

A Winter of Discontent



CHRISTMAS IS A TIME OF MANY QUESTIONS. Sure, it is a time of peace and joy and lots and lots of brown paper packages wrapped up with string, but it is also a time filled with questions. Questions like “What was the star that shone over Bethlehem?” “How does Santa Claus get around the world in one night?” “What does “wassail” mean?” “If Santa Claus only cares if you are good or bad, then why do rich kids get so many more presents than poor kids?”

These are all important questions, and the answers are difficult and complex. This story does not answer any of them.

This story is about a question that nobody has ever considered particularly important and which, until now, nobody has even cared to ask: what do Christmas elves do on their summer vacation? Oh, I know what you are thinking. “What kind of dumb question is that?” Well, you might think it is a pretty dumb question, but the answer is, nonetheless, difficult and complex.

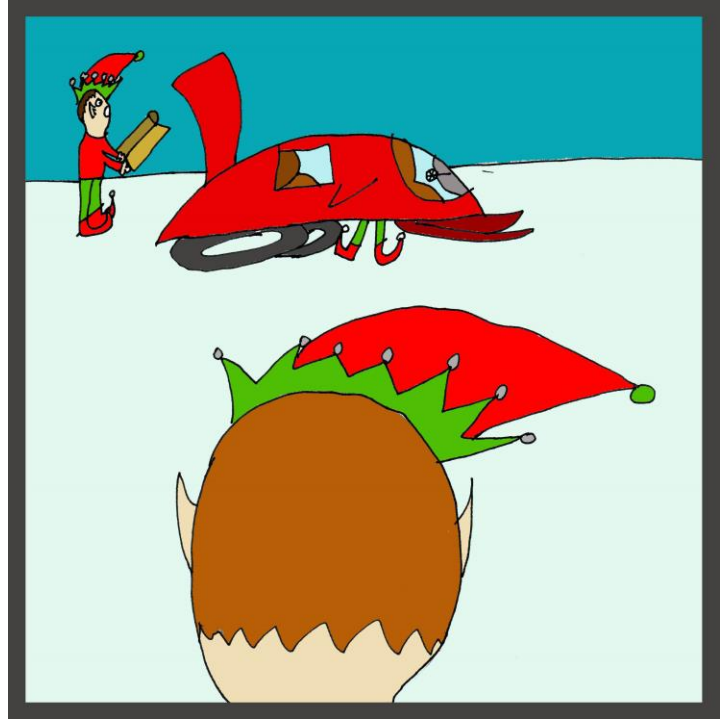
One would expect that most Christmas elves do what everybody else does on their summer vacation; pack their families in a van and drive until they cannot stand the complaining anymore. But this story is not about most elves. It is about three elves in particular. Three elves named Iggy, Yugo and Sam (perhaps you have heard of them). Moreover, they do not have a van. They have a snowmobile. This is where they were to be found one frosty July morning not too long ago . . .

IGGY AND YUGO HAD PLANNED THEIR summer trip for weeks. They had collected brochures, read guidebooks and researched hotels on the Internet. They could hardly wait to start.

Sam, on the other hand, was in no hurry to get going. It was not that he did not want to join his friends on their vacation. He enjoyed seeing different people and places. It was not the 'where' of this trip that was bothering him; it was the 'how.'

Sam wanted to travel by airplane. Or train. Or even bicycle or dog sled. Anything but Yugo's snowmobile. But Yugo insisted. Indeed, he promised that he had "made a few special modifications for the trip".

Sam took no comfort from this news. Yugo's past "modifications" had thrown Sam across space and time, and left him battered, bruised and the owner of an unwanted nervous twitch. Sam blinked as he looked down on Yugo's snowmobile in the big hanger on the west side of the North Pole.¹ Yugo's pointy-toed velvet boots stuck out from the bottom of the snowmobile. Sam could hear some grunting and what he was sure was the sound of a large wrench striking a metal object very hard. He looked over at Iggy, who was lifting a large suitcase into the back of the snowmobile. It looked like Iggy planned to be away for a long time.



There was another discordant crash from beneath the snowmobile and then Yugo slid out from underneath it. He wiped his brow with his pointy green velvet cap. "That should do it," he said.

"Do what?" asked Iggy. Sam just crossed his arms and pouted. He was sure that nothing good ever came of hitting anything that did not have teeth with a crescent wrench.

"Oh, I was having a little trouble with the space-time calibrator. I think I've got it now," answered Yugo.

"Great," said Iggy. Iggy had no idea what Yugo was talking about, but if Yugo said it was great, that was good enough for him. Iggy thought everything was great. He was an optimist by nature. He made most optimists look positively down in the dumps by comparison. He did not just see silver linings in every dark cloud, he saw platinum ones.

Iggy lifted another trunk into the back of the snowmobile. "Where's your luggage, Yugo," he asked.

Yugo patted a thin black bag that hung over his shoulder. "I have everything I need right here," he said. Iggy smiled and placed a big round hatbox on top of his suitcases.

¹ This bit is really hard to explain. You cannot actually go west anywhere from the North Pole. You can only go south. To find the hangar, first you have to go south a bit, then west. You cannot miss it.

Sam had never understood Iggy's rosy outlook on life. From what he had seen, most things in the world wanted nothing more than to fold, bend, mutilate and digest him. As far as Sam was concerned, elves were somewhere near the bottom of the food chain and needed to constantly look out for trouble. Sam knew, from painful experience, that trouble was usually just a block or two up the road and coming towards him fast. Some might call this paranoia; Sam just considered that he had a very finely honed survival instinct. Who could argue with him? Nothing had killed him. At least, nothing had killed him yet.

Yugo placed his wrench on his workbench. Sam noticed a big dent on the end of it. "So, just what is a 'space-time calibrator,' anyway?" Sam asked apprehensively.

"Oh, it's a new instrument I installed last week. It helps steer the snowmobile. Can't travel through time without it," said Yugo. "Of course, we won't be needing that on this trip. Still, better safe than sorry, I always say".

Sam felt exactly the same way. In fact, he felt better safe than almost anything else at all. "Look guys," Sam began, "I've been thinking, why don't the two of you just go on without me."

"I thought we had been through this already," said Iggy. "You need a vacation as much as anyone. Remember what the doctor said?"

Sam's eye twitched involuntarily. "The doctor said I was supposed to try to relax. I don't see how a trip in that . . . *thing* is going to help me relax." He blinked again.

Yugo stepped over and patted Sam on the shoulder. "Don't worry, it's perfectly safe. Nothing is going to go wrong this time."

Sam jerked involuntarily. "That's what you always say right before something goes wrong," he replied.

Yugo laughed. "Well, not this time," he said. "I've even installed new seat belts and air bags to ensure your comfort and safety during the trip. And we got you this." Yugo pulled a brown cardboard box out from beside his toolbox.

"Open it up, Sam," said Iggy.

Sam took the box from Yugo. It seemed odd to him for a Christmas elf to receive a present. They were in the business of giving presents, not getting them. He opened the box flaps and pulled out a shiny red object.

"We both chipped in to get it," said Yugo.

"I chose the colour," said Iggy, taking the object from Sam and placing it on his head. "It's a new helmet. Now nothing can go wrong."

Sam sighed. The visor on his helmet fogged up slightly. He really had no choice now. He lifted up his little backpack and tossed it into the back seat of the snowmobile and climbed in after it. "Well, what are we waiting for," he said. "Let's get going."

YUGO FLIPPED A FLASHING YELLOW SWITCH and the engines of the snowmobile growled to life. Sam winced as Yugo pulled back on the stick shift and backed the snowmobile out of the hanger. He turned a red dial, pushed forward on the stick shift and the snowmobile started forward, skimming across the summer ice.

It is always winter at the North Pole. Even in July, the temperature never rises above freezing. Of course, in July, the sun never goes down, not even at midnight, but it is still far too cold to get a tan. That is why most Christmas elves head for warmer climates each summer. There is not much to do at the North Pole at that time of the year; with Christmas still five months off, Santa Claus has not even settled the naughty or nice list.

