# **Christmas on Ganymede**

Isaac Asimov

Olaf Johnson hummed nasally to himself and his china-blue eyes were dreamy as he surveyed the stately fir tree in the corner of the library. Though the library was the largest single room in the Dome, Olaf felt it none too spacious for the occasion. Enthusiastically he dipped into the huge crate at his side and took out the first roll of red-and-green crepe paper.

What sudden burst of sentiment had inspired the Ganymedan Products Corporation, Inc. to ship a complete collection of Christmas decorations to the Dome, he did not pause to inquire. Olaf’s was a placid disposition, and in his self-imposed job as chief Christmas decorator, he was content with his lot.

He frowned suddenly and muttered a curse. The General Assembly signal light was Hashing on and off hysterically. With a hurt air Olaf laid down the tack-hammer he had just lifted, then the roll of crêpe paper, picked some tinsel out of his hair and left for officers quarters.

Commander Scott Pelham was in his deep armchair at the head of the table when Olaf entered. His stubby fingers were drumming unrhythmically upon the glass-topped table. Olaf met the commander’s hotly furious eyes without fear, for nothing had gone wrong in his department in twenty Ganymedan revolutions.

The room filled rapidly with men, and Pelham’s eyes hardened as he counted noses in one sweeping glance.

“We’re all here. Men, we face a crisis!”

There was a vague stir. Olaf’s eyes sought the ceiling and he relaxed. Crises hit the Dome once a revolution, on the average. Usually they turned out to be a sudden rise in the quota of oxite to be gathered, or the inferior quality of the last batch of karen leaves. He stiffened, however, at the next words.

“In connection with the crisis, I have one question to ask.” Pelham’s voice was a deep baritone, and it rasped unpleasantly when he was angry. “What dirty imbecilic troublemaker has been telling those blasted Ossies fairy tales?”

Olaf cleared his throat nervously and thus immediately became the center of attention. His Adam’s apple wobbled in sudden alarm and his forehead wrinkled into a washboard. He shivered.

“I-I-” he stuttered, quickly fell silent. His long fingers made a bewildered gesture of appeal. “I mean I was out there yesterday, after the last-uh-supplies of karen leaves, on account the Ossies were slow and-”

A deceptive sweetness entered Pelham’s voice. He smiled.

“Did you tell those natives about Santa Claus, Olaf?”

The smile looked uncommonly like a wolfish leer and Olaf broke down. He nodded convulsively.

“Oh, you did? Well, well, you told them about Santa Claus! He comes down in a sleigh that Hies through the air with eight reindeer pulling it, huh?”

“Well-er-doesn’t he?” Olaf asked unhappily.

“And you drew pictures of the reindeer, just to make sure there was no mistake. Also, he has a long white beard and red clothes with white trimmings.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Olaf, his face puzzled

“And he has a big bag, chock full of presents for good little boys and girls, and he brings it down the chimney and puts presents inside stockings.”

“Sure.”

“You also told them he’s about due, didn’t you? One more revolution and he’s going to visit us.”

Olaf smiled weakly. “Yeah, Commander, I meant to ten you. I’m fixing up the tree and-”

“Shut up!” The commander was breathing hard in a whistling sort of way. “Do you know what those Ossies have thought of?”

“No, Commander.”

Pelham leaned across the table toward Olaf and shouted:

“They want Santa Claus to visit them!”

Someone laughed and changed it quickly into a strangling cough at the commander’s raging stare.

“And if Santa Claus doesn’t visit them, the Ossies are going to quit work!” He repeated, “Quit cold-strike!”

There was no laughter, strangled or otherwise, after that. If there were more than one thought among the entire group, it didn’t show itself. Olaf expressed that thought:

“But what about the quota?”

“Well, what about it?” snarled Pelham. “Do I have to draw pictures for you? Ganymedan Products has to get one hundred tons of wolframite, eighty tons of karen leaves and fifty tons of oxite every year, or it loses its franchise. I suppose there isn’t anyone here who doesn’t know that. It so happens that the current year ends in two Ganymedan revolutions, and we’re five per cent behind schedule as it is.”

