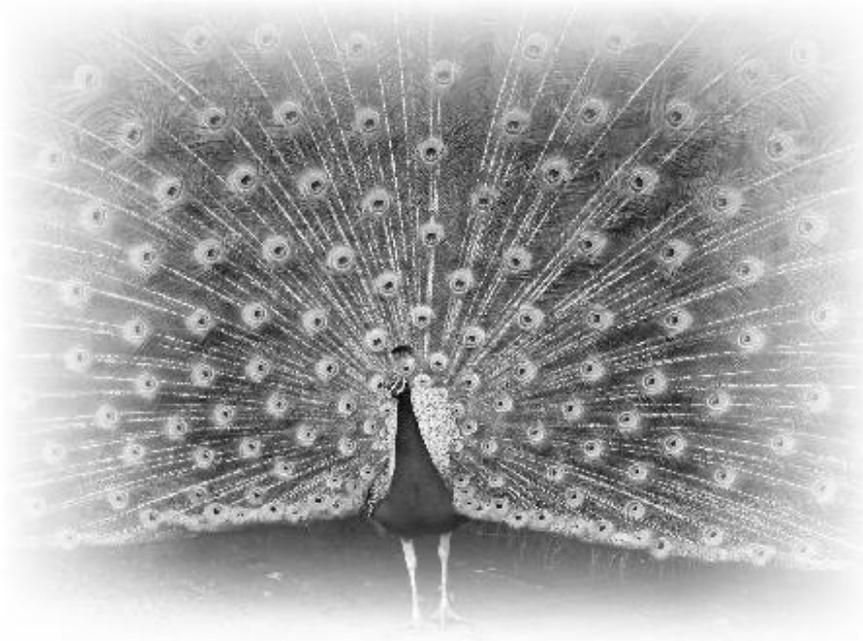


# *A Christmas Tail*



*for the young and the young at heart*

*By Phil Young*

*I*t's a rarely mentioned fact that all the languages on this beautiful planet of ours can be divided into two main groups; human and animal.

Once, many, many long years ago, these two types were very similar and people could understand the animals quite easily and they could understand us. As time went by and humans invented more and more things like houses, wheels and guns, they started to feel very self-important and began thinking it was beneath them to talk with the animals, and that's pretty much the way it's stayed ever since. That is of course with the exception of a few people, like Santa Claus.

Now those of us who've been paying attention at Christmas know that Santa is a fluent speaker of 'Mouse' amongst other languages like 'Deer', which includes Reindeer (of course), Moose (not to be confused with the 'Mouse' spoken in Scotland), and the very rare Wapiti. What you may not be aware of though is that just as there are human languages spoken by vast numbers of different looking people, there are several universal animal tongues. They enable the many species on Earth to communicate and this is what makes our story possible.

*Y*es it was December again and that wonderful festive season was bearing down on the town where Oliver and Eadie Harrigan lived, along with (unknowingly) Millard and Millicent the resident mice.

Just outside of town, in the grounds of the 'Bigg' house that overlooked the valley there was a commotion. This was nothing unusual. Commotion was close to the normal state of things there, what with the large collection of exotic animals the head of the household had collected in his time. For instance, most people would think it odd to see an elephant parked at the bike stand outside the corner store but not the locals in the area. It was just the normal mode of transport for Major Leigh Bigg, the eccentric gent from up on the hill. Also you might think it would be dangerous driving an elephant on the roads but he had taken care of that. As an elephant, Estroharf, (for that was his name), came equipped with a fine traffic warning device. On a car we'd call it the horn but for such animals we might call it a trumpet. It worked very well when needed except that there had been a small problem getting it to sound on request. This was achieved with a translator called 'Wolly' on account of him being one half of a pair of artistic parrots who used to 'doodle all the day' and in any case the other one was 'Polly' so the obvious choice was already taken. Wolly would ride on the Major's shoulder and when it was

necessary to 'sound the horn', the Major would tell him and he would 'suggest' to their big grey vehicle that it would be a good idea and, on most occasions, this would result in the appropriate noise. In this fashion the Major and a varying assortment of his menagerie would make their way around the village and surrounds as required.

On this December day however there had been a problem when Preener the peacock had begun to kick up a fuss.

"I've had a thought" he said to all in sundry. This quickly got the attention of the other animals, after all, peacocks are not known for thinking. They're usually too busy preening. "I think" he continued "that I should be the one to ride with the Major. Wolly is colourful, even pretty you might say, but I am magnificent. I would lend an air of regality to the Major's entourage. Yes, I believe it is my place to accompany him on his outings."

As usual he hadn't really thought it out for as we all now, peacocks are very large birds. There would be no room on the back of Estroharf for all those feathers plus the Major and his baggage. The rest of the animals knew this and they all started voicing their opinions loudly. This was the source of the kerfuffle. Preener strutted around and tried to look majestic but it just made the others yell and laugh at him more. Eventually the chicks and pups and kittens and calves, all the youngsters in the yard, began to chase the unfortunate bird round and round until in fright he did that rarest of things for a Peacock and tried to fly.

As you'd expect for a bird with such small wings and a huge tail, he wasn't terribly successful. He did however manage to get just high enough to leap off a pile of grain sacks, over the wall and into the field outside. Ahead of him lay the big wide world and freedom. This was an unexpected turn of events, but he looked around and smiled. He was free of the raggle taggle band of youngsters that had been pursuing him and the lush green of the farmland called him onwards. He started out towards the distant trees beyond which lay the town, its church, the Harrigans' cottage with Millard and Millicent, and Dowdy's pond. These things he was yet to discover.

