

Elf and Safety

1st December

Far away in the North, on the very top of our planet, the land is covered in snow and ice all year round. But in the middle of all this snow and ice is a very secret place. It is the workshop where Father Christmas and a massive army of elves work, making the toys to be delivered on Christmas night. As you may expect, it is a very busy place, where all kinds of wonderful and magical things happen. With so many elves and so much magic in one place, sometimes things happen that are not supposed to. This is a story about one of those times. Let me take you to the North Pole and introduce you to Charlie Elf. He is one of the workers in the workshop and is usually very happy, but one year, it seemed that just everything went wrong!

2nd December

Charlie loved working in Father Christmas's workshop. His speciality was balls; his bouncy balls were always the bounciest, his footballs went the furthest and he was especially good with sparkly balls, which glittered like stars as they bounced. It made Charlie happy to know how many children loved receiving one of his balls on Christmas morning, and how much they were played with and enjoyed throughout the year. It is an elf's special privilege to hear every time a child is grateful for a gift from Father Christmas's workshop, and so Charlie heard this a lot in the summer, when children were playing with their balls on their holidays. For this reason, Charlie always looked forward to the summer.

3rd December

But Charlie had another reason to prefer summer to winter. As you know, Father Christmas's elves have so much work to do that they work all through the year, but the run-up to Christmas is their busiest time. Of course, the elves don't mind this, and they always work even harder to make sure the work is done. But to help keep their spirits up, they decorate the workshop to make it bright and colourful. And the one thing they like best in their decoration is holly. They just love the dark green spiky leaves and the bright red berries, and they pick as much of it as they can find, so that every room in Father Christmas's workshop is covered with holly.

4th December

Now Charlie liked the look of holly just as much as any elf, but he had an unfortunate problem. You see, Charlie was allergic to holly. Whenever he came close to a bunch of holly, he would feel his eyes start to itch. Then his nose would begin to run. And then the sneezing started. If he could keep away from holly, he would be fine. But at Christmas, with so much holly in the workshop, Charlie was sneezing and spluttering nearly all day. It was a miserable time for him. But even though Christmas was ruined for him, he did not want to ruin it for the others, and so he told no-one about his problem. He kept on working and tried to keep smiling, all the time looking forward to January when all the holly would be gone.

5th December

Charlie really did try his best, but when he was full of sniffles and sneezes, he found it hard to work as speedily as the other elves. He worked twice as hard in the summer, knowing he wouldn't have as much time to finish all his jobs in December, and this way he always got his orders fulfilled. However, someone else noticed the difference in Charlie. He was Bertrand, the elf in charge of productivity, whose job it was to make sure everyone was working hard enough to get the job done on time. He was also a friend of Charlie's, and he knew he could rely on Charlie to make as many balls as would be needed. But it worried him that his friend slowed down so much just when everyone else was speeding up, and one year, he decided to find out why it happened.

6th December

"I know you try your best, and work extra hard in the summer," Bertrand said to Charlie. "But suppose something happened in the summer that meant you couldn't get everything done in advance? Or suppose we had an extra order for more balls in December? You are the best ball maker in the workshop; what would I do if I needed you to do more?"

"I'm so sorry, Bertrand," said Charlie. "I never thought of it like that before. But I don't know what else I can do. You see, it's all this holly. It makes me sneeze. And it's hard to make balls when you're sneezing all the time. They keep bouncing off."

7th December

Bertrand was rather stunned to hear this. "Why did you never say you were allergic to holly?" he said. "This is very serious. I know we all like holly, but it cannot be allowed to get in the way of work. Imagine if Christmas was spoiled just because of a bit of holly. Well, there is only one thing to do."

"What?" asked Charlie, feeling rather nervous to hear the answer.

"I will have to ban all holly from the workshop," said Bertrand decidedly.

8th December

For as much as Charlie would have liked to work in a holly-free environment, he was horrified to hear Bertrand's plan.

"You can't do that," he said. "Christmas wouldn't be the same. Everyone will be miserable without the holly."

