

How the General Stole Christmas...

By Rick Cogbill
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“This is downright embarrassing,” muttered Tooner, flapping his arms to keep warm. “If anyone figures out it’s me under this fake beard, my reputation will be ruined!”

“Oh, quit scowling, Santa; you’ll scare the kids.” I glanced down the street where throngs of people stood waiting for the Christmas parade to begin. “Besides, a little community involvement will smooth out your rough spots.”



“Those ain’t rough spots,” he retorted. “They’re character traits! An’ I earned ‘em fair and square.”

Basil squirmed uncomfortably in his reindeer suit. “If you want to see rough, wait until this zipper bursts.” His undersized costume had put a serious crimp on his usual donut intake.

“Yeah, well, that’s what happens when you call the costume rental store on the night before the parade – there’s not much left to choose from.” I glared at Quigley, our service writer, who was dressed like a Christmas tree. It was fitting punishment for getting us into this predicament in the first place.

“Sorry, boss,” he said sheepishly. “But you’re the one who put me in charge of advertising. I figured the Christmas Kid’s Parade would be good for our corporate image.”

Right then Beanie came running up to our float with some news. “The Parade Marshall says we got two minutes ‘til show time. Shall I start ‘er up?”

“Hey, nice elf costume,” said Tooner. “I ‘specially like the curly slippers.”

Our apprentice mumbled a few choice elfish words and climbed into our tow vehicle. The 1996 Buick Skylark with a 3.1 litre V6 was borrowed from one of our customers at the last minute. It was the only vehicle on the lot with a trailer hitch and taillight wiring that actually worked.

Once we got started, it became clear that Tooner's reputation was perfectly safe – nobody paid the slightest attention to him. Instead, it was my own costume that had become the crowd favorite. I beamed as I tossed handfuls of candy to my adoring fans. "They love me, guys; they're calling out my name!"

Basil frowned. "I don't believe the phrase 'Slim's a Grinch' would classify as a term of endearment."

Suddenly the whole parade ground to a halt. The high school band up front was doing an encore of The Twelve Days of Christmas, and they weren't leaving anything out.

"Hey, Twinkle Toes," I hollered down from the sleigh. "Turn off the engine, will ya? We're dying from the exhaust fumes back here."

Beanie turned off the Buick. But once the parade got moving again, our car would hardly budge. It would only start, run for two seconds, and then quit. Taunts and jeers from the crowd began to assail our ears.

"Get 'er movin', Beanie," growled Santa. "The natives are getting restless."

"Get 'er moving yourself!" Our pointy-eared apprentice mashed the ignition switch in another fruitless effort. "I need some help down here!"

It must have been quite a scene, to see Santa and Rudolf work frantically over a hot engine while The Grinch paced back and forth on the float berating a cowering Christmas Tree. But the Buick was not in the holiday spirit, and finally Beanie scampered off to find a tow truck. Tooner and Basil directed traffic while Quigley sat alone at the back of the float, flashing his tree lights on and off like a traffic flare.

Finally, Dutchy and his tow truck pulled up behind us, and as I reached in to put the car into neutral, I noticed that the key had been left in the 'on' position. Just for fun I tried the ignition one more time, and to my surprise the Buick fired up and ran like a dream. Great! I thought. Now we really look like fools.

Finally we were back at the shop and everybody began to calm down over some of Basil's special eggnog. I refilled Beanie's mug and handed it to him. "Say, how about checking that Buick for codes and doing a little web surfing while you drink this?"

Half an hour later The Bean returned with a funny look on his face, and it wasn't just the eggnog. "Turns out to be a common problem, guys. There's a history trouble code of P1629, which is the anti-theft system. Somehow, we'd set it off."

Tooner scratched his itchy face. "Okay, so how come it runs now? We didn't do anything."

“Oh yes, we did,” replied Beanie. “I left the key on, remember? Well, that’s how you relearn the alarm system; you leave the key turned on for ten minutes until the flashing light on the dash goes out.”

Basil helped himself to more eggnog. “I’d like to know what caused the problem in the first place.”

There were a number of possibilities, including a loose battery connection, a dirty pellet in the ignition key (cleanable with a pencil eraser), or a break in the tiny wires inside the ignition switch. In our case, it was the tiny wires that grounded Santa and his helpers.

“That was a costly bit of community involvement,” I said later. “A free car repair – since the car was donated – *and* Dutchy’s fee for a service call.”

“Serves us right!” grumbled Tooner. “So that means no more parades?”

I cleared my throat. “Actually, we’re already booked for the Valentines Parade in February. Now, to keep the budget down, I’ve already ordered our costumes. Tooner, you get to be Cupid...”

Tooner’s eyes bugged out. “But Cupid don’t wear nothin’ but a piece of ribbon!”

“Exactly,” I replied. “And that fits my advertising budget perfectly.”