

THE  
YULE TIDE

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

*By Phil Young*

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*'Christmas is often known to bring a flood of emotions; anticipation, joy, homesickness and even tears.*

*Sometimes though the flood can be of a different kind...'*

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There are years that Christmas seems to be more low-key than others. All the regular events, presents, work parties and family gatherings all take place but somehow the merriment lacks that certain edge. Since Santa had become a personal acquaintance of Millard this sort of festive season had become a thing of the past in the Harrigans home and out on the church pond. More recently up at the Bigg house Christmas had been brighter too.

This year however it was shaping up to be a return of the dull edge. The approach of the December rush brought with it thoughts of the previous year and Bjork ascending into the East with his new friend Barnaby securely perched in his beak; the two of them off on a voyage of discovery and adventure. The little bat's escapades before his departure had left an endearing impression on the animals around about and one by one they fell to wondering what the two aviators had got up to, out there beyond the sunrise.

For his part, Barnaby was starting to get a little homesick whenever he heard or saw something Christmassy.

"Ah, Christmas, Christmas, Christmas..." he said with a sigh as he hung under the eaves of his far off haunt. Out there in parts unknown, they celebrated quite differently and while he understood the whole religious thing behind it all, it just didn't feel the same. Bjork did his best to keep up the young bat's spirits and they actually had plenty of fun that December, but they both knew they were too far from the Bigg house to make it back by the 25<sup>th</sup>. Also, while he had enjoyed his sojourn in the farmyard, Bjork wanted to spend the coming days with his own relatives, something he hadn't done for some years as he soared here and there around the globe. All in all they had a bit of a quandary. How could they be in both places as once? Well, they couldn't, so Barnaby resigned himself to a Christmas far from the Bigg house and his mates in the farmyard.

Meanwhile, beyond the western horizon, just this side of sunset, dark clouds were gathering above his friends and family. The weather was looking decidedly dirty and the animals round the pond and in the yard at the Bigg house started settling into snug little nooks and crannies to await what might come. Dowdy and his mum nuzzled into the undergrowth and found a spot way back in under a bush where the gathering wind barely touched them. Estroharf backed into his shed, closed the door with his trunk and fluffed up the straw for warmth. He wasn't one for cold days, let alone cold nights and he didn't like the look of the roiling clouds rushing in from the West.

For their part, the townsfolk, including the Harrigans and the Major, kept a weather eye on the sky and checked the locks and latches of the doors and windows just in case something more than a

squall descended on their piece of paradise. Those with shutters on their houses secured them tight across the windows, thankful to have kept them when last they renovated their homes.

Eadie went willingly to bed when Oliver suggested it and after a final check of the house, he followed, tucking her in with an extra blanket before snuggling down to listen to the trees in the garden as they complained at the rising wind. "Oh woe is me" the old Oak moaned. "I have an awful feeling about this." Whether Oliver really did hear the stately tree actually say those words or not, is a point for conjecture, but in his half-sleep, the man about the house would swear next morning that it seemed so. In any case sleep did not come easily for him or for anyone else in the town.

Up on the hill the Major rattled around the mansion securing things 'just in case' and headed for his favourite spot under the covers. He gave the torch a little slap into the palm of his hand (as you do when checking the batteries) stood it lens down, on the bedside table and pulled the blankets up around his ears. "Good night Love" he muttered to the photo on the dresser of his dear departed, wife and closed his eyes, in the hope that next time they saw light, all would be clear and still outside.

## *Off To Church*

For the time being though, clear and still was far from the state of things and the weather just got worse as the clock ticked on, unheard behind the roar of the wind. Down at the pond, Dowdy watched the rare sight of whitecaps on the water while the bushes struggled to keep their composure as they flailed about in their encircling dance.

Back in the undergrowth the little community of waterfowl and attendant reptiles and rodents snuggled down into depressions in the earth or clung to whatever came to hand, in the hope of avoiding being blown or washed away. Soon though, the deluge cascading from the sky began to raise the water level and the land animals looked about for higher refuge, their eyes wide in fear. Through the wall of water the church periodically flashed into view, backlit by lightning. It looked solid and everlasting. The rats, mice, moles and other ground dwellers began to scurry through the lych-gate seeking an entrance to the sanctuary and before long a group of refugees had gathered at the front door hoping to get in. Alas though it was closed and latched. The forlorn little bunch of locals was huddled together contemplating a solution to their problem when the ducks arrived. As most of us who know Dowdy and his friends would understand, ducks aren't really that keen on wet weather or rough water for that matter, and now with their bushy shelters flailing about vigorously, they too were looking for a dependable nook to settle down into for the duration of the storm.

When the tiny flock arrived Dowdy saw the problem at once, and much to everyone's relief he also saw the solution. Immediately he flapped his way up onto the latch and jumped on it as hard as he could.

Now normally a duck wouldn't be heavy enough to weigh down the thumb lever on a latch but thanks to Oliver and Eadie and a regular supply of bread scraps, our little friend was not so little after all. Consequently, with a medieval 'clunk', the latch came undone and the door creaked opened under the weight of the visitors cowering up against it. Dowdy quickly spread his wings and glided

into the church above his friends and neighbours to look for a dry spot to alight. Inside the place was much as it was last time he had been there, apart from some stained glass lying scattered beneath the leadlight frame that the wind had burst in through. Still, even with the odd unwelcome gust intruding on the scene, it was snug and cosy compared to the shores of the pond outside and everyone settled down to wait for the revelations of dawn.

