

THE SQUIRREL'S CHRISTMAS

BY

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CONTENTS

1	Antnee and the Nest	3
2	The First Christmas	7
3	Christmas Morning	13
4	The Night of Christmas	15

Winter, it has arrived in its full force. I am out checking the pots of flowers that I have left out to overwinter, making sure that they do not get too frost burned as they sit in the dry freezing west winds atop of their small benches. They are nicely packed about

with leaves in an attempt to keep the effects of the winds at a minimum. I hear a rustle in the leaves at my feet and whom do I see but it is my old friend Antnee Squirrel.

1 ANTNEE AND THE NEST

I look down and I see his face packed full with dry oak leaves and he is gathering more by the second and continuing to stuff them in his mouth. I looked at him and said:

"Well, Antnee, what are your about?"

He said nothing, he just continued to stuff his mouth with the leaves from the pin oak tree, more and more of the lobed leaves were somehow shoved into his mouth. He turned and winked at me and then scampered over to his large ash tree and up the tree, round and round till near the top, at a fork in the branches, I could see his large nest, and into it, he went stuffing his mouthful of leaves. Then up behind him went Maria, his wife, she also holding large amounts of pin oak leaves and she then stuffing them into corners and crevices of the now growing nest.



Then down he came and over again to where I stood arranging the pots for winter. He looked up at me and shook his fluffy head and said:

"Wives, they are all the same, all she wants me to do is stuff the nest, as if I don't have a life."

I was a bit taken aback; I had never heard him speak that way before, so I responded:

"Antnee, why so upset, I thought that stuffing your nests was an important part of the winter ritual, it is important on those cold days when you have to shield yourself from the winds."

He replied:



"Really Sir, you know what we do, that hole you left open in your attic, many thanks, for we go up there, soft, warm, and we get to peak at your TV when you are watching at night. Nests, let

the birds have their nests. It is a territorial thing for Maria, she wants her nest just right. I cannot go and just stuff leaves any which way, she has her way of stuffing, one atop the other, carefully placed, and then we repeat the process. Drives me a bit crazy Sir."

Yes indeed, I could appreciate that. Wives have their ways and husbands have their duties. Somehow organizing leaves was something, which I had never thought of as a husbandly task. But alas, as I came to know Antnee's and his clan better I came to understand the differences we share but at the same time, the commonalities we all share.

So up and down Antnee ran back and forth many times, his mouth stuffed with the oak leaves, stuffing the nest. I never truly understood Antnee and his wife Maria, as they never went from

the leaf pile to their nest by any direct root. They always seemed to jump around, in an almost chaotic manner, gathering the leaves, then going up a small white oak, to a tall branch, then jumping to an ash tree, and up to another branch, over to an elm, and up to an even higher branch and then off to the top of the Norway spruce, and into the nest, then back down the trunk of the spruce. Never direct, never really the same, but back and forth, halting about every twenty or thirty steps, looking about, then proceeding.

Finally, Maria gave Antnee a break and he and his fellow males came down to eat and talk. The flowerpots and stands were lined up along and around the bird feeder, which frankly should be called the squirrel feeder, but alas, we still get birds. Then after some stuffing their mouths the group, led by

Antnee sat atop my gallon flowerpots and looked up at me as if to let me know that now they could amuse me with conversation.

I responded:

"Hi guys, you all seem very busy today."

They just lined up across the flower pots as before and just shrugged. Antnee start first as usual:

"Work, we are not made for this!"

I replied:

"It's your home, Antnee, why not take pride, look at my home, you see me working all the time."

2 THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

I sat down upon an empty pot stand, the sun was bright and Antnee and the other four squirrels sat opposite me on the pots that were lined up waiting for spring. Antnee was in the middle and each sat upright with their tails blocking the wind, slight as it was.



Antnee then began his tale:

"Sir, I am certain that you have heard many stories about the first Christmas. You have that Manger I see through the window; filled with cows, goats, sheep, camels, but Sir, do you see a single squirrel, no Sir your don't. Have you ever asked why?"



I was a bit amazed that he even asked that question but knowing Antnee as I

do I played along and responded as best as I could.

