

# The Professors' Party

a holiday story for friends and family

and, particularly this year, for **Gary and Liz Hopper**,  
and everyone who opens their homes  
to make a single family of us all.

by Bo Wilson  
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The Saint doesn't go to many parties.

For one thing, it makes for some tricky logistics. He is, after all, the Saint of All Giving, the master of a large realm at the top of the world, overseeing many thousands of miraculous makers, each fulfilling her or his own vital role in the Saint's vision of how this year's mid-winter giving shall occur. He is busier by far than any titan of industry, any president or prime minister, and (he'd tell you confidentially) busier than any ten saints of other domains. For these reasons and many more, it's not easy for him to get away, except of course for that single night each year.... and even then, he's not really 'getting away,' for on Christmas Eve his realm expands to compass the whole globe.

All of that being said, there are a very few special occasions he tries very hard to attend, and his favorite of these is the Professors' Christmas Party.

They are both professors, or were until they retired-- and in truth, professors never stop professing, regardless of pay or publication. These professors were married and so professed primarily to one another. Their very favorite subject, and one on which they were both authorities, was Christmas. Their expertise all but demanded that they share their joy at the season, so they had long ago begun the annual tradition of a party. Although it began as a modest affair, it quickly as their circle of associations grew; after only a few years it was an event of significance on the social calendars of a great many people. They were surely aware of their party's reputation... but they didn't let it affect how they did things, which was why it was so consistently one of the most delightful evenings of the year.

As the Saint stood before his mirror combing his enormous froth of beard, his Head Maker and oldest friend, Blaine, observed him from the passageway, holding a list of items which had required the Saint's attention. The list now dispensed with, Blaine lingered.

"The Professors' Party, is it sir?" he inquired.

"Indeed," replied the Saint, smiling as he bullied the last whisker into place. He turned fractionally toward the maker. "Like to come along?" he asked, all innocence, knowing full well the answer.

"Will there be people there?"

"Of course," rumbled the Saint. "It's a party!"

"More than three people, sir?" Blaine asked, as though coaxing a slow-witted child toward comprehension.

"Do you *know* the meaning of 'party', Blaine?"

The maker's face was as impassive as the sea. "I believe Mr. Bierce defined it as the opportunity to feel several different kinds of irritation in a single night."

"That wasn't Bierce," snorted the Saint. "But stay here if that's what makes you happy."

"It is my greatest and most thrilling joy, sir," demurred Blaine. The Saint chuckled, the sound knocking several books free from his shelves. He squeezed past his maker, who called after him, "Not too late, sir! You know how we worry!"

The Saint's wave of dismissal was a thing of perfect exasperation. Even Blaine's mouth twitched in something edging toward the beginnings of a smile; he caught it in time, of course, and resumed his duties.

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A word or two about the Professors' house:

It's perfect for parties. Appearing normal from the outside, its interior is splendidly quirky. The various rooms seem specially partitioned to offer welcome and advantage to any sort of personality (even Blaine might have found an unobjectionable corner.) For large personalities-- and there were many among the professors' acquaintances-- there were large rooms, with high ceilings, plush sofas and overstuffed chairs. More restrained folk could make quiet progress along passages that warrenedly invited this way and that, offering a variety of small niches and nests in which two or three people might huddle in cozy conspiracy. Something for everyone, that was the Professors' plan.

This notion extended to the refreshments they offered each year, their deliciousness exceeded only by their abundance. Assortments of savory meats and cheeses, fruits and nuts, cookies, cakes and candies, in such wide variety as to satisfy any taste. There was an open bar, tended by a conscientious young lad or lady, who knew to pour both quickly and generously. Of course, no matter how speedily the drinks were poured, there was always a line...but there was no impatience, for it was while waiting in line that many guests encountered each other for the first time since the previous year's party, and thus did they catch up on one another's follies and fortunes.

But while all of this was quite wonderful, the party's most impressive feature was its top-to-bottom décor, transforming the entire house into the quintessence of the season. No home had ever been more thoroughly Christmased. No spot was ignored; holly and ivy, myrrh and mistletoe, candles and cornucopia-- it was an explosion of the season. There was a beautifully decorated tree in each room, and a great many representations of the Saint himself, some tiny and perched on the mantel; others larger, sitting and standing on windowsills. (Blaine had more than once suggested that this was why the Saint enjoyed the party so much, and it is worth noting that the Saint's arguments on this point seemed rather perfunctory.) Lights twinkled everywhere, inside and out, illuminating everything so that the entire house seemed to look upon you with loving eyes that twinkled at a shared joke.

(Popular gossip has it that the local shops which sell decorations and ornaments know the Professors well, and have been known to close at the merest rumor of their approach, turning off their lights and hiding, lest their shops be emptied of entire inventories, leaving other customers despondent and empty-handed.)

This then, was the Professors' Party: a wondrous, transformative opportunity to feel as though you've entered into the very heart of Christmas itself, where fancies are toasted in fellowship, and no one leaves until they've been warmed to the centers of their heart.

