

Christmas Stories

Collected and adapted for telling by Chuck Larkin

Part 1 of 2

Table of Contents

2. Introduction
4. The First Christmas Gift—Fourth Century Tale
6. And It Came to Pass
7. The Animals from the Wild Visit and Ms. Cat Stays
7. The Baby Speaks
8. The Holly Tree—Fourth Century Tale

Introduction

This anthology of traditional stories was collected between 1962 and 1975 from people in the Southeastern region. On occasion, only the remnant of a memory was available. Sometimes in reading academic commentaries on the derivation of Christmas there would be references to the suggestion of a story, including the story itself, however, beyond the bare bones, the story was not deemed important by the academic historians.

The start was about 1961 or 1962 when I became friends with a teacher raised in the Barbados and educated in Great Britain. Mrs. Cecil Phillips was retired in Clewiston, Florida. I was studying the art of public speaking in Toastmasters International and had no inkling that I would become a storyteller. Ms. Phillips taught me the story of the "First Christmas Gift" and the story of the "Holly Tree" and the rich history of these legends. My notes rested in a box until the early '70s, when I agreed to tell Christmas stories. These two stories had arrived in our time through the oral tradition from her grandfather, a Scottish Highlander. He had emigrated into the Barbados during the repugnant period of the clearances. The stories, passing not only through generations of her family, but also through changes of language, reach back into the early days of Christianity.

Over the years, as I collected other old Christmas stories, and through my readings of the Roman Empire history, I realized the importance of these legends to storytelling for those of us who give voice to the images of our ancestors. During the period I actively collected these stories, it never occurred to me to list the books and monographs I read, or the names of the people who shared these stories with me.

In the words of Robert Burns, (The Scottish poet and collector), "These stories were snatched, hatched and patched."

I have imagery memorization skills that allow me to retell a story from bare bones, after one hearing, with appropriate flesh ornamentation. A few notes in my pocket notebook serves as a file locator to remind me of the serial image I have stored in memory. My eclectic knowledge from reading and listening has provided the resources to ornament the recalled skeletal structure of the story.

The stories in this collection, while staying true to my perception of the traditional foundation, include embellishments from my own imagination. The collection will provide the stories and I will provide my understanding of the stories and their historic mission. The time I recorded this collection was right after the Christmas holidays and the telling was fresh in my memory. I have tried to record these legends as close to the oral language style I use to assist those who will read or tell the legends to others. Storytellers have my permission to tell these stories as they are traditional public domain legends. However, storytellers should note that I do not tell the stories the same way each time and tellers should use their own language and embellish with their own creativity. Repeating the language in these pages from rote memory will stultify the images. In these stories and

especially "The Holly Tree" story, the characters, both animate and inanimate, need supportive para language and their own voices.

There are some images to be aware of in order to stay in the traditional path. The Oak tree in the Holly Tree story does not change. The Oak was the sacred tree of our Euro-pagan ancestors and is being assailed in the story. The Spruce and Ilex tree names are also traditional. The Pine tree should be changed to a tree native to the area of the teller.

"The Baby Speaks," was found in a traditional folk ballad. Old Christmas, referred to in the "First Christmas Gift," was the result of adopting a new calendar. The Gregorian Calendar, a modification of the Julian, was introduced in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII, and was adopted in Great Britain in 1752. The 25th of December in the Julian calendar is now January 7th in our current calendar recently changing from January 6th. This calendar change created religious controversy. Protestants resisted the change and continued to celebrate Christmas on January 5th, then later on January 6th as the true December 25th. Over the centuries, the tradition became Old Christmas until now, in the end of the 20th century, it has disappeared. Old Christmas does not derive from the Feast of the Epiphany, commemorating the time the star appeared to the wise men of the East. They may be siblings, since both were influenced from the change in the calendars.

