

Another Good Turn

By Phil Young



*Merry Christmas 2009
from Elaine and Phil*

A Christmas story

for the young and the young at heart.



ome people believe that children grow up to become what you name them, some people believe in being charitable to others, some people believe in love and some people believe in Santa Claus.

Dowdy believed in all of those things except the last one. He just wasn't quite sure.

Now Dowdy was a duck. Not a very big duck. Just a sweet little bundle of greyish feathers who lived on the pond next to the churchyard and just over the fence from Oliver and Eadie. He longed to be a brightly coloured bundle of feathers and would spend many hours standing at the edge of the water looking down at his reflection and wishing it would come true. In his eyes he was so colourless that on grey days his image disappeared into the reflection of the cloudy sky above. "Ah..." he would sigh. That was enough to express what he felt. Just "Ah..." and the sadness and resignation of that one word would drift out on the ripples spreading from his little legs and sink wearily into the depths.

To his way of thinking it was all his Mother's fault. Who would call their child Dowdy? Just the sound of it made him feel drab and uninteresting. Life would go nowhere for someone called Dowdy. Once or twice he actually plucked up the courage (plucking of course is a dangerous thing to do in Duck circles) and asked his mum why she gave him such a boring name. "It was your father's name" was the reply. No more, no less. That was enough and he left it at that. Had he enquired further he would have found that 'Dowdy' was actually spelled 'Tao-di'. His dad had been Chinese and perhaps this explained why he was that little bit different to the other young ducks on the pond.

Dowdy did know however that just before he hatched, his mother had been on the nest and his father was off looking for food, when poachers shattered the afternoon quiet with their shotguns. His father never returned after that, so really he thought that he couldn't complain too much about being given his name. There was another issue with it though. All the other young ducks made fun of him and called him 'Doubty'. Not only because of the similarity to his given name, but also because he doubted so many things, especially Santa Claus. After all they thought, 'who could doubt the old man's existence when every year at Christmas the local children would run down to the pond with presents for them of yummy leftovers from the feasting'. By their reasoning, it was a special day and only a special person such as Santa would warrant such festivities. The idea of church of course was totally lost on the ducks, what with them never having been inside one. Only the bravest mice and the feistiest barn owls ever went in there or maybe the occasional cat or two, as the mice will tell you if you care to ask.



ell, one Christmas Eve Dowdy had just finished a long session of water gazing and was waddling along the shore when he saw Oliver gently leading Eadie up the lane to the church. As was her way, Eadie was blissfully unaware of the significance of the day and most of what was going on around her. She smiled broadly when she saw the Bakers approaching from the other direction. There were thirteen children in the family and rumour had it that they were the ones who brought about the term 'Baker's dozen' for thirteen of anything. Joe Baker, the head of the family, had clearly stated the last time his wife was expecting a child that it was the final one and they would stop at a dozen kids. However, they had twins so the Baker's dozen turned out to be thirteen. The story was only a rumour after all and

nobody really believed it, but it was always something to chat about when you met them in the street and that's what happened at the lynch gate outside the church.

The children fluffed around like a flock of ducklings as the adults exchanged season's greetings and small talk. The tolling of the bell from the steeple made it a mite difficult to hear so soon the little crowd outside the big pointed church doors, shuffled into the echoes of the stone building. There was a chorus of creaks as they sat in the pews, not a few of which seemed to come from the backs of the parishioners. Country life could be hard on a body.

At the front of the church, beneath the modest stained glass window stood a small nativity scene, complete with the usual animals standing silently looking at the baby Jesus. Baker child number eight, officially known as Beresford, or 'Berry' for short, was swinging his legs aimlessly as he leaned on the book rail of the pew in front and staring at the scene, when there was a rustle in the straw at Mary's feet. It was so small that it barely caught the eye of the boy, but it did. He perked up and peered intently at the pile of dry grass. Soon there was another rustle and the flick of a tiny tail as a field mouse hurried about his business in the maze of tunnels that wound their way beneath the manger. He had hitched a ride into church with the farmer when he delivered the bale and discovered all sorts of interesting and edible things hidden in there. Soon the preacher was droning on, his voice rising into the beams of the steep roof and bouncing around playfully until they faded away into the corners. It was here that the jumbled words came across the Barn Owl, half asleep in the shadows. One eye was tightly shut while, much to the annoyance of its owner, the other kept popping open every time the voice from the pulpit below rose in an attempt grab the attention of the drowsy congregation. The bird's tummy rumbled with hunger. He had been trying to sleep all day but the hustle and bustle of a church Christmas had kept him from slumber and now he was starving, or so he thought. Other parts of his lower regions joined in the chorus of bodily noises and he unconsciously made himself comfortable again, decorating the head of the priest below who swiped at what he thought was a fly above him. A wave of giggles swept down the row of Baker kids, followed by a few quick glares from their parents.

