

THE LITTLE FIR TREE

Once there was a Little Fir Tree, slim and pointed, and shiny, which stood in the great forest in the midst of some big fir trees, broad, and tall, and shadowy green. The Little Fir Tree was very unhappy because he was not big like the others. When the birds came flying into the woods and lit on the branches of the big trees and built their nests there, he used to call up to them,--

"Come down, come down, rest in my branches!" But they always said,--

"Oh, no, no; you are too little!"

And when the splendid wind came blowing and singing through the forest, it bent and rocked and swung the tops of the big trees, and murmured to them. Then the Little Fir Tree looked up, and called,--

"Oh, please, dear wind, come down and play with me!" But he always said,--

"Oh, no; you are too little, you are too little!"

And in the winter the white snow fell softly, softly, and covered the great trees all over with wonderful caps and coats of white. The Little Fir Tree, close down in the cover of the others, would call up,--

"Oh, please, dear snow, give me a cap, too! I want to play, too!" But the snow always said,--

"Oh no, no, no; you are too little, you are too little!"

The worst of all was when men came into the wood, with sledges and teams of horses. They came to cut the big trees down and carry them away. And when one had been cut down and carried away the others talked about it, and nodded their heads. And the

Little Fir Tree listened, and heard them say that when you were carried away so, you might become the mast of a mighty ship, and go far away over the ocean, and see many wonderful things; or you might be part of a fine house in a great city, and see much of life. The Little Fir Tree wanted greatly to see life, but he was always too little; the men passed him by.

But by and by, one cold winter's morning, men came with a sledge and horses, and after they had cut here and there they came to the circle of trees round the Little Fir Tree, and looked all about.

"There are none little enough," they said.

Oh! how the Little Fir Tree pricked up his needles!

"Here is one," said one of the men, "it is just little enough." And he touched the Little Fir Tree.

The Little Fir Tree was happy as a bird, because he knew they were about to cut him down. And when he was being carried away on the sledge he lay wondering, so contentedly, whether he should be the mast of a ship or part of a fine city house. But when they came to the town he was taken out and set upright in a tub and placed on the edge of a sidewalk in a row of other fir trees, all small, but none so little as he. And then the Little Fir Tree began to see life.

People kept coming to look at the trees and to take them away. But always when they saw the Little Fir Tree they shook their heads and said,--

"It is too little, too little."

Until, finally, two children came along, hand in hand, looking carefully at all the small trees. When they saw the Little Fir Tree they cried out,--

"We'll take this one; it is just little enough!"

They took him out of his tub and carried him away, between them. And the happy Little Fir Tree spent all his time wondering what it could be that he was just little enough for; he knew it could hardly be a mast or a house, since he was going away with children.

He kept wondering, while they took him in through some big doors, and set him up in another tub, on the table, in a bare little room. Pretty soon they went away, and came back again with a big basket, carried between them. Then some pretty ladies, with white caps on their heads and white aprons over their blue dresses, came bringing little parcels. The children took things out of the basket and began to play with the Little Fir Tree, just as he had often begged the wind and the snow and the birds to do. He felt their soft little touches on his head and his twigs and his branches. And when he looked down at himself, as far as he could look, he saw that he was all hung with gold and silver

chains! There were strings of white fluffy stuff drooping around him; his twigs held little gold nuts and pink, rosy balls and silver stars; he had pretty little pink and white candles in his arms; but last, and most wonderful of all, the children hung a beautiful white, floating doll-angel over his head! The Little Fir Tree could not breathe, for joy and wonder. What was it that he was, now? Why was this glory for him?

After a time every one went away and left him. It grew dusk, and the Little Fir Tree began to hear strange sounds through the closed doors. Sometimes he heard a child crying. He was beginning to be lonely. It grew more and more shadowy.

All at once, the doors opened and the two children came in. Two of the pretty ladies were with them. They came up to the Little Fir Tree and quickly lighted all the little pink and white candles. Then the two pretty ladies took hold of the table with the Little Fir Tree on it and pushed it, very smoothly and quickly, out of the doors, across a hall, and in at another door.

The Little Fir Tree had a sudden sight of a long room with many little white beds in it, of children propped up on pillows in the beds, and of other children in great wheeled chairs, and others hobbling about or sitting in little chairs. He wondered why all the little children looked so pale and tired; he did not know that he was in a hospital. But before he could wonder any more his breath was quite taken away by the shout those little children gave.

"Oh! oh!" they cried.

"How pretty! How beautiful! Oh, isn't it lovely!"

He knew they must mean him, for all their shining eyes were looking straight at him. He stood as straight as a mast, and quivered in every needle, for joy. Presently one little weak child-voice called out,--

"It's the nicest Christmas tree I ever saw!"

And then, at last, the Little Fir Tree knew what he was; he was a Christmas tree! And from his shiny head to his feet he was glad, through and through, because he was just little enough to be the nicest kind of tree in the world!