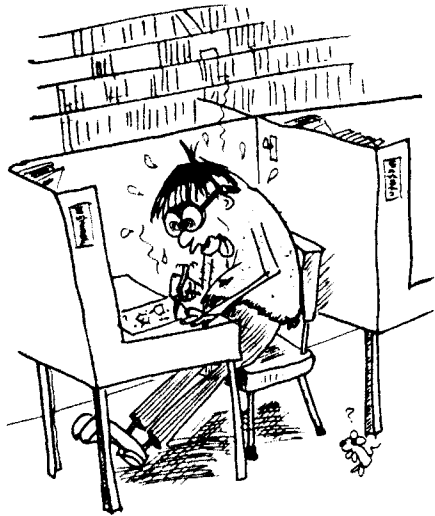


## Story - Terry Donnelly

# A Cameron

Elmer Scrunge was sitting in his carrel at Cameron library that Christmas Eve, looking out the window at the snow gently falling down on the finely wrought lines of the North Lab. It was nine o'clock; the building was deserted except for this lonely figure who turned from the peaceful scene before him and bent over the thick volume of Analytical Chemistry on the desk.

Elmer was a student. He knew that he was a student, and was proud



of the fact. He chuckled at the thought of all the poor fools sitting at home with their loved ones "enjoying" the bourgeois sentimentality of Christmas. "Let them waste the hours," thought Elmer as he pencilled out a formula. "You won't catch me letting valuable study time slip by like that!"

In fact, it is safe to assume that Elmer was the only person studying on campus that evening. Even the Dean of Arts had finally been torn away from his desk by the attractions of at least one evening with his family. The ed building, that beehive of intellectual activity, had been vacated years before. Thousands of weary students had plodded home to the joys of a domestic holiday. But Elmer studied on; he had gained special permission to let himself into the library for the night.

"No sense trying to study at home," he had thought. "All those damn fools singing and drinking and what not. Too much noise, too much

foolery. I'll study where it's nice and quiet." And so the night wore on, with Elmer Scrunge alternately working hard at his chemistry and chuckling gleefully in self-congratulation.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, in the great palace across the river, Santa Claus was sitting in his throne surrounded by his elves. He had been just about to put on his red suit and depart after saying a few words of congratulation to his little helpers. But just then one of Santa's spy-elves had rushed in; Santa was now listening to what the fellow had to say.

"In Cameron library across the river" said the elf, after bowing and scraping to the eminence for several minutes, "sits a man who has not the spirit of Christmas. Veroily, he works as Hercules in the seven labors, as the Egyptians on the pyramid of Cheops, as the coolies on the C.P.R., as the . . ."

"Enough!" bellowed Santa, turning a vivid red and swallowing several tranquilizers. "Go on with your story immediately or you'll be whipped!" He calmed down slightly and went on in a softer, more unsteady voice. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry



. . . it's so hard—the pressure—you understand. Now please . . . please go on." Santa slumped back in his chair.

The elf, somewhat taken aback, continued in a subdued voice. "He works, master. It is Christmas Eve, and he works. He is not going to spend the holiday with his family. He has not bought gifts. He . . ."

"Enough!" screamed Santa again, resuming his former florid complexion. "He has not bought gifts! Not bought gifts!" He took his bottle of sedatives and swallowed a mouthful, garbling unintelligibly for some time.

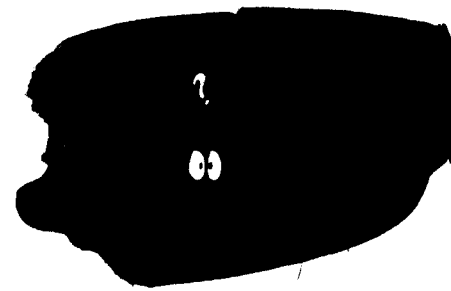
Santa sat slumped in his chair, engaged in deep thought, for a long while. He was in a bad situation. A man had succeeded, thus far, in spending the Christmas season without buying gifts. If word of this got out, Scrunge's example would be followed by hundreds, thousands of people. The economy would collapse; Santa would be out of a job.

