

“ANGELS ON MOUSEBACK”

It was a couple of days before Christmas. The weather was cool for the time of year, and Whistler was remembering the days when he lived in London. The snow, the freezing cold, the snow, the icy streets where even a cat often landed not on his feet, but on his bottom, the snow, the turkey with stuffing and indigestion, the snow. He shivered and cuddled up next to Max, Ziggy and Missy. The duvet had not yet been changed to winter weight, an oversight that was very irritating indeed. Staff were so hard to find these days, especially when you were a cat with no money

“Get off, Whistler, it’s far too hot,” said Missy. “You can wrap my tail around your neck if you’re really cold.”

“Thank you Missy, but it makes me sneeze”

Missy’s tail was like a rather long feather duster, and she was extremely proud of it. She gave it a quick lick and tucked it under herself. Some cats were just ungrateful she thought drowsily.

She was woken up by a sound not dissimilar to that of a large and effervescent firework. Whistler was sitting up, shaking his head and trying to dislodge a cloud of white fur from his nose. Missy ducked as he sneezed again, and the fur drifted over her head and landed on Max’s tummy. It moved up and down gently as he snored the afternoon away.

Whistler rubbed his nose with his paw and looked up towards the ceiling.

“Madam?”

“My goodness, you’re turning into a proper detective at last,” laughed Madam. “A right little Dr Watson.”

Whistler had no idea what a Dr Watson was. He’d ask Max later. Max seemed to know everything.

“Sorry, Madam, I’m still half asleep.”

“That can only be an improvement, dear Whistler. It’s lovely to see you again after all your investigative successes. I have a little mystery for you. Something very important has disappeared, and you need to find it before Christmas Eve.”

“ANGELS ON MOUSEBACK”

“That’s tomorrow,” said Whistler. “We’ll have to get our skates on”

Madam giggled. “Ice skates I suppose. That’s a very good joke.”

Whistler felt a warm glow inside. Madam’s approval was something he’d always sought, as she was a wise woman, though a bit violent when it came to wrestling, he recalled...

“Arthur will be round in about ten minutes to give you the details. I’ve got some last-minute shopping to do at Fortnum & Mason. Potted shrimps and smoked salmon.”

Whistler sighed at the thought.

“Have a lovely Christmas, old friend, and I’ll see you on New Year’s Eve. Give my love to Max, Ziggy and Missy.”

A furry kiss landed on his left ear, and she was gone.

“Happy Christmas, Madam.” He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye and went upstairs to wait for Arthur. Christmas could be a lonely time without your loved ones with you, he thought, gazing up expectantly at the sky.

Arthur wheeled in and landed with aplomb on the bamboo screen.

“Can’t stay for long, shopping to do” he gasped.

“Everyone seems to be shopping,” said Whistler. “Why?”

“It’s Christmas time,” replied Arthur. “You have to buy presents for everyone you’ve ever met, just in case they buy you one.”

“Do they?”

“Not often.”

“It seems a bit of a waste then.”

“It’s the spirit of Christmas that counts,” said Arthur, “not the presents you get. It’s all about giving.”

“ANGELS ON MOUSEBACK”

Whistler was puzzled by this concept. He was just about to ask Arthur to explain further when Arthur flapped his wings briskly.

“Must get on. You cats have no sense of urgency. The mystery you have to solve by Christmas Eve concerns an angel that’s been stolen from the top of a Christmas tree in the house next door.”

“What’s an angel”?

Arthur gave Whistler a slightly pitying glance. “It looks a bit like me, but with a halo. That’s a ring that floats above the head before you ask. It’s usually shiny and wears a dress.”

Whistler struggled to visualize this entity, but try as he might, nothing came to mind. He shook his head so hard that his ears made a flapping sound, but it was no good.

“You’ll know it when you see it,” said Arthur impatiently... “Must fly. I’ll drop by on Christmas Day if I can still get airborne after dinner. Good luck.”

He flew off towards Rabat, looking a bit stressed. Whistler walked slowly down the stairs to find out if any of the other Gozo Cat Detectives knew what an angel was. They didn’t. Not even Max. They puzzled until long after suppertime over how it was possible to find something that you couldn’t recognize.