There was pure, horrified silence.

“And now the Ossies worit work unless they get Santa Claus. No work, no quota, no franchise-no jobs! Get that, you low-grade morons. When the company loses its franchise, we lose the best-paying jobs in the System. Kiss them good-by, men, unless-”

He paused, glared steadily at Olaf, and added:

“Unless, by next revolution, we have a flying sleigh, eight reindeer and a Santa Claus. And by every cosmic speck in the rings of Saturn, we’re going to have just that, especially a Santa!”

Ten faces turned ghastly pale.

“Got someone in mind, Commander?” asked someone in a voice that was three-quarters croak.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I have.”

He sprawled back in his chair. Olaf Johnson broke into a sudden sweat as he found himself staring at the end of a pointing forefinger.

“Aw, Commander!” he quavered.

The pointing finger never moved.

Pelham tramped into the foreroom, removed his oxygen nosepiece and the cold cylinders attached to it One by one he cast off thick woolen outer garments and, with a final, weary sigh, jerked off a pair of heavy knee-high space boots.

Sim Pierce paused in his careful inspection of the latest batch of karen leaves and cast a hopeful glance over his spectacles.

“Well?” he asked.

Pelham shrugged. “I promised them Santa. What else could I do? I also doubled sugar rations, so they’re back on the job-for the moment.”

“You mean till the Santa we promised doesn’t show up.” Pierce straightened and waved a long karen leaf at the commander’s face for emphasis. “This is the silliest thing I ever heard of. It can’t be done. There ain’t no Santa Claus!”

“Try telling that to the Ossies:’ Pelham slumped into a chair and his expression became stonily bleak. “What’s Benson doing?”

“You mean that flying sleigh he says he can rig up?” Pierce held a leaf up to the light and peered at it critically. “He’s a crackpot, if you ask me. The old buzzard went down to the sub-level this morning and he’s been there ever since. All I know is that he’s taken the spare lectro-dissociator apart. If anything happens to the regular, it just means that we’re without oxygen.”

“Well,” Pelham rose heavily, “for my part I hope we do choke. It would be an easy way out of this whole mess. I’m going down below.”

He stumped out and slammed the door behind him.

In the sub-level he gazed about in bewilderment, for the room was littered with gleaming chrome-steel machine parts. It took him some time to recognize the mess as the remains of what had been a compact, snugly built lectro-dissociator the day before. In the center, in anachronistic contrast, stood a dusty wooden sleigh atop rust-red runners. From beneath it came the sound of hammering.

“Hey, Benson!” called Pelham.

A grimy, sweat-streaked face pushed out from underneath the sleigh, and a stream of tobacco juice shot toward Benson’s ever-present cuspidor.

“What are you shouting like that for?” he complained. “This is delicate work. “

“What the devil is that weird contraption?” demanded Pelham.

“Flying sleigh. My own idea, too.” The light of enthusiasm shone in Benson’s watery eyes, and the quid in his mouth shifted from cheek to cheek as he spoke. “The sleigh was brought here in the old days, when they thought Ganymede was covered with snow like the other Jovian moons. All I have to do is fix a few gravo-repulsors from the dissociator to the bottom and that’ll make it weightless when the current’s on. Compressed air-jets will do the rest. “

The commander chewed his lower lip dubiously.

“Will it work?”

“Sure it will. Lots of people have thought of using repulsors in air travel, but they’re inefficient, especially in heavy gravity fields. Here on Ganymede, with a field of one-third gravity and a thin atmosphere, a child could run it. Even Johnson could run it, though I wouldn’t mourn if he fell off and broke his blasted neck.”

“All right, then, look here. We’ve got lots of this native purplewood. Get Charlie Finn and tell him to put that sleigh on a platform of it. He’s to have it extend about twenty feet or more frontward, with a railing around the part that projects.”

Benson spat and scowled through the stringy hair over his eyes.

“What’s the idea, Commander?”

Pelham’s laughter came in short, harsh barks.

“Those Ossies are expecting reindeer, and reindeer they’re going to have. Those animals will have to stand on something, won’t they?”

