

## ***KERRYGOLD and the BABY OWL***

**It was a fine summer evening in that part of Ireland where Farmer Seán Dugan and his family lived. “Family” of course included not only his wife and children but also all the other creatures that lived there, great and small.**

**In addition to two families of dogs – both of which had just welcomed litters of puppies – and cats almost too numerous to count, goats, pigs, sheep, and chickens, there were the “stars” of the farm, Kerrygold – still the prettiest cow in Ireland – and her close friend Maria the Black Mare.**

**The cow and the horse were spending many happy days enjoying the fine weather in Farmer Seán's field, where they could graze to their hearts' content on the rich Irish grass. They also enjoyed the company of the wild creatures that occasionally came out of the nearby woods to say hello, deer and rabbits who, like the cow and the mare, enjoyed feasting on the rich summer greenery of the farm (and in Mrs. Dugan's vegetable garden!)**

**On this particular evening, Kerrygold and Maria were grazing and chatting close by the fence at the south end of the property when they heard an unfamiliar sound. “Did you hear that?” asked Maria, and Kerrygold nodded. “It sounded like it came from over there a little way,” she replied. “What did it sound like to you?” asked Maria. “Kind of an oo-oo sound,” said Kerrygold. “Not 'moo' like a cow, just a very soft oo-oo. It sounded like a bird to me.” “To me too,” said Maria, “except it sounded like it came from down on the ground and not up in a tree. It's getting dark and all the birds should be back in their nests by now.” “Let's go have a look,” suggested Kerrygold, and off they went in the direction of the little “oo-oo” sound.**

**They didn't have far to go before they discovered the source. “Oh look!” cried Maria. “Look, Kerrygold! It's a baby owl!” “Either your eyes are better than mine or I'm not looking in the right place,” said Kerrygold. “Point with your hoof to where you see him so I don't accidentally step on the poor thing.”**

**Maria did just that, and pretty soon the two large animals were looking down into the sad frightened eyes of a baby owl. “Hi, little guy!” said Kerrygold, bending down her muzzle into the tall grass where the baby owl was sitting with his big unblinking eyes. “What are you doing here? You should be home in the nest before**

## ***KERRYGOLD and the BABY OWL***

**it gets too dark!”**

**The little owl – whose brown feathers were getting harder to see as the evening light grew less and less - could only look up at them and make his “oo-oo” sound. Then Maria noticed that one of his wings seemed to be injured. “Oh dear!” she said in a voice of concern. “I could be wrong, but I think his wing is hurt. He probably couldn't fly if he wanted to.” As if to confirm this, the baby owl fluttered helplessly a few times.**

**Just then the cow and the horse heard a much louder “oo-oo” sound repeated several times from deeper in the woods. As if in response the baby owl turned his head and tried to flap his wings, but it was clear to Kerrygold and Maria that he wouldn't be going anywhere.**

**“We've got to help the poor little guy,” said Kerrygold. “I agree, but what do you suggest?” said Maria. “Well, I think the first thing would be to get him back up to the farmhouse,” said Kerrygold. “You know how kind-hearted the family all are – they'd probably all love a chance to help a baby owl. After all, it's not something that happens every day!” “I'm with you on that, but how on earth are you and I going to get this poor creature up to the farmhouse? We have no way to pick him up with our legs, and I'd be terrified of hurting him even more if I tried to carry him in my mouth the way Bran the hunting dog carries his ducks around!”**

**A minute or so of silence followed while the two animals thought about a solution to the problem. In the meantime the little owl – perhaps sensing that the two animals were intent on helping him – fell asleep, not awakening even when his mother's “oo-oo” was repeated again from the dark depths of the woods.**

**“I have it – I've got an idea!” said Kerrygold. “Look over there, Maria, towards the shed. You can just about see it, but it's there – a wheelbarrow!”**

**Maria the Mare peered through the growing darkness. “Yes, I see it – thank heavens the boys painted it bright green and yellow for the parade on Saint Patrick's Day, or we'd never see it in the dark!”**

**“Right,” said Kerrygold. “So now all we have to do is get the wheelbarrow down here, put some soft grass in it, ever so gently lift our little friend here into it, and**

## ***KERRYGOLD and the BABY OWL***

push it back up toward the house. Then we both make a lot of noise to let the family know that they have a guest!”

Maria nodded her approval. “Sounds like a plan ... but wait a second. In my corner of the barn there's a long piece of rope. If I go get that, I can wrap it around you and the wheelbarrow and you can pull it. That would probably be faster and safer than pushing it. At least you can see where you're going.”

“Well, I haven't done much pulling in my life,” said Kerrygold with a laugh. “After all, I am a dairy cow and not a mere draft animal.” “Yeah, yeah, sorry,” said Maria with a snort. “But I've been pals with you long enough to know that you won't mind being a 'mere draft animal' for the next little while!”

Maria trotted off and returned in a few minutes with the wheelbarrow attached to the end of the rope. “How on earth did you manage that?” said Kerrygold in amazement. “That's a great job!” “Well, I remembered watching young Tim the stableboy when he'd be tying something near my stall,” said Maria. “Somehow I realized that knowing how to tie a knot might come in handy someday, so I used to practice moving my head in just the right way with the rope in my teeth. Eventually I got the hang of it, but it wasn't easy, I can tell you that. I sure hope humans appreciate the hands and fingers that they're blessed with!”

“Well done, old friend,” said Kerrygold. “And now time to load our precious cargo.”

Maria passed the tow rope to Kerrygold. “I want to make a few practice moves with this rig before we put Little Owl into it,” said Kerrygold. “It certainly wouldn't help matters for me to tip the wheelbarrow over with him and his damaged wing inside.”

