

## Decorations - Al Shute

# Christmas Carrel

Elmer was a little less nervous, and politely introduced himself. "I wonder," he added, "do you suppose you could get the lights turned on again? I really would like to get this chapter finished."

"Elmer," replied the ghost, ignoring him, "do you realize what grief you have caused to those who love you by your absence tonight? Watch . . . watch and I will show you." He raised a thin and wrinkled arm to point at the light which had again begun to glow in the darkness.

Elmer gazed intently at the scene which was taking form. He saw his home; he saw the tree decorated as it had been for many Christmases. Around the tree were seated his parents, his brothers and sisters, and a few of his closest friends. Some of the group were rummaging madly through the presents piled beneath the tree. They picked up each one, glanced at the card attached, and threw it back on the heap. They got up, looked around the room, shrugged their shoulders, and fell to cursing. Their voices were very indistinct, but Elmer thought he heard his name among the curses.

"So, Elmer," croaked the spirit as the scene faded, "you see what your selfishness has done. These people have been plunged into the depths of sorrow because of your absence. Go, Elmer, go to them now!" The voice began to fade as the figure became more indistinct. "Go to them now . . . it's not too late . . . bring them gifts . . ."

Once again Elmer was alone, looking into nothingness. He sat down and mumbled to himself—something about damn fools and good time wasted.

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Outside the building a little group of people could be seen clustered around a sleigh to which were harnessed ten reindeer. In their midst was a large man clothed entirely in red. He had a long white beard and was very old—it was none other than Santa, accompanied by Fred and some of the other elves. In the sleigh, along with the many gifts that Santa had yet to deliver that night, was a small pile of equipment: chains, fluorescent paint, some fancy electrical equipment, make-up, and costumes of all sorts.

"Well, Fred, how's it going?" asked Santa of the loyal little elf.

"Not so good, not so good. This man works, master. He works as the slaves in the Roman galleys, he works as the . . ."

"I know, I know!" cried Santa with an impatient wave of his gloved hand. "Get on with your tale or I'll have you fed to the reindeer for tomorrow's breakfast!"

"I do not think that he will buy gifts, O Great One. I think he will work forever, in the dark if need be."

Santa stroked his beard thoughtfully and mused for a few moments. "Well, then, I suppose we had better give him everything we've got. Plan GOCYTC, Fred. I'll check back in an hour." He clambered into his sleigh and was gone.

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Elmer had located a pack of

matches in his coat pocket and was studying by the light of a bonfire fed with old Latin books he had discovered on the shelves beside him. Every now and again he glanced suspiciously about him, as if he were



expecting to be bothered once more by what he had mentally termed "figments of his imagination". He muttered on and on about damn fool ghosts and how he wished the lights would come back on so he could study for his exam next May.

A gust of wind blasted out of the air-conditioning system and extinguished the fire. Elmer threw down his pencil and broke out in a stream of curses even more horrendous than those before.

And, for the third time, he heard the steady clink-clink of an approaching ghost, and saw a dim figure drawing near between the stacks. Elmer put his head on his arms and began to weep softly as the ghost came and stood over him.

"Why can't you leave a body alone," he sobbed. "All I want to do is sit here and study quietly, but you won't leave me alone. You have to keep coming around and bothering me, over and over and over . . ."

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come!" boomed the spirit. Elmer looked up and saw that his latest arrival was young, handsome, clothed in cancelled bank cheques, and burdened only by platinum watch chains bearing the stamp of Birks Jewellers.

"Elmer, if you continue in your evil ways, a terrible fate awaits you! Let me show you your future . . . watch, and take heed!" The spirit pointed to the familiar spot, where after a few false starts the glow was coming into being again.

Elmer watched with renewed interest. He had once had his future forecast by an old tea-cup reader on Jasper Avenue, but she had said that Elmer would become a Trappist monk, a prediction that showed no immediate signs of coming true. But a ghost would probably know a great deal more about such matters, so he looked carefully at the proceedings in the little patch of light.

Elmer saw a great crowd of people applauding loudly; he saw a group of elderly men in academic robes carrying him on their shoulders through the crowd. In his own hand was a sheepskin scroll which he was waving over his head triumphantly.

Suddenly, more suddenly than

before, the scene vanished. The ghost was cursing softly and fiddling with something underneath his vest. Elmer thought he heard the ghost say something like "wrong switch", but he couldn't be sure.

A display of pyrotechnics was going on where formerly a vision had taken place. Little flashes of blue light kept darting from the floor, revealing little wisps of acrid smoke floating in the air. At last the ghost coughed, sighed, and once again indicated the spot to Elmer.

There was the most dreadful thing that Elmer Scrunge had seen that evening. He saw the same room, the living room at home, with the tree decked out as before. A large calendar was hanging on the wall, and on it Elmer made out the boldly printed numbers 1967. The same group of people was seated around the tree, but this time it was Elmer who was rummaging through the gifts piled underneath it.

Elmer—the Elmer in the vision—picked up each package, looked at the label, and threw it back. He went through all the gifts in this way, then got up and slowly turned around to face his family and friends. They were wildly laughing at him, pointing their fingers and laughing. He hung his head and slowly walked out the door. The vision ended.

Elmer gasped as he witnessed this scene. He turned wildly to the ghost, who was standing with his arms crossed, a knowing smile on his face.

"You see, then, Elmer, what it will be like. It's not too late, boy. Go on. Go back to your family. Find a store that's open and . . ."

Elmer gave him no chance to finish the sentence. He ran off, leaving books and pencils behind him, darting for the nearest exit. He was screaming "No! No!" as he ran out the door.

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Santa and his followers were

watching from the shadows when Elmer dashed out of Cameron library at full tilt. They emerged to



meet the figure who had brought about the conversion.

"I see you succeeded," remarked Santa as he gazed at the retreating figure of Elmer, who by now was nothing more than a speck on the horizon of the Quadrangle.

"Yes, indeed, we did," came a voice from the midsection of the tall man. Two hands lifted the head and garments, revealing Fred with another elf perched on his shoulders. "We did indeed succeed, if I do say so myself. He has gone to buy gifts. He will go home."

"Well done, lads," said the fat old man, patting his pocketbook. "But we had better be off. We have miles to go yet tonight." So saying, he jumped into the sleigh; the elves assisted one another into the back, which now was devoid of gifts and instead was full of money-bags.

Santa cracked his whip over the heads of the eager reindeer. They bounded forward and carried the sleigh into the boundless sky. And it is said that as the vehicle carried its passengers high over the campus, a voice was heard to descend from the sky:

"Mer-r-ry Christmas!"

And it was followed by a demonic fit of laughter.