Up at the Bigg house the shed doors rattled and banged, threatening to give in to the blast while leaves that had chosen to stay on the trees quickly rethought their decision and went exploring with the wind. Nearby, hillside paddocks turned into water-world theme parks for unsuspecting sheep and cattle while mud started its leisurely journey to the bottom of the valley.

As the gale roared on, power poles in the town took a rest from resisting the forces of nature and promptly lay down in the street. Instantly any lights that had been valiantly trying to maintain an air of warmth and comfort went out. It was about then that the mud reached its destination and, landing in a jumbled pile of sods, rocks, tree trunks and gravel, it slid into the river forming an effective dam.

The river began to rise.

For an hour or two the situation remained the same as the storm ripped through the valley. The inhabitants sheltered and tried to ignore it where they could, while way out in the darkness, the river, the lakes and the ponds kept getting deeper.

Just before dawn though, things started getting worse. The mud tired of hanging around on the river bed and scarpered off downstream with the flood waters in hot pursuit.

It rushed through 'The Dell', grabbing the footbridge on the way for company. Then round 'Barton's Bend', scraping the fishermen's shacks clear off their stilts as it passed. Finding some low ground, the water spread out and quickly infiltrated the woods, knocking over the bird hides for good measure.

And so on it went until it came to the church pond, nestled in its little hollow just up from the river bank. There the pond filled to overflowing and was making its way towards the church when Dowdy decided to check outside. He fluttered up to the broken window and peered out into the darkness. He could see nothing and was about to settle down again when a bolt of lightning blasted the countryside with a light show highlighting just how close the river had come.

"Everybody up!" He called. "Move, move! Get up on the pews. Anywhere. As high as you can get. The water's coming in."

The sound of little bodies rustling around came from all over the chapel as the animals found higher ground; the bigger ones helped the smaller ones to make it onto the furniture, or even higher if possible. No sooner had the last of them made it than a trickle of muddy water slithered in through the partially open door, feeling its way along the mortar between the flag stones, looking for mischief. And mischief it found.

A pile of hymn books sitting on the floor was soon submerged while random pamphlets blown from the display stand by the door went swimming briefly before drowning in the invading mud.

Gradually the mess accumulated as odd objects and foliage came in on the tide of the storm to check out the church for the first time.

Fortunately Dowdy's warning had been just in time and the motely bunch of wild life had all managed to get up high enough to be safe and dry. They huddled together for warmth and waited for the gathering dawn to throw its diamond patterns across what was once a tiled floor.

Not long afterward the sound of raindrops beating on the roof eased and soon a grey light began to penetrate the gloom. The storm had passed and in the light of the new day the animals could see a tide line of dirt around the walls of the chapel, somewhat like an un-scrubbed bath. It marked exactly how high the flood had reached. About two ducks high Dowdy figured. He couldn't be sure though because all the mud still spread across the tiles made it hard to guess how deep it was. In any case the place was a mess. There was stuff everywhere. Hymn books lay plastered against the walls and pieces of the nativity scene were piled up here and there. Some had disappeared out the door with the water as it began to recede. Other foreign objects had drifted in and lodged amongst the native furniture creating odd little tableaux of their own. Way back in one corner a small figure sat, head sticking out between the curtains under the table where an empty collection plate lay unheeded, waiting for the next service. In this case that ought to be on Christmas morning, just a couple of days away. With the state of the church though it looked highly unlikely it would be the venue this year.

The sad little face surveying the scene was that of a much loved doll belonging to the Baker twins. She had been tucked in to sleep in the playhouse behind the family farmhouse beside the river. Alas, as the children were soon to find out, the playhouse and its occupant had been swept off on an adventure of their own, coming to rest in various parts of the countryside and town, including the church.

Dowdy hopped down onto the mud and waddled out the door.

## *Stranded*

Next door in the Harrigans' garden the taller plants poked forlornly out of a bed of sticky brown that filled the hollow where their house stood. Dowdy looked up at the first floor as a lace curtain stirred in one of the dormer windows. Behind the glass the little duck could just make out the faces of Oliver and Eadie surveying the mess below them. Based on the height of the slime against the front door and house walls, Oliver came to the same conclusion as the duck, they were stranded. In her fragile condition Eadie would be hard to move from the second floor and so a concerned look spread across her husband's face as he contemplated their situation.

Pretty quickly he decided they needed help and he headed down the stairs to use the phone, only to be confronted by the knee deep sludge. He pondered a minute and retraced his steps upstairs. As he went he didn't notice Millard and Millicent huddled in a corner trying to keep warm and dry. From behind a banister post, Millard looked glumly down at the corner of the hallway where the phone should be. It was covered in mud and with only a day or so to their annual call from Santa it

looked like this year they would miss out. It seemed clear that the phone was out of action and likely to remain so for some time. He contemplated the consequences as his tiny tummy rumbled. It was telling him it was time to go looking for something to snack on. No use trying to get to the kitchen via the downstairs hallway, that way was well and truly blocked. They'd have to get creative, so the two mice set off along the upstairs passage. Down near the end they slipped into a hole in the skirting, into the labyrinth of wall spaces and eventually into the pantry.

