

# EWALD CARL

THE OLD WILLOW TREE,  
AND OTHER STORIES

Carl Ewald

**The Old Willow Tree,  
and Other Stories**

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# Carl Ewald

## The Old Willow Tree, and Other Stories

### The Old Willow-tree

#### 1

There are many kinds of willows and they are so unlike that you would hardly believe them to be relations.

There are some so small and wretched that they creep along the ground. They live on the heath, or high up in the mountains, or in the cold arctic regions. In the winter, they are quite hidden under the snow; in the summer, they just poke up their noses above the tops of the heather.

There are people who shrink from notice because they are so badly off. It is simply stupid to be ashamed of being poor; and the little dwarf-willows are not a bit ashamed. But they know that the soil they grow in is so poor that they can never attain the height of proper trees. If they tried to shoot up and began to carry their heads like their stately cousins the poplars, they would soon learn the difference.

For the poplars are their cousins. They are the stateliest of all the willow-trees and they know it, as any one can see by looking at them with half an eye. You only have to notice the way in which they hold themselves erect to perceive it.

The beech and the oak and the birch and whatever the other trees are called stick out one polite branch on this side and one polite branch on that.

"May I beg you kindly to give me a little bit of sunshine?" says the branch up in the air.

"Can I help you to a little bit of shadow?" says the branch down by the ground.

But the poplars sing a very different tune. With them it is:

"Every branch straight up on high! Close up to the trunk with you! There's nothing to stare at down below! Look above you! Heads up!.. March!"

And all the branches strut right up to the sky and the whole tree shoots up, straight and proud as a pikestaff.

It's tiring. But it's elegant. And it pays. For has any one ever seen a smarter tree than one of those real, regular poplars, as stiff as a tin soldier and as tall as a steeple?

And, when the poplars stand along the road, in a long row on either side, you feel very respectful as you walk between them and are not in the least surprised when it appears that the avenue leads right up to a fine country-house.

The dwarf-willows and the poplars belong to the same family. The first are the commonest on the common side, the second are the smartest on the smart side. Between them are a number of other willow-trees. There are some whose leaves are like silver underneath and some whose leaves quiver so mournfully in the warm summer wind that the poets write verses about them. There are some whose branches droop so sorrowfully towards the ground that people plant them on their graves and some whose branches are so tough and flexible that people use them to weave baskets of. There are some out of which you can carve yourself a grand flute, if you know how. And then there are a heap about which there is nothing very remarkable to tell.

## 2

The willow-tree in this story was just one of the middling sort. But he had a destiny; and that is how he came to find his way into print.

His destiny began with this, that one of the proud poplars who stood in the avenue leading to the manor-house was blown down in a terrible storm. He snapped right down at his roots; the stump was dug up; and it left a very ugly gap in the middle of the long row of trees. As soon as spring came, therefore, the keeper brought a cutting and stuck it where the old poplar used to stand, stamped down the ground firmly all around it and nodded to it:

"Hurry, now, and shoot up," he said. "I know it's in your blood; and you have only to look down the road to see good examples for you to follow in growing."

Now the man thought it was a poplar he had planted. But it was only a quite ordinary willow-twig, which he had taken by mistake, and, as time passed and the cutting grew up, this came to light.

"What a monster!" said the keeper. "We must pull this up again."

"Let him be, now that he's there," said the squire.

For that happened to be his mood that day.

"Shall we put up with him?" asked the poplars along the road.

They whispered about it for a long time; and, as no one knew how to get rid of him, they agreed to put up with him. After all, he belonged to the family, though not to the smart side of it.

"But let me see you make an effort and grow as straight as you're able," said the poplar who stood nearest to him. "You have found your way into much too fine a company, let me tell you. You would have done better beside a village-pond than in the avenue of a manor. But now the scandal is an accomplished fact and we must hush it up as best we may. The rest of us will shoot up and grow a bit straighter and thinner still; and then we'll hope that the quality will drive past without noticing you."

"I'll do my best," said the willow-tree.

In the fields close by, on a little hillock, stood an oak. On the hillock also grew a charming wild rose. They both heard what the trees of the avenue had said and the oak began to scoff at them:

"Fancy caring to stand out there in the road!" he said. "I suppose you will want to be running up and down next, like those silly men and women? It was unkind and thoughtless of your mother to sow you out there. Trees ought to grow together in a wood, if they are not as handsome and stately as I, who can stand alone."

"My mother didn't sow me at all," said the willow-tree.

"Oh, Lord preserve us!" said the oak. "So your mother didn't sow you at all, didn't she? Perhaps the others weren't sown either? Perhaps you just dropped down from the sky?"

