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The Fir Tree

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930], translated by M. R. James)

But in the forest there grew a pretty little fir tree. It had a good place of its own; it could get sunshine, it had plenty of air, and round it grew numbers of larger comrades, both firs and pines; but the little fir was in a great hurry to grow. It didn't care about the warm sun or the cool air, it took no notice of the village children who came and chattered when they were out gathering strawberries or raspberries. They often came there with jugs full of them or with strawberries strung on a straw, and would sit down by the little tree and say: "Look how pretty and little it is," which the tree didn't at all like to hear.

Next year it was bigger by quite a length of stem, and the year after by a yet longer growth: for on a fir tree you can always see how many years old it is by the number of joints it has.

"Oh, if I were only a big tree like the others," sighed the little tree, "then I could spread my branches far out round me and look out into the wide world with my top. The birds would build nests among my branches, and when the wind blew I could make stately bows like the others there," and it took no pleasure in the sunshine or the birds or the red clouds that sailed over it, morning and evening.

When it was winter, and the snow lay sparkling white all round, a hare would often come bounding along and jump over the little tree, and oh, it was annoyed! But two winters passed, and by the third the tree was so big that the hare had to run round it. Oh, to grow, to grow, and be big and old! That was the only pleasant thing in the world, the tree thought.

Every spring the woodcutters came and felled some of the largest trees. This happened every year, and the young fir, who was by this time well grown, shuddered at it; for the great stately trees fell with a crash and a smash, and when their branches were cut off they looked all naked and long and slender; they could hardly be recognized. Then they were loaded on to wagons, and drawn off out of the forest by horses.

Where were they going, and what awaited them?

In spring, when the swallow and the stork came, the tree asked them: "Do you know where they were taken to? Haven't you met them?" The swallows knew nothing, but the stork looked thoughtful and then nodded and said: "Yes, I think so. I met a lot of new ships when I set out from Egypt, and on those ships there were fine masts. I daresay it was them; they smelt of pine. Many's the time I salute them. They carry their heads high, that they do."

"Oh, I do wish I was big enough to fly over the sea too! What sort of thing is the sea really, and what does it look like?"

"Oh, that's a long affair to explain," said the stork, and walked off.

"You should rejoice in your youth," said the sunbeams, 'rejoice in your strong growth and the young life that's in you," and the wind kissed the tree and the dew shed tears on it, but the fir didn't understand that at all.

When Christmas time drew near, some quite young trees were felled, trees many of which were not so big or so old as this fir who could have neither peace nor quiet, but was always wanting to be off. These young trees, and they were always the prettiest, always kept their branches; and they were laid on wagons and drawn off out of the forest by horses.

"Where are they going?" asked the fir. "They're no bigger than me; in fact, one of them was much smaller. Why do they all keep their branches? Where are they being driven?" "We know, we know," twittered the grey sparrows. "Down in the town we've peeped in at the window-panes, we know where they're driven to. Why, they come in for the greatest brilliance and glory you can imagine. We've peeped in at the windows and seen how they're planted in the middle of a warm room and decked out with the most lovely things, gilded apples, gingerbread cakes, toys, and hundreds and hundreds of lights."

"And then?" asked the fir, quivering through all its branches, "and then, what happens then?"

"Why, we didn't see any more, but it was marvellous." "Can I be destined to go by that radiant path?" said the tree, exulting. "That's even better than faring over the sea. I am sick with longing. If only it was Christmas! I am quite as tall, and stretch out as far now as those others that were carried off last year. Oh! to be on the wagon, to be in the warm room with all the splendour and magnificence, and then? Why, then will come something still better, still more beautiful, or else why should they deck me out like that? There must be something still greater, still nobler, but what? Oh! how I suffer and yearn! I don't know myself what's the matter with me."

"Rejoice in me," said the breeze and the sunshine, "rejoice in your fresh youth out here in the free air." But it wouldn't rejoice. It grew and grew; in winter and summer it stood there in green; in dark green there it stood, and people who saw it said: "That's a fine tree," and at Christmas time it was the first of all to be felled. The axe cut deep through its marrow, and the tree fell over on to the ground with a sigh: it felt a pang and a weakness, and couldn't think at all of coming happiness, so sorrowful was it at being parted from its home, from the spot on which it had grown up. It knew that it would never again see the dear old companions, the little bushes and flowers about it—no, not even the birds, perhaps. The journey was by no means agreeable.

The tree came to itself only when it was unloaded with the other trees in the yard and heard someone say: "That's a fine one. We don't want anything better than that."

Two servants in gay livery came out and carried the fir in, into a large handsome drawing-room. All round the walls hung portraits, and beside the large stove were Chinese vases with lions on their covers. There were rocking-chairs, silk-covered sofas, large tables covered with picture-books, and more than a hundred times a hundred rix-dollars worth of toys—at least, so said the children. And the fir was set up in a big tub filled with sand; but nobody could see that it was a tub, for green stuff was draped all about it and it stood on a large many-coloured carpet. Oh, how the tree quivered! What was going to happen?

