

One Good Turn



*A Christmas story
for the young and young at heart*

by

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There is a poem that starts, 'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse...' well, although it was Christmas Eve and it was quiet, there was in fact a mouse stirring. It was Millard and he had been sleeping in a cosy little hole in the skirting under the telephone table at the end of the hall when the phone rang.

This little mouse was very fortunate to live in the home of Oliver and Eadie Harrigan, an older couple who had spent most of their lives in a quiet, tree-lined suburb, away from the hustle and bustle of the big city.

Ever since they'd moved in Oliver and Eadie had had a phone in the hallway, placed neatly on a small table with a comfy chair beside it where they could sit and relax with a cup of tea as they had their daily chats with friends and family. While they talked they would gaze out the window overlooking the flowerbeds tended lovingly by Oliver.

For many years Eadie had knelt alongside her husband with her hands in the dirt as they shared the joy of tending the plants. Over the last couple of years though things had been slipping from her mind and she no longer remembered what the trowel and fork were for. She still enjoyed playing in the dirt but her husband Oliver had to keep a strict eye on her to make sure she didn't dig up the flowers, and so it was that their time together in the garden grew less and less. Sometimes as he weeded and replanted bulbs, alone on his knees amongst the trees, he would feel a small tear collect in the corner of his eye as he

remembered the wonderful days spent together chatting and gardening in the sunshine.

It had taken some time for him to realise that his lovely wife had developed a problem with the way the world was and in her mind had returned to the joys and innocence of childhood. Her smile, that he had enjoyed for so many years, became even more frequent but also distant somehow, as she took to living in the simplicity of the moment, lost in childlike thoughts of nature and the little things that went on around her.

Eadie seemed very happy as the months went by and she became more and more like she was when growing up. Despite her daily little joys it made many people sad including Oliver. He was lucky however to have good friends and neighbours who helped him out. Often they would come to keep her company and amuse her while he tended to the daily tasks of shopping or running the home and looking after her needs. Nevertheless, he still never really had enough time to do the maintenance that was needed on the house. In some ways though this was fortunate because it meant that Millard's hidey hole stayed undisturbed and so it was that he was there to be woken up by the telephone on Christmas Eve night.

The little mouse quickly poked his nose out to see if Oliver was coming to answer the phone, but no, there was no noise from the bedroom. The phone rang and rang until it finally stopped.

A few seconds latter it started again with the same result.

Once more it started up then stopped and so it went on for half an hour or more, ringing out through the house; or rather if you were a mouse then it rang out. For the Harrigans and any people passing in the street, the old weatherboard place beneath the trees was as quiet as a Millard's mum, who rarely said anything. No, they couldn't hear the phone at all.

After forty minutes or so the sound was really starting to annoy our little friend.

"Don't you know it's Christmas Eve?" he yelled at the phone. "Some of us need some sleep you know", but of course the phone didn't answer. The handset was still on the cradle and besides that, when a mouse yells, it isn't very loud, and to most people it just sounds like a squeak anyway.

The next time it rang he'd had enough and scurried out into the hall, up the magazine rack next to the chair, across the seat, over the cushion and onto the table. He stopped briefly, weighed up the size of the handset and charged at the phone with his head down. With a sort of plastic 'clunk' the handset fell onto the table.

"Millard! Millard! Are you there?" There was a voice coming out of the earpiece. It seemed that someone wanted to talk to him. Millard had never had a phone call before. In fact I'm not sure if any mouse had had a phone call before, but then it was Christmas and they say that magic things do happen at that time of year.

After recovering from the shock of hearing his name blurring out of a machine, Millard ran over to the mouthpiece.

"Do you want me?" he said timidly.

"I do if you're Millard Mouse of the Harrigan house" the caller said.

The voice had a comforting sort of sound to it and so he replied that indeed he was Millard Mouse of the Harrigan house.

Many times he'd heard Oliver and Eadie answer the phone (he liked to use their first names, after all the three of them did share the house) and so he copied what he'd heard them say and spoke again.

"Good evening and to whom am I speaking?"

"It's Santa Claus here, Millard. I was hoping you would do me a favour."