Years ago, the Saint had heard of the party the way that he hears of all the good things we do for one another, and he decided to investigate it for himself. Initially watching from afar, he was drawn as iron filings to a magnet, like seeking like. The following year, he made his way all the way inside. He was careful not to overwhelm the circumstances, making sure to be as unobtrusive as possible. He didn't even allow himself to be seen, not fully-- oh, a guest might see a red woolen cap as it rounded a corner in the other direction, or glimpse a bit of enormous white beard in the reflection of an ornament, or hear a deep and glorious laugh from another room, but there was no suspicion of who or what he truly was. He was the very soul of discretion, for it was not, after all, *his* party, nor was it an affair that required any help from him to be fully and perfectly itself.

Still, he was occasionally unable to resist conjuring something to give things just a bit more sparkle.

There was the year that he quietly ushered in a very handsome young couple who introduced themselves as James and Ella; their clothes were threadbare but clean, and their love for one another was as bright and clear as sunrise over a millpond. Several party-goers found themselves wiping a joyful tear in the presence of such unbridled devotion. They were much remarked upon otherwise, too, not only for their antiquated way of speaking but for their striking appearance. The girl's hair was shorn so short as to be very nearly gone, but seldom had any guest beheld anyone so beautiful... and the young man performed magic tricks with the most splendid pocket watch ever seen. He carried it in his hand, for it had neither fob nor chain, but it gleamed in his clever hands like a tiny sun.

(You might wonder whether the two lovers felt disoriented or out of place, but it is a simple truth of the Professors' Party that everyone in attendance knows with certainty that they belong.)

Another year, the Saint's eye twinkled with a particular brightness; when its light had receded, there stood a crooked and ancient man, as bent as a question mark, and looking appropriately skeptical in the bargain. He looked about him, and there was an instant in which anyone glimpsing him would have felt stark terror, for the lines which the years had carved upon his face were severe, harsh, and unscrupling. It was the face of a bird of prey, a bird which never failed to catch up whatever gleam might catch its eye, grasp and never let go, its scorn for lesser creatures blazing from its face....

.... but then he seemed to remembered something. His eyes widened, and he looked around him in delight. "The spirits are at it again!" he murmured, and he spent the rest of the evening engaging the guests in conversation which he treated as though they were more rare than the weightiest of gold sovereigns. He gave his ear to all who spoke, commenting here with "Delightful!" and there with "A remarkable fellow!" He also, very quietly, made a point of asking after the guests' favored charities, and placing in their hands coins which were doubtless valuable when minted, and worth a great deal more now. When he introduced himself as "Eb" one guest laughed that he'd much more appropriately be called "Flow," such was the tide of his generosity.... and old Eb's laugh was as rich and full as anyone's.

Most recently, the Saint had rung a bell which hung from one of the trees, and from the bell seemed to come a kind of halo.... and in the center of the halo stood a slightly befuddled-looking fellow, who seemed perfectly content even in the center of his confusion. After trying twice to explain to the lad at the bar how to make a rum punch, he had forsworn the effort, accepting a bottle of stout and making his way through the guests, smiling and nodding. He said little, but whomever brushed past him felt a sudden surge of good fortune, as though they'd happened upon a rare bit of luck; it was a feeling like that of finding a bank note in the pocket of an old suit. He confided in a few guests that he was taking flying lessons, and they assured him of their confidence in his success.

This year, the Saint had decided to let well enough alone, and to enjoy the party for its own sake. He basked happily in its cheerful warmth, the laughter and conversation becoming a kind of chorale which soaked into the very bricks and mortar of the house. Then, as though the party itself had been eavesdropping on his thoughts, the sound of a pitch pipe was heard, and several voices answered in tones that either matched it or offered clever harmonies.

(Many of the guests were show folk.)

Time seemed to slow and then stop as the voices lifted in songs of the season, both popular tunes and older carols. The guests moved toward the music, streaming from every part of the house, coming together as many throats and a single voice, the voice of Christmas itself, snowswept and cided, glowing and gifted, one voice to another, weaving an unseen cloak that was as warm a thing as might be donned by the wealthiest lord.

*They* were Christmas, you see. The Professors' party had made them so.

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"I must say it seems rather an exhausting way to celebrate the holiday, sir," said Blaine as he took the Saint's gloves and boots. "All those people coming and going, all the preparation, all the mess to clean up after. I don't know how they do it."

“Oh, come now, Blaine,” chided the Saint. “Surely they don’t see it that way.”

“I suppose they wouldn’t,” came the breezy retort.

“After all,” continued the Saint, “What you call ‘celebrating the holiday’ is really just a phrase for ‘helping people to feel loved.’ It’s why I’m always sure, each year, to celebrate by making sure I say, to you particularly, ‘Merry Christmas, my friend.’”

Exactly one creature in all the many worlds has ever seen Blaine blush.

He’s quite pleased to see it now, as the ageless maker lowers his eyes before glancing shyly back at his friend. “Merry Christmas to you too, Sir.”