This year, the elves were off on a three-week London theatre tour. It was not Sam's first choice. He wanted to go to Maui or Tahiti or Fiji, or somewhere hot and sunny where there was nothing to do but lie on the beach all day with a pina colada and watch the pretty girls walk past. But Iggy and Yugo wanted to go to see the shows on the West End, and no amount of cajoling on Sam's part would convince them otherwise.

"It'll be fun Sam," said Iggy, though Sam knew that Iggy would find something fun about a tour of medieval torture chambers.²

"There are lots of great new shows," added Yugo.

"Yeah, I know," grumbled Sam, "lots of great new shows where the actors break into song every five minutes."

"Yeah," sighed Iggy. "Nothing like a musical."

That was how Sam found himself strapped into the back seat of Yugo's snowmobile, his helmet in place and both hands tightly gripping the arm rests, as it sped across the snow swept Arctic plain. This was no ordinary snowmobile. It did not even look much like a snowmobile. For example, the driver did not sit astride an open-air bench; he sat in a fully enclosed cockpit surrounded by control panels, gauges, digital displays and flashing lights. The passengers sat behind him in plush leather seats, each equipped with an array of modern conveniences, including their own surround sound system, individual temperature control and personal lumbar massage.

The snowmobile had a 50,000 horsepower engine, powered by a small nuclear reactor. This enabled it to achieve speeds in excess of the speed of sound, both on the ground and in the air. It could fly, it could float, and it could even travel underwater. For this reason, it was necessary that the passenger compartment be enclosed and watertight. And, now that Yugo had installed the space-time calibrator, it could even travel through time. Surely this was a snowmobile like no other in the world.

Yugo twisted a green dial on the control panel in front of him. Wings extended from each side of the snowmobile. He pressed a flashing red button and the twin rocket engines in the back of the snowmobile roared. Yugo eased back on a blue lever. The snowmobile

² This is a clever and subtle bit of foreshadowing. Well, clever anyway. I kind of gave up on subtlety when I included this footnote.

began rising into the air. "Next stop, London England!" Yugo shouted over the howl of the rocket engines.

"Hooray!" shouted Iggy. Sam just began poking through the pocket in the back of the seat in front of him, looking for an airsickness bag.

Three hours later, the elves found themselves in front of a small bed and breakfast near the Thames Embankment. They checked in, where they faced the usual questions they heard every time they traveled: "where are your parents?" "Wherever did you get those clothes?" "Aren't those felt caps just adorable?" "Nice ears, Mr. Spock". It was never easy being an elf.

For the next three days, the elves took in all of the sights, sounds, and occasionally odours that London had to offer. They saw Big Ben and Westminster Abbey. They saw London Bridge.³ They shopped at Harrods, Selfridges and the market at Covent Garden. They ate fish and chips off grease stained newspapers and drank Guinness out of grease tumblers. They saw the Old Bailey, the Mall and Buckingham Palace. They visited museums old and new.

And, they saw plays. Iggy and Yugo could not get enough of them. Plays with heroes, lost love and mistaken identities. Plays with singing. Always with singing. As far as Sam could see, English actors could not sneeze without a crowd gathering on stage to sing five or six verses about it. He mentioned it to the others as they walked out of the matinee of *The Happy Gigolo*.

"I don't understand what all the singing was about," said Sam."

"What do you mean, Sam?" asked Yugo.

"Yeah, it was a musical after all," said Iggy.

"I guess that's what I mean," said Sam. "I just don't get musicals. I mean, when the Happy Gigolo found out his own wife poisoned his brother, he started singing. It's just so completely phony."

"I think musicals are wonderful," said Iggy.

"It just doesn't make any sense," replied Sam. "Why sing about it? Why sing at all? No matter what happens to me, you never see me start singing about it spontaneously."

"I've seen you start screaming spontaneously," Yugo said.

Sam glared at him. "All I'm saying is, can't we go to something without the singing?"

"You liked the show we saw about bank robbers," said Yugo.

"You mean *Al Capone: The Musical*? Sure, but that had lots of gunfights and killing in it," said Sam. "I can put up with a little singing if there is some shooting going on."

³ Which Sam was comforted to see was NOT falling down.

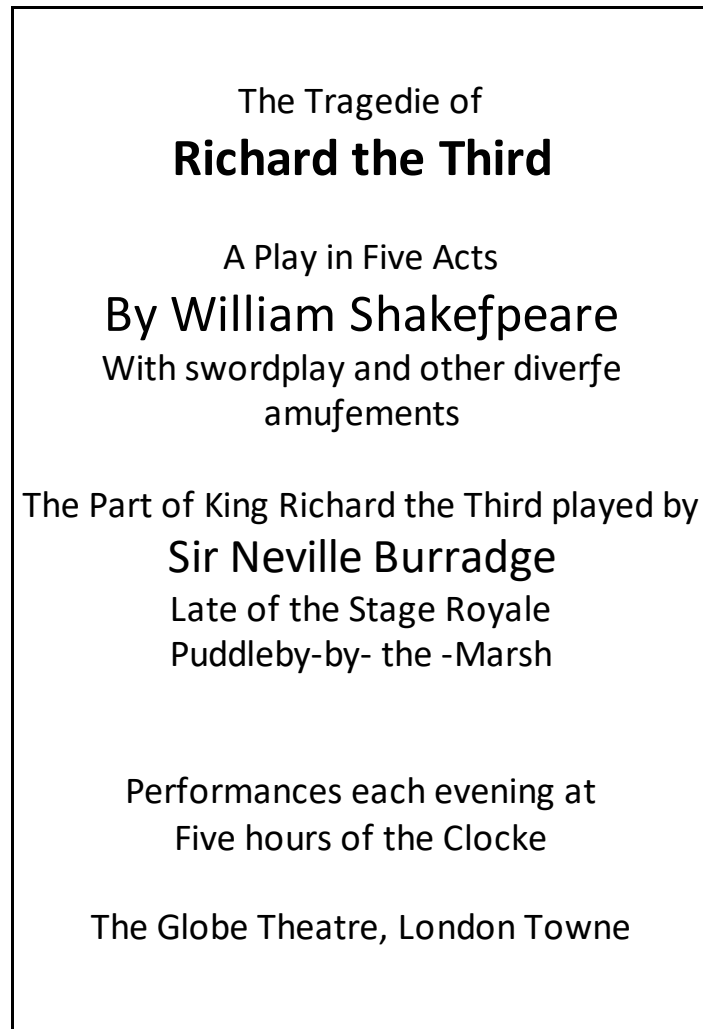
“How about some Shakespeare, then” suggested Yugo. “There’s never any singing in Shakespeare.”

“Oh, I love Shakespeare,” said Iggy. “He is only the greatest playwright in history,” he added knowingly to Sam.

“I don’t know,” said Sam. “There are an awful lot of forsooths in those plays.”

Yugo started digging through some papers in his thin black bag. “I have just the thing,” he said and pulled out an old tattered handbill. “I picked up a copy of this while we were at the museum yesterday.”

Sam took the paper from Yugo’s hands and lifted it to his eyes. It looked a lot like this:



Sam passed the playbill back to Yugo. “If he was such a great writer, why couldn’t he spell properly?”

Iggy took the playbill from Yugo. “Oh, Richard the Third! Sam, you’ll love it.”

“What makes you say so?” asked Sam, grabbing the playbill back from Iggy.

“It’s just terrific,” said Iggy. “It’s got all sorts of wonderful things in it. You see, Richard the Third is a real bad guy. He has this hunch back and goes around killing all these people. There’s swordfights and battles . . .”

Sam started nodding. “Sword fights, eh? Battles? Lots of people get killed? That all sounds pretty good,” he said slowly. “But,” and here Sam paused and looked each of Iggy and Yugo directly. “Is there any singing?”

“No,” said Iggy and Yugo together.

Sam looked at the playbill again. “Okay, if there’s sword fights and battles and . . .,” he looked again at Iggy and Yugo, “. . . no singing, I’ll go.”

“Great!” said Iggy. They had walked all the way from the theatre to the snowmobile. Yugo opened the passenger door and let each of Iggy and Sam inside.

