

The Old Oak Tree's Last Dream

Hans Christian Andersen

In the woods, on a high bank near the open seashore, there stood such a very old oak tree. It was exactly three hundred and sixty-five years old, but this long span of years seemed to the tree scarcely longer than as many days do to people like us. A tree's life is not the same as a man's. We are awake during the day, and sleep at night, and we have our dreams.

It is different with a tree; it is awake throughout three seasons, and not until winter comes does it go to sleep. Winter is its time for sleeping; that is its night after the long day which we call spring, summer, and autumn.

Many a warm summer day the May flies danced around its crown, lived happily and felt fortunate as they flitted about; and if one of the tiny creatures rested from its blissful play for a moment on a large oak leaf, the tree always said, "Poor little insect! Your whole life is but one day long! How sad!"

"Sad?" the little May fly always answered. "What do you mean by that? Everything is so bright and warm and beautiful, and I am so happy!"

"But only for one day, and then all is over."

"Over?" said the May fly. "What does over mean? Is it also over for you?"

"No, I shall live perhaps thousands of your days, and a day for me lasts a whole year. That is something so long you can't even figure it out."

"No, I don't understand you at all. You have thousands of my days to live, but I have thousands of moments in which to be happy and joyous. Will all the beauty of this world die when you die?"

"No," said the tree. "It will probably last longer, infinitely longer, than I am able to imagine."

"Well, then, we each have an equally long lifetime, only we figure differently."

And so the May fly danced and glided in the air, with its fine, artistic wings of veil and velvet, rejoicing in the warm air that was so perfumed with delicious scents from the clover field and the wild roses, elders, and honeysuckles of the hedges, not to speak of the bluebells, cowslip, and wild thyme; the fragrance was so strong that the tiny insect felt a little intoxicated from it. The day was long and beautiful, full of happiness and sweet experiences, and by sunset the little May fly was pleasantly weary from all the excitement. Its dainty wings would no longer support it; very gently it glided down onto the cool, rocking blades of grass, nodded its head as a May fly can, and fell into a very peaceful slumber; it was dead.

"Poor little May fly," said the Oak; "that was really too short a life!"

And every summer day was repeated the same dance, the same question, the same answer, and the same peaceful falling asleep; it happened through many generations of May flies, and all of them were lighthearted and happy.

The Oak stood wide-awake through its spring morning, its summer noon, and autumn evening; soon now it would be sleeping time, the tree's night, for winter was coming. Already the winds were singing, "Good night! Good night! There falls a leaf; there falls a leaf! We plucked it, we plucked it! See that you go to sleep! We will sing you to sleep, we will rock you to sleep! Surely it will do your old limbs good. They crackle from pure contentment. Sleep sweetly, sleep sweetly! This is your three hundred and sixty-fifth night, but you are really only a yearling! Sleep sweetly! The skies are sprinkling snow; it

will spread a warm coverlet over your feet. Sleep sweetly and have pleasant dreams!"

And now the great Oak stood stripped of its foliage, ready to rest throughout the long winter, and in its sleep to dream of something that had happened to it, just as men dream.

The tree had once been very small; yes, an acorn had been its cradle. According to human calculation, it was now in its fourth century; it was the tallest and mightiest tree in the forest; its crown towered high above all the other trees and could be seen far out at sea, where it served as a landmark to ships. The Oak had never thought of how many eyes sought it out from the watery distance. High up in its green crown the wood doves had built their nests, and there the cuckoo made its voice heard; and in the autumn, when its leaves looked like hammered-out copper plates, the birds of passage rested awhile there before flying on across the seas. But now it was winter; the tree was leafless, and the bowed and gnarled branches showed their dark outlines; crows and jackdaws came to gossip about the hard times that were beginning and how difficult it was to find food in the winter.

It was just at the holy Christmastime that the Oak dreamed its most beautiful dream-and this we shall hear.

The tree had a distinct feeling that it was a holiday season. It seemed to hear all the church bells ringing round about, and at that the day was mild and warm, like a lovely summer day. The Oak spread its mighty crown; sunbeams flickered among the leaves and branches, and the air was filled with the fragrance of herbs and blossoms. Colored butterflies played tag, and the May flies danced, which was the only way they could show their happiness. All that the tree had encountered and witnessed through the many years passed by as if in a holiday procession.

Knights and ladies of bygone days, with feathers in their caps and hawks on their wrists, rode gaily through the forest; dogs barked and the hunting horn sounded. The tree saw hostile soldiers, in shining armor and gaily colored garments, with spears and halberds, pitching their tents and then striking them again; the watchfire blazed, and they sang and then slept under the tree's protecting boughs. It saw lovers meet in quiet happiness there in the moonlight, and carve their names, or their initials, on the gray-green bark. At one time, many years before, a guitar and an Aeolian harp had been hung up in the Oak's boughs by carefree traveling youths; now they hung there again, and now once more their lovely music sounded. The wood doves cooed, as if they were trying to express what the tree felt, and the cuckoo announced many more summer days it had to live.

