

CARLYSLE'S QUEST

The din on the small lake was deafening. Just as the noise reached its peak, a dark cloud rose from the water's surface. Quickly it formed into a V-shape. The Canada geese were flying south. At the helm was Jeremiah, the oldest and wisest of the flock. Young Felix flew at his right wing as co-pilot.

Suddenly a voice rose above the racket of the excited gaggle. "Jeremiah, Jeremiah," cried Isabelle, flying as hard as she could to overtake the leader. "We have to go back. Carlysle is not with us."

"Isabelle," said Jeremiah sternly. "I've warned you about that boy. It's time he learned to straighten up and fly right."

"I know, Jeremiah. I'm sorry. Ever since he lost his father in that terrible hunting incident, he's felt the need to prove something. I'm very worried about him."

Jeremiah was stern, but not unfeeling. "Felix, go back and get the lad."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Felix and peeled away from the formation. He soon spotted Carlysle, walking up the road away from the lake.

"Carlysle," he called. "Come on, you're late."

"No, thank you, Felix. I'd rather walk."

"What?" shouted Felix, almost dropping from the sky.

"I'm going to walk to the North Pole for the winter solstice. I have to get there by December 21st."

"I'm going to tell Jeremiah." Felix headed back to report.

Jeremiah was flabbergasted by the news. "What is that young whipper snapper up to?" he asked Isabelle.

"We have to go back," she cried. "My baby is all alone."

Carlyslle's father had been Jeremiah's brother and the old goose felt a certain responsibility towards his rebellious nephew.

"Alright, Isabelle, but no more funny business. Just get him and we'll leave. We've already lost part of the day."

With that the entire flock turned around and headed back over the lake. People on the ground were very confused. By then, Carlyslle had made it almost to the main road.

"Come on, Carlyslle," his mother called. "It's time to fly south."

"No thank you, Mother," he replied. "I'd rather walk north."

"Don't be so contrary, boy," yelled Jeremiah.

"It's alright, Uncle Jeremiah. I'm going to get to the North Pole for the first day of winter. The raven told me that the solstice marks the beginning of the Month of the Snow Goose. I want to celebrate it.

"You're a Canada goose, Carlyslle, not a snow goose," said his mother.

"I will be when I get to the North Pole. There's lots of snow there."

By now Jeremiah was very angry. He couldn't land because the entire flock would follow and then they'd have to start all over again. He sent Isabelle down to reason with her son.

"I have to do this, Mother. You always taught me it's important to set goals. I have to prove to myself and to the others that I can accomplish something."

"But you can, my son, you can." Isabelle was distraught.

"Isabelle," shouted Jeremiah. "We have to go."

"Please, Carlyslle." A tear glistened on her beak.

"No, Mother. You go along. I'll be fine. I'll send a post card from the North Pole." He bent over and pecked his mother gently on the beak. Then he turned and waddled up the road. As the flock turned south once again, they all looked down. From the side of the road a lone Canada goose raised his wing and saluted.

For many days he walked. He got used to the strange automobiles and learned to hide in the ditch when they passed. He ate corn left in the fields and slept in the long grass at the roadside. From time to time he would encounter raccoons or skunks that would eye the pedestrian goose quizzically. Hawks often called down from the tops of the tall poles that lined the road. "Why don't you fly? Are you hurt?"

The reply was always the same. "No, I'd rather walk. I'm going to the North Pole to be the solstice snow goose."

One day, Carlyse came to a large house with a big, red barn beside it. In front of the barn were some white geese eating grain. On hearing his story, they invited him to join them for a snack.

"Why don't you stay here for a few days?" a pretty goose named Esther asked.

Carlyse was feeling rather lonely and tired so he decided to accept Esther's invitation. One morning when he woke up it was very cold and everything glistened with a coating of sparkling white. The frost was on the pumpkin, the others explained.

To be specific, the frost was on Porteus Pumpkin and to Stan the Scarecrow the chilly temperatures were a bad omen. He could protect the pumpkins from an attack by crows. He could even offer the smaller, delicate pumpkins a bit of shade on hot days. But, as the days grew shorter and the leaves on the trees turned to red and gold, there was one thing Stan knew he could not do. He could not protect the pumpkins against their day of doom - Halloween.

