From North Ireland, a tale of a few especially talented children who recognize that Santa Claus is going to have a large logistical problem getting all those toys delivered, and, unusually enough, decide to do something direct to make sure they don’t miss their share.

CHRISTMAS TREASON

by James White

Richard sat on the woolly rug beside his brother’s cot and watched the gang arrive one by one.

Liam came first wearing a thick sweater over pajamas too tight for him—his parents didn’t have central heating. Then Mub, whose folks did not need it, in a nightie. When Greg arrived he fell over a truck belonging to Buster, because he was coming from the daytime and the moonlight coming into the room was too dim for him to see properly. The noise he made did not disturb the sleeping grownups, but Buster got excited and started rattling the bars of his cot and had to be shushed. Loo arrived last, with one of her long, funny dresses on, and stood blinking for a while, then sat on the side of Richard’s bed with the others.

Now the meeting could begin. For some reason Richard felt worried even though the Investigation was going fine, and he hoped this was just a sign that he was growing up. His Daddy and the other big people worried nearly all the time. Richard was six.

"Before hearing your reports," he began formally, "we will have the Minutes of the last—"

"Do we hafta ... ?" whispered Liam angrily. Beside him Greg said a lot of nonsense words, louder than a whisper, which meant the same thing. Mub, Loo and his three-year-old brother merely radiated impatience.

"Quiet!" Richard whispered, then went on silently, "There has got to be Minutes, that book of my Daddy’s says so. And talk without making a noise, I can hear you just as well. . . ."

That was his only talent, Richard thought enviously. Compared with the things the others could do it wasn’t much. He wasn’t able to
go to Loo's place, with its funny shed that had no sides and just a turned up roof, or play pirates on the boat Liam's Daddy had given him. There was a big hole in the boat and the engine had been taken out, but there was rope and nets and bits of iron in it, and sometimes the waves came so close it seemed to be floating. Some of the gang were frightened when the big waves turned white and rushed at them along the sand, but he wouldn't have been scared if he had been able to go there. Nor had he been to Mub's place, which was noisy and crowded and not very nice, or climbed the trees beside Greg's farm.

Richard couldn't go anywhere unless a grown-up took him in a train or a car or something. While if the others wanted to go somewhere they just went—even Buster could do it now. All he could do was listen and watch through their minds when they were playing and, if one of them wanted to say something complicated to the others, he would take what they were thinking and repeat it so everybody could hear it. And it was only his friends' minds he could get into—if only he could see what Daddy was thinking!

He was the oldest and the leader of the gang, but by itself that wasn't much fun... "I want my train set!" Greg broke in impatiently. A bright but indistinct picture of the promised model railway filled Richard's mind, to be overlaid rapidly by pictures of Mub's dolly, Loo's blackboard, Liam's cowboy suit and Buster's machine-gun. His head felt like bursting.

"Stop thinking so loud!" Richard ordered sharply. "You'll get them, you'll all get them. We were promised."

"I know, but..." began Greg.

"... How?" ended the others, in unison.

"That's what the Investigation is for, to find out," Richard replied crossly. "And we'll never find out if you keep rushing things. Quiet, gang, and listen!"

The room was already silent and then even the thinking noises died down. Richard began to speak in a whisper—he had found that talking while he was thinking kept his mind from wandering onto something else. And besides, he had learned some new grown-up words and wanted to impress the gang with them.

He said, "Two weeks ago Daddy asked Buster and me what we wanted for Christmas and told us about Santa. Santa Claus will bring you anything you want. Or any two things, or even three things, within reason, my Daddy says. Buster doesn't remember last Christmas, but the rest of us do and that's the way it happens. You hang up your stocking and in the morning there's sweets and apples..."
and things in it, and the big stuff you asked for is on the bed. But the grown-ups don't seem to know for sure how they got there . . ."

"S-sleigh and reindeer," Greg whispered excitedly.

Richard shook his head. "None of the grown-ups can say how exactly it happens, they just tell us that Santa will come all right, that we'll get our toys in time and not to worry about it. But we can't help worrying about it. That's why we're having an Investigation to find out what really happens.

"We can't see how one man, even when he has a sleigh and magic reindeer that fly through the air, can bring everybody their toys all in one night . . ." Richard took a deep breath and got ready to use his new, grown-up words. "Delivering all that stuff during the course of a single night is a logistical impossibility."

Buster, Mub and Greg looked impressed. Loo thought primly, "Richard is showing off," and Liam said, "I think he's got a jet."

Feeling annoyed at the mixed reception to his big words, Richard was getting ready to whisper "Yah, Slanty-Eyes!" at Loo when he thought better of it and said instead, "Jets make a noise and we'd remember if we heard one last Christmas. But what we're supposed to do in an Investigation is get the facts and then find the answer—" he glared at Loo—"by a process of deductive reasoning."

Loo didn't say or think a word.

"All right then," Richard went on briskly, "this is what we know . . ."

His name was Santa Claus.

