Spruce

In the forest stood a wonderful little fir tree. It had a good spot, plenty of air and light; all around grew older companions—both firs and pines. The little fir terribly wanted to grow up quickly; it thought neither of the warm sun nor of the fresh air, and it did not care about the chattering peasant children who gathered strawberries and raspberries in the forest; having filled their little baskets or strung the berries like beads on thin twigs, they would sit down under the fir tree to rest and always say:

"Oh, what a splendid little fir! So pretty, so small!" The little tree did not even want to listen to such words.

A year passed, and the little fir gained one joint; another year passed, and it gained another—thus, by the number of joints, one can tell how old a tree is.

"Oh, if only I were as big as the other trees!" sighed the little fir. "Then I too would spread my branches wide, lift my head high, and I would see far, far all around! Birds would build nests in my branches, and in the wind I would nod my head just as importantly as the others!"

And neither the sun, nor the singing of birds, nor the rosy morning and evening clouds gave it the slightest pleasure.

Winter came; the earth was covered with a sparkling carpet of snow; now and then a hare would run across the snow and sometimes even jump over the little fir—what an offense! But two more winters passed, and by the third the little tree had grown so much that the hare had to go around it.

"Yes, grow, grow, and quickly become a big, old tree—what could be better than this!" thought the little fir.

Every autumn woodcutters appeared in the forest and cut down the biggest trees. Each time the little fir trembled with fear at the sight of the huge trees falling to the ground with noise and crackling. Their branches were stripped off, and they lay on the ground so bare, long, and thin. One could hardly recognize them! Then they were loaded onto sleds and carried out of the forest.

Where? Why?

In spring, when the swallows and storks arrived, the little tree asked them:

"Do you know where those trees were taken? Did you meet them?" The swallows knew nothing, but one of the storks thought, nodded its head, and said:

"Yes, perhaps! I met many new ships at sea, on my way from Egypt, with magnificent tall masts. They smelled of fir and pine. That's where they are!"

"Oh, if only I would grow up quickly and set sail on the sea! What is that sea like, what does it look like?"

"Well, that takes a long time to tell!" answered the stork and flew away.

"Rejoice in your youth!" the sunbeams told the little fir. "Rejoice in your healthy growth, your youth, and your vital forces!"

And the wind kissed the tree, the dew shed tears over it, but the fir valued none of this.

Shortly before Christmas, several very young fir trees were cut down; some of them were even smaller than our little fir, which so wanted to grow up quickly. All the cut-down little trees were extremely pretty; their branches were not stripped off, but they were placed directly onto sleds and carried out of the forest.

"Where?" asked the fir. "They are no bigger than I am, one is even smaller. And why were all the branches left on them? Where were they taken?"

"We know! We know!" chirped the sparrows. "We were in the city and peeked through the windows! We know where they were taken! They will be honored beyond words! We peeked through the windows and saw! They are placed in the middle of a warm room and decorated with the most wonderful things: gilded apples, honey cookies, and thousands of candles!"

"And then?.." asked the fir, trembling with all its branches. "And then?.. What happened to them afterwards?"

"We saw nothing more! But it was splendid!"

"Perhaps I too shall go along such a brilliant path!" rejoiced the fir. "This is better than sailing on the sea! Oh, I am simply wasting away with longing and impatience! If only Christmas would come soon! Now I have become just as tall and spreading as those that were cut down last year! Oh, if only I were already lying on a sled! Oh, if only I were already standing, decorated with all these beauties, in a warm room! And then what?.. Then, surely, it will be even better, otherwise why decorate me!.. But what exactly? Oh, how I long and strain to get away from here! I simply do not know what is happening to me!"

"Rejoice in us!" the air and sunlight told her. "Rejoice in your youth and the freedom of the forest!"

But she did not think of rejoicing; she just kept growing and growing. Both winter and summer she stood in her green attire, and everyone who saw her said: "What a wonderful little tree!" Finally, Christmas approached, and the little fir was cut down first. Burning pain and sorrow did not even allow her to think of future happiness; it was sad to part with her native forest, with that corner where she had grown: after all, she knew she would never again see her dear companions—the firs and pines, the bushes, the flowers, and perhaps even the birds! How heavy, how sad!..

The little tree came to itself only when it found itself together with other trees in the yard and heard a voice nearby:

"A wonderful fir tree! This is exactly what we need!"