Stan was particularly worried about Porteus. The pumpkin had grown very rotund and he revelled in his roundness. Conceit had swelled him so much that people driving by stopped to stare. Many pies could be made from the insides of Porteus and once or twice Stan had noticed Mrs. Jones gazing towards the pumpkin patch.

"What's up, Stan?" a shrill voice twittered. Crimson the cardinal often dropped by for an afternoon visit.

"I'm worried about Porteus, Crimson," Stan said. "Halloween is almost here and he's far too big to go unnoticed."

"I see what you mean," Crimson said, after briefly flying past the pumpkin.

"Oh, my," groaned Stan, looking over to see another carload staring and pointing towards them.

"I have an idea," exclaimed Crimson. He bent toward Stan and whispered excitedly.

Stan's stitched-on grin became wider and wider as the bird spoke. "I think it might work," he said.

Two days later it was Halloween. Sunrise was witness to strange activities in Farmer Jones' yard. Carlyle had been recruited to act as lookout. He was sitting underneath the giant oak tree at the end of the lane. If anyone came by, he was to let out a loud honk. This would alert Crimson and Stan and they would go into Operation Protect Porteus.

At precisely 9:30 a.m. a family emerged from their station wagon and headed towards the pumpkin patch. Carlyle honked for all he was worth, drawing attention to himself and startling the visitors. As everyone looked at the goose, Mrs. Cardinal neatly plucked the clothes pins off Mrs. Jones' freshly washed shawl. Esther draped it over Porteus as Crimson swooped down on the scarecrow and plucked off his hat. As he flew over the pumpkin, he dropped it neatly on top

of the shawl. It landed at a jaunty angle. When the family turned back towards the pumpkin patch, they saw a hatless scarecrow, a cardinal and a short, round child wearing his Halloween costume. The goose who had been making such a racket was quietly strolling back towards the barnyard.

They had a big Halloween party that night, but the cool weather made Carlyle realize he should be moving on. November was starting and he had a long way to go to the North Pole. He bid Stan and Porteus and Crimson farewell. Esther pecked him on the cheek and he blushed. Then he turned and headed up the road away from the farm.

Carlyle walked until he had blisters on his feet. One afternoon, he stopped to rest by a creek. He was so tired that sleep came easily. But it was short-lived.

"Hallo," croaked a deep voice from the direction of his right foot.

"Who're you?" asked another from the vicinity of his left.

Carlyle opened his right eye. At his foot sat a very fat, brown toad. He opened his left eye and saw the same thing.

"I'm Carlyle," he told them. "Who're you?"

"I'm Bethany," said the toad on his right.

"I'm Thistle," came the voice on the left.

"Why are you sitting here all alone?" asked Bethany. "Why didn't you fly south with the rest of the Canada geese?"

"I'm walking to the North Pole for the first day of winter."

"Why don't you fly there?" Bethany asked.

"Anyone can fly," said Carlyle, looking at the wingless toad. "I want to prove I can do something different."

"I don't think you should be walking anywhere," said Thistle. "Your foot looks awfully sore."

"So does this one," Bethany said. "Maybe you could swim part of the way along the creek. We could hop beside it."

And so they set off down the creek, the goose soothing his tired feet in the cool water. They chatted as they travelled. Carlyse told the toads about his father being killed and they told him about their life along the creek. They thought that Carlyse was very adventurous.

Gradually the creek widened and a few fish swam by. Carlyse's stomach grumbled and he realized it was a long time since he had eaten. The trio found a shady nook and stopped for a snack. Carlyse munched on the grass along the riverbank. Bethany and Thistle flicked out their tongues and caught flies.

They were not the only ones enjoying a meal. On the other side of the creek Marshall, the brown bear, was preparing for winter hibernation. He sat beneath a tree eating the last of the season's blackberries. On a branch above him Kathleen, the chipmunk, scolded. Despite their banter, they were very sad to be parting for the winter. They had already made plans to meet at this exact spot in the spring.

On hearing of Carlyse's quest, Marshall called out across the river. "You know," he said. "My cousin, a polar bear, lives at the North Pole. He says that on December 21st it's dark all day long."

Carlyse hadn't realized this, but thought it would be very interesting. Marshall also told him about the northern lights his cousin had witnessed. Sometimes, he said, they were even in colour.

