

The Festival of Animals

Chapters 13, 14 and 15 of The Festival of Stones: Autumn and Winter Tales of Tiptoes Lightly

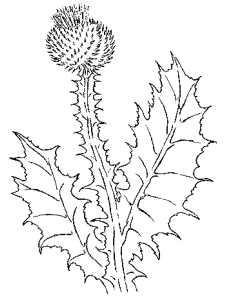
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The Gathering

“Tonight is the Festival of Animals,” said Tiptoes. “Hurry up or we’ll be late.” She was talking to Pine Cone and Pepper Pot. They were brushing their beards with thistle heads. You have to be careful when you brush your beard with a thistle head—its spiky!



“Ouch!” said Pepper Pot, pricking himself. “Why do we have to brush our beards so neatly anyway? I like mine bushy and wild.”

“Because it’s a festival day,” replied Pine Cone. “And besides, Jeremy Mouse brushed his fur neatly when he came here for the Festival of Stones. We have to look just as fine too.”

“I suppose,” grumbled Pepper Pot, pulling on his best red boots. “Is it time to go?”

“Yes,” said Tiptoes, “it’s time to go.”

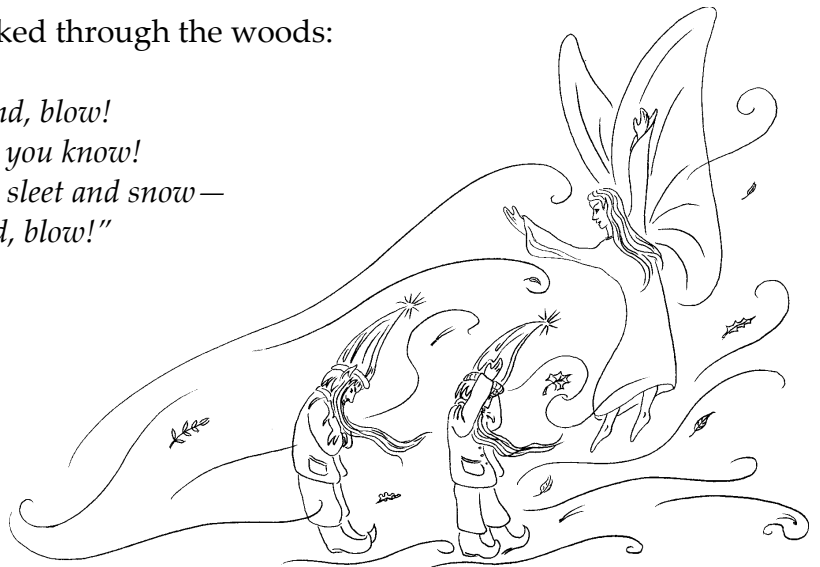
Pine Cone pulled on his yellow boots. He wore yellow boots at festival time because that was the color of pine pollen. He loved pine pollen sprinkled on his pancakes. Pepper Pot wore red boots because that’s the color of red peppers—and because he thought that red boots kept his feet warmer in the cold.

Outside it was winter. The wind blew and the forest trees were bleak and bare—except for the evergreens, of course.

Tiptoes started singing as they walked through the woods:

*“Blow, wind, blow!
Blow as hard you know!
Hail and rain and sleet and snow—
Blow, wind, blow!”*

Tiptoes loved the wind, and the wind listened to her and blew. Trees creaked and groaned, branches snapped and crackled, and pine needles shook free and flew through the air.



"Stop the wind!" cried the gnomes. "It'll blow us away. Our beards will get all messed up and we'll catch our death of cold!"

Tiptoes laughed, and sang:

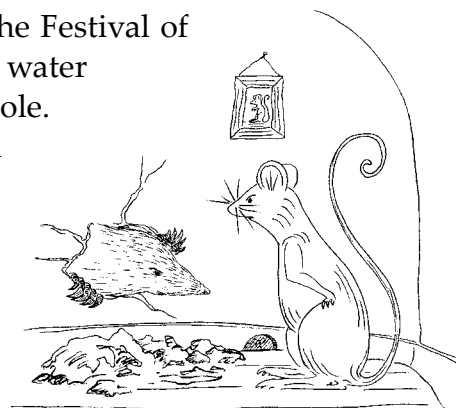
*"Stop, wind, please!
My friends love their ease—
We don't want them to freeze,
Or catch a cold and sneeze!"*

And the wind dropped to a gentle breeze and stayed at their backs until they reached the house of Jeremy Mouse.

"Knock! Knock!" called Pine Cone and Pepper Pot.

"Knock! Knock!" called Tiptoes.

