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THE BIRDS' CHRISTMAS TREE

by

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Once there was a group of children living in the little town of Fox Corners who called themselves "The Kind Hearts Club," for the aim of the members was to be kind to all the birds and animals. They learned that when walking home from school, if they met a little chipmunk scurrying along a log they could get quite close to him if they didn't make a great noise and perhaps offered him a bit of their left-over lunch. He might also get so trusting as to climb upon a knee and sit there while he ate his bite. Or if they found a bird's nest in a roadside bush, they might get a glimpse of the mother returning to feed her nestlings, if they stood still and watched.

Of course, they met more birds than animals and they became interested in the birds of their region and encouraged them to live in their own yards. So when winter came and the tall evergreen trees stood waiting to be frosted and glistening like Christmas trees, they decided to have a birds' Christmas tree loaded with all the good "eats" that the birds loved, especially if there was snow and they couldn't find food.

The club was a bonafide organization with a president, secretary, and treasurer, and already they had a small fund saved up for some good deed or a bird or animal that needed help. This had been earned by the sale of bird houses, feeding trays, and other such bird necessities. The boys were sometimes prone to neglect their arithmetic and geography to work on the houses. Usually their hoarded resources went to buy food for birds in winter. The momentous question of how this nest-egg was to be spent this year was to come up at the Birds' Christmas Tree, and everybody was thinking hard about it.

A two-inch fall of soft, clinging snow fell during the night before Christmas eve, so that the next morning "everything looked as pretty as the pictures on a calendar," so one little girl said. Each child had a hand in the makings and the decorations for their tree. Some strung quantities of popcorn upon the chance of the jays and the crows liking it, and festooned the strings about the limbs. They

used strong thread, but only strung the kernels by the very edges so that they could be pulled off easily. Others cut up chunks of suet for the flickers and chickadees and wired short lengths of marrow bones, or fastened up ears of red and yellow corn, bunches of rye, wheat, and oats for the seed-eaters like the sparrows, little hanging boxes filled with cracked nuts and bread crumbs for the towhees and juncos, and branches of wild red berries for the robins and other fruit eaters. In a circle half way up the straight young spruce tree, they hung round heads of sunflowers filled with their nutritious seeds, which the goldfinches and sparrows craved. And as a last tid-bit which all the birds liked in cold weather, little round cakes of corn bread baked with cracklings dangled here and there. In between, bobbing on their strings, were red apples which made the children's mouths water.

When it was all done, they stood off and looked at their pretty tree, which was a picture of a veritable harvest feast. And as they looked, a chickadee bounced in and clung up-side-down on a sunflower and began digging into its center, and little downy woodpecker discovered a bone and was revelling up to his neck in marrow.

In one corner of the back yard fence was a tent-shaped brush-heap, undecorated and forgotten for the time, but it was just as much of a Christmas tree as the glistening one in front. On the ground in the center of that teepee of old bean stalks and sticks cracked corn and wheat were scattered, a feeding station for the game birds, the quail and grouse. And out in the snowy corners or near the woods were several more of these wintry looking brush piles so that everybody might be fed.

Ted, and Tom, and Bob volunteered to keep food in these shelters. They had plans to nail boxes on their sleds to carry food and grain, or if the going was sometimes too rough for sleds, they would strap sacks on their backs and carry it in. It meant responsibility and regularity and the one who failed for some little excuse wouldn't get a second chance to join the brigade. He would be called a slacker. In fact, the game birds' brigade spent most of their Christmas holidays putting up more shelters in the neighborhood. One boy suggested that if they could get the farmers interested and trained how to put up these shelters, they might do it themselves and provide the food, which would save some of the Kind Hearts Club money.

In mid-afternoon all the school children of Fox Corners who had been invited to the Christmas tree party began to arrive. Jim, the pet crow, stalked about among

the crowd of feet, watching out of the corner of his eye for a careless shoe that might step on him, but proud to join in the fun and excitement. He always liked a big noise and good food, and every once in a while he stuck his bill straight up and said "Caw!" to show his approval.

Since early morning many things had been added to the tree that were not meant for birds. Bundles, strange of shape, wrapped in bright tissue-paper and tied up with red ribbon, were piled around its foot. Father Christmas, all dressed up and be-whiskered, stood by with a hooked stick to loosen the packages and drop them into waiting hands. It was a surprise for the children, as they thought they were the Christmas givers, and not the getters. There was a good deal of pinching and squeezing to guess what was in the lumpy bundles.

The girls were the first to open their packages and besides little sewing boxes with thimbles and scissors, there was a book for each one about birds, butterflies, flowers, and trees. The boys' bundles were long and flat with a bunch in the center. A little sawed-off boy untied his first, putting the string in his pocket to save for next time. A strong, well made knife with two blades fell out, and under it were a hammer, a chisel, an augur, and a medium-sized saw. Each boy had the same kit. Were they pleased!

When the fun of opening was all over, the president of the Club called the meeting to order, for they had to settle what they were going to do with their money. The treasurer had it right there in a box, fifty dollars. All eyes were fixed on the box. Each one must write on a piece of paper how he thought it ought to be spent, and sign his name.

When they were read, most of them suggested food for the birds, books for the school, bird pictures for the hospital nearby. One paper signed by a boy said the spring that flowed out of Farmer Evans' place onto the road should be fixed up with concrete to make a fountain for the birds and dogs and horses to drink. They were deliberating on this good idea, when suddenly the littlest boy in the Club chirped up that it wasn't anything for the birds that he wanted, but a blanket for the mail-man's old sick horse. It was a kind horse, and it was blind in one eye, and it knew all the mail boxes by itself, and it had a cough now. The old shed it slept in was leaky and cold and needed new shingles. The mail-man was a good man, but he

was just marked for trouble. And a horse is a good animal and useful, and he should be helped.

There was a silence after this speech, and everybody was solemn. Then the president, a thoughtful girl, spoke up and said that she thought other things could wait and be done later, but the blind, cold, old horse couldn't wait. He ought to have a good ton of hay instead of corn-stalks, and a new roof. She thought the boys could help put the shingles on, and the girls could help make the blanket. There was a whoop from the boys -- just right to try their new tools. And so it was voted to spend their money that way.