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MOONBERRY PIE



MP62

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STARLIGHT AND MOONSHINE The Very Last Christmas Present



Christmas Eve at Lucy's and Danny's house was busy as usual, what with putting up decorations and trimming the Christmas tree; but perhaps the main event was the wrapping of presents. The parents had been very secretive about this, making sure that they did it out of sight of the children. Lucy and Danny had gifts to wrap as well, and they had gone upstairs so that the grown-ups didn't see. Lucy had just finished wrapping her brother's present and went to his room to help with the ones for their Mum and Dad, and also for their Grandfather Joshua who was staying for Christmas. Pausing at the bedroom door she knocked. "Have you finished wrapping my present, Danny? Can I come in?"

"Yeah," Danny called out, "And I've hidden it, so don't go looking, okay?"

"Promise," said Lucy as she went in. Seeing her brother face down on the bed with a comic in front of him, she said rather disapprovingly: "What's that you're reading? Not another *WRONG* comic book I hope. Remember the problem you caused last time."

"I know," grumbled Danny, "But this is a *proper* Starlight and Moonshine one."

"So we should wait until Granddad comes up to read it with us like always."

"I'm only looking at the pictures," said the boy. "You know I can't read. That's your job, and you'd better do it now. There's something not right. The front cover looks the same as the other Starlight and Moonshine comics, but it seems to be all about Father Christmas. There he is on a roof climbing out of a chimney."

"How do you know he's not climbing in?" Lucy queried.

"Can't be," declared Danny pointing at what Santa had over his shoulder. "His bag's empty, so he must already have put the presents under the tree."

Lucy sat beside her brother on the bed and looked at the comic as Danny opened it to the first page. Father Christmas was getting into his sleigh which was parked on the roof. Speaking to his reindeer, he was saying: "That's taken care of Lord Nuff-Nuff and Henshaw. Just the very last present to deliver and we can head back to the North Pole".

"Nothing out of the ordinary there," commented Lucy. "Santa's obviously in Gumbyland and he's about to leave for somewhere else."

"Dunno about that," said Danny. "Look at the next pictures." The first showed the sleigh trying to take off, but it seemed to be caught on a flag pole. In the next it was veering sideways; and the one after was a real worry because the reindeer, sleigh and Santa were plummeting to the ground.

That was the last picture on the page. "Quick!" Lucy ordered, "Turn over. Let's hope Father Christmas is okay."

Danny turned the page and it was painfully clear Santa was in trouble. He was slumped seemingly unmoving over the front of his sleigh. Then the two children were seeing inside Gumblyland Manor where Lord Nuff-Nuff and Henshaw, both wearing nightshirts, were on the landing outside their bedrooms. “What are they saying, Lucy?”

Lucy read the story from the comic pictures...

“What was that noise?” Lord Nuff-Nuff demanded to know. “It woke me up.”

“How should I know?” grumbled his giant penguin butler. “It woke me up too.”

“I gathered that!” snapped Nuff-Nuff, “But what *kind* of noise was it?”

“Does it matter?” groaned Henshaw. “A noise, is a noise, is a noise.”

“Well, it sounded to me like something crashed outside,” muttered Nuff-Nuff sourly. “Go and see what caused it.”

“Me again,” droned Henshaw rolling his eyes. “I suppose *you* aren’t you coming?”

Lord Nuff-Nuff turned towards his bedroom. “Maybe after I’ve finished my cocoa. I don’t want it to go cold.” Hearing Henshaw’s growl of irritation drifting back to him, he droned: “And don’t start with the whingeing.” In less than two minutes, Henshaw was banging on Nuff-Nuff’s door and entering without being told to. His Lordship was sitting in bed with his mug of cocoa, and he was scowling. “Well?”

“You’d better come,” Henshaw panted breathlessly. “Father Christmas has had an accident. I think he might be dead!”

Lucy reached across and closed the comic book. “This sounds really serious. I’m going to get Granddad. Sliding off the bed she began towards the door, calling back over her shoulder: “Don’t do anything, Danny. Don’t open the comic; and don’t you dare touch any pictures! Just wait till we get back.”

Lucy went down to the lounge room where the grown-ups were sitting drinking tea. “We’d like your help with some presents, Granddad,” she said. This wasn’t true, of course; but it was really only what is called a white lie, one which does no-one any harm. Waiting until Joshua had got up from his chair and was by her side, she spoke to her parents: “No peaking by you two,” and she put on a big grin before adding: “Don’t even think about coming into Danny’s room.”

Shortly, the three of them were sitting on Danny’s bed. Lucy had read the first part of the story again from the beginning for Joshua’s benefit and they were up to the next part where Lord Nuff-Nuff and Henshaw were outside gawping at the crashed sleigh, and in particular at Santa who was still not moving. “Have they checked for a pulse, I wonder?” Joshua said to himself. “Put your hand on the picture and ask, Danny.”

In case you’ve forgotten: as you’ve read in the other Starlight and Moonshine comics this is the way the people in the real world can speak with those in comic-book world.

“What’s a pulse?” asked his grandson.