Jeremy Mouse opened his door. There was hardly any room inside. His house was full of little creatures from the forest, all gathered for the Festival of Animals. There were three field mice, four forest mice, one water mouse who lived by Running River, two chipmunks and a mole. Mr. Mole hadn't bothered to knock at the front door and had dug his way into the house. Jeremy Mouse had been mad at first, but Mr. Mole told him he could use the tunnel he'd made to store extra nuts and grain. Now Jeremy Mouse was pleased.



All of them were happy to see Tiptoes and the gnomes; now the Festival could begin. But no sooner had Tiptoes lit the Festival Candle when the earth started shaking and shuddering.

"Thump! THump! THump! THUMP!" they heard, getting louder and louder and closer and closer. Just as it reached the Great Oak Tree the shaking and thumping stopped. They all ran to the window and looked outside.

"It's Ompliant the Elephant!" cried Jeremy Mouse.

"Hoo, humpf," said Ompliant. "I've been hearing things with my ears."

"You have?" said Jeremy Mouse.

"Oh, yes," said Ompliant, "I've been hearing things with my ears, and my trunk is telling me things too."

"What are they telling you?" cried all the mice together.

"Hoo, humpf! You *are* in such a rush, my mouslings," said Ompliant. "My ears and trunk have been telling me that today is a special day."

"Yes! Yes!" cried all the mice. "It's the Festival of Animals!"

"Humpf, humpf! You are quite right," said Ompliant. "That *is* what my ears and trunk have been telling me. They've been telling me it's the Festival of Animals."

Ompliant could never be rushed. It takes a long time to talk to an elephant.

"I've been walking," said Ompliant.

"You have?" said Jeremy Mouse.

"I've been walking through the forest," said Ompliant.

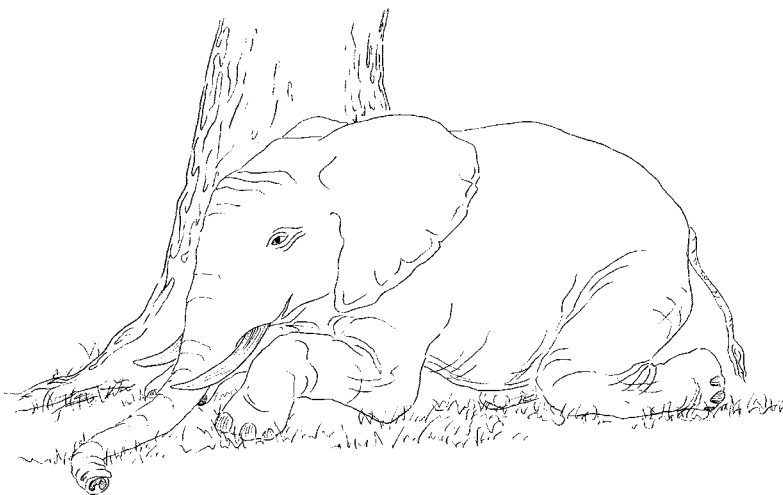
"Where to?" cried all the mice.

"I've been walking through the forest ... and here I am!" said Ompliant. "Can I come inside?"

"Oh, Ompliant," said Jeremy Mouse, "you are much too big. But we can open the window and you can look inside."

Ompliant bent down on his front knees. Then he knelt down on his back knees. Then he lay down at his front end, and then he sat down at his back end. (It takes a long time to get a whole elephant lying on the ground.) Ompliant stretched his trunk out in front of him and rested his head on the ground. Now his eye was low enough to see into the house.

"Okay," he said. "Let the festival begin."

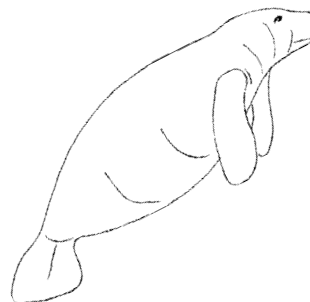


The Festival of Animals Begins

Tiptoes sat on a stool and all the animals fell silent. They were silent for a long time. They were remembering the good things of all the animals in the world. They remembered how beautifully the birds sang, how strong the bull was, and how handsome the horse. And they didn't forget the small animals—how the worm keeps the soil alive, how the mosquito can have so many babies, and how the bees make sweet honey.

At last Tiptoes stood up and said the Animal Verse:

*"Praise the bull and bless the bee,
Thank the mouse and manatee.
Praise the deer and bless the dog,
Hallowed be the horse and hog.
Praise all creatures big and small,
Bless them wide, and bless them tall;
For their goodness and their light,
We thank their souls in the winter's night."*



"Hurray!" cried all the mice and chipmunks.

"Hurray!" cried the gnomes and Mr. Mole.

Then they all chanted in unison: "Teller tells the Tale! Teller tells the Tale!"

Every year the animals chose a Teller to tell one of the Great Tales of the animals. This year Tiptoes had been chosen. She wasn't an animal, but she did have a soul just like them, so this year she was the Teller.