Description: a man, big even for a grown-up, fresh complexion, blue eyes, white hair and beard. He dressed in a red cap, coat and trousers, all trimmed with white fur, also black shiny belt and knee-boots. Careful questioning of grown-ups showed that they were all in agreement about his appearance, although none of them had admitted to actually seeing him. Liam's Daddy had been questioned closely on this point and had said that he knew because Liam's Grandad had told him. It was also generally agreed that he lived somewhere at the North Pole in a secret cavern under the ice. The cavern was said to contain his toy workshops and storage warehouses.

They knew quite a lot about Santa. The major gap in their knowledge was his methods of distribution. On Christmas Eve, did he have to shoot back and forwards to the North Pole when he needed his sleigh refilled? If so it was a very chancy way of doing things and the gang had good cause to be worried. They didn't want any hitches on Christmas Eve, like toys coming late or getting mixed up. If anything they wanted them to come early.

Two weeks ago Richard had seen his mother packing some of
his old toys in a box. She had told him that they were going to the orphans because Santa never came to orphans.

The gang had to be sure everything would be all right. Imagine wakening on Christmas morning to find you were an orphan!

"... We can't get any more information at this end," Richard continued, "so we have to find the secret cavern and then see how he sends the stuff out. That was your last assignment, gang, and I'll take your reports now.

"You first, Mub."

Mub shook her head, she had nothing to report. But there was a background picture of her Daddy's face looking angry and shiny and sort of loose, and a smack from her Daddy's large, pink-palmed hand which had hurt her dignity much more than her bottom. Sometimes her Daddy would play with her for hours and she could ask him questions all the time, but other times he would come into the house talking funny and bumping into things the way Buster had done when he was just learning to walk, and then he would smack her if she asked questions all the time. Mub didn't know what to make of her Daddy sometimes.

Still without a word she floated up from the bed and drifted to the window. She began staring out at the cold, moonlit desert and the distant buildings where Richard's Daddy worked.

"Loo?" said Richard. She had nothing to report either.

"Liam."

"I'll wait to last," said Liam smugly. It was plain that he knew something important, but he was thinking about sea-gulls to stop Richard from seeing what it was.

"All right, Greg then."

"I found where some of the toys are stored," Greg began. He went on to describe a trip with his mother and father into town to places called shops, and two of them had been full of toys. Then when he was home again his father gave him a beating and sent him to bed without his supper..."

"O-o-ooh," said Loo and Mub sympathetically.

This was because, Greg explained, he had seen a dinky little tractor with rubber treads on it that could climb over piles of books and things. When he got home he thought about it a lot, and then thought that he would try reaching for it the way they all did when they were somewhere and had left things they wanted to play with somewhere else. His Daddy had found him playing with it and smacked him, four times with his pants down, and told him it was wrong to take things that didn't belong to him and that the tractor was going right back to the shop.

But the beating had only hurt him for a short time and he was
nearly asleep when his mother came and gave him a hug and three big chocolates with cream in the middle. He had just finished eating them when his father brought in some more . . .

"O-h-h," said Loo and Mub, enviously.

"Feeties for me?" asked Buster, aloud. When excited he was apt to slip back into baby talk. Greg whispered "Night"—a nonsense word he used when he was thinking "No"—and added silently, "I ate them all."

"Getting back to the Investigation," Richard said firmly, "Dad took Buster and me to a shop the day before yesterday. I've been to town before but this time I was able to ask questions, and this is the way they work. Everybody doesn't always know exactly what they want for Christmas, so the stores are meant to show what toys Santa has in stock so they'll know what to ask for. But the toys in the shops can't be touched until Christmas, just like the ones at the North Pole. Daddy said so, and when we were talking to Santa he said the same thing . . . ."

"Santa!!"

A little awkwardly Richard went on, "Yes, Buster and I spoke to Santa. We . . . I asked him about his sleigh and reindeer, and then about what seemed to us to be a logistically insoluble problem of supply and distribution. When we were asking him he kept looking at Daddy and Daddy kept looking up in the air, and that was when we saw his beard was held on with elastic.

"When we told him about this," Richard continued, "he said we were very bright youngsters and he had to admit that he was only one of Santa's deputies in disguise, sent to say Merry Christmas to all the boys and girls because Santa himself was so rushed with toy-making. He said that Santa didn't even tell him how he worked the trick, it was a Top Secret, but he did know that Santa had lots of computers and things and that the old boy believed in keeping right up to date science-wise. So we didn't have to worry about our toys coming, all that would be taken care of, he said.

"He was a very nice man," Richard concluded, "and didn't mind when we spotted his disguise and asked all the questions. He even gave us a couple of small presents on account."

As he finished Richard couldn't help wondering if that deputy had told everything he knew—he had looked very uncomfortable during some of the questions. Richard thought that it was a great pity that he couldn't listen to what everybody was thinking instead of just the kids in his gang. If only they knew where that secret cavern was.

"I know," said Liam suddenly. "I found it."
Everybody was asking questions at once then, and they were talking instead of just thinking. Where was it and had he seen Santa and was my train-set there and what were the toys like . . . ? In his mind Richard thundered, "Quiet! You'll wake my Daddy! And I'll ask the questions." To Liam he said, "That's great! How did you find it?"