“Sure...But wait, hold on! There aren’t any reindeer on Ganymede.”

Commander Pelham paused on his way out. His eyes narrowed unpleasantly as they always did when he thought of Olaf Johnson.

“Olaf is out rounding up eight spinybacks for us. They’ve got four feet, a head on one end and a tail on the other. That’s close enough for the Ossies.”

The old engineer chewed this information and chuckled nastily.

“Good! I wish the fool joy of his job.”

“So do I,” gritted Pelham.

He stalked out as Benson, still leering, slid underneath the sleigh.

The commander’s description of a spinyback was concise and accurate, but it left out several interesting details. For one thing, a spinyback has a long, mobile snout, two large ears that wave back and forth gently, and two emotional purple eyes. The males have pliable spines of a deep crimson color along the backbone that seem to delight the female of the species. Combine these with a scaly, muscular tail and a brain by no means mediocre, and you have a spinyback-or at least you have one if you can catch one.

It was just such a thought that occurred to Olaf Johnson as he sneaked down from the rocky eminence toward the herd of twenty-five spinybacks grazing on the sparse, gritty undergrowth. The nearest spinies looked up as Olaf, bundled in fur and grotesque with attached oxygen nosepiece, approached. However, spinies have no natural enemies, so they merely gazed at the figure with lanquidly disapproving eyes and returned to their crunchy but nourishing fare.

Olaf’s notions on bagging big game were sketchy. He fumbled in his pocket for a lump of sugar, held it out and said:

“Here, pussy, pussy, pussy, pussy, pussy!”

The ears of the nearest spinie twitched in annoyance. Olaf came closer and held out the sugar again.

“Come, bossy! Come. Bossy!”

The spinie caught sight of the sugar and rolled his eyes at it. His snout twitched as he spat out his last mouthful of vegetation and ambled over. With neck stretched out, he sniffed. Then, using a rapid, expert motion, he struck at the outheld palm and Hipped the lump into his mouth. Olaf’s other hand whistled down upon nothingness.

With a hurt expression, Olaf held out another piece. “Here. Prince! Here, Fido!”

The spinie made a low, tremulous sound deep in his throat. It was a sound of pleasure. Evidently this strange monstrosity before him. having gone insane, intended to feed him these bits of concentrated succulence forever. He snatched and was back as quickly as the first time. But. since Olaf had held on firmly this time, the spinie almost bagged half a finger as well.

Olaf’s yell lacked a bit of the nonchalance necessary at such times. Nevertheless. a bite that can be felt through thick gloves is a bite!

He advanced boldly upon the spinie. There are some things that stir the Johnson blood and bring up the ancient spirit of the Vikings. Having one’s finger bitten, especially by an unearthly animal, is one of these.

There was an uncertain look in the spinie’s eyes as he backed slowly away. There weren’t any white cubes being offered any more and he wasn’t quite sure what was going to happen now. The uncertainty vanished with a suddenness he did not expect, when two glove-muffled hands came down upon his ears and jerked. He let out a high-pitched yelp and charged forward.

A spinie has a certain sense of dignity. He doesn’t like to have his ears pulled. particularly when other spinies. including several unattached females, have formed a ring and are looking on.

The Earthman went over backward and remained in that position for awhile. Meantime, the spinie backed away a few feet in a gentlemanly manner and allowed Johnson to get to his feet.

The old Viking blood frothed still higher in Olaf. After rubbing the hurt spot where he had landed on his oxygen cylinder, he jumped, forgetting to allow for Ganymedean gravity. He sailed five feet over the spinie’s back.

There was awe in the animal’s eye as he watched Olaf, for it was a stately jump. But there was a certain amount of bewilderment as well. There seemed to be no purpose to the maneuver.

Olaf landed on his back again and got the cylinder in the same place. He was beginning to feel a little embarrassed. The sounds that came from the circle of onlookers were remarkably like snickers.

“Laugh!” he muttered bitterly. “I haven’t even begun to fight yet.”

He approached the spinie slowly, cautiously. He circled, watching for his opening. So did the spinie. Olaf feinted and the spinie ducked. Then the spinie reared and Olaf ducked.

