



The Fir Tree

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

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CHAPTER 1

Out in the forest grew a pretty little fir tree. He had a good place of his own with plenty of sunshine and air. Around him grew many larger **comrades**, both firs and pines. He had all this, but the little fir was still in a great hurry to grow. He didn't value the warm sun or the cool air.

The fir tree took no notice of the village children who came happily chattering when they were out gathering strawberries or raspberries. They often came there with jugs full of berries, or with strawberries strung on a straw. They would sit down by the little tree and say, "Look how small and pretty it is!" The little fir tree didn't like to hear this at all.

By the next year the fir tree was taller by quite a length, and after another year he was even taller. With fir trees one can always tell by their **shoots** how old they are.

"Oh, if I were only a big tree like the others," sighed the little tree. "Then I could spread my branches far out around 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." He took no pleasure in the sunshine, or the birds and red clouds that sailed over him morning and evening.



When it was winter and the snow lay sparkling white all around, a hare would often come bounding along and jump over the little tree. Oh, how that annoyed him! Then two winters passed, and by the third, the tree was so big that the hare had to run around him.

“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. The young fir, who was by this time quite big, shuddered because the great stately trees fell with a crash and a smash. When their branches were cut off, they looked bare, long and thin, and he could hardly recognise them. Then they were loaded onto wagons and dragged out of the forest by horses.



Where were they going? What awaited them?

In spring, when the swallows and the storks came, the tree asked, “Do you know where they were taken to? Have you seen them?”



The swallows knew nothing, but the stork looked thoughtful. She 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 dare say it was them. They smelt of pine. Many’s the time I salute them. They carry their heads high, that they do.”

“Oh, I wish I was big enough to fly over the sea too! What does the sea look like in reality? What is it like?”

“Oh, that would take too long to explain,” said the stork as she walked off.

“You should rejoice in your youth,” said the sunbeams. “Rejoice in your strong growth and the young life that’s in you.” The wind kissed the tree and the dew shed tears on him, but the fir didn’t understand at all.

When Christmas drew near, some young trees were felled. Many of which were not so big or so grownup as the restless fir who was never happy and always wanted to be off. These fine young trees, they were the prettiest, kept their branches and 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 taken?”

“We know, we know,” twittered the sparrows. “Down in the town we’ve peeped in the windows, we know where they’re driven to. The greatest splendour and the greatest magnificence one can imagine awaits them. We’ve 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 his branches. “What happens then?”

“Why, we didn’t see more. What we did see was marvellous.”

“Can I be destined to go by that bright path?” said the tree, **exulting**.

“That’s even better than crossing over the sea. I am sick with longing. If only it was Christmas! I am quite as tall, and my branches stretch out as far as those 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 something even better, more beautiful will follow, 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 what’s the matter with me.”

“Rejoice in us,” cried the breeze and the sunshine. “Rejoice that you are young and outside in the fresh air.”

He wouldn’t rejoice. He grew and grew over winter and summer. Many travellers came across him and said, “What a fine tree!”

At Christmas time the fir tree was the first of all the trees to be felled. The axe cut deep through his **marrow** and he fell to the ground with a sigh. The fir tree felt a pang—it was like a swoon—and couldn’t think of happiness. He was sad to be separated from his home, from the spot on which he had grown up. He knew that he would never again see his dear old companions, the little bushes and flowers around him—perhaps not even the birds! His departure was not at all pleasant.

The fir tree only felt like himself once he was unloaded with the other trees in the yard and heard someone say, “That’s a fine one. We don’t need the others.”

Two servants in rich **livery** came out and carried the fir tree into a large handsome drawing-room. All round the walls hung portraits, and beside the large stove were Chinese vases with lions on their sides. There were rocking-chairs, silk-covered sofas, large tables covered with picture books, and toys worth a fortune—at least, so said the children.

The fir was set up in a big tub filled with sand. Nobody could see that it was a tub for green cloth was draped all around it, and it stood on a large colourful carpet. Oh, how the tree quivered! What was going to happen?

The servants helped the young ladies decorate the tree. On the branches they hung little nets cut out of coloured paper and every net was filled with sugarplums. Gilded apples and walnuts were hung onto the branches, looking as though they had grown there. More than a hundred blue and white **tapers** were placed among the leaves. Dolls that looked exactly like people—the tree had never seen anything like them—swung **to-and-fro** amongst the green, and at the very top sat a large star of gold leaf.



He was splendid, splendid beyond description.

“Tonight!” they all said. “How it will shine.”

“If it only it was night-time. If only the candles were lit!” thought the tree. “And what’ll happen then? Will the trees come out of the forest and look at me? Will the sparrows fly to the windows? Shall I grow here forever and be decorated in winter and summer too?”



He thought a great deal about the matter—he was so impatient with sheer longing that he gave himself a pain in his back, and this, with trees, is just as painful as a headache for us.

At last! The candles were lit. Oh, the brilliance and the glory! It made the tree tremble in every branch until one of the candles set fire to a **sprig** and it smoked furiously.

“Help! Help!” screamed the girls as they hurried to put the fire out. After this the tree dared not quiver. What a state he was in! He was terribly afraid of losing any of his beauty, and quite bewildered by all the lights and colour. Suddenly the folding doors were thrown open and in rushed a crowd of children almost tipping the tree to the ground. The elders followed quietly, and the small children stood silently—but 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.



“What’s this they’re doing,” thought the tree.
“What’s going to happen?”

The candles burnt down to the branches. As they burned down they were put out, one after the other, and then the children had permission to **plunder** the tree. They leaped upon him so enthusiastically the fir’s branches cracked! If he hadn’t been attached to the ceiling by the top and the gold star, he would have been fallen right over.