One of Liam's abilities—one shared by Greg and Buster, and to a lesser degree by the girls—was of thinking about a place he would like to be and then going there. Or to be more precise, going to one of the places that were most like the place he wanted to go. He did not think of where so much as what he wanted—a matter of environment rather than geography. He would decide whether the place should have night, day, rain, sunshine, snow, trees, grass or sand and then think about the fine details. When his mental picture was complete he would go there, or they all—with the exception of Richard—would go there. Liam and Greg had found lots of lovely places in this way, which the gang used when they grew tired of playing in each other's backyards, because once they went to a place they always knew how to go back to it.

This time Liam had been trying for ice caverns with toys and reindeer stalls in them and had got nowhere at all. Apparently no such place existed. Then he started asking himself what would a place look like if it had to make and store things, and maybe had to send them out to people fast. The answer was machinery. It mightn't be as noisy or dirty as the factory his Daddy had taken him to in Derry last summer, but there would have to be machinery.

But there might not be toys—they might not have been made or arrived yet. And if, as Richard had suggested, reindeer and sleighs were no longer in use, then they were out of the picture as well. And the ice cavern, now, that would be a cold place for Santa to work and if he turned on a heater the walls would melt, so the cavern might not be made of ice. What he was left with was a large underground factory or storehouse either at or somewhere near the North Pole.

It wasn't a very good description of the place he was looking for, but he found it.

In Liam's mind was the memory of a vast, echoing corridor so big it looked like a street. It was clean and brightly lit and empty. There was a sort of crane running along the roof with grabs hanging down, a bit like the ones he had seen lifting coal at the docks only these were painted red and yellow, and on both sides of the corridor stood a line of tall, splendid, unmistakable shapes. Rockets.

*Rockets,* thought Richard exci-
edly: *that was the answer, all right!* Rockets were faster than anything, although he didn't quite see how the toys would be delivered. Still, they would find that out easily now that they knew where the secret cavern was.

"Did you look inside them for toys?" Greg broke in, just ahead of the others asking the same question.

Liam had. Most of the rockets were filled with machinery and the nose had sort of sparkly stuff in it. All the ones he had looked at were the same and he had grown tired of floating about among the noses of the rockets and gone exploring instead. At the other end of the corridor there was a big notice with funny writing on it. He was standing in front of it when two grown-ups with guns started running at him and yelling nonsense words. He got scared and left.

When Liam finished the girls began congratulating him and the hole in the chest of his sweater grew bigger. Then Greg tried to cut him down to size again by saying, "They weren't nonsense words. What the guards yelled at you, I mean. If you could remember better how they sounded I could tell you what they said . . ."

Just when things were getting exciting, Richard thought impatiently, another argument was going to start about what were nonsense words and what weren't. Buster, Liam and himself could make themselves understood to each other whether they were speaking or thinking, but when any of the others spoke aloud it was just nonsense. And they said the same thing about words Richard, Liam and Buster spoke aloud. But the funny thing was that Loo, Mub and Greg couldn't understand what each other said, either.

Richard had an idea that this was because they lived in different places, like in the pictures he had studied in his Daddy's National Geographic magazines. He had tracked down Liam's place from some of those pictures—Liam lived in a fishing village on the North Irish coast. Why they spoke a funny, but recognisable, form of American there Richard didn't know. Loo and Mub were harder to pin down; there were a couple of places where the people had slanty eyes or had dark brown skin and black curly hair. Greg was the hardest because he didn't have any special skin or hair or eyes. His folks wore furry hats in winter, but that wasn't much to go on . . .

"What do we do now, Richard?" Liam broke in. "Keep thinking about the cavern, huh? Not your Daddy's old books."

For a moment Richard thought into himself, then he opened his mind and asked, "How much time have you all got?"

Mub said it was near her dinner-time. Greg had just finished
breakfast and was supposed to be playing in the shed for the next three or four hours. Loo’s time was about the same as Greg’s. Liam thought it was nearly breakfast time, but his mother didn’t mind if he stayed in bed these cold mornings. And Buster, like Richard, had practically the whole of the night to play around in.

“Right,” he said briskly when all the reports were in. “It looks like the cavern Liam found isn’t the right one—the rockets don’t have toys in them. Maybe it’s a place for sending toys out, but they haven’t arrived from Santa’s workshop yet. That workshop is the place we’re looking for, and it shouldn’t be hard to find now that we know the sort of place to look for—an underground place with rockets.”

His thoughts became authoritative as he went on. “You’ve got to find these underground places and see what goes on in them. We can’t be sure of anything we’ve been told about them, so there might be a lot of secret caverns. When you find one try not to let anybody see you, look around for toys and see if you can get to the office of the man in charge of the place. If it’s Santa or he looks like a nice man, ask him questions. And remember to say please and thank you. If he’s not a nice man or if there’s nobody there try to find out things whatever way you can. Everyone understand?”

Everybody thought, “Yes.”