Olaf kept remembering new profanity all the time. The husky “Ur-r-r-r-r” that came out the spinie’s throat seemed to lack the brotherly spirit that is usually associated with Christmas.

There was a sudden, swishing sound. Olaf felt something collide with his skull, just behind his left ear. This time he turned a back somersault and landed on the nape of his neck. There was a chorused whinny from the onlookers, and the spinie waved his tail triumphantly.

Olaf got rid of the impression that he was floating through a star-studded unlimited space and wavered to his feet.

“Listen,” he objected, “using your tail is a foul!”

He leaped back as the tail shot forward again, then flung himself forward in a diving tackle. He grabbed at the spinie’s feet and felt the animal come down on his back with an indignant yelp.

Now it was a case of Earth muscles against Ganymedan muscles, and Olaf became a man of brute strength. He struggled up, and the spinie found himself slung over the stranger’s shoulders.

The spinie objected vociferously and tried to prove his objections by a judicious whip of the tail. But he was in an inconvenient position and the stroke whistled harmlessly over Olaf’s head.

The other spinies made way for the Earthman with saddened expressions. Evidently they were all good friends of the captured animal and hated to see him lose a fight. They returned to their meal in philosophic resignation, plainly convinced that it was kismet.

On the other side of the rocky ledge, Olaf reached his prepared cave. There was the briefest of scrambling sh’uggles before he managed to sit down hard on the spinie’s head and put enough knots into rope to hold him there.

A few hours later, when he had corralled his eighth spinyback, he possessed the technique that comes of long practice. He could have given a Terrestrial cowboy valuable pointers on throwing a maverick. Also, he could have given a Terrestrial stevedore lessons in simple and compound swearing.

“Twas the night before Christmas-and all through the Ganymedan Dome there was deafening noise and bewildering excitement, like an exploding nova equipped for sound. Around the rusty sleigh, mounted on its huge platform of purplewood, five Earthmen were staging a battle royal with a spinie.

The spinie had definite views about most things, and one of his stubbornest and most definite views was that he would never go where he didn’t want to go. He made that clear by flailing one head, one tail, three spines and four legs in every possible direction, with all possible force.

But the Earthmen insisted, and not gently. Despite loud, agonized squeaks, the spinie was lifted onto the platform, hauled into place and harnessed into hopeless helplessness.

“Okay!” Peter Benson yelled. “Pass the bottle.”

Holding the spinie’s snout with one hand, Benson waved the bottle under it with the other. The spinie quivered eagerly and whined tremulously. Benson poured some of the liquid down the animal’s throat. There was a gurgling swallow and an appreciative whinny. The spinie’s neck stretched out for more.

Benson sighed. “Our best brandy, too.”

He up-ended the bottle and withdrew it half empty. The spinie, eyes whirling in their sockets rapidly, did what seemed an attempt at a gay jig. It didn’t last long, however, for Ganymedan metabolism is almost immediately affected by alcohol. His muscles locked in a drunken rigor and, with a loud hiccup, he went out on his feet.

“Drag out the next!” yelled Benson.

In an hour the eight spinybacks were so many cataleptic statues. Forked sticks were tied around their heads as antlers. The effect was crude and sketchy, but it would do.

As Benson opened his mouth to ask where Olaf Johnson was, that worthy showed up in the arms of three comrades, and he was putting up as stiff a fight as any spinie. His objections, however, were highly articulate.

“I’m not going anywhere in this costume!” he roared, gouging at the nearest eye. “You hear me?”

There certainly was cause for objection. Even at his best, Olaf had never been a heart-throb. But in his present condition, he resembled a hybrid between a spinie’s nightmare and a Picassian conception of a patriarch.

He wore the conventional costume of Santa. His clothes were as red as red tissue paper sewed onto his space coat could make it. The “ermine” was as white as cotton wool, which it was. His beard, more cotton wool glued into a linen foundation, hung loosely from his ears. With that below and his oxygen nosepiece above, even the strongest were forced to avert their eyes.

Olaf had not been shown a mirror. But, between what he could see of himself and what his instinct told him, he would have greeted a good, bright lightning bolt like a brother.

