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The Old Oak Tree's Last Dream

A Christmas Tale

by

Hans Christian Andersen

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

There stood in the wood, high up on the slope, by the open shore, a good old Oak tree that was just exactly three hundred and sixty-five years old; that long time was for the tree no more than the same number of days would be for us human beings. We are awake in the daytime and sleep at night, and then it is that we have our dreams; but with the tree it is different. The tree is awake for three of the seasons, and it is only towards winter that it gets its sleep. Winter is its sleeping-time, its night, after the long day that we call Spring, Summer and Autumn.

For many a warm summer day had the Day-fly danced about the tree's top; it had lived and hovered about and enjoyed itself, and when for an instant the little creature rested itself, in quiet happiness, on one of the big green oak leaves, the tree would always say: "Poor little thing, a single day is the whole of your life! How short that is! It is very sad."

"Sad!" the Day-fly would answer. "What do you mean by that? Everything is bright and warm and lovely as it can be, and I am very happy."

"But think, only one day and it is all over."

"Over?" said the Day-fly. "What's over? Are you 'over', too?"

"No, I shall live for perhaps thousands of your days, and my day lasts for three whole seasons. That means a time so long that you can't reckon it up."

"No, I can't, for I don't understand you. You have thousands of my days, perhaps, but I have thousands of moments to be glad and happy in. Will all the beauty of the world come to an end when you die?"

"Ah, no!" said the tree. "It will certainly last longer, infinitely longer than I can imagine."

"Why, then, we both have the same amount, only we reckon it differently."

And the Day-fly danced and played in the air and rejoiced in its delicate fine-wrought wings with their silk and velvet, and in the warm air that was spiced with the scent of the clover fields and the wild roses in the hedge, of elder and honeysuckle, not to speak of woodruff and cowslips and wild mint. So strong was the perfume that the Day-fly thought it must have made him a little drunk. Long and lovely was the day, full of happiness, and the little fly always felt comfortably tired of all the pleasure. His wings wouldn't carry him any longer, and quite gently he settled down on a soft swaying blade of grass, nodded his head after his own fashion, and fell happily to sleep; and the sleep was death.

"Poor little Day-fly," said the Oak, "that really was a short life!"

And every summer day the same dance went on again. There was the same question and answer and the same sleeping away to death. It repeated itself through whole generations of Day-flies, and they were all equally gay and happy. The Oak stood there awake through the morning of spring, the noon of summer, and the evening of autumn, and now its hour of sleep, its night, was at hand: winter was coming.

Already the great winds were singing: "Good night! Good night! Here falls a leaf! There falls a leaf! We are plucking, plucking! Look out for your sleep! We are singing you to sleep, rustling you to sleep, but it's good for the old branches, eh? They creak with the pure pleasure of it. Sleep well, sleep well! This is your three hundred and sixty-fifth night: you're really only a yearling now. Sleep well. The clouds will drop snow, and there'll be a whole blanket of it, a snug coverlet about your feet. Sleep well, and pleasant dreams to you!"

And the Oak stood stripped of all his leaves, ready to go to bed for the whole winter long and to dream many a dream: and his dreams, like ours, were always of something he had experienced.

Once he too had been little; yes, an acorn had been his cradle. Now, according to our counting, he was in his fourth century. He was the largest and most vigorous tree in the wood: his crown soared high over all the other trees and was seen far out at sea—a landmark for ships: little thought he how many eyes there were that looked only for him. High up in

his green crown the wood-pigeons built, and the cuckoo called there, and in autumn, when his leaves shone like plates of beaten copper, the migrant birds came and rested there before they flew away over the sea: but now it was winter, and the tree stood leafless. It was plain to be seen how bent and gnarled his branches spread. Crows and jackdaws came and sat there by turns and talked about the hard times that were setting in and how difficult it was to get food in winter.

It was just the holy Christmas time when the tree had his most beautiful dream: and that is what we are to hear.

The tree had a clear perception that it was a holiday time. He seemed to hear all the church bells of the countryside ringing: and besides it was mild and warm as on a beautiful day. He spread out his mighty crown all fresh and green. The sunbeams played between leaf and branch, the air was full of the scent of plants and bushes: spangled butterflies played hide-and-seek, and the Day-flies danced as if everything were only arranged for them to dance and enjoy themselves. All that the tree had lived through and seen round him in all the years passed by as in one great pageant. He saw knights and ladies of the olden time ride through the wood with plumed hats and hawk on hand. The hunting-horn sounded and the hounds bayed. He saw the enemy's troops, with bright weapons and gay clothing, with spear and halberd, pitch their tents and strike them; the watch fires blazed up and there was singing and sleeping under the tree's spreading branches. He saw lovers meet in the moonlight in quiet happiness and cut their names, or the first letters of them, on his grey-green bark. Once—years ago, it was—lutes and Aeolian harps had been hung up on the boughs of the Oak by merry prentices off on their journeys: now again they hung there, and rang out once more to delight him. The wood-pigeons cooed as if they wanted to express all that the tree felt, and the cuckoo cuckooed to tell how many a summer day he was to live.

