

The Long Traveller



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

*by
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*I*t's a wise man who knows that the more he knows, the more he has yet to learn'

Given that this is true then that same wise man may willingly accept that something he believes not to be, may well be so... and so it may be with Bjork, the Stork.

Bjork was one of those fly-by-nighters who would periodically blow in from parts unknown chasing the whiff of a rumour of good times at the Bigg house. Hints of such places have a habit of drifting on the seasonal breezes across the boundaries that hem in the ancient tales of Man and alighting on the branches of trees and rivers where the Long Travellers rest.

It was a December evening when he appeared out of the Eastern sky and circled above the pond where Dowdy and his friends were fussing about. The stork decided that the small community was the source of his curiosity, and looking down his beak at the modest chimney of the Harrigan's cottage he soared off across the town.

Over at the Bigg house, Zara sat sunning herself in the last rays of daylight. Being a cold blooded creature she needed all the sunlight she could get and so was squeezing as much of it out of the day as possible. Her spines were raised in salute to the sky and the top of her head lay exposed to the incoming warmth. Not too many people know that as the oldest living relatives to the dinosaurs Tuataras have a light sensitive patch on their head and can sense the shadows of possible attackers flying overhead. This is indeed so however and as the lengthening shadow of the stork swept across the Major's sprawling home, it fell upon Zara and she raised her head in that curiously zippy way that Tuatara's do. The shadow rushed on eclipsing the colours of Preener's tail and causing the feathered eyes to blink in unison.

Everyone in the farmyard looked up at once to see a big bird. An unfamiliar bird. 'What did it want? Where did it come from?' These questions rippled through the gathered residents as Bjork banked steeply into a landing approach between the high ridge of the barn and the stable. His webbed feet skated lightly to a stop on the cobbled yard and he ruffled his feathers into order and looked around.

Now storks are rather imposing birds. In fact some storks have wings as long as any land bird in the world so the arrival of such a large visitor could not really go ignored. If it wasn't for his unquestioned personal splendour, even Preener would have been intimidated by the sheer presence of the Long Traveller as he towered over the furry footed Bantams running around in somewhat of a kerfuffle. As it was though, the peacock felt it behove him to take on the role of ambassador and so he raised his tail and stepped forward to welcome the newcomer.

"Harrumph!" he cleared his throat. "Welcome sir. And to whom do we owe the pleasure of this visit?"

Bjork turned to face the shimmering regalia of the many eyed fan.

"Bjork. They call me Bjork, and you?" the big bird replied.

"I'm Preener. Welcome to the Bigg house. What brings you here?"

"Apart from the East Wind, I've been given to understand that this is a place of interest. Is that so?"

"I guess it depends on what interests you. We have a diverse little band here. Anyone is tolerated. Colour, size, shape and breed, no matter. All are welcome. Stay a while and see..."

Just then the shadows of the deepening dusk rumbled across the yard as Estroharf wandered around the corner of the house, with Polly and Wolly perched on his back. The parrots were deep in a conversation of sorts. As usual it was more of an argument... the kind of argument that two soul mates might have. The trio wandered past without as much as a 'by your leave' to the stork and disappeared into the barn. To Estroharf even a bird that large was small, and the parrots were otherwise engaged so none of them even noticed Bjork as they headed for the musty, homey smells of the old building.

Bjork noticed the elephant passing of course and his eyebrows shot up. (Most people don't think of birds as having eyebrows, but that's only because they can't see them through the feathers.) He turned his head in the quizzical way that birds do when something attracts their attention and cast his eyes over the gathering. By now the younger members of the community were starting to get bored and baby Wombats were scuffling about after a pair of Racoons as they rolled and tumbled between the legs of a Zebra. She in turn was busy stealing carrots from a basket hanging beside the stable door and perched on a pile of sacks, Zara was quickly over the brief excitement of the arrival and lay stone-still contemplating whether to retire for the night. Deciding it was time for some shut eye she suddenly burst into action (as Tuataras do) and scooting off to her hollow log she sideswiped Phantom sending him rolling into the dirt in a ball of feathers. The unfortunate bantam was nicknamed 'Phantom' because he was never around when there was work to do, (such work as bantams are wont to do that is). There was one job he was always ready to help with though and that was picking up spilled food. He would willingly get stuck into the task when asked, however the food never seemed to end up back in the bag somehow and not surprisingly he continued to get fatter and fatter. A 'ball of feathers' was in fact the perfect description for the lad, in any case Bjork added him and the ancient lizard to the list of odd friends he found as he panned his head around the scene, now fading into the dark of night.

'This is beginning to look like quite an interesting place', the Long Traveller mused to himself.

"Thank you for your invitation Preener. I guess I will stay a spell...I noticed a lake just outside the gate as I came in to land. I might settle in there for a bit if that's no problem?"

"Be our guest Bjork. You must be weary from your journey and the night is coming on so make yourself at home and we'll see you in the morning" The stork flapped a couple of times to rise over the farmyard wall and alighted at the edge of the lake. Back inside the yard a gentle chorus of snores, (you might even call it a 'snorus') gradually took over from the sounds of daytime as the farmyard residents settled down to rest. All that

is except the handful of nocturnal neighbours who Preener referred to as 'the night staff'. They would keep a wary eye on the place through the depths of the night.

