# THE LITTLE FIG-TREE STORIES

BY

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# Table of Contents

AUTHOR’S NOTE

THE LITTLE FIG-TREE STORIES

FLOWER OF THE ALMOND AND FRUIT OF THE FIG

THE LAMB THAT COULDN’T “KEEP UP”

DREAM-HORSES

AN IDAHO PICNIC

A VISIT TO JOHN’S CAMP

NOVEMBER IN THE CAÑON

THE GATES ON GRANDFATHER’S FARM

THE GARRET AT GRANDFATHER’S

THE SPARE BEDROOM AT GRANDFATHER’S

**UP THE LADDER TO THE SCUTTLE**

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

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# THE
# LITTLE FIG-TREE STORIES

# FLOWER OF THE ALMOND AND FRUIT OF THE FIG

There is a garden on a hill slope between the snows of the Sierra Nevada and the warm, rich valleys of the coast. It is in that region of Northern California where the pine belt and the fruit belt interlace. Both pine and fruit trees grow in that mountain garden, and there, in the new moon of February, six young Almond trees burst into flower.

The Peach and Plum trees in the upper garden felt a glow of sympathy with their forward sisters of the south, but the matronly Cherry trees shook their heads at such an untimely show of blossoms. They foresaw the trouble to come.

“The Almond trees,” they said, “will lose their fruit buds this year, as they did last and the year before. Poor things, they are so emotional! The first whisper of spring that wanders up the foothills sets them all aflame; out they rush, with their hearts on their sleeves, for the frosts to peck at. But what can one do? If you try to reason with them, ‘Our parents and grandparents always bloomed in February,’ they will tell you, ‘and *they* did not lose their fruit buds.’”

“The Almond trees come of very ancient stock,” said the Normandy Pear, who herself bore one of the oldest names in France. “Inherited tendencies are strong in people of good blood. One of their ancestors, I have heard, was born in a queen’s garden in Persia, a thousand years ago; and beautiful

women, whose faces the sun never shone upon, wore its blossoms in their hair. And as you probably know, their forefathers are spoken of in the Bible."

"A number of persons, my dear, are spoken of in the Bible who were no better than they should be," said the eldest Apple tree. "We go back to the 'Mayflower,'—that is far enough for us; and none of our family ever dreamed of putting on white and pink in February. It would be flying in the face of Providence."

"White and pink are for Easter," said the Pear tree, whose grandparents were raised in a bishop's garden. "I should not wish to put my blossoms on in Lent."

The Apple tree straightened herself stiffly.

"We do not keep the church fasts and feasts," she said; "but every one knows that faith without works is dead. What are these vain blossoms that we put forth for a few days in the spring, without the harvest that comes after?"

"Now the Apple tree is going to preach," said the light-hearted Peach tree, stepping on the Plum tree's toes. "If we must have preaching, I had rather listen to the Pines. They, at least, have good voices."

"Those misguided Almonds are putting out all their strength in fleshly flowers," the Apple tree continued; "but how when the gardener comes to look for his crop? We all know, as the Cherry trees said, what happened last year and the year before. It cannot be expected that the Master of the Garden will have patience with them forever."

“The Master of the Garden!” Four young Fig trees, who stood apart and listened in sorrowful silence to this talk of blossoms, repeated the words with fear and trembling.

“How long,—how much longer,”—they asked themselves, “will he have patience with us?”

It was now the third spring since they had been planted, but not one of the four sisters had yet produced a single flower. With deep, shy desire they longed to know what the flower of the fig might be like. They were all of one age, and they had no parent tree to tell them. They knew nothing of their own nature or race or history. Two seasons in succession, a strange, distressful change had come upon them. They had felt the spring thrills, and the sap mounting in their veins; but instead of breaking out into pink and white flowers, like the happy trees around them, ugly little hard green knobs had crept out of their tender bark, and these had swollen and increased in size till they were bowed with the burden of their deformity. Fruit this could not be, for they had seen that fruit comes from a flower, and no sign of blossom or bud had ever been vouchsafed them. When inquisitive hands came groping, and feeling of the purple excrescences upon their limbs, they covered them up in shame and tried to hide them with their broad green leaves. In time they were mercifully eased of this affliction; but then the frosts came, and the winter’s dull suspense, and then another spring’s awakening to hope and fear.

“Perhaps we were not old enough before,” they whispered encouragement to one another. “Blossoms no doubt are a great responsibility. Had we had them earlier, we might have been

foolish and brought ourselves to blame, like the Almond trees. Let us not be impatient; the sun is warm, but the nights are cold. Do not despair, dear sisters; we may have flowers yet. And when they do come, no doubt they will be fair enough to reward us for our long waiting."

They passed the word on softly, even to the littlest Fig-tree sister that stood in rocky ground close to the wall that shut the garden in from the pine wood at its back. The Pines were always chanting and singing anthems in the wood; but though the sound was beautiful, it oppressed the little Fig tree, and filled her with melancholy. Moreover, it was very dry in the ground where she stood, and a Fig tree must have drink.