Meanwhile, up on his hill Major Bigg had risen and looking out across the valley he could see the waters spread out across the fields, through the trees and streets and off towards the pond and the church. Over the past year or two the Harrigans and the Major had become firm friends and being no slouch, he realised straight away the potential for problems at his friend's place, so he determined to do something about it.

First he tried to phone them but the line remained dead. He thought for a second or two and pulling on his warmest clothes he grabbed some extra wet weather gear, slipped into his gumboots and made for the shed at the far end of the farm yard. Estroharf stirred as the major creakily swung the door open.

"Morning old lad!" the man greeted his long-time companion. "Bit rough out there last night. Are you okay?" The elephant nodded his head, seemingly understanding the question and he gently hugged the major with his trunk, just to make sure he was fine as well.

"Time for an expedition lad. Our friends are in need", the major said as he led the big animal out into the yard. "Come on, help me up" and stepping onto the curl of the trunk that was proffered, he rode it up to straddle Estroharf's neck.

"Off we go then" and the two of them headed out into the country lanes and down towards the town. As they passed through the muddy streets Major Bigg quickly saw the evidence of the flood. Sludge was piled up in the corners of yards and streets. Power and telephone poles were down, fruit carts, bicycles and park benches were scattered around and everywhere they passed the place was a general mess. The locals were just starting to clean up around their homes and looking down into their back yards from his perch the Major could see what a big job they had ahead of them. Just clearing access to their front doors was going to need a lot work, much less cleaning up inside. He knew at once that the Harrigans would be on their own out there beyond the edge of town and he gave the elephant a nudge with his knee to quicken up a little.

Now Estroharf is rather fond of a bit of mud as it turns out and he was having a lovely time squishing along the road accompanied by the squelching of said liquid between his toes, when the two of them arrived in the vicinity of the pond and strode into the Harrigans garden. As they eased down the shallow slope to the house the Major called out. "Oliver! Eadie! Are you alright? Oliver..."

On hearing his name, Oliver stopped what he was doing and went to the window where much to his relief his friends were waiting to save them.

"You two alright Oliver?"

"Yes thanks. Just a bit wet and cold up here, downstairs is full of mud and a real mess though."

“Well, grab some clothes then and you two can come home with me ‘til we get you sorted.”

Gushing with thanks, Oliver stuffed a carpet bag with the necessities and helped Eadie onto Estroharfs back as he eased up to the windowsill. Once Oliver joined the others it was a bit crowded but still it was do-able so Estroharf waded back out through the garden and the four of them trotted off up the lane towards town, on the way to the comfort of the Bigg house.

“Don’t worry Oliver. I have very little damage up at the farm. Once my men return from cleaning up their own places I’ll get them to take care of your house for you. ‘Til then you can stay with me. I’ve tons of room.”

Deep inside Oliver felt a load fall from his shoulders. He’d been wondering how he’d be able to cope with the house and Eadie all at once. She’d been getting worse lately and was in need of more attention as the months went by.

## *Of Mice and Ducks (And owls)*

Back at the farmyard things were actually quite normal. The animals in general had very little to worry about or work to do cleaning up after the storm. Several nests needed fixing after gusts had blasted their way into the barn, and some branches were strewn about outside. Clyde trotted over to them and one by one either pushed them aside with his big, hairy hooves or shifted them out of the way with a nudge or two of his head, rubbing mud down the white flame on his nose as he did so. After an hour or so of the irregular ‘clopping’ of his horseshoes, the place was pretty much as it always was. A little grubby, as farms can be, but tidy enough for business as usual. The handsome, heavy horse brushed his hairy white hooves up against a bale of straw to wipe off the accumulated mud and soon he was back to his usual smartly-turned-out self.

In the past ‘Business as usual for this time of year had included one, very popular little bat, Barnaby of course. This time though was going to be the first Christmas without him flitting about the rafters and generally enjoying the season of good cheer. The younger and smaller animals in particular had missed him since he had left for parts unknown nearly twelve months ago with Bjork. Phantom the ball of feathers usually referred to as a Bantam and Zara of Tuatara fame had both been somewhat vocal on and off during the year regarding his absence. Even Preener, with his airs and graces, had spent many hours wondering just what the pair had got up to after disappearing over the Eastern horizon. Following the little bats escapades last year when he had risen to the occasion and become a mouse transporter for Millicent, the peacock had developed a certain respect or maybe even affection for the little fellow. He really did hope he was alright. ‘It would be nice have him back for Christmas to tell us about his adventures’ he thought. ‘Ah well...’ , and so it was with most of the farm yard animals. Not a lot had really happened around their neck of the woods (even the flood waters had mainly passed them by) and they’d have loved a bunch of new stories to listen to and pass around. It looked like it was not to be however. Unless...

As fellow night dwellers, the resident owls in the barn were at the forefront of those who wished Barnaby had returned and that night they convened an impromptu council in the rafters to try and

find a way to do something about it. It is common knowledge that those all-seeing night eyes are a front for prodigious brain power and infinite knowledge and while that may not be entirely true, if you get even a small 'parliament of owls' together you can expect some enlightening conversation to result. This evening was not an exception. As we all know, this particular group of owls was quite familiar with Millard and Millicent and their connection with Mr. ('that's Santa to you') Claus, so perhaps the suggestion finally tabled in the discussion shouldn't be too big a surprise.

