

# The Heart of the Forest

The Heart of the Forest was filled with sunshine, for it lay open to the blue sky. It was ringed around with spreading oaks, and the softest green grass grew under foot.

One morning in spring came a sweet wind, brushing the leaves as it passed them; but when it reached the Heart of the Forest, it whispered "Hush!"—laughing a little—for there in the warm sunlight, by a newly sprung sapling, sat the littlest Dryad, waiting aloud.

"Why?" sighed the wind, lifting a golden curl from her cheek.

"It's nothing but a twig, and not a tree at all!" wept the littlest Dryad. "Why couldn't I have had a big oak tree, like the others? O, it has only a tiny stem, and hardly any leaves!"

She screwed her chubby fists into the big brown eyes—for truly there were tears in them, one in each—while the wind flew away to tell the Forest.

When the Forest knew, there was a fluttering of leaves. From the nearest of the great oaks glided four slender figures, dressed in palest green tissue, which floated behind them as they ran lightly out into the sunshine and knelt around their youngest sister.

"Why do you weep, little Nephelie?" asked Maia, swiftest of all the Dryads.

"Because my tree is so very small, and because it isn't an oak, like yours, and can have no acorns in it!" sobbed the littlest Dryad, as one round tear crept down over her cheek.

"But your tree will grow," whispered Silvia. "Has no one told you that we spirits of the trees live only while they do? The water spirits live forever, but when my oak falls I shall pass away like a mist in the wind. Your tree is newly born, little sister, and if you guard it well, you will have long life in the lovely Forest."

"And besides," laughed Oenone, "our trees are all the same—with bitter acorns—while you have been given one that is quite unlike any other. See, the leaves have tiny points."

"I didn't think of that," said the littlest Dryad, brushing away the second tear, and beginning to smile.

Then Daphne, who had been watching for that, caught her sisters' hands, and together they all danced around Nephelie and her baby tree.

Now that both tears had disappeared the littlest Dryad stood up, too, and tripped about merrily on the tips of her toes.

"It's my tree, isn't it?" she asked presently.

"Surely," came the four sweet voices.

"And can I do just what I like with it?"

"If you do not harm it in any way," answered Aenone. "If you should, the harm would be to your own life as well."

"I shan't hurt it the very wee-est bit. It's my dear little tree." She bent over and put her arms around it, looking over her dimpled shoulders at the other Dryads. "Please go back to your big old oak trees and let me take care of myself."

Her sisters looked at each other in amazement for a moment—then at the willful littlest Dryad, and all began to laugh, until it seemed like silver-bells chiming in the forest. The wind carried the sweet ringing sound onward, and all the woodland laughed, too—even the brook as it pattered over the white stones beneath the trees.

"Who gave them to you?" asked Ion, laughing as he capered across the grass and pranced before her.

"They have always been mine," replied Nephelie, "just as my tree is my own. They are never afraid of me."

"Oh, your tree!" chuckled Ion. "You do not even know what kind of tree you dwell in."

"But I do," said the littlest Dryad. "It is not an oak."

"Ha, ha, ha! Not an oak? Is that its name? Has it nuts?"

"What are nuts?"

"Oh, ignorant little Nephelie! Nuts are like the acorns that fall from the oaks of Maia and her sisters, but they are sweet, instead of bitter."

"My tree shall have nuts," decided Nephelie.

"But you cannot tell what they should be like," said Ion. "Ask me. I have seen many trees with pointed leaves."

"No," said Nephelie. "This is my tree, and it shall have only the nuts that I wish. None shall be for you, because you frighten the Forest dwellers."

Ion caught up water in his palms to sprinkle over her, but the littlest Dryad only yawned a dear little yawn, leaned back against the sapling, and when Ion looked again, he saw nothing but a slender young tree waving in the evening breeze.

"If that isn't just like a Dryad!" he said, provoked that she should have eluded him so easily. He tried to catch the porcupine, to tease it, but it pricked him, and he ran away to the vineyard.

One day the littlest Dryad noticed her tree was putting out long yellow tassels—almost the same color as her own golden curls.

"They do not look like nuts," she thought, ruefully. "Little tree of mine, you must have nuts. Do you hear?"

The tree shook and quivered, and at last a gentle whisper came from the boughs.

"How? I never had any. What are they like?"

"Like acorns" said Nephelie. "They must be pale brown and shiny, like the acorns—but with a sweet white kernel."

"Yes," breathed the tree. "I'll try. But the acorns turn darker as the sun shines on them."

"Then the nuts may do it, too," returned Nephelie.

So, after the summer passed, the tassels dropped, and the littlest Dryad saw the brown, shiny nuts on her tree.