"Sisters, I am very thirsty!" she cried. "Have you a little, a very little water that you could spare?"

The sister Fig trees had not much of anything to spare; they were spreading and growing fast, and their own soil was coarse and stony. The water that had so delicious a sound in coming seemed to leak away before their eager rootlets had more than tasted it; still they would have shared what they had, could they have passed it to their weaker sister. But the water would not go uphill; it ran away down, instead, and the Peach and Plum and Pear trees grew fat with what the Fig trees lacked.

"Courage, little sister!" they called to the fainting young tree by the wall. "The morning sun is strong, but soon the shadow of the wood will reach us. Cover thy face and keep a good heart. When our turn shall come, it will be thy turn too; one of us will not bloom without the others."

It was only February, and the Almond trees stood alone, without a rival in their beauty. They stood in the proudest place in the garden, in full view both from the road and from a high gallery that ran across the front of the house where the Master of the Garden lived. The house faced the west, and whenever the people came out to look at the sunset they admired the beauty of the Almond trees, with their upright shoots, tipped and starred with luminous blossoms, against the deep, rich colors in the west; and when the west faded, as it did every evening, a lamp on a high post by the gate, bigger and brighter than the brightest star, was set burning,—"for what purpose," thought the Almond trees, "but to show our beauty in the night?" So they watched through the dark hours, and felt the intoxication of the keen light upon them, and marveled at their own shadows on the grass.

They were somewhat troubled because so many of their blossoms were being picked; but the tree that stood nearest the house windows rose on tiptoe, and behold! each gathered spray had been kept for especial honor. Some were grouped in vases in the room, or massed against the chimney-piece; others were set in a silver bowl in the centre of a white table, under a shaded lamp, where a circle of people gazed at them, and every one praised their delicate, sumptuous beauty.

But peepers as well as listeners sometimes learn unpleasant truths about themselves.

"Aren't we picking too many of these blossoms?" asked the lady of the house. "I'm afraid we are wasting our almond crop."

“Almond trees will never bear in this climate,” said the Master of the Garden. “Better make the most of the blossoms while they last. The frost will catch them in a week or two.”

So the mother and children gathered the blossoms recklessly,—to save them, they said. Then a snow fall came, and those that had been left on the trees were whiter than ever for one day, and the next day they were dead. Each had died with a black spot at its core, which means the death that has no resurrection in the fruit to come.

After the snow came rain and frost, and snow again. The white Sierra descended and shook its storm cloak in the face of laughing Spring, and she fled away downward into the warm valleys. Alas, the flatterer! But the Almond trees alone had trusted her, and again their hope of fruit was lost.

“Did we not say so?” muttered the Apple tree between her chattering teeth. She was the most crabbed and censorious of the sisters, and by her talk of fruit one might have supposed her own to be of the finest quality; but this was not the case, and the gardener only that year had been threatening, though she did not know it, to cut off her top and graft her with a sweeter kind.

The leaves of the Almond tree are not beautiful, neither is her shape a thing to boast of. When spring did at last come back to stay, the Almonds were the plainest of all the trees. Their blossoms were like bright candles burned to the socket, that would light no more; their “corruptible crown” of beauty had passed to other heads. No one looked at them, no one pitied them, except the Fig trees, who wondered which had most

cause to mourn,—they, who had never had a blossom, or the Almond trees, who had risked theirs and lost them all before the time of blossoms came.

The Fig trees' reproach had not been taken away. While every tree around them was dressed in the pride of the crop to come, they stood flowerless and leafless, and burned with shame through all their barren shoots.

When the Master of the Garden came with his children to look at them, they hung their heads and were afraid.

"When will they blossom, like the other trees," the children asked, "and what sort of flower will *they* bear?"

The Fig trees held their breath to hear the answer.

"A Fig tree has no flower, like the other fruit trees," said the Master of the Garden. "Its blossom is contained in the fruit. You cannot see it unless you cut open the budding figs, and then you would not know it was a flower."

"What is the use of having blossoms, if no one ever sees them?" one of the children asked.

"What is the use of doing good, unless we tell everybody and brag about it beforehand?" the father questioned, smiling.

"I thought the best way was—you know—to do it in secret," said the child.

"That's what we are taught; and some persons do good in that way, and cover it up as if they were ashamed of it. And so the Fig tree doesn't tell anybody when it is going to bear fruit."

The Fig trees had heard their doom. To the words that followed they had not listened; nor would they have understood much more of it than the child of its father's meaning.

"What is this he calls our fruit?" they asked each other in fear and loathing. "Was *that* our fruit,—those green and purple swellings, that unspeakable weight of ugliness? Will it come year after year, and shall we never have a flower? The burden without the honor, without the love and praise, that beauty brings. That is the beginning and the end with us. Little sister, thou art happier than we, for soon thy burden-bearing will be done. Uncover thy head and let the sunbeams slay thee, for why should such as we encumber the ground!"