Having struggled to find a way to contact Barnaby and Bjork and then return the bat to the farm in two days, they decided to defer to the only greater intelligence they knew. That is, the man in the bright red suit. It all hinged on being able to get Millard to talk to him though and they knew that wasn't a 'done deal' as it were. It turned out though that Oscar, who was sitting further back on the rafters, had a habit of sleeping in the peak of Estroharfs shed, and had been trying to get a good days sleep when the Major had returned with the Harrigans. Their arrival had woken him quite rudely. Anyway, Oscars report on what the elephant had seen at the cottage didn't bode well for phone communications, still 'Operation Ask Santa' was the only scheme the parliament could come up with on the spot and time was running out so it was decided to give it a try and hope for the best.

The next step was to get the request from the farmyard to Millard and even though there was mutual respect between the parliament and the mice at the cottage, any owls over the Harrigans were still viewed with caution and the couple would scurry for cover unless forewarned that the approaching Owl was friendly. It seemed that a go-between really needed to be decided on and so it was done.

"Who-who-who's going to go then?" Piped up one of the younger birds, hoping to get the 'nod and a blink' from the elders. Perhaps in coming years the look of wisdom would be bestowed on him from the feathered gathering, but not this time. It was decided that seeing as Oscar had shown such an interest in the topic, he would be seconded to be first messenger and soon after dusk a chorus of quiet 'hoo-hoo-hoo's sent him on his way. His beautifully graceful wings were outstretched as he soared up on the last vestiges of the day time warmth that rose from the cobbles of the farmyard as he passed the top of the grandfather tree at the end of the lane where he started his familiar flapping and headed off across the fields. Rather than fly directly to the pond, he skirted the town where the strange pattern of the few street lights left glowing after the storm would have thrown his navigation out.

Moving further into the valley, the owl became aware of flying in a strange sort of limbo. Above him the moon played hide and seek with the few clouds left from the turmoil of the night before, but then it started doing the same thing beneath him as well. Rather like a jet pilot flying in cloud or maybe a scuba diver underwater at night, Oscar found that his sense of balance was thrown out for a minute and he wasn't sure which way was up. It only lasted briefly though until he accidentally turned upside down and found out instantly that inverted flying is not a good mode of transport for Owls. Well not for any bird really, as it happens.

As a resident of the Bigg house community, Oscar had been born and grown up on the farm and never been out over lakes or other large expanses of water before, so he was at first unaware of what the odd phenomenon was. It was however just the Moon's reflection, travelling with him; rather much as the Moon himself will follow you down the road as you ride sleepily home in the back seat of Dad's car from your Aunt's place after a long Christmas day. As you nod off and on along

the trip, opening an eyelid here and there will reveal that eternal night time companion watching over you on your journey. This time though, he was doing double watch, making sure that Oscar didn't lose his way above the flooded paddocks.

Presently he came to the Church pond and after circling the cottage to check the lie of the land he alighted in a bush by the water. "Hoo-hoo!" he called and with the rustling of leaves, Dowdy appeared, rubbing his eyes with his wings as he awoke from a sweet dream of Christmas.

Quickly Oscar explained his mission and asked if the little duck could help get the message into the house. Even if he wasn't likely to scare the wits out of Millard and Millicent, the Owl was too big to squeeze in through any cracks and so was Dowdy. He tapped his beak on the ground a few times while he had a think about it.

"You know, I seem to recall a mouse living in the church. I think he's still there. I'll go see if I can get him to do the delivery for us" and he bustled off towards the chapel door. It would normally be closed and latched but as it happened, the animals who had been sheltering inside during the flood (who were not used to such things as doors) just left it open and so Dowdy waddled in and began calling out for the mouse.

Most people wouldn't be too fussed about being hailed in the darkness but the duck's dulcet tones wouldn't frighten a flea so after a short while Marmy scurried up. He recognised Dowdy straight away. He had been watching from a cranny in the wall during the occupation by the pond dwellers and with his uniquely bright plumage, Dowdy was instantly identifiable. Even in what would seem like pitch dark to most everyone else.

After they introduced themselves the request was passed on and with his new responsibility weighing heavily on his shoulders, Marmy headed for the cottage.

Meanwhile at his destination Millard and Millicent were having a nice little rest after a day of foraging in the pantry. Usually they'd sleep half the day and be up and about after dusk, but with the Harrigans out of the house, they'd taken advantage of the food stores and ferreted away a bit of a store for a rainy day, which they really hoped wasn't about to come; particularly after the recent weather events.

## *A Call From Afar*

Following Dowdy's instructions Marmy scurried into the cottage and hunted around for a mouse hole in the hall, but they were all blocked by mud so he sat on the window sill at the end of the passage contemplating his options. His grey little countenance was furrowed in thought when something stirred below him. There it was again, and again! He squinted into the gloom and next time it moved he could see it was actually two tiny figures running across the newly dried mud on the floor. Yes it was just who he was seeking and he called out to the resident mice. Millicent jumped somewhat in surprise but she soon calmed down and the three of them met next to a pile of mud in the corner to chat. Marmy quickly passed on the request and Millard agreed to put it to Santa that he might help out somehow with the return of Barnaby.

“Lucky you came now. Santa should be calling soon. Any later and you might have missed...”

