

**A**  
**M**edieval  
**Christmas**

by Nela Leja

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Dithmarschen,  
Germany

In the Year of Our Lord 1484





## Christmas Eve & the Animals

*Apart from what he tells us himself, not much is known of the castle official who penned the following, most likely for his own private records. It is known that he left Tudor service once he arrived in Edinburgh as part of Princess Margaret's retinue in her procession north to marry James IV of Scotland. What motivated him—or even what his name was—has unfortunately not survived in any written document.*

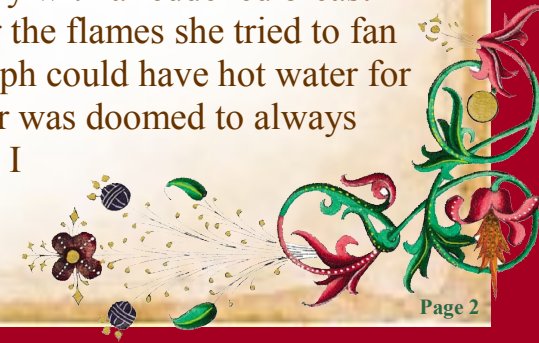
**W**hy am I still haunted by that Christmas Eve of over twenty years ago? The reason cannot be simply because it was the only one spent by myself – on a lonely, windswept dike above frozen fields, snow swirling about the hoofs of my horse, and nothing but darkness and the smell of ocean all about. I was journeying south of the Elbe River near Jutland as a courier for the Tudor before he seized the throne of England; and midnight found me in Dithmarschen, one of the Free Cantons.

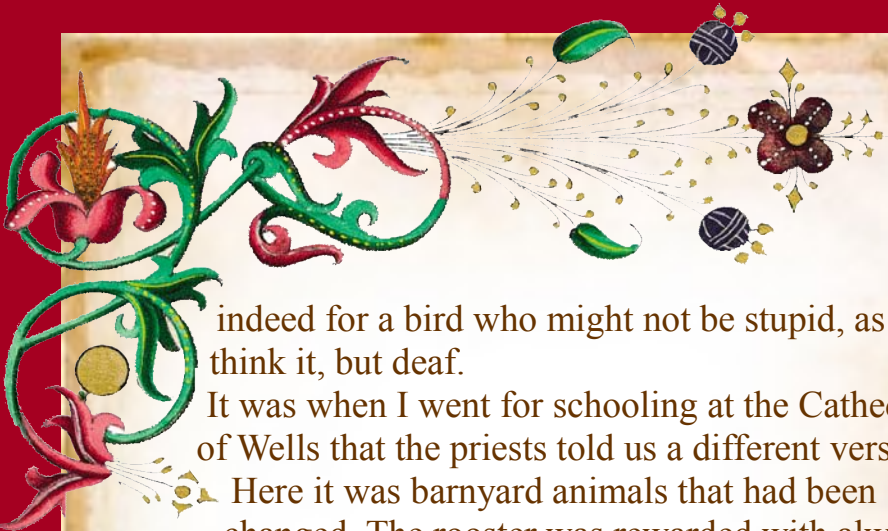
The peasants who live here have had no lord for nigh on three hundred years. They bow to no one. Though the Archbishop of Bremen may claim otherwise, they rule themselves. “We are both our own nobles and peasants,”

I have heard them say, and they take pride in the saying of it. They have a right to be proud: I have never seen richer peasants, with their houses built of baked blocks called ‘bricks’.

They even have separate ‘barns’ for their livestock. It was these barns that occupied my mind that cold and lonely Christmas Eve. On a previous journey, I had received shelter in one of them, and no innkeeper’s room was ever as warm or dry or peaceful. I had intended to seek the same again, until I heard the talk over my midday meal. And now I could not rid my mind of this new thing that was supposed to happen in barns on Christmas Eve.

I had grown up with tales of how the Holy Birth over a thousand years ago had changed some animals. In my home country of Wales, it was the birds of the wildwood that I was told about. The nightingale, for trying to join in the song of praise from the heavenly hosts, was rewarded with a glorious voice that re-creates the feelings of that first night every time she is heard. The stork, for her gift of breast feathers to line the crib for the Christ Child, was rewarded with the honour of becoming the symbol of childbirth itself. In the simplicity of my youth, though, it was sorry that I felt for the poor little robin and the poor lonely owl. The one was marked permanently with a reddened breast from standing too long near the flames she tried to fan with her wings, so that Joseph could have hot water for his wife in labour. The other was doomed to always call out, “Who? Who?” and I thought that harsh reward





indeed for a bird who might not be stupid, as most think it, but deaf.