Then it seemed that a new and stronger current of life flowed through the Oak, down into its smallest roots, up into its highest twigs, even out into the leaves! The tree felt that it was stretching; it could feel how life and warmth stirred down in the earth about its roots; it felt the strength increase and that it was growing taller and taller. The trunk shot up; there was no rest for the tree; it grew more and more; its crown became fuller; it spread and towered. And as the tree grew, its strength grew also, as did its ardent yearning to reach higher and higher toward the bright, warm sun.

Already it was high above the clouds, which drifted far below it, like a troop of dark migratory birds or like flocks of white swans.

And every leaf of the tree could see as if it had eyes; the stars became visible to them by daylight, large and bright, all shining, like very clear, mild eyes. They reminded the Oak of dear, kindly eyes it had known, the eyes of children, the eyes of lovers, who had met beneath the tree.

It was a blessed moment, so full of joy! And yet in all its joy the Oak felt a longing, a great desire that all the other trees below, all the bushes, plants, and flowers of the forest, might be lifted up with it, to share in its glory and gladness. Amid all its dream of splendor, the mighty Oak could not be fully happy without all the others, small and great, sharing in it,

and this yearning thrilled through boughs and leaves as fervently, as strongly, as it would within a human heart.

The crown of the tree bowed and looked back, as if it sought something it had missed. Then it felt the thyme and soon the still stronger scent of honeysuckle and violet, and imagined it could hear the cuckoo talking to itself.

Yes, and now the green tops of the forest peeped up through the clouds. The Oak saw that the other trees below were growing and lifting themselves up as it had; bushes and plants rose high into the air, some even tearing themselves loose from their roots, to soar up all the faster. The birch grew the most rapidly; like a white flash of lightning its slender stem shot up, its boughs waving like green gauze and banners. The whole forest, even the feathery brown reeds, grew high into the sky; the birds followed and sang, and on the grass that waved to and fro like long, green silken ribbons, the grasshopper sat, and drummed with his wings against his lean legs. The cockchafers hummed and the bees buzzed and every bird sang to the best of its ability; song and happiness were everywhere, right up into heaven.

"But the little red flower by the water-that should come along!" said the Oak tree. "And the bluebell flower, and the little daisy!" Yes, the Oak wanted to have them all with it.

"We are here! We are with you!" they sang and rang out.

"But the pretty anemones of last summer-and the mass of lilies of the valley of the year before that-and the wild crabapple tree that bloomed so beautifully-and all the beauties of the forest, throughout the many years-if only they had lived on and remained till now, then they also could have been with us!"

"We are here! We are with you!" they sang and rang out, even higher up; it seemed that they had ascended before the others.

"No, this is too wonderful to be true!" rejoiced the Oak. "I have them all with me; small and great, not one is forgotten! How can all this blessedness be conceivable and possible?"

"In the kingdom of God all things are conceivable and possible," came the mighty answer.

And the tree, which continued to grow, felt its very roots loosening themselves from the earth. "This is the best of all," it said. "Now no bonds shall hold me; I can soar upward to the heights of glory and light! And my loved ones are all with me, small and great-all with me!"

"All!"

That was the dream of the Oak tree, and while it dreamed on that holy Christmas Eve, a mighty storm was sweeping over land and sea. The ocean piled its heavy billows onto the shore; the tree cracked, groaned, and was torn up by the roots, at the very moment when it was dreaming that its roots were freeing themselves from the earth. It fell. Its three hundred and sixty-five years were now as a day is to the May fly.

Christmas morning, when the sun rose, the storm was past. All the church bells rang, while from every chimney, even the smallest one, on the peasant's hut, the blue smoke curled upward, like sacrificial steam rising from the altars of the ancient Druids. The sea became more and more calm, and aboard a big vessel that had weathered the storm of the night before all flags were hoisted now in greeting to the Yuletide. "The tree is gone-the old oak tree that was our landmark!" said the sailors. "It must have fallen during the storm last night. What can ever replace it? Nothing!"

That was the tree's eulogy, brief but sincere. There it lay, stretched out on the carpet of snow near the shore, while over it sounded the hymn sung on the ship, sung in thanksgiving for the joy of Christmas, for the bliss of the human soul's salvation through Christ, for the gift of eternal life:

*Sing loud, sweet angel, on Christmas morn.
Hallelujah! Christ the Saviour is born.
In joy receive His blessing.
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!*

Thus sounded the old hymn, and everyone aboard the ship felt himself lifted heavenward by the hymn, and by prayer, even as the old tree had lifted itself in its last, most beautiful dream that Christmas Eve.