

The Leaf that Longed To be Red

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Don't wish your life away!



Written by Amy Mack
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THE LEAF THAT LONGED TO BE RED

By Amy Mack

There was once a very discontented Leaf. He lived on a large spreading Sassafras tree in the thick shade of the beautiful brush, where the tall tree-ferns stretched their slender arms towards him, and the maiden-hair ferns grew thick upon the ground. The birds sang in the branches above his head, and the butterflies danced around him. In fact, it was the most delightful place for any leaf to live, and yet this Leaf was as unhappy as if he lived in a city park where the dust soiled and the smoke suffocated.

And the whole reason of his unhappiness was this—he wanted to be red. He was a brilliant shining green, the very prettiest colour a leaf can be, and yet nothing would suit this silly fellow but that he must be red.

He was a very young Leaf, and had been green all his life. He had always been contented until one day some American people had sat beneath his tree and talked, and he heard one say:—

"This is a beautiful bit of bush, but what a pity there is no red or yellow to show up the green." And another answered—

"Yes, if only there were some red leaves like those on the maples in our country, it would be perfect."

And then they went on to say how pretty red leaves were, and how nice they were to decorate with, and how sweet they looked in vases on the table, until the Leaf longed to be one of these wonderful red leaves of which people thought so much, and he felt quite sad and miserable that he was just ordinary bright green.

"Do the leaves here never turn red?" asked one of the Americans; and someone answered—"I believe some do in the autumn, but only a few."

The leaf heard, and in his heart a hope sprang up. Why shouldn't he be one of the

few? He was as large as any of his brothers on the tree, and had just as much right to receive this special honour as any other. He made up his mind to find out who turned some of the leaves red, and then to ask if he might be amongst the favoured ones.

So he asked an old Staghorn, which lived close by, who it was that painted the leaves red in the autumn, and the Staghorn replied—

"Mother Nature. She comes with her paint pot in April and May, and dabs a spot of colour here and there, sometimes red and sometimes yellow. But I really think she must love green best of all, for she lets most of the trees remain that colour. I am glad to say she never disturbs my beautiful blue-green leaves with any of her bright paints."

"But wouldn't you like to be red?" asked the Leaf.

"Certainly not," replied the Staghorn. "I am quite satisfied as I am."

But the Leaf was far from being satisfied. All day he wondered when Mother Nature would come, and he was afraid to sleep at night for fear he should miss her, for he intended to ask her to paint him red.

He thought so much about it that he forgot to drink in the dew and rain and even forgot to lean forward to catch the sunbeams as they flickered through the tall branches overhead. Day and night he thought about becoming red, and how beautiful he would look then, and how people would admire him, and he began to fret and worry more and more each day, for fear he should miss Mother Nature.

Again and again he asked the Staghorn when she would come, and each time the Staghorn told him the same thing—"In the autumn."

But at last the Staghorn grew tired of always being asked the same question, and refused to answer. Then the Leaf asked, "When does autumn come?" and the Staghorn replied, "At the end of summer".

"Is it nearly the end of the summer yet?" asked the Leaf.

"No; I'm very glad to say it is not," replied the Staghorn, rather sharply, for he wanted to be quiet and enjoy the breeze and sunshine, and the Leaf disturbed his peace with his continual questions.

"Don't you long for the autumn?" asked the Leaf.

"No!" answered the Staghorn, curtly. Then the Leaf saw that the Staghorn did not want to talk any more, so he left off asking questions for a while.

But though he did not speak about the autumn, he did not for a moment forget it. As the days passed, he became more and more anxious to see Mother Nature, and ask her to paint him red; and he spent his time imagining how fine he would look on a table, for the Americans said they put their red and yellow leaves in vases. He thought it would be much grander to live in a vase than on a tree; and he was so excited at the idea that he did not bother to take his food properly, and he did not eat the sweet juices of his mother tree or drink in the fresh rains and dews. And so he began to grow pale, and to lose his bright green colour, and he felt strangely tired. Then, as the days passed, he grew more and more dissatisfied, until at last there really was not a more discontented leaf in the whole of the bush.

The weather had been intensely hot, and the trees and ferns were all feeling tired, and wishing for the cooler days. Out of the ground rose moist, warm vapours, which made everything feel sticky and damp. Then one night the weather suddenly changed, and there was a fresh, cool feeling in the breeze.

The old Staghorn looked up to the Leaf as soon as it was light, and said—
"Autumn has come."

The Leaf trembled with excitement as he said eagerly, "Has it, really? And will Mother Nature soon come now?"

"Yes," replied the Staghorn. "She should be here to-day."

The Leaf was too excited to speak, and he just sat and shook on his twig. Then he

heard the Staghorn say in a surprised, eager tone, "Why, here she comes now!"

The Leaf turned to where the Staghorn was pointing, and there, coming through the bushes, was a tall and beautiful woman. Her eyes were bright and brown, and her hair was the colour of ripe corn. She wore a ruddy brown gown, the colour of a russet apple, and in her hand she carried a golden pail filled with a red and yellow mixture.

"She is robed in her autumn clothes," said the Staghorn; "and has the paint in her pail. She must be going to begin to-day."

