

‘FORGET ME KNOT’

Another Christmas tale of the folk on the fringe of town.

For the young and young at heart.

By Phil Young

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The Year That Was

It hadn't been a particularly good year on the fringe of the town.

The countryside had taken a long time to recover from the flood and the folk on the fringe; both man and beast, had felt uneasy going about their business in the turmoil of the tumbled environment.

The paddocks on the Bigg estate looked bedraggled and bare where soil had been washed away by mudslides and a broken fence or two awaited repair by the farm hands. The Major hadn't been too concerned about his animal friends wandering off, and rightly so. When the opportunity finally came to close the gaps on the boundaries, not one of the farmyard residents had gone off looking for adventure. In truth of course, none of them was there against their will and so the little community remained, all being it was not quite as happy as it had been in less interesting times.

On the pond life had been uncomfortable for several months while Dowdy, his mum and their friends could still taste the mud left by the river when it broke its banks. Finding food was a real chore for a while until the grasses and seeds began popping their heads up once more, but eventually this happened and life started to return to the old norm.

In the Harrigan house though, things would never return to normal. After years of slowly drifting away from Oliver, Eadie had finally gone for good. A quiet service in the church next allowed her loved ones to say farewell and quite a number of them there were too. Many who came were not even noticed. Millard and Millicent had been nearby when Oliver woke alone that fateful morning and so had spread the word amongst the animals. As a result the nooks and crannies of the chapel held many a furry or feathered friend of the gentle soul. Somewhat to the amazement of her cousins who had come from afar, when the congregation filed out the big wooden door, the path was lined with the larger of Eadie's friends. First in line was the big grey form of Estroharf, her favourite. It was his task to lead the procession the short distance to the graveyard next door. There he joined in the ceremony on behalf of the smaller of his companions, scattering a small measure of soil over the casket with his trunk.

For his part Major Bigg understood the effect all this would have on Oliver and began dropping by on a regular basis to keep him company and often they'd play a few games of 'Cathedral'. The shadows and light on the angular pieces and the simple rules would distract him as they played and occasionally the harrowed look on his face would be replaced with the kindly smile so loved by his friends.

At first the Major made a point of riding Estroharf when he visited, just as Eadie would have expected, but it soon became clear that the sight of the elephant brought back too many memories for the lonely widower. Next time the soft 'thump' of the great feet was replaced with the rattle of cart wheels in the country lane, punctuated by the 'clop clop' of hooves as he pulled up on the cobbles outside the front door. Harriett had been deputised to provide the transport.

Despite his best intentions though, the visits did little to lift the gloom in the little house where Millard and Millicent kept an eye on Oliver and they watched unseen from beneath the telephone table as he passed them in the twilight hours.

So the year dragged by until Christmas put out its feelers to remind the fringe dwellers it was coming round again. Millard felt a little tingle of excitement when he thought about it. It would mean another call from Santa, or at least, it should. This year had been one out of the ordinary though so who knew? Perhaps Christmas would be different too but he really hoped not. It would however be different without Eadie and the thought occurred to him that it was going to be Oliver's first festive

season on his own and perhaps something could be done to make it easier for him, so he set to pondering just what that might be.

Now apart from special occasions, the Harrigan house mice didn't really go outside but they had been often enough to get an idea of the neighbourhood and this included some large fields behind the church. They were part of a farm that stretched off up the valley towards the mill and were usually used to make hay that was kept in an open barn up along the riverside road.

From one of the many holes that had developed in the cladding, Millard had watched the farm hands as they harvested the hay for the year and as was his want, he mulled over the purpose and uses for such stuff. A lot of effort was being expended to stockpile it so there must be some point to it.

As a mouse he wasn't all that fond of eating grass so that thought didn't appeal to him. It didn't look too strong so wasn't a candidate for a building material, or so he thought. The problem of the purpose of hay nagged at him for some time until one day he noticed a small bird in the tree just outside. The little fellow was merrily chattering away as he assembled the beginnings of a nest, flitting to and fro with all sorts of materials that he wove into the framework. After a day or so Millard noticed that the wanna-be father kept returning with pieces of hay and these he deftly incorporated into a rope-like feature binding the oddments of the nest together.

"If only he could tie it in a knot" thought Millard, "it would be much stronger" and he resolved to give it a try himself somehow. Just quite how he wasn't sure, but in the matter that coincidence comes to those who need it most, an opportunity arrived that night in form of a visitor. It was Barnaby from the Bigg house. As a one-time distant traveller he had dropped in on his nocturnal friends in the hope of a bit of interesting conversation.

Now Millard knew (as did all the local animals), that the little bat was fond of a bit of adventure and curious about the world in general so he told him about his ideas and asked if he would help. "No sooner done than said..." Barnaby replied, "I'll nip out and get some for you now."

"Thanks. It's not 'No sooner done than said' though..." and his voice trailed off unheard in the direction of his disappearing friend.