The practice moves, clumsy at first, were finally accomplished to the satisfaction of both animals. Maria put several mouthfuls of fresh grass into the wheelbarrow and spread it around to cushion the ride for the baby owl.

“Now comes the tough part,” said Kerrygold. “I think your muzzle is gentle enough to pick up the patient with no damage.” “I know,” said Maria nervously. “It's just that I wouldn't want to do anything that might hurt his wing. For all we know it

## ***KERRYGOLD and the BABY OWL***

might be broken.”

“That's why it's important that we get going right away,” said Kerrygold. “We haven't much daylight left and I know the family are going down to the Connollys' house tonight. We've got to get our passenger up to the house as soon as possible.”

“Okay, okay ... just ... just don't look,” said Maria.

There was a short silence, then a relieved sigh from the horse. “Well, you can start moving, Kerrygold – he's in the wheelbarrow safe and sound. Didn't even wake up – poor little guy must have had a tough day!”

Slowly and with great care the cow and the horse made their way up the hill to the farmhouse, their precious cargo safe and snug in the wheelbarrow. Kerrygold did the pulling while Maria trailed close behind.

After what seemed like a long time but was actually only ten minutes or so, the pair arrived outside the farmhouse kitchen. Inside they could see Farmer Seán making a sandwich for himself. “Perfect!” whispered Kerrygold to Maria. “Now we start making noise!”

To say that the noise right outside the kitchen window surprised Farmer Seán would be an understatement – it would be more accurate to say that he nearly jumped out of his skin at the totally unexpected racket generated by the cow and the horse, joined in the midst of the commotion by the “oo-oo” of Little Owl, who had been dreaming an owl dream about being back in his nice warm nest before being rudely awakened by the hullabaloo.

Of course it didn't take long for the family to come running out to see what was up. Maria, normally the most quiet of horses, neighed loudly and tossed her head repeatedly in the direction of the wheelbarrow to make sure that the family knew it bore a special cargo.

It was little Rosie who made the discovery. “Oh look! A baby owl!” “A WHAT?” cried her mother. “A baby owl, Mama! He's beautiful!” “Don't touch him, sweetie,” said Farmer Seán. “He's probably hurt or he'd be flying away. Somebody please bring me a blanket.” A baby blanket appeared from somewhere and with great

## ***KERRYGOLD and the BABY OWL***

gentleness the farmer wrapped up the little owl. “Now inside everyone – and Mama will call Doctor Dan's clinic to see what they suggest.”

Of course all the kids wanted to see the baby owl, and after word got out a few neighbors came over too. Everyone was cautioned to be as quiet as possible to avoid scaring the little guy, whose big eyes were opened wide. Small owl noises – almost like a cat's purring – could be heard in the silence. The voice of Mrs. Dugan on the phone with the clinic was the only other sound in the house.

“They're going to call a vet over in Carna who has most experience with this kind of thing,” she announced on her return to the kitchen. “He should be calling us back in twenty minutes or so. In the meantime they said that our little friend might be thirsty, so we're to put some water in a small saucer and set it on the table in front of him. If he's not too badly hurt or scared, he might drink a bit.”

The saucer was placed as suggested, but the little owl didn't move. “That doesn't seem to be working,” said Farmer Seán. “Tell you what – fill an eye-dropper with water and we'll see if he takes it that way, like baby chickens sometimes do.” “Oh Daddy – can I try to give it to him?” said Rosie. “I learned all about owls in school. I'm sure I can do a good job.”

After a quick exchange of looks between father and mother, permission was granted. Rosie and the onlookers were delighted to see that the little owl – after a slight hesitation – began drinking thirstily from the eye-dropper.

In the meantime, the heroes of the evening – Kerrygold and Maria – stood patiently outside the kitchen listening to everything that was going on, pleased that their new friend seemed to be getting on well. In all the commotion no one thought to ask how in heaven's name a cow and a horse had managed to lift an injured baby owl into a wheelbarrow and get it up to where help was available.

To make a long but pleasant story short, the vet had the Dugans bring the patient into the clinic that evening for an x-ray. The good news was that the wing was bruised but not broken, and that Baby Owl would probably be as good as new after a week or so of rest and tender loving care in the Dugans' house. “How will we know when he's ready to go home?” asked Rosie, who secretly hoped that Baby Owl might decide to stay at the farm with her instead of flying off into the woods.

## ***KERRYGOLD and the BABY OWL***

**“You'll know,” said the vet. “One morning he'll start flapping his wings to show you that they're as good as new. When that happens, you can give him another ride in the wheelbarrow back down to the woods so he can get home to his folks.”**

**Rosie pretended to be happy to hear that.**

**A few days later everything happened just as the vet had predicted. The baby owl was put in a birdcage – the Dugans' parrot was thrilled to be let out for the day – and returned to the edge of the woods. When the cage door was opened, he stepped carefully over the sill, took a good long look around, and flew off as if nothing had ever happened to the wing. The Dugans cheered (even Rosie, though not as loudly as the others).**

**But then a strange thing happened.**

**Before reaching the trees, the little owl turned back towards the farm and flew to a part of the pasture where a smiling Kerrygold and Maria were observing the proceedings. As the amazed family watched, the little bird perched first between Kerrygold's horns and then on Maria's forehead and pecked gently on each of them several times before taking off for the trees again.**

**To this day the Dugans, and Kerrygold and Maria too, talk about the way the baby owl came back to thank them for their kindness. And if you go down near the woods after nightfall – especially if there's a full moon – the first “oo-oo” that you hear is Baby Owl's. At least Kerrygold and Maria think so!**

**- - - The End - - -**