During the early three hundreds, "After the Common Era" (ACE), Christianity was the State religion of the Roman Empire. Influencing the need for these Christmas legends to evolve, were two issues in the state church that came together. The first concern was the elimination of the Pagan holidays, and the second issue, under consideration, was the date to celebrate the birth of Jesus. There were arguments concerning the birth date promulgated for every month of the year, and celebrations of the birth of Jesus were occurring in December, January, April, and May.

The Christian Roman citizens, while accepting the new state religion, were not about to give up their traditional holidays. The Roman Empire state church, about 336, selected the 25th of December to celebrate the birth of Jesus, because it was already a traditional major holiday. For many generations, people brought decorated trees, green boughs of Holly, Ivy, Mistletoe and flowers into their homes. They attended parties, gave each other gifts, burned candles and Christmas Logs, Yule logs in Northern Europe, Badnyok logs in Russia and Ceppo logs in Italy, to celebrate the return of the sun.

Throughout the Roman Empire, Roman citizens, their slaves and subjects from Rome's northern outposts, many living in Rome itself were celebrating the Winter Solstice Festivals, which lasted about two weeks in December. The Saturnalia Festival, had been extended to 7 days starting on the 17th of December. Saturnalia was party time, no business was conducted, schools and law courts were

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Traditional Stories Collected and Adapted for Telling by Bluegrass Storyteller Chuck Larkin

closed, and on the 25th of December, people, throughout the Empire, celebrated festivals of many gods and goddesses. The 25th of December was referred to by the early Romans as a God's birthday. The primary deities, in that time, were Mithris, Saturn, Mordoc, Horus, Sol, Apollo, Osiris and Isis. Other deities also included members of the aristocracy, who had financed the appropriate rituals in order to have their status upgraded to a minor deity. This elevated status allowed them to depart from the underworld of Hades, if the rituals occurred after their deaths, or skip Hades if before their deaths, and move on up to Mount Olympus with the other minor gods and goddesses.

The ancestors of these stories were born during the mid to late fourth Century. I once heard a Native American story that sounded like a variant to the first Christmas Flower in the First Christmas Gift. Perhaps our ancestors adapted already old stories to explain the activity of Christmas. For that was the mission of these old legends. Variations of these stories were used throughout Europe, to explain in Christian motifs, why gift giving, holly, mistletoe, Poinsettia flowers and Christmas trees were part of the celebration of the birth of the Christ child. Our annual Christmas holiday struggle, between a religious celebration and a gift giving, commercial, party celebration began during the days of the Roman Empire. You can change people's religion, but it's hard to force people to give up a holiday, with parties and time off from work.

Our word for Christmas came from Old English "Christes Messe" or Christ's Mass. The first carol singing may have started as early as 129 C.E. by Bishop Telesphorus of Rome. St. Francis gave us the first full size nativity scene in 1223. The earliest first Christmas card is claimed in England to be 1842. There are other later first Christmas card claims.

An early legend evolved around St. Nicholas who may have lived in Asia Minor in Patras, although I concur with the historians, that the name evolved from Hold Nickar, the Teutonic sea god, who galloped over housetops during the winter solstice granting boons to his worshipers below. Hold Nikar and the Grandmother goddess Befana, who filled children's stockings with her gifts were replaced by the Saint Nicholas cult. The myth says that St. Nicholas was Archbishop of Myra and his death on December 6, 343 resulted in an annual celebration in memory of his courageous preaching against the Roman state, his charity, gracious personality and kind acts. By the year 1,000, his legend had expanded to include as example the fact that as

an infant he fasted and only accepted food on Wednesdays and Fridays. His bones, on his death, exuded a fountain of holy oil that could cure every disease. The worship of St. Nicholas spread into Northern Europe and he was bringing gifts to children on December 6th.

