

THE DREAM OF THE OAK TREE

There stood in a wood, high on the bank near the open sea-shore, such a grand old oak tree! It was three hundred and sixty-five years old; but all this length of years had seemed to the tree scarcely more than so many days appear to us men and women, boys and girls.

A tree's life is not quite the same as a man's: we wake during the day, and sleep and dream during the night; but a tree wakes throughout three seasons of the year, and has no sleep till winter comes. The winter is its sleeping time—its night after the long day which we call spring, summer, and autumn.

It was just at the holy Christmas-tide that the oak tree dreamed his most beautiful dream. He seemed to hear the church-bells ringing all around, and to feel as if it were a mild, warm summer day. Fresh and green he reared his mighty crown on high, and the sunbeams played among his leaves. As in a festive procession, all that the tree had beheld in his life now passed by.

Knights and ladies, with feathers in their caps and hawks perching on their wrists, rode gaily through the wood; dogs barked, and the huntsman sounded his bugle.

Then came foreign soldiers in bright armour and gay vestments, bearing spurs and halberds, setting up their tents, and presently taking them down again. Then watch-fires blazed up and bands of wild outlaws sang, revelled, and slept under the tree's outstretched boughs; or happy lovers met in quiet moonlight and carved their initials on the grayish bark.

At one time a guitar and an Æolian harp had been hung among the old oak's boughs by merry travelling apprentices; now they hung there again, and the wind played sweetly with their strings.

And now the dream changed. A new and stronger current of life flowed through him, down to his lowest roots, up to his highest twigs, even to the very leaves. The tree felt in his roots that a warm life stirred in the earth, and that he was growing taller and taller; his trunk shot up more and more, his crown grew fuller; and still he soared and spread. He felt that his power grew, too, and he longed to advance higher and higher to the warm, bright sun.

Already he towered above the clouds, which drifted below him, now like a troop of dark-plumaged birds of passage, now like flocks of large, white swans. The stars became visible by daylight, so large and bright, each one sparkling like a mild, clear eye.

It was a blessed moment! And yet, in the height of his joy, the oak tree felt a desire and longing that all the other trees, bushes, herbs, and flowers of the wood might be lifted up with him to share in his glory and gladness. He could not be fully blessed unless he might have all, small and great, blessed with him.

The tree's crown bowed itself as though it had missed something, and looked backward. Then he felt the fragrance of honeysuckle and violets, and fancied he could hear the birds. And so it was! for now peeped forth through the clouds the green summits of the wood; the other trees below

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had grown and lifted themselves up likewise; bushes and herbs shot high into the air, some tearing themselves loose from their roots to mount the faster.

Like a flash of white lightning the birch, moving fastest of all, shot upward its slender stem. Even the feathery brown reeds had pierced their way through the clouds, and the birds sang and sang, and on the grass that fluttered to and fro like a streaming ribbon perched the grasshopper, while cockchafers hummed and bees buzzed. All was music and gladness.

"But the little blue flower near the water—I want that, too," said the oak; "and the bellflower, and the dear little daisy." "We are here! We are here!" chanted sweet low voices on all sides.

"But the pretty anemones, and the bed of lilies of the valley, and all the flowers that bloomed so long ago,—would that they were here!" "We are here! We are here!" was the answer, and it seemed to come from the air above, as if they had fled upward first.

"Oh, this is too great happiness!" exclaimed the oak tree; and now he felt that his own roots were loosening themselves from the earth. "This is best of all," he said. "Now no bounds shall detain me. I can soar to the heights of light and glory, and I have all my dear ones with me."

Such was the oak tree's Christmas dream. And all the while a mighty storm swept the sea and land; the ocean rolled his heavy billows on the shore, the tree cracked, and was rent and torn up by the roots at the very moment when he dreamed that he was soaring to the skies.

Next day the sea was calm again, and a large vessel that had weathered the storm hoisted all its flags for Merry Christmas. "The tree is gone—the old oak tree, our beacon! How can its place ever be supplied?" said the crew. This was the tree's funeral eulogium, while the Christmas hymn re-echoed from the wood.

Hans Christian Andersen
(Adapted)