“Better buckle up,” said Yugo. Not that Sam needed any reminding. He had already strapped on his helmet and fastened his safety belt. Yugo started to pull forward slowly.

“How long will it take to get to the theatre,” asked Iggy.

“About 400 years,” answered Yugo, he punched a blue button. Swirling purple lights suddenly surrounded the snowmobile. “That playbill is from 1593. We’re going to go see some real Shakespeare.”

“Great,” shouted Iggy as the snowmobile lurched sideways into the space-time vortex that now surrounded it and started slipping back through time.

“Nooooo!” shouted Sam. But his cry faded into history.

YEARS PASSED. THE SNOWMOBILE ROCKED FROM SIDE TO SIDE as it rolled back through the centuries. Iggy and Sam watched the dancing lights through the window as Yugo explained how his time machine worked. “You see,” he said, “when I initiate the time travel sequence, the time machine slips into the space-time vortex. That’s where we are now. It’s a place where there is no space and no time. It’s nowhere at all.”

“That doesn’t sound very safe,” said Sam.

“Oh, it’s perfectly safe. Every possible time and place is connected to the vortex. Once we enter the vortex, the space-time calibrator looks for the right place and the right time. Once it finds it, it pulls us out. It’s scanning for London in 1593 right now.” A green light blinked on the dashboard. “There we go, now it is just seeking out the correct year,” said Yugo as he stared at a digital readout on his monitor. A series of numbers flashed past. “Almost there,” said Yugo. He continued to stare at the numbers.

"Whoops," said Yugo. He stabbed a blue button on the dashboard. Nothing happened. "Uh oh."

"What was that?" gasped Sam. "Is there something wrong?"

"Nope," Yugo said through pursed lips. "Everything is just fine." He quickly typed a series of commands onto his dashboard keyboard and punched the blue button again, only much harder this time. The snowmobile quivered. "Almost got it," grunted Yugo. He reached under the dashboard and pulled out a bundle of wires. He worked a red wire loose and touched the end of it to a black wire beside it. With the two wires pinched between his left thumb and forefinger, he slammed his right fist onto the blue button. The dashboard emitted a friendly sounding "peep" and the swirling purple lights around the snowmobile faded into a sapphire blue sky. Yugo wiped his brow with the back of his leather driving glove. "Whew," he said. "That was close."

"What was close?" Sam asked.

"Nothing, we're here now," said Yugo, and he twisted a yellow dial. The passenger doors slid open on silent hydraulics.

"I just know something is wrong," grumbled Sam as he stepped out of the snowmobile. Iggy followed him, stood straight and took a deep breath.

"Wow, the air smells so clean," he said.

"Sure," said Yugo, who was climbing under the front of the snowmobile. "There are no cars here. This is what air smells like without them."

"It's great," said Iggy, drawing another deep breath.

Sam bent over and looked at Yugo. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Yeah, just what I thought," said Yugo. "The decadometer came loose."

"What is a decadometer?" asked Sam, knowing that any answer Yugo gave him would range somewhere between the extremes of disappointing and very, very disappointing.

Yugo crawled out with a broken piece of tubing in his hand. "The decadometer is the device that identifies the chosen time from inside the space-time vortex. Once it gets a fix on it, the calibrator pulls us out. I was worried about this, it keeps coming loose."

"So, what does that mean," asked Iggy, taking another deep gulp of the clear blue air.

"It means that we overshot our target time by a century or so," said Yugo.

"I'd ask why we don't just hop back in the snowmobile, start the engine and go to the right time," said Sam, "but I have a feeling that you're going to say we can't."

"We can't," said Yugo.

“And I also have a feeling you’re going to say that until you fix the decadometer, we can’t even go back home either,” Sam continued in a knowing fashion.

“Right,” answered Yugo, “until we get the decadometer working it’s too dangerous to attempt time travel. We could get lost in the vortex and never come out. Or if we did come out, we’d have no control over what time we arrived in.”

“So, with a little luck, we could arrive back home just after we left,” said Iggy.

“Or in the belly of a dinosaur,” said Sam, tapping his fingers on the side of the snowmobile.

“Right,” said Yugo. “It’s just too dangerous. But it’s a problem that’s easily solved. I just need some kind of a clamp to hold the decadometer in place. Should be a pretty easy fix.”

“But, you don’t have a clamp, do you,” said Sam.

“Not exactly,” answered Yugo.

Iggy pointed towards a white castle on the other side of the river. “I’ll bet we could get a clamp there,” he said.

Yugo and Sam turned towards the castle. “Might as well try,” said Yugo.

The three elves pushed the snowmobile behind some bushes and started walking toward the castle. “If nothing else,” said Sam, “at least they should have some food.”

As they walked across the stone bridge that led to the castle, Iggy asked, “so, if we’re not where we are supposed to be, “where are we? When are we?”

Yugo pulled a book out of his bag and flipped through it. “That’s the Tower of London,” he said. Then he looked at the large round watch on his wrist. “And, by my reckoning,” he added, “it’s about quarter past two in the afternoon of December 24th, 1483.”

“Hey, it’s almost Christmas!” cheered Iggy.

“You can tell all that just by looking at your watch?” asked Sam.

Yugo looked at him blankly. “Sure, can’t you?” he replied.

“Why do they call it the Tower of London,” asked Iggy. It doesn’t look like a tower at all, just a really big castle.”

“I don’t know,” answered Yugo. “I suppose it is because it is the biggest building of any kind around. Remember, they didn’t have skyscrapers or radio towers in these days.”

“So I guess phoning for help is out of the question then,” remarked Sam.

The three elves reached the end of the bridge and started up the cobblestone path towards the castle. Horse drawn carts passed them on their way to the castle, carrying crates and barrels and the occasional chicken.

“Must be gearing up for some kind Christmas feast,” said Yugo.

“I knew we would find some food here,” said Sam.

They reached the castle gate. They stood behind two carts while the biggest man any of the elves had ever seen questioned the drivers. He was a knight dressed in gleaming silver armour. An enormous broad sword hung from a battered leather scabbard on his belt. He waved the two carts past with a chain mailed hand. Iggy stepped forward and introduced himself. “Hello good sir,” he began. He assumed all knights were good and sirs. Sam did not share his confidence.

The knight glared down at the diminutive trio. “What manner of men are thee?” he barked.

Iggy pulled off his pointed velvet cap. “We are three travelers from the north,” he began, but the knight interrupted him.

“Ah, ye must be the jesters for the feast,” said a skinny man beside him. The skinny man wore a red tunic with matching hose and an enormous floppy black hat. Sam thought he looked like a complete pansy. In fact, Iggy thought so, too. The skinny man held a long narrow piece of parchment. He directed the big knight to the pointed hat in Iggy’s hand.

“Of course,” said the big knight in a voice so large it seemed to echo all by itself. “I noticed not thy comical caps and boots.” He bent low and pointed to a large building inside the castle walls. “Ye be late.” He pushed the three elves forward with the back of his thick forearm.

The skinny man made a mark on the parchment with a long feather quill and then placed it neatly behind his ear. He called after the elves, “make haste. The King awaits thee and he is not a man of patience.”

As Iggy, Yugo and Sam made their way across the expansive and snow dusted courtyard, the skinny man turned to the giant knight. “I just hope they are funnier than the King’s last jesters,” he sighed.

The big knight boomed with laughter. “If they be not, we shall bear witness to a fine beheading on the morrow.”

Iggy, Yugo and Sam tumbled inside. They found themselves in a large courtyard, which was surrounded by two thick stone walls. Within the courtyard were a variety of tall stone buildings, the largest of which was a great white brick keep at the center. “Well, we’re inside,” said Yugo. Now, let’s see if we can scare up the parts we need.”

“First, let’s see if we can scare up some lunch,” said Sam, falling into step behind one of the carts. Iggy and Yugo jogged to catch up with him. They followed the cart along a cobblestone track. Large ravens hopped alongside the road, pausing to stare at the elves as

they passed. As they approached the keep, they passed beside large steel cages where lions and bears paced from side to side.