These were the thoughts that ran through Santa's head as he sat on his throne. At last a strange glimmer entered his eyes; he smiled a wicked smile, and he arose with a sigh of satisfaction.

"All right, Fred," he said to one of the elves seated expectantly at the foot of the throne, "you might as well get out the chains."

Fred rose silently and retreated into a dark recess at the far end of the hall. Some time later he emerged, dragging a great bundle of very rusty chains behind him. He approached Santa and stood before him.

"You know what to do, Fred," said the huge man in red. The elf nodded



grimly and motioned to a few of his comrades.

\* \* \*

Back in Cameron library, Elmer Scrunge was still bent over his books. The hour was drawing towards midnight. An occasional quiet chuckle could still be heard (if anyone were there to hear) as he rapidly traced out benzene molecules and worked out complex titration formulas on his slide rule. Just as the IBM clock on the wall buzzed the stroke of twelve Elmer sat back and stretched—and then the lights went out.

"Goddam!" cursed Elmer. "How's a body supposed to study in the dark?" He grumbled on for some moments, but stopped short suddenly. He heard something amidst the dreadful humid silence of Cameron library, something very like the clinking of coins in a Hudson's Bay cash register.

Elmer started and peered into the gloom. Between two vaguely visible stacks of books he thought he saw a shimmering white form. The form advanced slowly, becoming more and more visible, and let out a moan.

Elmer was rooted to his seat. He gazed with trembling eyes at the figure which now stood within a few feet of him: a tall creature with gaunt features, clothed in white robes and bound by white chains held by white padlocks.

A low sound rattled in the throat of the figure, slowly developing into a terrible voice.

"I am-m-m the ghost of Christmas-s Past-t-t."

"How d-d-do you d-d-do," replied Elmer in trepidation. "M-m-my name is Elm-m-mer Scrunge."

The ghost moaned again and raised his arms, causing the chains to rattle fearfully.

"Elm-m-mer Scrunge, you have done badly. You have not seen fit to spend this holy Eve with your family. You have not taken on the cloak of charity. You have not . . ."—here the ghost lowered his voice to a dry whisper—"You have not bought gifts!"

"You're absolutely right!" cried Elmer a little nervously. "Why



should I join all those damn fools sitting around all warm and glowy? Why should I waste time on all that nonsense? I'd rather sit here and study. Now, if you'll just stand a little closer until the lights come on again, I might be able to catch enough light from that shimmering stuff on your bathrobe to finish this problem." He turned to his notebook and began writing.

"But wait, Elmer! Look yonder!" The shade pointed into the darkness where a light was beginning to glow in an open space between the stacks. "This is Christmas Past!"

The light began to spread, and forms became visible within it. Elmer stared as the forms began to take shape. He saw a tree, gaily decked with tinsel, lights, and coloured bulbs. Beneath the tree was a child, eagerly tearing open a huge box covered in candy-stripe wrapping. "Me!" whisper Elmer. If he had looked more closely he would have seen a man and a woman seated to one side, looking with tired benevolence down on the child. But Elmer saw only the child, who had finished ravaging the box and drew from it an enormous toy truck. The boy looked at the truck with wonderment for a few seconds, then threw it aside and started in on the next package.

A tear came to Elmer's eye as he looked on this tender scene from his childhood. He rose, trembling, as the scene before him disappeared.

"Have you seen enough, Elmer?" inquired the ghost. "Do you realize now the folly of your ways? Happy times like this can be yours again. It's not too late . . . it's not too late . . ." The ghost and the voice faded simultaneously, and Elmer was left standing in the darkness. He sat down and stared into the darkness, left with his own thoughts.

\* \* \*

He didn't know how much time passed before he saw the strange, shimmering light approaching him again. It proved to be a different figure this time, even more horrible than the first. The face was emaciated and misshapen; the stooped body was clothed in old Christmas present wrappers; chains twice as long as before trailed behind him. The apparition stood before Elmer and groaned terribly.

"I . . . am . . . the . . . (each word was uttered slowly and painfully) . . . ghost . . . of . . . Christmas . . . Present!"

## casserole

a supplement section  
of the gateway

editor

brian campbell

features editor

sheila ballard

arts editor

bill beard

photo editor

al scarth