In the forest, high up on the steep shore and not far from the open seacoast, stood a very old oak tree. It was just three hundred and sixty-five years old, but that long time was to the tree as the same number of days might be to us. We wake by day and sleep by night, and then we have our dreams. It is different with the tree; it is obliged to keep awake through three seasons of the year and does not get any sleep till winter comes. Winter is its time for rest—its night after the long day of spring, summer, and autumn.

During many a warm summer, the Ephemeras, which are flies that exist for only a day, had fluttered about the old oak, enjoyed life, and felt happy. And if, for a moment, one of the tiny creatures rested on the large, fresh leaves, the tree would always say: “Poor little creature! your whole life consists of but a single day. How very short! It must be quite melancholy.”

“Melancholy! what do you mean?” the little creature would always reply. “Why do you say that? Everything around me is so wonderfully bright and warm and beautiful that it makes me joyous.”

“But only for one day, and then it is all over.”

“Over!” repeated the fly; “what is the meaning of ‘all over’? Are you ‘all over’ too?”

“No, I shall very likely live for thousands of your days, and my day is whole seasons long; indeed, it is so long that you could never reckon it up.”
“No? then I don’t understand you. You may have thousands of my days, but I have thousands of moments in which I can be merry and happy. Does all the beauty of the world cease when you die?”

“No,” replied the tree; “it will certainly last much longer, infinitely longer than I can think of.”

“Well, then,” said the little fly, “we have the same time to live, only we reckon differently.” And the little creature danced and floated in the air, rejoicing in its delicate wings of gauze and velvet, rejoicing in the balmy breezes laden with the fragrance from the clover fields and wild roses, elder blossoms and honeysuckle, and from the garden hedges of wild thyme, primroses, and mint. The perfume of all these was so strong that it almost intoxicated the little fly. The long and beautiful day had been so full of joy and sweet delights, that, when the sun sank, the fly felt tired of all its happiness and enjoyment. Its wings could sustain it no longer, and gently and slowly it glided down to the soft, waving blades of grass, nodded its little head as well as it could, and slept peacefully and sweetly. The fly was dead.

“Poor little Ephemera!” said the oak; “what a short life!” And so on every summer day the dance was repeated, the same questions were asked and the same answers given, and there was the same peaceful falling asleep at sunset. This continued through many generations of Ephemeras, and all of them felt merry and happy.

The oak remained awake through the morning of spring, the noon of summer, and the evening of autumn; its time of rest, its night, drew near—its winter was coming. Here fell a leaf and there fell a leaf. Already the storms were singing: “Good night, good night. We will rock you and lull you. Go to sleep, go to sleep. We will sing you to sleep, and shake you to sleep, and it will do your old twigs good; they will even crackle with pleasure. Sleep sweetly, sleep sweetly, it is your three hundred and sixty-fifth night. You are still very young in the world. Sleep sweetly; the clouds will drop snow upon you, which will be your coverlid, warm and sheltering to your feet. Sweet sleep to you, and pleasant dreams.”

And there stood the oak, stripped of all its leaves, left to rest during the whole of a long winter, and to dream many dreams of events that had happened, just as men dream.

The great tree had once been small; indeed, in its cradle it had been an acorn. According to human reckoning, it was now in the fourth century of its existence. It was the largest and best tree in the forest. Its summit towered above all the other trees and could be seen far out at sea, so that it served as a landmark to the sailors.
It had no idea how many eyes looked eagerly for it. In its topmost branches the wood pigeon built her nest, and the cuckoo sang his well-known song, the familiar notes echoing among the boughs; and in autumn, when the leaves looked like beaten copper plates, the birds of passage came and rested on the branches before beginning their flight across the sea.

But now that it was winter, the tree stood leafless, so that every one could see how crooked and bent were the branches that sprang forth from the trunk. Crows and rooks came by turns and sat on them, and talked of the hard times that were beginning, and how difficult it was in winter to obtain a living.

It was just at the holy Christmas time that the tree dreamed a dream. The tree had doubtless a feeling that the festive time had arrived, and in its dream fancied it heard the bells of the churches ringing. And yet it seemed to be a beautiful summer's day, mild and warm. The tree's mighty summit was crowned with spreading, fresh green foliage; the sunbeams played among its leaves and branches, and the air was full of fragrance from herb and blossom; painted butterflies chased each other; the summer flies danced around it as if the world had been created merely that they might dance and be merry. All that had happened to the tree during all the years of its life seemed to pass before it as if in a festive pageant.

It saw the knights of olden times and noble ladies ride through the wood on their gallant steeds, with plumes waving in their hats and with falcons on their wrists, while the hunting horn sounded and the dogs barked. It saw hostile warriors, in colored dress and glittering armor, with spear and halberd, pitching their tents and again taking them down; the watchfires blazed, and men sang and slept under the hospitable shelter of the tree. It saw lovers meet in quiet happiness near it in the moonshine, and carve the initials of their names in the grayish-green bark of its trunk.