*P*reener trudged along, picking at seeds and such as he came upon them and presently he entered the darkness of the copse of trees.

Around him the sounds of the farm retreated as the foliage blocked them out. In the yard the other animals had begun to settle down again. They weren't too worried about the disappearance of the big bird. It was

one less beak to avoid at feeding time and anyway he'd probably be found soon and returned. Peacocks aren't exactly camouflaged in the traditional sense of the word and his bright tail was sure to attract attention the first time he decided to show it off.

Meanwhile on the far edge of the trees, Dowdy and his friends were fussing around the rim of the pond, cleaning up for the coming Christmas and in the depths of the nearby cottage the mice were similarly occupied. Since they had made the acquaintance of Santa Claus over the preceding couple of years, the ducks and the mice had gained a certain house proud attitude to the festive season and liked to make sure their little corners of the world were as presentable as they could make them.

Dowdy's colourful plumage stood out brightly amongst his friends as they bustled about amongst the bushes surrounding the pond. His little head bobbed up and down as he rearranged the ground cover and quacked away quietly to himself, sort of singing something Christmassy he'd heard once. Perhaps it was in the church when he was resting out of the rain a year ago. In any case his mind was elsewhere as he wandered back into the bushes until 'thump', he bumped into something unexpected.

He looked up and nearly tumbled over on his cute little tail. Above him loomed a large blue body, topped with a speckled head wearing a crown of black fluff on stalks. Spread out in a huge fan behind it were eyes, eyes everywhere, staring down at him accusingly, or so it seemed.

The duck's eyes widened in fright and he swallowed hard. His little webbed feet froze to the spot as he looked up at the apparition. For a second or two, neither bird moved. Preener had seen plenty of ducks before but never one that might compete with him in colour and presence. While Dowdy was small compared to the Peacock and nowhere near as ostentatious, his understated splendour had a certain attraction that the big bird's magnificence lacked.

Preener cocked his head to one side and took a better look at the younger bird. "And who are you then?" he said.

"Uh, uh I'm Dowdy", came the reply.

"I don't think so young lad. Dowdy is definitely not the word I would use for you." There was a hint of jealousy in his voice.

"But I am, Sir. That's my name. You can ask my Mum if you like."

"There are others around here then?"

"Oh yes. A whole flock of us. We live here by the pond, come and see." Dowdy was beginning to pluck up his courage again," Come on" and he led off into the clearing beyond the bushes.

The sight of the two brilliantly coloured birds emerging from the leaves nearly knocked the rest of the flock off their feet. One young duck was bum up in the pond as they arrived and righting herself she nearly drowned when she gasped in surprise. She coughed and spluttered her way to the shore and joined the others lining up to find out what was going on. Of course Preener had lowered his tail to walk through the foliage but in a show of bravado he splayed out the golden feathers and paraded around a little as he answered questions from the gathered flock.

At that moment, over at the nearby cottage, Millard and Millicent were on the window sill disposing of rubbish from their home.

"Will you look at that?" she said, staring across the intervening paddock towards the pond. Millard followed her gaze and there, easily visible even at that distance, was the spectacular sight of the big bird on show.

"Well I'll be. Have you ever seen anything like it? Talk about Christmas decoration. I wonder where he came from." And from then on for rest of the day, the new neighbour was the couple's main topic of conversation, just as he was amongst the little community down by the water.

After a day of being the centre of attention, Preener decided to hang around a while. He didn't really have anywhere else to go of course, except back to the farm, and he wasn't ready to head back with his tail between his legs just yet. In fact I suspect trying to put your tail between your legs when you're a Peacock could involve a number of Yoga moves Preener wasn't familiar with, so he just hung around with Dowdy until they settled down in the undergrowth for a nights rest. As was usual whenever someone met Dowdy, he had rather taken to the perky little bird and was quite comfortable in his company. The odd pair tucked their respective beak and bill under their wings and soon small snoring noises emanated from the bushes. Reflections of the stars in the crystal skies flickered across their eyelids from the occasional ripple on the pond. Preener was at peace, away from the constant shuffling and snuffling of the farmyard and its odd collection of friends.

As she drifted off to sleep Dowdy's mother wondered what she'd done to attract another stranger into her life and hoped it would all turn out ok. As her son well knew it was not the first time a spectacular foreigner had tumbled into her life with his father arriving unexpectedly the year before

he was born. For the moment she decided to let it lie and just keep a close eye on the visitor. Perhaps he would leave in the morning and thus thinking, she nodded off for the night.

Meanwhile, across the paddock, the mice were scuffling about doing mouse things in the dark, as they do, when from somewhere high in the house there came a strange sort of husky barking sound. Millicent froze.

"What was that?"

"I don't know. Probably just the house settling" replied Millard, hoping to calm her fears. He was actually a bit scared himself though. It was a weird noise that he'd not heard before and it sounded distinctly like some fearful beast near by. They listened intently for a short while until, just as he thought he may have been right about the building settling, they heard it again. This time though it was accompanied by the sound of something running around in the roof space above them.

"There is it again" Millicent said rather unnecessarily. "What is it?"

"I don't know but I think we'd better find out. Santa will be here tomorrow night and we'll have to go up and collect Eadie's present from him. I'd rather know what we're dealing with now than have to deal with it then. Come on."

"Do I have to?" she replied

"Ok then, I'll go by myself."

"But it might be another Owl."