"What Great Tale have you chosen?" asked Jeremy Mouse.

"Yes! Yes! What tale? What tale?" chorused all the little animals.

"Hoo, humpf! My ears are telling me something," said Ompliant from outside the house. All they could see of him was one big eye looking in the window.

"Yes! Yes!" shouted all the mice. "Your ears are telling you a story is to be told."

"Hoo, humpf," said Ompliant, "you are *so* quick, my mouslings. That *is* what my ears are telling me. What tale have you chosen Tiptoes?"

"I have chosen '*The Myth of Ellah-jah*' for our Telling," said Tiptoes.

The animals hushed and gathered close to her. This is the tale she told.



The Myth of Ellah-jah

Once," said Tiptoes, "the angels lived on the earth. One angel was called Ellah-jah, and she loved to sing. The earth was as young as a baby then, and swaddled in warm mist. Tall trees grew out of the ground, with leaves bigger than an elephant and softer than a rabbit's ear. But no people were in the world in those long-ago times—and no animals lived there either.

One day, when Ellah-jah was singing beside a lake, she saw strange shapes glimmering underneath the water. She was astonished. She had never seen such beautiful creatures and she stopped singing in case they would hear her and swim away. But the moment she fell silent the wonderful beings vanished.

Ellah-jah pondered this for a long time. One night she had a dream. She dreamt she was singing, and with every word she sang a beautiful creature came out of her mouth—just like the ones she saw at the water's edge.

Ellah-jah awoke and went to the lake. All was calm, and the water still and clear as glass. She sang, and again the creatures appeared within the water. They were transparent and shimmered with many colors. Some were silvery-green or silvery-blue, others flashed red and gold. But as soon as she was silent they all vanished back into the water."

"Well," said Tiptoes, "time went on, and time went on. Long ages passed and the world fell asleep. For a long time the earth slept. Deep asleep she was, and no one disturbed her.

At last the world awoke and a new earth-day dawned. Ellah-jah awoke too. She looked around and the world was different. The rocks were firmer, the trees did not grow so tall, and their leaves were smaller and not as soft. She yawned and stretched, brushed her hair

from her face, and went to the lake to wash the sleep from her eyes. It was misty, but much cooler than she had ever felt before. She splashed her face with water and began to sing her morning song. But as soon as she sang, shapes appeared in the mist. They had wings, just like she did, and when she stopped singing to look at them they did not vanish but flew away silently into the mist. These were the first birds in the world.



Ellah-jah turned and gazed into the lake. Again she sang. Exquisite creatures appeared within the water, and when she stopped singing they also did not vanish but swam away into the deep. These were the first fish in the world.

Ellah-jah wandered over the earth singing, and wherever she sang living beings sprang forth from wind and water, even from the warmth of the sun. She sang fish into the rivers and streams. She climbed mountains at sunrise and sang golden eagles into the wind and they wheeled away high above the earth. She went to the great plains and sang the buffalo into numbers we shall never count. She sang butterflies for the flowers, bees for the heather, and beavers to make marshes. She sang the jumping mouse and all of his family, and the great brown bears of the hills.

That was long ago. Time has passed and Ellah-jah does not live on the earth anymore—but we can still hear her voice. We hear her in the gentle cooing of the white dove, the growl of the fierce cougar, and the chattering of chipmunks.”

“And that,” said Tiptoes, “is the story of Ellah-jah and how the animals come into the world.”

“Hoo, humpf,” said Ompliant. “That was a good story. Did she sing elephants too?”

“Yes, of course,” replied Tiptoes. “Ellah-jah went to the great land far away from here, to the land of Africa. She rode there on the back of Orca the whale.”



“This is a big land and a wild land,” she thought. “I will have to sing a big song.”

All day and all night she sang, and in the morning, Mompadana, the first and greatest elephant, stood before her.”

“Oh, yes,” interrupted Ompliant, “we call her our Greatest Grandmother. She was bigger than a house and taller than a tree. When she walked the ground shook so hard that mountains

fell into the sea, and when she flapped her ears clouds of dust rose up and turned the day into night. Oh, yes, she was our Greatest Grandmother."

All the animals listened in awe. They had never heard Ompliant speak for so long and with such heart.

"Hurray for Mompadana!" they burst out. "Hurray for the Greatest Grandmother!"

Now was the time for the Wandering and they trooped out into the forest. Tiptoes led the way; then came Jeremy Mouse and the other mice, followed by Mr. Mole and the chipmunks and Pine Cone and Pepper Pot. Last of all came Ompliant. Through the forest they Wandered, singing songs of moles and mice, lizards and lice and giant kangaroos.

Soon they met another festival group Wandering; then another and another. Tiptoes looked around. The forest was filled with animals, all singing, all Wandering, all joyful on this night of the Festival of Animals.