"If you had eyes in your head, you would have seen that the keeper put me here," said the willow. "I am a cutting."

And all along the road the poplars whispered to one another:

"We are cuttings ... cuttings ... cuttings..."

It was a real avenue and a real adventure.

"You managed that very well," said the poplar who stood nearest to the willow-tree. "Only go on as you've begun and we will forgive you for not being as smart as the rest of us."

"I'll do my best," replied the willow-tree.

The oak said nothing. He did not know what cuttings were, and did not want to commit himself or make a blunder. But, later on, in the evening, he whispered to the wild rose-bush:

"What was that rubbish he was talking about cuttings?"

"It's not rubbish at all," said the rose-bush. "It was right enough, what the willow said. I myself came out of a seed, like you, and I didn't see the keeper plant him either, for I happened to be busy with my buds that day. But I have some smart cousins up in the garden at the manor-house. They

came out of cuttings. Their scent is so sweet, their colours so bright and their blossoms so rich and full that one simply can't believe it. But they get no seed."

"What next!" said the oak.

"Yes, I, too, would rather be the wild rose I am," said the rose-bush.

### 3

Now years passed, as they are bound to pass.

Spring came and summer, autumn and winter. Rain came and snow came, sunshine and storm, good days and bad. The birds flew out of the country and flew back again, the flowers blossomed and withered, the trees burst into leaf and cast their leaves again, when the time came.

The willow-cutting grew and grew quickly, after the manner of the family. He was now quite a tree, with a thick trunk and a top with many branches.

But there was no denying it: he was not a poplar. And his fellow-members of the avenue were greatly displeased with him:

"Isn't it possible for you to grow taller in stature?" asked the nearest poplar. "You ought never to have been here, but, once you've joined the avenue through an accident, I should like to ask you to stretch yourself up a bit."

"I'll do my best," answered the willow-tree.

"I fear your best isn't good enough," said the poplar. "You have no grip at all to keep your branches in with. They hang quite slack on every side, just as if you were a common beech or birch or oak or whatever the ordinary trees are called."

"Do you call me ordinary, you windbag?" said the oak.

The poplar did not mind a jot what the oak said, but went on admonishing the willow-tree:

"You should take example by the squire's wife," he said. "At first she was no better than a common kitchen-maid. She used to scour the pots and make up the fire and stir the milk when it boiled. I used often to see her go down the avenue bare-armed and bare-headed, with a pail in her hand and her skirts tucked back."

"So did we ... so did we ... so did we," whispered the poplars along the avenue.

"Then the squire fell in love with her and made her his wife," said the poplar. "Now she goes in silk, with a train to her dress and ostrich-feathers on her head and gold slippers on her feet and long gloves from Paris on her hands. She looks down from on high: only yesterday she was driving along here in her smart turn-out with the four bays."

"We saw her ... we saw her ... we saw her," whispered the poplars along the avenue.

"She joined the avenue, do you see?" said the poplar. "She learnt to hold herself erect and whisper; and now she whispers and holds herself erect. I think you might profit by her example. After all, you belong to the family, even though you are not one of the real poplars; so it ought to be easier for you than her."

"I'll do my best," said the willow-tree.

But nothing came of it. His branches kept on growing out at the sides and the whole tree was not more than half as tall as the lowest poplars. For the rest, he was quite nice and comfortable-looking, but that's not what counts in the smart world.

And the poplars grew more and more annoyed every day.

They themselves stood stiff and straight and strutted and gave no more shade than their trunks were able to cast. But under the willow there was quite a big shady place.

"He's ruining the whole avenue," said the nearest poplar.

"The whole avenue ... the whole avenue ... the whole avenue," whispered the poplars.

Then, one regular sunny summer's day, the squire came walking along. He took off his hat, wiped the perspiration from his forehead and sat down in the shade of the willow:

"Thank you for your shade, you good Willow-Tree," he said. "Those confounded poplars stand there and strut and don't give as much shade as the back of my hand. I think I'll cut them all down and plant willows in their stead."

For that happened to be his mood that day.

"Did you hear the squire praise me?" said the willow-tree, when he had gone.

"Goodness gracious!" said the nearest poplar. "Did we hear him? It's a perfect scandal! He talked just like a common peasant. But, of course, that comes of marrying a kitchen-maid. It's the truest thing that ever was said, that birds of a feather fly together."

"Birds of a feather fly together ... fly together ... fly together ... together ... together," whispered the poplars all along the avenue.

The oak on the little hillock in the fields twisted his crooked branches with laughter. The wild rose, whose hips were already beginning to turn red, nodded to the willow-tree:

"Every one has his position in life," she said. "We have ours and the smart ones theirs. Now I wouldn't change with anybody."