The cart stopped in front of the white keep and three young boys ran out to unload it. Iggy, Yugo and Sam carried on into the building. It was filled with servants, cooks and waiters dashing in all directions. Three young serving boys walked past the elves carrying a large tray covered with three enormous hog's heads, each stuffed with spiced fruits and vegetables and glazed with honey. Sam started drooling in spite of himself and turned to follow them. Two pages pushed open a pair of thick carved wooden doors to let the serving boys pass. Iggy, Yugo and Sam followed them.

And found themselves in the middle of an enormous room. Stone walls covered in intricate tapestries rose several stories into the air. There was a banquet in progress, and hundreds of people sat feasting at long oak tables that lined the walls of the room. The three serving boys set their tray upon the largest of the tables before a smirking dark haired man. He wore an ermine trimmed robe and was seated on a large stone chair at the center of the table. He tore a strip from one of the hog's heads with his fork and dropped it on his plate. Then he pried a smaller chunk free and set it on the plate of the quiet fair-haired man beside him. Iggy noticed the dark haired man was wearing a simple gold crown on his head.

"You there," a voice shouted at the elves. Iggy, Yugo and Sam turned. An officious looking steward directed them to a bench near the fireplace. "You jesters, be seated there. Ye be next."

"Excuse me?" asked Iggy.

"Just sit thee down," barked the steward. "As soon as the harpist be done, it be thy turn. Saints bless thee if ye fail to amuse the King this day," he muttered.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam sat down on the hard wooden bench. Sam had never been particularly enthusiastic about classical music, but now he wished the harpist would never finish her set. "What are we going to do?" he whispered frantically to Iggy.

"Oh, I'm sure we'll think of something," answered Iggy. "Yugo, do you remember how to juggle?"

"Oh, sure," said Yugo, digging into his bag. "I even brought these." He pulled out four gold coloured rubber balls. He set the balls down beside him on the bench and reached back into his bag. He pulled out a dog-eared paper back book. "Now let's see if we can figure out who some of these people are."

As Yugo leafed through his book, Sam read the cover: *Selected Portraits of British Royalty and Retainers* by Sir Nigel Clogsbottom-Jones. "Here we are," he said, pointing to one of the portraits reproduced in the glossy pages of his book. "The guy in the big chair is Richard the Third. He's the King of England right now."

"You mean the real Richard the Third? Not some actor in a play?" asked Iggy.

"The one and only," said Yugo.

“Cool,” said Iggy delightedly. “This is even better than going to see the play, we’ve arrived in time to see the real thing.”

Sam sighed. Yugo flipped a couple of more pages. “Look, the fellow next to him is Henry Tudor,” he said. “In a couple of years, he’s going to be King Henry the Seventh.” As Yugo spoke, serving wenches laid out the next dish before the King and his companion: barbecued hedgehog, four to a stick, seasoned with parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. It was accompanied by mashed parsnips and raspberries and a stew of diced beaver and bear snouts.

“This is some serious feasting,” said Sam with approval.

“I expect Kings eat pretty well all the time,” said Iggy, “But it is Christmas Eve, after all, so I imagine the feasting is a little better than usual.”

“I just want to know when the jesters get served,” said Sam.

Just then the King rose to greet two more men who had just entered the room. The first was the big knight who had stopped the elves at the entrance to the castle. The huge man knelt and kissed the King’s ring. Then he rose and the King clapped him on the shoulder. “Hail and well met, Sir James,” he said.

Yugo flipped back through his book. “That’s James Tyrell,” he said when he found a painting of the huge knight.

I suppose he’s going to be King James the Twenty Second in a couple of years,” said Sam, his stomach growling as a tray of bluebird tarts was carried past him.

“Nope, just one of King Richard’s henchmen,” said Yugo. “And here’s another one. That’s the Duke of Buckingham,” he said, pointing to another painting as the tall skinny man from the castle gate greeted the King and sat down at his table. “He’s related to the king somehow.”

Just then, the harpist finished her piece. She stood and curtsied in the direction of the King’s table. King Richard led the assembled guests in a long round of applause. She made her exit gracefully as the Duke of Buckingham stood and read from his parchment.

“Now, my Liege, I present thee three fools from the North. They come well recommended by the Earl of Durkenwurst, so I am most certain you will find them pleasing.”

“They had best be,” spat King Richard and beckoned Iggy, Yugo and Sam to step forward.

“Isn’t this great,” grinned Iggy. “Real theatre in the Court of Richard the Third. Nobody back home is going to believe this.”

“I came on this trip to watch theatre, not to be it,” whispered Sam. “What are we going to do?”

"Just follow my lead," said Iggy. "Yugo, you start juggling." Yugo nodded and began tossing his golden balls into the air. As the balls danced in his hands, servants presented the next course to the king: battered wings of heron sprinkled with blackened pumpkin seeds, and glazed with oranges and onions. Bowls of puffy white rolls dripping with almond jam were laid on the table. Serving wenches filled each cup from flagons of spiced yak's milk and mead.

Iggy coughed and said in a loud voice, "good evening one and all. I am Iggy. Iggy of the, uh, of the North country. My colleagues, Yugo and Sam," he gestured to each of his two companions, "have some marvelous, ah, amusements for you today. But first, does anybody know what the choir sang at the funeral of the Knight who was stabbed to death last Christmas?"

The King and his guests looked at each other awkwardly. Iggy nudged Sam hard with his elbow. Sam jumped started to rub his ribs tenderly. "Ow, why did you do that?" he hissed. Iggy gestured to him to start talking.

"Uh, no, Iggy," Sam stammered, "um, so what did the choir sing last Christmas at the funeral of the Knight who was stabbed to death?"

"Silent Knight, Holy Knight!" Iggy started laughing uncontrollably. He raised his hands to utter silence. "That's okay, hold your applause, I've got a million of them," he said.

The court mumbled uncomfortably, but Iggy continued, undaunted. He told an off colour anecdote about a Duke, an Earl and the Countess of Middlesex and followed this with an even more vulgar piece involving a traveling wares merchant and a pig farmer's daughter. Henry Tudor turned to the King. "Methinks thy court clowns have little mirth and wit even less," he remarked as he dipped his jellied raven's egg into a dish of apple and asparagus chutney.

"Ye shall laugh this night, or I shall have their heads on a spike tomorrow, good cousin," sneered Richard. Henry Tudor chuckled and filled Richard's goblet with a generous draught of mulled wine.

Henry raised his goblet. "To Christmas and to your very good health, cousin," he said. Richard the Third lifted his own goblet, but he did not drink from it. Perhaps he suspected it was poisoned. If he did, he was right. He just smiled fiercely and concentrated on the three elves.

"You're going to love this one, your majesty," Iggy shouted enthusiastically. "What do have when you set the Mother Superior's habit on fire?"

"I don't know, Mr. Iggy," said Sam brightly, as Yugo started flipping the balls behind his back. "What do have when you set the Mother Superior's habit on fire?"

“A hot cross nun!” Iggy yelled with a loud chortle. Turning to Sam, he whispered, “I’m on fire, Sammy boy; get me to a punnery!”⁴ Even Yugo winced at that one, but he kept the four balls looping through the air, nonetheless.

As Iggy continued to stumble through his repertoire of royal punch lines, each of which was greeted with increasing degrees of hostility and discomfort, a tray of boiled lemmings brazed with mangos and topped with a red wine and blackberry gravy was laid before the guests. The Duke of Buckingham passed a small saltshaker to the King. The King nodded his thanks to the Duke, but wisely seasoned his dish with a pinch of salt of his own.

Iggy carried on, unabashed. “Knock knock,” he said. He nudged Sam.

“Uh, who’s there?” said Sam.

“Duke,” said Iggy.

“Duke who?” continued Sam.

“I said ‘Duke!’” shouted Iggy, scooping up a handful of pomegranate and raisin trifle from a nearby table and throwing it at Sam’s face.

Sam wiped away a blob of clotted cream from his eyes. “That wasn’t very funny, Iggy,” he said, but for the first time the crowd made some gentle murmurs of approval.

“Enough!” bellowed King Richard. He set his peppered ostrich wing on his plate and stood up. “These jesters amuse me not!” he cried. “Tyrell, take them away!” The great knight rose from his seat beside the King and thundered towards the three elves. He grabbed the elves in his massive arms and pulled them towards the doors. Yugo’s juggling balls bounced and scattered across the floor.