Soon there was a fluttering sound at the hole, and the little bat returned with a big (for him that is) bundle of hay and dropped it Millard's feet.

"There you go lad. That should keep you busy for a bit. I'd better be off now. It's my watch in the barn soon" and he melted into the night once more.

"Thanks heaps, for the heap..." Millard called out. Yet again the busyness of the aviator meant he was long gone before the words of gratitude caught up with him. The mouse sat down, picked up a couple of pieces of hay and began to experiment.

Dawn came and with the sunrise, so did Millicent. "Don't you think it's time you got some sleep" she said. "You've been playing with this grass all night. Did you get anywhere?"

"Well I made this... and this... and this..." he replied, holding up a series of ever more complex woven patterns.

“Why, they’re fascinating” she said, genuinely surprised. “And this one’s actually quite pretty” she continued, pointing to a ring of intricately interleaved straws. “I think you may have found your calling. You’ll need your energy though if you’re going to keep this up, come along now” and putting aside the work in progress Millard joined her as she scurried off to get some shut eye. He was looking forward to further experiments tomorrow and so he continued for the next few days, getting better and more creative as his little pile of hay shrunk.

Visitors

One day though the couple was woken in daylight by the familiar clop of horses hooves out front of the house accompanied by a strange sort of musical tooting sound. Another visit from the Major appeared to be in progress, but oddly enough it was not so. Perhaps the tooting should have been a clue that Oliver’s friend wasn’t approaching, after all he’d never made that noise before.

Millicent peered out from behind the hall curtain to see a strange horse and cart with an unfamiliar driver alighting. As he arose to climb down from the running board he removed an odd looking tubular thing from his lips and placed it gently on the seat beside him. Unbeknownst to the mouse, it was a Crumhorn. In front of the visitor stood his horse, huge but friendly looking, harnessed to the substantial vehicle. Actually it was more like a little house on wheels and along the sides there were racks and hooks with strange long-handled brushes and brooms on. This then was the first ‘traveller’ Millicent had seen and although she didn’t know about such things it was actually quite odd that he was on his own.

He climbed down onto the cobbles and looked up at the roof of the house, counting the chimneys. Smiling, he thought out loud, “Nice bit of work to do here...”

Putting two and two together most people would come up with four, and that was in fact the number of chimney pots he saw awaiting his attention. Yes, he was a chimney sweep. ‘Jeep the sweep’ as it happened. Why ‘Jeep’? Well that’s another story but suffice it to say it had something to do with his given name and a willingness to go ‘anywhere, anytime’.

Anyway he strode up to the front door and rapped with the knocker. Millicent scurried away before Oliver appeared at the far end of the gloomy hallway and shuffled along to entrance.

Opening the door his eyebrows lifted briefly in surprise. He too had heard the horse and by the time he responded to the bell he was quite certain it would be the Major waiting without.

“Uh? Oh good morning! Can I help you?” he said hesitantly.

“ ‘morning sir,” the visitor responded touching his cap. “I was just driving by and noticed your chimneys. You might see by my caravan that I’m a sweep and I thought you might need some cleaning done. It’s coming up to Christmas and you wouldn’t want Santa to get stuck in a dirty old, clogged up flue, now would you?”

Oliver was caught on the back foot straight off. He hadn’t actually noticed the caravan at all and furthermore no-one just ‘drove by’ his place. There wasn’t really anywhere to go apart from the church or maybe to the pond, but from there the path trickled out at a sty next to the hay field gate. He also hadn’t been expecting Jeep’s attempt at humour. Lately most of his days were rather glum and he had yet to reach the point of seeing the brighter side of life again.

Something about the young man's light-hearted demeanour however, pricked at the black balloon inside him and the image of Santa's feet dangling in his fireplace brought a hint, though just a hint, of lightness to his mood.

In support, the rays of the morning sun deftly choose that instant to drop onto his chest and deliver some inner warmth. Oliver shivered slightly, in the way you do when a cloak of snow finally drops from your overcoat at the bus stop.

"Well I guess it wouldn't hurt. It must be years since I had them done."

"Don't worry, I'm cheap"

"Oh yes. Um, money...?" Oliver replied. "I'm not sure..."

"No need for that. How about you just let me camp by your pond for a few days? Looks like a lovely little spot. I'm a quiet man... when I'm not working that is. No guarantees when I am though" and he smiled broadly.

"Very well. It's not actually my pond but I don't expect anyone would mind. Just don't disturb the waterfowl though. We're all rather fond of them you know."

"I'll drop my gear here and go and set up down there a bit" said Jeep and he proceeded to do just that.