Two elegantly dressed servants appeared, took the fir tree, and carried it into a huge, magnificent hall. Portraits hung on the walls, and on the large tiled stove stood Chinese vases with lions on their lids; everywhere were placed rocking chairs, silk sofas, and large tables piled with albums, books, and toys worth several hundred dalers—at least, that is what the children said. The fir tree was planted in a large tub with sand, the tub was wrapped in green cloth, and it was placed on a colorful carpet. How the little fir trembled! What would happen now? Servants and young girls appeared and began to decorate it. Small nets full of sweets, cut out of colored paper, gilded apples and nuts hung on the branches, and dolls swung there—just like living people; the fir had never seen such things before. Finally, hundreds of small multicolored candles were attached to the branches, and to the very top of the fir tree—a large star made of gold leaf. One's eyes simply ran wild looking at all this splendor!

"How the fir tree will shine, how it will sparkle in the evening when the candles are lit!" everyone said.

"Oh!" thought the fir tree, "if only evening would come soon and the candles were lit! And what will happen then? Won't other trees come from the forest to admire me? Won't the sparrows fly to the windows? Or perhaps I will take root in this tub and stand here so beautifully both winter and summer?"

Yes, she knew much!.. From tense expectation her bark even began to hurt, and for a tree this is as unpleasant as a headache is for us.

But then the candles were lit. What brilliance, what luxury! The fir tree trembled with all its branches; one of the candles singed the green needles, and the little fir burned painfully.

"Oh dear!" cried the young ladies and hastily put out the fire. The fir tree did not dare tremble anymore. And how frightened it was! Especially because it was afraid of losing even the smallest of its decorations. But all this brilliance simply overwhelmed it... Suddenly both halves of the doors flew open, and a whole crowd of children rushed in; one might have thought they intended to knock the tree down! Behind them the elders entered sedately. The little ones stopped as if rooted to the spot, but only for a moment, and then such noise and clamor arose that one's ears rang. The children danced around the fir tree, and gradually all the gifts were torn from it.

"What are they doing!" thought the fir tree. "What does this mean?" The candles burned down, they were extinguished, and the children were allowed to strip the tree. How they threw themselves upon it! Only the branches cracked! Had the fir tree not been firmly tied by its top with the golden star to the ceiling, they would have knocked it over.

Then the children began dancing again, not letting go of their wonderful toys. No one looked at the fir tree anymore, except the old nanny, and she was only looking to see if an apple or a date remained somewhere in the branches.

"A story! A story!" shouted the children and dragged a small, stout gentleman to the fir tree.

He sat down under the tree and said:

"Here we are in the forest! And the fir tree, by the way, will listen! But I will tell only one story! Which one do you want: about Ivede-Avede or about Klumpe-Dumpe, who, although he fell down the stairs, nevertheless achieved honor and won himself a princess?"

"About Ivede-Avede!" shouted some.

"About Klumpe-Dumpe!" shouted others.

Shouting and noise arose; only the fir tree stood still and thought: "Is there nothing more for me to do?"

It had already done its job!

And the stout gentleman told the story of Klumpe-Dumpe, who, although he fell down the stairs, nevertheless achieved honor

and won himself a princess.

The children clapped their hands and shouted: "More, more!" They wanted to hear about Ivede-Avede too, but they had to make do with Klumpe-Dumpe alone.

Silently and thoughtfully stood the fir tree: the forest birds had never told anything like this. "Klumpe-Dumpe fell down the stairs, and yet he got a princess! Yes, that's how things happen in this world!" thought the fir tree; it fully believed everything it had just heard—for such a respectable gentleman was telling the story. "Yes, yes, who knows! Perhaps I too will have to fall down the stairs, and then I too will get a princess!" And it thought joyfully of the next day: it would be decorated again with candles, toys, gold, and fruit! "Tomorrow I shall not tremble!" it thought. "I want to properly enjoy my splendor! And tomorrow I shall hear the tale of Klumpe-Dumpe again, and perhaps even that of Ivede-Avede." And the little tree stood quietly all night long, dreaming of the morrow.

In the morning came the footman and the maid. "Now they will start decorating me again!" thought the fir tree, but they dragged it out of the room, hauled it down the stairs, and shoved it into the darkest corner of the attic, where even daylight did not penetrate.

"What does this mean?" wondered the fir tree. "What am I to do here? What shall I see and hear here?" And it leaned against the wall and kept thinking, thinking... There was plenty of time for this: days and nights passed—no one came to visit it. Only once did people come to put some boxes up in the attic. The tree stood quite aside, and it seemed forgotten.

"It is winter outside!" thought the fir tree. "The ground has hardened and is covered with snow; thus, I cannot be planted in the earth again, so I must stay under the roof until spring! How cleverly devised! How kind people are! If only it were not so dark and so terribly empty here!... There is not even a single little hare!... But how merry it was in the forest! Snow everywhere, and little hares hopping over the snow! It was good... Even when they jumped over me, though that angered me! But here it is so empty!"