“Okay then. Greg will go to the cavern Liam found, because he can understand what the people say there. Liam and Buster will look for caverns on their own. But remember, once you see that a place doesn’t have toys in it, leave and look somewhere else. Don’t waste time. Mub and Loo will stay here and be ready to help if you need them, they can’t go to new places as easily as you men can.”

Richard’s mouth felt suddenly dry. He ended, “All right, take off.”

Buster flicked out of sight in the middle of a “Wheee-e-e” of excitement. Liam held back for a moment thinking, “But why do they have guards in the caverns?” To which Greg replied, “Maybe to protect the toys against juvenile delinquents. I don’t know what they are exactly, but my Daddy says they steal and break things, and if I had kept that tractor I took from the shop I would grow up to be one.” Then Liam and Greg quietly disappeared. Loo and Mub began gathering up Buster’s teddybear and toys. They floated into Buster’s cot with them and started to play houses.

Richard got into bed and lay back on his elbows. Buster was the member of the gang most likely to get into trouble so he listened in for him first. But his brother was in a place where each rocket was held out level by a little crane
instead of standing straight up. The sound of voices and footsteps echoed about the place in a spooky fashion, but his brother had not been spotted. Buster reported that he had looked into the noses of the rockets and they were filled with a lot of junk and some stuff which sparkled and frightened him away.

The stuff didn't sparkle really, of course, but Buster had a talent for looking through things—like brick walls and engine casings—and when he looked into the rocket nose in that way the stuff sparkled. Like the electric wiring at home, he thought, only worse. There were no toys or any sign of Santa, so he was going to try some other place. Richard switched to Greg.

Greg was in the cavern originally found by Liam. Two of the guards were still talking about seeing a boy in pajamas. Greg was going to look around some more and then try another place. Liam's report was much the same, right down to the stuff in the rocket noses which made him afraid to go too close. Richard stopped listening to them and began thinking to himself.

Why had the caverns guards in them? To protect the toys against damage or theft, as Greg had suggested? But where were the toys? The answer to that question was, some of them were in the shops ... 

A bit of conversation between his mother and father, overheard yesterday when they were in one of the shops, popped suddenly into his mind. Richard hadn't known exactly what was going on because he had been watching to see that Buster didn't knock over anything. Daddy had asked his mother if she would like something—beads or a shiny broach or something—for Christmas. Mummy had said Oh John it's lovely but ... Then a man from behind the counter had come up to Daddy, said a few words and gone away again. Daddy had said Okay. Then Mummy had said, But John, are you sure you can afford it? It's robbery, sheer robbery! These storekeepers are robbers at Christmas time!

Guards all over the place, Greg's theory, and storekeepers who were robbers at Christmas time. It was beginning to make sense, but Richard was very worried by the picture that was forming.

Loo and Mub had the cot pillow and the teddybear floating in the air above the cot, with Buster's broken truck doing a figure-of-eight between them. But they were being careful not to make a noise so Richard did not say anything. He began listening in for the others again.

Buster had found another cavern, so had Liam. Greg had gone through three more—they had all been small places and plainly not what the gang was looking for. All
reported rockets with the same puzzling load, no sign of toys and no Santa. And so it went on. Richard's eyes began to feel heavy and he had to sit on the edge of the bed again to keep from falling asleep.

Mub was lying in Buster's cot being a sick Mommy and Loo was kneeling beside her being the Nurse. At the same time they had taken the truck apart and now a long procession of parts was in orbit around the pillow and teddy-bear. Richard knew they would put the truck together again before they went home, and probably fix it, too. He wished that he could do something useful like that, and he began to wonder if Loo could move people, too.

When he mentioned the idea to her she stopped being a Nurse long enough to do some experiments. Richard tried as hard as he could to stay sitting on the edge of his bed, but Loo forced him to lie flat on his back. It was as if a big, soft cushion was pushing against his arms and chest. When he tried to prop his elbows behind him, other cushions pushed his arms out straight. After he had been forced to lie flat three times Loo told him she wanted to go back to playing Nurse. She didn't like this other game because it made her head hurt.

Richard went back to listening to the searchers again.

Buster was working on this fourth cavern, Liam and Greg on their seventh and ninth respectively. The sudden speeding up of the search was explained by the fact that they no longer walked from place to place inside the caverns, they just went. Tired legs, Richard discovered, had been the reason for them all thinking of this time-saving idea. It seemed to get the guards all excited, though. Everywhere the gang went there were guards who got excited—it was hard to stay hidden with so many guards about—but they had not stayed anywhere long enough to be caught. They had found lots of rockets but no sign of a toy workshop, or Santa.

Richard was now pretty sure that the guards were soldiers. In some of the caverns they wore dark green uniforms with black belts and red things on their shoulders, and only Greg could understand the nonsense words they said. In another place, the cavern Liam had searched where you could hear planes taking off, they'd had blue-grey uniforms with shiny buttons and rings on their sleeves and Liam had been able to understand them. Then in a lot of other caverns they had been dressed like that picture of Daddy downstairs, taken when he had been working in a place called Korea.

But where was Santa?