Trotting around the edge of the pond the traveller and his horse came to rest in the small vale next to the farm gate. He gazed across the mercurial surface at the church and its reflection. Peering out through the trees just beyond it Oliver's house waited, keeping an eye on his equipment stacked along the wall. There was work to be done he knew, but it could wait a little while. Top priority was to set up camp and settle in. For someone constantly on the move, he was really very keen on the idea of 'settling in' whenever he came to rest and he could see that this spot was going to be just perfect.

Now Travellers, Gypsies, Romany, call them what you will, have been known to acquire a bad reputation. Sometimes this is not without reason. Jeep, however, was what some might call the 'exception that proves the rule', keeping in mind that there probably isn't a rule in any case. He was quiet, scrupulously honest and clean, friendly and welcoming, reliable and industrious when he chose to be. Add to that a certain gentle sense of humour, coupled with an artistic and musical bent and you pretty much have the perfect companion for someone who lives on their own.

This paragon of personableness climbed down once more and began to set up the few things he needed outside of his caravan. It didn't take long, even at his usual measured pace, and soon he was relaxing in a deck chair with his feet up on a milking stool (you never know when you might come across a cow) a good book in one hand and a small bottle of beer in the other.

"Ah... this is the life" he said to himself and to the locals pecking around the shoreline.

Dowdy looked up from his foraging and nudged his mum beside him. "Will you look at that? Nice to be some people. Just roll up to someone else's home, settle in and relax in the sunshine. I wonder what he wants around here." It was said in a nice way though. Just a bit of conjecture really.

“Oh I don’t think he’ll be a problem” she replied. “Actually he looks a bit familiar. I’ve a feeling I’ve seen him before... years ago” and she went back to seeking out tasty morsels.

Back in his house Oliver could just see the caravan from his kitchen window and kept an eye on the activities (or more precisely the lack of them) as he boiled the kettle for an afternoon cuppa.

Normally about now he’d be getting a dose of the ‘black dog’ and be heading for an afternoon nap, but the stranger had peaked his interest and in any case he thought he’d better hang around as he expected Jeep to return presently to start on the chimneys. The younger man seemed quite pleasant and Oliver was beginning to look forward to having someone making noise about the house for an (albeit brief) time.

Soon Oliver’s tea was poured and drunk and the late afternoon sun poked its head in the window, brightening up the place once more. There was no sign of the impending chimney cleaning though. He brushed the lace curtain aside a little better to check out the situation. Beyond the pond lay the snoring form of Jeep protected from the solar rays by the open book shading his face. The bottle sat neatly beside the deck chair, apparently empty, but then who could tell from that distance. It seemed like work wasn’t on the agenda for the rest of the day.

“Oh well” Oliver murmured. “I guess there’s no hurry. Why do today, what you can put off ‘til tomorrow?” and he smiled lightly at the memory of his old dad intoning his favourite motto. Even such slight amusement had become rare in his life and he hardly noticed the beginning of its warm glow. He just accepted it as the warmth of the sunlight and the tea pot cooling on the corner of the table.

Campfire Companions

By evening, as expected, Jeep had still not returned and as he finished up the dishes Oliver could see the flickering of a small fire reflected on the water, accompanied by the intriguing sound of the crumhorn. The player was relaxing after a frugal meal cooked over the flames. Crumbs from his tin plate had been scattered towards the ripples where Dowdy and his friends scurried about on the surface lapping up the morsels before they sank.

“Crumbs... Ah...!” he had said as the thought of a little music occurred to him and so he had retrieved the horn from the caravan. Now he leaned back tracing patterns in the stars with the end of the instrument, contemplating such things as you do on a starry night.

The quietude of the scene struck Oliver, and hanging up the tea towel on the drying rail, he wiped his hands on the hand towel, picked up his hiking stick and went out into the dark.

Heading out through the overrun garden, past the church yard and around the pond he soon came to the little camp.

“Excuse me...?” he said as he stepped into the firelight.

“Have a seat” Jeep said, almost without stopping, and he dragged over a small chair with his foot.

Oliver nodded in gratitude and sitting down, he leaned forward with his fingers splayed out over the warmth of the fire, as one inevitably does. A little shiver helped settle him in place and the two sat

for a spell as the traveller played and the host contemplated how long it had been since he'd 'done something like this'.

Amongst the trees in the churchyard, lights appeared as someone entered the chapel.

The music stopped.

"Pretty windows" the erstwhile player said. Oliver peered across the water where the stained glass rippled in reflection.

"I always thought so" he replied. "They're actually new though. The ones at this end at least. Flood took some of them out last year. They've only just been replaced."

"Must have been hard for a small church like that, to be able to get new ones."

"Yes, but the Reverend's ah ... very resourceful you know. He made it happen somehow." The traveller nodded knowingly in response.

