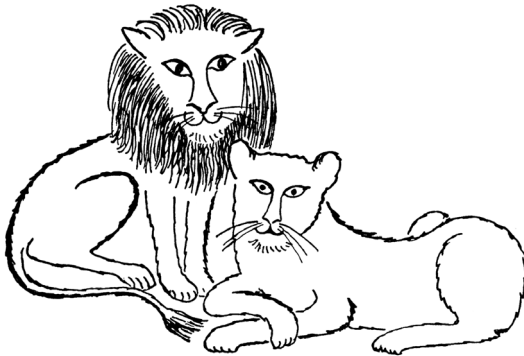


More Catholic Tales for Boys and Girls

by Caryll Houselander

Illustrated by Renée George



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Inside the Ark

Just before the strange and wonderful thing happened to us, I was dreaming a lot. I mean asleep-dreaming, not daydreaming. In my youth, I would have a fine, big dinner and sleep without moving, shut up, it seemed, in a tunnel of velvet darkness that had the evening star at one end and the rising sun at the other, and nothing at all in between. But as I grew older, I began to think that something had gone wrong with me or the world, or both. I would dream that I was hungry, and the hunger was gripping hold of my stomach like some great beast's teeth, a very nasty feeling. Or I would dream that I was fighting, my claws out, my eyes blazing, my body stiff, and my coat

Inside the Ark

pricked up; and instead of doing it for fun and enjoying it, I was doing it in a rage and feeling ever so miserable.

I had a friend, a brontosaurus, very old and wise, and one day I went to see her and told her about my dreams and about the way life was all topsy-turvy. She listened with her eyes closed, nodding her great horned head and snuffling enormously now and then. Every time she snuffled, the whole jungle shook.

Well, after a time, she opened her eyes and said slowly, in a sing-song voice, as if she was inspired, “My friend Tiger, what you are coming to know is *sin*, alas!”

“Sin?” I said. “What is that?”

“It is hard for us animals to understand,” she replied, “but as you know, I am some hundreds of years old, and I remember a time when no animal ever suffered at all. Things like hunger and thirst were pleasures; they only sharpened our joy in being alive. We used, even mighty beasts like myself, to pick our way on the grass not to tread

Inside the Ark

down the opening flowers. We all knew that when we ate, we pushed our eager snouts into the invisible hand of a great Person. And that hand stroked and ruffled our fur and closed our eyes in sleep, and — ”

The Brontosaurus broke off as if the memory was so lovely that she could not go on speaking of it. Then shaking herself and at the same time shaking all the neighboring bushes and the birds in them, she went on in a loud, violent voice: “Now all is changed. Man set himself up against God, against all the burning stars and flowing waters and springing fields, and he brought *our* troubles in the world. That’s hard to understand. That’s sin. And we animals feel it in our insides, in our dry tongues when we thirst, in our heaving flanks when we are hungry. Because of that, men, who used to love us and whom we used to serve, hunt us down, and we feel inclined, for our part, to eat them.

“Every sort of nasty thing happens now, and that, my friend, is why you dream. You, a tiger,

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get indigestion, and you dream! Alas!” She went on mumbling darkly, saying that sad things were gathering like a cloud of black flies, and no one knew where it would end, and so on, until she fell asleep. I slipped away, not really cheered up, to my own cave and my young wife, Mitsie.

It was to Mitsie that the call came first. She got up in the night and began pacing our cave, to and fro from wall to entrance, listening, listening. I rose with a thrilling shiver trembling through me and listened, too; but I heard nothing, at least only wolves howling, and nearer at home the squeak and scuffle of a mouse. Then Mitsie said, “Don’t listen to outside. Listen to inside.” So I did, and it was as if the sun had gotten inside us and called us. And now it led us out of the cave.

We trotted through the forest and were not surprised to find many other animals awake and trotting in the same direction. Their coats were all silvered in the moonlight, and they moved as if they were in a trance: tigers with little birds

Inside the Ark

perching on their backs, and little silver mice scampering round their feet; bears and lions and zebras and rabbits and squirrels and weasels and every kind of beast, all together as friends, moving as if a gentle wind carried them along with it. You would not have supposed that any of these animals could quarrel and fight.

I remembered what the old Brontosaurus had said about everyone eating out of a big, kind hand. Now it seemed to me that this beautiful hand, although invisible, was stretched out over us all. As we turned out of the forest to the open plains, I saw many other animals coming from all the four corners of the earth: camels and elephants, and flights of birds like singing clouds, and on the ground hosts of shining insects.