“Wait!” shouted Sam. “Aren’t you even going to give us supper?”

“Begone foul mummers!” shouted King Richard the Third, “and blacken this Christmas no more!”

SO IT WAS, ON CHRISTMAS EVE, 1483 that Iggy, Yugo and Sam found themselves in a dark and dingy chamber at the bottom of one of the castle towers. Iggy sat on a bench, rubbing his elbow. Sir James had not been gentle when he threw them into their cell. Sam touched a raw patch on his cheek tenderly. “This is just great,” he complained. “I’m going to be shot in the morning. What a way to spend Christmas.”

“Not to worry, Sam,” said Yugo. “The rifle hasn’t been invented yet. You definitely won’t be facing that in the morning. More likely we’ll just be beheaded, then our heads will

⁴ I’m really sorry about that. I was not going to include it, but I could not stop myself. Perhaps it is I who should be sent to the punnery.

be stuck on spikes at the castle gates. Then the rest of us will be drawn and quartered. That was really the preferred way of doing things back then. Back now, I mean.”

“Oh, that makes me feel a lot better, thank you,” replied Sam sarcastically. They were in a large round room filled with implements of torture. There were pinchers and pokers, prodders and peelers and an array of other things so nasty that Sam shuddered just looking at them.

Iggy lay down on a table at the center of the room. It was a well-oiled rack with shackles on each end, attached to a large wooden crank. It was designed to pull a man’s arms and legs and leave him either dead, or a little bit longer. “Hey, do either of you guys know how to work this thing?” he asked. “A guy my height could always stand to be a little bit taller.”⁵

Yugo rummaged around the chamber, picking up odd and twisted metal objects. He looked at each intently and then either discarded it or dropped it into his bag. “Eureka!” he shouted, holding up a black iron thing. “This is just what we’re looking for!”

“What is it?” asked Iggy.

Yugo turned it over in his hand. “It’s a thumb screw, I think,” he said. “But it will be perfect for clamping the decadometer back to the space-time calibrator. Once I hook this up, we’ll be on our way home.”

“Great,” said Iggy.

Sam coughed. He pointed at the thick wooden door to the chamber. “What about that?” he asked. Sam looked through the tiny window set in the door. Sir James stared back with his big buggy eyes. “He’s still there.”

Yugo just waved his hand in the air. “Oh, don’t worry about that,” he said. “I’m working on a plan.”

“Well, while you work on that, why don’t you work on a plan to get us some food. I’m starving,” said Sam.

Iggy lifted a tin dish from the floor. “There’s lots of dried bread crusts here,” he said. “They’re not too bad if you dip them in this gravy.” He held up a battered metal cup.

Sam curled his lip in disgust. “That’s the drinking water, Iggy,” he said.

Iggy looked again at the lumpy rusty liquid that sloshed in his cup. He dipped his bread crust in it again and took another bite. “Still, it’s not bad,” he said.

Sam paced around the room. “Enjoy your bread crusts, Iggy,” he sighed. “And keep working on that escape plan, Yugo,” he yawned. “I’m going to try and get some sleep. It wouldn’t do at all to have baggy eyes before my hanging.”

⁵ I told you he would act like that, remember?

“Beheading, you mean,” said Yugo.

“Whatever,” replied Sam. He wandered over to a corner of the room where he laid down beside a small cage with spikes poking up from the bottom and a set of very rusty iron nose clamps, carefully arranged in a rack from smallest to largest. He curled up in a small ball (he was, after all, a small person) and soon fell asleep.

SAM AWOKE SOME TIME LATER WITH A pain in his neck. He sat up and realized he had rolled on top of a polished pewter fingernail puller. He pushed the torture device aside and tried to get back to sleep, but somehow, imprisoned in a medieval dungeon awaiting execution, he found that sleep would not come. Both Iggy and Yugo snored softly on the other side of the room.

As Sam struggled to find a comfortable position, his hand pressed against a large discoloured brick on the wall. It slid aside with a soft scraping noise, revealing a dark and narrow passage. Sam got up onto his hands and knees and peered into the hole. He could not make out where it led. He leaned a little further, then lost his balance and fell through the gap. The brick doorway slid back into place behind him.

Sam found himself in a dark tunnel. He pounded his fist on the door behind him, but it remained as solid and immovable as, well, a solid and immovable brick door. He sat back against the wall and crossed his arms. As he did so, he leaned against another brick (which he would have seen was equally discoloured, if only he could see in the dark) and the door slid silently open again.

Sam was about to call out to the others that he had found a way out, but then he stopped. “What if,” he thought, “the passage led to a dead end?” They would only be angry with him for waking them if it did. “More important,” he thought, “what if the passage led to food? And what if there was not enough there for all of them?” No, all things considered, it would be best if he investigated the tunnel alone. If he did find a way out, he could always come back for the others.

He crawled a short ways, then the passageway became a little wider and taller. Soon, he was able to walk comfortably. He reached a narrow stairway that wound upwards. “This does not look like a way out,” he thought to himself, “but maybe it will lead to the kitchen. Those peacock drumsticks looked really good.” He decided to climb the stairs. They spiraled upwards for several circuits before abruptly reaching a dead end.

Now, by this time, Sam had developed an understanding of the workings of secret passages. If he could just find a discoloured brick nearby, there was bound to be a secret door. Sam set about pressing and pushing every brick in the hallway. Nothing happened. He repeated the exercise, assuming he had missed the trigger somehow, but again, no entrance appeared.

Sam stomped his foot on the ground in frustration. His left foot struck a discoloured brick. There was a soft scraping noise, and a section of the wall to his right slid aside. “Piece

of cake," Sam thought, but that just reminded him of how hungry he was. He stepped through the opening.

He was in an elegantly appointed room. Everywhere he looked he saw finely carved furniture, exquisite tapestries and thick, hand woven carpets. Mounted heads of deer, elk and boar adorned the walls. In the center of the room, two boys were playing jacks. By their appearance, Sam guessed they were probably brothers. There was no one else there.

"Hey fellas," said Sam, stepping forward to greet them. "How's it going?"

The boys jumped to their feet, startled. The taller boy, who Sam guessed might be about twelve years old, placed a protective hand on the younger boy's shoulder and stepped forward. He looked curiously at Sam. "What manner of imp art thou?" he asked.

Sam removed his cap. "Pardon me," he said. "I'm from, uh, the North country. My name is Sam." He extended his hand.

The two boys looked at him. The taller of the two took Sam's hand in his and shook it firmly. "I am Edward," he said. "And this is my brother Richard."

"Pleased to meet you," said Sam. "I'm sorry to barge in on you like this, but I really don't know my way around and I seem to be, um, lost. Would either of you know the way out, or perhaps, the way to the kitchens?"

Edward shook his head. "I fear not, Sam the imp," he said. "My brother and I have been sequestered in this chamber for these past months. The door is ever kept locked and closely guarded. There is no egress here."

Sam nodded. "No way out, eh?" he commented. "And as for food . . ."

"Oh, ye are welcome to share in our repast," said Edward, motioning Sam towards a table spread with cold meat, thick rolls of bread and jugs of mulled wine. Sam wiped a thin trail of drool from the corner of his mouth. "Don't mind if I do," he said, as he began shoveling strips of cured venison into his mouth. "This is terrific," he said.

"Yes," said Richard. "The meals are always fine. But it would be ever so grand to go out of a morn again."

"Love to help you," said Sam, chewing greedily on a baked boar cutlet. He filled his pockets with bread, meat and cheese and backed slowly towards the secret tunnel from which he had come. "But I have no idea how to get out either. If I figure it out, I'll be sure to give you a call. See ya now." And, with that, Sam slipped back into the tunnel.

"Curious little man," said Richard.

"Big appetite, for one so slight," said Edward, surveying what little was left of their breakfast. "Mayhaps it be the pointed ears."

IGGY AND YUGO WERE JUST WAKING UP WHEN SAM slipped back into the dungeon. "Where have you been?" asked Yugo.