"I don't think Owls make that sort of noise. Did you ever hear an Owl make that sort of noise?"

"Well no, but..."

"It's probably nothing to worry about. It'll be alright, you'll see."

"Maybe I'd better come too, just in case. You go first though" she said as she nudged him gently in the direction of the hallway. Truth be told she didn't want to be left on her own with an unknown night visitor loose in the cottage. The two of them slunk out into the hall and along the skirting until they reached the lounge. The door was open and they peered around it into the gloom. A partially folded newspaper lay on the floor beside Oliver's chair. As expected the man of the house was nowhere in sight,

but to be sure that the unknown intruder didn't see them, they scurried across to the discarded publication as quickly as they could and into the tunnel formed by the loosely folded pages.

As they rested there a moment planning their next move, the noise came from the ceiling again. It seemed that the perpetrator was moving away from the chimney area. Perfect. The fireplace was next to their usual highway to the roof and with a quiet nod Millard indicated to follow him as he set off up the chair toward the mantelpiece. A short jump and the pair were behind the big clock as it ticked solemnly in the dark. Millicent stumbled slightly as they ran over the wind up key and ducked under the tinsel draped above the fireplace. Around the corner they sped to the hole in the wallpaper that gave access to the wall.

Up, up, they ran; the stripes of light from the street lamps flickering across their backs. Each year the slowly warping weatherboards let in more light and by now it was quite easy to see where they were going. Coming to the top of the wall they squeezed into a tiny space where a fragment had broken off the chimney bricks, and waited for more noises, hoping they hadn't been heard.

Millicent shook a little when outside an Owl hooted as it circled the neighbourhood.

"See, that's an Owl", Millard whispered, motioning skyward. He said it to make Millicent feel better but his confirmation that the dangerous bird was just above them didn't help her one bit. It also meant that whatever was in the roof space with them was something they knew nothing about. It could be almost anything. This thought brought the image of Preener to mind and while it was by no means scary, she did wonder what was going on with these two strangers appearing in the same day.

Suddenly her attention was brought back to the present by a scuffling sound close by and another husky bark. It was way to close for comfort. The mice huddled together as quietly as... well... mice really, so as you'd expect, they weren't discovered. The pounding of their hearts however threatened to reveal their hiding place.

Millard stuck the tip of his nose out just a bit past the edge of the bricks to see if he could recognise the intruder by smell. No luck, he'd have to take a look. He stood up on his back legs and flattened himself against the cold chimney with just one eye exposed to the scene. A beam of light pierced the dark through a hole where a roofing nail had

worked its way out and slid down the corrugated iron into the gutter, never quite making it to freedom.

There was another sound of movement and Millard saw a big furry body with four legs and sharp claws hurry through the beam of light into the far corner. He couldn't fathom what it was, but it certainly looked as dangerous as it sounded. He turned to Millicent.

"We've got to get out of here" he whispered and pushed her towards the wall cavity. As they scurried back down the noggins and braces, movement could be heard directly above them. 'Just in time' he thought. At least whatever it was seemed to be too large to follow them so that was something positive. They popped out onto the mantelpiece and retraced their steps to their home in the wall beside the telephone table.

As their breathing subsided after the rushing about, Millicent asked Millard what he'd seen. His lack of a name for it didn't help, but at least he knew now that it might be a problem on Christmas Eve and that it was too big for him to tackle head on. They would need to employ cunning to get rid of the beast.

The next morning dawned bright and clear as it so frequently does around those parts. The mice had managed to sleep relatively undisturbed for the small amount of time they needed to rest and just to be sure they'd had a sleep in too.

By the time they had risen for the day, Oliver had got Eadie up, dressed, fed and made her comfy in her favourite chair on the terrace overlooking the garden. Millicent looked on somewhat sadly from the sill of the window in the hall, knowing in her heart that Eadie's was an imperfect life now days. Her time was mostly spent chasing wisps of memories that drifted in and out of focus on gentle breezes from her past. She and Oliver had had a happy life together and one of the gifts that age had given her was the inability to recall the few sad times that had been woven into their days. The flighty images she did manage to catch were the source of the perpetual smile that intrigued Millicent whenever she saw Eadie.

Towards the far end of the flower beds, now ever so slightly scruffy from the lack of Oliver's time, the fairies that hide in the sparkle of the dew drops entertained Eadie with their play and beyond the field that bordered the garden Millicent could just see the water birds bathing in the shallows of the pond. Nearby Preener shook out his feathers and poked around for something to breakfast on. Dowdy proffered a piece of water grass but

that's not exactly what peacocks like to eat and Preener politely declined. Casting his eye around for something tastier he thought he saw a plate with a likely prospect on it sitting next to Eadie. He was in fact right. There was a sandwich there sitting uneaten although he didn't know that for sure from way over by the pond.

Now the ducks liked to steer clear of the houses and people around about, but Preener had been brought up in the farmyard with men and women working and children running around and he wasn't backward in being forward when it came to food so off he trotted towards the cottage. He managed to squeeze through the three wire fence, although his tail didn't take too kindly to it and soon he was wandering up the garden to Eadie who was beginning to nod off in the morning sunshine, her face shaded by a wide brimmed sun hat. 'Never go out in the sun without a hat' she had told Oliver time and time again, and now that she could no longer do such things for herself, he always made sure that she had on appropriate headwear for the season. He knew she would be pleased and it made him feel good to know that he was doing what she would wish.