As we moved on faster and faster, I saw that the wind was rising and the forests, now in the distance, were tossing and swaying like fields of grass. It was beginning to rain, too. I saw little diamonds glistening on our fur and hanging like dew on our whiskers. A feeling of hope and joy

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began to fill us, and we moved with a swinging movement, like dancing, like the birds that were circling overhead. We lurched from side to side and stamped our feet, and each in his own way, we started to sing. There was roaring and bellowing and squeaking such as I have not heard before or since.

And then I heard a new sound — a small sound, but so clear that it rang out more distinct and pure than all our singing put together. It was the sound of a man chanting.

Then I saw him: Father Noah, putting the last nail into the Ark that was already stirring, restively, like an impatient horse, on a rising lake of flood water. There he was, Father Noah, the first man I ever knew personally, the man who made me love men in spite of what they have done to us by bringing pain into the world with their sins. There he was, wearing a big leather apron and a broad sun hat, and he waved to us with his hammer in his brown hand and shouted a welcome.

Inside the Ark

It was crowded in the ark, and at first strange. Mrs. Noah was a homey soul and cooked some fine meals for us on her stove. Father Noah and his children brought them round to us twice a day. They brought us buckets of clean water, too, and armfuls of fresh straw and hay. We had stalls and bunk beds down each side of the ark. The small animals, rabbits and squirrels and the like, slept in the highest bunks, hogs and deer and so on in the middle bunks, and my own sort, tigers and lions, on the ground floor. In the middle of the ark, between our bunks, the Noah family lived. They had their table there and a small swinging lamp, and I always saw them, a little kind family, living in a ring of light, and all round them darkness; and out of that darkness the glowing eyes of beasts gazing, watching, wondering, questioning.

Outside the waters rose. Through the port-holes we could see the black, swirling waters rising up as high as hills and dashing against the sides of the Ark higher and higher and higher,

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and the hard, sharp rain coming down into the water like hosts of sharp spears. We would have been afraid but for Father Noah. He was only a little man sitting there in his circle of light, but he made us feel safe, as if there were something about him that made him able to save us from all those strong, black towers of water, able to keep us safe and warm and fed in a world without forest, valley, or field, without cave or lair or nest or mountain rocks.

But at first I wondered how Father Noah could feel so safe himself, for even apart from the water filling the whole world, he had a great deal of worry. Even I could see that. First of all, he had all the food tubs to look after. Then there was all our straw to change, and the whole great Ark to sweep and scrub. And then there was keeping Mrs. Noah bright and happy, and looking after and teaching the three boys.

Poor Father Noah was the only man in the world, the only one who was good. He must have felt very lonely; at least I would have thought so.



I used to look at him and at all the glowering eyes of the watching beasts, shining out of the darkness on him, and one night I suddenly felt very much afraid for him.

I said to Mitsie, “Look how small Father Noah is. Do you know, Mitsie, if we liked, we could kill him: a blow from one of our great paws, a dart from a serpent’s tongue — ” I was going on, but Mitsie hushed me.

“Father Noah is greater than we are,” she said, “although he looks smaller. For without him

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we wouldn't have any food or clean straw, and we would begin to fight and eat each other!"

"But how is it that he can be so strong and rule us when we are bigger than he is?"

"Listen," Mitsie answered, "you stay awake tonight and watch, and you'll know."

So I did. I saw the three Noah boys and their mother settle down in their rugs and fall asleep, and then Father Noah going softly around from bunk to bunk to see that all was well. I saw how tired he was, for his shoulders drooped and his eyes were heavy. I thought he would turn in when he had done his rounds. He looked at each beast, putting straight the donkey's blanket, patting the old camel, and giving the elephant a last bun. But when it was done, he didn't turn in at once. No, he blew out his lamp and knelt down, and he lifted his head toward the roof of the Ark as if there were someone there, and he began to speak.

"Lord," I heard him say, "You've destroyed almost everything that You made. There is no

Inside the Ark

good grain growing on earth anymore, and no fish or fowl or flesh to eat. There are no flowers growing anymore to remind us of You, Lord, and nothing at all to lighten our load. It's hard work tending Your creatures and keeping them well and good. But, Lord, we've got one thing left, I know. We've got Your love. You are our Father, and we are in Your hands, and we won't perish."

Then it seemed as if a soft, warm light came all round Father Noah, and I saw the shadow of a great hand blessing him on the lime-washed ceiling of the Ark. So I knew Father Noah was safe, because he prayed, because he trusted in God.

About a week after this, the dove who had sat so patiently in the dovecote opposite me flew out at Father Noah's bidding and returned with a green olive branch. That was the sign that the waters were sinking, and the fields and the flowers and the forests coming again. Soon we were all going out of the open door into a new world, a green, shining world, washed pure and sweet and circled by a rainbow.