

It Came upon a Midnight, Dear

by John J. Fritscher

ONCE UPON A TIME—for that is how all good stories begin and writers seem to have forgotten how to write good Christmas stories for adults—there lived a man named Oliver. Now Oliver was as kind and as good a man as any you'd find. "God bless us, each and everyone," he used to say every day, not just on Christmas. And he meant it. He backed it up.

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He gave money to poor people. He gave hospitals to sick people.

He gave toys to orphans. He gave two hours' pay a month to the United Fund.

And his pay was considerably—considering, of course, that he was self-employed and squeaked out a neat little bundle for himself every week.

Being a good sort of chap, every year he threw an office party at which all 759 of his employees had a very good time, and coffee. All the sweet young typists thought that Oliver was a very cute fatherly type and they held him in the highest regard. All the handsome young clerks agreed that he was indeed very fatherly, and they too

This is a Christmas story for people over twenty-one . . . the allegorical tale of Oliver, his 759 employees, his 236 trailer people, his 37 unemployed workers . . . and his five Christmas cats. . . .

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(written age 24)

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Now this year's party was to be something really special. A *bash*, Oliver said. (He always kept up on the latest with the young set. Three years ago he knew six verses of "Rockin' around the Christmas Tree.") But this year, this year, the notice on Oliver's SPECIAL FRIENDLY COMMUNIQUES TO MY FAVORITE 759 CO-WORKERS bulletin board said, "Everybody is invited to my Christmas bash. (signed) Mr. Oliver. XXXX."

Now in the once-upon-a-time place where Mr. Oliver had his huge, sprawling, suburban offices,

the weather is once-upon-a-time warm all the once-upon-a-time year. And this was especially nice for the 759 employees who always used the once-upon-a-time pool Mr. Oliver had outside in the year-round once-upon-a-time sun. (But that's another story.)

And it was so nice this particular year that Oliver intended to bash it up out on the rolling lawn.

Anyway, at Christmas right around Thanksgiving, Oliver opened up a free trailer park at one end of his suburban office property: free, that is, for the poor people who can afford to live in trailers.

All at once generous-hearted Oliver in the midst of his plans had an inspiration. "It shall be blue! The invitation," he shrieked, "and we'll invite everyone. Even those poor trailer people. God bless us each and every one."

"Oh, Mr. Oliver! You're so clever," shrieked back one of those assembly-line secretaries. "But why shouldn't you be merry? You're rich enough."

"Get good old Bob, my favorite clerk, on it right away."

Now Oliver had lots and lots and very much to do before the bash began. So he rounded up the trailer people and had them begin the preparations. But in three days it was plain even to wide-eyed Oliver that they needed help. Delighted, off to the unemployment office he went. There would be work for everyone this Christmas.

Inside the warm cheery office he saw the same old familiar faces sitting on the same old familiar benches. Oliver simply bubbled. They had all worked for him at one or another Christmas party before—with bonuses big enough that really it was the only job they needed.

"Season's greetings, everyone. Your host of Christmas past is your host of Christmas present. Ho ho ho."

"Ho ho ho," they chorused back and followed him out of the office.

Now with 759 employees, 236 trailer people, 37 unemployed workers, two orphanages, and one whole Order of nuns invited, Oliver certainly needed a good bit of food.

When the guests heard that Oliver's nephew was catering the bash, they all knew the cuisine would be excellent. It was such a good time of the year to keep things in the family. In fact, the 759 employees were so pleased that the weekend after Thanksgiving they gave beloved Mr. Oliver not one Christmas cat, but a whole litter: mother and four kittens. Immediately, of course, they all fell in love with each other, and the Christmas cats began to accompany him every place: in the morning to the office, in the afternoon around the grounds inspecting the holiday preparations.

Before any one of them knew it, the big day was at hand. Busloads of orphans and nuns and

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Two of Mr. Oliver's five Christmas cats

employees spilled gaily onto the lawn, waving gaily at the gay workers gaily finishing up the last-minute scrubings and decorating. From the huge spotless kitchen came the aroma of venison and roast pork and Mr. Oliver's special treat, a 400-pound blue marlin that he had caught himself. Everyone must have some of that!

At either end of the grounds was a bandstand. The nuns and orphans played games, listened to Rodgers and Hammerstein, and marched to Sousa. The 759 favorite employees, the 236 trailer people, and the 37 unemployed workers were having a wonderful time with their dance band.