"Peep-peep!" squeaked suddenly a mouse, darting out of its hole, followed by several others. They began sniffing the tree and scurrying among its branches.

"It is terribly cold here!" said the little mice. "Otherwise it would be quite nice! Isn't that true, old fir tree?"

"I am not old at all!" replied the fir. "There are many trees older than I!"

"Where are you from, and what do you know?" asked the little mice; they were terribly curious. "Tell us, where is the best place on earth? Have you been there? Have you ever been in the pantry, where cheeses lie on the shelves and hams hang from the ceiling, and where one can dance upon tallow candles? You go in there thin and come out fat!"

"No, I do not know such a place!" said the tree. "But I know the forest, where the sun shines and the birds sing!"

And it told them about its youth; the little mice had never heard anything like this, listened to the fir's tale, and then said:

"How much you have seen! How happy you were!"

"Happy?" said the fir and pondered over the time it had just described. "Yes, perhaps life was not bad for me then!"

Then it told them about that evening when it was adorned with gingerbread and candles.

"Oh!" said the little mice. "How happy you were, old fir tree!"

"I am not old at all!" objected the fir. "I was taken from the forest only this winter! I am in my prime! I have only just begun to grow!"

"How wonderfully you tell stories!" said the little mice, and the following night they brought four more with them, who also needed to hear the fir's tales. And the more the fir told, the more clearly it remembered its past, and it seemed to it that it had lived through many good days.

"But they will return! They will return! And Klumpe-Dumpe fell down the stairs, and still he got a princess! Perhaps I too will get a princess!"

At this, the tree remembered the pretty little birch that grew in the forest thicket not far from itself—it seemed to it a real princess.

"Who is this Klumpe-Dumpe?" asked the little mice, and the fir told them the whole fairy tale; it remembered it word for word. The little mice nearly jumped with delight up to the very top of the tree. The next night several more mice arrived, and on Sunday even two rats came. These did not like the story at all, which greatly saddened the little mice, but now they too ceased to admire the story as much as before.

"Do you know only this one story?" asked the rats.

"Only this one!" replied the fir. "I heard it on the happiest evening of my life; though at that time, incidentally, I did not realize it!"

"A most pitiful story! Do you not know anything about fat or tallow candles? About the pantry?"

"No!" answered the tree.

"Then farewell!" said the rats and departed. The little mice scattered too, and the fir sighed:

"It was indeed fine when those lively little mice sat around me and listened to my stories! Now that too is over... But now I shall not miss my chance; I shall rejoice properly when finally I emerge again into the white light!"

This did not happen so soon!

One morning people came to tidy up the attic. The boxes were taken out, and after them, the fir tree. At first, it was rather roughly thrown onto the floor, then the footman dragged it down the stairs.

"Well, now a new life will begin for me!" thought the fir tree.

Then fresh air wafted over it, a ray of sun gleamed—the fir found itself in the yard. All this happened so quickly, there was so much that was new and interesting around it, that it did not even have time to look at itself. The yard adjoined the garden; in the garden everything was green and blooming. Fresh fragrant roses hung over the fence, the linden trees were covered with blossoms, swallows flew back and forth and chirped:

"Chirp-chirp-cheep! My husband has returned!" But this did not concern the fir.

"Now I too shall live!" rejoiced the fir and spread out its branches. Ah, how faded and yellowed they were!

The tree lay in a corner of the yard, among nettles and weeds; on its top still shone the golden star.

In the yard, the very same children who had jumped and danced around the decorated fir on Christmas Eve were playing merrily. The youngest saw the tree and tore the star from it.

"Just look what is left on this nasty, old fir tree!" he said, and trampled its branches with his feet—the branches crackled.

The fir looked at the young, blooming life around it, then looked at itself and wished to return to its dark corner in the attic.

It remembered its youth, and the forest, and the merry Christmas Eve, and the little mice joyfully listening to the tale of Klumpe-Dumpe...

"All is past, past!" said the poor tree. "If only I had rejoiced while there was time! But now... all is past, past!"

The footman came and chopped the fir into pieces—a whole bundle of kindling resulted. How splendidly they blazed beneath the great cauldron! The tree sighed deeply, deeply, and these sighs resembled faint shots. The children ran up, sat down before the fire, and greeted each shot with a cheerful "Bang! Pop!" And the fir, emitting heavy sighs, remembered the clear summer days and starry winter nights in the forest, the merry Christmas Eve, and the tale of Klumpe-Dumpe, the only tale it had ever heard!... Thus it burned away completely.

The boys played again in the yard; on the youngest's chest shone that very golden star which had adorned the fir on the happiest evening of its life. Now he has passed, vanished into eternity, the fir too has come to an end, and with it our story. The end, the end! Everything in the world has its end!