"No Antnee, I do not. But perhaps it is because there were no Squirrels in Bethlehem."

Well it was as if I had lit a match in a gasoline storage tank. The five of them jumped and bounced about screeching like all get out. Their tails fluffing about as they jumped and screeched over my flowerpots. The Antnee came to rest and said in a rather blunt manner:

"See Sir, you are like all others, you thought that there were no squirrels in Bethlehem. Sir, did you not know that the land was filled with trees, that the Lebanon Cedars were plentiful, that we ate the seeds of the Lebanon cedars and that we squirrel's were also plentiful. Yes, I admit that now, two

thousand years later, few if any of us survived, but Sir that is a tale for another day. As for then, we were there en masse, yes Sir, we truly were. So why no squirrels in the crèche, a tale of woe Sir, a true tale of woe."

Knowing Antnee as I do I thought it best to keep my silence for in a brief moment I would soon hear that tale of woe. Antnee then continued the tale.

The other squirrels then looked at me intently; whisker fluttering about their noses, and Antnee began.

"You see Sir, those many years ago; Bethlehem was surrounded by many cedars and other trees, well before the Romans had cut them down. And our ancestors lived happily amongst them. As we have passed down many generations the story goes that when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem

it was late at night and indeed Sir as the tale goes there was no room at the Inn, in fact even we had been chased out, you know Sir, some Inn keepers are not very kind to us. So there was a large shed in the rear of the Inn and the Innkeeper told Joseph that he might use it for a small fee. Imagine that Sir, charging a man like Joseph to use a barn. But lucky for Joseph it was our barn, Sir, indeed it was the barn of Micha Squirrel, our long distant relative. Well, Sir, Micha had lived there with his large family for many years and he was a kind old squirrel, and his wife Lady Esther was also a kind old squirrel. When Joseph and Mary entered, they jumped down and spoke with them and Micha was the first to offer help. He said to Joseph that he would help him get some hay to let Mary lay upon, indeed a good squirrel, Sir, a good squirrel."

I was as usual amazed by the clarity and detail of Antnee's story telling and perhaps it was a result of it not being written that it took such life, the life of the story tellers of old, an oral tradition so noble that story tellers have always been revered, as ones close to prophets, for the story teller remembers and conveys the past which becomes so much a part of the future.

Thus Antnee continued:

"Then Sir, Micha and the good Lady Esther called their family to the barn and when the good Lady Mary saw them all she began to laugh so greatly that her large belly shook frightfully so. It appeared that she had never before seen so many of us at any one time, but Sir, we were just trying to help her, for she was near that time Sir, indeed, she was near that time.

Then the Lady Mary said to Joseph, as well as Micha and the Lady Esther, that she felt the child within also laughing, but one knew that children still within Sir do no such thing, but Lady Mary said for certain, Sir, for certain indeed, that the child within was laughing."

"Micha said that the child would arrive soon, and that they needed to set the Lady Mary to rest, so that the child may come. It was then Sir, that the good Micha set about his task. He first sent his family to clear out the other animals, for cows and sheep Sir, they are not that smart, Sir, they just sit and eat Sir and their droppings foul the floors, not a good thing for a new child Sir, no indeed. Thus Micha shooed the large animals out, indeed Sir, they also were eating all of the hay, and at that rate there would be none for Lady Mary."

He continued for now Antnee was on a roll:

"Then Micha and Esther went and, seeing that Mary and Joseph were hungry from their long journey, scrambled out and collected the nuts that they had stored away. Hundreds of nuts. Micah also enlisted the help of his family members, which counted for almost fifty of us, scrambling collecting straw, nuts, and arranging the manger in anticipation of the birth. The warm fire was enough to roast the nuts and Mary and Joseph had a good meal."

"Then Sir, a miracle, for the child was born, and Sir, it was born as if it happened in a split second, one second the Lady Mary was sitting there eating roasted nuts, and a second latter, well Sir, there was the child, wrapped in the

cloth that the Lady Mary had wrapped around her shoulders. The fire was warm and the baby was laid into the manger where Micha and all the family had gathered soft fresh straw. There was a quiet amongst the family that made it all silent, not a whisper, not a squeak, then the Lady Mary Sir said to Esther, that all of the family could come and look upon the new babe, and all fifty, Sit I believe that was the true number, all fifty Sir, they climbed up on the beams, atom the trees overhanging the manger and peered down at the new babe, and Sir, we are told that the babe smile ad great smile at all of us, his very first smile Sir, yes indeed, his very first smile was given to us, a gift indeed Sir, a great gift indeed."