Preener reached for the sandwich and his beak tapped sharply on the plate. Eadie stirred and so he quickly backed up, spreading out his tale to make himself look bigger and stronger, as peacocks do. Her eyes opened, beholding the glorious gold and blues of the feather fan glowing in the light and her face lit up to match. Suddenly the warmth in the garden came not just from the Sun. As Millicent watched with pleasure from behind the lace curtain, Oliver appeared at the kitchen door.

"I see all eyes are on you love. Just as they were at the dance. You were the prettiest thing I'd ever seen..." his voice drifted off as he recalled the night they met at the local hall many years ago when Eadie had come to town to visit her aunt. The eyes he referred to were of course the hundreds of beautiful blue patterns on Preener's tail. They did indeed seem to be watching her intently. The thought of so many eyes on her made a little shiver run up Millicent's spine, and this gave her an idea. Knowing that the couple were both outside, she quickly turned and scurried down across the phone table and back to Millard who was having his morning wash.

"You know the thing in the roof" she said, "if we can't confront it, maybe we could scare it away."

"Scare it away? I know I'm not all that handsome but I doubt I'd see it cut and run just by poking my head into its line of sight."

"No, no. Not you. That big bird next door. Have you seen all those eyes on its tail? Imagine meeting them in the dark. It'd be enough make me run. What do you think?"

"Well... I guess it might work, but how do we do it? That thing is up there and the bird is down here."

"Maybe the bird could fly up. It is a bird after all."

"...or we could try luring it down. By the look of it I doubt the bird can actually fly with that huge tail."

"Very well then. What do we do next?"

"I guess we need to see if the bird will co-operate. I saw Dowdy with it yesterday. We'll go and talk to him later" and that's just what they did.

Going down to the pond was really a bit of an adventure for the two mice. Negotiating the longish grass required good navigation skills to avoid getting lost and there was always the fear of predators diving from the blue, although with the other birds and Eadie around, that was pretty unlikely, so off they went.

The back door was open and while Oliver was up on a chair replacing Christmas decorations that the wind had dislodged the couple slipped out through the kitchen and into the sunshine. The crazy paving on the terrace formed a sort of maze and Millard had fun running here and there figuring out the best way forward, somewhat unnecessarily actually, but he liked to look important and thought he was impressing Millicent with his antics. She wasn't fooled though and smiled to herself as she wondered when he'd really grow up.

Reaching the garden they slipped down into the trough around the edge and hurried off towards the distance fence and into the paddock. From the garden gate a lightly worn path ran down to the water where Oliver would go every now and then for a little alone time in which to 'ponder the universe'. Keeping to the grassy shadows at the edges, they ran in single file across the open space, skipping on and off with one foot or other to clear small stones and earthy clods. Soon they came to the clearing at the waters edge where Dowdy and Preener were sitting chatting about this and that. Mainly 'that' actually.

"Dowdy" called Millicent. "Dowdy..." The two birds turned to see the mice sitting next to them.

"Hello Millicent, how are you?"

"Fine thanks. Who's your friend?" she replied, nodding towards Preener.

"Oh, so sorry. Millicent...Millard...I'd like you to meet Preener. He comes from the house up on the hill."

"Nice to meet you", the couple responded.

"And you too" said the Peacock. "Nice day to be out and about. What brings you here?"

"We've got a favour to ask" she said just a little shyly, and with help from Millard she told the pair about the beast in the roof.

"That sounds like a possum" Preener suggested. "We have them up at the farm. They can get quite nasty when they're in a bad mood. You'd definitely be better off without him around.

"Well, we... I mean I, saw your wonderful tail and thought that maybe you could scare it away with all those eyes on your tail."

"They're not actually eyes you know, but I see where you're coming from. Perhaps it could work. Possums do like their privacy and if he thinks he's under the gaze of hundreds of eyes, he might just move on. But how can I get to him? I'm afraid that although we're birds, us Peacocks are really not very good at flying. We glide not too badly but we're not too good at flying up onto things."

"I guess we'll have to bring him down somehow then. Maybe we can tempt him with something nice to eat. What do they like?"

"The ones I've seen seem to like pretty much everything, but particularly fruit. Do you have any fruit you could use?"

"How about cheese? Cheese is yummy." Millicent said.

"Now now, we don't want to waste good food that we need for ourselves" Millard popped into the conversation. "I'm sure we can find something else. We'll have a look around tonight and get back to you in the morning, if that's alright with you? You will be here won't you?"

"If you need me then I'll be here" Preener replied. He was quite keen on the idea actually. The whole scheme made him feel rather important, which is something Peacocks like very much. As a result he decided to stay around and help out before thinking about returning to the Bigg house. It would be a bit of a holiday and something to talk about if and when he went back. Furthermore, there was nothing he liked more than a

good story to tell, especially when he was the hero and the proposed escapade sounded like it would fit the bill nicely.

Millard and Millicent said their goodbyes and keeping a wary eye on the sky they hurried back to the cottage passing Eadie as she napped and on into their cosy little home to plan the evening's expedition. As they hurried inside, two colourful forms winged their way across the morning sky and whirling round above the pond they flew out over the nearby paddocks and out of sight. Unnoticed beneath them, Preener had just disappeared into the undergrowth for a little nap in the shade.

**D**usk was falling when the phone rang. It made that odd sort of sound that Millard knew by now meant the call was for him and he rushed out and up onto the phone table. This would be the third call he'd received at Christmas but despite that he still found it hard work moving the handset and running back and forth between the earpiece and the mouthpiece to speak with Santa.