When St. Nicholas arrived in America, he wore a red cape and used reindeer and the Dutch called him Sinte Klaas. The early American settlers were celebrating two gift days, St. Nicholas on December 6th and Christmas on the 25th. St. Nicholas became Santa Nicholas and then merged with the Dutch Sinte Klaas and became Santa Clause. In the meantime, a third tradition was imported from Europe, that derived from Hertha, a German Goddess, who had been bringing gifts, cakes and cookies down the chimneys on December 25th.

In the great cultural melting pot of America the early settlers pulled together the two gift-giving celebrations, and this convergence merged with a description of Santa Clause, as we know him today, described by Washington Irving in 1809. This metamorphosis of St. Nicholas into Santa Clause next combined with the Hertha tradition, when in 1822, Clement Moore published the poem "The Visit of St. Nicholas," better known as "'Twas The Night Before Christmas"; now we had an image of Santa Clause coming down the chimney on Christmas Eve with gifts and this new American fable, from a potpourri of old legends, crossed back into Europe and spread from country to country.

One more piece of folklore about Old Christmas. If you place a piece of mistletoe under your mattress, on the night of the 6th of January, then after midnight on the 7th, in your dream state you will see the face of true love. I tried it. I woke up three or four times seeing clearly a face. The next morning, a lady telephoned and scheduled me to tell stories in the retirement center where she worked. We met a week later, Elizabeth was the woman I saw in my dream state on Old Christmas Eve. We became engaged seven weeks later, and were married the following September 13, 1992. Elizabeth had also written a description of her desired characteristics needed in a spouse on October 14, 1990, that included a detailed description of myself, even to the extent of words like "humor - storytelling ability...etc."

Remember, a goal not written down is a wish, therefore be careful what you write down because you may get it. Elizabeth also wrote down "large frame". I'm a 350 pounder and that is a large frame!

The First Christmas Gift

Now you remember how, right after baby Jesus was born, the angels appeared in the sky, singing the first Christmas carols. There was a group of shepherds herding their sheep out on the side of the hills. The angels were singing to the shepherds, again just regular country people out working, tending their sheep in their fields. Uh huh, I bet they were surprised and maybe a little scared. I know I think I would be. Well, the angels called out, "Hey, it's all right, don't be afraid." They also told the shepherds about how baby Jesus, the Christ child, was born in a barn in a little town called Bethlehem. The barn was in a cave. Now some have said it was a building, but I was told it was a cave. Well, at least the back part of the barn was in a cave. The front part of the barn had been built out of mud, straw and wood. The angels said if the shepherds wanted to go and visit the Christ child, they could find baby Jesus under the new star they had set up in the sky to help people find Bethlehem and the barn.

The next morning, bright and early, Sylvester, the chief of all the shepherds, called his son, "Frederick! Your uncles and aunts and I are going into Bethlehem to see the new baby the angels were singing about last night. Would you like to go?"

Would Frederick like to go? He was nine years old and had never been to town! Of course, he wanted to go. Not only would he get to go to town for the first time, but he'd be able to see the new baby, the son of God, too. Frederick was excited!

Let me tell you about Frederick. When he became nine-years-old, he was considered old enough to help his daddy and uncles tend the sheep. He was given his own shepherd's staff, a long pole with the crook or a curve on one end. Those staffs were good for hooking a sheep, to catch them like a cowboy ropes a cow with a lasso. Sometimes, a shepherd's staff was even better, to smack an old wolf on the side the head in order to get his attention. Especially, when a wolf wanted a sheep for dinner.

Now you talk about a shepherd's staff, you should have seen Sylvester's staff! Frederick's daddy, Sylvester, had a shepherd's staff that was so big, that Frederick could just barely lift it up off the ground. Sylvester's staff was the chief shepherd's staff, and it was covered all over with all kinds of carved pictures. The staff had been in their family for a long, long, long time.

Back in the old times, when you got to be nine years old, young men and young women were considered old enough to help the big people with big people's work.