The drone of the sermon resumed and with a ruffle of feathers the owl settled down again.

About this time it started to rain outside. All the ducks hurried to the water to play amongst the raindrops. All except one that is. Dowdy didn't really like rain. Water under underneath was one thing, but having it fall on you was something different altogether in his opinion. And when it came to flying in the rain, now that was really problematic. If he didn't keep up enough speed the drops would pound him out of the sky, and if he did keep up enough speed then they splattered on his face making it impossible to see. What's more with all the extra effort to fly in those conditions, he would be breathing heavily and nearly drown as the water splashed into his open mouth. All in all rain was a pain. "Great weather for ducks indeed! Give me sunshine any day!" he'd quack and waddle off to find shelter.

As it happened, this particular year the farmer had been doing a general clear up of the farm and the pond had resounded to the sounds of a line trimmer and tree saw as his

nephew chopped back the blackberry bushes and pruned the fruit trees. All the scrubby bushes that had crowded around them like a pack of school kids in a lolly shop were now gone to provide access to the trunks for the ladder. As a result there was little shelter to be had for a duck on a wet Christmas Eve.

The rain started to get heavier and Dowdy looked around for a spot to hide from it. Seeing the open church door nearby he decided to try his luck there. Off he toddled along the hedge and through the gate, up the path and into the vestibule. He sort of flapped and jumped up onto a pile of hymn books on a chair and turned to look back at the weather outside shaking himself all over. Droplets of water flicked off, landing all over the rack of flyers arranged along the wall while more dripped onto the hymn books and trickled down the edge of the pages. Next Sunday a puzzled verger would find them stuck together.

Now it's a well known fact that ducks can't frown, but if they could Dowdy would have lost his by now and that perpetual smile of contentment would have returned. He was dry and somewhat warmer now. Actually he noticed that the warmth was flowing out from inside the main church itself where the crowd of bodies pumped out 37 degrees centigrade and the electric heaters high above the windows struggled to add their little bit to the general atmosphere. It was an oddly cold day for the time of year.

The little bird pondered it for a while and decided to go in search of the source of the heat. There was a quiet Plop! as he landed on the stone floor and turned to the doorway, gazing down the long blue strip of carpet towards the nativity scene. The ends of the pews obscured the parishioners arrayed down each side. He took a couple of hesitant steps into the room. The carpet felt soft and warm underfoot. This was a new experience for the wild fowl and not unpleasant at all. He waddled on a bit further looking around as he went. Then an enticing smell beckoned him from down one of the rows. There was no-one sitting there so he turned and went in search of its source.

"Let us pray." said a voice from the far end of the church. The congregation closed their eyes and lowered their heads. All that is except the Baker twins who had been playing 'Paper, Rock, Scissors' just out of sight of their parents. They kept right on, engrossed in their little competition.



owdy wandered along between the pews until at the far end he found a small piece of fruit. He gobbled it down, wagging his head to make sure it slipped smoothly down his throat. 'Marvellous' he thought, 'I could do with some more of that' and looked around. Lo and behold a trail of scraps from a mince pie led down the side aisle to the front of the church. Quickly he followed it, gulping down each morsel with delight, unnoticed by the praying congregation and unwittingly slipping past the twins absorbed in their game. Soon he was sitting inside the dark base of the baptismal font. He began preening himself with pleasure as all heads were raised again. No-one was any the wiser that he was there. Hidden behind the many legs of the font he stared out at into the church. The surroundings were all very new to him but not that strange really, with the straw of the nativity strewn across the floor and the animals standing around the manger with Mary and Joseph and their visitors. They did look a bit stiff though. He could have sworn that not one of them had moved since he came inside. He took a better look and saw that they were just cardboard cut outs from the 'DIY

Christmass Shop' in the city that lurked just beyond the hills. He smiled inside, matching his thoughts to his constant expression, but then he noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye. Watching carefully he soon saw a piece of straw rustle. From his position at floor level he could look into the nooks and crannies to where a tiny pair of eyes gazed out into the light. It was the mouse.