"Oh, here and there," answered Sam.

"Good news," said Iggy. "Sir James brought us some fresh bread crusts." He offered a stiff brown rind of pumpernickel to Sam.

Sam waved him off. "No thanks," he said. He pulled a large drumstick from his pocket. "I think I'll just nibble on this."

Iggy and Yugo stared at Sam, open mouthed. "Where did you get that?" asked Yugo.

"I found a secret passage," Sam said between bites.

"You found a way out?" asked Iggy.

"Nope," said Sam, "the tunnel just leads to another room where they've locked up a couple of kids. I gotta tell you, their place puts ours to shame, and the food is way better." He dug into his pocket and passed a large fresh roll to each of Iggy and Yugo.

Iggy bit into his, but Yugo just looked thoughtfully at Sam. "What were the names of these kids?" he asked slowly.

"Eddie and Dick, I think," said Sam. "Here, try some of these, they're terrific," he added, passing each of them a spiced osprey wing.

Yugo pulled out his portrait book and flipped through it. He opened the book to a page with a painting of two boys on it and held it out to Sam. "Is this them?" he asked.

Sam nodded. "Yup, that's them. Nice kids. Talk kind of funny, though."

Yugo turned through the pages of his book. "Oh dear, oh dear," he said. "It can't be."

"Who are they, Yugo?" asked Iggy.

"They are Edward and Richard, the two nephews of King Richard," replied Yugo. "The Princes in the Tower."

"The Princes in the great big room with the all you can eat buffet, is more like it," said Sam.

"You don't understand Sam," said Yugo, "according to history, those two boys were imprisoned in the tower of London and murdered there."

Sam spat out a mouthful of marinated duck breast. "What?" he cried.

Yugo started pacing around the room. "Didn't you learn any history in school?" he asked.

"The only thing I remember from history class, was that my desk was right beside Shelly Migwak," answered Sam with a dreamy look in his eyes.

"I remember Shelly," said Iggy. "She always smelled really nice."

"As I was saying," continued Yugo, "the two boys are Edward the fifth, the King of England and his brother Richard, the Duke of York."

"Wait a minute," said Iggy, "I thought Richard the Third was the king. He sure seemed to act like it at dinner last night."

"Edward's father, Edward the Fourth, died earlier this year and Edward became King," explained Yugo. "Because Edward was still a boy, his Uncle Richard was put in charge until Edward would be old enough to run the kingdom on his own. But instead of running the kingdom for his nephew, Richard imprisoned him and his brother in the Tower of London and claimed the crown for himself."

"That's a pretty rotten trick," said Iggy.

"Oh, it's pretty much par for the course. The usual way somebody became king in this time was to kill the king and claim the throne for yourself. Edward's father, Edward the Fourth did it by killing Henry the Sixth, and his grandfather, Henry the Fourth, did it by killing Edward the Fourth's great grandfather, Richard the Second. Richard the Third is just continuing with a family tradition."

Sam interrupted at this point. "Why are all of these people named Edward, Richard or Henry?"

"They are not," said Yugo

"Oh yeah, then what's the Duke of Buckingham's name then?" asked Sam.

Yugo leafed through the index of his book. "Um, Henry," he said quietly.

"See, I told you so," said Sam. "It makes it awfully hard to keep track of them."

"Maybe that's why you spent so much time thinking about Shelly Migwak in history class," offered Iggy.

"Would you two pay attention?" asked Yugo impatiently. "The point is that not many people are happy with the way that Richard stole the kingdom from his own nephew. Some of them, like Henry Tudor and the Duke of Buckingham think they have as good a claim to be the king as Richard does."

"But as long as Edward the Fifth, the real king is alive, none of them has a good claim," said Iggy, finishing Yugo's thought.

"Right," said Yugo. "If any of them are going to claim the throne or keep it, they have to get rid of those two boys."

"We can't let that happen," said Iggy.

"Just what do you propose to do about it?" asked Sam. "They're locked up upstairs. We're locked up downstairs. And, we're due to be hung in an hour or two."

"Beheaded, most likely," interrupted Yugo. "But Iggy's right, we have to do something. And I think I have a plan." He motioned to the others to come closer. They huddled together while Yugo whispered to them quickly.

BELLS RANG IN THE CHURCH TOWERS WELCOMING Christmas morning. Peasants and nobles alike filled the snow swept streets of London. Some were going to church, some were going to meet family and friends, but most were crowding into the town square. After all, what would Christmas be without an execution in the morning?

Iggy, Yugo and Sam had spent the last twenty minutes in Edward and Richard's cell, trying to persuade the two boys to come down the passage with them.

"You have to come," pleaded Iggy. "They're going to kill you!"

Edward smiled and shook his head. "You are kind imps, fine and fair, but thy worries are for naught, for I am heir of England and shall be king one day."

"That's the problem," hissed Sam. "None of these other guys want that to happen. Why do you think you've been locked up here all these months? The king is just waiting for a chance to finish you off."

"It could even happen today," continued Yugo. "After all, there's a lot going on today, what with Christmas and our execution and all."

Edward just smiled regally. "Look, if you don't believe us, why not just come with us. If we play our cards right, you might even get a chance to see the execution," said Iggy. Yugo and Sam glared at him.

"Oh, that sounds grand indeed," said Prince Richard. "Let us join them, Edward. It would be fair of a Christmas morn to see the sun anon."

Edward nodded. "If it would suit thee, dear brother, we can go. But let us make haste, lest the Constable of the Tower make unkind note of our departure."

"I swear I can't understand a thing these kids say," muttered Sam.

So it was, that as the bells rang and the crowds gathered, that Iggy, Yugo Sam and two princes emerged from Sam's secret passage and into the dungeon. "All right, everyone take your places," whispered Yugo, "they should be here any moment."

As they scrambled into position, they heard a booming knock at the chamber door. It swung open quickly and Sir James Tyrell crouched through it. "Ho ho ho jesters," he

thundered. "Merry Christmas! I hope thou hast made thy peace with thy Northern gods, for thou shalt be meeting them ere this day be past."

"Now Iggy," whispered Yugo, and Iggy jumped out from behind an iron maiden, twirling a length of chain above his head. Iggy hurled the end of chain towards Sir James.

Sir James laughed, his enormous belly rocking up and down. "What folly be this?" Unfortunately for Sir James, he had not noticed the hammer Iggy had tied at the end of the chain. It struck him full in the face, spinning him around.

"Shades and demons!" shouted Sir James, an ugly purple bruise swelling above his right eye. Then, Sam was upon him with one of the rusted nose pinchers (size extra large) in his right hand. He clamped it over the big knight's nose and pulled. "Zounds!" screamed Sir James, but Sam would not let go. Then Yugo stepped behind him and jabbed him in the back with the butt end of a flail. Sir James stumbled forward and fell upon the rack. Iggy ran to the rack and closed one of the shackles about Sir James' left wrist. Yugo locked the knight's ankle into place and gave the crank a spin. Sir James howled. Sam just held onto the nose clamp.

"You can let go of that now," said Yugo.

"Come on Sam," said Iggy. "It's time to get out of here."

Sam turned the clamp one last time and then released his grip on Sir James' nose. "I'm coming." He turned back to the two princes. "Eddie, Dick, let's go." They stared at Sam. "Let us make haste," he said, and the two boys nodded and followed the elves out of the dungeon.

They dashed down a narrow hall, up a short flight of steps and through another hall. They turned left, then right, right again and then down a few steps. They reached an intersection, where the hall led to both their left and their right.

"Now what?" said Sam.

"This way," said Edward, stepping to the front of pack. "My brother and I oft played in these halls as lads." The elves followed as he led them through a maze of right and left turns, then up a few more steps, through an archway and into the castle courtyard.

"We made it!" shouted Iggy. "We're free!"

"Uh, Ig," said Sam, tapping his friend's shoulder, "I don't want you to get your hopes up too high." He pointed to their left, where the Duke of Buckingham approached, with a small cadre of knights. The elves stepped back into the doorway.

They could hear the Duke speaking to one of the knights beside him. "The Tower shall be unguarded this morn. It is nigh time we deal with Edward's brats."