*A*s Barnaby hung from his perch high in the gables, the little bat could see Christmas lights blinking in the streets around town. Away across the paddocks and past the copse of trees, a warm glow could just be seen in the kitchen window of the Harrigans. Oliver was preparing to go to bed having tucked Eadie in snug and tight, her perpetual smile resting up against the pillow. Meanwhile hidden from the world Millard and Millicent were going about their mousey business. Further on, by the pond next to the church, Dowdy and his flock of friends had each folded their feet underneath them, tucked their bills beneath their wings and nestled down into a sheltered pile of leaves. Every now and then a quiet contented "tduuckkk..." slipped from their mouths as they dreamed of the coming visit of the man in the red suit.

*M*orning arrived, reluctantly summoned by the Rooster's crow, and the farmyard residents began to stir. The breakfast hustle was soon underway and presently a farmhand was amongst the animals with the expected food. After a while the Major appeared and the ring of shod hooves on the stones announced his departure on a morning ride around the property. All this activity was watched with interest from the peak of the barn roof by Bjork and as the men left the yard he glided down to say 'good morning' to Preener. Always one for a chat the peacock drew the stork into conversation and the two settled down for a long talk. The subjects ranged far and wide which was very appropriate considering Bjork's travels. Preener on the other hand, had been born in a zoo and had little experience of the greater world so hung on every word. Sensing this the Long Traveller began embellishing his stories somewhat. A wider sea here, a higher mountain there, a more beautiful city somewhere else. All these he added freely to the tales of his life, puffing out his chest as he spoke.

Now Preener may not have had a wide experience of the world but he wasn't as stupid as some might think and he began to get suspicious of the Stork's stories. Some of them seemed just too fanciful to be true and there was one in particular that caught his ear. Bjork claimed to come from a long line of storks that had been delivering babies right back 2000 years, to and including Jesus.

Preener had heard the many tales that circulated amongst the bird community about storks delivering babies. They always surfaced whenever the topic of environmental damage came up. "Where would those humans be without us animals?" someone would say. "What if the Storks disappeared? Where would the babies come from?" or something similar. Of course Preener didn't believe a word of it so Bjork's claims didn't sit too well with him.

"I've heard about the three wise men and angels and such, but not a word about the baby Jesus arriving in the beak of a stork. I think you're stretching it a bit my man" he said, but Bjork insisted he was descended from the very bird who made the delivery to the manger.

As the days went by the storks insistence on this claim began to irk the peacock and he decided to put some thought into how he could prove it wrong. What he needed was someone of authority who could put the matter to rest. The world is of course full of such people but unfortunately pretty much all of them are unable to talk to folks such as Bjork and Preener. It seemed he would have his work cut out for him until one day the Harrigans arrived in the farmyard. Oliver had brought Eadie to visit Estroharf as he had done on several occasions since the Major's invitation the previous Christmas. Their presence brought Preener's friends Dowdy, Millard and Millicent to mind and it was while contemplating what they would be up to as Christmas approached that he hit on a idea.

*A*s we all now know, Santa Claus is a man of vast knowledge and not only that, he is well versed in animal languages too and thus Preener figured that he would be the perfect person to lay the matter to rest. Furthermore he was due in a couple of nights. It was time to contact the mice and see what could be done. After his previous jaunt into the countryside, Preener had decided not to go walkabout again but there were others who could help out and so he approached Polly and Wolly on the subject. Fortunately they were of the same mind regarding the plausibility of Bjork's claim and agreed to fly over to the cottage and talk to the mice.

Taking advantage of the opportunity presented by the Harrigan's absence from the cottage, the parrot pair rose into the air and departed across the fields. Their colourful wings brightened up the scene as they alighted on the sill of the hall window. It was slightly open, but not enough for them to squeeze inside so Wolly began tapping on the glass with his beak. There was no response from inside so Polly joined in and with a musical rhythm familiar to such jungle dwellers, they soon woke Millard from his midday nap. His head appeared cautiously from the hole in the skirting. Seeing that Oliver and Eadie were not in sight, he scurried out from under the telephone table and looked up at the source of the noise. He could just see the heads of the parrots at the window and scurried up the chair, across the table and onto the window sill where, squeezing through the narrow opening, he greeted the pair warmly. Once the niceties were out of the way, the visitors related the story of the Long Traveller and his claims.

"But how can I help?" replied the mouse.

"Well, Preener thought you might be able to ask Santa about it. He knows everything doesn't he?"

"I guess..." said Millard. "But I can't just pick up the phone and call him you know."

"Doesn't he ring you though?" Polly asked. "It is nearly Christmas after all."

"Well yes. I suppose he'll ring again this year. I could ask him then if there's no hurry."

"Please do." The pair replied in unison, and so it was decided. Millard would ask Santa if Bjork's ancestor delivered the baby Jesus.

The parrots rose into a darkening sky as Millard returned to his hole to continue his nap.

Over by the pond Dowdy and his mother eyed the clouds building in the west. Mrs Baker did likewise as she hurried into the vestibule of the church to give the place a bit of a spruce up before the Christmas services.

Yes, it was starting to look like a stormy Christmas was on the way as the parrots arrived back at the Bigg house. There they found Bjork holding forth again on the wonders of the world to an enraptured circle of young animals. They drew Preener aside and filled him in on their visit to the cottage. Tomorrow night they hoped to have their answer.