"But you are miserable because of the holly," insisted Bertrand, "and you are just as important as everyone else. Plus, you are the best ball maker, and I know we still have a lot of balls to make. It is my job to make sure everything gets done on time, and if I find a problem that gets in the way of that, it is my responsibility to sort it. So that is what I am going to do. It's not up to you." And off he went, leaving poor Charlie helpless to stop him.

9th December

When Bertrand made his mind up about something, he really did mean business. He started straight away, pulling down the wreaths and garlands of holly that hung around the workshop. For the first time ever, it fell silent in the workshop, as every elf stopped work to stare at Bertrand. Nobody could believe what they were seeing.

“Back to work everyone,” shouted Bertrand. “There’s no need to stop. I’m just introducing a new rule. From now on, there will be no more holly in the workshop.”

10th December

When they heard Bertrand’s decree, all the elves let out a noisy gasp. They turned to each other with expressions of disbelief and horror. Then one elf stepped forward to confront Bertrand. She was part of the team responsible for entertainments and keeping festive spirits up, and she had spent many hours gathering all the holly and hanging it in beautiful arrangements. She had been very proud of her display that year. She also happened to have the name Holly, which made her especially fond of the festive plant. And she more than any other elf was furious about what Bertrand was doing.

11th December

“Excuse me, Bertrand, but you can’t do that,” she said in a loud voice. “I’m in charge of the holly displays and no one else can touch them without my permission.”

“Well, I’m in charge of productivity,” said Bertrand, “and I say that the holly is a problem and therefore it has to go.”

“How can the holly be a problem?” demanded Holly. “All it does is decorate the walls and cheer us up. We work quicker when we’re happy. Therefore the holly should stay.”

“But Charlie is allergic to holly,” said Bertrand, “and he can’t get on with his job if he is sneezing all the time. So the holly goes.”

12th December

Poor Charlie wanted to shrink to the size of a mouse as everybody in the workshop turned and looked at him. He could not even try to hide away, because every time Bertrand pulled down a bunch of holly, it made his allergy even worse, and he started sneezing uncontrollably.

“See,” said Bertrand. “The holly is making Charlie ill.”

“I’m sorry about Charlie’s allergy,” said Holly, “but there are hundreds of elves employed in this workshop. If you take down the holly, you will make everyone miserable, and then how much work will get done? Do you want us all to slow down just before Christmas?”

“It’s no excuse to slow down,” said Bertrand. “Elves are perfectly capable of working without holly.”

“Actually, an unhappy elf is not capable of working,” said Holly. “Why do you think Father Christmas put someone in charge of general happiness?”

13th December

Around the workshop, the elves were starting to discuss the problem. Some felt sorry for Charlie and agreed with Bertrand. Others agreed with Holly, and began to argue that the holly should stay. Some asked if they could have just a little bit of holly, or keep it away from Charlie, but others said it had to be all or nothing. Someone else suggested that Charlie was found another job away from the workshop entirely, but then they all agreed that Charlie was the best ball maker and so he had to stay in the workshop. The longer they talked about it, the more hopeless it seemed. Elves are not generally argumentative creatures, but with such an insolvable problem, quite a lot of them were starting to lose their temper.

14th December

In the middle of it all, Holly and Bertrand were already shouting at each other.

“If you lay one more finger on my holly wreaths, I’ll have to take drastic action,” said Holly.

“You’ve already caused enough trouble,” said Bertrand. “Thanks to you, nobody is working. We are going to be seriously behind if this goes on.”

“They’ve only stopped working because you took down the holly,” said Holly. “If you really want them to go back to work, you need to put the holly back up.”

“It’s not your job to tell me what to do,” said Bertrand.

“And it’s not your job to interfere in mine,” said Holly.

15th December

By then, everyone was so busy arguing that they had stopped paying attention to Charlie. He was sneezing so much that it was difficult to breathe, and he really needed some fresh air. At least nobody was watching as he started to creep out of the workshop. It was a relief to leave all the shouting behind him and make his way outside. It was very cold and a thick layer of snow covered the ground, but the clean, fresh air instantly cleared all the holly dust from his nose and he stopped sneezing. But it didn’t make him feel much better. He knew that Bertrand and Holly were both right, and that would make it impossible to come to an agreement. But if they kept on arguing, no work would get done at all, and then they would never finish all the Christmas presents on time, and some children would go without presents. Charlie couldn’t bear to think of that. There was only one thing he could do; he would have to leave Father Christmas’s workshop, then Christmas could carry on without any more trouble.

