

Christmas Fantasy

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JACKIE DROPPED HIS LUNCH pail by the backdoor and picked up the ax from the top of the woodbox. Usually when he came home from school, his mother had to remind him about the woodbox, but today he started off without a single word. It was the week before Christmas and for the very first time, Jackie was going to pick out the Christmas tree by himself.

He had known for a long time which tree he would pick. It was a balsam tree, very tall and very thick with long, graceful branches alternating from each side of the slender trunk in perfect balance. The ground under the tree was covered with moss in the summertime, and it was here that Jackie had made friends with the Squirrel.

Squirrel was not really a squirrel; he was a chipmunk. But Jackie had never seen a chipmunk before the time they met, so he had been a little confused. Squirrel did not seem to mind being called by the wrong name. As a matter of fact, he thought it rather flattering since all the real squirrels he knew had much prettier tails than he.

Jackie and Squirrel had become great friends since that day last summer, and today Jackie hoped to see him and tell him the news about the Christmas tree. When he reached the spot where the great pine tree stood, Jackie looked around for Squirrel and whistled. Suddenly something warm and soft landed on his shoulder and he jumped backwards exclaiming, "Oh, Squirrel.. How you scared me!"

"Ha, ha," laughed Squirrel, showing two large front teeth, "that's just exactly what I meant to do."

Jackie leaned his ax against the tree and sat down cross-legged on the ground.

"Guess what I'm going to do today?" Jackie said excitedly.

"Chop wood, I suppose," Squirrel said crawling down Jackie's arm.

"Yes, I'm going to chop wood. But that's not all. I'm going to cut down our Christmas tree!" Jackie sat up very straight.

"What!" said Squirrel, jumping onto Jackie's knee. "That's going to be great fun. I'll help you find one."

"You don't need to help me. I've already got it all picked out." Jackie paused importantly. "I'm going to cut down this very tree for Christmas, and my father is going to come and drag it to our house."

Squirrel hopped to the ground and ran excitedly around the trunk of the tree. "No, no, no," he chattered stopping in front of Jackie. "You can't cut down this tree."

"I bet I can," Jackie laughed.

"Oh, dear, oh dear, oh dear. This is terrible, simply terrible." Squirrel ran up one side of the tree and down the other.

"I do wish you would stop running around like that," Jackie pleaded. "Please sit down and tell me *what* is terrible." Squirrel ran up the tree again and sat on a branch above Jackie's head.

"Well, you see," he said, curling his tail around him, "this is the animals, Christmas tree. Every year all the animals in the woods bring things to hang on the tree and then we have a wonderful party on Christmas day with lots of nuts and everything."

"That sounds very nice," Jackie said sadly. "But I would like to have this tree for my own Christmas."

"Oh dear, oh dear. Surely you can find some other tree to suit you." Squirrel scampered out to the end of the branch and back to the trunk again.

"No, Squirrel," Jackie shook his head, "there isn't another tree like this one in the whole woods."

They sat silently for several minutes and Squirrel tried to think how angry the other animals would be if they knew that Jackie was trying to take their Christmas tree.

"I know what!" Jackie said jumping up. "I'll take the Christmas tree home, and you can all come to my house for a party on Christmas day."

"That will never do, never do," Squirrel shook his head. "I'm sure the fireflies wouldn't come so far in the cold, and you can't have a Christmas tree without fireflies to light it up."

"That's no reason," Jackie said defiantly. "You can't fool me. There aren't any fireflies in the wintertime."

"Why of course there are, Jackie. Just because you don't see them doesn't mean they're not still around. They sleep all winter just like bears do, but all the animals come out on Christmas day. Goodness, I don't know what we'd do without the fireflies."

"Well, if they wake up on Christmas day, they can just come to my house to see the tree," Jackie stamped his foot.

"But the animals wouldn't be happy away from the woods, Jackie, and besides, there are far too many of us to get in your house. No, you'll just have to find another tree."

"I think you're awfully mean." Jackie began to cry. This was just too much for Squirrel. He couldn't stand to see people cry (or

animals either, for that matter), especially Jackie, since he was his very best friend. But he couldn't let Jackie have the Christmas tree either because the animals would have no place to have their party. Then he got a wonderful idea.

"Come along, Jackie. I want to show you a tree as pretty as this one, only it's not quite so big."

Jackie nodded his head and shuffled after Squirrel through some bushes.

"There it is!" Squirrel ran up the trunk of a little tree not much taller than Jackie. It was almost exactly like the big tree except that it came to a very sharp point on top.

"Oh," said Jackie cautiously walking around the tree. "It is awfully pretty."

"Yes," Squirrel nodded. "And you could drag this one home yourself."

"Uh, huh. And I could reach high enough to put the star on top, too." Jackie hesitated. "But I don't know . . ."

"I'll tell you what! Why don't you come to the animals' party on Christmas day and see the big tree with all the hollyberries and nuts on it. I'm sure the other animals would be glad to have you."

"Ho, that would be wonderful!" Jackie began to hop up and down excitedly, because he loved parties.

Jackie and Squirrel went back through the bushes to the animals' Christmas tree to get the ax. They chopped down the little tree and Jackie took it home and trimmed it all by himself.

On Christmas morning, he got up early and combed his hair very carefully. He hurried to the woods and ran down the path to the big tree. When he reached the edge of the clearing, he saw Squirrel running from one side of the tree to the other, shouting instructions to the fireflies and directing the birds in the arrangement of berries and long strings of colored leaves. Jackie watched for a long time before Squirrel noticed him.

"Oh, here you are." Squirrel danced around him. "I want you to meet all my friends." He introduced Jackie to the rabbits first, but Jackie couldn't remember any of their names because they looked so much alike. Then he met the tree animals, and the birds, and said hello very shyly to the bear who yawned and rubbed his eyes sleepily. Jackie was given the seat of honor on the back of a very old moose with a great beard of wrinkled skin and from there he watched the party under the animals' Christmas tree.