

The Menagerie of Saint Francis

The First Nativity Play

By
Thomas J. Gardiner

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Friar Francis and Friar Juniper decide to try to re-enact the First Nativity for the people of their town at Christmas. They ask the nearby animals if their ancestors were at the First Nativity and could tell them what it was like. They encounter an amusing variety of creatures, reflecting a range of human foibles.

An Ox, who does imitations of many animals but gets them all wrong, tries in his charmingly clumsy way to provide information. (*Which is also all wrong.*) A pair of Horses, who are joined like Siamese twins, are so busy competing with (*And contradicting.*) each other that they provide more amusement than information. A Peacock, who is vain as a starlet, patronizes them archly. A male chauvinist Pig and his wife have a domestic spat. Three Carpenters contract to reconstruct the stable for the friars.

The Ox returns dressed like an oversize child in galoshes and mittens. The Horses return separated but race off again. The Peacock returns but is too proud to appear in a play with a Pig. The Carpenters return with a jerry-built stable frame and a monstrous manger. The Pig returns carrying a cask of brandy like a St. Bernard dog. In despair, Francis lies down for a nap.

As Francis sleeps it is disclosed that Friar Juniper and all the animals have secretly been rehearsing the First Nativity play for weeks as a surprise Christmas gift for Friar Francis. The Ox awakens Francis with another mistaken animal imitation, and the Carpenters pretend to be shepherds who lead Francis to the Nativity scene that is discovered onstage. Angels sing carols and the Three Kings present gifts to Joseph, Mary, and the Child. The animals have improved: the Peacock gives away her mirror, the Horses offer to transport the holy family, the Pigs become generous, and the Ox imitates a turkey like a lion! Francis is delighted by the surprise play, and grateful to all.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

FRIAR FRANCIS
FRIAR JUNIPER
THE OX
JOE HORSE
JACK HORSE
THE PEACOCK
MISTER PIG
MADAM PIG
FIRST CARPENTER
SECOND CARPENTER
THIRD CARPENTER
THE GIRL WITH THE STAR
THREE KINGS
JOSEPH
MARY
ANGELS

TIME

December

COSTUMES

FRIAR FRANCIS and FRIAR JUNIPER: They are dressed in colorful or even modern versions of Franciscan habits - brown robes tied with white ropes, and sandals, will suffice.

HORSE: A brown blanket covers their backs, they are loosely tied at their belts back-to-back, so that their heads -with horse half-masks on stick out at each end of the blanket.

PEACOCK: Wears a blue-sequined gown.

MISTER PIG: Wears a sports a vest, a fedora on his head, and big rings on his fingers, which hold a cigar.

MADAM PIG: Wears a dress, a flowery hat on her head, and carries a soft purse with strap handles.

GIRL WITH THE STAR: Dressed like a ballerina, with silvery sequins on her skirt.

THREE KINGS: Dressed in the traditional costumes, two with crowns and one black-complexioned with a turban.

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(AT RISE: an empty stage. The stage lights come up. FRIAR FRANCIS and FRIAR JUNIPER walk in from offstage left. Francis walks with a wooden staff. They are engaged in conversation as they enter.)

FRANCIS: I know I mentioned this to you a month ago
But I still think that we might put on a show.

Do you think it's too late to do it?

JUNIPER: Well, I don't know...

FRANCIS: I understand it might seem much too bold
To think the real story could be told
Of how the baby Jesus first appeared
In Bethlehem, and how the men of old
Witnessed His birth -- and yet we might come near
To picturing it, if we could only find
The proper people in a frame of mind
To imagine the scene...

JUNIPER: ...or if the animals told
What their ancestors witnessed in those days of old
When they were gathered shivering in the cold
Around the stable in Bethlehem! I spy
Several animals in the field nearby
Whose ancestors may have been there. Let me try
To befriend them, and to see if they can tell me
What it was like at The First Nativity.

FRANCIS: By all means do, and may the Spirit guide you --
But may I also hastily remind you
That it's almost Christmas eve, and tomorrow's the day
We should have ready our little Nativity play
To entertain the people in our town --
Whatever happens, we must not let them down.

(JUNIPER nods and bows to FRANCIS, then walks off stage right. Francis leans on his staff meditatively, then looking up, prays aloud.)

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FRANCIS: Lord, we are not worthy
To behold Thee,
But if it is Your will for us to see
What it was like on that first Christmas day --
Show us the way!

(HE leans forward on his staff and cradles his head in his hands. OX lumbers in from stage right and stares at Francis, who is still absorbed in prayer. The Ox faces front and addresses the audience.)

OX: I may not be
A clever Fox
But even an OX
Like me
Can see
This Friar's worried as he can be!
Maybe
I can help him
If I end his reverie. *(Turns toward FRANCIS.)*
Meow.
(FRANCIS does not respond. To audience, puzzled.)
Isn't that the sound made by a Cow?
No?
Then let me try a Horse.
(The OX turns toward FRANCIS and crows.)
Cock-a-doodle-doo.
(To audience.) He must be hard of hearing.
Just my luck.
I know!
I'll imitate a little Duck.
(The OX turns toward FRANCIS and brays very loudly.)
Hee-haw! Hee-haw!
FRANCIS: *(So startled he opens his eyes widely and drops his staff.)* Did somebody laugh?!
OX: *(Crestfallen.)* Oh, no!
Did I imitate a Giraffe?!

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FRANCIS: *(Looks at the OX and smiles in delighted recognition.)* Brother Ox --

So good to see you again!

OX: *(Recognizing him.)* Friar Francis!

(They shake hands warmly.)

OX: *(Continued. Hurt.)*

You used to be my good friend,

But you didn't seem to recognize me

FRANCIS: I'm very sorry --

I was in a reverie: *(Puzzled.)*

I dreamt I heard a Cat...a Rooster...

And a very loud Donkey

Call me!

OX: *(Sheepishly.)* These woods are full of animals...!

(Changing the subject.)

Have you ever heard

Me do an imitation of a bird?

FRANCIS: Can't say I have.

What kind of bird?

OX: *(Proudly.)* What kind of bird

Would you like me to do?

FRANCIS: A Cuckoo!

OX: Oh -- that's too easy to do

FRANCIS: No -- go ahead --

OX: You're sure you want me to?

FRANCIS: I do.

OX: *(Announcing formally.)* "A Cuckoo" *(After a brief pause.)* Oink! Oink!

FRANCIS: *(Puzzled.)* That was a Cuckoo...?

OX: *(Covering.)* It could have been a fat one...

(Hastily.) Would you like to hear

A Snail?

FRANCIS: *(Warily.)* A Snail.

Okay --

But this is the last one.

OX: Okay. *(Announcing formally.)*

A Snail. *(The OX says nothing. Pause.)*

End of Freeview

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