

## REALLY, TRULY, REILLY

By Anne Merrick

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ON THE NIGHT before Christmas the weather was cold and Samuel Shrubwort came home from work in a terrible temper.

When they heard him snarling through the hall, Oscar the cat, flimsy as a shadow, fled upstairs while Reilly, the small white dog with one black eye and one brown, slunk out of sight beneath the table.

“Scram!” bawled Samuel Shrubwort, giving the table a kick. “Get out, you HORRIBLE, SCRAWNY, USELESS dog!”

*Useless? thought Reilly. Who’s he calling useless? It’s starving I am. Cold and uncared for as a long-buried bone. Really and truly, this is no life for a dog!*

And seizing his chance while Samuel Shrubwort drank another tankard of beer, Reilly squeezed through Oscar’s cat-flap and escaped into the stone-cold winter street.

The weather was so cold that the stars were shivering in the sky; so cold that all the trees turned white with frost and stood about the gardens like bony ghosts of themselves; so cold that in every house in Hometown, the fires burned with a blue flame.

But from the Great Hall on the hilltop to the Small Shack by the river, all the windows of the village beamed with warm and friendly light.

*Heigh-ho, said Reilly. On the night before Christmas, surely someone will give a home to a small white dog with one black eye and one brown.*

And after a moment’s thought he trotted up the hill to the Great Hall where the rich man lived.

On the night before Christmas, the rich man was counting his gold when he heard a sniffing and a scratching at his door.

“Help!” he cried. “Thieves! Robbers! Burglars! Bandits!”

R-r-really! growled Reilly. *I am not a BANDIT! I'm just a small white dog with one black eye and one brown, and if you give me a home I'll guard your gold for you!*

"Be off!" shouted the rich man. "Or I'll call the POLICE!"

Then he drew the bolt across the door and the curtains across the window, shutting off the warm and friendly light.

*Talk about giving a dog a bad name! thought Reilly. Really and truly I wouldn't want to live there anyway.*

But he had a lonely kind of feeling inside as he started back down the hill, trying each house as he went. To the man in the Church House he protested, *I am NOT the DEVIL HIMSELF. I'm just a dog-in-need. A lonely kind of a dog. And if you give me a home I'll do good works for you.* To the lady in the Pretty Pink Cottage, he pleaded, but *I am NOT a MANGY OLD FLEA-BAG! I'm just a lonely dog, a useful kind of a dog. And I'll fetch your slippers for you if you'll only give me a home.* To the farmer in the Farmhouse, he barked, *What! WORRY YOUR SHEEP! Never! I'm just a dogged kind of a dog. A lonely, useful dog. And if you give me a home, I'll work my whiskers off for you!* And to the inn-keeper at the Welcome Inn, he howled, *Oh no I'm NOT a PESKY SCAVENGING STRAY. I'm just a dog-in-need. A dogged dog. A lonely, useful kind of a dog. Really and truly I'm used to drunks! I'll chivvy them out and chase them home, if only you'll give me a bed and a bone!*

On the night before Christmas, by the time Reilly had gone all the way down the hill, the curtains of every house in Hometown were closed. Only in the Small Shack by the river a feeble candle flame still flickered.

Reilly limped to the Shack and sat on the doorstep. His paws were so caked with ice that he could not lift them to scratch at the door.

*Heigh-ho!* he sighed. *Here I am, a small white dog with one black eye and one brown. A dog-in-need. A dogged dog. But there's nobody in this world who will give me a home!* And in spite of himself two tears rolled down his muzzle and froze into pearls on his whiskers.

*Perhaps after all, he cried, I'm a HORRIBLE. . . SCRAWNY. . . USELESS. . . kind of a dog. A lonely, homeless dog.* Early on the morning of Christmas Day it snowed and soon all the houses of Hometown lay snug under a dazzling white quilt. Inside the Small Shack by the river Tim Merryweather stoked up the fire and he, his wife Lovejoy, and Jo-John their son, sat close around it. From a pot on the hob a warm smell of onion soup wafted up to the rafters.

Tim Merryweather began to play the fiddle. He played the tunes of his favourite carols while Lovejoy sang the words. And on a patchwork blanket by the hearth, Jo-John stroked the head of a small white dog with one black eye and one brown.

“Tell me again,” said Jo-John, “how he came to be my Christmas present-when I wasn’t going to have any present . . .”

So Tim Merryweather rested his fiddle on his knee and told how he’d just been saying his bedtime prayers when he’d heard a small sad cry outside.

“And when I opened the door,” he said, “I darn near fell over him. Frozen to the step he was! Dog-tired and nearly done for!”

Lovejoy stirred the pot of onion soup.

“It seems to me,” she laughed, “he must be a holy kind of a dog. Coming like that in answer to our prayers!”

Then Jo-John took from his pocket a morsel of the sausage he’d had for his breakfast and popped it into Reilly’s grinning mouth.

“He’s going to be my very best friend,” he said. “My one and only dog in the world!”

On the morning of Christmas Day, the small white dog with one black eye and one brown swallowed the sausage in one gulp.

*Really and truly, he said, this is the life! And to think that only yesterday I was a horrible, useless, wholly lonely dog. And today I am the one-and-only-HOLY-kind-of-a-dog-in-the-world!*

And licking Jo-John’s hand for the very last taste of the sausage, he winked his one black eye.