As they gazed over at the lights a dark form flitted unnoticed across the starlight sky. It was Barnaby delivering another bunch of hay to Millard. It had been a few days and by now Millicent was getting a little frustrated with his new hobby and the scraps he left lying around. Nevertheless she was impressed by his results. With their lack of personal property to decorate, Millicent thought there would be little use for his works, but he had made some rather attractive wreath-like structures and fancy knots and they were pleasant to look at. Furthermore, this time the little bat was also delivering some nice bendy willow twigs so it looked like the artist would be moving on to something a bit more permanent in the near future.

"They would fit in nicely with the Christmas decorations in the house" she thought. "If they were up", but of course this particular year Oliver had let it slip and the festive season was sneaking up rapidly without a sign of welcome anywhere in the house. The fact that the usual bright atmosphere was missing came home to roost right then as the phone rang.

"Who would be ringing Oliver at this time of night?" she said to Millard, and together their eyes lit up as they realised it was coming up to Christmas Eve.

"I'll bet it's Santa" he said. "Come on" and they rushed out into the hall, up the pile of old phone books still sitting on the floor and onto the table. Apart from a faint light easing out under the door of the silent kitchen, the house was dark. If Oliver was home they figured he was either asleep at the table or hadn't heard the ringer, in which case it must be Santa. His special ring could only be heard by those he was calling, like the mice of the Harrigan house. In either case they'd better answer it just in case.

The two of them pushed and pulled at the handset and sure enough the jolly voice of the man in red was soon heard coming from the earpiece.

"Merry Christmas my good friends. How are we this this year?"

There followed the brief but now familiar small talk about the important things that had transpired in the past twelve months, before Santa got down to business.

“As you may be expecting, I have a small task for you...” and he outlined his idea for the year’s special delivery. Millard and Millicent agreed of course and wishing Santa farewell for a couple of days, they set off to put the plan into action.

After an hour or two of shooting the breeze with Jeep, Oliver excused himself and sauntered back to the cottage and yes, sauntered is the right word. For the first time in months his spirits weren’t at rock bottom. He brushed his hand through the long grass around the garden verge and thought about tidying the place up again.

“Soon” he thought. “I’ll see how I feel after Christmas.”

Beneath the weeds and overgrown bushes, the seed pods of Eadie’s favourite flowers, ‘Forget Me Nots’, slept peacefully awaiting his attention.

Gamesmanship

The next day when Jeep trotted up to the cottage, Oliver was in the kitchen and the mice were sound asleep after a long night.

“Morning Ollie” the younger man called to the man of the house as he stood at the sink in the kitchen window.

While Oliver had always insisted on the use of his full name, the new acquaintance really was quite cheery to have around and he watched with interest as the sweep erected his extension ladder and organised his equipment for the job. Soon he was at the door, asking for directions to the first fireplace so he could prepare for the rapid descent of soot and gunk into the lounge. Oliver took him in and leaving him to the task he went back to the kitchen for his first morning cuppa.

As Jeep passed the kitchen door a few minutes later, they somehow ended up in conversation and before he knew it Oliver was offering him a tea as he sat at the kitchen table. The host pulled out his favourite chair with that familiar sort of scraping sound of wooden legs on floorboards and the discussion entered more serious territory.

Before long the ‘Cathedral’ board was between them and a game was in progress... then another, and another. Quickly and almost entirely unnoticed, the morning passed and lunchtime rolled around without a jot of chimney sweeping being done. Neither man either noticed or commented. They were having a really pleasant time.

It was early afternoon and the scene had hardly changed when they were distracted by the arrival of Major Bigg. Time for another cuppa (of course) along with a snack and then some more ‘Cathedral’. With three of them playing now, a tournament of sorts was begun and not unexpectedly it lasted into the late afternoon.

It was going on five pm when Jeep stood up, stretched and finally looked at his watch.

“Oh!” he said. “It’s getting late. I’d better get working.”

“Oh, it can wait can’t it? We’re not in a hurry are we?” replied Oliver. “You’re just trying to get out of being beaten again. Sit down” and so his young opponent did as he was bid and a very pleasant day drew to a close with no real work done at all.

Jeep smiled to himself. The Major noticed the grin and with his own little smirk he looked across at Oliver concentrating on the game pieces. He too was smiling unthinkingly. The Major nodded in approval.

The night drew in and the three men went their separate ways at an unusually late hour. A couple of bottles of rough wine had been found in the depths of Jeep's caravan and some very blue cheese had surfaced from somewhere in the kitchen to tide them over. Both were very much appreciated. Meanwhile, from a crack in the skirting, the two mice also contemplated the possibility of appreciating a taste of the cheese. Consequently, as the click of the light switch signalled the end to the day for Oliver, the tiny couple scurried out into the kitchen in search of crumbs to nibble. Much to their pleasure, success was theirs and soon they were revitalised for a night of Christmas preparations. From there things moved forward nicely as the time of Santa's visit crept closer.

Eve's Day

The morning of Christmas Eve dawned bright and clear. The lightly snow-dusted mountains away to the West glowed in the fluorescent sunrise. They stood like giant wedges of plum pudding awaiting a 'glug' of hot custard and a large dollop of ice cream.