By fits and starts, he was hauled to the sleigh. Others pitched in to help, until Olaf was nothing but a smothered squirm and muffled voice.

“Leggo,” he mumbled. “Leggo and come at me one by one. Come on!”

He tried to spar a bit, to point his dare. But the multiple grips upon him left him unable to wriggle a finger.

“Get in!” ordered Benson.

“You go to hell!” gasped Olaf. “I’m not getting into any patented short-cut to suicide, and you can take your bloody flying sleigh and-“

“Listen,” interrupted Benson, “Commander Pelham is waiting for you at the other end. He’ll skin you alive if you don’t show up in half an hour.”

“Commander Pelham can take the sleigh sideways and-”

“Then think of your job! Think of a hundred and fifty a week. Think of every other year off with pay. Think of Hilda, back on Earth, who isn’t going to marry you without a job. Think of all that!”

Johnson thought, snarled. He thought some more, got into the sleigh, strapped down his bag and turned on the gravo-repulsors. With a horrible curse, he opened the rear jet.

The sleigh dashed forward and he caught himself from going backward, over and out of the sleigh, by two-thirds of a whisker. He held onto the sides thereafter, watching the surrounding hills as they rose and fell with each lurch of the unsteady sleigh.

As the wind rose, the undulations grew more marked. And when Jupiter came up, its yellow light brought out every jag and crag of the rocky ground, toward everyone of which, in turn, the sleigh seemed headed. And by the time the giant planet had shoved completely over the horizon, the curse of drink-which departs from the Ganymedan organism just as quickly as it descends-began removing itself from the spinies.

The hindmost spinie came out of it first, tasted the inside of his mouth, winced and swore off drink. Having made that resolution, he took in his immediate surroundings languidly. They made no immediate impression on him. Only gradually was the fact forced upon him that his footing, whatever it was, was not the usual stable one of solid Ganymede. It swayed and shifted, which seemed very unusual.

Yet he might have attributed this unsteadiness to his recent orgy, had he not been so careless as to drop his glance over the railing to which he was anchored. No spinie ever died of heart-failure, as far as is recorded, but, looking downward, this one almost did.

His agonized screech of horror and despair brought the other spinies into full, if headachy, consciousness. For a while there was a confused blur of squawking conversation as the animals tried to get the pain out of their heads and the facts in. Both aims were achieved and a stampede was organized. It wasn’t much of a stampede, because the spinies were anchored tightly. But, except for the fact that they got nowhere, they went through all the motions of a full gallop. And the sleigh went crazy.

Olaf grabbed his beard a second before it let go of his ears.

“Hey!” he shouted.

It was something like saying “Tut, tut” to a hurricane.

The sleigh kicked, bucked and did a hysterical tango. It made sudden spurts, as if inspired to dash its wooden brains out against Ganymede’s crust. Meanwhile Olaf prayed, swore, wept and jiggled all the compressed air jets at once.

Ganymede whirled and Jupiter was a wild blur. Perhaps it was the spectacle of Jupiter doing the shimmy that steadied the spinies. More likely it was the fact that they just didn’t give a hang any more. Whatever it was, they halted, made lofty farewell speeches to one another, confessed their sins and waited for death.

The sleigh steadied and Olaf resumed his breathing once more. Only to stop again as he viewed the curious spectacle of hills and solid ground up above, and black sky and swollen Jupiter down below.

It was at this point that he, too, made his peace with the eternal and awaited the end.

“Ossie” is short for ostrich, and that’s what native Ganymedans look like, except that their necks are shorter, their heads are larger, and their feathers look as if they were about to fall out by the roots. To this, add a pair of scrawny, feathered arms with three stubby fingers apiece. They can speak English, but when you hear them, you wish they couldn’t

There were fifty of them in the low purplewood structure that was their “meeting hall.” On the mound of raised dirt in the front of the room-dark with the smoky dimness of burning purplewood torches fetid to boot-sat Commander Scott Pelham and five of his men. Before them strutted the frowziest Ossie of them all, inflating his huge chest with rhythmic, booming sounds.

