

A Night in Midwinter



High above London's sullen smog, the freezing North Wind whipped the moisture-filled clouds into those lovely flakes we know as snow.

Along with its blankets of snow, the North Wind blew in a rotund figure mounted upon a sleigh, who was convulsively chirruping to a dozen reindeer that pranced as if they were pulling their master through the winter glades of Lapland instead of the clouds of the firmament.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he said and doubled up with a cough. I, his elfin companion and servant, pounded his back until his breath came easier.

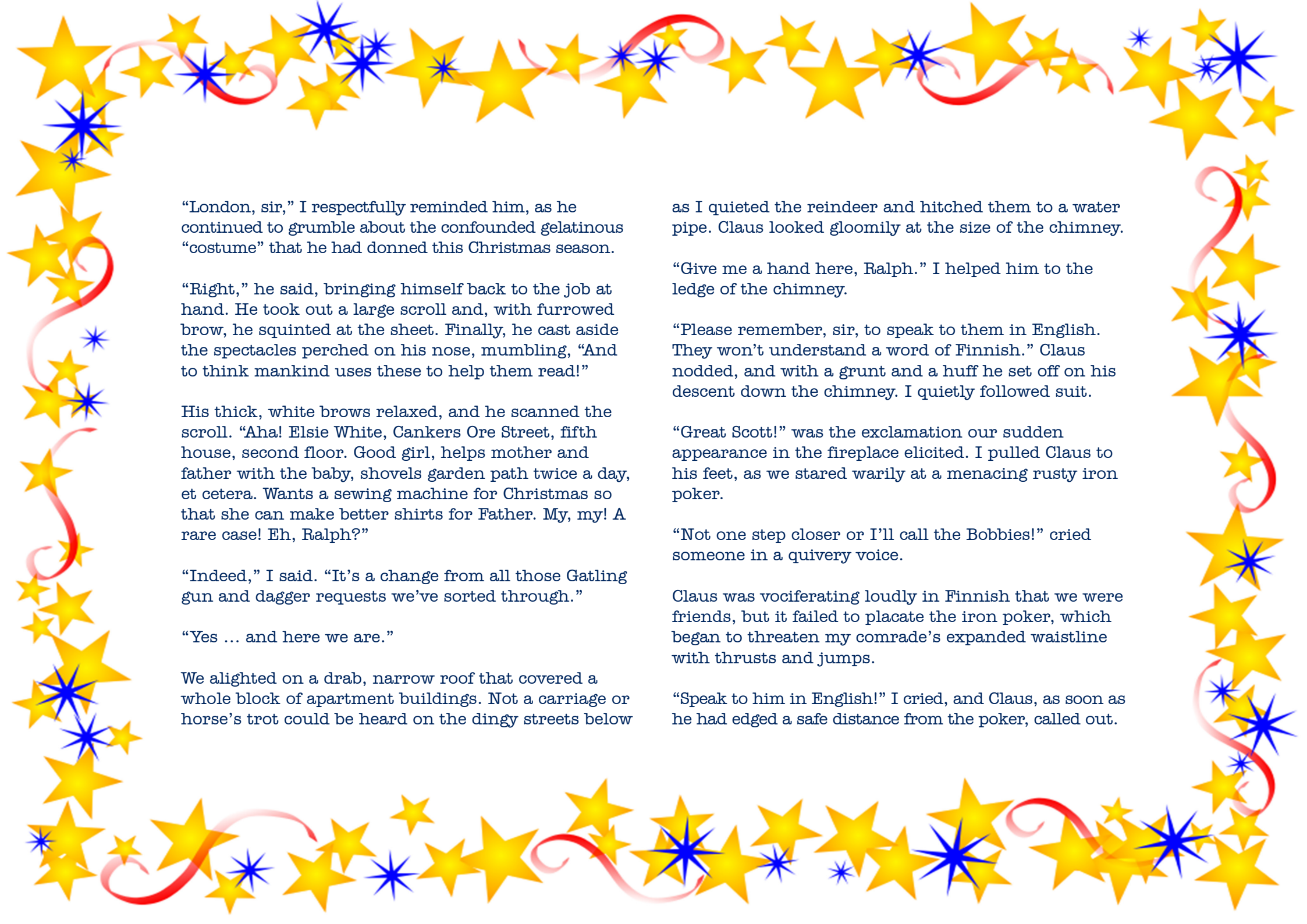
"That'll do. Thank you, Ralph," he said with a wheeze. I was glad I had taken extra care to learn Finnish at the Elves Intergalactic Preparatory School, for Claus was difficult to understand at any time, but his Finnish was more intelligible than his English.