Now Dowdy had always had a soft spot for mice. They seemed to have a hard time of it in the countryside. Always the prey and never the predator. Innocent wee beings who helped clean up the bushes and tidy up round the edge of the pond. They had had a lot of bad press over the years and with the burden of his name, and all the teasing that it caused, Dowdy felt a certain connection with them as brother victims. It made him feel somewhat at home in the church knowing he wasn't the only uninvited guest in there, but little did he know that there was one more hiding in the rafters waiting to cause havoc.

The voice in the pulpit continued to drone on and Dowdy became drowsy in his cosy little nest. Every now and then he'd wake with a start as someone in the congregation awoke with a grunt and a giggle ran along the line of Bakers. Soon the light started to fade and the stained glass windows glowed with the radiance of the setting sun. Up in its hiding place the Owl stirred.



inally the service came to an end and the pews began to empty. Oliver helped Eadie to her feet, his hand gently supporting her elbow and they edged along to the central aisle. Someone flicked the lights on and Eadie's eye was caught by the Nativity scene. She was intrigued and pulling away from her husband's touch she went up to the manger and peered inside, disturbing the straw as she did so. Almost under her feet the mouse took fright and rushed out into the light.

The shadows amongst the rafters flickered as the Owl prepared to dive. At this point Dowdy was watching from the shadows and noticed the movement. Almost as one, the two birds launched themselves into the void of the church, the duck ascending in a somewhat clumsy climb and the predator swooping silently from its perch in the dark. Beneath them the mouse saw the movement and tried to run for shelter between Eadie's feet. She squealed with delight and high stepped back onto the carpet. The retreating congregation turned at the commotion in time to see the Duck and the Owl on a collision course above the altar. Someone screamed in surprise. Another cursed and quickly covered their mouth with a guilty look.

Dowdy did a barrel roll just avoiding crashing into the Owl which banked away into the cloisters where the Bakers were traipsing towards the door. The silent wings of the hunter flicked across Mr Baker's hairless head and as it sought to gain height again its razor sharp claws caught the cap of the eldest Baker boy. "Oi!" he exclaimed and grabbed at the air, missing the bird completely. A forest of little hands rose into the air trying to help and there were Baker children launching from pews and running up the aisles in an attempt to retrieve the headgear. Chaos was quickly developing. The preacher stood in the pulpit clutching a bible to his chest with a look of horror on his face as he ran his fingers through his thinning hair. He gazed towards the heavens praying for divine intervention, but instead was just in time for the delivery of a little whitish parcel of bird poop directly onto his glasses. Quite which bird was the culprit I couldn't

say, but it was enough to cause small tears of frustration to form in the corners of his eyes. He sat down heavily with his head bowed and resigned himself to sit out the confusion. Luckily he didn't look up again for a while. If he had he would have seen hymn books shooting up into the rafters as the Baker twins decided to try make the Owl drop the cap. Their parents, who had been watching the bird as it rose, saw the books in the air and turned to their children to chastise them.

Landing on a ledge Dowdy looked down on the scene just in time to see Mrs. Baker collapse as a hymn book landed on her head. Nearby he noticed the confused little mouse wondering where to hide next. There were children running, women fainting, books and bird poop falling and men cursing everywhere. Nowhere seemed safe. The mouse ran out into the centre of the church in bewilderment as the Owl let go of the cap which wafted down somewhat like an Autumn leaf. She ran back and forward trying to avoid it as it fell, but to no avail. Right before Dowdy's eyes it landed with a 'plop!' trapping the little animal beneath out of sight of the hunter.