"Still, one would like to give satisfaction in one's position," said the willow-tree and sighed!

## 4

After the warm days came rain and drizzle and wind. The roads became difficult because of the mud and slosh. Only in the avenue did it dry up soon, however hard it had rained. For the poplars gave no shade, so the sun was able to come at once as soon as the rain had ceased. And they gave no shelter either, so the wind came with a rush and dried the puddles.

The squire came driving with his wife. When the carriage reached the place where the willow stood, the wet mud splashed all over her new silk dress.

"Ugh!" she said.

"What's all this nasty mess?" asked the squire.

The keeper, who was sitting on the box beside the coachman, pointed to the willow-tree:

"It's that fellow there," he said. "He was planted by mistake and now he has stood and grown big. He shelters the ground from the wind and shades it from the sun, so there is always a big puddle under him, long after the rest of the avenue is dry."

"Did you ever hear of such a thing?" said the squire. "And the look of him, too! He spoils the whole of the beautiful, stately avenue. See and poll him to-morrow, keeper. Off with the whole of his crown, do you hear?"

For that happened to be his mood that day.

On the next day, they came and sawed the willow-tree down to a man's height. Only the thick naked trunk remained. Not a leaf was-left, except five that stood on a little twig down by the ground and really had no business to be there at all. The whole of the splendid crown lay in the ditch. The keeper chopped all the branches into pieces with his axe.

"Will they become cuttings?" asked the willow, disconsolately.

"They will become faggots," replied the keeper and went on chopping to the last stick.

"Then rather let me die at once," said the willow.

"For the present, you will stay where you are, till the winter is past," said the keeper. "When the snow lies thick and smooth all over the roads, you can do good service as a warning-post against the ditch. What will happen afterwards depends upon the squire."

"That was a fine ending to the cutting-farce," said the oak-tree.

"Poor Willow-Tree!" said the wild rose-bush.

"Thank you," said the willow-tree. "I still feel a little stunned. It is no trifle to lose the whole of one's crown. I don't quite know what's to become of me."

"It's a terrible scandal," said the nearest poplar. "A wholly unprecedented family-scandal. If only they would come and take you away altogether, so that you couldn't stand there and disgrace us like a horrible, withered stick!"

"A family-scandal ... a scandal ... a scandal," whispered the poplars along the avenue.

"I don't feel at all withered, oddly enough," said the willow-tree. "I don't know either that I have done anything to be ashamed of. I was set up here and I did my best to fill the position. The squire praised me one day and cut me down another. We must take life as it comes. I shall never be a poplar, but I am one of the family for all that. And a family has other qualities, besides pride. So let us see in a year's time what becomes of me."

"He's speaking like a man," said the wild rose-bush.

The oak-tree said nothing. The poplars whispered in their superior way, but talked no more about the family-scandal.

## 5

Now it so happened that the squire and his wife went to Italy and stayed there for a couple of years. And this, in its turn, led to the result that the polled willow was left to stand in peace among the proud poplars. When the master and mistress were away, there was no one who gave a further thought to the stately avenue.

Throughout the winter, the willow stood silent and perplexed. And it is quite natural that a tree should not care to talk when his head is chopped off. But, half-way through March, suddenly one day he fell a-moaning in the most piteous fashion:

"Oh, my head, my head!" he cried.

"Well, I never in all my born days heard the like," said the oak. "Listen to him talking about his head, when all the world can see that it's been chopped off, so that there's nothing but a wretched stump left."

"It's all very well for you to talk," said the willow-tree. "I should like to see you in my place. All my crown is gone, all the big branches and the little twigs, on which the next year's buds used to sit so nicely, each in its axil. But I still have all my roots, all those which I procured when I had a big household and many to provide for. Now the ice on the ground is melting and the sun shining and the roots are sucking and sucking. All the sap is going up through my trunk and rising to my head. And I haven't the slightest use for it... Oh, oh!.. I'm bursting, I'm dying!"

"Poor Willow-Tree!" said the rose-bush.

But round on the other side of the little hillock stood an elder-bush, whom no one talked to, as a rule, and who never put in his oar:

"Just wait and see," he said. "Two or three days will put things right. Only listen to what a poor, but honest elder-bush tells you. Things always end by settling themselves in one way or another."

"Yes, you've experienced a bit of life," said the oak.

"Goodness knows I have!" said the elder. "They have cut me and cropped me and chopped me and slashed at me in every direction. But, every time they curtailed me on one side, I shot out on the other. It will be just like that with the willow-tree. He comes of a tough family too."