I was amazed to hear the story told in the style, which only Antnee could do.

He clearly has taken on the task of being their storyteller.

But it was clear that there was more. This tale was one I had never heard of and moreover one that I could never imagine, were it not for Antnee. So I cleaned the snow off an edge of one of the potting benches and sat down for I knew that there would be a great deal more and I wished not to miss a word. Antnee then took a small breath and continued:

"The babe was fed, and they all looked at Lady Mary and she spoke to Esther and said, "Esther, we thank you for your help, for we were hungry and you found food, we were weary and you brought soft straw, and we were burdened with worry and you brought joy, and now we are all so happy." The Lady Mary patted Esther on her head and gave her a small kiss. Micha was

sitting over the head of the small babe and suddenly he started to talk to the babe. Lady Mary was startled and she said to Micha, "Who are you talking to Micha?" and Micha replied, "Why Lady Mary to the babe, to the baby Jesus, he tells me that he too is thankful for all our help. He is such a nice babe, friendly and of good spirit." And with that the Lady Mary was taken aback as was Joseph."

At this point, I was truly amazed, there was truth to this or over the many years, it had been embellished beyond belief. Yet I knew Antnee well enough by this time that he was a bearer of the details, a holder of truth. So I then asked:

"Antnee, this is amazing, so then what happened?"

He again ruffled up his tail over his head to block the light wind, and squatted a bit lower and fluffed if fur, for he appeared to be feeling the cold, but no matter, he continued:

"Then amazing to all, the Baby Jesus looked around at all of Micha and Esther's clan and said to them in a soft and quite kind voice, "To you I give my thanks, you are creatures of goodness and kindness and you have brought me great joy upon my arrival. For such gifts I ask that you continue to bring joy to all mankind as a sign of goodness and love, you must frolic in front of mankind and become one with them. In turn, you will be protected and you will journey across all the earth and you will be loved by all. My thanks again and you are true creature of joy." At that Micha and Esther were elated and all of the family scampered about, over the edge of the manger, up

through the rafters and jumped to the branches, and all of the time the babe was laughing in his new found bed."

Finally, Antnee said:

"From that time on we have been on a journey and always close to mankind. Sometimes we get to find some men not too friendly but we adjust. Like you Sir, we have many friends like you. And as the babe said Sir, it is joy we bring, for that is an important part of our daily lives."

I replied:

"Indeed Antnee, you bring great joy."

I saw that the light was almost gone and I said:

"Well my friend, I must go in, it is getting late and my good wife will

want dinner. Merry Christmas my friends."

The replied in unison:

"Merry Christmas Sir and to Lady Sara."

3 CHRISTMAS MORNING



On Christmas morning, the snow was covering all the pots atop the wooden

planks and it was deep enough to cover the holes in the cinder blocks, which held the wooden planks above the ground. I went out and filled the feeders, adding an excess amount of sunflower seeds to give Antnee, Maria and the others a treat. The storm was clearing, and there may be a chance for a clear day but the wind had built up from the west and it was quite frigid.



I went out with new seed and a Christmas present for my fine furry

friends. I had a dozen corncobs replete with dry corn kernels, all yellow and glistening above the white snow. As I approached the feeder, there was Antnee and Maria, and I spoke to them:

"Good morning good friends and a Merry Christmas to you all, I have some great corn for your Christmas present."

Antnee looked at the corn and turned briefly to check Maria, who was sitting there with a bit of a smile, and said:

"Merry Christmas to you Sir, and many thanks. We do enjoy that corn, indeed we do Sir, a bit tough but very tasty. Is there enough for daily eating, Sir, or is this just a onetime treat?"