"Thank God we don't always need to use these earthly bodies!" he gasped and looked at me enviously. "You, Ralph, look slender, lithe—positively elfish, sir! Your disguise fits you like a second skin. What have you to say about that?"

"That I'm glad the general idea was achieved," I replied. I liked the small size and agility of my "costume."

"'The general idea' ... 'the general idea'! What, then, was 'the general idea' for my attire? A fall-stuffed woodchuck much enlarged and dropped in a vat of red ink? I feel like a man permanently strapped to several life preservers! Is it possible, Ralph, that human beings can inflate themselves to such a state?"

"It's only too true, I'm afraid. But isn't this our destination?" I leaned over the side of our sleigh and looked down at the surface of the earth. The city below looked like a cluttered firmament of stars set within a dull haze.



“London, sir,” I respectfully reminded him, as he continued to grumble about the confounded gelatinous “costume” that he had donned this Christmas season.

“Right,” he said, bringing himself back to the job at hand. He took out a large scroll and, with furrowed brow, he squinted at the sheet. Finally, he cast aside the spectacles perched on his nose, mumbling, “And to think mankind uses these to help them read!”

His thick, white brows relaxed, and he scanned the scroll. “Aha! Elsie White, Cankers Ore Street, fifth house, second floor. Good girl, helps mother and father with the baby, shovels garden path twice a day, et cetera. Wants a sewing machine for Christmas so that she can make better shirts for Father. My, my! A rare case! Eh, Ralph?”

“Indeed,” I said. “It’s a change from all those Gatling gun and dagger requests we’ve sorted through.”

“Yes ... and here we are.”

We alighted on a drab, narrow roof that covered a whole block of apartment buildings. Not a carriage or horse’s trot could be heard on the dingy streets below

as I quieted the reindeer and hitched them to a water pipe. Claus looked gloomily at the size of the chimney.

“Give me a hand here, Ralph.” I helped him to the ledge of the chimney.