"Do you hear that?" said the nearest poplar. "The elder-bush is comparing his family with ours! Let's pretend not to hear him. We'll stand erect and whisper."

"We'll stand erect and whisper ... whisper ... stand erect and whisper," whispered the poplars along the avenue.

"What are those funny little things up in the willow-tree's top?" said the oak. "Just look ... he's swelling, right up there ... it's a regular eruption... If only we don't catch it!"

"Oh dear no, those are buds!" said the willow-tree. "I can't understand it, but I can feel it. They are real live buds. I am turning green again, I am getting a new crown."

Then came the busiest time of the year, when every one had enough to do minding his own affairs and had no time to think about the poor willow-tree.

The stately poplars and the humble elder got new leaves. The grass shot up green beside the ditch, the corn grew in the fields, the wild rose-bush put forth her dainty leaves, so that the flowers should look their best when they arrived in July. Violets and anemones blossomed and died, daisies and pansies, dandelions and wild chervil and parsley: oh, it was a swarming and a delight on every hand! The birds sang as they had never sung before, the frogs croaked in the marsh, the snake lay on the stone fence, basking his black body in the sun.

The only one who did not join in was the oak. He was distrustful by nature and nothing would persuade him to come out until he saw that all the others were green. Therefore he stood and peered from one to the other and therefore he was the first to discover what was happening to the willow-tree:

"Look! Look!" he cried.

They all looked across and saw that the willow-tree was standing with quite a lot of charming, green, long, lithe twigs, which shot straight up and waved their green and pretty leaves. All the twigs stood in a circle at the top of the polled trunk and were so straight that no poplar need have been ashamed to own them.

"What did I tell you?" said the elder-bush, who stood quite full of dark-green leaves.

"Now I have a crown again," said the willow-tree. "Even though it's not so smart as the old one, it's a crown, as nobody can deny."

"No," said the wild rose. "That's true enough. Besides, one can live very happily without a crown. I have none and never had one and enjoy just as much honour and esteem without it."

"If I may say so, one's crown is only an inconvenience," said the elder-bush. "I had one myself once, but am much more contented since they took it away; and I can shoot my branches as it suits me."

"That's not my way of thinking," said the willow-tree. "I am a tree; and a tree must have a crown. If I had never got a crown, I should certainly have died of sorrow and shame."

"There's poplar-blood in him after all," said the nearest poplar. The others whispered their assent along the avenue.

"Let us now see what happens," said the oak.

## 6

The summer passed as usual. The sun shone until every living thing prayed for rain. Then it rained until they all cried to Heaven for sunshine.

The willow-tree, however, was not the worst off. He was easily contented by nature. And then he was so greatly pleased with his new crown that he thought he could manage, whatever happened.

Up in the top, in the middle of the wreath of green branches, was a hole which had come when the keeper had chopped off the crown. The hole was not so very small even; and, when it rained, it was full of water, which remained for a good while after the sun had dried the ground again.

One day, a blackbird came flying and sat down up there:

"May I take a drop of water from you, you dear old Willow-Tree?" he asked.

"With the greatest pleasure," said the willow-tree. "By the way, I am not so very old. I have been ill-treated."

"Oh, yes," said the blackbird, "you have been polled! We know all about that."

"Would you be so kind as to wipe your feet?" said the willow-tree. "I only mean that I should not like you to muddy the water if another should come and want a drink. One can never tell, in this drought."

The blackbird scraped his feet clean on a splinter of wood that was there. The splinter broke off and, when the bird flew away, there was quite a little heap of earth left. Next day a swallow came and next a lark and gradually quite a number of birds.

For it soon got about that, at a pinch, there was generally a drop of water to be found in the old polled willow in the avenue. They all left something or other behind them; and, by the autumn, there was so much up there that, one fine day, it collapsed and quite filled up the little hole where the water was.

"You're simply keeping a public-house," said the oak.

"Why shouldn't one be kind to one's fellow-creatures?" said the willow-tree.

It was now autumn. The withered leaves blew up into the willow-tree and lay and rotted. A dragon-fly had lain down to die up there in the latter part of the summer. One of the dandelion's fluffy seeds had fallen just beside her. The winter came and the snow fell on the little spot and lay for its appointed time, exactly as on the ground.

"It is just as though I had quite a piece of the world in my head," said the willow-tree.

"It's not healthy to have too much in one's head," said the oak.

"Once I had a large and glorious crown," said the willow-tree, sadly. "Now I am satisfied and delighted with less. We must take life as it comes."

"That's so," said the wild rose-bush.