After everyone had eaten, they had a nap. Suddenly, they were awakened by the strident screeching of a crow in a treetop. "Hunters coming!" he was yelling. "Hunters coming!"

Marshall got up and ambled into the thicket, Kathleen on his head guiding the way. Bethany and Thistle were not in danger. Toads were rarely hunters' targets and, besides, they blended perfectly with the mud. But Carlyslle was terrified. At this moment he sincerely wished he had left with the flock. He tried to duck under the water, but when his head went down, his tail came up. It was no use. Then Bethany had an idea.

"The mud hides us," she said. "It will hide you too. Come here."

With some uneasiness, Carlyslle climbed onto the bank. As the goose sat still, the toads hopped all over him until he was caked with the slimy goo. By the time the hunters floated past in their rowboat, all they saw were two small brown blobs and a large brown rock. Had they looked closely with their binoculars, they would have seen that the rock had eyes and the eyes were watching them!

Carlyslle stayed motionless. Finally, Thistle and Bethany convinced him that the coast was clear.

"I think I'd better go along the road, again. My feet feel much better and the hunters may still be on the river."

"We won't be able to go, Carlyslle," Bethany said. "We need to stay close to the water."

The new friends bid each other a sad farewell. Carlyslle promised to send a postcard from the North Pole.

He walked and he walked. It got colder and the days got shorter. One morning he awoke

to a piercing whistle that shattered the air. Carlyslle jumped up in surprise as a giant beast came to a grinding, screeching and long-drawn-out halt beside him. A giggle echoed from within.

Then a pinched, little grey face peered down at him.

"Hi, there!" said the rat. "I'm Maple. Who are you?"

"I'm Carlyslle," the goose answered, once again explaining his mission. His voice was beginning to lack enthusiasm.

"I'm getting very cold," he confided in the rat. "Now I know why the geese go south in winter."

"Live and learn," said Maple wisely. "Say, I have an idea. Why don't you hop on the train with me? That way you can still say you didn't fly."

Carlyslle pondered this suggestion. He didn't stand shivering too long before he decided the rat was right. He leapt onto the platform.

"All aboard," called Maple gleefully.

Just then they felt a lurch and the giant steel monster started forward. The car they were in contained corn. Over time Carlyslle became quite lazy and spoiled in its warmth. The two new friends told stories about their lives and played games, such as tossing corn kernels closest to the target. Maple had a lovely singing voice and would entertain the goose in the evenings with folk songs.

One night Maple jabbed him and woke him up. "Carlyslle, the train is turning south instead of north. You'd better get off if you're going to go to the North Pole."

As Carlyslle came fully awake, he could feel the train moving in a curve to the left. Maple was right. He'd have to go. Saying good-bye to yet another friend, Carlyslle waited until the train slowed and then he jumped from the door. He expected to land on hard ground but, instead, he

felt himself sinking into something soft and fluffy and very, very cold. Carlyslle opened his eyes and looked around. The moonlight shone on a world turned completely white.

Then he heard the bells; beautiful chimes ringing out across the sparkling expanse. Looking to his right he saw a rabbit, also staring out over the valley, his ears swivelling to hear the music.

"Hello," said Carlyslle, introducing himself.

"Oh, my," said the rabbit, suddenly aware of him. "I'm Jordan. What in the world is a Canada goose doing in the north on the first day of winter?"

"I'm walking to the North Po...." Suddenly Carlyslle realized what Jordan had said. "Did you say winter? Oh, dear. Oh, dear." Carlyslle began to cry. "I don't suppose this is the North Pole, is it?" he asked.

"No," said the rabbit. "It's Wawa."

"What is a Wawa?" asked Carlyslle through his tears.

"It's a town right over there." Jordan cocked his ear.

"But I wanted to be at the North Pole," wailed Carlyslle. "I wanted to see the coloured lights in the sky!"

Jordan was concerned. He wanted to help the goose but he didn't know quite how. Then he had an idea. "Why don't you go into town? There are lots of lights there. Some of them are bound to be in colour."

The plan seemed better than nothing, so Carlyslle headed in the direction of the town. He hadn't gone very far when he heard a faint whimpering sound. The only thing nearby was an old tree. He went towards it and saw the source of the noise. A little sparrow was lying on the ground, his wing bent at an awkward angle.