“Never mind,” replied Joshua impatiently. “Just ask.”

Danny placed a hand on the picture and repeated Joshua’s question. Nuff-Nuff and Henshaw looked up to where the voice was coming from. “Thank goodness,” said Henshaw. “We were hoping you’d come. We have a big problem here.”

“We can see that,” snapped Joshua rather hurriedly. “Have you checked Santa’s pulse?”

Henshaw hadn’t a clue what he was talking about. Joshua groaned, dipped into his cardigan pocket and took out a cookie. Holding it up, he called out: “Moonberry Pie!” Instantly he was flying through the rainbow sky and tasting sweet berries; then

he was there in the comic picture, right beside the sleigh. Lucy and Danny watched as he went close and reached forward to place a finger on Santa's neck. He kept it there for a few seconds, then stood up and breathed a sigh of relief. "He's alive," were the words that appeared in the picture bubble, "He's had a bump on the head. Hopefully it's not too serious, but we should take him inside." Looking up to where he knew Lucy and Danny would be as they read the comic he was now in, he said: "I'll stay for a bit, just until Father Christmas wakes up. Will you two be okay?"

"You bet," said Danny. "I mean, we've done this loads before, haven't we?"

As the story progressed two more characters appeared in the comic. Starlight and Moonshine were also in their nightshirts, and it seemed they too were staying at Gumbyland Manor for Christmas. Santa's head was now bandaged and he was saying: "I'm a little better, thank you, but I keep having dizzy spells so I won't be able to drive my sleigh; so how am I going to deliver the very last Christmas present?"

"No problem," said Colonel Moonshine. "Starlight can do that for you; and if I can borrow your suit, I'll do the climbing-down-the-chimney bit."

"I'm afraid not," said Santa, and he went on to explain why, plus a few more problems. Apparently only Father Christmas could drive the sleigh, and even with the Santa suit, Moonshine wouldn't be able to climb in and out of the chimney. "It's all to do with the magic of Christmas," Santa explained.

"Okay," declared Moonshine. "Forget the suit and the chimney. Starlight can fly us there in her ship and I'll put the present on the doorstep."

"No good, I'm afraid," said Santa with a sigh. "The present *must* be placed under the Christmas tree. As for Captain Starlight's ship, I'm afraid it would be too slow. Only my reindeer are fast enough to get there before the sun rises on Christmas morning; and that isn't far away."

"Hey," cut in Danny, "What about tying the reindeer to Captain Starlight's ship?"

"Not a bad idea," said Father Christmas. "Good thinking, Danny."

The boy frowned. "How did you know my name?"

"I know everyone's name, Danny," said Santa with a chuckle, "And I certainly know who's been naughty or nice," then added a tired but cheery: "Ho, Ho, Ho."

Danny's plan was put into action, with the reindeer being unhitched from the sleigh and tied to the front of Starlight's ship. Moonshine was out of breath by the time he'd fetched the present and brought it on board. "It's pretty heavy, Starlight – I wonder what it is?"

"Santa wasn't allowed to tell us," Starlight reminded her friend, "Nor who it was for. But he said not to worry *where* to take it as the reindeer know the way."

Joshua spoke to Father Christmas: "I'll leave you in the capable hands of Lord Nuff-Nuff and Henshaw," and with that he called out: "Moonberry Pie!" to be whisked instantly back to Danny's room.

After waving their goodbyes, the two comic-book heroes set off across the sky, flying in Starlight's ship towards the mystery destination which only the reindeer knew. Moonshine was at the front of the ship peering ahead through his telescope. He paused for a moment to call back: "I thought this was going to be rather ordinary, but I suppose being pulled along really fast by these reindeer is something different. Maybe we should get some, Starlight."

"I think not, Moonshine. The way we were is fine, and we don't want a quiet Christmas ruined by it being turned into one of your huge adventures. Now, please return your attention to keep a lookout for where the reindeer are taking us."

Moonshine did as ordered and he had barely put the telescope to his eye when he spotted something which was rather disturbing. He gasped and his eyes popped

as he called back: "We're coming up on it now, and you're not going to like it. Get ready for REALLY HUGE, Starlight! We're approaching Darkmire, Prince Jocula's land, and you know how he hates us after what we did to him and his soldiers when he invaded Gumblyland. If we're seen we'll be in heaps of trouble."

They were lucky. Somehow the reindeer must have known that Moonshine didn't have the magic to do the chimney bit, and also that he and Starlight should stay hidden from sight. They had stopped the ship well away from the castle. Soon, two very shifty-looking characters were sneaking through the darkness, one of them carrying the unknown present. "If this is a present for Prince Jocula," whispered Moonshine, "I hope it's a nasty one."

"That's not really in the Christmas spirit, Moonshine," said Starlight

Her friend had to agree. "Well, whatever it is, I hope he's already got one." Before long they were crouching beside the castle wall. "We have to find a way in where we won't be spotted," he said quietly. "Maybe there's a window they've forgotten to shut."

They found one eventually and it presented another problem. "We'll never get through there," said Starlight. "We're too big."