There is something else about Frederick I need to tell you. When he was a little tiny baby, his Grandma had taken

some sheep's wool and had made Frederick a baby lamb doll. From as far back as Frederick could remember, he slept with that baby lamb doll and he ate his meals with that baby lamb doll. He even carried the doll with him everywhere he went. He loved that baby lamb doll. He was like Linus, Charlie Brown's friend in the Peanuts comic strip, carrying that blanket around all the time. Frederick flat out loved that baby lamb doll. He called her "Lauren Leigh".

The problem was this. Now that he was nine-years-old, the older children had been teasing him about carrying a doll all the time. Recently, he had been hiding Lauren Leigh under his shepherd's clothes. Frederick decided that if he was old enough to go to town and old enough to see baby Jesus, he was old enough to leave his baby lamb doll home. He hugged Lauren Leigh and hid her under his bed covers.

Frederick stood up straight, puffed out his chest, put on his new shepherd's cloak and strutted out the cabin door with his daddy and his family heading for Bethlehem. They had not gone down the road a hundred yards when he stopped and said, "Daddy I left something at home I need. I'm going to run back and fetch it, but I'll catch up with you."

Well, you can guess what he went back for. He picked up Lauren Leigh and hid that baby lamb doll under his cloak and ran to catch up with his mommy and daddy and kin folk. He quit strutting too and just trod along quietly with the grown ups.

When they entered Bethlehem, Frederick had never seen so many people. The barn was filled with well wishers and gift givers and a long line of folk outside waiting to get in.

Frederick was almost broken hearted. He didn't see how they would ever get in to see baby Jesus. Frederick forgot that his daddy was the chief of all the shepherds. When the folks saw Sylvester, they all called out. "Come on Sylvester bring your boy Frederick and come on in the barn."

When they got inside the barn, Frederick climbed up on a high pile of hay, so he could see over everybody. There was baby Jesus, sleeping and Frederick couldn't believe what he was seeing. There was baby Jesus, sleeping in a horse's feeding trough, with some fresh hay under him for a mattress.

"Oh, wow! I remember mama saying that once when I was a baby, we were visiting, and I slept a few nights in a wooden box that was used to feed the sheep, just like baby Jesus. What an exciting day! I'm in town for the first time

and I'm seeing the baby son of God. Oh wow!"

Then Frederick noticed that the whole barn, full of people, had gotten quiet. Frederick turned and looked toward the door. People were moving aside, and in walked three men. Frederick looked at their clothes and remembered the stories his mama had told him all about Kings and how they dressed. He never thought he'd ever see a King. Those three men had on fancy King clothes for sure. What a day!

First time to go to town. First time to see so many people. A chance to see baby Jesus and now three Kings. Oh, what an adventure!

Frederick watched as the Kings went over to baby Jesus. The first king, whose voice was commanding and deep said, "I bring a gift of gold to the Christ child, the symbol of a King."

Frederick thought, "Now hold on there king, that's a foolish gift to give a little tiny baby. What's a baby going to do with money!"

The second king stepped up and with that same kind of king voice said, "I bring the gift of Myrrh, the symbol of the healer, for the Christ child."

Frederick thought, "oh oh, that king's not so smart either. Mama cooks sometimes with Myrrh. What does that king think a baby is going to do with a bitter herb like Myrrh."

Then the third king said, "I bring the gift of Frankincense, symbol of the priest, to the Christ child."

"Frankincense", thought Frederick, "that's incense and that stuff stinks! Kings may dress fancy but they sure don't have much gift giving judgment. The only time I've ever smelled Frankincense, was when it was burned at funerals and he gives that stuff to a baby?"

Frederick sadly shook his head and thought how silly Kings were, as he watched other gifts given. Nothing for a baby. Then he saw Sylvester, his own daddy, stand up, walk over to where baby Jesus was sleeping, and lay down that huge shepherd's staff that Frederick could hardly lift, as a gift to baby Jesus. That's when Frederick realized that sometimes grown ups do silly things. They just don't have the sense they were born with. Did you ever notice that?