"Merry Christmas Millard", came the familiar voice. "I trust you are well?" "Yes thanks Santa. Millicent and I are fine."

"I'm just checking to see if you'll be right to collect Eadie's present this year." the rich dark voice continued. "No problems I hope?"

"Well there is one little one" said Millard in somewhat of an understatement, and he told Santa about the possum.

Let me look up the 'Naughty List' and see if he's on it. I'd hate you to be chasing around after some deserving fellow... Ah, there he is. Yes, it's ok. It seems your possum has been somewhat greedy this past year. Moving into gardens and stealing all the fruit and veges, leaving none for the poor people who grew them. Not a very sharing way to live at all. At one place he even trashed the special comfy home they'd built him and then carelessly damaged their house getting in and out of the roof. I think you'd better try and move him on. Oliver has enough to deal with without a pesky possum causing trouble. Can you handle it? He's not really dangerous you know, but he could cause you problems with coming to meet me on the roof if he's in a bad mood."

"Somehow we'll find a way to be by the chimney when you come, don't worry. Millicent has an idea that just might work."

"Right then, I'll leave it you. I know you won't let me down. Bye bye", and the phone fell silent.

With much huffing and puffing Millard replaced the handset, thinking as he did that it was definitely time Oliver got a new phone, one with a speaker function. 'Maybe Santa could drop one off for him...?'

In the kitchen Millard could hear Oliver's voice as he chatted away to himself while he prepared for bed. Soon the sound faded away with the soft foot steps of his slippers and the house fell silent enough to hear the final rays of sunshine slipping up the wall and back outside for the night.

After a while the noises in the roof started up, followed soon after by snoring coming from the main bedroom. It was time for the nights expedition.

"Come on... off we go" Millard said and they headed out into the darkened house. Down the hall to the Kitchen door (left open as usual), across the lino they went and up onto the table via the dining chairs. "Nothing here". They scanned the benches and the stove top. Oliver had done his usual good job of clearing things away neat and tidy. Nothing had been left out that might attract ants, or mice for that matter.

"Hmmm..."

"What about the rubbish bin?" Millicent offered.

"Good thought. Come on" and they scrambled back down to the floor and over to the cupboard under the sink. "We're in luck, the doors ajar". They squeezed inside, up against the stainless steel cylinder that held the promise of enticing tit bits to suit their purpose. The lid was firmly closed.

"Now what?" she said.

"We'll have to open it and have a look I guess" he replied.

"How do we do that?" Up until last Christmas Millicent had been a field mouse and didn't have the 'city smarts' of Millard.

"There should be a pedal here that I've seen them press to open it. Ah, there it is!" They ran around the bin and sure enough there was a pedal on the side that looked promising. Millard stood on his hind legs and tried pressing it. It didn't move.

He climbed up on it, but he was too light and it didn't budge. "Hop up here with me Millicent" he said, and she did, but it was to no avail.

"How about jumping on it" she suggested. Together they bounced up and down a few times but although it shook a little, nothing happened.

"I think we need more height" he said looking around the cupboard. His eye was caught by the pipes of the sink plumbing. "Come on. Up here!" and they scrambled up onto the nearest pipe.

Together they jumped down onto the pedal and the lid flipped up just a bit. It was enough for them to get in, except that as soon as it lifted, it fell back down again, raising the pedal and flipping them into the air from where they landed roughly on the shelf. That idea wouldn't work.

While Millicent calmed down and wiped the surprised look off her face, Millard had a good sniff at the air, trying to gauge if it was worth trying to get in to the rubbish bin again. "I can't smell any food. I would have thought we'd smell it when the lid opened if there was any. Perhaps we should give it a miss for now and look elsewhere. It's a big house and there must be something we can use." Of course it wasn't a big house. It was only a cottage, but to a mouse that was plenty big enough to fit the description.

They ran around the skirting and poked into the crevices around the fridge looking for errant scraps but there was nothing suitable. A few crumbs that had eluded Oliver's careful cleaning lay about but nothing much else.

"Let's try another room" Millard suggested and off they went, back into the hallway and along to the lounge room. Entry was no problem and soon they split up to speed up their search and hurried around looking for something to tempt the possum.

"What about these?" Millicent called in a strong whisper.

Millard looked up to where her voice was coming from to see her hanging precariously from a branch of the Christmas tree, trying to remove a big red bauble. She thought it was a ripe fruit growing on the tree.

"No! No!" he called in panic. Leave it there and come down quickly. You'll kill yourself if you fall from there". She had him really worried.

Millicent swung around to get a better grip and descend the tree when her hind legs caught in some tinsel which jerked the bauble violently. It started to slip slowly down the slippery pine needles towards the end of the branch. Both mice held their breath. Time seemed to slow down as they helplessly watched it slip ever closer to the end. Finally it broke free and plunged towards the floor.

There was a shattering sort of 'Plop' as it broke into a hundred pieces. It seemed loud enough to wake the dead and they froze where they were, expecting Oliver to appear at any minute. Millicent was in a difficult position not being able to come down straight away and Millard wasn't about to leave her there on her own in the face of imminent danger.

After what seemed like an hour, but was really only a minute or two, there had been no sign of Oliver and they breathed easy again.

"Quickly now! Come on down before anything else happens", Millard motioned to his companion and she hurried back to the lounge room floor weaving her way between the branches and needles of the pine tree.

"Let's try the table he said" and they hurried up the leg of the side table to check it out.