Danny rose to the occasion and blurted out: "I'm not. Remember when I climbed through that little window in Gumblyland Manor and put addlewort in the soldiers' dinner? I can do it again, but this time with the present, not the addlewort." Turning to Joshua, he said: "What do you reckon, Granddad?"

Joshua was still thinking when Captain Starlight spoke to Danny: "On your own you'd never manage – the present is too heavy."

"What about if I go with Danny and we carried it between us?" Lucy interrupted. "Am I small enough to climb through the window?"

"Well..." mumbled Starlight as she thought about the proposal.

Moonshine didn't wait for her to go on. "What choice do we have, Starlight? Surely it's worth a try...?"

With their grandfather's approval the two children Moonberry Pied into comic-book world to join Starlight and Moonshine who were waiting by the open window. "I'm pretty sure I can squeeze through," said Lucy, and with a bit of effort she managed to. Peering out she said: "Push the present in Colonel Moonshine, then Danny can come and join me." This part went well, until Danny began talking in a voice that was too loud for Lucy's liking. "Shhh! We don't want anyone to hear us."

"They'll all be asleep, won't they?" Danny suggested in a whisper.

"Maybe not all," said his sister as she looked across the dark room in which they found themselves. "This is Prince Jocula's castle remember, and I bet there are guards. Not too many I hope. Come on. We have to find the Christmas tree." Picking up the present, they started towards the door on the far side when Lucy called a halt. "We're still making too much noise and it's coming from our shoes. We'll have to take them off."

"But these are my best runners," moaned Danny. "I don't want to lose them."

"You won't," his sister assured him. "We'll pick them up on the way back."

The task was harder than at first thought. Lucy figured that Prince Jocula's castle would be similar to Lord Nuff-Nuff's house and that the Christmas tree would be in the main hall; and that meant a long trudge carrying a heavy weight. Lucy was right about the guards and they came across at least one in every corridor; but they obviously weren't expecting to see anyone coming in the middle of the night and were all asleep. Luck, it seemed was with the two children, and creeping almost silently along in their socks they managed to reach the far side of the castle without

disturbing any of the sleeping guards. Pausing to rest outside the door to the main hall, Lucy whispered: "Almost done, Danny. I just hope the door doesn't creak when I open it." Unfortunately it did a little, and there were more problems on the far side.

"There's a load of guards," whispered Danny, "And two of them are sleeping right next to the Christmas tree."

Lucy let out a sigh. "We'll have to be extra quiet. And don't let go of the present like you did back there when we dropped it."

The two children started across the main hall, weaving carefully through the sleeping soldiers towards the Christmas tree. It was really tall and also very wide; which, they would soon discover, was just as well. They managed to place the present gently under the tree on the floor between two guards, one of whom was snoring; but he didn't wake, not until they were about to retreat and Danny trod on the man's hand. As the boy was only in his socks it wouldn't have hurt, but it was enough and the guard awoke with a spluttering snort. Danny's response was: "Um-aaah!" Lucy's was more practical as she grabbed her brother's wrist and dragged him around the tree to the far side and hissed: "Get your Pie, Danny, quickly!"

They had already talked about this and that it might be necessary; and now they had to do it before the guards caught them. Pretty much at the same time, they each pulled their cookies from a pocket and together called out: "MOONBERRY PIE !!!"

"That was close," commented Joshua as his grandchildren suddenly appeared back in Danny's room. "Hopefully the guard you woke up didn't see you; or if he did he might have imagined he was dreaming. You did well. Pity about leaving your shoes behind. Let's see the next picture to find out what Father Christmas thinks."

This was a continuation of the one before, depicting Lucy and Danny behind the Christmas tree. The next switched to outside the castle where Starlight and Moonshine were beating a hasty retreat back to the ship. Then finally, they had returned to Gumblyland and were in the Manor House talking to Santa. "If it hadn't been for Lucy and Danny we'd never have managed it," said Captain Starlight.

Father Christmas beamed at Starlight and Moonshine, then spoke to the three people in the real world: "I owe you all a debt of thanks for your help delivering the very last present. As for you two children, you were very brave." The old man with the bushy white beard stood up and seemed to have recovered from his bump on the head. "Now I must head back to the North Pole before the sun begins to rise."

The second last page of the comic showed Father Christmas speeding off into the night on his sleigh. This was followed by one with Henshaw going up the stairs to his bedroom. He had turned to see Lord Nuff-Nuff walking in a different direction. "I hope you aren't going to look under the Christmas tree," he warned sternly.

Lord Nuff-Nuff tutted and sighed. "You really are no fun anymore, Henshaw."

In the real world, Christmas morning had arrived. The family was in the lounge-room and presents were being taken from under the tree and handed out. The parents were whispering, wondering about two packages in particular that they knew nothing about; and when their children opened them they were even more puzzled. "New shoes?" said their Mother in surprise. "Who are *they* from?"

Lucy grinned widely as she said: "Father Christmas, of course," then to Danny in a whisper: "How did he know we'd left them behind?"

Danny smiled. "Father Christmas knows everything. He said so."