Servants and young ladies came and decked it out. On the branches they hung little nets cut out of coloured paper and every net was filled with sweetmeats; gilded apples and walnuts were hung on it, looking as if they had grown there, and more than a hundred little tapers, red, blue, and white, were stuck upon the branches. Dolls that looked exactly like people—the tree had never seen the like of them—swung to and fro amid the green, and at the very tip-top was fastened a large star of gold leaf. It was splendid, splendid beyond compare. "To-night," they all said, "to-night it'll shine all right." "Oh," thought the tree, "if it were only night, if only the candles were lit! And what'll happen then? Will the trees come out of the forest and look at me? Will the sparrows fly to the window-panes? Shall I grow here always and be decked out in winter and summer too?"

Ah, it was full of it all, but it had a terrible backache from pure longing, and backache is every bit as painful for a tree as headache is for the rest of us.

Then the candles were lit. Oh, the brilliance and the glory! It made the tree quiver through every branch, till one of the candles set fire to a sprig, and it smoked furiously.

"Help! Help!" screamed the girls, and hastened to put it out. After this the tree durst not quiver. What a turn it had got! It was terribly afraid of losing any of its finery and quite bewildered with all the splendour. And now the folding doors were thrown open, and in rushed a crowd of children—fit to throw the tree right down. The elders followed sedately. The little ones stood dumb—for a moment only. Then they shouted for joy till the room rang again, and danced round the tree while one present after another was pulled off it.

"What's this they're doing," thought the tree. "What's going to happen?"

The candles burnt down to the branches, and as they did so they were put out, and then the children were allowed to plunder the tree. Oh, how they rushed upon it, till the branches cracked! If it hadn't been tied fast to the ceiling by the top and the gold star, it would have been tumbled right over.

The children danced round about with their beautiful toys, and nobody looked at the tree except the old nurse who went about peering among the branches; but that was only to see if a fig or an apple had been missed.

"A story! A story!" cried the children, as they dragged a stout little man towards the tree. He sat himself down beneath it.

"Now we're on the green," said he, "and it'll be very good for the tree to listen too; but I'm only going to tell one story. Will you have the one about Ivede Avede, [1] or the one about Humpty Dumpty who tumbled downstairs and yet got up to the throne and married the Princess?"

"Ivede Avede," cried some of them. "Humpty Dumpty," cried others. There was a deal of shrieking and screaming, and only the fir kept quiet and thought "Aren't I to take any part or do anything at all?" Well! it had taken part; it had done what it was meant to do.

So the man told the story of Humpty Dumpty, who tumbled downstairs and after all got to the throne and married the Princess, and the children clapped their hands and cried, "Go on, go on." They wanted Ivede Avede as well, but they only got Humpty Dumpty. The fir stood there quite still and full of thought; never had the birds in the forest told such tales as this; "Humpty Dumpty tumbled downstairs and yet married the Princess. Yes, yes, that's the way things go in the world," thought the fir, and believed it was all true; the man who told the story was so nice. "Yes, yes, who can tell? Perhaps I shall tumble downstairs too and marry a Princess." So it enjoyed itself with thinking of the next day, and of being dressed out with candles and toys and gold and fruit. "To-morrow I won't shiver," it thought. "I'll enjoy myself properly with all my finery. To-morrow I shall hear the story of Humpty Dumpty over again, and perhaps the one about Ivede Avede." All night the tree stood still and thought.

Next morning in came the men and the maids. "Now the dressing will begin again," thought the tree. But they dragged it out of the room and up stairs into a loft, and there put it away in a dark corner where no daylight came. "What's the meaning of this?" thought the tree. "What am I to do here, what can I listen to here?" It leant up against the wall and stood there, thinking, thinking.

It had plenty of time for that, for days and nights passed by, and no one came up there, and when somebody did come at last, it was only to stow away some big boxes in the corner. The tree was quite hidden up; you might have thought it was clean forgotten.

"It's winter outside now," thought the tree. "The ground is hard and covered with snow. The people couldn't plant me now, so I shall stay here under cover till spring. What a good plan that is! Lord, how kind the people are! I only wish it wasn't quite so dark and so frightfully lonely here. There's not even a little hare. It was very pleasant after all, out there in the forest; yes, even when he jumped over me, though I didn't like that at the time. Frightfully lonely it is up here, to be sure."

At that moment a little mouse said "Pi pi," and came stealing out, and then another little one. They sniffed at the fir and ran about among its branches. "It's horribly cold," said the little mice, "but for all that it's a delightful place, isn't it, old fir?"

"I'm not at all old," said the fir, "there are a lot who are much older than me."