On top was a small pile of magazines and some brochures, including a flier from the local pest control company. Millard shuddered as he noticed a photo of a dead rat on it. Quickly he ushered Millicent away from it to the bowl in the centre of the table. The sweet smell coming from it seemed more promising.

He stood up, sticking his nose over the rim and 'behold' it was full of ripe juicy grapes.

"Bingo!" he exclaimed. Millicent joined him to see what he'd found.

"They should do perfectly she said."

"Yes. Just what we need for the job. Now what next? I guess we'd better store some of these grapes for tomorrow night and in the morning we'll organise Preeener to be in position at dusk." So they set to, picking grapes off the stalks and one by one carrying them down the table leg, across the floor, up the chair, along the mantelpiece, behind the clock, through the hole in the wallpaper and into a hidey hole where the possum wouldn't see or smell them.

It was hard work for the two tiny creatures and it was well after midnight when they finally called it a night and crept home to sleep.

**L**ate the next morning Dowdy and Preeener were fluffing up their feathers in their reflections when two chirpy little voices heralded the arrival of the mouse couple. There followed a detailed explanation of progress since their last meeting and the suggestion was made to try and ambush the possum in the garden shed. Oliver hadn't fixed the door since it came off its hinges in a storm a couple of months before and Preeener

could stay out of sight there until needed. Then Dowdy had a better idea. "Why not do it in the graveyard between the church and cottage? That's really spooky at night and there're plenty of places for Preener to hide where he can pop up from behind a headstone like a ghost."

The others agreed that it sounded like a perfect setup and so the plan was finalised. During the afternoon Millard and Millicent would place a trail of grapes to lead the unwanted visitor into the trap as it were. As possums are generally only out and about at night, all but the last few grapes could be laid from the graveyard to the hole in the roof that the possum used and the last few put in place just before dusk, when he went out on his nightly prow. The furry fiend would be sure to stumble on the tempting morsels and follow them all the way to where Preener would be waiting to scare the wits out of him. Success wasn't assured of course, but the chance of it seemed good enough that Millicent was starting to feel a bit sorry for the poor unsuspecting possum, currently asleep in the attic, blissfully unaware of the scheming going on nearby.

"You know what would be good?" Dowdy piped up at the last minute. "If we shone a light on Preener's tail. That should make it look spookier don't you think?"

"I guess so, but how would we do that?" said Millard.

"Maybe there's a torch in the shed" said Preener. "The Major and his men use them around the farm sheds."

"Stay here. I'll go and have a look" offered the duck. "It is that little building around the back of the cottage, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's it" said Millard. "Good Luck" and the gaily coloured little bird launched into the air. Behind him a trail of rippled circles spread across the surface of the pond from the drops of water that fell from his webbed feet. He tucked them up into his feathers and in seconds he was out of sight over by the cottage. The trio left on the shore stood around a bit self-consciously wondering what to say to each other, until a few minutes later there was a rush of wings and a gentle splash as Dowdy alighted on the water in front of them. He had a smile on his bill, if that's possible.

"Well...?" the other three chorused.

"We're in luck. There's a small torch lying on the floor just inside the door. It should be easy to take outside later. I pecked at the switch and it went on and off ok. If you like, I can work it tonight. That should make it

easier on you two. You can just hide up in the eaves and watch the fun in safety.

He was pleased that he had found something to do to help and an important thing it was at that. He had been starting to feel a bit left out of the adventure, but now he really was a part of it.

“Preener, why don’t you have a rest here and practice your scary voice, if you have one, and I’ll go and keep a watch out while these two place the grapes? I’ll come and tell you when it’s all ready and then we can go back at dusk to wait for him.”

So saying Dowdy flew off to keep an eye out for danger and Millard and Millicent headed back to the house to start setting up for the evenings escapade.

*I*t wasn’t the easiest of tasks, moving the grapes one by one from the hidey hole and the pair were quite exhausted when they had finally laid the trail. It ran from a small pile that they left in front of a suitably sized headstone, across the graveyard, to the base of a tree just inside the cottage garden. There Millicent had carefully, and with much difficulty, managed to balance a series of grapes in various branches leading from where the tree touched the roof, down to the ground. All that remained was to place the last few in the roof between the branch and the sleeping possum. That would be the most dangerous bit and would have to be done right at dusk, before he awoke but as late as possible to make sure they didn’t blow or roll away as there would only be one chance to put them in place.

Finally the Sun began to set and the mice positioned themselves to complete the task. Quickly they carried the remaining grapes up to the attic and made a little pile where they were handy to the task at hand.

Millard looked out of a crack and watched the last rays of daylight fading. There was a flutter below as Dowdy alighted on the doorstep of the shed. A few seconds later and Millard saw him emerge with the torch and fly over the fence to the graveyard, ready for the coming encounter. A bit further away he could just make out Preener’s tail behind the headstone. It was folded down and would soon be invisible in the dark until he raised it and Dowdy did his bit with the light.

Far away to the North Santa was beginning his trip. Now, originally the whole reason for the escapade had been to make it safe for the mice to meet him on the roof to collect Eadies present. It hadn’t occurred to them

that they'd been running around quite safely so far and it probably was all very unnecessary. In fact if they'd thought about it a bit more, they might have decided they were being somewhat mean to the possum. After all, everyone needs somewhere to live. Luckily though they didn't think about it because, as Santa had said, he was actually on the Naughty List and furthermore, Santa had something up his sleeve for the rascal, but more of that later.

**D**arkness descended quickly and the mice went into action. Within a moment or two the final grapes were in place and they ran up into the rafters to watch from where the chimney met the roof line.