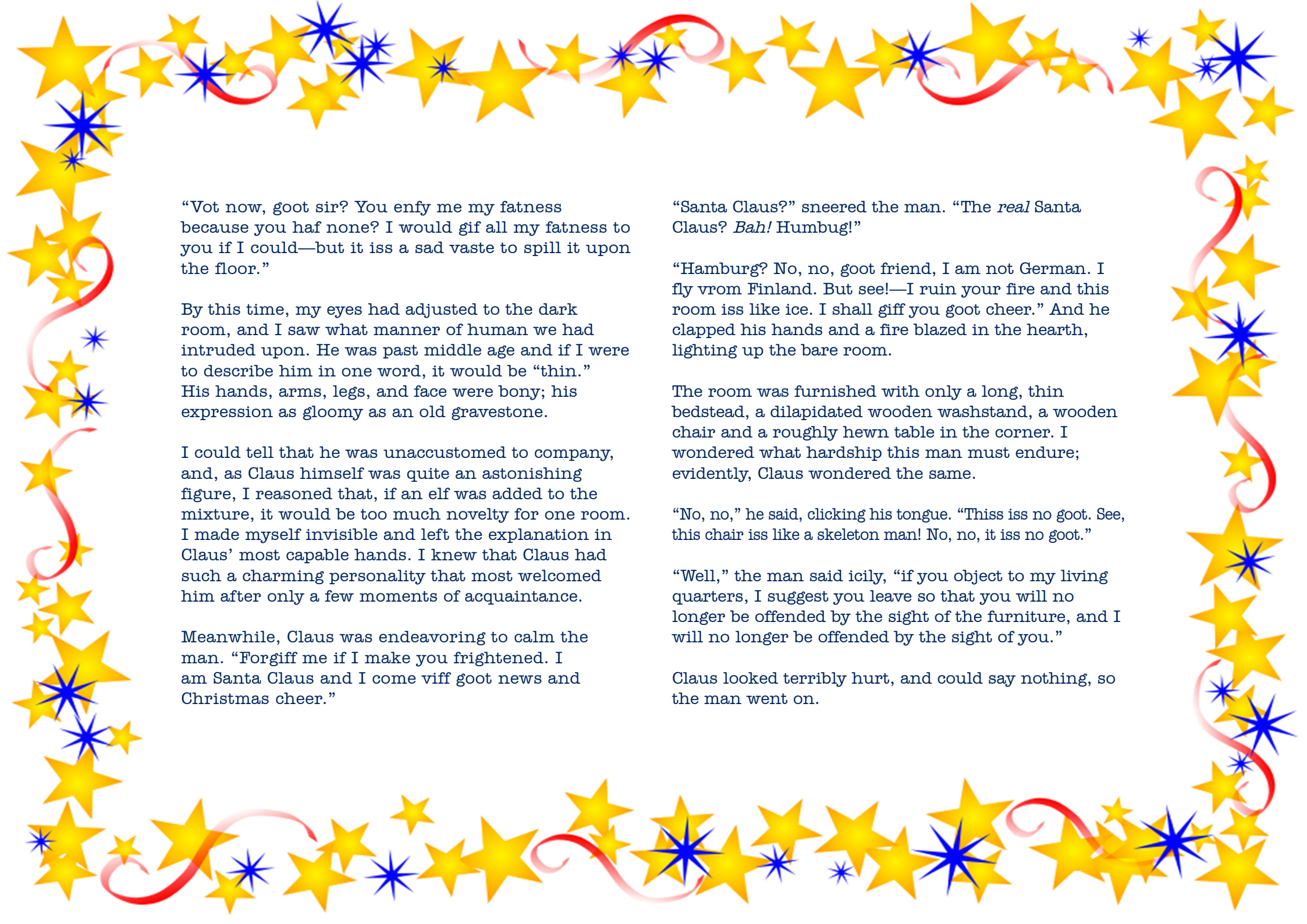
“Please remember, sir, to speak to them in English. They won’t understand a word of Finnish.” Claus nodded, and with a grunt and a huff he set off on his descent down the chimney. I quietly followed suit.

“Great Scott!” was the exclamation our sudden appearance in the fireplace elicited. I pulled Claus to his feet, as we stared warily at a menacing rusty iron poker.

“Not one step closer or I’ll call the Bobbies!” cried someone in a quivery voice.

Claus was vociferating loudly in Finnish that we were friends, but it failed to placate the iron poker, which began to threaten my comrade’s expanded waistline with thrusts and jumps.

“Speak to him in English!” I cried, and Claus, as soon as he had edged a safe distance from the poker, called out.



“Vot now, goot sir? You enfy me my fatness because you haf none? I would gif all my fatness to you if I could—but it iss a sad vaste to spill it upon the floor.”

By this time, my eyes had adjusted to the dark room, and I saw what manner of human we had intruded upon. He was past middle age and if I were to describe him in one word, it would be “thin.” His hands, arms, legs, and face were bony; his expression as gloomy as an old gravestone.

I could tell that he was unaccustomed to company, and, as Claus himself was quite an astonishing figure, I reasoned that, if an elf was added to the mixture, it would be too much novelty for one room. I made myself invisible and left the explanation in Claus’ most capable hands. I knew that Claus had such a charming personality that most welcomed him after only a few moments of acquaintance.

Meanwhile, Claus was endeavoring to calm the man. “Forgiff me if I make you frightened. I am Santa Claus and I come viff goot news and Christmas cheer.”