The mouse was dumbfounded. Firstly, to receive a personal call from Santa and then to be asked for a favour was something very special. Helping Santa would be a big honour and so he said, "Of course I will, if I can. What would you like me to do?"

"Well I believe there's a little girl in your house who needs a present and I haven't scheduled a stop for her. She didn't seem to be there when I looked over the list for the second time, but my address checker has just told me that the situation has changed. Can you please have a look and see if there's a stocking waiting for me on the fireplace?"

"Certainly Santa. Just hold on a minute."

(Of course if we'd been listening to this conversation all we would have heard was a bunch of squeaks, but it's a little known fact that Santa can speak International Mouse, just as he speaks Reindeer when travelling on his sleigh, so he had no problem talking with Millard.)

'This is odd', thought Millard. 'There hasn't been a little girl or a Christmas stocking in the house for years and years. I wonder what's going on?' and he scrambled down to the floor and along the hall to the lounge room door. Fortunately it was slightly ajar and he squeezed through into the room and hurried across to the fireplace where, sure enough, hanging on a pin from the mantelpiece, was a small red stocking. Also stuck under the pin was a scrap of paper with some words on it. Millard couldn't read what it said. Actually he couldn't read at all, which isn't odd for a mouse, but even if he could, it would have made no difference. All the squiggles made no sense except for the two words; 'Dear Santa'. It was as if someone who had once been able to write had somehow forgotten. He pondered this for a second or two, then remembering that Santa was waiting for him on the phone on his busiest night of the year, the little mouse scurried back the way he'd come.

"You're right, there is a stocking on the fireplace." he said.

"Are you there? I can't hear you", came the reply.

It was then that Millard realised he was talking into the earpiece.

'This talking on the phone thing is complicated'; he thought as he rushed to the mouthpiece and repeated his message.

"That's better", Santa said as Millard rushed back to the other end of the phone to listen. "I think I know what's happened. Poor Eadie is reliving what it's like to be a girl again. It is

such a shame that this happens to some older people, but I think we should help her enjoy her Christmas, don't you Millard?"

The mouse ran back to the mouthpiece again.

"Yes I do, but how can I help? And can we keep this conversation short? I'm getting puffed with all this running back and forth."

With that he hurried along to the earpiece again to hear Santa's answer.

"I'm sorry about the rushing about my friend, but you're doing a fine job. Keep it up a bit longer and we'll get there yet. I won't have time to add another house to my schedule so I want you to go to the roof and wait for me there. I'll be by in about half an hour and I'll drop off a small present as I pass for you to put in her stocking if that's alright."

Once more the mouse headed for the mouthpiece. "Of course I'll do that for you Santa. I'll head up there now. See you soon..."

"Okay. Bye bye," came Santa's distant voice from the other end of the phone. Millard didn't bother to run along to listen as the long 'off the hook' tone sounded. He turned around to jump down onto the chair as a 'clunk' sounded behind him and the tone stopped. He looked back at the phone. The handset was back on the base as if nothing had happened. This caused him to pause. He looked around him. Everything looked normal in the darkened hall. He nipped himself on the foreleg. Nope, he wasn't dreaming. But then maybe he was dreaming that he wasn't dreaming. Perhaps he'd better check, so he hurried down to the floor along the carpet runner and into the lounge room where as previously the stocking hung expectantly above the fireplace.

'Thank goodness for that' he thought. 'I'd better get moving' and he ran over to the darkest corner where he knew there was a substantial hole that he could use to get into the wall. He nudged back a flap of the rug that covered the entrance and slipped into the eerie light of the wall space. Looking up he could see stripes of light from the street lamps shining in between the old weather boards.

Up one of the cross braces he scurried, across a noggin, up another brace and so on until he found himself in the roof space.

All around him he could see piles of junk and many years worth of keepsakes. There were far more memories stored up here than in poor Eadie's brain he thought. This passing notion brought him back to the task at hand and he zipped around the old trunks and cardboard boxes towards the chimney. As he passed the boxes he could see where he'd been nibbling away at some of them as mice are want to do and it occurred to him that maybe he'd better stop doing that in future. What they contained was perhaps too precious to the old couple to mess about with and he resolved to cross 'nibbling boxes in the attic' off his list of pastimes.