As Frederick thought about all the foolish baby gifts, he suddenly remembered that, under his cloak, he had the perfect gift for a newborn baby!

No, uh-uh, no, no way, he sure didn't want to give up his Lauren Leigh! Frederick even looked out of the barn window and watched a small flock of birds perching on a tree. It didn't do any good. All Frederick could think about,

was how baby Jesus was born in this old barn, dug into the side of the hill, dirty and smelly and everybody giving him gifts that baby Jesus couldn't use.

Frederick knew that if baby Jesus was going to receive a gift that a baby could use, he was going to have to be the one to do it. Frederick climbed down the pile of hay. He squeezed between the big people until he reached the manger. Frederick thought, for a horse's feeding box, the manger wasn't even well built. No mattress, just straw for baby Jesus, the son of Heaven, the Christ child, to sleep on in this rank-smelling barn. That's awful!

He looked down at baby Jesus sound asleep. He reached under his cloak, pulled out Lauren Leigh, his baby lamb doll that his grandma Geneva had made out of sheep's wool. He held her up and whispered into her ears how much Frederick loved Lauren Leigh and how baby Jesus would love her too, and how much he would miss her, but now Lauren Leigh had to take care of a new baby, like she had taken care of Frederick, when Frederick was a baby.

Frederick gave Lauren Leigh a big hug. When he started to put Lauren Leigh into the manger, baby Jesus woke up, saw the baby lamb doll up in the air above him, he started giggling, reached his little hands into the air, grabbed and hugged Lauren Leigh to his chest. Then baby Jesus, snuggled up to Lauren Leigh, the baby lamb doll made out of sheep's wool, closed his eyes and went back to sleep with a smile on his face.

THE FIRST THREE MIRACLES. When baby Jesus saw Lauren Leigh and laughed for the first time, that's when the first three miracles we know about took place. First, Jack the donkey got his sight and was able to see. You should have seen the big grin on his face!

Second, there was an old weed growing all through the Roman Empire, that for the first time, bloomed a pretty red flower that night. Every year after that, the old weed blossomed the same red flower during the Christmas season. People started calling it the "Christmas Flower."

When people moved to the Americas, the flower grew very well in the Caribbean and Mexico. In 1832, our ambassador to Mexico from Charleston, South Carolina, brought the Christmas Flower home and it grew in our country. His name was Ambassador Poinsett and we still call the Christmas Flower by derivative of his name, "Poinsettia."

It was the third miracle I liked the best. That one was the gift of speech given to the animals.

Ms. Cow turned, and looked out the window and spoke to the same flock of birds in the tree that Frederick

had been watching earlier. Ms. Cow told the birds how, out of an act of love, the first Christmas gift had been given to the Christ child by Frederick, a young shepherd boy. The birds and Ms. Cow found they could talk to each other and Ms. Cow told the birds everything I've been telling you and the birds told Ms. Cow about hearing the angels singing and watching Frederick get up that morning.

Every year since then on Christmas Eve all the animals again get the gift of speech.

When I was a child, we would go down to our barn and watch the farm animals. First, they bow down on their knees and say a quiet prayer, then they tell these old stories. If you have pets at home, watch them. Just after they bow their heads to say their Christmas prayers, they will have the gift of speech and they love to tell these old stories.

My sister, Barbara Anne, told me her pet fish came to the top of the water once and told a Christmas fish story. I

would tell you that story but my sister was real young and forgot the story. This happens on Christmas Eve but not on the 25th of December.

The animals receive the gift of speech on "Old Christmas Eve." In 1752, folks changed the calendar to the one we use now. What used to be the 25th of December on the old calendar, was the 6th of January when I grew up and now has moved to the 7th of January on today's calendar. It was on the 6th of January eve that we called "Old Christmas" when I was a child. That's when the animals get the gift of speech.