*T*he night passed without incident as the owls and bats up at the Bigg house kept an eye and ear on things. Even if these winged friends had not been locals someone would have had to keep a watch through the dark for not all owls and bats are as friendly as the Bigg crew. As you may recall, Millard and Millicent can attest to that from their annual rooftop adventures with Santa.

After a grey dawn, the dull day dragged by as the storm clouds hung around casually as if half interested in the result of Millard's coming chat with the man in the red suit.

Dowdy and his mates kept out of his mother's way by playing in the puddles that collected between the cobblestones on the church path. Unfortunately that did mean they nearly tripped up Mrs. Baker and a number of her thirteen children as they traipsed in and out of the vestibule with flowers and such like. A brief scuffling of webbed feet on wet stone with accompanying quacks, clucks and suppressed curses, (in deference to the venue) usually took care of the formalities of the following sequence of events. Which was; 'child meets duck, duck ducks child, child stumbles over duck, flowers decorate the carpet rather than the vase etc.' before a calm of sorts returned to the establishment. Of course with thirteen children Mrs Baker knew there wasn't really such a thing as true calm and so the ducks enjoyed the luxury of not being shooed away every time, leaving them to play the day away in the excited expectation of Santa's coming visit. ('Only two sleeps 'til Santa', being the chant of the day.)

*F*inally, as the cloud cover reluctantly relinquished control of the sky to the night, the few farmyard friends who had braved the drizzle, trotted into the many corners of the barn and the out buildings. Vigorously shaking off the truculent drops of water clinging to their coats

they nuzzled down to sleep amongst the hay and old bags scattered about the floor. Even Bjork had wandered inside to stay out of the wet and plonked himself regally in the middle of it all, much to the chagrin of some of the residents who felt like he was only there to spy on them. (Yes, even animals can be naturally suspicious.) You may well think it odd for a bird that likes water to go in out of the rain, but they do say you can have too much of a good thing, and you know it doesn't only apply to people. Anyway, his presence created a small dilemma for Preener. He had planned to ask one of the owls to go and check with Millard later in the night to see what Santa's answer was, but he didn't want to alert the Long Traveller to what was afoot.

He was contemplating how to organise this when he realised that of course he couldn't send an owl to do the job. The mice would just scurry off at the first hint of his presence. Better to send one of the bats and Barnaby seemed a likely lad for the task. As bats go Barnaby was really quite attractive and as such not at all scary. Also with his smaller body he would be able to get into the roof to meet Millard out of the weather. There did remain though one rather vexing question. How does a large multi-coloured, many-plumed ground-dwelling bird, surreptitiously get the message to the small black pilot hanging upside-down in the rafters without causing a commotion in the barn? Hmm...

Perhaps the answer was in fact to do the reverse. Why not cause a commotion instead, then in the confusion, pass on the instructions to Barnaby while the place settled down again. Now that sounded like a plan. Possibly not a very good plan, but a plan nevertheless and Preener peered through the darkness for something to produce a ruckus with.

*J*ust across the yard, Estroharf had retired alone to the shed he referred to as his 'Bedouin'. For someone with such big ears he had a surprising habit of mis-hearing and misunderstanding things however no one else in the yard knew he had it all wrong. If he knew though Bjork would have been the exception, but he didn't, and so elephant was sound asleep in his oddly labelled bedroom. When preener slipped in through the crack in the door.

In the corner he could just make out the large dark lump that was Estroharf, hiding behind a shield of half suppressed snores.

The peacock sidled over to elephant sleeping unsuspecting in the gloom and turning round Preener lightly brushed his gorgeous tail feathers across the tip of Estroharf's trunk. A quiet "Harrumph!" was accompanied by a gentle stirring of the hay. The bird tried again, with a little more vigour. Ah...ah... ah... CHOO... Success! The noise reverberated around the farmyard echoing from wall to brick wall amongst the brick buildings,

Instantly there was pandemonium. No, not a place for black and white animals in pain, but a huge cacophony of noise and movement, as the menagerie burst into life. Apart from the owls and bats, no one was actually properly awake and there were cats and dogs, monkeys, zebras,

parrots et al running, flying, swinging, jumping and generally going berserk everywhere. Preener pecked at a passing monkey and got her instant attention.

"Oi! Wot yer do that fer?"

"Martha. Do me a favour will you?"

"Why should I? That hurt."

"No time to explain. Please just climb up and get Barnaby to come down for me will you?"

"Oh alright. But leave off the pecking in future won't yer. Okay?"

"Yes, yes. Now go get him...." The monkey scurried off between the legs of Herman the draft horse, up the zebra's tail and jumped across to a loft beam. From there she grabbed the trapdoor rope and swung over to Barnaby's favourite hangout.

By this point the rest of the barn's occupants had started settling down again, but unfortunately Martha had miscalculated her swing and the trapdoor rope came undone, dumping a load of pigeons square on Herman's head and the whole lot started up again.

Out in the yard, torchlight glistened on the cobbles as the Major hurried out to see what the noise was all about. The owls quickly hooted a warning and everyone instantly went quiet. When the door creaked open just enough for an eyeball's view into the darkness, there was nothing to see but peace and quiet, and nothing to hear but the odd snore, which was of course fake. No-one drops off to sleep that fast. Nevertheless it worked and the owner of the Bigg house retreated to his fireside, a little puzzled but satisfied that it was all over. Back in the barn though the night was just starting for Barnaby.