Soon the possum rolled over, stretched and stood up. His nose twitched. "Hmmp!" he said to himself. "That smells interesting" and he started looking for the source of the fragrance. The sweet smell of the grapes drew him on and as hoped he quickly found the start of the trail. Glop! "Yum", it disappeared into his mouth. Gulp! And down it went into his waiting tum.

He sniffed around looking for some more and of course he found the next one along the trail. The plan was starting to work as he began snacking his way towards the branch. As he reached the edge of the roof, Milard and Milicent slipped out through the hole in the chimney flashing and ran down to a convenient spot in the gutter, where they could watch the rest of the action without being exposed to the eyes of any passing owls. Last year's encounter with the owl in the church had been one too many for Millicent and so they took extra precautions to be out of sight.

The possum ran along the branches, stopping to gobble down the grapes as he came to them and within a short space of time he was on the ground heading for the graveyard.

Dowdy had been watching and following his silhouette against the moonlit sky so was ready and able to keep Preener up to date on progress.

Finally the possum came to a stop at the pile of grapes in front of the headstone. By now he had eaten quite a few. In fact you could say he'd gorged himself on them, as planned, and so he sat down before the pile to have a short rest and let them settle a bit. He had no intention of leaving the pile there for someone else, but he did need a bit more room to fit them in his tum.

"Ahhhh...!" he said in a satisfied manner. "Lovely... and at Christmas too. What more could a possum want?" then, right on cue, Preener raised his tail from behind the headstone and Dowdy pecked the switch, turning on the torch. All the possum saw was hundreds of big blues eyes gazing down at him, surrounded by a golden fan as the torch glinted off the fluttering feathers.

It was of course totally unexpected and he nearly fell over backwards in surprise. Not surprisingly though he'd never seen a Peacock and had no way of knowing what was confronting him. Furthermore, Preeners body was out of sight behind the stone, so what he could see didn't look like a bird in any shape or form but very much like a ghostly golden halo staring at him from beyond the grave. The effect was almost perfect. Up on the gutter the mice giggled to themselves while Dowdy had trouble not giving the game away as he stifled his laughter.

The possum's eyes were wide (and if you know possums you'll know that's pretty wide) when Preener spoke.

In his spookiest voice he said "Po,o,o,o,o,...sssssum....  
Po,o,o,o,o,o...sssssummmmm"

"Who said that!" the possum flicked his head around looking for the source of the voice.

"I did."

This time he figured out that the voice came from the headstone and made a move toward it. Preener flicked his tail and the array of eyes shimmered, "Stay where you are! Approach at your peril." Possum froze in his tracks.

"Who... who are you?"

"I am the ghost of Christmas Charity".

Fortunately it turned out that Possum was one of the not so rare gullible examples of his species and he was completely taken in by the little show.

"What brings you to my domain, night crawler?" Preener continued.

"I, I, I, just followed the food"

"I should have known it would be food." Preener sneered. "I've been watching you young possum. It seems you have a one track mind when it comes to food. In fact you don't care who's food it is, you take it and stuff

yourself full. You never share while others share with you. You, my boy are a greedy guts and it's got to stop. In particular it's got to stop around here." The eyes shook and shimmered again. Possum took a step back. The light flicked off and all was dark in the moonshadows from the trees of the graveyard.

"Oooooooooo...." It was Dowdy adding to the occasion. Possum shivered. Just by chance an Owl hooted right then, heightening the tension. Possum was really on edge and up on the gutter the mice huddled back as far out of sight as they could. The last thing they needed was to be found by the owl after all their work to get rid of the intruder, but as it happened the hunter it was far enough away that they didn't need to worry.

Dowdy flicked the torch on again.

"Be gone you greedy possum! Go from here now and don't return. If you do you will join us here in the mists of darkness, and remember I'll have my eyes on you." Dowdy added another "Oooooo..." for effect.

Possum was on the edge of leaving as Preener peered carefully around the headstone. His head was out of the torchlight but he could see enough to know that a bit more incentive was needed.

"Ssssssssssssssss... Boo!"

It wasn't really very scary but it was enough of a surprise that Possum jumped in fright and ran around the church and off across the fields, heading for the dark horizon.

**D**oubty and Preener, Millard and Milicent all breathed sighs of relief and each had a little laugh. It looked like their plan had worked.

"Well I guess Santa will be here soon" Millard said. "We'd better get back to the chimney." And they scurried up the roof to wait in the shadows of the brickwork. Below them Dowdy returned the torch to the shed and the two birds strode back to the pond quietly chuckling about their adventure.

"Very convincing ghost voice you've got there Preener" the Duck said.

"I thought it wasn't too bad myself replied the Peacock. Nice touch adding the sound affects though Dowdy" and their conversation drifted off into the night.

Millard checked the sky and almost immediately saw the silhouette of a sleigh with Reindeer pass across the moon and sweep down towards the

cottage. Santa had arrived, and he spiraled down to slowly circle the chimney.

"Hello Millard, Millicent. I see you've taken care of your pesky possum. Well done."

"But where will he go Santa?" said Millicent. She was definitely beginning to feel guilty about frightening the poor thing.

"Oh don't worry about him, I passed him on my way over and I have a plan for him. He'll be fine and you won't have him stealing food around here again. Now, here's Eadies present... catch!" and he tossed it out to float down beneath its little parachute into Millards waiting hands. "See you next year. Take care and Merry Christmas!"