‘Rrring.... Rrring...!’ The pile of mud beside them sprang into life. The dark form bounced up and down vigorously as flakes of chocolate-like mud fell away. Without realising it they had been sitting right next to the sludge encrusted phone.

“Quick, help me answer it!” said Millard and the three of them pushed together to nudge the receiver off onto the table top.

Had they been aware of the Majors failed attempt to call they might not have expected Santa to get through, but of course his calls don’t go through the regular exchange so their anticipation was rewarded as usual at this time of year. Excitedly Millard answered the call.

“Santa?”

“That it is, Millard. How are you?” came back the now familiar voice. Of course he didn’t know the details of the flood so Millard proceeded to fill him in until, having answered a couple of the old gent’s queries, it was time to mention Oscar’s message.

“Well, let me see” said Santa. “I can make no promises, but I’ll see what I can do. I might be able to rustle up a plan.”

“It would mean a lot to those in the farm yard if you could” the mouse replied. “They’re awfully fond of him you know”.

“Yes I do know as it happens. Thanks for telling me about Eadie and Oliver being over at the Bigg house, now I can make sure her present arrives at the right place. Better go now. I’ll be by tomorrow night as usual with a little something. See you then, on the roof. Cheerio!”

“Bye Santa” and the click of the handset in the far North signalled the end of their conversation.

“Well that’s all I can do to help for now Marmy” said Millard. “Hopefully Santa can organise it somehow.”

“You’ve done marvellously. The farmyard folks will be very grateful, either way. Now I’d better be moving along and let Dowdy know so the message can begin its journey home.”

Now it’s common knowledge that so-called ‘Chinese whispers’ tend to twist messages up something fearsome. Keeping this in mind then it wouldn’t be a surprise if what was delivered by Oscar had been through somewhat of a transformation by the time it reached the rafters of the barn.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on your point of view, that is what happened. After Marmy passed the response to Dowdy and he trotted off to tell it to Oscar, the message had already started to change. Then to add to that, on the way home, the Owl managed to get a little flustered by the flooded landscape and by the time he landed he was convinced that Santa had said he ‘couldn’t see too good’ and that it ‘would ruffle up his plans’. Consequently when he met with the parliament, spirits and feathers drooped with the news. Hopes had been high for a Christmas surprise to raise good cheer after the bad weather but now it seemed unlikely, to say the least. The flock dispersed and went off glumly to their nocturnal activities. Oscar was disappointed and tired after his journey

so snuggled up in a nook way up under the ridge for an early nap. Soon his snoring joined similar sounds from far below where his friends slept on, blissfully unaware of the night's adventure.

"They're none the wiser" he thought before closing his lids over his beautiful big eyes. "I guess it'll make no difference that we failed" and his head nodded slightly in a weary sort of way.

## *Christmas Eve*

Next day the ducks and their neighbours fluffed around the edge of the church pond tidying up and trying to create a festive air about the place. When the flood had rushed through it had messed things up quite a bit, but there was one up side. Plenty of gay scraps of foil and paper, and even some genuine tinsel had floated into the grasp of the bushes around about. The younger animals pooled their energy and soon the big bush under the Oak tree was decorated all over, glinting in the meagre rays of the late morning sun as it poked through the intermittent gaps in the clouds.

Next door, the church and the Harrigans home remained empty of people. Millard and Millicent rattled around in the cottage on their own, taking full advantage of the opportunity to look for tit-bits and such like, with which to enliven their lives in the shadows. Rev. Rumble, ( a.k.a. 'George' to the adults and 'Grumble' to the Baker kids) had been to have a look at the flood damage, but he would need help to clean out the mud and rubbish and after upturning a couple of pews he left dejectedly, trying but failing to pull the door closed against the drying sludge. The clean-up would have to wait until the town folk had finished putting their homes and work places back in order before he could ask them to come and assist him. Perhaps they could have the service in the churchyard. The forecast was for clearing skies. "Yes, that'll have to do. It might even be nice out in the open" and his face brightened up a bit as he trotted off down the lane mulling over the sermons of Jesus in the great outdoors.

Dowdy had always felt that Christmas Eve was particularly special. That feeling of expectation imbued it with all sorts of possibilities for the next morning and so he liked to do something different with the day if he could. This time he decided to go and poke around in the church... just because he could.

As he entered he found Marmy scurrying about on a similar mission and hailed him. The two ascended a pile of muddy something and surveyed the shambles.

"You know, the last time I was here, before the flood that is, it was a Christmas too and there was a sort of scene set up over there. Kind of like a party in a barn."

"I know" said the mouse. "with sheep and cows and other animals. Not real ones of course, and men in bright clothes with shiny boxes and stuff."

"That's right. And there was a baby in a bucket..."

"Until the water came in, there was one this year too. In fact, as far as I can remember, there always has been one at Christmas. The church people come in and sing songs around it and smile a lot. I like to sleep in on Christmas day but their hustle and bustle always wakes me before I'm ready. You

know though, I never really mind. Their neighbourly good humour is so nice to see, and those Baker kids always seem to cause some kerfuffle worth watching, but I guess there'll be none of that this year. Just look at it" and the little fellow waved a forepaw over the devastation spread out before them.

"Hmm...." came a rather 'Duckish' reply and that was it for the time being. The two of them parted ways and Dowdy went out into the grey day again, with an intense look on his face.

