

(This is intended to be a picture book to be read to children ages 3 to 6)

The Curious Gray Mouse and the Christmas Tree

by Martha Jeffers

“Brrrrrrrrrr.....”

‘Twas the night before Christmas, and the little pine tree lay discarded beside the metal dumpster.

“The most important night of the year, and I’ve already been tossed out.”

A curious gray mouse watched from the top of the rusted bin.

A wealthy young couple had decorated their tree a week earlier, but an unexpected trip to Chicago changed their plans. They knew Christmas would be past and the small pine dried up by the time they returned. So the two agreed to take it down before they left.

The little tree shivered. All it knew was that it felt alone and sad.

“My friends are wearing twinkling lights and shiny tinsel,” thought the tree. “All over the world, beautiful silver angels with golden wings look down on ornaments of different colors, shapes, and sizes. And soon they’ll see Santa pile lots of toys under their branches. But I’ll still be out here in the cold.”

The little pine became sadder. It longed for a drink of water.

Suddenly, the tree heard singing.

“That sounds like children. But what would they be doing out this late on Christmas Eve?”

The voices grew louder, and the tree began to understand the words: “*O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, how lovely are thy branches....*”

“Oh sure,” it thought. “After lying by the trash day after day, my branches aren’t very lovely.”

And the curious gray mouse watched silently from the shadows.

“Not only green when summer's here, but also when 'tis cold and drear.” The children sounded happy as they walked through the neighborhood.

“Woof, woof!”

The abandoned tree saw two big brown eyes staring at him.

“Uh, oh,” thought the little pine. It had heard stories about dogs liking trees.

“O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, Much pleasure doth thou bring to me.” The children stopped singing and ran toward the dog.

“Chipper! You come back here right now!”

Then they noticed that Chipper had discovered something. In the darkness, it resembled a tree.

“Why would someone have thrown out a nice tree like this before Christmas?” said Billy.

“Are you two thinking what I’m thinking?”

The curious gray mouse smiled as he watched from the top of the dumpster.

The children stood the tree on its skinny trunk and shook out the kinks.

“It looks pretty good.”

“Ouch! Take it easy!” thought the tree. “I’m a little stiff and sore!”

“How will we get it home?”

“I have an idea. You take one end and I’ll take the other. Billy’s the tallest, so we’ll put him in the middle.”

So with Chipper leading the way, off the children went with the little tree barely off the ground.

“I’m not sure where I’m going, but anyplace is better than being alone on Christmas Eve!”

And the curious gray mouse watched from his hiding place in the branches.

“For every year the Christmas tree, brings to us all both joy and glee...”

The children walked and sang until they finally came to a run-down brown shack on a street with more run-down shacks.

“Hey, be careful,” thought the tree, as all three children tried to squeeze through the front door at the same time.

A dim light shone in the living room, where an elderly couple sat in lumpy overstuffed chairs. The old woman was knitting a scarf from balls of red yarn. The old man had fallen asleep. His chin nearly touched his chest, and his glasses had slipped from his nose. Hot coals from the fading fire cast a golden glow on the hearth.

“Nana! Gramps! Come see what we found!”

“Well, I’ll be!” exclaimed Gramps.

“Wonderful!” announced Nana.

Cane in hand, Gramps tottered to the garage with Chipper following. He returned in a few minutes with a rusted metal bucket.

The children helped their grandfather secure the tree. Then they filled the bucket with cold water.

“Ahhhhhhhhh,” thought the little tree as it gazed around the room. “I feel better now that I’ve had a drink. That was a rough trip!”

Nana pulled dusty cardboard boxes from under the bed.

“It’s been a long time since we used these decorations!”

“*O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, much pleasure doth thou bring to me,*” sang the whole family.

They hung red and yellow and blue and green lights on the tree’s branches. They draped tinsel on its outstretched arms. Ornaments of all shapes and sizes reflected the colored lights.

“I wish we had something special for the top,” said Billy. But the boxes were empty.

Everyone was so excited, it was almost midnight before they went to bed.

“I wish we had some gifts to put under the tree,” whispered Nana.

“So do I,” murmured Gramps, “but I’m sure the children will understand.”

And the curious gray mouse watched knowingly from the windowsill.

The next morning, the children woke before daylight. When they remembered what had taken place the night before, they hopped quickly from their beds.

“Merry Christmas!” said Billy. “Let’s turn on the tree lights and surprise Nana and Gramps when they get up!”

The children pulled on their worn robes and slippers, and raced to the living room. They rubbed their sleepy eyes. Had it been a dream?

Standing tall and proud was their Christmas tree. It appeared the same except for one important thing: on the very tiptop, a lovely silver angel with golden wings!

“Look at that!” said Billy, pointing under the tree to five presents, each with a huge bow.

“There’s one for each of us!”

“Each bough doth hold its tiny light, That makes each toy to sparkle bright.”

“What’s all this commotion?” asked Gramps, as he and Nana entered the room. All at once they spotted the tree.

“Santa Claus found us after all!” said Billy. And everyone laughed.

The little pine beamed as it gazed on its new friends. It was no longer sad and lonely.

“Who could have done this?” whispered Nana.

“I’m not sure,” said Gramps, “but I’ll bet I know someone who does.”

And the curious gray mouse watched happily from beside the fireplace.