

A Leaf from Heaven

Hans Christian Andersen

High up in the thin, clear air there flew an angel bearing a flower from the garden of heaven. As he kissed it, a tiny leaf drifted down into the muddy soil in the middle of the wood; it very soon took root there, and sprouted, and sent up shoots among the other plants.

"That's a funny kind of slip," said the plants.

And neither the thistle nor the stinging nettle would have anything to do with the stranger. "It must be some low kind of garden plant," they said, grinning and making fun at it. But it grew and grew, and like no other plant its long branches spread far about.

"Where do you think you're going?" said the tall thistles, who have thorns on each of their leaves. "You're taking a good deal of space. That's a lot of nonsense—we can't stand here and support you!"

When winter came, the snow covered the plant, but from it the blanket of snow received a glow as if the sun were shining from below. Then the spring returned, and the plant was in glorious bloom, more beautiful than any other in the forest.

And now there came to the forest a professor of botany, who could show what he was with many degrees. He carefully inspected the plant and tested it, but decided it was not included in his system of botany; he could not possibly learn to what class it did belong.

"This must be some unimportant variety," he said. "I certainly don't know it. It's not included in any system."

"Not included in any system!" said the thistles and the nettles.

The big trees which grew round it heard what was said and they also saw the tree was not one of their kind, but they said nothing, good or bad. And that is much the wisest course for stupid people to take.

Then a poor, innocent girl came through the forest. Her heart was pure, and her understanding was glorious with faith. Her only inheritance was an old Bible, but from its pages the voice of God spoke to her: "If people wish to do you evil, remember the story of Joseph. They had evil in their hearts, but God turned it to good. If you suffer wrong, if you are despised and misunderstood, then you must remember the words of Him who was purity and goodness itself, and who prayed for those who struck Him and nailed Him to the cross. 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do!' "

She stopped before the wondrous plant, whose great leaves gave forth sweet and refreshing fragrance and whose flowers glowed in the sun like a wonderful firework of color. And from each flower there came a sound as though it held concealed within itself a deep well of melody that thousands of years would not empty. With devout gratitude the girl gazed on this exquisite work of the Creator and bent down one of the branches, that she might examine the flower and breathe in its sweetness; and a lovely light burned in her soul. It seemed to uplift her heart, and she wanted to pluck a flower, but she had not the heart to break one off, for she knew it would soon fade if she did. So she took only a single green leaf, carried it home, and there she pressed it in between the pages of her Bible; and it lay there quite fresh, always green, and never fading.

It was kept in the pages of that Bible, and with that Bible it was placed under the girl's head when, some weeks thereafter, she lay in her coffin. On her gentle face was the solemn peace of death, as if the earthly remains carried the imprint of the truth that she now was in the presence of her Creator.

But the marvelous plant still bloomed in the forest. It looked almost like a great tree now, and all the birds of passage, especially the storks and the swallows, bowed down before it.

"That thing is taking on foreign airs now," said the thistles and the burdocks. "We never act like that here in this country!"

And the black forest snails spat at the plant.

Then the swineherd came, collecting thistles and other shrubs, to burn them for their ashes. He tore up the heavenly plant by the roots and crammed it into his bag.

"I can use that, too," he said, and no sooner said than done.

But for years the King of that country had been troubled by a deep melancholy of spirit. He kept busy and laborious always, but it seemed to do him no good. They read books to him—deep and learned tomes, or the lightest and most trifling they could find; but nothing did any good. Then one of the world's wisest men, to whom they had applied for help, sent a messenger to explain to the King that there was but one sure remedy that would relieve and cure him.

"In a forest in the King's own country there grows a plant of heavenly origin. Its appearance cannot be mistaken." And then the messenger brought out a drawing of the plant; it would be easy to recognize it. "Its leaves are green winter and summer, so every evening put a fresh leaf on the King's forehead. His thoughts will then clear, and a beautiful dream will refresh and strengthen him."

"I think I took it up in my bundle and burned it to ashes a long time ago," said the swineherd. "I just didn't know any better."

"You did not know any better!" they all said. "Ignorance, oh, ignorance! How great you are!"

And those words the swineherd might well take to heart, for they were meant for him and no one else.

Not a single leaf of that plant could be found; no one knew about the one leaf that lay in the coffin of the dead girl.

And the King himself, in his terrible depression, wandered out to the spot in the woods. "This is where the plant grew," he said. "It shall be a sacred place." Then he had it surrounded by a golden railing, and a sentry was posted there, by day and by night.

The professor of botany wrote a thesis on the heavenly plant. As a reward he was gilded all over, and that gilding suited him and his family very well indeed. As a matter of fact, that was the pleasantest part of the whole story, for the plant had disappeared.

The King remained as melancholy and sad as before; but then he had always been that way—said the sentry.