"See!" she laughed in triumph.

"See Maia, Silvia! Look, sister Daphne, at the nuts on my tree. Are they not better than acorns?" and she danced across the grass in glee.

But among the bushes was one hiding. "Yes, better than bitter acorns" said Ion, nodding his head as he ate one of the ripe kernels. He bounded away to tell all of his brother fauns, who dwelt in the Forest, and when the littlest Dryad came back she found every ripe nut gone.

"Who did it?" asked the littlest Dryad ready to cry.

"Ion," sighed the tree, sadly.

Then she did cry, a very small cry—after which she felt better, and ready to find a remedy.

"You must cover all the other nuts with soft brown fur, like the rabbits," said the littlest Dryad, "and then the fauns cannot tell whether the nuts are ripe or not, and they may not take them."

"I'll try," promised the tree, and in the morning every nut was dressed in silky down, like the ears of the baby rabbits, and Nephelie tripped away to her sisters to tell them what she had done.

Alas the day! When she returned, only a few unripe nuts hung on the highest boughs. She sat down by the brook and dropped many sad tears into the running water, until Nais peeped up through the wavelets to see who was weeping so bitterly.

"What troubles you, little Nephelie?" asked the rippling voice.

"Ion, the naughty faun, has taken away my nuts. They were beautiful and brown and shiny, so I told the tree to cover them with soft fur that he might not find them; but he brought the other fauns and tore them from the branches."

"Read down and listen," said Nais. "I have seen many little fauns."

So Nephelie leaned close to the water, and the spirit of the brook whispered—just a few words, but enough to make the littlest Dryad clap her hands and run quickly back to her tree.

"Little tree, hearken," called Nephelie.

"Yes," rustled the tree.

"You shall keep the sweet white kernels, with their shining brown cover—and the soft fur shall be around to keep them warm. But outside of all you must grow little sharp spines, like the porcupine. Then

Ion and his brothers cannot touch our nuts."

"I'll try," sighed the waving branches, "but—"

It was troublesome work for so young a tree, which knew so little about nuts—but by the next morning all those that remained were concealed by a prickly coat, and the littlest Dryad nodded her sunny head, knowing that Nais was wise.

She hid behind the nearest oak—that wherein dwelt Aenone—and waited. And before many hours had passed little pattering feet were heard, and there were the fauns, ready to rob the tree of its last nuts.

"Where are they?" asked one.

"At the top," said Ion. "Throw up stones. Or wait, and I will shake the tree."

The tree cared little for what Ion could do, but at last it let one nut fall. All the fauns were on it at once—and all sprang up with pricked fingers—very angry.

"You have tricked us," they said to Ion. "You have taken the nuts away when we were far from here, and have put baby porcupines in the tree to hurt us. Soon their mother will come and shoot her sharp quills at us."

"No, no!" said Ion. "It must have been little Nephelie."

"Her hands are too soft and tender," answered the other fauns. "No, it was you. Come, brothers. Let us put Ion in the brook, and ask Nais to hold him under the water until he gives us the nuts."

Ion did not wait for that. Off he rushed, through bushes and vines and never paused until he was far down the hillside.

"If that wasn't just like a Dryad," he thought, out of breath and in a very bad temper.

But the littlest Dryad laughed happily with her sisters—and Nais laughed, too—for she had seen many little fauns.

**Nigni, the Dwarf-Tells Tales.**

I have told you of my battles with the grasshoppers and the bantam roosters, and I must relate yet another adventure of my childhood before I pass on.

When I was 4 years old and yet so small that I could hide in the sugar bowl, my father brought home a goat in order that we might make an experiment. Several people had told him that if I drank plenty of goat's milk I would begin to grow fat and tall, and so he paid \$3 for a goat.

I can tell you that the milk did no good at all, though I drank a quart a day for many weeks, and the folks who thought themselves so wise had to admit their mistake.

The goat and I took a dislike to each other from the start, and seeing this, my father said to me:

"Nigni, you must beware of the goat. She cannot only strike a hard blow with her feet, but she can smash in the head of a barrel by butting it. If she should get in a fair blow at you with her head she would break all your bones. I have known a goat to knock a strong man down and do him a great injury."

I promised to keep away from her, but at the same time I used to go out to her when she was tied up and wish that I was old enough and big enough to give her a fair fight. She would beat at me and shake her head in anger, and no doubt she was saying that if she could only break her rope she would make short work of me.

One day as my mother went to market and left me on the doorstep alone, a boy came and gave a new tin sword to me. The cost was only a cent but I had never had one before. He was a boy who had always spoken kindly to me, and he bought the sword as a present.

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