It was a wonderful trip for Frederick. In fact, as they were going home, they stopped to look back. There, in the air, hovering above the barn, they could see a great angel and the angel waved to them. Oh what a day!

I'm so glad Ms. Cow and the birds were storytellers to tell people this story. My own dog told me these stories when I was five years old.

And It Came to Pass

The story that started Christmas began something like this.

"And it came to pass that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus." He was the Roman Empire's Governor for Jerusalem in those days.

The decree, kind of like a public notice, said that all of the world should be taxed and everybody had to go to the city where they were born. Joseph went up from Galilee, out of the City of Nazareth, into Judea, into the city which is called Bethlehem, to be taxed with Mary, his wife, and she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for him in the Inn.

Just think about that, baby Jesus, the Christ child, born in a barn, that's where you find a manger, which is another name for a feeding trough for a horse. And his daddy was a

carpenter, just regular working people back in their hometown and homeless.

This part of the story you probably don't know. I was told that Mary rode into Bethlehem, on a little donkey they named Jack. Joseph had been leading Jack about two days on the trip, before he and Mary realized Jack was blind. I mean stone, cold blind. Jack couldn't see anything. As I recall, by the time Joseph noticed that Jack was blind, he also realized Jack had never tripped or complained and was real gentle carrying Mary.

Since the road was sandy dirt and really nothing for Jack to trip on, Joseph decided not to worry. Joseph and Mary continued to the hometown where Joseph was born in Bethlehem and that's where baby Jesus was born.

The Animals from the Wild Visit, and Ms. Cat Stays

I think it was the ninth night, I was told that the wild animals came in from the forest, fields and desert. Some had traveled a long way. They came in late at night when everybody was asleep. They didn't want to scare people. They came in quietly to see the Son of Heaven, baby Jesus, for already the birds were telling the story of the first Christmas gift.

There were wolves, foxes, bears, deer, rabbits, squirrels, crows, owls, eagles and on and on. At least one representative from all the animal and bird clans. Some of the birds who lived by the rivers, lakes and seas, also represented the fish clans and the other animal and insect clans that lived too far away to make the journey. I remember a storyteller saying that, all night, for three nights, the barn was full, as each wild animal took turns to look at the sleeping Christ child, the son of Supreme Being.

The larger animals held the smaller animals up so they could see into the manger. Arturis, a great cave bear,

came each night and laid down on one side of the manger, so the small ones could also climb up on his back to see baby Jesus.

Until that first night, even the tabby cats were wild. Ms. Cat came in from the forest, looked around the barn and saw all the barn and house mice and thought, "plenty of food after the temporary, peace among the beast, truce, but look at all the roaches. This is no place for the son of God or any other human baby, for that matter, and the human houses are not much better than this barn. It looks like these humans need some help to keep their homes clean."

My cat told me this part. Her ancestor moved in and spread the word and other cats moved into our homes. Cats chose to live with people, they did not become tame first. That's why cats still have an independent streak, but they do keep our homes and barns free from creepy crawly things.

Baby Jesus Speaks

Right after the wild animal from the fields and forest made their night visit, Michelle, the Archangel, warned Mary and Joseph they needed to flee from Bethlehem and go to Egypt. Evil King Herod was trying to kill baby Jesus.

Joseph put some camping supplies together in a backpack. Mary got back up on Jack, the donkey. Baby Jesus, in his mama's arms, was wrapped in a blanket. They hurried down the road to Egypt.

As they reached the edge of Bethlehem, they passed a farmer planting corn in his field. Baby Jesus peaked out of the blanket and quietly said, "Corn be ready to be harvested"!

About 15 minutes later, some of evil King Herod's soldiers came by and asked the farmer if they had seen a couple with a donkey carrying a baby.

The farmer truthfully said, "Yes, when I was sowing this corn, they passed by."

At the time, he was pulling ears of corn off of six foot high stalks. The soldiers thought the farmer had planted the corn several weeks earlier.

One soldier said, "They must have left by another road."