"Orange ice cream. Now that would be nice" Oliver thought out loud. "I haven't tasted Orange ice cream for years, although I guess it wouldn't really go with plum pudding..." he pondered.

Now you may be wondering why such an idea had just occurred to him, but it happened that for all the time he and Eadie had lived there the mountains had been obscured by a row of large trees down along the river. Last year though the flood had dug out the river bank, draped it's not so friendly arm over their shoulders and enticed them into an adventure downstream. Now the view from the kitchen sink included this necklace of peaks strung out between a couple of the larger trees embracing the pond. Their leaves glowed orange in the morning light, framing the distant vista.

Yes, Orange had always been his favourite flavour, he mused. Eadie's too and so understandably he fell to thinking of his dear departed wife. It was, after all, his first Christmas Eve without her so he could be excused for falling into contemplation of his loss. Fortunately, before his thoughts drifted into sadness there was an irregular, 'Clop! Clop! Click! Clop!' outside, followed but the familiar 'clunk' of the of door knocker.

Oliver scurried to the door to find Jeep outside ready for work.

"I'll just get on with it then" he said in a sort of 'how about a cuppa first' way, but Oliver was still a little distracted and didn't fall for it. "I'll just put Clyde round the side where I can keep an eye on him if you don't mind. He's thrown a shoe and I don't want him to stand on anything nasty while I'm busy."

"No. No. That's fine. I'll keep an eye out too" the man of the house replied and Jeep led his big hairy friend around the side of the cottage and began his work.

Soon the younger man was scrambling up the roof to the lounge room chimney and the sounds of actual work followed soon after. As he hadn't checked his preparations from the day before it was lucky no-one had been in the lounge overnight but in the end very little dirt and grime made it into the room.

After a while Jeep's apparently headless form returned to normal as he withdrew his soot-laden face from the chimney.

"That's one done" he called down to Oliver who was watching the action and absent-mindedly feeding Clyde a couple of carrots. The crunching of the fresh orange vegetables heralded the disappearance of the leafy green tops into the horse's mouth.

"There you go boy" the man murmured, slapping the gentle steed on the side of his neck. The big head nuzzled him in thanks.

A few metres above the two of them, the sweep was moving his brushes to the next chimney before descending to block off the fireplace below. And so it went through the morning and early afternoon. The sunny weather made for a pleasant day's work and meanwhile Clyde and Oliver became good friends down in the garden. The day was interspersed with the usual breaks for a cuppa or two and by mid-afternoon, Jeep had finished the physical part of his job. Collecting the soot covered sheets he emptied them into Oliver's backyard incinerator before giving them a good shake.

As you'd expect, the chimney sweep disappeared in a black fog.

Presently the cloud drifted off on a whisper of wind. In its place shone a crescent moon, grinning broadly beneath two bright stars in a night black face. Oliver burst out laughing at the sight of the sweep. It felt good after so long.

"Want to see an eclipse?" Jeep said and he winked. One star blinked out in a little puff of soot.

"...or two?" and he winked the other eye. Oliver laughed again. He was suddenly aware of the musty, dusty smell of Clyde close beside him. It was mixed with a whiff of soot and the smell of the grass in the back paddock. The leaves brushing the sky above the pond furnished a backing track to the sounds of Dowdy and his friends splashing in the water as birds chirped in the churchyard.

Oliver sighed gently with pleasure.

"Well I better get cleaned up then" It was Jeep interrupting his reverie as he started packing up his tools of the trade.

"I'd offer you a bath but I hate to think of the mess all the soot would make", replied Oliver.

"Not a problem" the younger man said. "I'll just jump in the pond. It'll be refreshing on such a lovely day. My clothes will soon dry too."

"Just watch out for the wildlife. Those ducks can be a bit jittery. Oh, and over when you're done and we'll have bite to eat. You've worked hard today" and they went their respective ways.

As it happened the birds on the pond did kick up a bit of a fuss at the intruder dashing fully clothed into the water and splashing about. Indignant might really be the right word for it. With Christmas day just a few hours away they had been decorating their bushes with scraps of tin foil and other bright baubles and were preening themselves when he leapt upon the scene. The patch of dirty black left floating on the surface didn't go down too well either. In fact it didn't go down for quite a while and the birds spent an hour or so avoiding it as it drifted about before finally sinking out of sight.

After a change of clothes Jeep wandered back to Oliver's and the promised snack turned into another session of Cathedral, accompanied by the odd 'cuppa' or two of course.

"This could get to be a habit" Oliver thought to himself "and I wouldn't mind one bit." It was quite obvious that his opponent was of a similar mind, particularly as he had really got the hang of the game and victory was now quite evenly shared between the two of them.

Outside the sound of children's voices heralded the passing of the 'Baker's dozen'.

