

The Buckwheat

Hans Christian Andersen

When after a thunderstorm you pass by a field in which buckwheat is growing, you will very often notice that the buckwheat appears quite blackened and singed as if a fire had swept over it. The farmer will tell you, "It got that from lightning." But why and how did it happen?

I'll tell you the story as the sparrow told it to me, and he heard it from an old willow tree that stands beside a buckwheat field. And who could possibly know better than that old willow tree, for he still stands there? He is such a respectable and dignified tree, but is old and crippled, with grass and brambles growing out of a cleft in his middle. He bends forward, with his branches hanging down to the ground as if they were long green hair.

In the fields around the tree, corn was growing, and rye and barley, and oats - oh, very fine oats, which when ripe looked like a whole flock of little yellow canary birds sitting on sprays. The corn stood so prosperous in its field, and the fuller an ear was the deeper it bent in pious humility.

But just opposite the old willow tree there was also a field of buckwheat. And the buckwheat didn't bend like the rest of the grain, but strutted very proudly and stiffly. "I'm as rich as any old corn," he said. "And besides, I'm lots handsomer; my flowers are as beautiful as the apple blossoms; it's a pleasure to look at me and my family. Do you know anybody more splendid than we are, you old willow tree?"

And the willow tree nodded his head, just as if he were saying, "Yes, certainly I do."

But the buckwheat puffed himself up with foolish pride and said, "That stupid tree's so old he has grass growing out of his stomach!"

Suddenly a terrible storm broke out, and all the field flowers folded their petals and bowed their delicate heads while the storm passed over them, but the buckwheat strutted with arrogance.

Bend your head down the way we do! cried the flowers.

I don't need to! replied the buckwheat.

"Bend your head!" the other crops all cried. "The Angel of Storm is flying down on us! He has wings that reach from the clouds right down to earth, and he'll break you in two before you can cry for mercy!"

"Yes, but I certainly won't bend," replied the buckwheat defiantly. "Shut up your flowers and bend your leaves," the old willow tree called. "And whatever you do, don't look up at the lightning when the cloud bursts! Even human beings don't dare do that, for in the lightning one can look into God's Heaven itself, and that sight will strike even human beings blind! So if we, who are so much less worthy than they, dared to do it, what would happen to us!"

"Now I'll certainly look straight up into Heaven itself!" and he did so with pride and haughtiness. So vivid was the lightning that it seemed as if the whole world were on fire.

When the storm finally passed, the flowers and crops stood again in the clear, sweet air, refreshed by the rain; but the buckwheat was blasted coal-black by the lightning, and he was now a dead, useless weed on the field. Then the willow tree waved his branches in the breeze, and great drops of water fell from his green leaves just as if he was crying. "Why are you weeping?" the sparrows asked him. "Everything is so wonderful here. Look how the sun shines, see how the clouds sail across the sky. Can't you smell the fragrance

of the flowers and the bushes? Why do you weep, old willow tree?"

Then the willow tree told them of the pride and the haughtiness of the buckwheat, and of the punishment that he had to suffer.

And I who tell you this story have heard it from the sparrows. One evening when I asked them for a tale, they told it to me.