“Santa Claus?” sneered the man. “The *real* Santa Claus? *Bah!* Humbug!”


“Hamburg? No, no, goot friend, I am not German. I fly vrom Finland. But see!—I ruin your fire and this room iss like ice. I shall giff you goot cheer.” And he clapped his hands and a fire blazed in the hearth, lighting up the bare room.

The room was furnished with only a long, thin bedstead, a dilapidated wooden washstand, a wooden chair and a roughly hewn table in the corner. I wondered what hardship this man must endure; evidently, Claus wondered the same.

“No, no,” he said, clicking his tongue. “Thiss iss no goot. See, this chair iss like a skeleton man! No, no, it iss no goot.”

“Well,” the man said icily, “if you object to my living quarters, I suggest you leave so that you will no longer be offended by the sight of the furniture, and I will no longer be offended by the sight of you.”

Claus looked terribly hurt, and could say nothing, so the man went on.



“Look at this fire,” he said. “A whole week’s rations wasted in useless heat. Why, if we continue at this rate, I shouldn’t be surprised to see the ice caps melting.”

“But surely, for a little Christmas cheer...”

“Bah, humbug!”

“I tell you, I come not from Hamburg but from Sodankyla.”

“Out with Merry Christmas!”

“Christmas is inside, outside, everywhere!” exclaimed the jovial Claus, and ended with a strangled “Ho, ho, ho!” I pounded his back.

“Thank you, my dear Ralph,” he said.

I glanced at the skeletal man standing in the room, and I put two and two together.

“Don’t I know you?” I asked him. “Your trick of speech is familiar. You aren’t, by chance, a Scrooge, are you?”

To make myself audible, I had to reappear, but the man seemed to think it was all a bizarre dream that he would soon wake from. I believe at this point not even the appearance of all the spirits of Christmas could have startled him.

“I am,” he said lifting his pointed chin, “Gareth Scrooge.”

“Aha!” I cried, for I was wroth at his disparaging remarks about such a holy day. “I thought so! I can smell a miser a mile away. Why, Claus”—I turned to the ample red form beside me—“it appears we have just stepped down the chimney of old Ebenezer’s first cousin on his father’s side. It seems that skinning the flea for its hide and tallow runs in the family.”

“Well, well, well,” Claus said in a mock fearful voice, “we really have put our foot into it.”

“I’ll not have you talking me over as if I were some sort of carnival amusement!” Scrooge shrieked.

“Yust tink,” Claus continued, as if he had not heard the man, “to be so stingy as to not enjoy a roaring fire in the hearth. ...”

“You dare insult me in my own house!” Scrooge exclaimed, looking very deadly for an old man.

“Begone, you great, red monstrosity! And you ... you pointy-eared aberration!” cried Scrooge, as if reciting an incantation, and waved his arm about in the air.

That got us both piping mad.

“Iss that so?!” roared Claus. “I shall not go until you haff learned some Christmas spirit!”

I must say, that Claus, when angered, is just as terrible and frightening as any displaced spirit of the dead I’ve had acquaintance with. Scrooge quailed before him. Then, Claus regained control over his anger and said in a softer tone, “There, I do not mean you harm, but it iss better so, that you learn more Christmas spirit.”

Whereupon, Claus took Mr. Scrooge by the arm and led him through the wall and into the snowy air outside.

“Steady on, Claus,” I said. “Don’t do anything too extreme.”

Claus only laughed in his jovial way that shook his entire frame; he looked as if he were made entirely out of jelly, and, as he was holding Scrooge by the arm, Scrooge was also shaken—only he shook like a brittle windblown fence.

“Vy be merry at Christmas?” asked Claus. “Because,” he went on, “aff the greatest gift giffen to mans. Look down, Scrooge, at the people.” And Scrooge looked down, and gasped, for many of those bustling about the streets had a great golden light within them that sent brilliant rays outward. The wonder and the beauty of this glow smote even the hard heart of Scrooge.