In the doorway, Edward and Richard looked at each other. "Friend Sam was right, Edward. They do mean us harm," said Richard.

“Told you,” whispered Sam. Turning to Yugo he asked, “Now what?”

“Not to worry,” said Yugo. “I have a plan.” He reached into his bag and pulled out a heavy black metal disc. Two wires ran from the disc to a hand held switch. Yugo set the disc down in the middle of the archway and gestured to the others to stand back. As the Duke and his men turned into the entrance, Yugo pressed the switch in his hand. The disc emitted a loud buzz. The Duke of Buckingham’s metal boot slid towards the disc and stuck up against it.

“What manner of wizard’s trick be this?” asked the Duke, and he bent over to examine the disc and pull his boot free. As he leaned forward, three knights tumbled on top of him. The others rushed to the Duke’s aid but as soon as they laid their metal gloves on the armour of their fellows, they stuck in place. The more they pulled and twisted, the harder they fixed themselves into place.

As the knights struggled vainly to get free, Yugo set the switch on the ground and rubbed his hands together. “Portable electromagnet,” he said. “Never leave home without one.”

“Let me get this straight,” said Sam. “You brought one suitcase on this trip, in which you packed an old playbill, a book of medieval portraits, four juggling balls, and a portable electromagnet.”

“Yeah,” agreed Yugo.

Sam continued, “and you didn’t think to pack any tools in there?”

“I’m not sure we have time for this,” said Iggy. “Let’s get going.” They stepped around the heap of squirming knights and into the courtyard. Horse drawn carts still rumbled along the cobblestone trail. The caged lions and bears stared disinterestedly at the elves as they passed.

“What’s the deal with the cages?” asked Sam.

“This is the menagerie,” answered Edward. “English kings have kept these beasts here for a hundred years past. There is nothing else like it in all the world.”

Iggy, Yugo and Sam paused in front of a cage where a white-coated tiger paced back and forth. Iggy turned to ask where the white tiger was from and noticed that Richard was missing. He looked around quickly, and then spotted the boy about fifty feet away, standing before a fence with ribbons and streamers hanging from it. On the other side of the fence, a group of knights took turns pairing off and charging at each other on horseback, lances lowered. At the back of the jousting grounds, Henry Tudor sat astride a great white stallion, his own lance at his side.

Richard waved a scarf at a knight as he rumbled past. He was a slight man, even fully armoured, and charged down the field towards a much larger opponent dressed in black plate mail with a red plume in his helmet. He raised his lance, but it glanced off the shield of the smaller knight, who then flicked his lance upward and struck the black knight

full in the chest. There was a clash of metal and the big fellow tumbled from his horse onto the dusty field. "Oh well met!" shouted Richard.

Henry Tudor was applauding the combatants when he heard Richard's cheer. He looked up and as his eyes met Richard's, a look of recognition stole across his face. "It's those boys!" he shouted. He called four other knights to his side. He gave a few commands and the five of them turned and rode towards Richard and the others.

"They're coming this way," called Richard, waving his scarf. The knights lowered their lances, each one trained on the heart of one of the five spectators.

"Oh, this does not look good," said Sam.

"It's okay," said Yugo. "I have a plan"

"This time, I'm using my own plan," said Sam. "Run away!" he shouted. Iggy and Yugo had seen Sam run from trouble before, but Edward was astonished at how quickly he could turn, kneel down into a sprinter's position and dash away across the courtyard.

Iggy turned to Yugo. "So, what's your plan?"

"Actually," answered Yugo, "it is pretty much the same as Sam's. Run away!!" The two elves ran after Sam, with Edward and Richard following closely. The five knights chewed up the ground behind them on their big horses. The gap between them closed quickly. The knights would be upon them in a matter of moments.

Sam reached the cage with the white tiger first. He started frantically trying to climb up the bars. Yugo arrived at the cage next, but rather than scale it, he flipped open the latch. He pulled Iggy and the two princes to his side as he swung open the door.

The white tiger sprung from the cage directly into the path of the five charging knights. "Charge!" yelled Henry Tudor, but their horses would have none of it. They all skidded to a stop on the slippery grass. The tiger bounded forward, baring his vicious yellow teeth and growling a challenge. The five knights turned their mounts and galloped away, the tiger in close pursuit.

Yugo pushed the door closed. He looked up to where Sam was shinnying up a decorative flagpole at the top of the cage. "It's okay, Sam," he called. "You can come down now."

Sam looked down. He smiled sheepishly and slid down the bars. "I was, uh, just scouting out our escape route," he mumbled.

The others looked at him coldly. "It's this way," Sam pointed, and led the other four down the cobblestone trail.

"Uh oh," said Iggy. "Look who's coming now." He pointed to the castle gate, scarcely twenty yards away, where King Richard and an entourage of squires and nobles had just stepped into the courtyard and strolled towards them.

"We better get out of here before the king sees us," said Iggy. But it was too late, for beside him, young Prince Richard was waving and shouting.

"Uncle Richard!" he called.

"Dick, don't you know when to clam up?" grunted Sam.

The King looked over at the elves and their companions. A dark grin spread across his face. "Why nephew," he said, in a voice as sweet as vinegar, "what art thou doing about the castle grounds of a Christmas morning?"

"Oh, uncle" answered Prince Richard, "it is ever so wonderful. Edward, our new friends and I hast had such a splendid time. We've seen the jousting and the . . ."

The King interrupted him, "hast thou really?" Then, he turned to the elves, "Methinks that I ordered thy executions this evening past."

"I'm sure that wasn't us," interjected Sam. "I think I would have remembered that. Do you remember any execution orders, Iggy?"

Iggy rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "No, no. I can't say that I do," he answered.

"Enough!" screamed King Richard. "I hast already heard more of your japes than I canst stomach. Squire, strike off their heads."

A black robed man with a large axe stepped forward. "All of them, sire?" he asked.

"Indeed," commanded King Richard. "Do it now." He pursed his lips and pressed his fingers together as the Squire raised his axe.

"What's your plan this time," Sam whispered to Yugo.

Yugo shrugged. "I've got nothing," he answered.

The big axe whipped through the air. Had Iggy been a taller man, he would have suddenly become shorter by a head or so. As it was, he only had to duck a little ways for the axe to pass harmlessly over his head. "I really think we should be going," he said to the others. He took a step or two back as the squire raised his axe for a second, and what would surely be a lower, blow. He stumbled against a trade cart as it rattled slowly towards the castle gate. He pulled himself up onto the cart. "Come on," he called to the others.

"Stop him!" screamed King Richard. Yugo, Sam and the two princes dashed after Iggy and followed him up into the back of the cart. The cart driver seemed completely oblivious to the five passengers he had suddenly acquired.

"Giddy up!" shouted Sam, but the cart continued forward at a gentle pace. King Richard walked alongside them.

"'Tis scarcely as fast as a man can walk," he chuckled. "Didst thou truly expect to escape from me thusly?" As he spoke, Yugo was once again rummaging in his thin black bag.

He pulled out a slingshot and slipped a small stone into the pocket. King Richard laughed again. "A pea, jester? Wouldst thou suppose I would flee from a pea?"

"It's not for you, your highness," said Yugo. He stood up, aimed the slingshot quickly and fired. The stone struck the horse pulling the cart full on the backside. It gave a snort and bolted forward. The elves and the two princes tumbled to the back of the cart but managed to hang on.

King Richard started to run after the cart, but it pulled away from him too quickly. "Halt!" he growled. "Somebody stop them!" He spun around and shouted at his retainers. "A horse! Somebody get me a horse! My kingdom for a horse!" But it was too late. The cart had already rolled out of the castle. By the time the driver could rein in his horse, his five stowaways had slipped out of the cart and disappeared into the bushes alongside the road. IT WAS A FAMILIAR SCENE. Iggy and Sam sat on a log beside the snowmobile. Yugo's pointy-toed boots extended from beneath it. They heard grunting and a few metallic bangs and then Yugo slid out. "That ought to do it," he said, standing up and dusting off his leotards.

"So we can go home?" asked Iggy.