This year Mrs Baker was trying to get 'ahead of the game' as it were and prepare the church early for the Christmas morning service. There wasn't a lot to do but by the time she finished the only thing left would be to pop some flowers in the vases when she arrived next day. She glanced at Oliver's unkempt garden as she went by. "It used to look so pretty this time of year" she thought, and made a mental note to organise some help for him with it in the New Year.

The sound of the younger members of the family playing nearby punctuated the afternoon as Christmas Eve day slid into the pool of excitement that is Christmas Eve night. Meanwhile the older children helped their mother in the chapel. Closing the big church door as she left Mrs Baker was surrounded by the younger of her excited offspring.

"Look Ma! A gypsy caravan" the first one said, pointing across the water to Jeep's home on wheels. Beside it Clyde grazed quietly on the grassy bank. His master's clothes waved gently in the breeze as they dried on a line tied across to the sty. He pawed in aggravation at the shoeless hoof. They had come a long way for this particular festive event and he had put in a lot of work to get them here. He knew it wasn't Jeep's fault but it would be nice to have a complete set of shoes before they moved on. He hoped that he hadn't been forgotten in the whirl of tea cups and game pieces. On another hoof though, Jeep seemed to be settling in here and it really was rather pleasant. He certainly wouldn't be too upset if they stayed for a while.

"I guess we'll see. Once what we came here for has come to pass" and he went back to ruminating in the grass.

"Come on kids, let's go home. And please do keep away from the caravan and particularly that big horse. I know it all looks like fun but everyone needs a little privacy you know" and she shepherded her flock off down the lane towards the turrets and gables of the Baker house.

Over in Oliver's kitchen Jeep announced that it was going to be early-to-bed for him this Christmas Eve. As his host had seen, the traveller had worked hard through the day and a nice bit of shut eye was just what he needed. Unknown to Oliver though the younger man had other plans on his mind for the events of the next day. He had come to deliver a special present... himself.

While his new friend had only been around for a couple of days, Oliver had a sneaking feeling that he'd met Jeep before. He hadn't found an opportunity to ask, but if he had then he might have found out that the sweep had been christened Graham by his father who was a reverend, or parson as many people called him. As Graham grew, they moved every few years to a new congregation and he came to feel restless and doubting in his faith. Eventually 'Graham the parson's son' had fallen out with his father and drifted off to become 'Jeep the sweep'. Since then his life had been one on the road. Just him and his trusty friend Clyde. It had been quite some time now however and he now longed to see his father again and make amends. He was weary of being alone.

It happened that Oliver was also feeling a touch weary at the moment and so yet again, he didn't pursue this nagging feeling and Graham's story remained unheard.

The two wished each other "Merry Christmas" and Jeep said he'd see Oliver at the morning service. It did occur to the older man that the younger didn't seem like the sort to be bothered with church, but then 'you never know' and he brushed the thought off rather like a fleck of soot on a Sunday shirt.

He turned in for the night and peace and quiet descended on the dwelling. Or did it?

All Through The Night

Christmas can be a hectic time for some people, like the Bakers and their pride of ginger-heads. It may also be a reflective time for those with friends and relations far away, perhaps never to be seen again; like Barnaby on his trip East with Bjork, or maybe Oliver. For Millard and Millicent though, Christmas Eve was again cooked up from a recipe of bustle with a touch of hustle, flavoured with anticipation and warmed up nicely by the glow of charity. Once more they would be Santa's reception committee in the Harrigan house. In the past they had huddled patiently up against the chimney in the dark, waiting for the man in red to drop them a simple something for Eadie, who just loved such things. From the starry sky the sleigh would zoom in and pass low over the mice as Santa tossed out a small parachute. As it gently drifted down to the couple, his rich voice would be heard "Ho, ho, ho'ing" across the heavens as he zipped off to complete his deliveries. This year though it would be a little different and Millicent was just as excited as Millard as they sat staring up into the sea of stars. Their natural fear of Owls had faded over the years and now they were able to enjoy the view as they waited.

"There he is!" one of them might say pointing to a meteor.

"Maybe that's him!" would comment the other, seeing the wings of a bird reflecting the street lights of the town.

Once or twice it had even been one of the bats from the Bigg House dropping in. Eventually though the nearly imperceptible change in the night sky would resolve into a row of Reindeer and the familiar sleigh, on a beeline for the cottage. And so it did once more.

This time though there was no tiny parachute in the offering. Instead the whole procession swung around and circled down to land on the roof top. Santa stepped down. This really was an honour. It would be hard to find someone busier than him on a night like this and it's extremely rare for him to stop, no matter how briefly, during his deliveries.

He greeted the mice and with the necessary urgency said, "You know what to do, don't you?"

