



Santa's *Littlest* Helpers

by Kate & Mike Bridger
(1996)

On Christmas Eve, 1996, Mike, like most young children, was having difficulty falling to sleep, he was far too excited about Santa's anticipated delivery and opening presents on Christmas morning. So, I sat on the edge of his bed and made up a Christmas Eve story especially for him. A few days later, we decided to write it down. Much later, I made a fabric illustration depicting life in the squirrel community we called Trembling Tree Tops.

This is our story:

WELCOME TO TREMBLING TREE TOPS. This is home to a bustling community of little squirrels and our two, soon-to-be bushy-tailed heroes, Dilly and Dally.

Today, everyone is enjoying the last warm days of the year. But, as autumn approaches, you will find all the squirrels scurrying about gathering nuts, stuffing acorns into their cheeks and preparing their stores for the coming winter.

All the squirrels that is, except Dilly and Dally. These two young pals are idly basking on warm rocks soaking up rays and playing hide 'n seek in the fallen leaves. They watch all the activity of the other squirrels around them, but have not a care in the world.

Before too long, winter's first snowflakes begin to appear, dropping like gentle feathers from the sky. The hustle and bustle of the previous weeks at Trembling Tree Tops comes to an end as everyone snuggles up in their cosy nests for their long winter sleep. Dilly and Dally cuddle up together in their bed and have not a care in the world.

One morning, however, Dilly sat up, rubbed his sleepy eyes and then rubbed his empty, growling tummy. He gave Dally a gentle nudge. Dally rolled over, rubbed his sleepy eyes and then, he too, rubbed his empty, growling tummy.

"I'm hungry," moaned Dilly.

"Me too," replied Dally.

They both got out of bed and began to rummage around in their nest looking for a snack. They looked under their beds, behind the cupboards and even in their laundry hamper! But, there was nothing, absolutely nothing left to eat. Weeks ago, they had finished the last of the small stash of food they had managed to put away in the late summer when they weren't playing or snoozing in the sun. But by this time, there was not a nut, not an acorn, not even an acorn shell left!

Poor Dilly and Dally. This was their first winter living alone without their parents to provide for them. They both felt rather miserable as well as awfully hungry.

First Dilly, and then Dally, stuck his nose outside and sniffed the cool December air. Neither of them had ever awoken and ventured out at this time of year before.

So, what a surprise it was when they pushed open their front door, looked down, and saw that everything—and I mean everything—was covered with a soft, white, fluffy carpet.

They scampered down from their treetop lodge and very cautiously sank

their toes into the cold, white stuff. They played for a few moments as only squirrels who have never seen snow before can play. But soon their rumbling tummies reminded them just how hungry they were.

They began searching beneath their favourite oak tree for acorns. They clambered up their favourite hazel tree looking for hazel nuts. But, there was nothing. The trees were bare and the ground was completely covered in snow.

Dilly and Dally sat themselves down on a frosty old tree stump and felt very alone and sorry for themselves. They knew that all their friends and neighbours were well stocked with provisions to see them through the winter months. Dilly and Dally had been too lazy to gather their full winter supply and had dilly-dallied around soaking up the autumn sun without a care in the world.

As they sat there on their frozen stump, grimly realizing the error of their ways, they heard a soft, tinkling sound coming from way up in the sky. As they looked up, the sound grew louder and louder as it came closer and closer.

Then, before they could say 'nuts in May', there before them stood a very large, round, jolly old fellow. He towered above them in his huge black boots, with his hands firmly holding his large, wobbly belly. His belly was so huge, it cast a dark shadow over the two squirrels. The very large, round, jolly old fellow wore a bright red suit, a long white beard and a very wide grin.

"Well now, what do we have here?" he chuckled. "You two should be snug in your nests and deep asleep right now."

Dilly and Dally looked up at the large, round, jolly old fellow peering down at them and said, very timidly, "we woke up because we were so hungry."

"We don't have any food left," Dilly added.

"We didn't realize just how long winter was going to be," said Dally, "and when everyone else was gathering nuts and acorns, we were busy playing games or snoozing in the sun without a care in the world."

"Well," chuckled the large, round, jolly old fellow, "perhaps I can help."

“Oh, please,” said Dilly and Dally together.

“All right,” replied the large, round, jolly old fellow, “but first, my friends, you will have to earn your winter’s keep.”