The day passed slowly and the skies cleared as Dowdy went about his business with a look of concentration on his face. His mother was a bit worried for a while but when she asked if he was alright he ensured her that he was fine. He just had 'something on his mind that's all' so she left him to it.

Finally dusk snuck up on the little community and darkness descended. Millard and Millicent scuttled up through walls to the roof to wait for Santa. This time though they took it a bit more carefully. The usual flashes of light that would sneak in through the weather boards were missing. The nearby streetlight or two that supplied the illumination were still out of action from the storm; still the mice made it safely to their annual perch at the base of the chimney and settled in to wait. They were early of course but they knew it and so started playing 'I Spy' as they gazed out across the strangely dark townscape. Above the sea of dark gables though, the town clock still glowed on. Somehow it had survived the black out and ticked on through the night.

## *An unexpected arrival*

Time drifted by slowly and the alphabet was running out rapidly when out in the Eastern sky Millicent spotted a small light zipping towards the valley. As Santa's 'official' friends they expected him to drop by the Harrigans house first but the shape of the sleigh and its reindeer were just discernible when the man in red swung away to the far side of the town and disappeared below the skyline.

"I wonder where he's gone" said Millard.

"Why, to the Bigg House, I'll bet" said Millicent. After all you did tell him where Eadie was didn't you?"

"Of course. That'll be it" and as he spoke, the sleigh rose from beyond a copse and came barrelling across the void to arrive above their heads where it circled tightly as Santa called out.

"Ho! my good friends. Merry Christmas! Thanks for your help once more. Here's a little something for your efforts," and the familiar hanky sized parachute wafted down in a gentle pendulum fashion to land beside Millicent. The two of them quickly nibbled off the strings and dragged the not so tiny parcel into the roof space. Peeling back the waxed wrapping paper, they uncovered a magnificent smelling parcel of cheeses. Just a couple of different ones but oh what a fragrance. Like nothing they'd sniffed at or consumed before. The regular and enticing cheesy fumes were blended with exotic spices, herbs and who knows what. Well the mice couple didn't anyway but they were keen to find out.

“I reckon it came from the Far East Milli” Millard proffered.”

“Perhaps you’re right. That is the way he came tonight after all. In any case, we’d better share some with Marmy and Dowdy and maybe Oscar too if we can get in touch with him. They’ve been busy this Christmas. Such a pity that it was all to no avail. Maybe the cheese will be a bit of compensation for them. Do you think that Owls like cheese?” she said, musing out loud.

Meanwhile, the subject of her thoughts was back home in the farmyard where a real ruckus was threatening to break out. Little did the residents of the church pond community know but Santa had been just a little bit naughty during his quick visit to them. He’s always been a tad mischievous and this year he’d indulged himself by delivering a surprise to the barn up at the Bigg House, and not telling Dowdy and the mice about it.

Perhaps you guessed it but yes, he had made a point of starting his present run way off in parts unknown and there he found Barnaby, sitting on his own, forlornly dreaming of the valley and his friends and family. Bjork, his globetrotting companion, was with his family for the first time in several years and had invited the bat to accompany him, but Barnaby felt that he would be an intruder at the family celebrations and said he’d like to stay and ‘contemplate the meaning of Christmas a bit’ (as he put) it and so it was into this little scene that Santa had sped. It was obvious to ‘His Jolliness’ that the young bat was homesick so in one swift swooping arc the reindeer zoomed down to where he sat and Santa scooped him up gently and popped him on the seat beside him.

“How’d you like to go home lad?” he said.

The beam of joy that had spread across the little face said it all and Barnaby was all at once on his way back to the valley.

In a trice the sleigh was passing low over Bjork’s family home and Barnaby waved and shouted out the good news to the big bird who bid him a fond farewell. His words faded quickly behind the speeding pair as Santa and his tiny friend barrel-rolled around the heavens delivering presents here, there and everywhere, all the while getting closer and closer to the valley.

With the marvellous speed of Santa’s favoured mode of transport the pair rapidly made it to the Bigg House, where, to save precious time, they said their farewells and Barnaby leapt into the sky, spread his wings and soared down in an arc to the barn door.

Being the middle of the night, it was the Parliament who saw him first, followed by the rest of the small bat colony. Excitement burst out instantly and as the tail of the sleigh disappeared towards the church, the farmyard residents began waking up at the noise. All of course except Zara, the Tuatara. Being a cold blooded reptile, her system was running on idle for the duration of the cool night and her eyes stayed shut. The morning was to bring her a real surprise.

While she slept, the rest of the population gathered round to hear about Barnaby’s adventures and in turn he wanted to hear all the local news. Eventually they got round to telling him about the flood and how it had affected them and their friends down at the church pond.

“I must go and see how they are” said the little bat and he prepared to launch into the air.

“You can’t go now” said Estroharf, who had just wandered in. “It’s dark”.

“You of all people should know that’s not a problem for a bat” replied Barnaby. “I’m too excited to wait till morning”.

“So am I”. “Me too...” “Can I come?” and on it went as the animals all decided that they’d like an adventure too.

“Don’t be silly. It’s a long way and the street lights are still out. You couldn’t find your way even if you were big enough.” said the elephant.

“Oh please, Estroharf. You could carry us...”