They nodded. "We'll meet you downstairs" they replied and scurried off. Down through the gap in the flashing along the roofing braces, into the wall cavity and hop, hurry, jump, and scurry through the shafts of light from the cladding cracks until they reached the ground floor. Quick, skip, the two of them raced to their home hole and grabbed Millard's latest creation. It took both of them to move it but knowing the lack of time they found the energy and pushed, pulled and perspired their way to the lounge with it.

Meanwhile, 'his jolliness' was practicing his chimney skills, something that he had let slide in the last few years since the population had expanded so much. He found that he'd expanded somewhat too; nevertheless he made it down the flue in time to be there when the pair arrived from the hallway.

"There you go, and not bad if I say so myself" said Millard, ever the humble artist.

"So true, so true" replied Santa and he picked up a framed photo of Eadie from the mantelpiece and slid it from its mount. Replacing the frame with Millard's oval of knotted willow twigs he wedged a note between the frame and glass. Producing a perfectly sized piece of Christmas paper from a pocket that the mice had never noticed before, he deftly wrapped it up and holding his beard with his left hand he mumbled "To dearest Oliver" and rubbed the present once, twice and yet thrice upon his big golden belt buckle. Instantly the package was sealed with the recipient's name stamped into the wax.

He laid it down on the mantelpiece where the picture had previously stood and further along he discretely placed another parcel that he slipped from the invisible pocket. On the card it said: 'To Clyde. Thank you my friend, Santa'. It was heavy for such a compact package.

"All done" he said. "Thanks again Millicent..., Millard. Another fine job completed. Now I must away. The world awaits. Take care you two. Bye....." and he sort of just slipped off up the chimney before the pair could see the manner of his going. They looked at each a little puzzled.

"How...? Millicent asked.

"I don't know" puzzled Millard "and just by the way, he didn't have any soot on him when he came down. Now there's a trick Jeep could do with learning."

"Hmmm" they said in chorus and left it at that. They knew full well that no one would ever really know all of Santa's secrets so there was no point in worrying about it. In any case they were worn out from rushing around and needed to rest out the night, so off they trod slowly, through the open lounge door, to lie down till dawn. Christmas day was one day they liked to stay up and watch the festivities.

Up on the roof, Santa jumped into the pilot's seat and called "On Dasher, On Dancer, Prancer and Vixen. On Comet and Cupid, Donner and Blitzen" and he laughed quietly to himself. His little escapade down Oliver's chimney had put him in mind of the old days and the traditional sleighing cry had just sort of slipped out. It had been a long time since the original reindeer had been with him and he sighed at the memory as he swung his rig around for one last touch before departing.

The sleigh swooped in low, almost brushing the ground as the reindeer bounded through the tops of the long grass in Oliver's garden trailing a twinkling tail of light. Swiftly reaching the far end they climbed over the pond as Santa cast a shower of little gifts and titbits for Dowdy and his companions. In the morning they would find the presents where they had rolled under the bushes to where the locals slept. His job done he was off on his way again around the globe. Morning would not wait.

Merry Christmas

The Sun rose on a pleasant morning and not too long afterward, in millions of homes, presents were being unwrapped.

Next to the pond Jeep stretched languidly in his fold down bed and peered out from behind the curtain. All round the water's edge young ducks were running about making noise and bumping into each other. It occurred to him that they looked like they were meeting, greeting and sharing, just like children in homes around the world. He shook his head and dismissed the thought, little knowing how right he was.

He arose, dressed and had a quick breakfast, peering out frequently as if expecting someone to arrive. He was rinsing his plate when the figure of a man appeared in the lane at the lych-gate and entered the churchyard.

Jeep recognised him from his bearing and quickly wiping his hands on a towel he slipped outside and moved off towards the church. Ahead, he could see the sunlight in the chapel pouring through the stained glass. The door stood open in welcome.

There was a creak as the gate opened in Jeep's hands and he walked up the flagstone path to the portico.

The sound of movement came from inside as he stepped into the kaleidoscope of light. No-one was in view and he walked up the aisle to the front row of pews, stopped and turned, looking around for a sign of life.

A couple of soft footsteps announced the arrival of a man entering from the presbytery. He glanced toward the windows and saw Jeep's silhouette, backlit by the blaze of colour.

"Good morning...?" he said warmly. He couldn't see who it was.

"Merry Christmas father" came the reply.

"Reverend... it's Reverend Rumble".

"I know father. It's Graham. I've come home."

There was a brief moment of silence as the preacher took in the news. Jeep stepped out of the light and clasping his father's right hand he wrapped his left arm around his shoulders. The warmth of the simple act flooded the older man's eyes.

"What made you come back?" his father asked softly.

"Something brought me, or should I say, someone brought me. Someone called Clyde. I've been lonely these past couple of years. Just sort of wandering the country in my caravan, doing odd jobs. A bit of carpentry, some farm work and sweeping. Chimney sweeping. Then one day I was working next to a church and when I looked up the steeple reminded me of this place. The next day when I started out again I wasn't quite sure where I was heading and Clyde just seemed to take the lead, until here I am. It seems I've come for Christmas."