He stopped for a moment and pointed to a ragged hole in the ceiling.

“Look!” he squawked. “Chimney. We make. Sannycaws come in.”

Pelham grunted approval. The Ossie clucked happily. He pointed to the little sacks of woven grass that hung from the walls.

“Look! Stockies. Sannycaws put presets!”

“Yeah,” said Pelham unenthusiastically. “Chimney and stockings. Very nice.” He spoke out of the corner of his mouth to Sim Pierce, who sat next to him: “Another half-hour in this dump will kill me. When is that fool coming?”

Pierce stirred uneasily.

“Listen,” he said, “I’ve been doing some figuring. We’re safe on everything but the karen leaves, and we’re still four tons short on that If we can get this fool business over with in the next hour, so we can start the next shift and work the Ossies at double, we can make it” He leaned back “Yes, I think we can make it”

“Just about,” replied Pelham gloomily. “That’s if Johnson gets here without pulling another bloomer.”

The Ossie was talking again, for Ossies like to talk He said:

“Every year Kissmess comes. Kissmess nice, evvybody friendly. Ossie like Kissmess. You like Kissmess?”

“Yeah, fine,” Pelham snarled politely. “Peace on Ganymede, good will toward men-especially Johnson. Where the devil is that idiot, anyhow?”

He fell into an annoyed fidget, while the Ossie jumped up and down a few times in a thoughtful sort of manner, evidently for the exercise of it. He continued the jumping, varying it with little hopping dance steps, till Pelham’s fists began making strangling gestures. Only an excited squawk from the hole in the wall dignified by the term “window” kept Pelham from committing Ossie-slaughter.

Ossies swarmed about and the Earthmen fought for a view.

Against Jupiter’s great yellowness was outlined a flying sleigh, complete with reindeers. It was only a tiny thing, but there was no doubt about it. Santa Claus was coming.

There was only one thing wrong with the picture. The sleigh, “reindeer” and all, while plunging ahead at a terrific speed, was flying upside down.

The Ossies dissolved into squawking cacophony. “Sannycaws! Sannycaws! Sannycaws!”

They scrambled out the window like so many animated dust-mops gone mad. Pelham and his men used the low door.

The sleigh was approaching, growing larger, lurching from side to side and vibrating like an off-center flywheel. Olaf Johnson was a tiny figure holding on desperately to the side of the sleigh with both hands.

Pelham was shouting wildly, incoherently, choking on the thin atmosphere every time he forgot to breathe through his nose. Then he stopped and stared in horror. The sleigh, almost life-size now, was dipping down. If it had been an arrow shot by William Tell, it could not have aimed between Pelham’s eyes more accurately.

“Everybody down!” he shrieked, and dropped.

The wind of the sleigh’s passage whistled keenly and brushed his face. Olaf’s voice could be heard for an instant, high-pitched and indistinct. Compressed air spurted, leaving tracks of condensing water vapor.

Pelham lay quivering, hugging Ganymede’s frozen crust. Then, knees shaking like a Hawaiian hula-girl, he rose slowly. The Ossies who had scattered before the plunging vehicle had assembled again. Off in the distance, the sleigh was veering back.

Pelham watched as it swayed and hovered, still rotating. It lurched toward the dome, curved off to one side, turned back, and gathered speed.

Inside that sleigh, Olaf worked like a demon. Straddling his legs wide, he shifted his weight desperately. Sweating and cursing, trying hard not to look “downward” at Jupiter, he urged the sleigh into wilder and wilder swings. It was wobbling through an angle of 180 degrees now, and Olaf felt his stomach raise strenuous objections.

Holding his breath, he leaned hard with his right foot and felt the sleigh swing far over. At the extremity of that swing, he released the gravo-repulsor and, in Ganymede’s weak gravity, the sleigh jerked downward. Naturally, since the vehicle was bottom-heavy due to the metal gravo-repulsor beneath, it righted itself as it fell.

But this was little comfort to Commander Pelham, who found himself once more in the direct path of the sleigh.

“Down!” he yelled, and dropped again.