“I can show you the way”, offered Barnaby,” but first I must do a favour for Santa and deliver Eadies present. I’ll be back soon” and he flitted off towards the nearby chimney of the main house. Slipping down the coal black tunnel and into the lounge he found a lone stocking hanging from the mantelpiece. Quickly he dropped a tiny parcel inside and returned the way he had come.

“Come on let’s go” he called when he got back to the barn and so they did. The smaller animals climbed, scrambled or rode up Estroharfs trunk and in a ragged line the Bigg House crew traipsed through the muddy lanes of the dark town and out into the countryside to the church pond. Through it all not one person heard or saw them go by. The children were fast asleep dreaming of Santa, little knowing he had already zoomed past on his mission, while the adults were snoring away their tiredness after cleaning up the town all day. Even with all their energetic efforts they hadn’t managed to get to clean up the church. ‘Oh well’, the minister thought, before turning out the light. ‘I guess Jesus didn’t have a nice shiny building to preach in. If he can do it so can I. There might not be many people this year anyway. We’ll just have to see in the morning I suppose’ and he rolled over and drifted off to sleep.

## *Off To Church (Once More)*

It took a while but in the end the whole troupe arrived before dawn and woke up the neighbourhood. There were animals everywhere. For many from the farm this was the first time they’d been to the pond and they caused quite a rumpus charging around meeting new friends and investigating the place in general.

Millard, Millicent and Marmy all heard the fuss and came out to see what was going on. Once they noticed Estroharf, any fear faded that they might be attacked by rogue Owls or Foxes and they hurried out to see what was going on. Pretty soon the place was in serious celebration mode. You couldn’t be sure if it was all just about Barnaby’s return or if Christmas had something to do with it. No matter, they had excuse enough to party in their own way and so they did. Or rather they did until the rain came. More correctly, the Moon clouded over threatening to rain, so Marmy invited them all into his abode for shelter and the trail of muddy footprints encircling the pond quickly extended through the Lych-gate across the churchyard and into the chapel.

About now they were starting to run out of puff and as it was a long way home the whole bunch of them cast their eyes around in the gloom for comfy spots to lie down and they finally all went back to sleep.

Dawn brought a spectacular light show to the floor where the motley band sprawled. The threatened rain had not eventuated and the rising sun scared off the last few flecks of remaining cloud before bursting in through the kaleidoscope of the stain glass windows.

Soon little grunts and yawns penetrated the snoring and scuffling and noises began in the nooks and crannies around the chapel. Feathery heads popped up here and there, did a quick look around the scene to get some bearings and disappeared again looking for scraps of food for breakfast.

Back in one corner cries of "Help" erupted as Eric inadvertently tumbled from his chosen bed and onto the back of Hermes where he became stuck, upside down. Now it's not all that common for Echidna's and Hedgehogs to live in the same place, but the Major had been collecting animal friends for many years and so the sight of Eric waving his legs frantically in the air while trying to untangle his quills from those of Hermes shouldn't have been much of a surprise. In all truth it wasn't really. What it was though, was hilarious, or so thought the bantams and Phantom in particular. He rolled and tumbled about as he had a habit of doing and consequently changed from a sort of golden red coloured feather ball to something that looked like a soccer ball at the end of a mid-winter's match. He was just a blob of mud.

Well as you can tell things were getting kind of rambunctious. Fortunately it didn't get right out of hand and one of the Owls swooped down to save Eric, tickling him on the tummy (just for fun) as he lifted him back onto his feet. Echidna's may not be all that big, but Hedgehogs are smaller and don't take kindly to being treated like pack animals and the Hedgehog shook himself with relief as the weight lifted off his back.

Meanwhile Dowdy wandered up, "Are you two alright?" he asked and receiving a positive reply he gazed around the room in the early morning light to check out the situation.

## *The Clean-up Crew*

"Look at the mess" Dowdy quacked. There were elephant prints, hoof prints and foot prints everywhere all leading to or from the balls of fluff, feathers, hair and hide that comprised the members of the Major's menagerie.

"We had better clean this up before the people come. I suspect we won't be popular if they find the place like this. Come on let's get moving" and so one by one the farm crew began to help clear the chapel up. Not all the animals could do much but those that could did, and those that couldn't tried hard to keep out of the way. Most of them would need help from Estroharf to get home so they had to wait while he lifted furniture back on its feet, swept out what dried mud and rubbish that he could and generally helped return the place to some semblance of normality.

With Dowdy's supervision, the scenery for the nativity was nuzzled back into place by Simon and Gautier. Usually the sheep and goat were keen to have little to do with each other but as is common, unusual circumstances bred unusual actions and they did a fine job (or so all the animals thought) of putting things back where they belonged. In fact, rather than just clean up their own

mess the troupe did a pretty fair job of cleaning up after the flood too and by the time Mrs Baker arrived at mid-morning with the twins, the church was almost habitable.

She walked in just as Estroharf was placing the doll into the manger where he thought it came from. Most of the over nighters were standing around in a semicircle watching him and the impromptu tableau was not lost on the children's mother.

"Look kids! The nativity scene is back together." She had heard from the reverend about what a mess the flood had made and so had come early to try and fix it up a bit for the Christmas service, bringing some flowers to brighten up the day. What she found though was a total surprise. "George must have been working all night to do this." she thought out loud, and the farmyard folks smiled knowingly to themselves, more than just a little proud of their work. They stood around sheepishly, especially Simon, looking for all the world like the occupants of a stable in Bethlehem.