"Well bless you and Clyde too."

Meanwhile, next door, Oliver had risen. Unexpectedly he had a spring in his step. For several months he had been dreading this first Christmas alone, but events of the last few days had put him a good mood. Not that he had forgotten Eadie at all. He had simply rediscovered the pleasures of friendship

and the opportunities that unplanned changes in life can bring out of the blue. He did feel a touch guilty about it nevertheless.

Starting down the hall towards the kitchen he was passing the lounge room when he noticed the door was open. He would have sworn that it had been closed when he went to bed.

He poked his head in and looked around. The curtains were drawn most of the way and in the grey light he thought he saw something out of place on the mantelpiece. Stepping inside he found the two presents. He picked them up intending to read the cards in a shaft of light that snuck through a crack in the drapes. Not expecting the weight of the one for Clyde however, he nearly dropped it. After recovering his composure he pondered the meaning of a present for a horse with a 'thank you' note from Santa.

"Very odd. Jeep must have left it there. But why? " And then what about the one for him? It was addressed to 'Dearest Oliver'. Nobody but Eadie had ever called him 'dearest'.

He opened his present to find the knotted frame and the picture, now with a note in a familiar hand.

It said simply 'Forget me not.'

Two small tears slipped from his eyes, landing on the frame. They trickled down the woven twigs highlighting an inscription scratched delicately into the bark. The work of tiny claws. It too said 'Forget me Knot'. He smiled at what appeared to be a spelling mistake. The sort of thing that his wife did so many times over the years of her demise. Despite their trials he knew that life had held many happinesses for the two of them and he was grateful. Grateful too for the present; the present he was living and the present in his hand. No he would not forget.

The man in red though had left one more surprise for him. In the dusky atmosphere he flung the curtains open and there in glorious colour, was a broad blue swathe of Eadie's favourite flowers. There were Forget Me Nots, right down the middle of the bed of weeds where the sleigh had passed. Santa's work had been done well.

With a newly gained optimism, Oliver put on the breakfast kettle and dressed for church.

A little while later Mrs Baker walked by with the family, each with a bunch of flowers held carefully and proudly out before them. At the rear of the entourage came Mr Baker, gathering up the youngest, more errant members of the tribe. As she passed Oliver's garden the bright blue swathe attracted her attention and a look of mild astonishment swept across her face. A stammered query began forming in her mind but she thought better of it as she reached the gate and ushered her family inside.

"You should meet Clyde" Jeep was saying as the flower brigade entered. "Come on. He's just out by the pond" and the two men started to go out to the camp as the family passed into the chapel.

"Back in a minute Mrs B", the reverend called and scuttled off with his son to meet the architect of their reunion.

With another look of mild surprise on her face the matriarch began directing the floral assault to ensure it was finished before the service. She cleared her head with a shake and wondered just what was going on.

Leaving the house Oliver saw Reverend Rumble and his son heading for the caravan. He hurried along and caught up with them as they reached Clyde.

“Father, this is Clyde. Clyde, my father...”

The horse nuzzled into Jeep’s shoulder. He was rewarded with a treat from the young man’s pocket. The reverend was opening his mouth to say something as Oliver strode up.

“Good Morning. Merry Christmas” he called. “I believe I have something for you.”

“For me” the two Rumbles chorused.

“No, sorry gents. It’s for Clyde actually.” Six eyebrows instantly lifted in surprise. Well really it was only four, but Clyde would have raised them if he had any. With a little difficulty Oliver passed the weighty present to Jeep to open for his hairy friend. “I’m guessing you have an idea what it is.”

“I wonder what this was for” the younger rumble mused reading the card out loud. “Do you know old boy?” he said as he removed the paper to reveal the horseshoes.

“Ah...” thought Clyde. “Santa did not forget me and if I’m not mistaken this will be the last time I’ll ever have to put up with the indignity of the farrier’s file.”

“We’ll get them on you as soon as the blacksmith opens again and don’t worry we’re not going anywhere for a while old boy. You just have a rest.” Jeep reached into the caravan, grabbed his crumhorn and the three men moved off towards the church to the sounds of “We three Kings’.

From across the water the big horse watched as Estroharf sidled up and helped the Major to the ground. Several other ‘Bigg house’ residents had come along too and joined the members of the congregation in a procession of children, adults, peacocks, goats et al, as it traipsed into the chapel. The elephant waited in the lane and waved his trunk merrily to Clyde. He really was just too big for the gateway. Anyway it was such a pleasant day to be out in the sunlight.

“Eadie would have loved this” he thought, echoing Oliver’s own reflections. Clyde tossed his head in contented response.

All in all it was shaping up to be an unforgettable Christmas.

The End (for now)