“What is the meaning of this light?” he asked

“Diss iss the light of life and lofe never ending. Diss iss the gift of Christmas. See, thiss beggar haf it and this young girl haf it and the rich man haf it not. Why? Because it iss a gift. Why, you haf thiss gift too.”

“I received no such gift!” said Scrooge.

“Ah, the forgetfulness of mens,” said Claus. “Come and see vot I show you.”

We flew down the streets, Claus uttering invectives whenever we passed pictures or models of Santa in shop windows or on the sidewalk.



At last, we came to a tiny church with lighted windows. We entered and listened to a Christmas service given to small boys and girls gathered around a Nativity scene.

“Ha! You say you get no giff? Well, tell me who iss that?” said Claus, pointing to one very thin boy in a far corner bowing his head in prayer.

“Scrooge,” I said with a smile, “you look downright peaceable with God and man.”

“Vatch, vatch,” said Claus.

As the prayer ended, the room was filled with light emanating from each of the children, unfolding like a flower and flinging radiance to all corners of the room.

Scrooge looked, and for a second I thought I saw his face soften ... but it was only a second. He shook himself and uttered a feeble “Humbug!” Then, as if to turn the attention away from himself, he turned to Claus and demanded, “What is the meaning of this? This church was demolished years ago. I ought to know.”

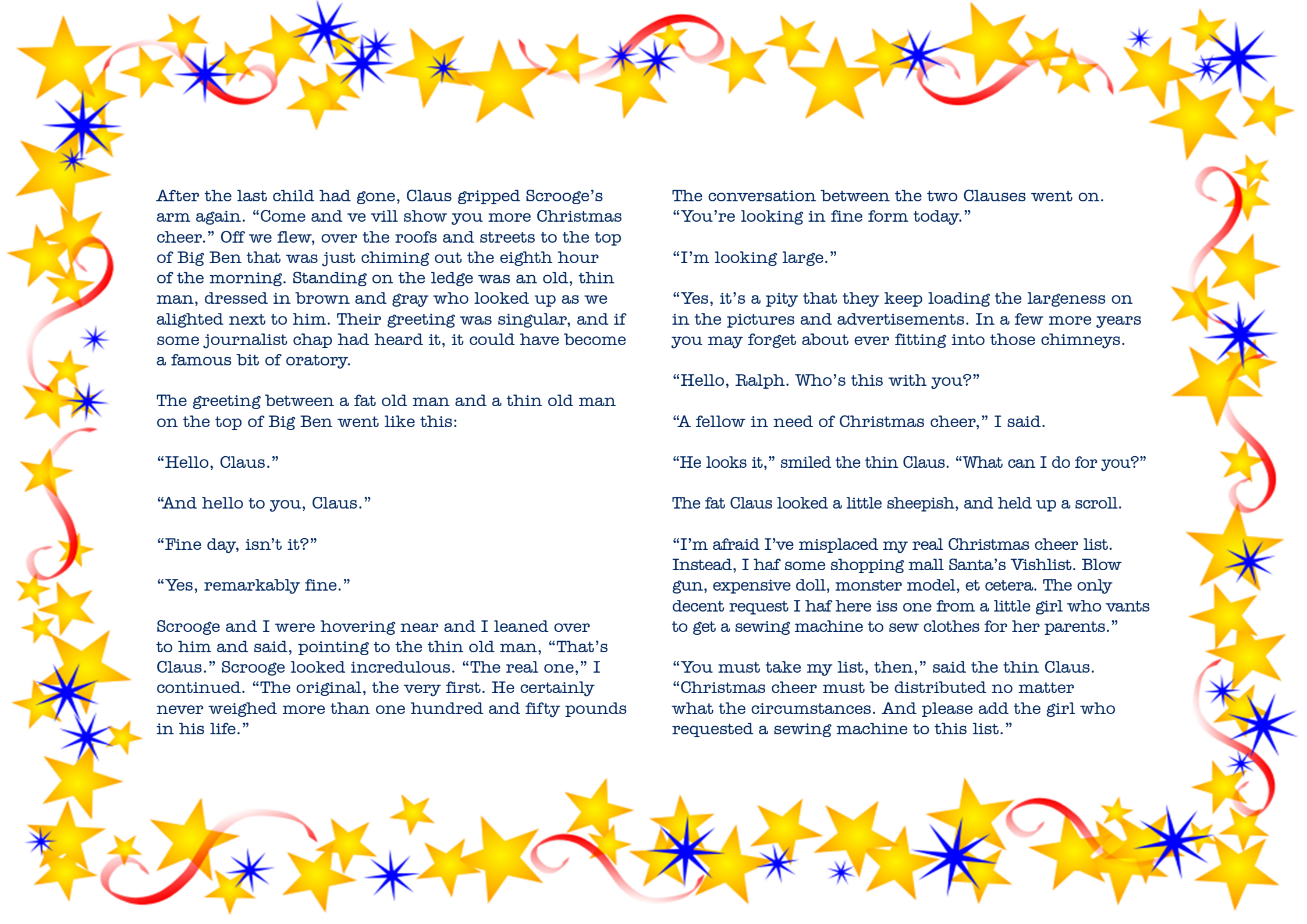
“Yes,” I said (for I had done some research on the Scrooge family in my first year at Elves Intergalactic Prep), “you certainly ought to know. It was torn down as a result of your building a row of flats here ten years ago. A more miserable set of hovels I never did see.”