During the next three hours the search still failed to reveal his
whereabouts. Mub went home for her breakfast and Loo for her dinner, both with orders to come back tomorrow night or sooner if Richard called them. Liam had another two hours before his mother expected him out of bed. Greg had to break off for dinner.

But he was back to searching caverns again within half an hour, and it was then that Richard noticed something funny about the reports that were coming back. It was as if he was seeing the same caverns twice—the same red-painted cranes, the same groupings of rockets, even the same guards' faces. The only explanation he could think of was that caverns were being searched which had been searched before.

Quickly he told the gang of his suspicions and opened his mind to receive and relay. This meant that Buster, Greg and Liam knew everything that was in each other's minds having to do with the search, including the total number of caverns found up to that time together with their identifying characteristics. Knowing this they would no longer be in danger of going over ground already searched by another member of the gang. Richard then told them to go looking for new caverns.

They tried, and couldn't find one.

Altogether they had uncovered forty-seven of them, from big underground places with hundreds of rockets in them down to small places with just a few. And now it seemed plain that this was all the caverns there were, and there was still no trace of Santa Claus.

"We've missed something, gang," Richard told them worriedly. "You've got to go back to the biggest caverns again and look around some more. This time ask questions—"

"B-but the guards run at you and yell," Greg broke in. "They're not nice men."

"No," Liam joined in, "they're scary."

Buster said, "I'm hungry."

Richard ignored him and said, "Search the big caverns again. Look for important places, places where there are lots of guards. Find the boss and ask him questions. And don't forget to say please and thank you. Grown-ups will give you practically anything if you say please. . . ."

For a long time after that nothing happened. Richard kept most of his attention on Buster, because his brother had a tendency to forget what he was looking for if anything interesting turned up. Buster was becoming very hungry and a little bored.

His next contact with Liam showed the other hiding behind a large metal cabinet and looking out at a big room. Three walls of the room were covered from floor to ceiling with other cabinets, some of which made clicking,
whirring noises and had coloured lights on them. The room was empty now except for a guard at the door, but it had always been that way. In Liam’s mind Richard could see the memory of two men in the room who had talked and then left again before Liam could ask them questions. They had been wearing blue-grey uniforms and one of them had had gold stuff on his cap. Liam had remembered every word they said, even the long ones which he didn’t understand.

The cabinets with the flashing lights on them were called a Director-Computer, and it worked out speeds and Tradge Ectories so that every rocket in this cavern, and in about twenty others just like it, would be sent to the spot it was meant to go and hit it right on the button. It would tell hundreds and hundreds of rockets where to go, and it would send them off as soon as there was a blip. Liam didn’t know what a blip was, however. Did Richard?

“No,” said Richard impatiently. “Why didn’t you ask one of the guards?”

Because the man with the gold stuff on his cap had told the guard that the situation was getting worse, that there were reports from all over of bases being Infil Trated, and that some sort of Hall- loo Sinatory weapon was being used because the guards had insisted that the saboteurs were not adults. He had said trust them to play a dirty trick like this just before Christmas, and he had told the guard to kill any unauthorised personnel trying to enter the computer-room on sight. Liam didn’t know what an unauthorised personnel was, but he thought it might mean him. And anyway, he was hungry and his mother would be expecting him down from bed soon and he wanted to go home.

“Oh, all right,” said Richard.

Maybe it was a sleigh and reindeer he used in Daddy’s young days, he thought excitedly, but now it is rockets. And computers to tell them where to go, just like the deputy Santa told us!

But why were the guards being told to kill people? Even unauthorised personnel—which sounded like a very nasty sort of people, like juvenile delinquents maybe. Who was pulling what dirty trick just before Christmas? And where were the toys? In short, who was lousing up his and everyone else’s Christmas?

The answer was becoming clearer in Richard’s mind, and it made him feel mad enough to hit somebody. He thought of contacting Greg, then decided that he should try to find out if he could fix things instead of just finding out more about what had gone wrong. So he called up Loo and Mub, linked them to each other through his mind, and spoke:

“Loo, do you know the catapult
Greg keeps under his mattress? Can you send it here without having to go to Greg's place to look for it?"

The grubby, well-used weapon was lying on Richard's bed.

"Good," he said. "Now can you send it b—"

The catapult was gone.

Loo wasn't doing anything special just then and wouldn't have minded continuing with the game. But it wasn't a game to Richard, it was a test.

"Mub, can you do the same?"

Mub's Daddy was at work and her mother was baking. Mub was waiting to lick the spoon with the icing sugar on it. A little absently she replied, "Yes, Richard."

"Does it make your heads tired?" he asked anxiously.

Apparently it didn't. The girls explained that it was hard to make people, or pussycats, or goldfish move because live things had minds which kind of pushed back, but dead things didn't have anything to push back with and could be moved easily. Richard told them thanks, broke away, then made contact with Greg.

Through Greg's eyes and mind he saw a large desk and two men in dark green uniforms behind it—one standing behind the other, an older and bigger man who was sitting down. Greg was in a chair beside the desk and only a few feet away from the bigger man.