Bounding from one beam to another Millard ran to the chimney and up a rafter to where the bricks and the roofing iron met. There was an old nest here from last spring and just next to it a small hole from where the chicks of last year's brood ventured into the wide world for the first time. The sticks and straw of the nest scratched him as he squeezed past and scrambled on to the roof. This was the first

time he'd been up here but he could see at once that it could be dangerous and so he backed up against the towering shape of the chimney for safety. Here he was out of the light and hopefully would remain unseen until Santa arrived.

'I wonder how long it's been' he thought. He looked out over the houses towards the town hall and there, surrounded by Christmas lights was a clock. Although he could see it clearly as the face shone over the town like a second moon, he was unable to read that it was just after midnight. Usually mice don't need to know the time and so while he often saw the clock on the mantle piece he had never figured out how it worked.

A gentle breeze ruffled his fur as he huddled in the dark watching wispy clouds scud across the moon. Now and then the sound of a bat or something unknown startled him and a chill ran up his spine. He waited, nodding off briefly despite the sense of danger, until one foot slipped on the shiny metal ridge of the roof and he awoke with a start.

'What am I doing up here he?' thought in panic and then he remembered his task. The short nap made it feel like he'd been waiting for hours and he started to feel silly for thinking that Santa was on his way to give him a present to deliver. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and thought about heading down to bed again when zooming in low across the roof tops he saw the jolly old fellow himself. The sleigh swung round and circled the Harrigan house. Millard stood on his hind legs and waved to attract attention. Fortunately Santa had his glasses on and saw his little

friend waiting, then just as he passed overhead he tossed out a little package which floated down beneath a knotted handkerchief, just like a parachute.

It caught lightly on a nail head that stuck out of the chimney where the TV cable ran down, but it didn't tear. The nail was well within reach of such a tiny mouse and you would swear that it was put there for that very purpose. Millard hadn't noticed it before, but there it was, just when needed. He carefully removed the present it from its perch and taking it in his mouth he headed back inside. It was not a moment too soon as a moon shadow flitted across the roof. It was a hungry Owl, on the hunt for tasty little mice such as he. Although our little friend didn't know it, his sense of danger had been right and it had been a close shave.

Back along the rafter, across the attic and down the wall he ran, his shiny fur coat seeming to flash on and off as the streetlights picked him out through the slits in the boards. He was nearly there when he came to an abrupt stop.

"Whoops" he said out loud as his feet flew out from beneath him and dropped him on his bum, balancing unsteadily on the board. He looked around and saw that the handkerchief was still attached to the parcel but was caught on a splinter. He backed up and managing to get it unhooked without ripping it, he tucked it under his chin and continued on his way, but this time he was a little more careful.

Popping out into the lounge room once more he gazed up at the stocking. It seemed an awful long way up and he wondered how he could get the present up there. He looked around the room at the furniture. The coffee table was too low, the chairs were nearly high enough but they were too far away. 'What about the sideboard? Nope, not high enough either' and the curtains might have been useful to swing across on but they were closed, which meant that was out of the question. Then his eyes came to rest on the standard lamp. It stood between Oliver's favourite chair and the hearth; carefully positioned so he could read before the fire on cold winter nights. It was tall enough and had a gently sloping shade with tassels that hung just above the edge of the mantelpiece, but could he climb up it? He'd never tried it before because he couldn't smell anything edible up there, however the twin spirals of the stand looked promising as a route to the stocking.

He took a deep breath for courage, slung the present across his back by holding the handkerchief in his mouth and took a run at it. After a few centimetres he slipped off and fell heavily onto the base of the lamp. He winced with the brief pain but was quickly on all fours again and shaking himself off.

'How did I get into this? I don't know why Santa picked me for this job'.

Of course there really was no-one else around to do the job. After all, Santa doesn't go about asking just anyone to help him with his magical mission and then maybe he knew something about Millard that even Millard didn't know. Perhaps it was that he was a

mouse with a mind to stick at things. He had a will to overcome the odds no matter what and it was this determination that now urged him on.

