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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The animals' Christmas tree

Once upon a time the animals decided to have a Christmas tree, and this was why: The swallows in the chimneys were awakened from their sleep by joy and laughter and peeped down to see lots of happiness. In the center of which was an evergreen tree covered with bright balls of many colours, and sparkling threads of gold and silver. A star was at the top, and underneath the tree were dolls and sleds and skates and drums and toys of every sort and all the things that boys and girls need and like; and all around this tree were gathered little children with faces full of wonder, changing to excitement as toys and candies were taken off the tree or from underneath it and given to them.

The swallows told the other animals all about it, until all the animals knew that on one day in the year children were made wonderfully happy by some sort of festival that was held around 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. And when they were asked about the Christmas tree, they told wonderful stories 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 the decorations only came on it in the Christmas time, and that Christmas time was the time when men and women and little children were always kind and good and loving, and gave things to one another. 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, brought the Christmas spirit, and they had heard men say that the Christmas spirit was a great thing, and that that was what made everyone happy.

The animals talked about in their dens and on their roosts, in the fields, and in the forests, wild beasts and tame—the cows and the 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 the animals. Like the men, they, too, would have a tree of their very own. But how to do it?

Then the lion called a meeting, for you know the lion is king of beasts and when he calls they all must come. 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 will not

touch him. 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 around.

Then, when the lion had called the meeting to order, the swallows told what they had seen, and a fat little pug-dog, with a ribbon and a silver bell on his neck, told 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 told how there was a white mouse made of cream cheese for her under the tree. Then the monkeys chattered and the elephants trumpeted, the horses neighed, the hyenas laughed, and each in his own way argued for a Christmas tree and told what he would do to help 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 with pretty feathers 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.

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.



So each animal planned what he could do. Even the little beetle, who makes great balls of earth, thought that if he could see one of those balls that grow on the children's Christmas tree, he might be able make some for the animals' tree. Different birds and beasts told of the oranges and apples and holly-berries and who knows what they could get and hang upon the tree.

And so they arranged how they would ornament the tree, and the next thing was to decide what presents should be hung on the tree or put beneath it, for each one must have a present. Well, after much discussion in roars, and bellows, crows and croaks, lows and screams and bleats, and baas and grunts, and all the other sounds of birds and beast language, it was voted that each can choose the present he wished hung on the

tree. The clerkly owl would call their names one by one, and each might declare his choice. So they began. The parrots and the macaws thought that they would like oranges and bananas and such things, which would look so pretty on the tree. The robins and the cedar birds chose cherries; the the partridges, partridge berries, the squirrels, the red and grey and black, nuts and apples and pears. The monkeys said the popcorn strings would do for them, and the cats and dogs, remembering the Christmas gift which the pug-dog and Persian cat had told about, asked for tiny mice made of cream cheese or chocolate. "Grunt, grunt!" said the pig, "I want a nice pail of mud hung on the very lowest branch."

"Ugh!" said the black leopard, so sleek and so clean.

"Faugh!" said the gazelle, with his dainty sense of smell.

"Neigh!" said the horse, so daintily groomed.

"What!" roared the lion, "what's that you want?"

"A pail of mud," grunted the pig. "Each one has chosen what he wants, and I have a right to choose what I want."

"But," roared the lion, "each one has chosen something beautiful to make the tree a joy to all."

"Grunt, grunt," said the pig. "I will have what I want to eat, too, and what I want is a pail of mud."

Now, you see it had been voted, as I told you, that each should have what he wanted hung on the tree for him, and so the lion could not help himself. If the pig chose mud, mud he must have, and angrily he had to roar: "If the pig wants mud, a pail of mud he must have, hung on the lowest branch of the tree!"

Then the wolf's wicked eyes gleamed, for his turn was next, and he said: "If the pig has mud because he wants mud to eat, I must have what I want to eat, and I want a tender lamb, six months old." And at that all the lambs and the sheep bleated and baaed.

"Ha, ha!" barked the fox; "then I want a turkey!" And the turkeys gobbled in fear.

"And I," said the hawk, "will take a rabbit."

"And I," said the leopard, "want a deer or a gazelle."

Then all was fear and uproar. The hares and rabbits scuttled into the grass; the gazelles and the deer bounded away; the sheep and the cattle crowded close together; the small birds rose in the air in flocks.

Then a little lamb stepped out and bleated: "Ah! king lion, it would be very sad if all the animals should lose their Christmas tree, for the very thought of that tree has brought us closer together, and here we were, wild and tame, fierce and timid, met together as friends; and, rather than there should not be a tree, they may take me and hang me on it. Let the tigers and leopards, and wolves and foxes and eagles, and hawks and owls and all their kind be content that their Christmas present shall be a lamb; and so we may come together again and have our happy Christmas tree, and each have what he wishes."

"But," said the lion, "what will you have? If you give yourself, then you will have no Christmas present."

"Yes," said the lamb, "I, too, shall have what I want, for I shall have brought them all together again, and made each one happy."

Then the lion roared: "See what the lamb has done! My food, oh, tigers and leopards and wolves and eagles and all your kind, is like your food; but I would rather eat nothing from our Christmas tree than take this lamb for my present."

Then all the beasts kept still, because the lion roared so loud and angrily. Then the lion turned to the pig, and roared: "See this lamb! Are you not ashamed for what you have done? You have spoiled all our happiness. Will you take back your choice, you pig, or do you wish to ruin our Christmas tree?"

"Grunt, grunt," said the pig, "it is my right. I want something good. I don't care for your lamb. I want my mud!"

Then the lion roared again: "Have all chosen?" and all answered, "Yes."

"Then," said the lion, "it is my choice."

And all said: "It is."

"I love fat and tender pigs. I choose a pig for my Christmas gift," roared the lion.

Did you ever hear a pig squeal? Oh, how that pig squealed then! And he got up on his fat little legs and tried to run away, but all the animals gathered around in a ring, when the pig found that he could not run away, he lay down on his back with his feet in the air and squealed with all his might: "Oh, I don't want the mud, I take it all back! I don't want anything!"

At first no one heard him, because all were talking at once in their own way—barking and growling and roaring and chattering; but the lion saw that the pig was squealing something, so he roared for silence, and

then they all heard the pig squeal out that he did not want any mud. And the lion roared aloud: "You have heard. Has the owl recorded that the pig will have no mud?"

"Yes," said the owl.

"Then," said the lion, "record that the lion wants no pig." And so it came about that the animals did have a Christmas tree after all; but instead of hanging lambs upon the tree, they agreed that they could hang little images of lambs, and other birds and animals, too. And so the custom spread until the humans came to hang the same little images on their trees, too.