"Your name is Gregor Ivano-"vitch Krejinski," said the big man, smiling. He was a nice big man, a little like Greg's Daddy, with dark grey hair and lines at the corners of his eyes. He looked like he was scared of Greg but was trying to be nice anyway. Greg, and through him the watching Richard, wondered why he should be scared.

"And you say your parents have a farm not far from a town," the big man went on gently. "But there are no farms or towns such as you describe within three hundred miles of here. What do you say to that, Little Gregor?

"Now suppose you tell me how you got here, eh?"

That was a difficult question. Greg and the other members of the gang didn't know how they got to places, they just went.

"I just . . . came, sir," said Greg.

The man who was standing lifted his cap and rubbed his forehead, which was sweating. In a low voice he spoke to the big man about other launching bases which had been similarly penetrated. He said that relations with the other side had been almost friendly this past year or so, but it was now obvious that they had been lulled into a sense of false security. In his opinion they were being attacked by a brand new psychological weapon and all firing officers should be ready with their finger on the big red button ready for the first blip. The big man frowned at
him and he stopped talking.

"Well, now," the big man resumed to Greg, "if you can't say how you came, can you tell me why, Gregor?"

The big man was sweating now, too.

"To find Santa Claus," said Greg.

The other man began to laugh in a funny way until the big man shushed him and told him to phone the Colonel, and told him what to say. In the big man's opinion the boy himself was not a threat but the circumstances of his appearance here were cause for the gravest concern. He therefore suggested that the base be prepared for a full emergency launch and that the Colonel use his influence to urge that all other bases be similarly prepared. He did not yet know what tactic was being used against them, but he would continue with the interrogation.

"Now, son," he said, returning to Greg. "I can't tell you how to find Santa Claus exactly, but maybe we could do a trade. You tell me what you know and I'll tell you what I know."

Richard thought the big man was very nice and he told Greg to find out all he could from him, then he broke away. It was time he checked on Buster again.

His brother was just on the point of revealing himself to a man sitting in a small room with lots of coloured lights around the walls. There was a big glass screen on one wall with a white line going round and round on it, and the man was bent forward in his chair holding his knees tightly with his hands. He was chewing.

"Feeties . . . ?" asked Buster hopefully.

The man swung round. One hand went to the gun at his belt and the other shot out to stop with one finger on a big red button on his panel, but he didn't push it. He stared at Buster with his face white and shiny and his mouth open. There was a little piece of chewing gum showing on his teeth.

Buster was disappointed; he had thought the man might have been eating cakes of toffee. Chewing gum wasn't much good when you were hungry. Still, maybe if he was polite the man might give him some anyway, and even tell him where Santa Claus was.

"How do 'oo do," he said carefully.

"F-fine thanks," said the man, and shook his head. He took his finger off the big red button and pushed another one. He began talking to somebody:

"Unauthorised person in the Firing . . . No, no, I don't have to push the button . . . I know the orders, dammit, but this is a kid! About three, w-wearing pajamas. . . ."

A few minutes later two men ran in. One was thin and young and he told the man at the panel
to keep his blasted eyes on the screen in case there was a blip instead of gawking at the kid. The other one was big and broad and very like the man who had asked Greg questions—except he had on a tie instead of a high, tight collar. The second man looked at Buster for a long time, then got down on one knee.

"What are you doing here, sonny?" he said in a funny voice. "Looking for Santa," said Buster, looking at the man's pockets. They looked empty, not even a hanky in them. Then, on Richard's prompting, he added, "What's a . . . a blip?"

The man who was standing began to speak rapidly. He said that this was some sort of diversion, that guards at bases all over had been reporting kids, that the other side was working up to some sort of sneak punch. And just when everybody thought relations were improving, too. Maybe this wasn't a kid, maybe this was a child impersonator . . .

"Impersonating a three-year-old?" asked the big man, straightening up again.

All the talk had not helped Richard much and he was getting impatient. He thought for a minute, then made Buster say, "What's a blip . . . please!"

The big man went to the one who was sitting in front of the screen. They whispered together, then he walked toward Buster.

"Maybe we should T-I-E his H-A-N-D-S," said the thin man.

In a quiet voice the big man said, "Contact the General. Tell him that until further notice I consider it advisable that all launching bases be placed in Condition Red. Meanwhile I'll see what I can find out. And call Doc, we might as well check on your child impersonation theory."

He turned away from the now open locker with a candy bar in his hand, stripping off the wrapping as he added, "Don't they teach you psychology these days?" And to Buster he said, "A blip is a teeny white mark on a screen like that man is watching."

Buster's mind was so full of thinking about the candy bar that it was hard for Richard to make him ask the proper questions. Ask him what makes a blip? he thought furiously at his brother—why were the minds of grown-ups impossible to get into! and eventually he got through.

"A rocket going up," said the big man; then added crossly, "This is ridiculous!"

"What makes a rocket go up?" prompted Richard.

The man who was watching for blips was holding his knees tightly again. Nobody was talking to him but he said, "One way is to push a big red button . . ." His voice sounded very hoarse.