"It will be all right," said the elder-bush. "I told you so."

"Horrid vulgar fellow," said the nearest poplar.

"Horrid ... vulgar ... fellow," whispered the poplars along the avenue.

## 7

The winter passed and the spring came. Up in the middle of the willow-tree's top peeped a little green sprout.

"Hullo, who are you?" asked the willow-tree.

"I'm just a little dandelion," said the sprout. "I was in mother's head, with a heap of brothers and sisters. Each of us had a little parachute. 'Fly away now, darlings,' said mother. 'The farther away you go, the better. I can do no more for you than I have done; and I won't deny that I am a little concerned about all the children that I have brought into the world. But that can't be helped either; and I hope you will find a spot where an honest dandelion can shift for herself.'"

"Yes, that's just how a little flower-mother talks," said the wild rose-bush.

"What then?" asked the willow-tree.

"Then there came a gust of wind," said the dandelion. "We all flew up into the air together, carried by our parachutes. What became of the others I have no idea; but I remember it began to rain and then I was flung down here. Of course, I thought that, when I had dried, I could fly on again. But not a bit of it, for my parachute was smashed. So I had to stay where I was. To my great surprise, I saw that I was lying on earth. Gradually more earth came, in which I lay hidden all the winter; and now I have sprouted. That's the whole story."

"It's quite a romance," said the wild rose-bush.

"Very likely," said the dandelion. "But what's going to happen to me in the future? Honestly speaking, I would give a good deal to be down in the earth again."

"I'll do all I can for you," said the willow-tree. "I have known adversity myself; and it is a great honour and pleasure for me to have you growing in my poor head."

"Very many thanks for your kindness," said the dandelion. "There's really not so much of it in the world that one shouldn't appreciate it when one meets with it. But, when all is said and done, it's ability that tells; and I fear that's where the shoe pinches."

"I know what you're thinking of," said the willow-tree, sadly. "I can't shade you, since the keeper cut off my nice crown. My long branches up there are all very well and I wouldn't be without them for anything, but they don't give any shade worth talking about and I shall never get another crown, that's quite clear. So you're afraid that the sun will shine too strong on you?"

"Not in the least!" said the dandelion. "The more the sun shines on my yellow face, the better I'm pleased. No, look here, it's the earth I'm anxious about."

"And the most important thing too," said the oak. "But that's the willow-tree's business. If he wants to run an hotel for flowers in his head, he must provide earth: that goes without saying."

"Yes, but is there no earth, my dear Dandelion?" asked the willow-tree.

"There is," said the dandelion. "And good earth too: it's not that. I'm only afraid that there won't be enough of it. You must know, I have a terribly long root: quite a stake, I assure you. When I'm full-grown, there will be at least six inches of it down in the ground."

"Upon my word!" said the oak. "To hear that brat of a dandelion talking about roots!"

The willow-tree stood for a while and said nothing, but thought all the more. The wild rose-bush comforted the dandelion and said nice things about the willow-tree; the elder-bush said it would be all right; the oak grumbled and asked whether, after all, one could expect much from a tree without a crown.

"Now listen," said the willow-tree, who had paid no attention to the others. "I'll tell you something, my dear Dandelion, which I don't generally care to talk about. You know I have had a bad time and have lost my crown?"

"I heard you say so," said the dandelion. "I can also see that you look rather cowed among the other trees in the avenue."

"Don't talk about the poplars," said the willow-tree, distressfully. "They are my relations, but they have never forgiven me for being put here by mistake as a cutting. Look at them and look at me and you can judge for yourself that such a monster as I must be a blot upon a stately avenue of poplars."

"He has some sense of shame left in him," said the nearest poplar.

And all the other trees of the avenue whispered their assent.

"You think about it too much," said the elder-bush. "The more one broods upon a thing, the worse it becomes. I should have died long ago, you know, if I had stood and cried at the losses I have suffered."

"Yes, that's as may be," said the willow-tree. "We all take things in our own way and I in mine. I have not the least intention of throwing up the game, but I know that I am a cripple and shall never be anything else. I thought, a little time ago, that my branches up there would turn into a new crown, but that was sheer folly. They grow and strut and turn green and that is all they do. And then, besides, I feel that I am beginning to decay."

"What's that you say?" asked the wild rose-bush.

"Are you decaying?" asked the oak.

"Yes ... that's by far the worst thing of all," said the elder-bush.

"He's revealing his inmost secrets to the rabble," said the nearest poplar. "Let us stand erect and stiff and whisper and look aloft, dear brothers of the avenue!"

All the poplars whispered.

