

THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

Times change, and there had been a major change in Santa's world. He had fallen out with Mother Christmas. Santa had suggested that they relocate to the South Pole, because he was tired of the constant interference of polar bears in the work he and the elves had to do. She, being a respecter of tradition, had refused. The Arctic, quiet at the best of times, had become home to a deafening silence as the two refused to speak to each other.

Earlier in the year, unknown to Father Christmas, Bernard, the chief elf, had taken a summer break, to travel the globe, wanting to discover other lifestyles. On his travels he met Maria Carey, who sang to him that all she wanted for Christmas was him.

'Really?' said Bernard.

'Absolutely!' she replied.

This gave Bernard the courage to believe in himself, and he became determined to take this new self-confidence back with him to the Arctic, deciding that the way things had been run by Santa had been dictatorial and had to change. Returning, Bernard made a speech to the assembled throng of elves.

'Fellow elves, now is the time for change. On my travels I made a major discovery. I know that we have all worked hard all these years, believing that Father Christmas has his name because he is our father. Before leaving I took a sample of Santa's saliva with me, and have discovered, via a DNA test, that he is, in fact, not an elf. Human beings regard him as one of their own!'

The shock round the ice palace was audible, as elves questioned their parentage and wondered if they were related to one another.

Then Bernard slammed his fist down on the ice block, instigating the first and only 'Red Revolution' at the North Pole.

'This time our time!' he yelled.

Later, being confronted by Bernard, Santa realised that the obedience of the elves, which he had previously taken for granted, would cease. He would have to wrap all the presents by himself, and he would have to start soon.

The task was an arduous one, and although Rudolph and the rest of the reindeer did their best to help, they just did not have the dexterity to do the wrapping. Their antlers became enmeshed in paper and sellotape got stuck across their mouths, although this was a relief for many of the reindeer, as Rudolph was shut up for once.

Perhaps it was the temporary silence imposed on Rudolph, which had given him time to reflect, or perhaps it was his natural rivalry with Bernard, but the changing situation in the Arctic made Rudolph resolve to convene a meeting of his own. As he had been drinking the night before, the root cause of his red nose, Rudolph was not in a good mood.

'Freedom for all those possessing antlers!' he shouted to the assembled group.

'We get the point!' came the retort from Donner, who had always considered herself to be something of a comic. It was decided that all reindeer would join the elves in going on strike for that year; Santa would have to find his own way of propelling the sleigh.

'Our decision has been made,' said Rudolph to Santa. 'Unless you change attitude, you shall have no assistance from us this year!'

Santa, stubborn as he was, refused to concede. If his wife, the elves and the reindeer were against him, he would show them who was the boss. Why should he be told what to do by reindeer and elves? He was sure that penguins would be far more compliant.

But there were presents to be delivered, and no time to waste. Santa found an old engine he had kept in his garage to propel his sleigh, and, unwrapping an undelivered present from the previous year, Santa renamed the present 'SantaNav', resolving to show the world that he could manage alone.

The great night came, and the sleigh took off. As usual, Santa's only fear was that he would encounter the dreaded, interfering polar bears.

As he set out, Santa accepted SantaNav's commands, but was starting to understand that accepting orders from others wasn't easy. 'Just who does SantaNav think she is?' he complained under his breath.

'At the first fir tree, bear right. Then continue for 651.7 miles.'

'Bear right?! I'm not going anywhere near those wretched creatures!' he yelled, before shouting 'Ho! Ho! Haaaaaarg!' as he swerved in desperation to avoid any bears, before crashing into a pine tree, resulting in the destruction of his sleigh. The peace of the snow-covered surroundings had been disturbed, just as Santa's anger had disturbed the peace of the Arctic Circle.

That was a moment of epiphany for Santa. He realised that he could not act alone, and needed the help of others. Going against his instincts, Santa picked up his phone, dialling Mother Christmas.

'I'm so sorry,' he said, 'I was wrong. My home is with you in the Arctic. I still love you, you know that, don't you?'

The silence that followed was so different from the silence that had engulfed the Arctic previously. This was the silence of hope.

'I love you, too,' came the reply.

Tears of gratitude rolled down Santa's face.

He gave his location. 'The third tree on the right, as you enter the third forest on the left, as you leave our home... which will be our home forever.'

Mother Christmas and the reindeer met Santa, and brought him back to their forever home, where the elves, appreciating Santa's change of heart, piled presents on to a sleigh which they had kept in reserve.

They all worked as one and, against all expectations, the adrenalin born of togetherness powered the whole team to get the new sleigh loaded in time.

Santa Claus, and all those around him, had learnt a lesson. At Christmas the most important gift we can give is the gift of love.