The newest and littlest of Santa's helpers cast his eyes around again in the dark. He needed something to help him grip the slippery lamp stand. His eyes came to rest on the cave-like gap under the grate. He ran over and scrapped his feet around in the soot and ash that coated the tiles. It had been a while since Oliver last lit the fire but luckily, what with looking after Eadie, he hadn't yet had time to clean the hearth out properly.

After grungeing up his paws Millard scampered back to the lamp stand, grabbed the present and headed upward once more. This time he just managed to keep his grip and made it all the way up to the lamp. From there he jumped onto the shade and slid down to the edge where he dropped on the mantelpiece. The hard work was over or so he thought. Running along to the stocking he dropped the present in, watching the handkerchief disappear into its depths.

'Hmm, thank goodness that's done', he thought. 'I hope she likes whatever it is. I'm sure Santa's picked something very nice for her. Time for bed' and he turned round and hurried back to the lamp and there he came across a problem. Having dropped some distance from the lamp shade he now found that he couldn't jump back up.

He sat on his haunches and thought about it for a few seconds while eyeing up the situation.

He looked down at the floor. It was scarily far below him. No chance of jumping down and a fall would surely be the end of him. Then he had an idea. It would need quite a bit of courage but he had to do something. He couldn't just stay there until Eadie came to check the stocking in the morning. He backed up somewhat and took a deep breath. 'Here goes' he thought and ran towards the edge. Just as he reached the point of no return, the plucky little fellow leapt as high as he could and grabbed at the longest tassel with his teeth. Holding on with all his might he swung out over the gap between the mantelpiece and the standard lamp and coming to the far point of his swing he opened his mouth wide and flew through the air. As he started to fall past the lamp stand Millard wrapped his tiny paws around it and clinging as tightly as he could he slid down in a long slippery spiral to the bottom. He breathed a sigh of relief to be safely back on the floor. Running over to the door he slipped through into the hall and hurried back to his home under the telephone table. Exhausted from his efforts and thankful to be home in one piece, he quickly nestled down for the rest of the night. Soon tiny mouse snores echoed around in the depths of the wall.

Christmas morning came and when breakfast time rolled around Millard heard giggling as Eadie ran excitedly down the hall to the lounge room. He blinked awake with a dim memory of his night time adventure and went to sit at his doorway, just out of sight in the shadows. He really wasn't sure that it had all happened. The

phone call from Santa, the little parachute falling from the night sky, the climb up the lamp stand and that death defying swing from the tassels. It wasn't at all like him to be rushing around like that.

There was a squeal of joy and Eadie hurried out of the lounge room with the handkerchief in her hands. Her eyes were bright with delight as she examined the fairy embroidered on it and she held it to her cheek. All at once Millard knew that it hadn't been a dream and he smiled at her joy. He was so pleased that Santa had called on him.

Coming to the window she stopped and gazed out at the garden in the early morning light. Dew drops reflected the sunshine in rainbow hues as it fell upon the brightly coloured flowers. Eadie had always called these flashes of light her fairies.

Oliver ambled out of the kitchen, his slippers making a swooshing sound on the polished boards. He stood beside his wife as she held up the handkerchief for the sunlight from the garden to light up the stitch work.

"Yes love, it's a fairy. Isn't she beautiful? Just like the ones in the garden. Where did you find her sweetie?"

Eadie looked around, a little puzzled.

"Where did you get the handkerchief love?" he asked again.

Her brow furrowed as she thought for a second or two and then pointed to the lounge. Oliver followed her as she went to show him the stocking and the tiny black foot prints left in the night.

As the couple moved off down the hall, the little package that had been tied to the

embroidered parachute, came loose and slipped unnoticed to the floor. The wrapping unravelled as it rolled across the mat to where Millard sat. As the last small piece of sliver foil fell away, the mouse smelled the heavenly scent of cheese. Blue vein cheese no less. He'd never even dreamed that such a wonderful smell existed. The Harrigans had never been ones for such things, but here, on this special Christmas morning, the mouse who had risked his life for the happiness of another, was rewarded for his selflessness.

Truly it seemed that Santa had remembered the old saying, 'One good turn deserves another', and so should we.