Wicked King Herod's sinister soldiers turned around and went the other way.

The Holly Tree

It was about the third day on the road to Egypt, when trouble started. Joseph had stopped to rest Jack, who by the way, was grinning from ear to ear. Jack, the donkey, was seeing the world for the first time. Remember, Jack had been blind, until the first miracle of the first Christmas gift.

Joseph climbed a large rock to look around the countryside. There was trouble and trouble was behind them. Joseph could see three of heinous King Herod's evil soldiers riding toward them on great war horses. There was no way Jack the donkey could outrun war horses. The Holy family would have to hide. Joseph quickly looked around.

You have seen pictures of the area between Bethlehem and Egypt. It's mostly open desert country. There was no place to hide. Then Mary saw a tiny grove of trees. Joseph hurried over to the Oak tree and said, "Oak tree will you hide baby Jesus from the vicious soldiers of evil King Herod?"

"No! No way!", answered the Oak tree. "I am King Herod's Oak tree. Someday I'll be cut down and made into beautiful furniture for King Herod's palatial palace. I will not betray my King!"

Joseph turned to the Pine tree.

"Pine tree will you help hide baby Jesus? The evil soldier's want to kill him."

"Nooooo. Noooo. I am King Herod's Pine tree. I hope to be cut down and made into masts and spars and sail King Herod's ships throughout the Mediterranean sea. I would never betray my King.

Joseph looked at the Spruce tree.

In those far off days, Spruce trees looked a whole lot different from our Spruce trees today. At that time, the branches of the Spruce tree grew straight down along the sides of their trunk. Not much of a place to hide.

Joseph asked, "Spruce tree, can you help hide our baby?"

"I'll try. I'll try."

The Spruce tree grunted and groaned, trying to pull its branches away from its trunk. Spruce tree got the branches out from her trunk, but they stuck slanting down and the Spruce tree couldn't pull them back or push them out. They just stuck right there and wouldn't move. In fact, even today, the spruce tree's branches are still stuck in the same place.

There was another tree in the grove called the Ilex tree. A childish tree. Always acting silly. Playing with the wind, flipping it's branches, bending this a way, bending that a way. A bird would start to land on one branch and the Ilex tree would suddenly wiggle the branch out from under their feet

to their tail feathers and flip the bird onto another branch. The birds loved it, especially the young ones. Well their mothers sometimes would say, "Oh Ilex, please do be careful."

Ilex then would remind them that he had been their baby sitter and they turned out rather well.

Ilex always baby sat the eggs in the nests and watched over the new baby birds and baby squirrels. The birds always nested with Ilex. In fact, Ilex was the first tree the mother squirrels would let the baby squirrels play on by themselves. Sometimes, when Ilex was feeling silly, he would pick up acorns and pitch them at the squirrels. The frivolous squirrels, most of the time, would fling them back, or run through Ilex's branches trying to tickle her and she always pretended that she was being tickled.

When rabbit visited, Ilex would ask crow to find rabbit some carrots, to have with their tea. Of course, it was always pretend since neither drank tea. Then rabbit and Ilex would get into an acorn-ball game. Rabbit pitched, Ilex would bat, squirrel would run the bases and the birds played the infield and outfield. Ilex always asked Squirrel to run bases for her because of her aching sore foot. Squirrel would ask which foot this time? Then they would both laugh at their own joke. They both knew that trees had no feet.

Lots of times, Oak tree, feeling righteous and proper, would call out, "Ilex stop talking foolishness. Stop playing games. Stand up straight. How do you expect your wood to ever amount to anything? Quit acting so immature. You are old enough to start taking some responsibility for your behavior!"

Ilex, always gentle and kind, would answer, "Thank you Oak tree. Life is also to be enjoyed, is it not?"

Oak tree would grumble and mutter about this young generation.