Martha had done her job and as the door clicked shut again, the young bat alighted on the workbench next to Preener. The peacock quickly signalled him to keep quiet and with his back to Bjork, he explained the proposed mission.

Now Barnaby hadn't been out and about for a while so he was ready and willing to embark on the adventure, while still being a little unsure as to how he would actually get in touch with the mice once he got there.

"There must be a way in from the roof" Preener said, "after all they go up there to meet Santa every year. You'll just have to have a nosey around. It's probably next to the guttering or the chimney. I have every faith you'll find a way, now off you go" and, puffed up with the compliment, the little bat switched on his radar and ascended to the peak of the barn where he knew he could easily fly out into the night.

*A*s he moved off over the countryside, the warm glow of family firesides illuminated little patches in the yards of the farms and the laneways of the villages. The Moon, bored with being overshadowed by the guiding star at this time every year, was playing hide and seek with the clouds who seemed to have given up on raining for the moment. Looking down over the lake Barnaby could see the moonbeams bouncing off the ripples of the quickly fading breeze that gently swayed the reeds. Somewhere

amongst the stalks a frog began croaking, the rasping sound of his winter cold disappearing behind the bat as he headed for Dowdy's pond and the Harrigan house.

Flapping his way over the houses, Barnaby sang to himself, not that anyone but a bat would have been able to hear it. Christmas carols in bat speak do sound to most of us just like squeaking, but of course there was no one to hear him anyway. They were all inside in bed, sitting by the fire or preparing for Christmas day, so close at hand.

Presently he crossed the far boundary of the town and circling the church spire came in to land on the ridge of the Harrigan's cottage. A wisp of smoke curled lazily up from the chimney pot but there was no glow from the fireplace below. Oliver had bedded down the fire and after kissing Eadie on the forehead he had retired for the night too. Knowing full well that her dreams would be filled with the childhood delights that also populated her days in these latter years, he had dropped off to sleep quickly, but with an ever vigilant ear out for any help she may require in the depths of her mystery-laden night.

The night visitor perched precariously on the edge of the chimney pot, pondering what to do next. Nearby he could hear the wind rustle in the leaves of the trees. Taking no notice he peered down into the dark chimney. Suddenly the breeze arrived on the roof and Barnaby's little form tumbled head over heels into the mouth of the cavern. Frantically he flailed about with his wings, gaining traction just as he arrived in the fireplace. He scooted out into the darkness of the lounge, casting around with his radar to try and get his bearings, but not quite quick enough. Looping around to avoid crashing into the half opened door he sideswiped the crystals decorating the rim of the standard lamp and a tinkle of glass against glass permeated the gloom.

In the bedroom, Oliver's ever vigilant ears pricked up instantly, and he rolled over, picking up a torch as he rose from the bed. Scurrying out into the hallway he shuffled along to the lounge, his slippers still only half on his feet. A slight creak announced his arrival as he opened the door wider and shone the torch into the room. All seemed in order. The crystals had just about stopped swinging, and the torch light flickered off their many facets in multi-coloured sparkles that decorated the walls and ceiling. Oliver briefly smiled at the light show, swung the beam across the fireplace, noting the Christmas stocking hanging on the mantelpiece and satisfied all was fine, although still a little puzzled, he retired once more to his bed.

Of course there was one, quite obvious, thing wrong with the scene in the lounge, but fortunately Oliver's sleepy mind had not taken it in or the jig would have been up for Barnaby. What it was, was that as it wasn't Christmas Eve there shouldn't have been a stocking hanging up at all and of course there wasn't. It was the young bat clinging precariously, upside down as usual, to the edge of the ledge and, pretending to be a stocking. Quite successfully as it turned out.

Talk about smart... and to think that the other bats called him 'Barn Baby'. If only they knew.

He hung here for a few minutes contemplating his next move, until the sound of gentle snoring announced that Oliver had slipped back into dream world.

From the tales that circulated in the farmyard, Barnaby knew that the phone must be close to the mouse hole, so as quietly as he could he flapped out into the hallway to look for it. Soon he spied it's dark shape huddled on the hall table and hearing a small scuffling sound he noticed Millard hurrying up to answer it. Being a bat, Barnaby couldn't hear it ringing but Millard could and of course he was also expecting.

Barnaby landed on the lace curtains to listen, wrapping his claws into the intricate webbing of the cotton, which threatened to pull it apart with his weight.

Below him he could make out the frantic to-ing and fro-ing as Millard conversed with the man in red. The usual pleasantries were quickly taken care of and soon he could just catch snatches of a question that included 'the word 'Baby Jesus'.

'Ah' he thought, 'here we go.'

One thing you can say about bats, despite their reputation, they're actually quite polite animals and Barnaby was no exception. His upbringing meant he wasn't about to interrupt Millard on the phone and so he waited quietly for the conversation to end.