The sleigh whi-i-ished overhead, came up against a huge boulder with a crack, bounced twenty-five feet into the air, came down with a rush and a bang, and Olaf fell over the railing and out.

Santa Claus had arrived.

With a deep, shuddering breath, Olaf swung his bag over his shoulders, adjusted his beard and patted one of the silently suffering spinies on the head. Death might be coming-in fact, Olaf could hardly wait-but he was going to die on his feet nobly, like a Johnson.

Inside the shack, into which the Ossies had once more swarmed, a thump announced the arrival of Santa’s bag on the roof, and a second thud the arrival of Santa himself. A ghastly face appeared through the makeshift hole in the ceiling.

“Merry Christmas!” it croaked, and tumbled through. Olaf landed on his oxygen cylinders, as usual, and got them in the usual place.

The Ossies jumped up and down like rubber balls with the itch.

Olaf limped heavily toward the first stocking and deposited the garishly colored sphere he withdrew from his bag, one of the many that had originally been intended as a Christmas tree ornament One by one he deposited the rest in every available stocking.

Having completed his job, he dropped into an exhausted squat, from which position he watched subsequent proceedings with a glazed and fishy eye. The jolliness and belly-shaking good humor, traditionally characteristic of Santa Claus, were absent from this one with remarkable thoroughness.

The Ossies made up for it by their wild ecstasy. Until Olaf had deposited the last globe, they had kept their silence and their seats. But when he had finished, the air heaved and writhed under the stresses of the discordant screeches that arose. In half a second the hand of each Ossie contained a globe.

They chattered among themselves furiously, handling the globes carefully and hugging them close to their chests. Then they compared one with another) flocking about to gaze at particularly good ones.

The frowziest Ossie approached Pelham and plucked at the commander’s sleeve. “Sannycaws good)” he cackled. “Look, he leave eggs I” He stared reverently at his sphere and said: “Pittier’n Ossie eggs. Must be Sannycaws eggs, huh?”

His skinny finger punched Pelham in the stomach.

“No!” yowled Pelham vehemently. “Hell, no!”

But the Ossie wasn’t listening. He plunged the globe deep into the warmth of his feathers and said:

“Pitty colors. How long take for little Sannycaws come out? And what little Sannycaws eat?” He looked up. “We take good care. We teach little Sannycaws) make him smart and full of brain like Ossie.”

Pierce grabbed Commander Pelham’s arm.

“Don’t argue with them).. he whispered frantically. “What do you care if they think those are Santa Claus eggs? Come on! If we work like maniacs) we can still make the quota. Lets get started.”

“That’s right,” Pelham admitted. He turned to the Ossie. “Tell everyone to get going.” He spoke clearly and loudly. “Work now. Do you understand? Hurry) hurry) hurry! Come on!”

He motioned with his arms. But the frowzy Ossie had come to a sudden halt. He said slowly:

“We work, but Johnson say Kissmess come evvy year...

“Isn’t one Christmas enough for you?” Pelham rasped.

“No!” squawked the Ossie. “We want Sannycaws next year. Get more eggs. And next year more eggs. And next year. And next year) And next year. More eggs. More little Sannycaws eggs. If Sannycaws not come) we not work.”

“That’s a long time off,.. said Pelham. “We’ll talk about it then. By that time I’ll either have gone completely crazy) or you’ll have forgotten all about it...

Pierce opened his mouth, closed it, opened his mouth, closed it, opened it, and finally managed to speak.

“Commander, they want him to come every year...

“I know. They won’t remember by next year, though...

“But you don’t get it. A year to them is one Ganymedan revolution around Jupiter. In Earth time, that’s seven days and three hours. They want Santa Claus to come every week...

“Every week!” Pelham gulped. “Johnson told them-”

For a moment everything turned sparkling somersaults before his eyes. He choked, and automatically his eye sought Olaf.

Olaf turned cold to the marrow of his bones and rose to his feet apprehensively, sidling toward the door. There he stopped as a sudden recollection of tradition hit him. Beard a-dangle, he croaked:

“Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!”

He made for the sleigh as if all the imps of Hades were after him. The imps weren’t, but Commander Scott Pelham was.