Then it seemed as if a new current of life was thrilling through the tree, down into his tiniest root, up into his topmost twig, and out into all his leaves. The tree felt that he was stretching himself. He was conscious in his roots how even down in the earth below there was life and warmth: conscious that his strength was increasing, that he was growing higher and higher. Up rose his trunk, there was no pause: more and more he grew—his crown waxed fuller, spread out, spread upward—and as the tree grew his vigour grew too—his exhilarating desire to reach even higher, right up to the bright warm sun.

Already he had grown far up above the clouds which sailed away below him like dark skeins of migrant birds or great white flights of swans. And every one of his leaves could see, as if it had eyes. The stars became visible in the daylight, all large and bright; each of them shone like a pair of eyes, so kind, so clear, they reminded him of eyes he had known, loving eyes, eyes of children, of lovers, when they met beneath the tree.

A pleasant sight it was and a joyful, and yet with all the joy he felt a longing, a yearning. If only all the other trees of the wood down below, all the bushes, the weeds, the flowers, could rise along with him and feel and drink in all this light and gladness! The mighty Oak in the midst of his dream of glory was yet not completely happy unless he had them all with him, small and great; and this feeling penetrated through every branch and leaf as deeply and as strongly as in a human breast.

The tree moved his crown as if seeking something he could not find. He looked downward, and then—then there came to him a scent of woodruff, and upon that, stronger still, a scent of honeysuckle and violet: he thought he could hear the cuckoo call and answer itself. Yes, through the clouds the green top of the wood was peeping up. The tree saw beneath him the other trees growing and rising like himself: bushes and weeds shot high into the air—some tore themselves loose, root and all, and flew up more quickly. Swiftest of all was the birch; like a white flash of lightning its slender trunk flickered upward, its branches waving like green pennants and flags. The whole growth of the wood, down to the brown-plumaged reeds, was springing together, and the birds kept it company and sang, and in the grass, which flew and floated wide like a long green silken thread, sat the grasshopper playing on his shinbone with his wing: cockchafers boomed and bees hummed, every bird sang full-throated, everything was music and gladness right up into the heaven.

"But the little red flower by the waterside, that should be here too," said the Oak, "and the blue cuckoo-flower and the little daisy"—for the Oak would have them all together with him.

"We are here! We are here!" Voices rang and sang in answer. "But the pretty woodruff of last summer—and the year before there was a bed of lilies of the valley—and the wild apple tree, how pretty it was! And all the beauty of the wood for years past, many years—had it but lived and lasted till now, it could have been with me too."

"We are with you," rang the voices from yet higher up; it seemed as if they had flown on before.

"No, but this is too beautiful to be believed!" the old Oak cried joyfully. "I have them all together, big and small! not one is forgotten! How can such happiness be possible or thinkable?" "In God's heaven it is possible and thinkable," rang the voices.

Then the tree, which was still growing, felt that his roots were tearing themselves from the earth.

"Now this is best of all," said he. "Now no bond holds me. I can soar up to the brightest of all in light and brightness, and I have all my dear ones with me, great and small—all together! All!"

That was the dream of the Oak tree: and while he dreamt, there passed a mighty storm far over land and sea on the holy eve of Christmas. The sea rolled heavy billows against the beach, the tree creaked, cracked, was torn up by the roots. Just as it was dreaming that its roots were loosening themselves, it fell. Its three hundred and sixty-five years were now as the single day of the Day-fly.

On Christmas morning, when the sun rose, the storm had laid itself to rest. All the church bells were chiming for the holy day, and from every chimney, even the least, on the cottager's roof, the smoke rose blue, as from the altar at the Druid's feast—the smoke of the thank-offering. Calmer and calmer grew the sea, and on a great ship that stood off the land and had bravely fought out the hard weather of last night, every flag was being run up, in gay Christmas fashion.

"The tree is gone, the old Oak that was our landmark!" said the sailormen. "It's fallen in last night's storm! Who'll find us such another? Why, nobody!"

That was the funeral sermon that the tree got—(short it was, but well meant) as it lay stretched on the carpet of snow on the shore—and far over it rang the sound of a hymn from the ship—a song of the joy of Christmas and of the redemption of man's soul by Christ, and of the life everlasting.

*Unto the clouds, O flock of God
Your voices raise. Hallelujah!
So all mankind contenting
This joy hath no repenting.
Hallelujah!*

So ran the old hymn, and everyone on the ship out there was uplifted after his own fashion by it, and by the prayer, just as the old tree had risen upward in its last and fairest dream on Christmas Eve.

[End of *The Old Oak Tree's Last Dream (A Christmas Tale)* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]