Watching and listening through his brother's mind Richard decided
that he had heard and seen enough. For some time he had been worried about the safety of Greg and Liam and Buster—all the talk of shooting, and the way the guards looked so cross at just a few children who weren’t doing any harm. Richard had seen people get shot lots of times on television, and while he hadn’t thought much about what being dead meant, getting shot had looked like a very sore thing. He didn’t want it happening to any of his gang, especially now when he was sure that there was no reason to go on with the search.

Santa had hid out somewhere, and if what Richard suspected was true, he couldn’t blame him. Poor Santa, he thought.

Quickly Richard called off the search. He thought he knew what was going on now, but he wanted to think about it some more before deciding what to do. Almost before he had finished Buster was back in his cot, still working on the candy bar. Richard made his brother give him half of it, then he got into bed himself. But not to sleep.

Mub and Loo had never seen any of the caverns yet so he had to attend to that chore first. Using the data available in the three boys’ minds he was able to direct the girls to all forty-seven places with no trouble at all. The girls were seen a couple of times but nothing happened—they were just looking, not asking questions.

When he was sure they understood what they had to do Richard let them go home, but told them to start practising on rocks and things outside his window. After that he lay on his side and looked out at the moonlit desert.

Small rocks and big boulders began to move about. They arranged themselves into circles and squares and stars, or built themselves into cairns. But mostly they just changed places with each other too fast for Richard to see. Fence posts disappeared leaving the wire sagging but unbroken and bushes rose into the air with the ground undisturbed beneath them and every root intact. After an hour of it Richard told them to stop and asked them if they were sure it didn’t make their heads tired.

They told him no, that moving dead things was easy.

“But you’ll have to work awful fast . . .” Richard began.

Apparently it didn’t matter. Just so long as they knew where everything was they could move it just like that, and Mub sent a thought of her Daddy snapping his fingers. Relieved, Richard told them to put everything out on the desert back the way it had been and to start getting to know the other places he had told them about. They went off joyfully to mix the gang’s business with their own pleasure.

Richard became aware of move-
ments downstairs. It was nearly breakfast time.

Since the early hours of the morning Richard had been sure he knew what had gone wrong with the Christmas business, and the steps the gang must take to put matters right again—or as near right as it was possible to put them. It was a terrific responsibility for a six-year-old, and the trouble was that he hadn’t heard the grown-ups’ side of it. What he intended doing could get him into bad trouble if his Daddy found out—he might even get beaten. Richard’s parents had taught him to respect other people’s property.

But his Daddy was usually a bit dopey at breakfast time. Maybe he would be able to ask some questions without his Daddy asking too many back.

“Daddy,” he said as he was finishing his cereal, “d’you know all those rockets Santa has in his secret caverns at the North Pole? And the stuff in the nose of them that you’re not allowed to go near . . . ?”

His Daddy choked and got cross and began talking to his mother. He said that he would never have taken this out-of-the-way job if he hadn’t been sure that Richard’s mother, being an ex-schoolteacher, could look after the children’s education. But it was quite obvious that she was forcing Richard far too much and he was too young to be told about things like rocket bases. To which his mother replied that his Daddy didn’t believe her when she told him that Richard could read the National Geographic—and not just pretend to read them—and even an odd who-dunit. Sure she had taught him more than a normal six-year-old but that was because he could take it—she wasn’t doing a doting mother act, Richard really was an exceptionally bright boy. And she hadn’t told him about rocket bases, he must have got it from a magazine or something . . .

And so it went on. Richard sighed, thinking that every time he asked a complicated question his mother and father started arguing about him between themselves and ignoring his question completely.

“Daddy,” said Richard during a lull, “they’re big people’s toys, aren’t they?”

“Yes!” his father snapped. “But the big people don’t want to play with them. In fact, we’d be better off without them!” Then he turned and went back to arguing with their mother. Richard excused himself and left, thinking at Buster to follow him as soon as he could.

So the big people didn’t want their toys, Richard thought with grim satisfaction. That meant the gang was free to go ahead.

All that day Richard listened in on Loo and Mub. The girls were fast but there was an awful lot to do so he set Greg and Liam to helping them—the boys could
move things, too, but not as fast as the girls. But everybody had been awake for so long they began to fall asleep one by one. When it happened to Buster and Richard their mother thought they were taking sick and was worried, but both of them were up as fresh as ever when their father came home so she didn’t mention it. And that night there was another meeting of the gang in the bedroom.

“We’ll dispense with the Minutes of the last Meeting,” Richard began formally, then opened his mind to all of them. Up until then the gang had been acting on orders, although from the things they had been doing they must have guessed what he intended, but now they knew. He gave them all the pieces of the puzzle and showed them how it fitted together.

The evasions of their parents, the overflowing toy stores and the computers which could direct a rocket to any spot in the world. A strangely uncomfortable deputy Santa—they must have had some kind of hold over him at the store—and secret caverns guarded by angry soldiers and storekeepers who were robbers. And juvenile delinquents, and a Santa Claus who couldn’t be found because he must have run away and hidden himself because he was ashamed to face the children and tell them that all their toys had been stolen.