Even as he spoke, Mother Nature stopped before a tall gum-tree, and, stretching up her arm, put a splash of colour on some leaves. The Leaf saw that they at once lost their blue shade, and became a light yellow. Then Mother Nature came along towards the Leaf, touching branches here and there as she passed and leaving a red or yellow spot of colour wherever her brush had rested. At last she reached the Leaf's tree, looked at it for a second, and was just going to pass by, when she heard a voice say—

"Please don't go. Won't you paint me, too?"

She looked round in surprise, and saw the Leaf gazing anxiously at her as he repeated—"Please, please paint me, too!"

"Oh, no, dear. I couldn't paint you," said Mother Nature, kindly. "You are too young."

"Ah, no, I'm not, I'm quite grown up, and I do want to be painted red."

"But why, my child?"

"Because red leaves are the most beautiful, and people put them into vases, and I want to live in a vase, and--"

The Leaf stopped for breath, and Mother Nature replied, sadly—

"Ah, yes, red leaves are indeed beautiful, but a leaf must suffer very much before it becomes red, and then it often lies on the ground for days before it is picked up and put into a vase."

"I don't mind how much I suffer, or if I do have to lie on the ground. I'm not afraid of pain. Oh, if only I could be red!"

"But you are too young to suffer, my child."

"No, no, I'm not. I don't mind how you hurt me, if only you will paint me red. Oh, please say you will," and the Leaf stretched eagerly out and touched her hand.

Mother Nature smiled sadly, as she answered:

"Very well, my child. Since you long so much to be red, you shall have your wish. But I hope you won't be sorry afterwards."

"Oh, no; I'll only be happy," cried the Leaf. "I'm not a bit frightened of pain."

Then Mother Nature dipped her brush into her pail, and splashed it right into the Leaf's face.

For a moment he felt as if he were choking, and he could not see. All through his body fire seemed to be rushing, and the pain was terrific,

"Oh, oh, oh!" he cried, and turned to Mother Nature to ask her to take away this terrible feeling. But when he was able to clear the paint from his eyes, so that he could see, she was out of sight. He bent as far forward as he could, but it was no use. She had vanished.

After a little while the pain grew less, and he thought to himself, "Oh, well; I'll soon be all right. I am changing colour already, and I expect by the time I am quite red, I shall be perfectly well again."

But each day, instead of feeling better, he seemed to become weaker and weaker. He no longer felt as if fire was rushing through his veins, but as if all his blood was

ebbing away. He was strangely drowsy, too, and wanted to sleep all the time. He took no notice of the birds that flew above his head, and he didn't answer when his old friend the Staghorn spoke to him. He didn't even seem to mind whether he was red or not. All he wanted to do was to sleep.

One day, as he was feeling more than usually drowsy, he was suddenly awakened by voices be-neath him, and, as he looked round, he saw a girl pointing to him, and heard her say—"What a pretty red leaf!"

In an instant he was wide awake. He forgot to be tired; forgot he was ill—all he thought of was that at last he was red. At last he would be carried into a house, and live in a vase and decor-ate a table. Oh, how happy he was! He jumped with joy, and in a moment he had shaken himself free from his twig, and was floating through the air. Softly and slowly he sank till he reached the earth at the girl's feet.

He lay there trembling with excitement, wait-ing for her to pick him up and carry him to her house. But he waited in vain, for the girl was gaz-ing at the old Staghorn, and had quite forgotten the Leaf, and though he lay quite close to her foot, she did not notice him, and in a little while she walked on, leaving him alone.

The Leaf could not understand it at all. He did not want to lie on the ground; he wanted to live in a vase, but he did not know how he was to reach one. He knew people put red leaves in vases, and yet this girl had not taken him.

There he lay, however, all that night, and all the next day, but no one else passed him. All round him other leaves were lying, but they were a queer brown colour, which the Leaf had never seen before; and they rustled in a strange manner, and when the Leaf spoke to them they did not answer. They were poor dead leaves, but he did not know that, and thought they were unkind not to speak to him.

As the second day passed into night, he felt very sad and lonely, and he wished he was back on the tree with his brothers. The Old Staghorn was ever so high above his head, too far to hear him, and the maiden-hair ferns which were close by were

whispering to themselves all the time, and took no notice of him; so there was no one at all for the Leaf to talk to, and he was very miserable.

Then, just as the sun was sinking behind the Sassafras tree, he heard a gentle rustling, and, turning, he saw Mother Nature walking towards him.

"Oh, dear Mother Nature," he cried, "take me home to my branch. I don't like being on the ground, and I am so miserable."

"You shouldn't be miserable," said Mother Nature. "You are now a most lovely red leaf, and if you wait long enough, perhaps someone will pick you up and put you into a vase."

"I don't want to be in a vase. I only want to be back on my tree. Dear Mother Nature, take me back!"

But Mother Nature shook her head, and answered sadly—

"There is no going back, my child. You wanted to be red, and you said you did not mind pain. You have had your own way, and I cannot alter things now. If you had been content to remain green, you would have lived on your tree for years. I did not want to paint you, and tried to persuade you to stay green; but you would not be happy until I touched you with my paint brush, so I did as you asked."

The poor Leaf grew sadder and sadder as she spoke, and when she had ceased, he felt a strange cold shiver strike through his veins, and he cried —"Oh, if only I had been satisfied!"

But before he could say another word, he rolled over lifeless, and there he lay, a sad, dead Leaf.

Then Mother Nature, with tears in her eyes, took a handful of soft warm earth, and placed it over him.