"Well Millard" said Santa in reply. "Now that's an interesting question. Let me see." Far away in the frozen wastes of the Arctic, he stroked his luxuriant beard and looked up at the ceiling. A quiet mumbling tumbled out through the white hair as he pondered Bjork's family tree. Unseen by our friends in the Harrigan cottage, Santa held up one hand and began touching each finger in turn as if counting off a list of something. Something like family members perhaps. Having only five fingers per hand like the rest of us, he soon changed hands and started again with his left thumb. Millard waited patiently for the old man to come to some conclusion. After a while there was a 'clunk!' as a large fur topped boot fell to floor and counting continued on the toes of Santa's right foot. Being briefly distracted by the warmth of the fire on his bare foot, Millard had to gently prompt the old man to continue. This brought forth another 'clunk' (the left boot) before the mumbling stopped and an answer was proffered down the line.

"Now my little friend. In answer to your question..."

"Yes, yes?" replied the mouse in anticipation. Unheard, the words were silently echoed in the lace above him.

"You know the world is a big place and there are many, many strange things in it. Some things that you would never believe if you didn't see them with your own eyes and some that only exist because you believe. Now the baby Jesus could be said by some to be one of those, and the same applies to storks and babies. If you believe in one, why not believe in the other?"

"I'm sorry Santa, but that's not really a very helpful answer. What will I tell them up at the farm?"

"Perhaps you can put it like this. 'By my calculation, there is no reason that the Long Traveller couldn't be born of the line that performed that particular delivery. So if you believe in Christmas and wonderful presents appearing in the night, you'd have to be rather mean spirited to deny the truth of it. A baby is after all a most precious gift. Just think, most of the world knows what happened to the baby born that night in the manger, but no-one knows, or cares what happened to the Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh and they were meant to be very precious indeed.'

Now you ponder that and I'll see you on the roof tomorrow night. Merry Christmas Millard, and give my love to Millicent."

"Bye Santa and thanks" Millard replied and with that the line went silent. The little mouse rubbed his ears with his paws and was giving Santa's answer some thought when from the darkness above came a disembodied voice.

"Millard! Millard!"

The poor mouse nearly had a heart attack. For someone who believes in Santa (with good reason), ghosts came to mind all too easily in the dark of night.

"Millard! Millard!" he heard again, followed by the rustling of curtains as Barnaby slithered down to the table.

The mouse jumped in surprise to see a bat arriving beside him.

"Who are you?" he said timidly.

Barnaby quickly explained and enquired as to the response from the old man on the phone.

This time it was Millard's turn to explain, but it was kind of complicated and the bat really thought he might have trouble remembering it all. He, and Preener, had been expecting something a bit simpler, like, 'Yes' or 'No', but the message entrusted to the small pair, there in that darkened corner of the hall, was something quite different.

"How am I going to remember all that?" Barnaby wondered out loud, but quietly.

"I know", said his new friend. "Millicent has a wonderful memory. Maybe I can tell her and you can take her to tell Preener. What do you think?"

"Will she mind flying with me?" the little bat replied.

"Oh she's flown before. She'll be fine" said Millard. "I'll go get her" and so he did.

Soon bat and mouse were winging their way above the house lights, now blinking out here and there amongst the streets. Barnaby carefully avoided the glow of the remaining lights for fear of being seen and scaring some poor creature on the ground.

It was around midnight by the time they made it to the Bigg house and Barnaby was beginning to feel a little tired. He knew though that his nights travels were but half done and after dropping off Millicent on the workbench next to Preener, he scurried off for a little refreshment. By the

time she would be ready to leave again, he would be well fortified for the flight.

Meanwhile Millicent introduced herself and explained why she had come. "Well then... Thank you and what was the answer in the end?"

The mini messenger recited Santa's comments, pretty much word for word and as she did so, the look on the birds face turned first puzzled then to one of enlightenment.

"Ah I see" he said almost to himself, when Millicent had finished. "I believe" and here he smiled at his own little play on words, "that the answer is both 'Yes' and 'No' depending on what you believe. And furthermore, Bjork believes his family stories, so he is, in his way, telling the truth. It may seem to us that he's just making up tales, but if we believe in Santa, which of course we do, then we must believe in Christmas presents... and if we believe in Christmas presents then we must believe in what some call the greatest gift of all. Then if we believe in the greatest gift we must be mean spirited indeed not to believe in the giver. You know I can see a real case for a stork being the one to deliver the baby Jesus."

If he'd had a beard, Preener would have stroked it right about then, and pursed his lips to boot, but then of course he didn't have either so he just stood for a minute and looked important.

"Excuse me" Millicent chirped up. "Will that be all? I do have other things to attend to tonight."

"Oh yes certainly. Thank you so much for coming all this way. It is much appreciated. Now where's that Barn baby? I'll get him to take you home."

"Barn baby? Did you call him Barn baby?" She replied. "I think he's a bit more than a baby. He's been very helpful tonight. It's a big job for a little fellow like him to carry me all that way."

"You're right of course. Maybe it's time we treated him like a grown up around here. I'll have see to it."

Just then the bat in question alighted next to Millicent.

"Ready to go?" he said excitedly. It's amazing what a little food will do to get one going again and he was now looking forward to another jaunt across field and town to the Harrigan's.

"Yes, all done here. Let's go" she replied. "Good to meet you Preener. Glad to be of service."

"Farewell and thank you", he said as Barnaby gently picked up Millicent and launched into the night sky once again.

Convinced now that the Long Traveller wasn't just an inflated ego on wings, Preener settled down to sleep off the remainder of the night, in the expectation of the arrival of Christmas Eve at dawn.