Obviously the juvenile delinquents had raided Santa’s toy caverns and cleaned them out, leaving only big people’s toys which the adults themselves no longer wanted—this explained why Santa’s guards were so mad at everybody. Then the stolen toys had been sent to the store-keepers, who were probably in cahoots with the delinquents. It was as simple as that. Santa just would not be coming around this Christmas and nobody would get any toys, unless the gang did something about it . . .

“. . . We’re going to see that the children get something,” Richard went on grimly. “But none of us is going to get what we asked for. There is no way of telling which one of all those hundreds of rockets is meant for any one of us. So we’ll just have to take what comes. The only good thing is that we’re going to make Christmas come three days early.

“All right, gang, let’s get started.”

Buster returned to the room where he had been given candy the night before, the room with the man who watched a screen with a white line going round on it. But he stayed hidden this time—he was merely acting as the gang’s eyes. Then Mub and Loo, linked to the distant room through Buster and Richard’s mind, began to move the grown-up who sat before the screen. More precisely they moved his hand and arm in
the direction of the big red button.

But the grown-up didn’t want to push the button and make blips. He struggled to pull back his hand so hard that Loo complained that it was hurting her head. Then they all got together—Liam, Greg, Buster and the girls—and concentrated. The man’s finger started moving towards the button again and he began to shout to somebody on the radio. Then he drew his gun with the other hand and hit his arm with it, knocking it away from the button. He was being very, very naughty.

“Why don’t we push the button,” Greg asked suddenly, “instead of making the grown-up push it?”

Richard felt his face going red, he should have thought of that. Within a second the big red button drove down into the bottom of its socket.

The Early Warning systems were efficient on both sides. Within three minutes all forty-seven missile bases had launched or were launching their rockets. It was an automatic process, there were no last-minute checks, the missiles being maintained in constant readiness. In those same three minutes orders went out to missile-carrying submarines to take up previously-assigned positions off enemy coasts, and giant bombers screamed away from airfields which expected total annihilation before the last one was off. Like two vast, opposing shoals of fish the missiles slid spacewards, their numbers thinned—but only slightly—by the suicidal frenzy of the anti-missiles. The shoals dispersed and curved groundwards again, dead on course, to strike dead on target. The casualty and damage reports began coming in.

Seventeen people injured by falling plaster or masonry; impact craters twenty feet across in the middle of city streets; tens of thousands of dollars and pounds and rubles worth of damage. It was not long before urgent messages were going out to recall the subs and bombers. Before anything else was tried the authorities had to know why every missile that had been sent against the enemy, and every missile that the enemy had sent against them, had failed to explode.

They also wanted to know who or what had been making rocket base personnel on both sides do and see things which they didn’t want to. And why an examination of the dud missiles revealed the shattered and fused remains of train sets and toy six-shooters, and if this could have any possible connection with the robberies of large toy stores in such widely separate places as Salt Lake City, Irkutsk, Londonderry and Tokyo. Tentatively at first both sides came together to compare notes, their in-
tense curiosity to know what the blazes had happened being one thing they had in common. Later, of course, they discovered other things . . .

That year Christmas came with the beginnings of a lasting peace on Earth, although six members of a young and very talented gang did not appreciate this. The toys which they had put in the noses of the rockets to replace the sparkly stuff—which they had dumped in the ocean because the grown-ups didn’t want it—had failed to reach them. They had been worrying in case they had done something very wrong or been very bad. They couldn’t have been very bad, however, because Santa came just as they had been told he would, on a sleigh with reindeer.

They were asleep at the time, though, and didn’t see it.

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Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot: XLVII

The mass migration of neo-beatniks from Earth to the Moon took place after 1980, when space travel became cheaper than staying at home. Soon beat bars were infringing on such luxurious developments as Moonolulu, Moon Goddess Meadows, and Sky-Vegas Executive Homes. Finally, after an all-night catnip-and-bhang party in the once-sacrosanct lobby of the Copernicus-Hilton, the authorities took appropriate action. They summoned Ferdinand Feghoot from the 38th Century.

Feghoot timed in outside a beat hangout, “The Lunching Pad.” It was surrounded by a menacing crowd of respectable citizens, uttering catcalls and brandishing golf clubs. The beat men, wearing huaraches, beards, torn jeans, and helmet liners decorated with abstract designs and Henry Miller quotations, beat their bongo-drums in the background. Their women were much more aggressive. Dressed in prolapsing black sweaters and leotards, they wore odd nineteen-sixtyish hairdos which looked as though they had stood at just the wrong moment under very big birds, and which they had pulled out into hang-down scallops that almost covered their faces. They advanced, mouthing lewd threats, their ropy curtains thrust forward.

Obviously, only precisely the right phrase, instantly spoken, could distract both sides and prevent civil war.

“Peekaboo, like!” chuckled Ferdinand Feghoot, pointing straight at the oncoming phalanx. “The Lunachick Fringe!”

—GRENDEL BRIARTON