

# The Animals' CHRISTMAS TREE

John P. Peters



**The  
Animals' Christmas Tree**

By  
**The Rev. John P. Peters**

# **The Animals' Christmas Tree**

# The Animals' Christmas Tree



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 tippetts, 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 the birds and beasts would do their part. So each planned what he could do. Even the little beetle, who makes great balls of earth, thought that if he could only once see one of those gay balls that grow on the children's Christmas tree, he might

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. You see the animals came from many places, and then, too, they could send the carrier pigeons to go and bring fruit and berries, and who knows what besides, from oh, so far away, because the carrier pigeons can fly through the air no one knows how fast or how far.

Well, I cannot tell you everything that each one was going to do, but if you will go and get your Noah's ark and take the animals out one by one, then you surely will think it out for yourself, for you have all the animals there.

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 its boughs, for each one must have his 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 bird and beast language, it was voted that each might choose the present he wished hung on the tree. The clerkly owl should 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, too; and so they were arranged for. The robins and the cedar birds chose cherries; the partridges, partridge berries; the squirrels, red and gray 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 gifts which the pug-dog and Persian cat had told about, asked for tiny mice made of cream cheese or chocolate. By and by it came the pig's turn to tell his choice. "Grunt, grunt!" said the pig, "I want a nice pail of swill hung on the very lowest bough of all."

"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 swill,” 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. “The parrots and the macaws are going to have oranges and bananas, and the robins and the cedar birds red cherries, the partridges their berries, the squirrels nuts and apples and pears, the dog and the cat their cream and chocolate mice. They all have what they want to eat. Grunt, grunt,” said he; “I will have what I want to eat, too, and what I want is a pail of swill.”

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

Then the wolf’s wicked eyes gleamed, for his turn was next, and he said: “If the pig has swill because he wants swill 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 tiger, “want a yearling calf.” And the cows and the calves lowed in horror.

“And I,” said the owl, the clerk, “I want a plump dove.”

“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 the rabbits scuttled into the grass; the gazelles and the deer bounded away; the sheep and cattle crowded close together; the small birds rose in the air in flocks; and the Christmas tree was like to have come to grief and ended, not in Christmas joy, but in fear and hatred and terror.



Then a little timid 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 oh! king lion, rather than there should not be a tree, they may take me and hang me on it. Let them not take the turkeys and gazelles and the calves and the rabbits, and all the rest that they have chosen. 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 a dove fluttered down from a tree and landed on the ground beside the lamb, and very timidly and softly she cooed: "Take me, too, king lion, as the present for the owls and the hawks, and the weasels and the minks, because for them a lamb is too big. I am the best present for them. Take me, king lion!"

Then the lion roared: "See what the lamb and the dove have 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 or this dove for my present."

Then all the beasts kept still, because the lion roared so loud and angrily, and the birds that were flying away settled on the branches of the trees, and the gazelles stopped their running and turned their heads to listen, and the rabbits peeped out through the grass and brush where they had hid. Then the lion turned to the pig, and roared:

"See this lamb and this dove! 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 lambs and your doves. I want my swill!"

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 and the hyenas laughed, and the jackals cried, and the dogs and the wolves and the foxes headed him off, and hunted the poor pig back again. Then, 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 swill; oh, I don't want the swill! I take it all back! I don't want anything!"

But at first no one heard him, because all were talking at once in their own way—barking and growling and roaring and chattering; but by and by 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 swill. And the lion roared aloud: "You have heard. Has the owl recorded that the pig will have no swill?"

"Yes," said the owl.

"Then," said the lion, "record that the lion wants no pig."

Then the tiger growled: "And I want no calf," and one by one the leopard and the eagle, the wolf and the fox, the hawk and the owl, and all their kind, took back their votes.

And so it came about that the animals did have a Christmas tree after all; but instead of hanging lambs and doves upon the tree, they agreed that they could hang little images of lambs and doves, and other birds and animals, too, perhaps. And by and by the custom spread until the humans came to hang the same little images on their trees, too, and when you see a little figure of a lamb or a dove on the Christmas tree,

you may know that it is all because the lamb and the dove, by their unselfishness, saved the animals from strife; for neither thought what he wanted from the tree, but each was ready to give himself for the others, so that they might not fight and kill one another at the Christmas time.

Was it not cruel of the wolves and tigers and leopards and foxes to wish to eat the doves and sheep and rabbits and hares? But after all, the worst one of the lot, I think, was the pig; for the pig began the trouble, because he only thought of what Mr. Pig wanted for himself.

And do you know, I think that after all that is the trouble everywhere. We can get along all right if the pig will only keep away, for when the pig comes and begins to think what he can get for himself, without thinking of the pleasure and the comfort of anyone else, why, then the fun is all spoiled, and pretty soon all sorts of bad tempers and bad passions are let loose.