The children danced about with their beautiful toys, and nobody looked at the tree except the old nurse who went peering among the branches 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 in the shade and the tree can listen too,” said he. “I shall tell you one story. Will you have the one about Ivede Avede, or the one about Humpty Dumpty who tumbled down the stairs and still came to the throne to marry the Princess?”

“Ivede Avede,” cried some of them.

“Humpty Dumpty,” cried others. There was a deal of shrieking and screaming, only the fir kept quiet.

He thought to himself, “Aren’t I to take any part or do anything at all?”

Well, he had taken part! He had done what he was meant to do.

So the man told the story of Humpty Dumpty, who tumbled down the stairs and still got to the throne and married the Princess. 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 tales like this.

"Humpty Dumpty tumbled down the stairs and married the Princess. Yes, yes! That's the way things should be in the world," thought the fir. He believed the story was all true seeing as the man who told it was so nice. "Yes, yes, who knows! Perhaps I shall tumble too and marry a Princess." He began to look forward to the next day, and of being decked out with candles and toys and gold and fruit. "Tomorrow I won't tremble," he thought. "I'll enjoy myself properly with all my finery. Tomorrow I shall hear the story of Humpty Dumpty over again, and perhaps the one about Ivede Avede." All night the tree stood still in deep thought.



In the morning, in came the men and the maids. “Now the decorating will begin again,” thought the tree. But they dragged him out of the room and upstairs into a loft. He was put up there, 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 hear up here?” He leant up against the wall and stood there, thinking, thinking.

The fir tree had plenty of time for thinking. Days and nights passed, and nobody came up there. When somebody did come at last, it was only to **stow** away some big boxes in the corner. The tree was quite hidden, it seemed as if he had been 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 have been put away until springtime comes. What a good plan that is! How thoughtful 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, “Squeak, squeak.”



Then another little one came peeping out of his hole. They sniffed at the fir tree and ran among his branches. “It’s horribly cold,” said the little mice. “Apart from that it’s a delightful place, isn’t it old fir?”

“I’m not at all old!” cried the fir tree. “There are many who are much older than me.”

“Where do you come from?” asked the mice. “What can you do?” Indeed, they were dreadfully **inquisitive**. “Tell us about the loveliest place in the world. Have you ever been there? Have you been in the **larder**, where there are cheeses stored on the shelves and bacon hanging from the ceiling? In there you can dance on **tallow** candles, and go in thin and come out stout!”



“No, I don’t know of that place,” said the tree. “I do know of the place where the sun shines and the birds sing.” And with that he told them the story of his youth, and the little mice had never heard anything like it before.

They listened most attentively and said, “Dear me, what a lot you’ve seen and how fortunate you’ve been!”

“Me?” said the fir tree. He pondered over what he had told them. “Yes, I guess they were merry days.” He then told them about Christmas Eve when he 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 from 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.

The next night they came back with four more little mice who wanted to hear the tree tell stories. The more stories he told, the clearer he remembered and pondered, “Those were very merry days, to be sure, but they may come again ... they may. Humpty Dumpty tumbled

down the stairs and still 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. To him, she seemed like a really beautiful Princess.



"Who is Humpty Dumpty?" the little mice asked.

The fir tree told them the whole story, for he remembered every single word of it. The little mice were jumping as high as the tree with delight. The next night a great many more mice came, and on

Sunday two rats as well. The rats were not as amused by the story and that disappointed the little mice, for it made them like it less too.

"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. At the time I didn't know 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 larder stories?"

"No," said the tree.

"Oh, well!" said the rats, and disappeared off home.



CHAPTER 4

Eventually, the small mice stayed away too. The tree said with a sigh, “It was very nice, so it was, when those **nimble** little mice sat around me and listened to my stories. Now that’s past and gone too. I must remember to enjoy myself when I’m free from here 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 threw him down on the floor roughly, to be sure, but then a man dragged him over towards the stairs where the sun shone.

“Now life is beginning again,” thought the tree when he felt the fresh air and the first sunbeams—and then he found himself out in the yard. Everything happened so quickly that the tree didn’t have time to think.

The yard was next door to a garden where 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 has come!” But they were not talking about the fir tree.



“Now I’m going to live,” said the tree, in exultation, stretching out his branches. Oh no! They were all withered and yellow. He was thrown in a corner among weeds and nettles. The gold paper star was still on his top and it glittered in the bright sunshine.

Some of the children who had danced around the tree at Christmas, and been so happy, 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 flowers and freshness in the garden. He then looked at himself and wished he had stayed in the dark corner in the loft. He thought of his 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 pile of firewood. The wood gave out crackling sighs as it burnt brightly under the big brewing kettle.

The children who were playing, ran to sit in front of the fire. They stared at it and cried, “Pop! Pop!”

With each deep sigh the tree was thinking of a summer day in the forest, or a winter night when the stars were shining. He was thinking of Christmas Eve and Humpty Dumpty, the one and only story he had heard and knew how to tell.

The boys went on playing in the yard, and the smallest of them held to 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, just as every tale must end.

T H E E N D



GLOSSARY

comrades friends and companions

exulting joyful

felled cut down

gilded covered thinly with gold leaf or gold paint

inquisitive curious

larder pantry, or place to store food

livery a uniform worn by servants

marrow the core

nimble quick

plunder to take

shoots young branches

sprig a twig with some leaves

stately grand

stow to store away

tallow a fat used to make candles

tapers candles

to-and-fro back and forth

A classic story about a little fir tree who spends his time wishing to be tall and grown up. Written by Hans Christian Anderson, the tale follows the fir tree from his beautiful forest home, to his time as a stately Christmas tree and beyond. A lovely cautionary tale about finding joy in what you have.