"Where do you come from?" asked the mice, "and what do you know about?" (indeed they were dreadfully inquisitive). "Do tell us about the loveliest place in the world. Have you ever been there? Have you been in the storeroom, where there are cheeses lying on the shelves and bacon hanging from the ceiling, and where you can dance on tallow candles and go in thin and come out fat?" "No, I don't know that," said the tree, "but I know the place where the sun shines and the birds sing." And with that it told them all its story from its youth up, and the little mice had never heard anything of the kind before, and they listened most attentively and said, "Dear me, what a lot you've seen, and how happy you've been!"

"I?" said the fir and began thinking over what it had told them. "Yes, after all, those were merry days," and then it told them about Christmas Eve when it had been decked out with cakes and candles.

"Oh!" said the little mice. "How happy you have been, old fir!"

"I'm not old at all," said the tree, "it was only this winter that I came out of the forest. I'm in the prime of life. I've hardly begun to grow properly."

"What lovely stories you do tell!" said the little mice; and next night they came with four more little mice who wanted to hear the tree tell stories; and the more it told the more plainly it remembered it all itself, and thought "Those were very merry days, to be sure, but they may come again: they may. Humpty Dumpty tumbled downstairs and yet married the Princess. Perhaps I too shall get a Princess." And then the fir remembered a very pretty little birch tree that grew in the

forest, and to it she seemed like a real beautiful Princess.

"Who's Humpty Dumpty?" the little mice asked, and it told them the whole story, for it could recollect every single word of it; and the little mice were fit to jump to the very top of the tree with delight. Next night a great many more mice came, and on Sunday two rats besides; but the rats said the story did not amuse them; and that disappointed the little mice, for it made them too think less of it.

"So that's the only story you know?" asked the rats. "That's the only one," the tree replied. "I heard it on the happiest evening of my life; but at the time I didn't think how happy I was."

"Well, it's an extraordinarily poor story; don't you know one with bacon and tallow candles in it? Haven't you any store-room stories?"

"No," said the tree.

"Oh, well! Much obliged, I'm sure," said the rats, and went off home. At last the small mice stopped away too, and then the tree said with a sigh, "It was very nice, so it was, when they sat round me, those nimble little mice, and listened to my stories. Now that's past and gone too; but I must remember to enjoy myself when I'm taken out again."

But when did that happen? Why, it was one morning when people came and rummaged about in the loft. The boxes were shifted and the tree was pulled out. They tumbled it down on the floor pretty roughly, to be sure, but then a man dragged it over towards the stairs where the sun shone.

"Now life's beginning again," thought the tree when it felt the fresh air and the first sunbeam—and now it was out in the yard. Everything happened so quickly that the tree quite forgot to look at itself, there was so much to see all about it. The yard was next door to a garden, and there everything was in bloom. Roses hung fresh and fragrant over the low fence, the lime trees were in flower, and the swallows were flying around and saying, "Kvirre-virre-vit! my husband's come!" But it wasn't the fir that they meant.

"Now I'm going to live," said the tree, in exultation, stretching out its branches. Alas! they were all withered and yellow. It was in a corner that it lay, among weeds and nettles. The gold paper star was still fixed on its crown, and glittered in the bright sunshine.

Some of the merry children who had danced about the tree at Christmas, and been so gay, were playing in the yard. One of the littlest ran across and pulled the gold star off the tree.

"Look what's been left on the ugly old Christmas tree!" he said, and he trampled on the branches till they snapped under his boots.

The tree looked at all the beauty of blossom and freshness in the garden and then at itself, and it wished it had stayed in its dark corner in the loft. It thought of its fresh youth in the forest, and of the merry Christmas Eve, and of the little mice who had so enjoyed listening to the story of Humpty Dumpty.

"Past and gone, past and gone!" said the poor tree. "If only I'd enjoyed myself when I could! Past and gone!"

The men came and chopped the tree into little bits—a whole faggot of them—and it made a rare blaze under the big brewing kettle, and deeply it sighed, and every sigh was like a little gun-fire. So the children who were playing about ran in and sat down in front of the fire and looked at it and cried "Pop, pop!" But at every report—which was a deep sigh—the tree was thinking of some summer day in the forest, or a winter night out there, when the stars were shining; or it was thinking of Christmas Eve and Humpty Dumpty, the one and only story it had heard and knew how to tell—and with that the tree was burnt up.

The boys went on playing in the yard, and the smallest of them had on his chest the gold star which the tree had worn on the happiest evening of its life. It was past and gone now: the tree was past and gone, and the story too. Past and gone, past and gone!—it's the same with all stories.

FOOTNOTES:

[1]Nobody knows what this story was, if it ever existed.

Transcriber's Note:

1. page 179—changed single quote to double in sentence 'rejoice in your strong growth...'
2. page 181—changed single quote to double in sentence "What's this they're doing,"
3. page 181—removed extra "to" in following sentence
4. page 182—moved period inside quote marks in sentence "Go on, go on".

[End of *The Fir Tree* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]