At that, the large, round, jolly old fellow put his thumb and forefinger to his mouth and gave a shrill, ear-piercing whistle.

All of a sudden, as if by magic, nine magnificent reindeer pulling a silver sleigh came to a screeching halt at the fat man’s feet. Their hasty landing caused a cloud of snow to rise that took a few moments to settle.

The large, round, jolly old fellow brushed the fallen snow off himself, glared briefly at the lead reindeer and then began to speak:

“I am Santa Clause,” he announced, “and these are my reindeer. Today is Christmas Eve and, all over the world, boys and girls are expecting us to come to their homes while they are sleeping and deliver new toys to them all before the morning.”

“The tricky part,” Santa Claus continued as he shook a few more snowflakes from his thick white beard, “is that it is sort of traditional for Santa—that’s me—to deliver these toys down the chimneys of the girls and boys’ homes.”

“Unlike you, Dilly and Dally, I have no shortage of food for the winter,” he said, rubbing his very round tummy. “As you can tell, my wife, Mrs. Claus, is a very good cook and I find it is becoming increasingly difficult for me to get down some of today’s modern chimneys. So, Dilly and Dally, if you would care to join my work crew this evening and help deliver the toys to the girls and boys, I will make sure that you have plenty of food to see you through to the spring.”

At first the two squirrels were a bit afraid of the reindeer that stood there breathing steam from their nostrils, but Dilly and Dally both agreed that this Santa fellow seemed awfully nice and the one reindeer in the front (whose name was Rudolph) had a friendly glow about him. They decided to accept Santa Claus’ offer. (In truth, they didn’t have a better one!)

Dilly and Dally climbed aboard the sleigh. Immediately the nine powerful reindeer stomped their feet six times and, after another ear-splitting whistle from Mr. Claus, took off and began to race across the skies. Dilly and Dally

rode beside Santa Claus clutching tightly to the fur trim of his jacket with their eyes squeezed shut. Later, as they became more accustomed to flight and the ways of flying reindeer, they settled back and enjoyed the whole adventure with both eyes open.

After the first two or three stops, Dilly and Dally had mastered the art of descending and ascending chimneys. The only real snag had been at the second stop when Dally's coat button had got caught on a bit of rough brick inside a chimney somewhere in Italy. Dally was hanging by a thread, quite literally. Santa had to climb out of the sleigh and, after carefully wedging his large body between the chimney and Rudolph's front hoofs, he rolled up his sleeve and reached his hand deep into the chimney. He finally grasped hold of Dally's collar and pulled him out. The coat button was lost, but Dally was very grateful to be rescued.

Aside from that little mishap, Dilly and Dally were quick and nimble as they delivered toys down the narrow chimneys and scampered up again to the waiting sleigh.

They visited so many places that night and saw so many things they had never even dreamed of before. They saw the Eiffel Tower in Paris and the pyramids in Egypt. They flew over the Grand Canyon in America and up and over the Rockies in Canada. They even stopped to deliver presents to the King and Queen of England. Dilly and Dally agreed that it wasn't the cleanest chimney they'd had to climb down, but it made them giggle to leave sooty footprints on the carpets of Buckingham Palace!

By the time they set off on the return trip, two very tired squirrels were sleeping peacefully—one on Rudolph's back, the other curled up in Santa's lap.

Very carefully, Rudolph and Santa placed Dilly and Dally back in their warm bed at Trembling Tree Tops. They hung two, tiny little stockings at the end of their bed and filled them with nuts gathered from all over the world: Brazil nuts from South America, macadamia nuts from Hawaii and cashews from South Africa, to name a few.

Dilly and Dally slept for quite some time. They were both exhausted. But, when they finally awoke and rubbed the sleep from their eyes and the powdery chimney soot from their fur, there, at the foot of their bed, were the two tiny stockings filled with the most wonderful treats they had ever enjoyed.

The following autumn, Dilly and Dally were much more industrious when it came to nut gathering time. They made sure they had plenty of food to last them through the winter.

Nonetheless, every year since then, when Christmas Eve comes around, they get out of their warm beds to help Santa Claus and his team deliver gifts to boys and girls around the world. After all, even though Santa claims he goes to the gym every week, he doesn't appear to be getting any slimmer.

And, every Christmas Eve, while making their rounds, Dilly and Dally gather nuts from far away places to put in tiny stockings for all their friends and neighbours at Trembling Tree Tops.



THE END