Seizing the opportunity, the duck swooped down and nudging the cap out of the way Dowdy picked up the little fellow by the tail and launched into the air, heading straight for the open doors. Out into the dusk he flew with his unwilling passenger squeaking loudly about not wanting to be eaten. Of course Dowdy couldn't tell her that he wasn't planning on having mouse for dinner because if he'd opened his mouth the poor thing would have fallen to the ground. He did a quick circuit of the pond looking for a good spot to land her then decided to put down in the Harrigan's lovely garden next door. She would be safe there. Just as they touched down, Oliver and Eadie came home from the church through the side gate and went into the house. Through the door the two animals could see the coals banked up in the fireplace and glowing warmly as the smell of bread in the oven wafted out into the evening air. The mouse headed straight for the cottage where Dowdy knew she would receive a warm welcome, but before disappearing into the warmth she stopped, turned around and asked, "And who am I to thank for my rescue then?"

"I'm Dowdy. I know I look that way, but that's my name too, unfortunately."

"Well I don't think you're dowdy at all. I think you're brave and fearless. You just keep that up and I'm sure you'll have a life that is full of everything but dowdiness. Thank you so much for saving me."

"Maybe you're right. Someday perhaps I'll be bold and bright, but I doubt it."

"Don't be a doubter my friend. The world is full of strange things and you never know what may come to pass."

With that she waved goodbye and hurried inside to a new life.

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ack at the church things were calming down again. The Bakers picked up the hymn books and placed them back on the pews, carefully flattening the pages that had been crumpled by their journey into space. The preacher rose again at the return of relative calm, wiping his glasses with the hem of his cassock as the family filed out the door and the Owl settled back onto his perch with an "Hurrumph!" of frustration. He was still hungry thanks to Dowdy's selfless rescue.

All the rushing about had worn poor Dowdy out and he did a short hop over the fence and back to the pond to sleep. First though he had to put up his Christmas stocking. Well ducks don't actually wear stockings so he did what ducks traditionally do. He broke off a big Lilly pad and standing on one side, folded it over into a pouch with his beak and stuck a twig through the edge to hold it closed. Then he hung it on the designated Christmas bush for Santa to find, just in case he really did exist. 'Time for sleep', he thought and crawling into a sheltered nook he snuggled his little grey body next to his Mum for the night.

For ducks, as for the rest of us, Christmas Eve night can be a restless time and Dowdy tossed and turned all night in dreams, annoying his mother no end with his flailing feet. His head was filled with running mice and swooping Owls, excited children and ringing bells and somewhere just before he awoke his dream self looked into the pond once more, and there in his reflection he saw a handsome young duck with multi-coloured feathers. He had red and green and orange and purple plumage the likes of which he had never seen before and all the other young ducks gathered around to admire him. No-one was calling him 'Dowdy' anymore.



Meanwhile over the fence in the Harrigan's house Millicent, the recently rescued mouse had befriended Millard the resident rodent. Like Dowdy, he had been known to do a favour or two for others and in the process met and helped Santa with his busy job.

Since that time he had taken to waiting on the roof to greet the old man on his annual rounds and this time he invited his new found friend along. Up they scampered on the frames inside the walls with the street lights flashing once again on their coats. Across the attic, up the chimney and out onto the roof. Together they sat by the tower of brick and waited for the distant "Ho, Ho, Ho" as Santa approached.

"You know" said Millard. "You were very lucky today that Dowdy was there to rescue you. I'm sure you'd be a goner if he hadn't been so brave. He could have been killed, taking on the Owl like that."

"I know. I'd love to be able to do something for him in return."

"Well maybe you can" Millard said mysteriously.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You'll see" he replied and fell to silent watching the sky.

With the chill in the air, it was fortunate that Santa wasn't too long in arriving. He landed gently and parked the sleigh on the ridge.

"Merry Christmas Millard and who's this with you?"

"This is Millicent and she has a small favour to ask you Santa."

"Very well Millicent. What can I do for you? Any friend of Millard's is friend of mine."

Millicent stayed silent. She was overawed by the big man in red and somewhat humbled by Millard's familiarity with the legendary philanthropist. Knowing full well that Santa was in a hurry, Millard spoke up.

"Today Millicent was saved from death by Dowdy, a duck from the pond over there and he pointed towards the neighbouring paddock. She was hoping to do something for him in return."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well he's ever so sensitive about his grey coat and would love to be all bold, bright colours. Is that possible?"

