art deco lines, reminiscent of a 1930's New York skyline. To the right of the building was a vast tree covered plaza. Other buildings of like structure were on the other side of the park. As we stared in awe at the sight before us, a face appeared in the window, so suddenly, that we sprang away from the door, seating ourselves unceremoniously on the floor of the machine with a loud "Oof!" We sat panting and staring at the window, which was now empty, our hearts beating rapidly, when the door opened and the same face inserted itself inside the machine with a cheerful, "Good morning!"

It was a very handsome face, framed by golden blond hair, curling down to the shoulders, smooth tan skin, and incredibly brilliant blue eyes. He was wearing a short skirt and sandals. Both of his wrists were encircled by wide gold bracelets.

"Please, don't be frightened. We get many visitors like you and all have departed here in a safe and timely manner." He stepped over to the time machine's instrument panel and while he studied it, he rubbed his Romanesque nose. "Yes, yes... A simple but effective design. Now," turning to look at us, "when is it are you trying to get to?"

All I could do was sit on my behind, stare at our unexpected guest open-mouthed, and point to the stone tablets.

He picked them up and again rubbed his nose as he read. "Ah yes. Oh...?" Suddenly his eyes brightened and his eye brows raised, "Santa! Well then, we had better get you two in to the correct time line."

He began adjusting dials and levers, buttons and doohickeys, stopped to pick up Barsnood's note book, flipped a few pages and wrote some notes. When he seemed to be satisfied, he took a step back, rubbed his nose one last time and said, "Yes, that should do it! Just push the "GO" doohickey and you'll be on your way."

As he started to leave the machine I finally came to my senses, stood up on shaky legs, and asked, "Who are you?"

"My name is Adarious," said the handsomely tanned face. He turned to go, but before he could leave I asked him, "What is this place?"

Adarious stood looking at us for a moment with those brilliant blue eyes and with an impish smile he said, "Atlantis, of course!"

We stood dumbfounded as he exited the time machine, closed the door, walked off toward the park, as dozens of pure white doves flew in circles directly above his head, with two or three at a time, landing on his strong, bronzed shoulders. Once he finally disappeared into a grove of trees, we turned to each other and said, "Cool!"

Once again I stood in front of the instrument panel and poised my hand over the go doohickey. Vern took a deep breath, I took a deep breath, we both closed our eyes, and then I pushed the doohickey that would hopefully send us back in time to Santa Claus and Barsnood Bellyup.

With a soft bump, the time machine came to a stop. When we opened our eyes there were two faces peering into the windows. The top most window framed a jolly face covered by a white beard, while in the lower window could be seen a face with elf like features.

"Santa!" I cried.

"Barsnood!" yelled Vern.

The two faces in the windows began grinning from ear to ear. Both Vern and I jumped to open the door from the inside just as Santa and Barsnood made an effort to open it from the outside. Somehow we managed to get the door open and Vern and I finally spilled out. We began hugging our North Pole pals, pounding each other on the back and laughing like crazy fools. Eventually we stopped giggling, squeezing each other, and sobbing our heads off. Now it was time to get work, to do the job I was commissioned for. As I wiped my eyes dry with the back of my hand, I surveyed the occupants and land about me. Santa and Barsnood stood before me, barefoot and wearing nothing but loin clothes made of animal skin and their silly grins.

Beyond the Tarzanesque clad pair was gently rolling hills covered with short green grasses and spotted here and there with very squat, but wide branching trees with large, broad leaves. The time machine had landed near a quiet little stream next to a jerry-built lean-to made of branches and the leaves from the surrounding trees. It looked very much lived in. A fire ring, constructed of well blackened rocks from the stream, was positioned just in front of the lean-to, as if standing guard.

"Ho, ho, ho," said Santa "good ole Nick saves the day again. Maybe we should call you Good Ole Saint Nick!" This sent Santa off with a whole new series of "Ho, ho, ho."

Barsnood soon chimed in with his "ho, ho, ho" version, which came out more like rapid fire "he, he, he, he... he, he, he, he..."

Soon Vern couldn't stand it any longer and added her voice to form a tittering trio of time traveling tourists.

