

The Animals' Christmas Tree

**By
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ONCE upon a time the animals decided to have a Christmas tree, and this was how it came about. The swifts and the swallows in the chimneys in the country houses, awakened from their sleep by joy and laughter, had stolen down and peeped in upon scenes of happiness, the centre of which was always an evergreen tree covered with wonderful fruit, bright balls of many colors, and sparkling threads of gold and silver, lying like beautiful frost-work among the green fir needles. A sweet, fairy-like figure of a Christ-Child or an angel rested high among the branches, and underneath the tree were dolls and sleds and skates and drums and toys of every sort, and furs and gloves and tippets, ribbons and handkerchiefs, and all the things that boys and girls need and like; and all about this tree were gathered always little children with faces oh! so full of wonderment and expectation, changing to radiant, sparkling merriment as toys and candies were taken off the tree or from underneath its boughs and distributed among them.

The swifts and the swallows told their feathered friends all about it, and they told others, both birds and animals, until at last it began to be rumored through all the animal world that on one day in the year the children of men were made wonderfully happy by means of some sort of a festival which

they held about a fir-tree from the forest. Now, of course the tame animals and the house animals, the dogs and the cats and the mice, knew something more about this festival. But then, they did not exchange visits with the wild animals, because they felt themselves above them. They were always trying to be like men and women, you know, putting on airs and pretending to know everything; but after all they were animals and could not help making friendships now and then with the wild creatures, especially when the men and women were not there. And when they were asked about the Christmas tree, they told still more wonderful stories than the swifts and the swallows from the chimneys had told, for some of them had taken part in these festivals, and some had even received presents from the tree, just like the children. They said that the tree was called a Christmas tree, because that strange fruit and that wonderful frosting came on it only in the Christmas time, and that the Christmas time was the time when men and women and little children, too, were always kind and good and loving and gave things to one another; and they said, moreover, that on the Christmas tree grew the things which everyone wanted and which would make them happy, and that it was so, because in the Christmas time everyone was trying to make everyone else happy and to think of what other people would like. This they said was what they had seen and heard told about Christmas trees. They did not quite understand why it was so but they knew that the Christmas tree, when rightly made, brought the Christmas spirit, and they had heard men say that the Christmas spirit was the great thing, and that that was what made everyone happy.

Well, the long and the short of it was that the animals talked of it in their dens and on their roosts, in the fields and in the forests, wild beasts and tame alike—the cows and horses in their stalls, the sheep in their fold, the doves in their cotes, and the poultry in the poultry yard, until all agreed that a Christmas tree would be a grand thing for wild and tame alike. Like the men they, too, would have a tree of their very own. But how to do it?

Then the lion called a meeting of all the creatures, wild and tame, for you know the lion is king of beasts and when he calls they all must come. You know, too, that before and during and after these animal congresses, there is a royal peace. The lamb can come to the meeting and sit down by the wolf, and the wolf dare not touch him; the dove may perch on the bough between the hawk and the owl and neither will harm him, when the great king of beasts has summoned them all together to take counsel. But you know all about the rules of the animals, for you have read them in books, and you have seen the pictures: how the lion sits on his throne with a crown on one side of his head, and all the other creatures gather about—the elephant, and giraffe, the hippopotamus, the buffalo, wolves and tigers and leopards, foxes and deer, goats and sheep, monkeys and orang-outangs, parrots and robins and turkeys and swans and storks and eagles and frogs and lizards and alligators, and all the rest besides.

Then, when the lion had called the meeting to order, the swifts and the swallows told what they had seen, and a fat little pug-dog, with a ribbon and a silver bell about his neck, wheezed out a story of a Christmas tree that he had seen, and how a silver

bell had grown on that tree for him and a whole box of the best sweets he had ever dreamed of while he lay comfortably snoozing on his cushion before the fire. And a Persian cat, with her hair turned the wrong way, mewed out her story of a Christmas tree that she had attended, and how there was a white mouse made of cream cheese for her creeping about beneath the branches.

Then the monkeys chattered and the elephants trumpeted, the horses neighed, the hyenas laughed, and each in its own way argued for a Christmas tree and told what they would do to help to make it. The elephant would go into the forest and choose the tree and pull it up. The buffaloes would drag it in. The giraffe would fix the ornaments on the higher limbs, because its neck was long. The monkeys would scramble up where the giraffe could not reach. The squirrels could run out on the slender twigs and help the monkeys. The birds would fly about and get the golden threads and put them on the tree with their beaks. The fire-flies would hide themselves among the branches and sparkle like diamonds, and the glow-worms promised to help the fire-flies by playing candles, if someone would lift them up and put them on the branches. The parrots and paroquets and other birds of gay plumage would give feathers to hang among the branches, and the humming-birds promised to flutter in and out among the twigs, and the sheep to give white wool to lie like snow among the boughs.

Then the parrots screeched and the peacocks screamed with delight, and you and I never could have told whether anybody voted aye or nay; but the lion knew and the owl, for he was clerk, set it down in the minutes, as the lion bade him, that all

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