Scrooge looked uncomfortable and bridled. “I don’t see that it’s any of your business.”

I was about to retort when Claus stopped me. “Be silent, Ralph,” he said, and when he spoke like that, I always obeyed.

We saw the children rise and gather around the Christmas tree and receive their presents, and then file out of the church toward their homes. The light was still plainly visible around each one, and it lit up the white snow and the dingy alleyways as they moved past.





After the last child had gone, Claus gripped Scrooge's arm again. "Come and ve vill show you more Christmas cheer." Off we flew, over the roofs and streets to the top of Big Ben that was just chiming out the eighth hour of the morning. Standing on the ledge was an old, thin man, dressed in brown and gray who looked up as we alighted next to him. Their greeting was singular, and if some journalist chap had heard it, it could have become a famous bit of oratory.

The greeting between a fat old man and a thin old man on the top of Big Ben went like this:

"Hello, Claus."

"And hello to you, Claus."

"Fine day, isn't it?"

"Yes, remarkably fine."

Scrooge and I were hovering near and I leaned over to him and said, pointing to the thin old man, "That's Claus." Scrooge looked incredulous. "The real one," I continued. "The original, the very first. He certainly never weighed more than one hundred and fifty pounds in his life."

The conversation between the two Clauses went on. "You're looking in fine form today."

"I'm looking large."

"Yes, it's a pity that they keep loading the largeness on in the pictures and advertisements. In a few more years you may forget about ever fitting into those chimneys."

"Hello, Ralph. Who's this with you?"


"A fellow in need of Christmas cheer," I said.

"He looks it," smiled the thin Claus. "What can I do for you?"

The fat Claus looked a little sheepish, and held up a scroll.

"I'm afraid I've misplaced my real Christmas cheer list. Instead, I haf some shopping mall Santa's Vishlist. Blow gun, expensive doll, monster model, et cetera. The only decent request I haf here iss one from a little girl who wants to get a sewing machine to sew clothes for her parents."

"You must take my list, then," said the thin Claus. "Christmas cheer must be distributed no matter what the circumstances. And please add the girl who requested a sewing machine to this list."



With many thanks, the fat Claus received the new list from the thin Claus, and we flew off at great speed toward Scrooge's apartment.

Alighting on the roof, I hitched the reindeer to the sleigh and whistled cheerfully to them as Claus squeezed Scrooge between us.

"First stop, teddy bear to chimney sweep!" cried Claus, and in a flash we were at a small toy store. Claus took Scrooge's arm and they floated through the showcase window and into the brightly lit store.