"I am decaying," said the willow-tree. "I am decaying in my top. How could it be otherwise? There's a puddle up there in summer, the snow lies there in winter and now it's full of moist earth. I can plainly perceive that the hole is growing bigger and bigger, going deeper and deeper inside me. My wood is mouldering away. The shell is good enough still; and I am satisfied as long as it holds out. Then the sap can run up from my roots to my dear, long twigs. Well ... I was thinking the birds will come and visit me, as they are used to, and they will be sure to bring earth with them, so that there will always be more of it as my hole becomes deeper by degrees. And plenty of withered leaves fall on my poor maimed top. I also positively believe that I have an earth-worm up there. How he got there, I don't know: perhaps a bird dropped him out of his beak. But he draws the leaves down into the earth and eats them and turns them into mould. So I say, like the elder-bush, it will be all right."

"So you're becoming hollow?" asked the oak.

"I am," said the willow-tree. "It can't be helped. It's not quite the sort of thing to talk about, but it's different now, because the dandelion was so anxious. It shall never be said of me that I took a respectable flower as a boarder and then let her suffer mortal want."

"Who ever heard a tree talk like that?" said the oak.

"Well, I must say I agree with you this time," said the wild rose-bush.

"I don't think he will hold out very long now," said the elder-bush.

"Thank you, you good old Willow-Tree," said the dandelion. "Now I can go on growing hopefully. I have only this year to think of. When I have sent my seeds into the world with their little parachutes, I shall have done all that is expected of me. I should be delighted if one of them would stay here and grow on you."

"Many thanks," said the willow-tree.

"He accepts the sympathy of the rose-bush and the elder ... he says thank-you to the dandelion ... and he's a relation of ours ... oh, shocking!" said the nearest poplar.

"Shocking ... shocking ... shocking!" whispered the poplars along the avenue.

Then evening came and night; and one and all slept. The wind had gone down, so that there was not even the least whisper in the poplars. But the oak on the little hillock in the fields called out to the willow-tree:

"Pst!.. Pst!.. Willow-Tree!.. Are you asleep?"

"I can't sleep," said the willow-tree. "It's rumbling and gnawing and trickling and seething inside me. I can feel it coming lower and lower. I don't know what it is, but it makes me so melancholy."

"You're becoming hollow," said the oak.

"Perhaps that's what it is," said the willow-tree, sadly. "Well, there's nothing to be done. What can't be cured must be endured."

"Now listen to me, Willow-Tree," said the oak. "On the whole I don't like you."

"I don't know that I ever did you any harm," said the willow-tree.

"Very likely," said the oak. "Only I thought you so arrogant ever since the time when you came the cutting over us. But never mind that now. I have felt most awfully sorry for you since I heard that you were about to become hollow. Take care, that's what I say. It's a terrible misfortune."

"I really don't know what to do to prevent it," said the willow-tree.

"No more do I," said the oak. "But I tell you for all that: take care. See if you can't get all the birds who visit you to scrape all the earth out of the hole in your head before it becomes too deep."

"I mustn't harm the dandelion," said the willow-tree. "Besides, I don't think there's any danger yet. My twigs are green and thriving and my roots are sucking pretty well. As long as the root is sound, everything's sound: you know that as well as I do."

"Take care, that's all," said the oak. "You don't know what it means, but I do. I may as well tell you, I have an old hollow uncle."

"Have you?" said the willow-tree. "Yes, there's a tragedy in every family. You have your uncle and the poplars have me."

"You've no idea of the sort of life he leads," said the oak. "He's awfully old and awfully hollow. Yes, he's like you in a way, but ever so much worse. There's nothing left of him but a very thin shell and just a wretched twig or two in his top. Almost all his roots are dead, too. And he's always full of owls and bats and other vermin. It's a terrible life he leads."

"I'm very sorry to hear it," said the willow-tree.

"I merely say, look out!" said the oak.

## 8

And the years came and went and time passed, as it must and will pass.

The willow-tree became more and more decayed and the hole filled with earth and more customers arrived. One spring there was a dainty little sprout, which the tree welcomed under the impression that it was a dandelion.

"Hullo!" said the sprout. "What do you think I am?"

"I have the highest opinion of you," said the willow-tree. "But you are still so small. May I ask your name?"

"I am a strawberry-plant," said the sprout. "And one of the best. My own idea is that I am the equal of those which grow in the manor-garden. Just wait till I get my fruit: then we shall see."

"Goodness me!" said the willow-tree. "If I could only understand where you came from!"

Another sprout came, which proved to be the beginning of a black-currant-bush. A third came, which grew into a dear little mountain-ash. Every summer there were a couple of dandelions. The bees came and buzzed and sucked honey and flew away with it to their hives. The butterflies flitted from flower to flower, sipped a little honey here and there and ate it up. They knew they had to die, so there was no reason for saving it.