"And what a wonderful idea to have real animals. That must be the Major's Elephant, and these would be from his farm too I guess. I wonder when he brought them here. He must have been up early." She might as well have been talking to herself, with the lack of notice taken by the twins, but as it happened, answers to all her puzzling were about to arrive.

## *The Harrigans return*

Outside, the Major was just jogging up pulling Eadie and Oliver in a rickshaw as he followed the tracks of his wayward animals. While it may at first have seemed that he'd just given up on his farmyard friends this was never the case. With years of experience in tracking animals in jungles and deserts across the globe he had quickly noticed the muddy footprints of Estroharf and the rest heading out the gate of the farm and knew he would be able to catch up with them as soon as he had time. Without his usual mode of transport for Eadie, who loved riding on Estroharf, he had ferreted out the old hand drawn cart and headed off to the church with the couple in tow. As it happened, the further they went the more obvious it became that the errant band of critters had also headed for the church, or somewhere nearby at least.

Meanwhile Oliver was unaware they were following in the footsteps of the farmyard crew.

'For a man of his age he really is in excellent condition' he thought as he watched his friend trot along between the shafts of the rickshaw. 'I guess it's all that mountain climbing and adventuring he's done. Bound to keep you fit.' and he felt just a little jealous at the wonders and mysteries his friend had encountered away in parts unknown. All in all though he was content with his life in the valley and wouldn't have changed his life if he had the choice. He smiled at Eadie, snuggled up beside him on the seat as they rolled into the yard. Yes, he was content it seemed. Then he saw the house again all caked with mud. For a second it shook him and he let out a short exclamation. The major heard him and stopping by the front door he turned around to see what was up. Straight away he figured out the cause of Oliver's concern.

"Don't worry, we'll get it all fixed up for you soon enough" he said. "Let's go to church first though. It is Christmas after all". He grabbed the shafts again and they rolled over to the church yard.

By now Rev Rumble had arrived along with a small band of parishioners ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus. These were the hardy ones who had come despite the prospect of a muddy, messy morning in the chapel. They were pleasantly surprised however with the results of the animal's clean-up and coupled with the flowers that Mrs Baker had put around the place, it all looked quite bright and cheerful. The nativity scene, in living colour and sound, added even more interest and as no one made a move to usher the animals out they got to enjoy the singing and festivity of the rustic service first hand.

As the service progressed Eadie sat smiling and joining in with some of the hymns while the Major sat in thought for a bit. Part way through his eyes lit up with an idea and by the time the congregation filed out the door he went into action. First he gently rounded up his farm yard friends and they all moved next door to the Harrigans.

"Right you lot" he called out. "Time to do some work" and prodding Estroharf to lead by example, he started the animals cleaning up the cottage and surrounds. Having been working all morning it was fortunate that they were soon joined by people from the church and a couple of the farm hands arrived to help out too. For the rest of the day Eadie and Oliver were treated to a bustling display of charity which included scenes of Estroharf wandering from the pond to cottage with a trunk full of water and hosing down the walls so they glowed white again. Mud was scraped from the floors inside by both men and animals, chunks of rubbish and the like being snatched up and despatched to parts unknown by the avian members of the crew. As early afternoon came some of the women of the church appeared with a sumptuous lunch for all and they stopped for a while to sit in the garden sunshine and eat and chat. The men and women carefully left scraps and crumbs for the animals and quiet cluckings, rumblings and 'thankyou' type sounds emanated from all corners of the glade.

As the more intense work neared an end the kitchen benches and furniture were wiped down with disinfectant and the downstairs floors were swept and mopped. Damp furnishings went into the wash for a good scrub and things generally started to look normal again. By the closing of day Oliver and Eadie were able to sleep once again in their familiar cosy bed. There were still things to do to finish off the clean-up, but there was time in coming days for Oliver to do it and most importantly Eadie was back home where she belonged, smiling as usual as she nodded off for the night.

Outside, the band from the Bigg house gathered together and once the queue of smaller animals had installed themselves on the elephant's back, or on the seat of the rickshaw, the Major led the procession down the lane heading for home. All around them it seemed there was a satisfied glow from a job well done. Through that glow flew Oscar and the rest of the parliament accompanied by the bats headed by Barnaby, pleased to be home so unexpectedly. They had done a particularly sterling job, staying awake all day to help dispose of the litter from the flood.

It had certainly been the most strenuous Christmas that anyone in the valley could remember but in return every one of them received the most wonderful gift of all; the joy of giving and it kept the animal parade warm and satisfied all the way home through the darkened streets of the town. The muddy feet and tired muscles faded from their minds as they turned in through the farmyard gate again. Weary wings deposited the feathered residents onto various perches throughout the out buildings and the ground dwellers snuffled their way towards a cosy nesting spot amongst the hay and implements in the barn and sheds. Zara was so relieved to see she hadn't been abandoned, but

not as relieved as the returning workers were when the Major came round with a feed for everyone before they went to sleep. He even gave Zara an extra snack as she had been left on her own all day long not knowing what was happening, or if anyone was coming back or not. She needed a little comfort food to relief the stress of waiting.

Very soon, after their hard day's effort, even the Owls hooded their wise old eyes and went to sleep dreaming of their Christmas adventure; out, about and above the high tide line of the Yuletide flood.

*The End*