Claus passed line after line of toys and stopped at a shelf full of dolls and animals. He picked up a small bear, reached into his pocket and drew out some fine gold dust, which he sprinkled on the bear. With a smile, he set it back on the shelf.

"Now, vatch the magic begin," said Claus to Scrooge.

Scrooge watched with anticipation as the storekeeper began to close up the shop. He swept the floors and pulled in the shutter, and as he was


turning for one last inspection he stopped before the shelf on which the bear lay. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and the bear began to glow and send tiny sparks of light toward the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper rubbed his chin with greater speed and then swept the bear into a bag full of other toys.

Claus rubbed his hands and took hold of Scrooge again as we followed the shopkeeper outside into the cold.

The shopkeeper stopped at the door of a small chapel from which warm light was pouring. "Here, too, iss filled vit the light of Christmas!"

We entered the chapel and watched as those inside read the story of the most Precious Gift ever given. Gifts were exchanged—not expensive gifts, but meaningful gifts from the heart, and as such, they were filled with the light of Christmas.

"Merry Christmas to you, lad," said the storekeeper to a small boy who we knew instantly to be the chimney sweep from our list. The boy received the bear with delight.



“Thank ye, sir! God bless ye!” he exclaimed. It seemed as if the glow in the room brightened. With the end of the service there was a prayer in which the boy received the most Precious Gift, and another blossom opened full of light and joy.

“That boy,” said Claus, as we floated out into the sky once more, “vill not keep the bear.”

“Why not?” asked Scrooge.

“If I know my subject, and I do, he vill give it to hiss younger brother as hiss Christmas gift.”

Scrooge looked dismayed. “But then, why didn’t we give the boy two bears?”

“And take away hiss chance at even greater blessing? No, never! Hiss love and blessings iss greatly multiplied vit each kind thought and action. Iss not this vonderful magics?”

Scrooge slowly nodded.

The clock chimed the midnight hour and Claus jumped. “Goodness me! Look at the time!”

Scrooge looked alarmed, “Oh! Say, you needn’t go yet!”

“Sadly, when dealing with mortals in a mortal world, we are indeed bound by time,” I said.