Next morning Preener greeted the guest with somewhat more respect and as the news of the night's activities spread rumour-like through the farmyard community, the other animals did too. This fact did not go unnoticed by Bjork and he strode around feeling quite important all in all.

The rain that had been threatening for a couple of days, put in a brief appearance and then skedaddled for the Eastern horizon. Fortunately it did so just in time for the afternoon sun to towel off the damp paddocks for the youngsters to expend some of their pre-Santa energy in. The teenage Bantams in particular were in quite a buoyant mood bouncing and tumbling around in the grass looking for tit-bits and generally causing havoc amongst the more sedate hens. Phantom was perhaps the worst culprit, having somehow, somewhere, taken to calling Christmas 'Eatser' due to the amount of food usually scattered the way of the farmyard residents after Christmas dinner. This year he got quite confused and thinking it was Easter he went charging around looking for eggs. Of course he found some, as you do if you go searching in a yard with chickens, and a right old barney ensued as the mothering hens proceeded to put him right.

Over at Dowdy's pond the latest generation of ducklings was bustling about preparing for the night ahead. The Christmas bush was as usual hung with bits and pieces of shiny stuff, found during the year and hoarded in a dark hollow in the copse, where no do-gooders would find them while cleaning up the woods. There is after all a limit to how far you should go when tidying up the environment. There can be unknown and far-reaching consequences. In this case they wouldn't have been too far-reaching, but there would definitely have been a little band of long faces when it came time to decorate the bush.

*F*inally the long fingers of Christmas eve night stretched out across the farmlands feeling their way towards the town and its various little communities dotted around the edge.

Dowdy and his Mum and friends settled down beneath the bushes at the shore of the pond and watched the Bakers traipse into the church, nearly outnumbering the other parishioners at the service. Bringing up the rear of the procession, Oliver gently shepherded Eadie into the warm glow of the chapel. He knew full well how she enjoyed the singing of the congregation and would often join in. This was not always an entirely successful venture, but her many friends from round about could see the joy on her face and they'd nod to her in approval if she looked their way. This was often acknowledged with a wink. A simple gesture that was one of the few still available to her now days and that spoke volumes to those who loved and cared about her.

At the front of the chapel the traditional nativity scene was set up once again, despite the memories of the cacophony of a certain past Christmas debacle.

Soon the service began and after a short period of barely audible talking from the pulpit, the ducks could hear the congregational voices lifted in song. The pleasant tones, interspersed now and then with a 'bum' note or two lulled the younger ducks off to sleep, with dreams of an impending midnight visitor playing happily in their heads.

Following the service, the little column of worshippers bustled out into the night, softly wishing each other well for the festive season and planting the occasional kiss on the cheek of particularly close friends. Soft clicks accompanied the disappearing glow in the leadlight windows and the preacher withdrew to the front door. Turning the big iron key in the lock he made an about face and shuffled off down the stone paving, through the gate out onto the road and off into the stillness of the night.

Cottonwool clouds scudded across the sky, painting moon shadow paisley patterns over the countryside. Up at the Bigg house, Bjork was feeling restless. He couldn't quite say why, but then it was his first Christmas after all and perhaps he was just a little nervous, or expectant. Maybe he had just been in one place too long and needed to move on, in any case after a while he decided he needed some exercise and so he launched himself into the sky for a circuit of the town.

It was about then that Millard and Millicent were making their way up to the roof for their annual rendezvous with Santa. He was quickly approaching in the wake of his trusty reindeer, loaded down with presents for all the good folk near and far.

The mice were somewhat more relaxed about their rooftop adventure this year as there had been word that the owls in the Bigg barn had spread the word amongst their kind that they wouldn't tolerate anyone hassling the new friends of the farmyard. They settled down beside the chimney to wait, sitting in the shadows nevertheless, just in case. You really can never be too careful.

It wasn't long afterward that they were thankful they did so as a large winged shadow drifted over them rushing up the roof from the spouting to the ridge and careening down the other side. The two tiny animals pressed back against the bricks and stared up into the dark to try and find the perpetrator. Soon the dark shape was back and with a rattling of claws on stone a bird alighted on the top of the chimney.

Millard stretched out just a little to see if he could identify it and to his surprise saw a long beak sticking out over them. Yes, it was Bjork. Storks are rather fond of chimney tops so it really was no surprise that had he landed there. Millard breathed a sigh of relief and told Millicent who it was.

Just then a flickering movement attracted their attention as Santa flew in down the path of a moonbeam and circled slowly overhead. Calling out "Catch, Millard" he dropped his customary little parachute with Eadie's present and it drifted gently into Millard's waiting grasp. Being the smart cookie that he is, the man in red spied Bjork and quickly figured out just who he was.

"Ho my good Long Traveller! How are you this fine Christmas?" he called. Bjork was a bit taken aback, but as a bird of the world he swiftly regained his composure and replied; "Ah, Santa I presume?"

"The very same. Come up here. I've something special for you." And so saying he gestured to the bird to join him on the sleigh, which he did. "There's a present for the farmyard that I'd like you to deliver for me. It's very delicate and I need someone like you to take care of leaving it for Preener and his wife to find in the morning. It is most important and I can't trust it to just anyone. I'd do it myself but the barn doesn't have a chimney so it's a bit of a problem. Also with all the extra people to get to each year I'm running a bit short of time. Will you do it for me?" "Of course Santa. I'd be proud to" and opening his beak wide, Bjork let Santa place a large egg into the warmth of his mouth. "Now don't let it get cold on the way." "Mumble mumble mumble", the big bird replied and nodded his head. Despite the obstruction to his speech, he got the message across and sliding off into the void he swooped down over the mice on the rooftop and soared out and away towards the Bigg house.