"Good as new," said Yugo. "I even made a couple of modifications while I was under there. Let's get going."

"Terrific," grumbled Sam. He nodded towards the two princes who were running in and out of the woods. "What are we going to do with those two?" he asked.

"We can't leave them here," said Iggy. "Everybody wants to kill them."

Yugo was about to suggest he had a plan, when he was interrupted by the sound of a very large horse stepping out of the bushes. Upon the horse was a very large, and very angry knight. Sir James Tyrell slipped out of his saddle and unsheathed his great sword. "Well, what hath we here?" he mused aloud. "Three condemned fools and two unwanted princes." He swung his sword through the air. It buzzed like a hive of angry wasps. "King Richard shall see me a Lord for this."

He reached forward and slapped Sam with his heavy steel gauntlet. The elf somersaulted backwards and rolled stiffly into a stump. Sir James wheeled and struck Iggy with the end of his sword, sending the elf reeling on top of Sam.

He turned to Yugo. "Ye be the sneaky one," he said. He flicked his sword and cut Yugo's bag from his shoulder. He kicked it into the woods. "Let's see how ye fare without thy bag of sorcerer's tricks," he said, as he tossed his sword from hand to hand. Yugo feinted left, but Sir James was far too quick. He struck Yugo in the jaw with an armoured elbow and sent him tumbling on top of Iggy and Sam.

"That leaves but two," said Sir James and he cast about to find the princes. He did not need to look for long as Edward stepped out of the woods, a short sword in his hand.

"Thou hast defeated three unarmed men, blackguard," said Edward. "How wilt thou fare against my steel?"

Sir James smiled and charged forward, his great sword buzzing through the air. It struck Edward's short sword with a shower of sparks, but the young prince parried it neatly. Then he swung his own sword at the big knight, who blocked his thrust. The battle was joined. Back and forth they went, their swords ringing with each stroke.

The clanging melody of the swords brought Iggy, Yugo and Sam slowly back to consciousness. They watched from the stump, transfixed as the two swordsmen moved back and forth in a deadly ballet.

"Where did he get that sword?" asked Iggy.

"Must have found it in my bag," said Yugo. "I put some weapons I found in the dungeon there. Thought they would make good souvenirs."

"No doubt about it," said Sam, "the kid's good."

The kid was good, and so he should be, for he had been trained by some of the finest swordsmen in Europe from the time he could scarcely walk. But as good as Edward was, he was still just a boy battling a grown man. Sir James coupled his own prodigious skill with a sword with brute strength. With each stroke he wore the boy down. His sword slammed down again and again, and though Edward deflected each blow, Sir James drove him back relentlessly towards the snowmobile. Edward stumbled over one of the front skis of the snowmobile as he sidestepped Sir James. The big knight pressed his sudden advantage. With a bold swing, he struck the sword from Edward's hand.

"Wouldst thou not beg me for mercy now, young prince," panted Sir James.

"I shall not," grimaced Edward falling to one knee.

"Good. I'd not have granted it." Sir James raised his sword for the killing blow.

"I can't look," said Sam, covering his eyes. There was a meaty slapping sound and the ground shook with a heavy thud.

Sam opened his eyes in horror. To his surprise, it was Sir James who lay on the ground, his tongue hanging from his mouth like a dead fish. Prince Richard stood behind him with a morningstar⁶ swinging gently back and forth in his hand.

"Twas a cowardly deed, to strike a man from behind," said Richard. "But I daresay 'twas a deed I would do again in a nonce."

"Well done, Dick," shouted Sam, jumping up to embrace the boy. Iggy helped Edward to his feet, while Yugo climbed behind the wheel of the snowmobile.

"I really think it's time we got going," he said. Iggy and Sam crawled in behind him.

"Well, aren't you coming?" Iggy asked Edward.

⁶ A morningstar is one of those metal balls with spikes on it that hangs from the end of a chain. I suppose they call it a morningstar because once you have been hit with one, all you can see are stars.

"Yes, I suppose we shall," he said. "There is aught for us here." The two princes climbed into the rumble seat.

"What are we going to do with them?" asked Sam.

"Don't worry," answered Yugo. "I have a plan." He punched the flashing blue button. The space-time vortex swirled around them and they left history behind.

THE SNOWMOBILE APPEARED IN A FLASH OF amber light on a July afternoon in London. Yugo flipped a red toggle switch and engaged the rear wheels. He stepped on the accelerator and guided them through the afternoon traffic.

"There's that smell again," said Iggy.

"What are these foul iron beasts?" asked Edward.

"Just cars," said Sam. "You'll get used to them." Then he stuck his head out the window and screamed at one of the drivers beside them, "hey buddy, where did you get you license? Harrods?"

An airplane roared overhead. Richard pointed to it, "look Edward," he said to his brother, "there be dragons here."

Iggy smiled. "I think it's going to take a little while for Edward and Richard to get used to the twenty first century."

"Methinks thou be correct," agreed Sam.

Yugo laughed and steered the snowmobile slowly down a long red paved road. He stopped in front of an iron gate. "End of the road, guys," he said. The door beside Edward slid open silently. The two princes stepped outside.

"Thank you all for everything," said the Prince.

"Especially this," added Richard, swinging his morningstar in dangerous loops.

"You're welcome," said Iggy. The two boys walked up to the gate and pressed a bell. Yugo closed the passenger hatch and started to drive away slowly from the gates to Buckingham Palace.

"Are you sure they'll be all right there?" asked Iggy.

"Oh sure," said Yugo. "After all, they're with family."

"And that family is used to some pretty strange goings on," added Sam. A red-coated guard opened the gate and spoke to the boys. After a few minutes, he ushered them inside.

“Well,” said Iggy. “I guess everything turned out all right in the end.”

“Of course,” said Sam. “I always knew it would.”

“So, what will we do now?”

“I read about a pretty good production of Oedipus Rex,” answered Yugo.

“Oh, that would be great,” said Iggy. “Sam, you’d love it. It’s a story of forbidden love. There’s mystery and scandal and a sword fight or two.”

“It sounds all right, said Sam. “But I need to know one thing. Is there any singing?”

Iggy laughed. “Not a note,” he answered.

Sam picked up his helmet from the seat beside him and strapped it onto his head. “Where is it playing, anyway?”

“The Theatre of Euripides,” answered Yugo, pressing his thumb on the blue button and engaging the space-time calibrator, “521 B.C.”

Flashing purple lights swirled about them as they slipped into the space-time vortex. “Nooooo” yelled Sam.

And the rest is history.

AN HISTORICAL NOTE

This is a true story. Well, parts of it are true and the rest I made up to make a better story. There is nothing wrong with that, a lot of history books work that way. It is a pretty good bet that Richard III never had Henry Tudor over for Christmas dinner. After all, they were great enemies. In fact, on Christmas Day 1483 Henry declared war on Richard. Eventually, Henry's army killed Richard at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485 and Henry claimed the crown, becoming Henry VII. The Duke of Buckingham and Sir James Tyrell, who fought for Richard, then swore allegiance to Henry. It did not do them much good; they were both executed anyway a few years later. It never pays to be on the losing side.

The two Princes really were imprisoned in the Tower of London by Richard III and disappeared under mysterious circumstances in the summer of 1483. This story explains what really happened to them. Most historians, who know nothing of Elfin Christmas stories, believe King Richard murdered the Princes to secure his claim to the throne. Others believe Henry VII or even the Duke of Buckingham murdered them to secure their own claims to the throne. Certainly all of these gentlemen faced a problem convincing the country they had the right to be king with the true Prince and heir walking about. All that is known for sure is that the Princes were locked up in the Tower in the summer of 1483 and were never seen again. I changed the date to Christmastime because, after all, this is supposed to be a Christmas story.

If you want to know more about the Princes in the Tower, you might be interested in reading *The Princes in the Tower* by Alison Weir or *The Daughter of Time* by Josephine Tey. If you are really ambitious, you can try *Richard III* by some guy named Shakespeare, but as Sam pointed out, it does have a lot of forsooths in it.

Then again, you may not want to read any of these books. Not a one of them has any elves in it.

MERRY CHRISTMAS