It was when I went for schooling at the Cathedral of Wells that the priests told us a different version.

Here it was barnyard animals that had been changed. The rooster was rewarded with always announcing the birth as he had with his first clarion of “Christus natus est!” The ox, when hearing this cry on the first night, had called out, “Ube?” (which he still does) and the sheep had answered him with, “Bethlehem.” Thus the priests told us. I was prepared to believe them for those animals I was familiar with; but not for those – the rook and the raven – who I knew were not part of a barnyard nor for the one creature I did not meet until my first pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Try as I might, I could never hear the word ‘Eamus’ in the braying of a donkey; nor, after witnessing their stubbornness, could I imagine one eager enough to call out, “Let us go!” on that first night.

By that time, I had also heard other versions. It seemed to me that each district where I found myself in my travels and my soldiering had a slightly different version about the Holy Child’s birth. If one district claimed that the ox and the sheep woke up and stood in silence at midnight, another claimed they bowed to the east. Still another had it that they knelt in adoration. In some parts of England, I learned, bees joined in by

humming a psalm within their hives; and, of course, there was that carol making its rounds.

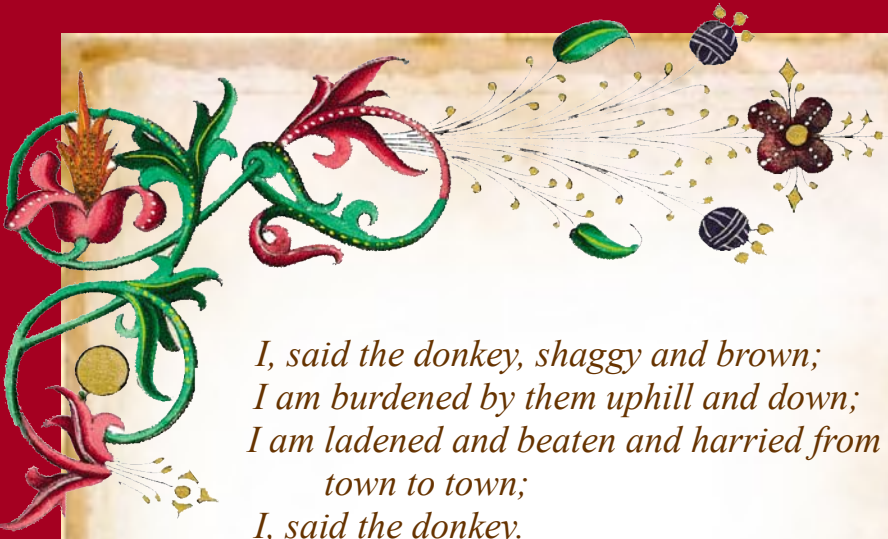
*I, said the donkey, shaggy and brown;  
I carried His mother uphill and down;  
I carried her safely to Bethlehem town;  
I, said the donkey, shaggy and brown.*

And so it went, with each verse, another animal from around the manger: the cow gave up her crib to lay the Holy Babe in; the sheep gave up his wool for a blanket; the dove cooed a lullaby so that He would not cry; the camel brought the gifts of the Three Wise Men.

I will admit I love that carol. It reminds me of the tales from my childhood, of the gifts of the nightingale and the stork and the robin. It is a pretty fancy, that tune – but here in Dithmarschen, earlier in the day of that Christmas of long ago, I learned of another turn to that fancy. In Dithmarschen, it was told to me, the animals speak to each other at the stroke of midnight.

For precious moments, they are the equal of men and have the gift of speech.

It had filled my mind all afternoon, the thought of this new gift. If I were to again seek shelter in a barn that night, would I hear the animals speak? What would I hear them say? Would it be of their gifts, as in the words of the carol; was that a true fancy after all? Or would they speak as men do – not of what they can give but of what they receive?



*I, said the donkey, shaggy and brown;  
I am burdened by them uphill and down;  
I am laden and beaten and harried from  
town to town;  
I, said the donkey.*

Or, since this was the Free Canton of Dithmarschen, where the peasants were not subjected to cruel lords and therefore would have no reason to pass cruelty on, would the animals speak kindly of their masters?

I am ashamed to say I did not find out. No doubt this is why I am still haunted by that Christmas Eve. It was not because I could not find a barn, but because I dared not. I was afraid to find out the truth of this new version.

**A Merry Medieval Christmas  
& Happy Holidays  
to you and yours  
from Anita, Denise, Nan, Nela  
and Linda at  
The Medieval Chronicle**



Book of Hours of the Marshal of Boucicaut  
Ca. 1405 — 1408