"I don't see why not. Dowdy eh? I think I know the lad. You just leave it to me. Now I must keep moving. There's Eadie's present, you can handle that for me again can't you Millard? I'm off then. Lovely to meet you Millicent. See you next year" and he bounced up onto the sleigh and with the clatter of light-footed hooves, the reindeer pulled away and circled down to the pond.

"What's he going to do?" Millicent asked.

"I guess we'll find out in the morning. We'd better get down from here quick before that Owl has another go at you" and the two of them hurried off down the through the house to deposit Eadie's present in the stocking.



Outside, over the fence, a quiet swooshing sound heralded the passing of the sleigh and little parcels tumbled from Santa hands straight into the Lily leaves pinned on the Christmas bush. All of them were wonderful treats for ducks, such as yummy food, or fragrant oils to help keep their feathers waterproofed. All that was expect one. That one that drifted softly into Dowdy's leaf, suspended on a cloud of stardust. The gentle glow lit the bushes around the pond and reflected off the ripples left by the passing sleigh, but no-one stirred.

In the morning Millard led Millicent up onto the table in the hall making sure to stay out of Eadie's way as she ran excitedly to the kitchen to show Oliver her present. The mice clambered up on the phone and jumped across to the window sill. There they hid behind the curtains and looked out across the garden and past the fence to the paddock and the pond beyond.

In their cosy little nook, Dowdy was just waking. His mother slept on as he waddled out to the Christmas bush. All the young ducks were rushing around oblivious to him as they opened their presents and congratulated each other. 'Just as usual he thought. They're ignoring me again. No one wants to play with a dullard like me'. In the back of his mind though, he wasn't sure that he actually wanted play at all. He felt somewhat older all of a sudden. Maybe his little escapade on Christmas Eve had helped him grow up and the flock of giggling ducklings seemed all a bit childish. 'Oh well' he thought and went over to the bush. 'Lets see if so-called Santa has bothered to leave me anything.' A couple of young ducks by the bush moved back and stared at him with puzzled looks on their faces. Dowdy ignored them. He was too interested in seeing whether Santa had left him

a present because although he was doubtful about the existence of the jolly red one, he secretly hoped for proof that he was wrong.

He poked into the folded leaf and pulled out the contents. It was slippery in his bill and dropped gently onto the soft earth at his feet. He looked down at it and looking back was the brightly coloured duck of his dream. He waggled his head. It waggled its head. He opened his mouth. It opened its mouth. He winked at it. It winked back at the same time. He tried to peck it, but just succeeded in banging bills with it. Then it dawned on him that it was a reflection. Just like the pond. 'But that doesn't look like me' he thought. He rushed over to the pond where he knew he would see himself and there he was, bright and bold with colour. It was him alright but his dreams had come true and he was a handsome young duck, brighter and more magnificent than any duck in the county. He was overjoyed. "Thank you Santa" he said quietly to himself and in that instant he became a believer.

Just then his mother trotted out of the bushes and cried "Dowdy!" with a look of amazement on her face. It was a wonder she recognised him at all, but then mothers always do know their children don't they? On the other hand there was another good reason she knew it was him. He looked exactly like his dad had on the day she met him. He had been a wondrous sight in their little community. A traveller from a far off land, he had blown in one day on an Easterly wind, all flash and fire. She had been entranced at first sight. There had been a whirlwind romance and soon Dowdy was on the way, snugly tucked away in the nest with his mother keeping him warm as his father left for a short flight on that fateful day. At the sight of her handsome son, her eyes watered and a little tear dripped off her bill with a soft 'plop'.

"Look at me, Mum" he said. "Look at the surprise Santa left me."

"You're beautiful son, just like your dad."

On the windowsill of the cottage, Millard and Millicent could just make out what was going on. She turned to him and spoke.

"Is that what I think it is? Did Santa really do that?"

"I suspect so" he replied. "He's like that you know, and it wouldn't be the first time he did a good turn for another."

In the kitchen Eadie sat smiling to herself. Oliver reached out and gently touching her hand said, "Happy Christmas sweetheart". Outside, beyond the garden they could hear the distant quacking of happy ducks.