Seeing Carlysle, the little bird began to cry louder. "I want my mama," he said, looking up at the goose with tear-filled eyes.

"Where is she?" asked Carlysle.

"I don't know. She went to get me some dinner. I got scared and decided to look for her. I fell from the tree and...." With that the little bird burst into tears again.

Carlysle knew he must do something right away. He forgot about the North Pole. He forgot how cold he was. He even forgot he was supposed to walk. Scooping the sparrow up gently in his beak, he flew off towards the town, hoping to find the bird's mother or at least someone who could help. Carlysle had never been in a town before and the lights confused him. Disoriented, he touched down to get his bearings. He tucked the shivering little sparrow under his wing to keep it warm.

"Huddle up against my base, young one. I will keep you safe from the wind." The booming voice came from above them.

Carlysle looked up and saw the largest Canada goose he had ever seen in his life. It was much larger than even Uncle Jeremiah. Its wings were back as if in flight and its long necked craned to get a look at everything around it. It stood perfectly still.

"Who are you?" Carlysle asked timidly.

"In the Ojibway language Wawa means Canada goose. That's me," he said. "I'm the famous Big Goose statue."

"I'm Carlysle. Do you know where I can find this little fellow's mother?" Carlysle asked. "He fell out of a tree and hurt his wing."

"Fly up onto my head and call for her," said the Big Goose.

Carlysle flew up onto the giant statue's head, being very careful not to drop his precious bundle. When he got to the top he held open his wing.

"Mama, Mama," cried the little bird. "Mama, I need you."

They stood quietly, listening for a reply. Then in the distance they heard the sound of beating wings. Closer and closer it came until they could see the mother sparrow flying frantically towards them.

"My child," she cried, as she too landed on the statue's head. "I've looked everywhere for you."

Carlysle bent down and the mother sparrow gently lifted her chick from the warmth of his wing.

"Thank you," she said, as she bent lovingly over her little one. "Thank you," she whispered again. Then, taking her baby in her beak, she flew off towards their nest.

Carlysle looked up into the night sky. "Oh, my," he said. "I wanted to prove that I could accomplish something. All this time, all that way and in the end I failed. I never got to the North Pole." Carlysle sat down on the statue's back. His head hung very low.

"Carlysle," said the Big Goose. "Tell me about your journey. Did you meet anyone?"

"Oh, yes," said Carlysle, perking up. "There was Stan the Scarecrow and Crimson Cardinal and Porteus Pumpkin. There was Esther, the goose, and, of course, Bethany and Thistle. Maple and I had a jolly train ride and just tonight I met Jordan, the rabbit."

"And what would you call these folks you met?"

"They're my friends," said Carlysle. "And they were ever so kind. Stan helped Porteus so the people wouldn't make him into a jack-o-lantern. The toads put mud all over me so the hunters wouldn't shoot me. Maple let me share her corn."

"You were very kind, too, Carlyslle," said the Big Goose. "You helped that little sparrow find his mother. If it hadn't been for you he would have froze. Hop down and look under my base. There's a hole underneath. That's where I keep things that people leave behind. Pull out the red scarf."

Carlyslle did as he was told.

"It would look very jolly around your neck."

Carlyslle felt a little self-conscious, but he was cold from the now falling snow, so he flung the scarf around his neck. It was nice and warm.

"There, Carlyslle, you look like the most wonderful, snowy Canada goose there could ever be."

Just then a door opened in the little house nearby. Light spilled out onto the snow and it sparkled like blue diamonds. They could hear the clear voices of people inside singing.

"T'was in the moon of wintertime, when all the birds had fled

That Mighty Gitchy Manitou sent angel choirs instead."

"Welcome to winter, Carlyslle."

"Thank you, Wawa."

The next day people from the town were delighted to find a real Canada goose, handsomely attired in a bright red scarf, sitting atop their famous statue. They took many pictures. Before long, Bethany and Thistle, Stan the Scarecrow, Esther and Maple all received post cards with Carlyslle smiling from atop his giant perch. To his mother, he wrote, "See you in the spring. Tell Jeremiah to save a spot for me. Love, Carlyslle."