"It's wonderful!" said the willow-tree. "If only I knew where all this good fortune comes from!"

"Never mind about that: just take it as it comes," said the elder-bush.

"You will have a fine old age," said the wild rose-bush.

"You're getting hollower and hollower," said the oak. "Remember what I told you about my poor old uncle."

"He has gradually become quite weak-minded," said the nearest poplar.

"Quite weak-minded ... quite weak-minded ... weak-minded," whispered the poplars along the avenue.

The blackbird was the first who had visited the willow-tree and he returned several times each year. One day he came in a great state of fright and asked if he might hide up there. There was a horrid boy who had been shooting at him all the morning with his air-gun:

"I am really preserved at this time of the year," he said. "But what does that brat of a boy care about that? And, if I must lose my life, I would rather be caught in a proper snare."

"I should have thought it would be better to be shot," said the willow-tree. "Then you're done with for good and all."

"I don't agree with you," said the blackbird. "While there's life there's hope. You can always hang on in the snare and struggle and feel that there may be a chance of escaping."

"Yes, indeed," said the willow-tree, pensively. "That's just my case. I also am caught in a trap and know that I must die soon, but I cling to life nevertheless. Well, I have now attained a blessed old age, as the wild rose said. If only I knew where all the dear creatures who grew in my top came from!"

"Well, I can tell you that," said the blackbird. "You may be sure that most of them come from me."

Then he described how fond he was of red berries of every kind. He resorted in particular to the garden of the manor-house, which was full of the nicest things. Then, when he sat and digested his food in the willow-tree, he usually left something behind him, something in the way of one seed or another.

"Is that true?" said the willow-tree. "Yes, of course it's true. So I really owe all my happiness to you!"

"Probably," said the blackbird and whistled with a very consequential air. "We all of us have our mission in this world, thank goodness... But just look: as I live, there's a beautiful ripe strawberry!"

He ate the strawberry and said, "Hum!" and "Ha!" and "Ho!" for it was so nice:

"It's just as good as those which grow in the squire's own beds," he said. "But I almost think it has got a still nicer flavour by growing up here in you, you old Willow-Tree."

"My dear Blackbird," said the strawberry-plant, "you're often at the manor-house. Won't you do me the favour to tell the squire that I am growing up here?"

"That I will certainly not do," said the blackbird. "In the first place, nothing would induce me to tell any one else where a good berry grows. In the second place, I have been getting so stout and fat lately that I must be a bit careful. Otherwise, it might occur to the squire that strawberries taste twice as nice on top of roast blackbird."

"That's very tiresome," said the strawberry-plant. "I know that the squire has said he will eat no other berries than those which grow in our family; and there are so very few of us. I also heard a bird sing that he had come home from Italy; and I am sure that, if he knew I grew up here, he would himself climb up and pick my berries."

"Lord preserve us!" said the willow-tree. "Would the squire himself really climb into my top? That honour would be greater than I could bear!"

"It certainly would," said the oak. "For you are growing hollower every day. Your long branches are not so green this year as last. You are beginning to look more and more like my unhappy uncle. You're approaching your end, Willow-Tree."

"You may be right," said the willow-tree. "We must all undergo our lot. I myself feel that my shell is getting thinner and thinner; and it has holes in it, besides, in two places down below."

"Away with him!" said the nearest poplar. "He's a disgrace and a reproach to our family."

"Away with him!.. Away ... away ... away!" whispered the poplars along the avenue.

## 9

Time passed and it was incredible that the old willow-tree should still be alive.

His bark had fallen off in great pieces and the holes below had joined in the middle, so that, one day, the fox was able to slip in at one and out at the other. The mice gnawed at the rotten wood. There were only three or four twigs left up above and they were so thin and leafless that it was a pitiful sight to see.

But the garden at the top thrived as it had never done before.

The strawberry-plant put out big flowers which turned into red heavy berries. The black-currant-bush had also grown up and was bearing her fruit. The dandelions shone yellow; and there was also a little blue violet and a scarlet pimpernel, who only opened her flower when the sun shone strongest at noon, and a tall spike of rye, swaying before the wind.

"Why, you're better off now than ever!" said the wild rose-bush. "Since you absolutely had to come to grief and lose your crown, you may well say that fate has been kind to you and made amends to you."

"That's just what I do say," said the willow-tree. "If only I can bear all this good fortune! I am getting thinner and thinner in my shell and every year I lose a twig or two."