With that unmistakable sound of cloud-muffled hooves, the sleigh swung out over the pond and was away again leaving a cloud of tiny parcels drifting down to earth in its wake.

As the mice hauled the tiny present back inside, they didn't notice Santa swoop down over a distant field and back up into the sky on his way to finish his record breaking flight around the world.

**D**own the rafters and over the ceiling joists the mice ran. Sliding down the braces in the wall, flish flash, flish flash they went, the tiny sack over Millards shoulder.

"I wonder what could be in it?" he thought, but knew better than to peek at Eadies present. He also noted that somehow Santa always managed to deliver her a present that just fitted neatly through the hole in the wall as it did this time. Around the corner of the mantelpiece they went and over to the stocking hung above the fireplace. Millard held the present by the cords of the parachute and lowered it into the stocking. He brushed his hands together. "There... all done. Time for bed, finally. Tomorrow's Christmas morning." And he smiled, just a little self satisfied, to himself. Outside Preener and Dowdy were settling down with matching smiles to sleep. They'd made a good team, the birds and the mice, Preener was thinking. 'What a nice way to get things done, co-operating like that instead of the constant fighting and chasing and quarrelling of the farm yard'; but he did miss it. Perhaps he should go home now that he'd done his bit at the pond and so thinking he nodded off to sleep.

**C**hristmas morning dawned clear and bright as expected. As she had for the past few years Eadie arose with a smile and hurried through to the lounge room to check the stocking. As we know there was a

present in it for her and she rushed out to the kitchen to open it in front of Oliver who was making breakfast. Being familiar with this routine by now, Millard had woken Milicent and they snuck out on the windowsill in the hall from where they could see what was unfolding in the kitchen.

Excitedly Eadie unwrapped the present and held up a bag of unshelled peanuts and her face dropped. This was not at all what anyone expected. For a start, Oliver was allergic to Peanuts and while the present wasn't for him, there was always the danger that a piece might fall in his porridge or into his cup of tea. Eadie could be a little uncoordinated at times so an accident like that wasn't entirely out of the question and as so many folk know, for people with peanut allergies that could be fatal. The other thing was that as a result of Oliver's allergy Eadie had never had them to grow to like them. It really did seem odd that a man of such vast knowledge as Santa Claus would leave them at the cottage.

Oliver was standing at the sink looking somewhat puzzled about it when through the kitchen window he saw the answer.

Now if there are two things Eadie really does love, it's children and animals and 'lo and behold' there in front of the cottage proceeding noisily down the road was a parade of all sorts of animals, accompanied by children. Lots of children, running and laughing and playing with the goats and dogs and cats and chickens and pigs and parrots and zebras and kangaroos and wombats and elephants! Well only one elephant actually and yes, you guessed it, it was Estroharf, with Major Bigg mounted on top and Wolly on his shoulder. The animals from the Bigg house had been searching for Preener since soon after he disappeared over the farmyard wall and early Christmas morning Wolly had flown over the pond again and spotted him fast asleep beside Dowdy. He looked so peaceful and comfy there that the parrot had organised a 'Please Come Home We Miss You' parade to encourage him to return. The children who had risen early to check their stockings, had joined the throng as it passed through the town on its way. (It's doubtful their parents even knew they were gone.)

'That Santa knows a thing or two more than I gave him credit for' Oliver thought as he followed his wife out into the lane and he smiled broadly in the morning light. As he passed the garden, the flowers opened to greet the Sun, some of them nodding gently as two little bodies brushed past on their way from the mouse hole to the pond.

By the time all the residents of the cottage had caught up with the parade it had reached the waterside and come to a stop. There, in front of the

crowd stood Preener. Having just finished his morning wash his tail was spread grandly in the sunshine, shining like a big Christmas decoration over the ducklings gathered round to open their presents. He looked truly magnificent and all the animals and children in the parade said so. He felt all warm inside and not just from the rays of Sun. He knew now that his farmyard friends really did like him despite it all and he was also amongst new friends who appreciated him for helping them out. It was really the nicest present he'd ever had.

As for Eadie, well Oliver suspected that Estraharf had a liking for peanuts and he was right. By the time the surprise party had come to an end, the children had drifted home to Christmas dinner and the menagerie was heading for home, she had a new friend. A kind of big, grey friend, but a friend nevertheless and as they disappeared around the corner, Major Bigg called out, "Come and visit anytime Eadie and Merry Christmas!" It seems that Eadie's real present wasn't peanuts at all.

The last she saw of the animals that first day was the vibrant golds and blues of Preener's tail waving goodbye in the sun as he trotted contentedly home. You might even say he was showing his 'Christmas Tail.'

Oh! Perhaps you're wondering what became of Possum, well when Santa dipped down to the fields as he left the cottage, he scooped up the furry fellow and took him on a whirlwind tour of the world, ending up at the North Pole. With his fur coat and night time habits, Possum was perfectly equipped to be one of Santa's helpers through the long Winter nights and so he was given a job in the bakery. As you might expect, the Elves and other helpers are free to sample their baking to their hearts content and you could be excused for thinking it would be dangerous to let a greedy guts like Possum loose in there. However, as chocolate factory workers know, the novelty soon wears off, and he so he quickly settled into a comfy life amongst the warm community of Santa's workshop. Despite his terrifying experience with the 'Ghost of Christmas Charity' and with a cosy new home and plenty of food, even Possum felt he had received the best Christmas present his little heart could desire... a life of making (and occasionally sampling) Santa's tasty treats, topped with the reward of sharing them with the children of the world.