*A*s the Long Traveller made his landing approach, the sound of loud snoring could be heard coming from the barn. It seemed everyone inside had nestled down into their respective corners to dream of Christmas morning and that included Preener and his wife. Even the owls had nodded off.

Bjork alighted on the cobbles, sliding slightly on the moist stones. He came to a stop with a light tap of his toes on the barn door. It was as usual left open just a little in case any of the occupants needed to step out in the night to answer the call of nature. With a barn full of animals it could come often and loud. In any case it was fortunate for the big bird that the door was ajar and he slipped in through the crack, making sure not to bump his beak and damage his precious cargo.

He looked around in the dark and saw... nothing. It was pitch black, as you'd expect.

"Hmm" he thought. "How will I find my way in this?" He stumbled forward as carefully as he could before knocking against a pitch fork standing against the hay rick. There was a slight rustle of hay.

He froze for a second or two then just as he was about to raise his leg and move on, there was another, flapping, noise. He could sense that someone or something had just arrived beside him.

"Hullo Bjork. You're up late." It was the quiet voice of Barnaby, swinging upside down from the handle of the pitch fork.

"I might say the same of you" the bird tried to reply, but only managed another sentence of mumbling.

"What's the trouble? Cat got your tongue?" the bat replied, knowing full well that cats, least ways the cats he was friends with, didn't do things like taking tongues that weren't their own.

Bjork gently laid the egg on the hay so he could speak and snuggled up against it to keep it warm.

"I have a present to deliver for Santa although I'm not sure I can find who it's for, in this darkness."

"You mean that present?" said Barnaby motioning in the blackness to the egg.

The stork had forgotten that bats were good in the dark, and Barnaby's comment gave him an idea.

"You know, lad, you've been very helpful this Christmas haven't you?"

"Yep, I guess I have. My pleasure really. It's nice to be of some use."

"Would you like to be of some more use? I need a hand to find the Preeners."

"Why sure. Of course I'll help. Just pick up the egg and I'll show you the way.

The bird slipped the present back into the warmth of his mouth and stood up again. With a short flap Barnaby was up and hanging from his long beak. "Straight forward" he whispered and the pair advanced a couple of paces through the darkness of the barn.

"Left now" and Bjork carefully moved in that direction.

Using his radar, the little bat directed their line of travel around the sleeping occupants and hidden farm implements until the two of them were next to Preener and his wife in the rear of the building.

'Now what?' thought Bjork. 'How do I get the egg under her so it stays warm till morning without waking her up?' The thought hadn't occurred to him when he accepted his task from Santa. On the other hand, the man in red had shown so much faith in him that it didn't cross his mind that he wouldn't be able to fulfil the request, but now this looked decidedly problematic.

In the dark his brow was furrowed in thought, when Barnaby came to the rescue, yet again. He had been pondering the same thing and had come up with an answer.

"Unless you have a better idea" he whispered, "why don't you put me down here and let the egg slide down beside Mrs' Preener. Then, when I say 'Now', you blow gently on her wing. My guess is that she'll move in her sleep to resettle herself and I'll just brush the egg under her feathers. What do you think?"

Bjork nodded. Maybe a little too vigorously as the bat nearly fell off on top of the Peacocks. He swung in the air by one foot briefly before managing to regain his footing. Fortunately this prevented him from plummeting onto the backs of the birds and giving the game away.

"Ok, I get the message. Now lower me gently" and the big bird did so.

Once his little friend was safely down, Bjork opened his mouth a little and the egg slid slowly down beside the bat.

"Right here we go, one, two, three..." and the long Traveller puffed gently on the peacock's wing. Nothing happened.

"Once more. One, two three..." This time she moved a little but not enough for Barnaby to position the egg properly. Bjork couldn't see it though so the bat reported the situation and they tried a third time.

This time her wing was raised just enough and with his own leathery little wing, Barnaby swept the present into place and scuttled out of the way.

Leaping up onto Bjork's beak again he said "Job done. Let's go. I'll show you the way out" and the big bird followed his directions back to the barn door.

The moonlight was now peering through the opening and the clouds were playing connect the dots with the stars scattered across the deep purple sky as the two stepped outside.

Barnaby swung down to the ground as the Long Traveller spoke.

"What a magnificent night Barnaby. It reminds me of the sky over the far Eastern sands. Maybe I should go visit there. It's been a while now."

"Perhaps you should. It's what you do isn't it? The travelling thing. And you've been here a wee while now. You must miss soaring above strange and interesting lands and all those colourful countries and people. It all sounds rather exciting actually."

"Well, yes, I do now you mention it. You know, I think I will, and as I always say 'There's no present like the time' and he smiled at his own weak little joke in that mysterious and hard-to-see way that storks have. Despite his claim though, no one, much less Barnaby, had actually heard him say this before; nevertheless he got the idea and said, "I suppose it's as good a time as any".

"Would you like to come with me?" Bjork asked. "There's much to see, and you might meet a few relations on the way.