16th December

Back in the workshop, the arguments were getting very noisy. Finally, Holly and Bertrand realised that they couldn’t go on arguing about it all night.

“We should have a vote,” said Holly. “Then everyone can choose whether to keep the holly or not.”

“No, that will take too long,” said Bertrand. “I say we take it to Father Christmas and let him decide.”

“But Father Christmas is too busy to deal with this kind of thing right now,” said Holly. “Surely we can find some solution. Charlie, do you have any suggestions?”

But when they looked around, they discovered that Charlie was no longer there.

“Drat that elf,” said Bertrand, “and I’m doing all this to help him. How ungrateful can you get?”

“Charlie’s not usually like that,” said Holly guiltily. “I think we scared him off. We need to find him.”

17th December

Holly clapped her hands and called for quiet, and finally all the arguing came to a halt.

“We need to find Charlie, but we also need to clear up the mess, and get some work done,” she said. “Let’s split up into three teams. Team One to tidy up all this mess. Team Two to get back to work, so we don’t lose a whole day of production. And Team Three to hunt for Charlie. We have to find him and let him know he is not in trouble.”

Now that there was a plan, the elves quickly settled into action. They easily divided into three teams. Holly and Bertrand were both feeling so bad about Charlie that they led the hunt.

18th December

So the hunt began. Father Christmas’s workshop is a very big place, with many bedrooms for all the elves, and dining rooms, and games rooms, and libraries, and kitchens, and bathrooms, not to mention all the cupboards and storerooms. There were just so many places to look. Holly and Bertrand made sure nowhere was left out, but they just couldn’t find Charlie. When all the likely places had been exhausted, they started to look in the unlikely places, like the back of wardrobes and under the beds. And when they still couldn’t find him, they started looking in all the obvious places again, just in case. But as the hours went on with no sign of Charlie, they began to grow more and more worried.

19th December

“Has anyone checked the stables?” asked Bertrand.

“Yes of course,” said Holly, “at least two times.”

“All the same, I think I might check again,” said Bertrand.

“Alright, I’ll come with you,” said Holly. And they went together to the stables where the reindeer lived. They checked in every stall, every store room, every cupboard, all the time dashing about in growing desperation. The reindeer were quite surprised to see them. Eventually, one called out to them.

“What is all this commotion?” asked Dasher. “There have been elves in and out of here all evening. Why don’t you stop and tell us what is going on?”

So Holly and Bertrand quickly explained about Charlie and the holly, and the argument that had led to Charlie’s disappearance.

20th December

“Good grief,” said Dasher. “You silly elves, making such a fuss over nothing. No wonder Charlie ran away.”

Holly and Bertrand hung their heads in shame. “We know that now,” said Holly. “That’s why we’re trying to find Charlie, to put things right.”

“Do you really think he has run away?” asked Bertrand.

“Well, if he’s not anywhere in the workshop, he must have done,” said Dasher.

One of the other reindeer called out. “I went out to look at the snow earlier,” said Blitzen. “I saw an elf walking away from the workshop. I thought he must be on an errand for Father Christmas, though it did seem to be a bit strange that he was going on his own. Do you think that might have been Charlie?”

“It could have been,” said Bertrand. “Which way was he going?”

“South,” said Blitzen. “If you’re quick, you might still find his footprints in the snow.”

21st December

Holly and Bertrand rushed outside, along with Dasher and Blitzen. Blitzen showed them where she had seen Charlie, and they found his footprints leading away from the workshop. However, it was starting to snow again, which was quickly covering up the footprints.

“We must hurry,” said Holly. “He can’t stay out here in this snow.”

“Don’t worry, young elves,” said Blitzen. “My nose can follow his scent. You two climb up on my back and we’ll go and look for him together.”

So Holly and Bertrand climbed onto Blitzen’s warm, furry back, and they set off into the snow. Elves don’t have very long legs, and the snow was getting thicker and thicker, so the two elves were very glad to have Blitzen to help them, but it made them even more worried about Charlie. If he was trying to walk through the snow, he could be in real trouble. And then, ahead of them, they saw a lump in the snow, with just the tip of an elf hat sticking out.