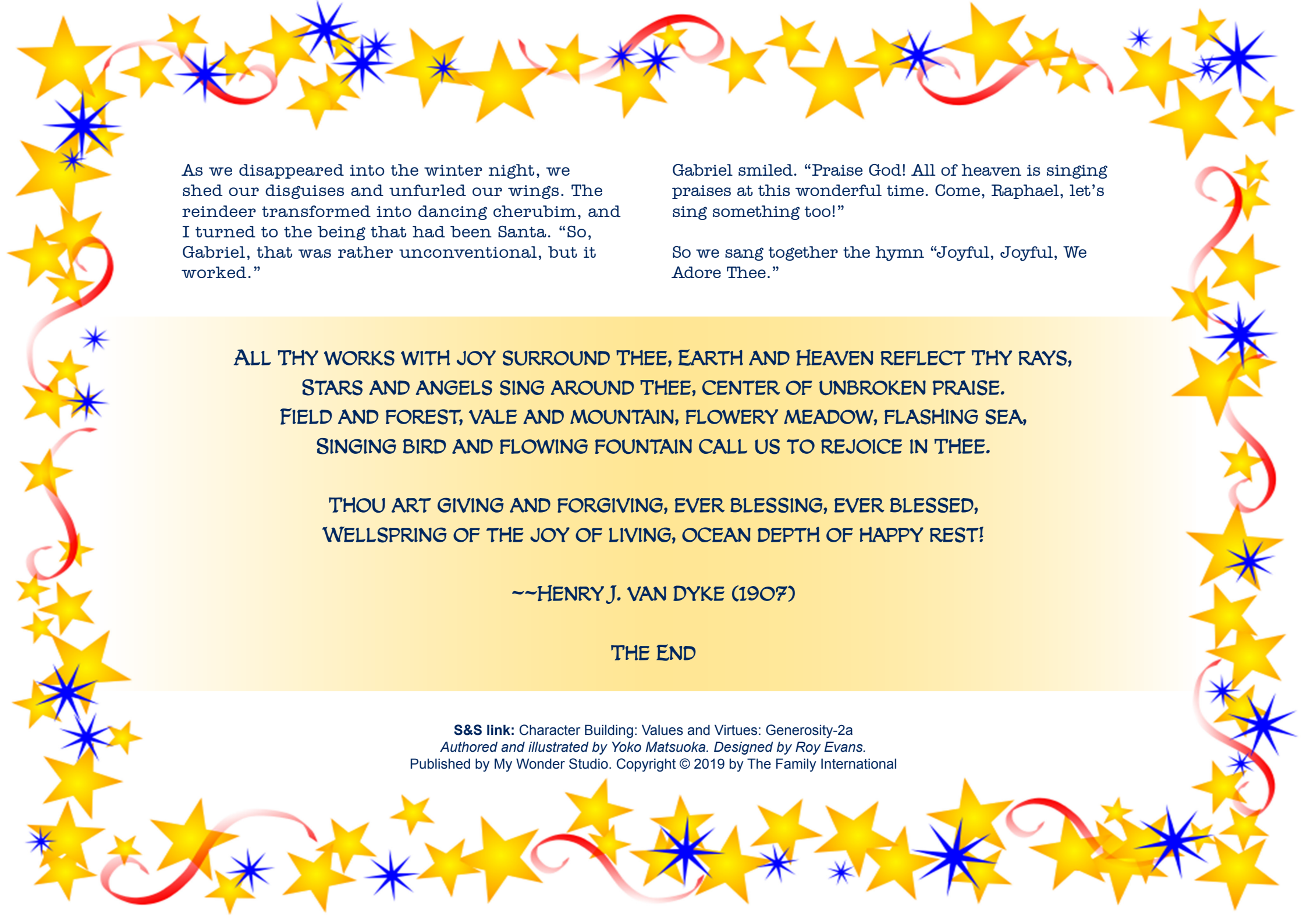
“But what about the rest of the list? What about the girl in the flat next to mine? You can’t just go! I say, it’s not right.

“Give me that list!” he cried, and snatched it from Claus’ fingers. “If you won’t carry out these wishes, then I will. Take me home at once! ... Er ... please.”

“Very vell,” grumbled Claus with a wink for me. We squeezed into the sleigh again and shot toward his apartment. Through his window Claus and Scrooge entered, and I waited outside with the reindeer, as was my job to do.

I couldn’t hear what went on inside, but the light in the old man’s apartment grew brighter and brighter, and when Claus emerged with some difficulty from the narrow chimney, the old building now positively radiated warmth and happiness. The sound of “Hip, hip, hooray!” and “Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to all!” echoed up the chimney.

Claus and I smiled at each other. “Mission complete. Let’s head for home.”



As we disappeared into the winter night, we shed our disguises and unfurled our wings. The reindeer transformed into dancing cherubim, and I turned to the being that had been Santa. “So, Gabriel, that was rather unconventional, but it worked.”

Gabriel smiled. “Praise God! All of heaven is singing praises at this wonderful time. Come, Raphael, let’s sing something too!”

So we sang together the hymn “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.”

ALL THY WORKS WITH JOY SURROUND THEE, EARTH AND HEAVEN REFLECT THY RAYS,
STARS AND ANGELS SING AROUND THEE, CENTER OF UNBROKEN PRAISE.
FIELD AND FOREST, VALE AND MOUNTAIN, FLOWERY MEADOW, FLASHING SEA,
SINGING BIRD AND FLOWING FOUNTAIN CALL US TO REJOICE IN THEE.

THOU ART GIVING AND FORGIVING, EVER BLESSING, EVER BLESSED,
WELLSPRING OF THE JOY OF LIVING, OCEAN DEPTH OF HAPPY REST!

~~HENRY J. VAN DYKE (1907)

THE END

S&S link: Character Building: Values and Virtues: Generosity-2a
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