"It's a long way for a small fellow like me to travel. A bit beyond my capability wouldn't you say?"

"Maybe, but you don't have to fly. I'll carry you in my beak. I'm quite used to that as you've seen."

"Well I guess ..." came the reply.

The little bat had become quite adventurous in the past couple of days and the thought of crossing those distant horizons was beginning to appeal to him, so it only took a little more persuasion before he accepted the offer from his big new friend and they made plans to venture forth the next evening.

Christmas day dawned clear and bright in the farmyard.

A little later Major Bigg appeared from the feed shed to hand out breakfast himself. It was a day off for his farmhands of course and he liked to give his animal friends a little something special at Christmas. This year was no exception. The creaking of the barn door had just begun as he swung it open, when a ruckus broke out inside. Least ways that's what he thought it was. He pushed both doors wide to let in the light so he could see what the fuss was all about, and there back in the corner he found all the barn residents gathered around Mrs. Preener, rather like the nativity scene at the church. They were 'coo'ing and clucking in the way parents do at new babies, for that was what was the focus of all the attention - a freshly hatched baby peacock. Bjork and Barnaby were smiling proudly at each other, trying not to give the game away, and luckily they were succeeding. With their plans in hand to depart that

evening, they felt sure they would be able to keep their little secret from the slightly bewildered (yet very happy) new parents.

The major backed out of the barn smiling too, and soon reappeared as he passed the door on Estroharf. Due to his bulk the Elephant had his own shed to sleep in and this morning he and the boss were off to collect Eadie and Oliver for the midday Christmas meal. Since the Christmas when he had first met them, the major had taken quite a shine to the quiet couple and loved to see Eadie's face light up at the sight of his big grey friend. Living alone in the manor could get a little lonely, particularly in the festive season so he had arranged to transport them in old Indian fashion, back to the house to dine with him. He was anticipating a very pleasant day, and that's exactly what transpired.

Man and beast headed off at a leisurely pace through the village in the direction of the church. On the way the major waved to the children playing in the streets and they briefly looked up from their presents to return the greeting. The gaily decorated Howdah was a strange but festive sight with all the Indian beads, brocades and little mirrors intermingled with the Christmas tree baubles and bunting of the season. At the churchyard wall Estroharf stood patiently by the lych-gate while the major attended the morning service and upon leaving the church the two of them walked along to the Harrigans' house where Estroharf eased up beside the front wall. With a little encouragement, but not too much, Oliver and the major managed to get Eadie into the howdah via the dormer window of the upstairs hall. Down below Millard and Millicent watched through the lace curtains. Hidden in the dappled shadows on the windowsill there was little danger of them testing the old myth about elephants being scared of mice.

Presently they heard the click of the front door and the furry couple watched Oliver and the major walk off down the lane leading the Elephant into the village with Eadie waved enthusiastically from his back.

Coming to a stop in the farmyard, the major beckoned Eadie over to the barn to show her the new arrival and her face lit up with joy. Nothing can truly take away the motherly instinct and babies of any kind were still Eadie's favourite people.

To Oliver it was events such as this that reminded him that despite the condition that had distanced her from the rest of the world for some years, behind her eyes she never ever really slipped away. The hope and warmth he gained from this thought enwrapped him as the three of them moved into the house for a meal prepared by the major himself. The simple fare suited the Harrigans admirably, and the little effort required to prepare it let Merry (Major Biggs' long time cook) dine with her widowed sister in the next village.

All was well at the Bigg house, as it was back at Dowdy's pond and in the deep recesses of the Harrigan house where Millard and Millicent nibbled cheerfully away at the final crumbs of some morsels that had (not so mysteriously) appeared following Santa's visit. On the water the ducks

and their friends cleaned up the last of the titbits cast there earlier by Oliver and Eadie.

*A*nd so another Christmas day passed almost exactly as it had done for centuries in the village and round about, with one small exception; travel plans were afoot.

All day Barnaby's little tummy had been churning with excitement. Usually of course he'd be asleep for most of the daylight but this habit was about to be turned on it's head (as bats are so fond of saying) and he was bustling about making sure to speak with all his friends in the yard before he left. Even the thought of leaving them behind didn't put a damper on his nervous expectation. Bjork had assured him that they would return in the not too distant future so it was 'all good'.

Finally the sun eased it's weary way toward the Western horizon and the night crept in. Barnaby hadn't thought to ask why they were leaving in the evening, it was after all the natural time for him to start doing things, but it turned out that Bjork liked to head off with the Sun at his back and not in his eyes. It just made the leaving that much more pleasant. He had spent the day conversing with Preener in particular passing on his thanks to them all for helping him recover his heritage, culminating of course in his first baby delivery. He now felt he was a stork with a real pedigree, willing and able to carry the mantle of his ancestors. Any doubts he'd had about the family tales of the first Christmas had gone and he was calm and confident within himself, ready for anything that might come on the journey East.

'Maybe we could even visit Bethlehem' he thought. I'm sure Barnaby would like that.'

*F*inally the last of the farewells had been exchanged and the Long Traveller launched into the newly darkened sky. He wings stretched out wide as he performed a circuit above the farmyard and headed East, his beak emphatically pointing the way. With Barnaby lying prone inside, Bjork held it open just enough for the bat to see where they were going. From his vantage point all he could see ahead was adventure and he smiled to himself in anticipation.

The End