Ilex heard Mary and Joseph and called out. "Hurry, hurry over to my trunk. I can bend over all of you and touch my head to the ground. I can wrap my branches around you and no one can see you through my leaves." And so quickly the Holy family hid in the Ilex tree.

Meanwhile, back on the road one of the soldiers said, "Sergeant, I saw someone standing on that rock over there awhile ago. That man was looking back in our direction. We've been riding kind of fast and should be getting close to whomever it was. I don't see any one."

"You're right", answered the Sergeant, "they must be hiding somewhere. We'd best look for them."

"No places to hide that I can see Sergeant," said the soldier. "Your right there too. Except maybe that funny

round green tree over yonder. One could hide in alongside of the trunk. Let's ride our war horses into the branches. If we flush out anybody and they got any babies, King Herod says we got to kill them and we will do just that."

Ilex heard the soldiers. Ilex knew she could not keep the war horses away from her trunk. Ilex tried, slapping and pushing, but her branches were only slowing the horses. Ilex kept fighting and started to pray.

"Oh Lord, help me help baby Jesus. I can't stop these war horses and soldiers. Please Lord, help me help save baby Jesus!"

All of a sudden, Ilex felt a sharp burning pain in her roots. The searing fire moved into her trunk and up into her branches. The pain moved out into her twigs and into her leaves. A burning pain in each leaf as one, two, three, four, five little needles came out on each leaf. The leaves began to scratch the hands and faces of wicked King Herod's evil soldiers.

"Woe, woe, back up horse, back up. I don't know what kind of tree this is, but I'm all scratched and bleeding. I'm paid to fight, not to get hurt! Nobody is hiding in that tree. We'll go back and tell King Herod that this road was clear."

Ilex watched the war horses ride back toward Judea. When the soldiers were gone, Ilex slowly pulled away her branches and lifted her head.

"Ma, Ma, Mary, Jo, Jo, Joseph the soldiers are gone and you are safe. Something strange has happened to me. Please be careful so my leaves don't scratch you."

Mary and Joseph thanked the Ilex tree. They all said their good-byes and promised to stop and visit, if they came through this road again. Mary, riding Jack with baby Jesus and Joseph, went on to Egypt.

They had hardly rode out of sight, when there was Michelle, the Archangel, flying in the air above the Ilex tree.

I don't know if you have ever seen a Celtic Archangel, but they are beautiful. Michelle has a dark bronze body,

red flowing hair. Her helmet, armored breastplate, kilt and leg sheaths are made from polished gold. On her back are enormous silver wings. On her side, she wears a great broad sword. The scabbard and shoulder straps that hold the long crystal sword, are a rich ebony black, covered with diamonds and rubies. Around her neck, she wears a long green silk scarf. An Archangel is magnificent.

Michelle looked down at the Ilex tree and in a lilting brogue said, "Ilex, that was a great battle you fought today. We are so proud of you. What a fine fight it was. Your fight with King Herod's soldiers will not be forgotten."

"From this day on, you and all your kith and kin, for all time, will keep your leaves green all year round. I'm going to let you keep the little stickers on your leaves and give you three berries, three for baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph. And the berries will be the color red so that when people see you, they will be reminded of the blood you drew from the soldiers, in this great battle to save the Holy family." "And Ilex, since you saved the Holy Family from now on we will call you and all your kith and kin the Holy Tree. However, don't be surprised when someday, in far off America, people will change your name from the Holy tree to the Holly tree."

"You will also keep the power from olden times the power that whomever, child, woman, man or even a house pet, whomever brings a branch of Holly into the home to decorate and celebrate this time of the year, will rule the home for the next year."

The next time you go out into the woods and look at a Holly tree you will see the three red berry clusters, three for the Holy family; Joseph, Mary and the Christ child. Sometimes, you will see a Holly tree with four red berry clusters. That Holly tree wants you to remember that Jack the Donkey was in this story. Sometimes you will see a Holly tree with only one red berry. That tree wants you to remember that this story was about baby Jesus.