"It will end badly," said the oak. "I warned you beforehand. Remember my poor old hollow uncle!"

"I daresay that it will end as it always ends," said the elder-bush. "Whether the end comes one way or another, it is the same for all of us. But I think the willow-tree has life left in him yet."

"There's nothing left to show that he belongs to the family," said the nearest poplar. "His own branches are withering more and more; and it is only strange twigs and leaves that he fans himself with. So that's all right. We sha'n't say a word about his belonging to us: hush!"

"Hush ... hush ... hush!" whispered the poplars along the avenue.

One afternoon the earth-worm crept up there. Hitherto, he had always kept down in the earth, for fear of the many birds about. He was the longest, stoutest, fattest earth-worm in the world.

"Hullo, my dear Earth-Worm, how are you?" said the willow-tree. "I knew you were there, but I have not had the pleasure of seeing you. I am glad you are doing so well in me. How did you come up here exactly?"

"To tell the truth, it was really the blackbird's fault," said the earth-worm. "He dropped me out of his beak. That is to say, he had only got half of me. The rest of me drew back into the ground. So I was only half a worm when I arrived."

"You're welcome all the same," said the willow-tree. "It makes no difference to me if you're whole or half. I myself have lost my crown and become no more than a wretched cripple. But are you all right again now?"

"Oh dear yes!" said the earth-worm. "I don't mind in the least if they chip one end off me. It soon grows again, if only they leave me alone... But do you know what sort of little sprout this is who is coming up here beside me, with such a funny thick hat on his head?"

"I don't know him," said the willow-tree. "I have become feeble with years and can't at once make out all that grows on me. Do you know him?"

"I should think I ought to!" said the earth-worm. "Why it was I who dragged him into the ground a couple of years ago. He was joined on to a leaf and stalk and I ate up both the leaf and the stalk, but I couldn't manage this chap. That wasn't so odd either, for he was an acorn. Now he has sprouted, he's a little oak."

"An oak!" said the willow-tree, overcome with respectful awe.

"He blew over here in the great storm of the autumn before last," said the earth-worm. "I remember it distinctly, because you were creaking so that I thought it would have been up with all of us."

"What's that you're saying?" said the oak on the little hillock in the fields. "Is one of my children growing on you?"

"Yes," said the old willow-tree. "It's really a little oak. That's a great honour for me."

"It's folly," said the oak. "He must be going to die."

"We all have to die," said the elder-bush.

## 10

One day the squire came walking down the avenue.

He had the keeper with him and his own two children, a little boy and a little girl. They had not been long at the manor-house and looked about them inquisitively, for everything was new to them.

"What on earth is that ugly old stump doing there?" asked the squire, pointing at the old willow-tree with his cane. "He's enough to spoil the whole avenue. See that you get rid of him to-morrow, keeper. It makes me quite ill to look at him."

For that happened to be his mood that day.

"Now it's coming," said the oak. "That's your death-warrant, you old Willow-Tree. Well, you won't be sorry. I think it must be better to make an end of it than to stand and get hollower day by day."

"We all cling to life," said the willow-tree sadly. "And what will become of my boarders?"

"They may be thankful that they lived so long," said the wild rose-bush.

"Let's first see what happens," said the elder-bush. "I have been through times that looked worse still and have escaped for all that."

"Thank goodness that's over!" said the poplar who stood nearest.

"Thank goodness!.. Thank goodness!.. Thank goodness!" whispered the poplars along the avenue.

Next morning the keeper came. He had merely an axe with him, for he thought it would only take a couple of blows to do away with the old, rotten willow-stump. Just as he was about to strike, his eyes fell upon the black-currant-bush in the top. The currants were big and ripe. He put out his hand, picked one of them and ate it:

"What a remarkable thing!" he said. "It's exactly like those in the manor-garden. Goodness knows how it got up there!"

"Keeper! Keeper!"

The squire's son came running down the avenue. He wanted to see the old willow-tree felled. The keeper told him about the black-currant-bush and picked a currant and gave it to him.

"Lift me up. I must pick some for myself," said the boy.

The keeper lifted him up. He pulled with both hands at the willow-twigs up there and pulled so hard that they snapped.

Then he caught hold of the tree's thin shell, which was so brittle that a big piece came off in each of his hands. But then he clapped his hands with surprise and delight and shouted:

"Keeper! Keeper! There's quite a garden up here. There are the loveliest strawberries beside the black-currant-bush ... and here's a little mountain-ash ... and a dear little oak ... and weeds, too ... five yellow dandelions ... and a spike of barley, keeper... Oh, how glorious, how glorious! I say, I must show it to sissy ... and to father!"

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