Trees that grow in gardens may have long memories and nature teaches them a few things by degrees, but they can know little of what goes on in the dwellings or the brains of men, or why one man should plant and call it good and later another come and dig up the first man's planting. But so it happened in this garden. "The stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner."

"These little Fig trees with their strange, great leaves,—why were they put off here by themselves, I wonder?" A lady spoke who had lately come to the cottage. She was the wife of the new Master of the Garden. "I wish we had them where we could see them from the house," she said. "All the other trees are commonplace beside them."

"They are not doing well here," said her husband. "This one, you see, is nearly dead. They must be transplanted, or we shall lose them all."

Then followed talk which set the Fig trees a-tremble with doubt and amazement and joy. They were to be moved from that arid spot,—where, they knew not, but to some place of high distinction! They—the little aliens who had stood nearest the wall and thirsted for a bare existence—were to be called to the front of the garden and have honor in the presence of all! The despised burden which they had called their deformity they heard spoken of as the rarest fruit of the garden, and themselves outvalued beyond all the other trees, for that, having so little, they had done so much.

Beauty too was theirs, it appeared, as well as excellence, though they could scarcely believe what their own ears told them; and they had a history and a family as old as those of the Almond tree, who can remember nothing that did not happen a thousand years ago and so has never learned anything in the present.

But the Fig trees would have been deeply troubled at their promotion could they have known what it was to cost their neighbors the Almond trees.

“Two we will keep for the sake of their flowers, but the others must go, and give room for the Figs.” So said the new Master, and so it was done. The unfruitful Almond trees were dug up and thrown over the wall,—all but the two whom their sisters had ransomed with their lives; for beauty has its price in this world and there must be some one to pay it.

When another spring came round, it was the little Fig tree that stood in the bright corner where the splendor of the road lamp shone upon its leaves all night. Its leaves were now as broad as

a man’s outspread hand, and its fruit was twice the size it had been the season before.

Its sister trees stood round and interlaced their boughs about it.

“Lean on us, little one,” they said, regarding it with pride.

“But you have your own load to bear.”

“We scarcely feel it,” said the happy trees.

This was true; for the burden that had seemed beyond their strength, when their hearts were heavy with shame and despondency, they could bear up lightly now, since they had learned its meaning and its worth.

The new Master’s children were so full of the joy of spring in that mountain garden—for they too, like the little Fig trees, had been transplanted from arid ground—they had no words of their own in which to utter it. So their mother taught them some words from a song as old, almost, as the oldest garden that was ever planted:—

“For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; the fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell.”

“Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out.”

# THE LAMB THAT COULDN'T "KEEP UP"

Until Jack Gilmour was seven years old his home had been at his grandfather's house in a country "well wooded and watered," as the Dutch captain who discovered it described it to his king.

There was water in the river; there was water in the ponds that lay linked together by falling streams among the hills above the mill; there was water in the spring lot; there was water in the brook that ran through the meadow across the road; there was water in the fountain that plashed quietly all through the dark, close summer nights, when not a leaf stirred, even of the weeping ash, and the children lay tossing in their beds, with only their nightgowns covering them. And besides all these living, flowing waters, there was water in the cistern that lay concealed under the foundations of the house. Not one of the grandchildren knew who had dug it, or cemented it, or sealed it up, for children and children's children to receive their first bath from its waters. The good grandfather's care had placed it there; but even that fact the little ones took for granted, as they took the grandfather himself,—as they took the fact that the ground was under their feet when they ran about in the sunshine.

In an outer room, which had been a kitchen once (before Jack's mother was born), there was a certain place in the floor that gave out a hollow sound, like that from the planking of a

covered bridge, whenever Jack stamped upon it. Somebody found him, one day, trying the echoes on this queer spot in the floor, and advised him to keep off it. It was the trapdoor which led down into the cistern; and although it was solidly made and rested upon a broad ledge of wood—well, it had rested there on that same ledge for many years, and it wasn't a pleasant thought that a little boy in kilts should be prancing about with only a few ancestral planks between him and a hidden pit of water.

Once, when the trapdoor had been raised for the purpose of measuring the depth of the water in the cistern, Jack had looked down and had watched a single spot of light wavering over the face of the dark, still pool. It gave him a strange, uncomfortable feeling, as if this water were something quite unlike the outdoor waters, which reflected the sky instead of the under side of a board floor. This water was imprisoned, alone and silent; and if ever a sunbeam reached it, it was only a stray gleam wandering where it could not have felt at home, and must have been glad to leap out again when the sunbeam moved away from the crack in the floor that had let it in.

That same night a thunderstorm descended; the chimneys bellowed, and the rain made a loud trampling upon the roof. Jack woke and felt for his mother's hand. As he lay still, listening to the rain lessening to a steady, quiet drip, drip, he heard another sound, very mysterious in the sleeping house,—a sound as of a small stream of water falling from a height into an echoing vault. His mother told him it was the rain water pouring from all the roofs and gutters into the cistern, and that the echoing sound was because the cistern was "low." Next

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