That night they all went next door. As usual, the back window was open so there was no problem getting in. They went through the kitchen into the living room. In the corner was a big tree, covered in tiny bright lights, tinsel and hanging baubles made of glass. It was such a magical sight that the cats were transfixed. They sat around it in a semi-circle, admiring the sparkling spectacle. It was the most beautiful tempting toy they’d ever seen, and also the largest. After a few minutes. Missy slowly approached the tree and raised a tentative paw to play with a beautiful blue glass ball suspended from the lowest branch. Whistler was just about to reprimand her when he felt something very light and small land on his head. Ziggy cackled and whispered

”There’s a mouse on your head.”

Whistler was unable to verify this statement, not having eyes on the top of his head, but, before he could do anything about it, he heard a tiny voice in his ear.

“ANGELS ON MOUSEBACK”

“If you think this is good, you should see what we’ve got upstairs in *our* house.”

The mouse leapt off Whistler and ran up the stairs, the cats following in hot pursuit. On the right was a door with a night-light shining through. The mouse’s tail was just visible as they barged in, finding two children asleep in bunk beds and a doll’s house sitting on the bedroom floor with its front ajar.

“In here,” said the tiny voice. “Remember, it’s Christmas, don’t hurt us please.”

Max’s slim foot prised open the front of the house, and another marvellous sight awaited them. An entire mouse family, mother, father, and twelve children, all sitting in chairs or on sofas, with a roaring painted fire in the grate, plenty of bread and cheese lying around, and with a figure made of gauze, glitter and sequins standing in the corner. There were three storeys to the little house, which contained a fully fitted kitchen, two double bedrooms en-suite, and six other bedrooms with bunk beds. There was even a beautiful blue swimming pool the size of a cat’s water bowl in the back garden. The Gozo Cat Detectives gasped in envy. What a place!

“Not bad, is it?” said the mouse. “We stumbled across it last week. The humans never play with it and it suits us very well. Plenty of room, a house full of left-over pizza, and no cats ... until today.”

“We won’t bother you,” said Whistler, “we’re looking for an angel that’s missing from the top of the tree downstairs. It looks like a shiny sparrow apparently.”

Ziggy coughed politely and nudged Max in the ribs.

“That’s it there.”

Max looked in the direction of Ziggy’s twitching nose and focused on the glittering creature in the corner of the mouse’s living room. He eyed it up and down and noticed a rather bent ring suspended above its head, and one battered wing-like attachment hanging from its back.

“So that’s an angel,” he thought. “It must be a hard life. How could it take off with only one wing?”

"ANGELS ON MOUSEBACK"

"I've found it, Whistler," he said. Ziggy growled in a frustrated manner under his breath and Missy hid behind Whistler's bulky frame. She hated conflict unless she'd started it.

"That's what I was telling you about," said the mouse. "Three of my youngest brought it home yesterday. Said they'd found it lying on the floor, didn't you?" He glared at his offspring and small squeaks of confirmation could be heard from some even smaller trembling bodies. "You can have it if you like. We much prefer the telly."

"It's missing a wing," said Max.

"Eaten I'm afraid," said the mouse. "The wife's expecting again and she has strange cravings for odd foods when she gets in the family way. Marmite and coal, gauze and wire, Lobster Thermidor with a glass of champagne, vodka and caviar on blinis, haggis and Glenmorangie. You name it, she's eaten it. It takes some finding and carrying, I can tell you."

"No-one will notice a missing wing when it's on top of the tree," said Ziggy. "Let's take it and get it up there. I'm feeling hungry." He grasped the angel between his teeth and led the way downstairs before anyone could stop him.

Max, Missy and Whistler followed him, and so did the mouse. He thought this would be a sight worth watching and telling his numerous grandchildren about.

"How are we ...?" Whistler got no further as Ziggy began climbing the Christmas tree. It swayed alarmingly, and baubles fell all over the place. Missy chased them furiously and then became entangled in lengths of tinsel as they floated around her. Max and Whistler retreated to the kitchen door, and gales of squeaky laughter could be heard from the mouse, as, slowly and remorselessly, the tree toppled over and landed with a deafening crash on the floor.

"Timber!" cried the mouse joyously, and ran upstairs as quickly as possible.

Ziggy and Missy emerged somewhat dazed from the carnage, covered in Christmas decorations and dust. They looked pleased with themselves for some reason.

“ANGELS ON MOUSEBACK”

“At least the angel’s on top of the tree,” they chorused. And so it was, clearly visible in the mass of tangled lights, tinsel and broken baubles that covered the floor.

“Not our finest hour,” reflected Whistler, as they fled the scene of the crime, “but a mystery solved, nonetheless.”

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year from The Gozo Cat Detectives.