I looked at the fat furry Antnee and wondered if he had any idea that he

was the biggest and roundest squirrel perhaps in the entire world. Then Maria said:

"Sir, you perhaps see what I do, a fine but fat furry husband. You see Sir, he waddles up the tree to the nest and recently when he has tried to jump, well Sir, snap went the branches, never before have we squirrels seen such, snap Sir, not from the ice, not from the wind, Sir, it was from that..."

And Maria pointed at the rather round belly on Antnee, a large round and comfortable squirrel belly. She continued:

"I am certain that the promise of the Baby Jesus on the first Christmas that we squirrels would be taken care of by man did not mean that we would become gray round balls of fur and fat!"

And with that, she turned and scratched Antnee on the belly, and he just sat there and giggled. I was amazed since I had never seen him giggle before, in fact, I doubt that anyone has seen a fat furry giggling squirrel, but there before me was Antnee. I placed the corncobs on the white snow and said:

"Well, I have to get back in; my wife wants me to make some muffins. Here is the corn and again I wish you a very Merry Christmas."

Antnee and Maria replied in concert:

"To you and Lady Sara, Merry Christmas."

4 THE NIGHT OF CHRISTMAS

As we sat about the chimney, the fire in the fireplace burning now for a couple of hours with a good bed of coals, it was dark and I thought of my conversations with Antnee. I thought that he should be warm in his nest and hoped he would enjoy the day as I had.

The large glass door behind me faced out onto the large deck now covered with snow and the four leaf stuffed boxes of tree seedling were jammed against the bottom outside in hope that my new trees would get safely through the winter. My fondest was a Franklinia I had take in seed from Mount Vernon, a gift to George Washington many years ago, when on top of the Franklinia, and now tapping at the door was Antnee, and nine other members of his family. I could see the smile and my wife looked with amazement at the crowd.

I invited them in over the loud objections of my wonderful wife; after all, they were my friends.

They rumbled about, jumping here and there and then Antnee came upon my small crèche. From that, I hear a screech. Antnee said:

"Sir, look here, this is what we said. Your crèche has a cow, a sheep, a goat, and not one squirrel!"

It was as if I had betrayed him to the core. I said:

"Antnee, relax, we will fix this."

I took the crèche and moved it towards the fire, a warm spot in the room, and I took out the cow, the sheep and the goat. I even took out the camels.

I then said:

"Guys, get here in front of the crèche and I will take a photo, a photo of the real Christmas."

The nine of them bumbled their way to the crèche; somewhat overthrowing it in the jumble, but there was the crèche, the statue of Joseph, Mary and the manger with baby Jesus. And there were the nine squirrels up on their haunches about the crèche with the fire burning in the background.

I took several photos, just to memorialize this splendid occasion, and recognizing that anyone who saw them would never believe me, but who cared, the nine of them then had me print the best one out and they sat before the fire admiring it the rest of the evening. My lovely wife just sat there shaking her head!

Then, if things were not already a bit strange, Antnee jumped over, as well as a slightly obese squirrel can ever do so, and said:

"Lady Sara, let's all sing Christmas Carols!"

At this point my dear wife thought we all had lost our minds. Here she was with nine squirrels, a roaring fire, an empty crèche her husband communing with the animals and now one of them is asking to jointly sing carols! She was without reply. I thus jumped in and started it off.

W echoes some of the standards and when we finished the third my wife said:

"Oh what fun, this reminds me of that Chipmunk song from Christmas time. It was Alvin and the Chipmunks!"

Well, I could have expected this, up spoke Antnee:

"Lady Sara, Chipmunks indeed, why that was just another one of those Hollywood tales which twist the truth, it was squirrels!"

I interrupted for I knew Antnee would again go off. I said to them:

"Okay guys, we know, we know, it's Christmas, let's just sing."

We sang for another dozen or so songs and the fire died down. Maria had cuddled up on the edge of the sofa and she was sound asleep, Antnee was near my foot, now snoring away and the others were slowly going into their

deep sleep. My good wife looked at me and said:

"I suppose we should go to bed ourselves, what do we do with them?"

I replied:

"Well it is still Christmas, let them stay here and we can let them out in the morning."

So we went to bed and slept. Upon awakening I felt fur on my nose, and as I opened my eyes there were nine squirrels all nestled in the bed from our heads to our feet!

