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The Oak-tree and the Ivy.



THE OAK-TREE AND THE IVY.

In the greenwood stood a mighty oak. So majestic was he that all who came that way paused to admire his strength and beauty, and all the other trees of the greenwood acknowledged him to be their monarch.

Now it came to pass that the ivy loved the oak-tree, and inclining her graceful tendrils where he stood, she crept about his feet and twined herself around his sturdy and knotted trunk. And the oak-tree pitied the ivy.

"Oho!" he cried, laughing boisterously, but good-naturedly,—"oho! so you love me, do you, little vine? Very well, then; play about my feet, and I will keep the storms from you and will tell you pretty stories about the clouds, the birds, and the stars."

The ivy marvelled greatly at the strange stories the oak-tree told; they were stories the oak-tree heard from the wind that loitered about his lofty head and whispered to the leaves of his topmost branches. Sometimes the story was about the great ocean in the East, sometimes of the broad prairies in the West, sometimes of the ice-king who lived in the North, and sometimes of the flower-queen who dwelt in the South. Then, too, the moon told a story to the oak-tree every night,—or at least every night that she came to the greenwood, which was very often, for the greenwood is a very charming spot, as we all know. And the oak-tree repeated to the ivy every story the moon told and every song the stars sang.

"Pray, what are the winds saying now?" or "What song is that I hear?" the ivy would ask; and then the oak-tree would repeat the story or the song, and the ivy would listen in great wonderment.

Whenever the storms came, the oak-tree cried to the little ivy: "Cling close to me, and no harm shall befall you! See how strong I am; the tempest does not so much as stir me—I mock its fury!"

Then, seeing how strong and brave he was, the ivy hugged him closely; his brown, rugged breast protected her from every harm, and she was secure.

The years went by; how quickly they flew,—spring, summer, winter, and then again spring, summer, winter,—ah, life is short in the greenwood as elsewhere! And now the ivy was no longer a weakly little vine to excite the pity of the passer-by. Her thousand beautiful arms had twined hither and thither about the oak-tree, covering his brown and knotted trunk, shooting forth a bright, delicious foliage and stretching far up among his lower branches. Then the oak-tree's pity grew into a love for the ivy, and the ivy was filled with a great joy. And the oak-tree and the ivy were wed one June night, and there was a wonderful celebration in the greenwood; and there was the most beautiful music, in which the pine-trees, the crickets, the katydids, the frogs, and the nightingales joined with pleasing harmony.

The oak-tree was always good and gentle to the ivy. "There is a storm coming over the hills," he would say. "The east wind tells me so; the swallows fly low in the air, and the sky is dark. Cling close to me, my beloved, and no harm shall befall you."

Then, confidently and with an always-growing love, the ivy would cling more closely to the oak-tree, and no harm came to her.

"How good the oak-tree is to the ivy!" said the other trees of the greenwood. The ivy heard them, and she loved the oak-tree more and more. And, although the ivy was now the most umbrageous and luxuriant vine in all the greenwood, the oak-tree regarded her still as the tender little thing he had laughingly called to his feet that spring day, many years before,—the same little ivy he had told about the stars, the clouds, and the birds. And, just as patiently as in those days he had told her of these things, he now repeated other tales the winds whispered to his topmost boughs,—tales of the ocean in the East, the prairies in the West, the ice-king in the North, and the flower-queen in the South. Nestling upon his brave breast and in his stout arms, the ivy heard him tell these wondrous things, and she never wearied with the listening.

"How the oak-tree loves her!" said the ash. "The lazy vine has naught to do but to twine herself about the arrogant oak-tree and hear him tell his wondrous stories!"

The ivy heard these envious words, and they made her very sad; but she said nothing of them to the oak-tree, and that night the oak-tree rocked her to sleep as he repeated the lullaby a zephyr was singing to him.

"There is a storm coming over the hills," said the oak-tree one day. "The east wind tells me so; the swallows fly low in

the air, and the sky is dark. Clasp me round about with thy dear arms, my beloved, and nestle close unto my bosom, and no harm shall befall thee."

"I have no fear," murmured the ivy; and she clasped her arms most closely about him and nestled unto his bosom.

The storm came over the hills and swept down upon the greenwood with deafening thunder and vivid lightning. The storm-king himself rode upon the blast; his horses breathed flames, and his chariot trailed through the air like a serpent of fire. The ash fell before the violence of the storm-king's fury, and the cedars groaning fell, and the hemlocks and the pines; but the oak-tree alone quailed not.

"Oho!" cried the storm-king, angrily, "the oak-tree does not bow to me, he does not tremble in my presence. Well, we shall see."

With that, the storm-king hurled a mighty thunderbolt at the oak-tree, and the brave, strong monarch of the greenwood was riven. Then, with a shout of triumph, the storm-king rode away.

"Dear oak-tree, you are riven by the storm-king's thunderbolt!" cried the ivy, in anguish.

"Ay," said the oak-tree, feebly, "my end has come; see, I am shattered and helpless."

"But *I* am unhurt," remonstrated the ivy, "and I will bind up your wounds and nurse you back to health and vigor."

And so it was that, although the oak-tree was ever afterward a riven and broken thing, the ivy concealed the scars upon his shattered form and covered his wounds all over with her soft foliage.

"I had hoped, dear one," she said, "to grow up to thy height, to live with thee among the clouds, and to hear the solemn voices thou didst hear. Thou wouldst have loved me better then?"

But the old oak-tree said: "Nay, nay, my beloved; I love thee better as thou art, for with thy beauty and thy love thou comfortest mine age."

Then would the ivy tell quaint stories to the old and broken oak-tree,—stories she had learned from the crickets, the bees, the butterflies, and the mice when she was an humble little vine and played at the foot of the majestic oak-tree, towering in the greenwood with no thought of the tiny shoot that crept toward him with her love. And these simple tales pleased the old and riven oak-tree; they were not as heroic as the tales the winds, the clouds, and the stars told, but they were far sweeter, for they were tales of contentment, of humility, of love.

So the old age of the oak-tree was grander than his youth.

And all who went through the greenwood paused to behold and admire the beauty of the oak-tree then; for about his seared and broken trunk the gentle vine had so entwined her graceful tendrils and spread her fair foliage, that one saw not the havoc of the years nor the ruin of the tempest, but only the glory of the oak-tree's age, which was the ivy's love and ministering.

1886.

[End of *The Oak-tree and the Ivy* by Eugene Field]