Once, but long years had passed since then, guitars and Æolian harps had been hung on its boughs by merry travelers; now they seemed to hang there again, and their marvelous notes sounded again. The wood pigeons cooed as if to express the feelings of the tree, and the cuckoo called out to tell it how many summer days it had yet to live.

Then it appeared to it that new life was thrilling through every fiber of root and stem and leaf, rising even to its highest branches. The tree felt itself stretching and spreading out, while through the root beneath the earth ran the warm vigor of life. As it grew higher and still higher and its strength increased, the topmost boughs
became broader and fuller; and in proportion to its growth its self-satisfaction increased, and there came a joyous longing to grow higher and higher—to reach even to the warm, bright sun itself.

Already had its topmost branches pierced the clouds, which floated beneath them like troops of birds of passage or large white swans; every leaf seemed gifted with sight, as if it possessed eyes to see. The stars became visible in broad daylight, large and sparkling, like clear and gentle eyes. They brought to the tree's memory the light that it had seen in the eyes of a child and in the eyes of lovers who had once met beneath the branches of the old oak.

These were wonderful and happy moments for the old oak, full of peace and joy; and yet amidst all this happiness, the tree felt a yearning desire that all the other trees, bushes, herbs, and flowers beneath it might also be able to rise higher, to see all this splendor and experience the same happiness. The grand, majestic oak could not be quite happy in its enjoyment until all the rest, both great and small, could share it. And this feeling of yearning trembled through every branch, through every leaf, as warmly and fervently as through a human heart.

The summit of the tree waved to and fro and bent downwards, as if in its silent longing it sought something. Then there came to it the fragrance of thyme and the more powerful scent of honeysuckle and violets, and the tree fancied it heard the note of the cuckoo.

At length its longing was satisfied. Up through the clouds came the green summits of the forest trees, and the oak watched them rising higher and higher. Bush and herb shot upward, and some even tore themselves up by the roots to rise more quickly. The quickest of all was the birch tree. Like a lightning flash the slender stem shot upwards in a zigzag line, the branches spreading round it like green gauze and banners. Every native of the wood, even to the brown and feathery rushes, grew with the rest, while the birds ascended with the melody of song. On a blade of grass that fluttered in the air like a long green ribbon sat a grasshopper cleaning its wings with its legs. May beetles hummed, bees murmured, birds sang—each in its own way; the air was filled with the sounds of song and gladness.

“But where is the little blue flower that grows by the water, and the purple bellflower, and the daisy?” asked the oak. “I want them all.”
“Here we are; here we are,” came the reply in words and in song.

“But the beautiful thyme of last summer, where is that? And where are the lilies of the valley which last year covered the earth with their bloom, and the wild apple tree with its fragrant blossoms, and all the glory of the wood, which has flourished year after year? And where is even what may have but just been born?”

“We are here; we are here,” sounded voices high up in the air, as if they had flown there beforehand.

“Why, this is beautiful, too beautiful to be believed,” cried the oak in a joyful tone. “I have them all here, both great and small; not one has been forgotten. Can such happiness be imagined? It seems almost impossible.”

“In heaven with the Eternal God it can be imagined, for all things are possible,” sounded the reply through the air.

And the old tree, as it still grew upwards and onwards, felt that its roots were loosening themselves from the earth.

“It is right so; it is best,” said the tree. “No fetters hold me now. I can fly up to the very highest point in light and glory. And all I love are with me, both small and great. All—all are here.”

Such was the dream of the old oak at the holy Christmas time. And while it dreamed, a mighty storm came rushing over land and sea. The sea rolled in great billows toward the shore. A cracking and crushing was heard in the tree. Its roots were torn from the ground, just at the moment when in its dream it was being loosened from the earth. It fell; its three hundred and sixty-five years were ended like the single day of the Ephemera.

On the morning of Christmas Day, when the sun rose, the storm had ceased. From all the churches sounded the festive bells, and from every hearth, even of the smallest hut, rose the smoke into the blue sky, like the smoke from the festive thank-offerings on the Druids’ altars. The sea gradually became calm, and on board a great ship that had withstood the tempest during the night, all the flags were displayed as a token of joy and festivity.
“The tree is down! the old oak—our landmark on the coast!” exclaimed the sailors. “It must have fallen in the storm of last night. Who can replace it? Alas! no one.” This was the old tree's funeral oration, brief but well said.

There it lay stretched on the snow-covered shore, and over it sounded the notes of a song from the ship—a song of Christmas joy, of the redemption of the soul of man, and of eternal life through Christ.

Sing aloud on this happy morn,
All is fulfilled, for Christ is born;
With songs of joy let us loudly sing,
“Hallelujahs to Christ our King.”

Thus sounded the Christmas carol, and every one on board the ship felt his thoughts elevated through the song and the prayer, even as the old tree had felt lifted up in its last beautiful dream on that Christmas morn.

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