

English Literature in the Lower Grades.

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STORIES ABOUT TREES.

When little children begin to notice the strange things they see around them in this wonderful world, they are very apt to ask questions about these wonders that sound very funny to you older children; and sometimes they will answer their own questions and explain things that puzzle them in a funny way. They will say that the snow-flakes are feathers, that the stars are the moon's children, or think because the trees wave about when the wind blows that it is the trees that make the wind. Sometimes they think that animals and things without life are like people in their thoughts and feelings, and a child will ask, "What is pussy thinking about?" I know a little girl who, when she went out for her walk, would kiss her hand, and say, "Good morning, Sun," or, if it were windy, "Good morning, Wind."

Now, when the world was young, and before wise men had discovered so many explanations of the wonderful things in nature, men and women used to make explanations for themselves, very much as children do now. Sometimes, when these explanations and fancies were told by one person to another, several different ones would be put together, or new thoughts would be added, until a whole story grew up. These stories are called myths. Many of them, especially those that grew up among those wise people, the Greeks, are very beautiful, and so they have not been forgotten, but have been handed down for ages.

Last month I spoke of some of the myths about the wind, and now I shall tell you one or two about trees.

The old Greeks believed that every tree had its guardian spirit, who dwelt within it, and who perished if the tree were destroyed. The spirits usually took the form of beautiful girls, called Dryads. If you have even been fond of one particular tree, and have watched it through all the seasons, so that you feel its beauty and grace and life, you will not find it hard to understand how this fancy dwelt in men's minds, and why they thought it a terribly wicked thing to hurt or destroy a tree, if it could be helped. And because trees were considered so sacred, the old stories tell us of people who, for safety, were turned into trees.

Once there was a beautiful girl named Daphne. She was the daughter of a river-god, and all her

delight was in the woods, where she played games and hunted. She had many lovers, but she cared for none of them, and she prayed to her father, that, like the great goddess of the woods, Diana, she might live and die unmarried.

But the mighty Apollo, god of the sun, and of music and poetry, saw Daphne and loved her for her beauty. She ran away from him, but he followed, and begged and prayed her to listen to him. Still she fled on, but at last he was gaining on her, and she was growing faint and ready to fall. So she cried, "Help, O my father! either let the earth open and take me in, or change me into some other form." As she spoke she felt her body stiffening; and when Apollo came up he found, instead of the beautiful nymph, a laurel tree. The god kissed the wood, which shrank away from him. Then he said, "If you cannot be my wife, you shall be my tree. Your leaves shall be used to make wreaths for great conquerors and famous poets. And, as I am always young, so you shall be always green and know not decay."

And so the laurel wreath has always been the symbol of fame. Our English poet, Spenser, writes:

"The laurel, meed of mighty conquerors and poets sage."

THE STORY OF RHOECUS.*

A young man named Rhœcus was one day wandering in the woods when he saw a fine old oak just ready to fall. Rhœcus, admiring the beautiful tree, propped it up carefully, and turned to walk on, thinking no more about it. But he heard a soft voice behind him murmur his name; at first he thought it must have been only the gentle rustling of the leaves, but again the sound came, very softly, "Rhœcus." Then he turned, and saw standing before him, the most lovely woman he had ever seen. She said to him very sweetly, "Rhœcus, I am the Dryad of this tree; I am to live and die in it, and when you saved my tree, you saved my life. So now, ask whatever I can give, and it shall be yours."

And Rhœcus answered, "Now that I have seen you, my best hope is that you will love me. Nothing but your love can satisfy my heart." The Dryad hesitated a moment, then she said, rather sadly, "My love is a perilous gift, but I will give it to you; meet me here an hour before sunset." Then she vanished, and there was nothing to be seen but the green shade of the trees, and not a sound but the faint rustling of the leaves.

*This is a paraphrase of Lowell's poem—Rhœcus.