While my friends sang their opus to this young world, I went back into the time machine to gather up Barsnood's note book and the cookie tin Mrs. Claus packed for Santa. As soon as Santa saw the red and green tin in my hands, his eyes got big and he stopped laughing.

"My dearest wife! Cookies! I'm off on some fool adventure and she still bakes me cookies!" I handed him the tin, he opened it, took a handful of cookies, and passed the tin to Barsnood.

"How are Mrs. Claus, and Mrs. Bellyup, and Rudolph... and, well, everyone at the North Pole?"

"All are well. A bit concerned, but they seem to have confidence in us, so we can't let them down," I told him.

"Or the children," added Santa.

Suddenly the ground began to rumble. I looked at Santa to ask, "Earthquake?" But he never got a chance to confirm or deny my query. Suddenly a huge, hairy elephant came charging over a hill. It was almost fifteen feet of towering, brutal beast, and was bearing directly down on us. Immediately following the beast were about eight scantily clad, running men with crude weapons. They were obviously out hunting (or else this was an early example of fast food).

Our little time traveling troop seemed to move as one as we flew to the other side of the stream. Once there, we turned in time to see the beast burst into the camp site and rush head first into the time machine. As the woolly monster passed through the machine it exploded into shards of brightly painted debris that rained down like so much confetti. The little hunting party followed, passing through the falling pieces, stirring them around. The scene across the stream looked like those little glass balls you shake and it snows inside. The burly beast and its hungry hunters kept on going until they all passed out of sight over another hill.

When I looked at the remains of the time machine, I noticed a similar pile of debris directly behind. I looked at Santa to ask, "Time Machine...?"

"...#1," finished Santa. Then he spread his arms, as if addressing an audience in a theatre, and said, "Welcome to the Neolithic Period!" Turning from me Santa bellowed over his shoulder, "Barsnood, my good lad, come, we have work to do!"

"Before we get started," I said, "I need to know. Why in the world did you build a time machine? Aren't you busy enough with Christmas?"

"That's precisely it!" Santa excitedly replied. "There are more and more children being born every day. Last year little Johnny Brucmeyer was coming down the stairs before I was finished. I had to hide behind the tree until his parents called for him to go back to bed! And the year before that, I was in such a rush, I knocked down three trees, almost broke a sled that William asked for, and he'd been such a good boy, missed the cookies and milk that the Chadwick twins put out for me every year, I had to go back to enjoy them, nearly being late for..."

"Okay!" I said, holding my hands up in an "I give up fashion."

"It was my idea, really," Barsnood interjected, "I thought it might help. In the past, Santa was always home in time for Christmas breakfast with Mrs. Claus and all of us elves. Now he gets in after breakfast, then naps through lunch and doesn't join us until dinner! I felt that if we could just manipulate time somewhat, we could visit all the children's homes and still have plenty of time for our Christmas." He stopped talking, looked over at the neat piles of ex-time machines, "Now I'm not so sure it was a good idea."

"So now what?" I asked. "Can we change these piles of junk into time machines? Are we stuck here forever? Will we be able to save Christmas one more time?"

Two days later, after long hours of time machine reconstruction, we stood before a new machine. The body was formed from branches and leaves of the local trees. Barsnood was able to scavenge enough parts from the two other machines to make one last one. Time Machine #3, was proudly displayed on the front with paint made from smashed berries found in the forest.

We began gathering up our belongings and stowing them away. We all took one last look around. It was a peaceful moment, gazing out across this prehistoric landscape. All was quiet until from over the hill we were facing, came our friends, the hunters, once again chasing the galloping Mammoth. We all froze in fear.

"Oh, no! Not again!" I cried. But this time, the little party paraded past us. As the woolly monster zoomed by us, he raised his mighty trunk and gave us a trumpet fanfare. When the hunters went by, they all smiled at us and waved. The four of us stood, staring silently, as the parade disappeared over the next hill. All was quiet once again when suddenly we all burst into explosive laughter.

Soon we were all in the time machine. Barsnood made some adjustments, checked his book, turned another dial, and pushed another button. He stood back, looked at the instruments, nodded, and said to Santa. "I think that's it. Are you ready?"