“Did you see Oliver twist?” asked one of the handsome clerks.

“Oh, Charlie, isn't he just the dickens!” giggled one of those secretaries.

But then it happened. *Right there, folks. Step right up. Look down there. Right among the Christmas trees. (Beat it, kid. Ya bother me.) Here, let me lift the roof off the kitchen. (I said beat it, kid.) Zero in on there. Yes, folks, could be effects of radiation. Could be something else. (Listen, kid, I don't care if Red China does have the bomb, beat it.)*

Mr. Oliver was in the counting house giving out his money.

The orphans were in the dining room eating bread and honey.

The cook was in the kitchen baking bread and rolls.

When along came....

“Mon Dieu!” (He was a French cook.) “Get zose cats off zee table! Oh, look what zay have done! Zay have eaten bites. Many bites out of zee end of zee fish. Zee prize fish. Mon Dieu!”

And truly, then it was it happened. Deceit descended into the happy world of Oliver and his friends.

“I know,” said the French cook, “I weell covair up all zee bites weeth parsley. Voila!” And he chased the five overstuffed Christmas cats out into the yard. “No one weell evair know zee difference!”

And once descended, Deceit and its henchmen spread like a pall over Oliver's suburban grounds. While all the other everyday-people in the world were becoming once-upon-a-time type people at least for Christmas, 759 and 236 and 37 and then some were becoming very un-once-upon-a-time.

The bandleader curled his lip a bit and obstinately played a two-step. The orphans made faces at each other and at everyone, and disobeyed. The 759 employees gathered in small groups that excluded the people from the trailer park. The people from the trailer park excluded the workers from the unemployment office. And they all jostled each other at the buffets trying to get the best cuts of meat and the best filets of Mr. Oliver's special fish.

Well now, Clarence Oliver was nobody's fool. He could see an elephant in the rose garden as easy as pie. And from his vantage point beneath a huge electric Christmas star, he started to say softly, “God bless us, each and every one.” He chanted it over and over, gradually growing louder.

But in the kitchen the cook, taking the last of the desserts from the warm oven, nearly had a stroke. There, come back to the warmth of the stove, lying on their backs, feet in the air were the five Christmas cats, deader than doornails.

“Mon Dieu,” screamed his staff, who had deceptively covered the fish with parsley.

“I'm ruined,” screamed Oliver's nephew, the caterer.

And since all good news travels fast, immediately everyone on the grounds knew about the cook who put the parsley on the fish which the cats had eaten and died. Someone said to someone who said to someone, “I don't like it: not one bit: what's old Oliver trying to do. Listen to him up there under that neon star. The old boy's flipped. Who's he think he is, God already?”

And they all began to push toward the buses, shaking their fists at Oliver and saying nasty, nasty things like: “Go boil in your own pudding” and “With a stick of your crummy holly in your crazy black heart.”

The 759 employees, the 236 trailer people, the 37 unemployed workers, and Oliver's nephew did not like having their stomachs pumped out at one of Oliver's free hospitals. They insisted on paying; they

threatened; they opened lawsuits; they picketed his suburban office right that very evening as soon as they could walk.

Now Oliver was truly alone for all his goodness, and he wandered among the blowing litter and the overturned tables. It's pretty bloody cold for a once-upon-a-time land, he thought angrily. And there was even the smell of snow in the wind.

Out of the darkness by a sagging pavilion one of the unemployed workers came to him, hat in hand. "I'm sorry 'bout the party, Mr. Oliver."

"Yeah," Oliver said.

"I'm sorry 'bout your Christmas cats."

"Yeah," Oliver repeated. "Too bad they died. Too bad they couldn't have had their stomachs pumped."

"Yessir. But then, sir, I guess that wouldn't of done any much good seein's how when I was sprayin' the bushes for mosquitoes right before the party I sorta come upon 'em all sleepin' in a nest together. Like I mean, I sprayed 'em all accidental, 'fore I even knew they was there."

"I loved those Christmas cats."

"Yessir."

"I loved those people out there."

"Yessir."

"I..."

"Yessir?"

"Oh, you wouldn't understand." And Oliver jerked the cord and plunged the big Christmas star into everyday darkness.

"Merry Christmas, sir."

"What?"

"It's Christmas Eve, sir."

"Is it?" Oliver asked, backing away from the man. "Is it really now."

"Yessir."

"Bah," said Oliver, walking off alone in the dark, "humbug."

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