22nd December

Blitzen and the elves hurried to the lump and began to dig in the snow. There they found poor Charlie, almost blue with cold, curled up in a ball to keep warm. He cried big tears when he saw them. Holly and Bertrand quickly pulled him out of the snow and put him on Blitzen’s back with a thick woolly blanket wrapped around him.

“Oh Charlie, what are you doing out here?” said Holly. “We’ve been so worried about you.”

“I...I...I’m s-s-sorry,” said Charlie through chattering teeth. “I n-n-never meant to c-c-c-cause so m-m-much t-t-trouble.”

“You didn’t cause any trouble, we did,” said Bertrand. “We’re sorry, Charlie. We should never have behaved the way we did.”

“And you don’t need to worry anymore,” said Holly. “We’ll get you back to the workshop and warm you up, and then we’ll find a way to sort things out without any more arguing.”

23rd December

A bit of snow didn’t slow Blitzen down, and she galloped back to the workshop with the elves. Very soon, Charlie was sitting by a roaring fire with a big mug of hot chocolate in his hands and a hot water bottle at his feet, and he began to feel much better. Holly and Bertrand sat with him, very relieved to see his cheeks turning pink again.

“I thought I was trying to help you, Charlie,” said Bertrand, “but I suppose I went about it the wrong way. I shouldn’t have just started pulling down the holly without talking to Holly first.”

“And I’m sorry if I made it seem like I don’t care about your allergy,” said Holly. “I do want to help you. I already have some ideas of other things we could use instead of holly, like tinsel and fairy lights. We can still make the workshop bright and festive.”

“But you can’t give up all the holly just because of me,” said Charlie. “I never wanted that to happen.”

“But I have another idea that might help,” said Bertrand. “What if I put more elves onto the ball team, so that our order of balls is done first, before the decorations go up? Then Charlie won’t have to spend so much time in the workshop while the decorations are up.”

“But what will I do instead?” asked Charlie.

24th December

At that moment, the door opened and in came Father Christmas himself.

"Well done, elves," he said. "I heard all about the commotion, but it looks like everything is all sorted out now."

"It is, Father Christmas," said Bertrand. "I am very sorry for having caused so much trouble. I'll make sure we make up for all the time lost. I promise that all the presents will be made on time."

"I know I can rely on you, Bertrand," said Father Christmas. "You have one of the hardest jobs in the workshop, and I think you will do it even better now that you learnt about the importance of listening."

"And I will help Bertrand before I start fixing the new decorations," said Holly. "I can easily do both."

"That's because you are a very capable and creative worker," said Father Christmas. "I'm looking forward to seeing your new decorations. Traditions are good but it is also good to try new things sometimes. Now that you know this, I'm sure our Christmas decorations are going to be better than ever."

"But what about me, Father Christmas?" asked Charlie. "What will I do in December? I don't want to be the only one not doing anything."

"Don't worry, I shall keep you very busy," said Father Christmas. "Your balls are so spectacular that I would like to give you the chance to show them off. From now on, I'm going to send you out each December to demonstrate your brilliant balls, all around the world. I'm sure that when the children see you with them, they will all be wanting one of your balls. It means we will have to make even more balls during the summer. Do you think you can cope with that?"

"I certainly can," said Charlie. "Thank you Father Christmas. That sounds wonderful."

"Then that's all settled," said Father Christmas. "I don't think I need to say any more, as you all seemed to have learned a lesson from this."

"We have," shouted the elves all together. "Thank you Father Christmas."

"I feel much better already," said Charlie. "We should get back to work straight away."

And so they did, and they found that by working together, they had soon caught up on all the orders, and no presents were forgotten. And when that was done, Bertrand and Charlie helped Holly put up the new decorations. While Bertrand hung the traditional holly wreaths in the places that wouldn't disturb Charlie, Charlie helped Holly hang hundreds of glowing fairy lights. All the elves agreed that the workshop had never looked nicer. And from that day on, Charlie, Bertrand and Holly were the best of friends.

*****MERRY CHRISTMAS*****