Santa struck a pose, turned to Barsnood, pointed two fingers and said, "Mr. Bellyup, engage!" Barsnood's hand had been hovering over the go doohickey. Then he said, "Aye, aye, Captain!" and with a flourish, pressed the button.

Nothing happened. We all stood silently staring at poor Barsnood as his eyes began to well with tears. "I'm... sorry," was all he could say.

“Let me give it a try,” I said. I checked all the settings. Everything seemed to be in order. When I looked over at Barsnood he just shrugged his shoulders as more and more tears began running down his face, dropping to the floor, and forming an ever spreading puddle around his feet. I gave him a small pat on his shoulder and Vern handed him her handkerchief. Placing my hand on the “GO” doohickey, I looked at Barsnood, smiled, and pushed the button. Again nothing happened.

I stood back and scratched my head. Barsnood wiped his face dry and then scratched his head. Vern stood scratching her head, while Santa scratched his beard. Inside the time machine all was quiet, except for the sounds of fingernails scratching away at scalp and face. Soon, the sound of tears splashing in the puddle at Barsnood’s feet was added.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door, we all stopped scratching. No one moved, no one breathed. Once again there was a knock.

“W-w-w-ho is it?” I asked. In answer, the door slowly opened, and a very handsome face, framed by golden blond hair, peeked in.

“Adarious!” Vern shouted out with glee.

“Good morning!” said the ever cheerful Adarious. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“It doesn’t work!” cried Barsnood. “Now we’ll all be stuck here forever and it’s all my fault!” This started a whole new flood of tears cascading down his sorrowful face.

Adarious stepped up to the instrument panel that had been constructed from the salvaged parts of the first two time machines. He took a long look, checking the settings, dials, levels, and thingamajigs. “All appears to be in order,” he reached for the “GO” doohickey, “let’s see what happens.” he pressed the button, and again nothing happened.

“Most curious,” said Adarious, as he rubbed his nose. He stood in silent thought for a moment, then seemed to come to a conclusion, picked up his right foot, and gave the base of the control panel a sharp kick. In answer, a small sproing, followed by a ding, emitted from the inner workings of the time machine.

“There, that should do it,” Adarious said. He moved away from the panel, opened the door, and with a smile said, “Good day and good trip!” then exited the machine and closed the door.

We all stood in dumbfounded silence, staring at the closed door like deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck.

Santa broke the air of stillness with a hearty, “Ho, ho, ho!” Then he put his hand on Barsnood’s shoulder and said, “Well, my good lad, let’s give it another try shall we?”

Barsnood Bellyup, the right hand elf of Santa Claus, and designer of the Bellyup & Claus Time Machine, proudly raised himself to his almost four foot stature, stepped up to the control panel, and without hesitation, pressed the go doohickey. Immediately a whistle was blowing, it sounded just like a factory whistle that signals shift changes or lunch. It went on for about eight seconds and stopped. Silence for two or three seconds. A series of little chirp-like beeps, a spring being sprung, the sound of a marble (cat’s eye?) being dropped and bouncing a couple of times, then rolling across the floor. Silence for three or four seconds. A small bump and more silence.

Santa was the first one of us to move, and just like Barsnood, he did not hesitate, but went right to the door and opened it. Santa strode through the door with out checking where we had landed. He was followed by Barsnood, Vern, and then myself. We were in Barsnood’s workshop! We had made it home! Once again Santa let out with a “Ho, ho, ho!” Looking at me he said, “Nick Noel, you’ve saved Christmas again!”

“But it wasn’t me,” I began, “if it wasn’t for Barsnood’s rebuilding... or Adarious... or...”

Santa stopped me with, “Come, let’s get upstairs. I’m sure Mrs. Claus and Mrs. Bellyup have some cookies in the oven and some cider warming on the stove.” Santa, Barsnood, and Vern began walking up the stairs. I watched for a moment, then took the key from my pocket, locked the door, then followed my fellow time travelers up the steps, as the warm smell of baking cookies filled the air.

CASE CLOSED!

A few months later I was in my office completing a case involving some fairies and some missing fairy dust, when a very frantic Barsnood burst through the door shouting, “Nick! Aliens have abducted Santa Claus!”

“Oh, no! Here we go again.” was all I could say.