

The Cooper and the Winter Oak

A solstice story of integrity, hard work, service and trust in the support of others when we ask for help



There was once an old cooper or a barrel maker who kept a workshop outside of town. His home and workshop were the same small dwelling nestled on a hilltop overlooking the town. But for a single old tree that shaded the north side of his home, the land was open and covered in grasses and wildflowers. His workshop was small consisting of a forge and table, a pile of split wood, and a wall of tools – planes, axes and knives, and hammers – all for the purpose of making barrels. This may seem like a silly occupation to us now but some time ago so much was stored in barrels – all manner of drink and food was stored in barrels – and they must be tight lest they spill the treasures inside. This took great skill and knowledge – the wooden staves must fit perfectly together and the iron hoops just the right tightness. But the cooper must also know his woods and which were best for which purpose.

The cooper that lived outside of town was such a cooper. His knowledge was vast and his reputation for quality was unquestioned. He was thus never without work and was busy building barrels every day. The only challenge for the cooper was acquiring wood. When he was a young man he would think nothing of taking his wagon into the forest and bringing back the trees he needed to build a particular order of barrels. But now he was old and did not have the strength to pull trees out of the forest – and besides, he had let go of his old horse years ago. He, therefore, depended on the foresters that worked out of the nearby town. And they, unfortunately, could not be depended on to procure the cooper's specific order – for trees were scarce in that part of the world. The ones that once covered this land had been cleared for grazing. The forests to the north were the only option and the variety in those forests was limited. There was plenty of cedar, birch, and pine for storing grains, nails fruits, and vegetables. There were also some oak trees to be found to build barrels for beer and winemakers that required the wood to complete the taste of their products.

In a nearby village, however, there was a very particular winemaker that wanted his wine to be stored in particular barrels made with the wood of a very particular kind of oak tree – the winter white oak. This kind of wood gave a unique taste to his wine that was the perfect compliment. No other wood would do. These oak trees were very rare in this part of the world, but there were a few.

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A year ago a forester found one of these trees in a forest to the west and the cooper paid a handsome price for it. The wood was quartered, eighth-ed, and sixteenth-ed and piled in orderly rows waiting to be made into staves. In the late fall, an unusually large order of barrels was issued from the particular winemaker who wanted his barrels to be made with this particular oak tree. It was imperative that the exact number be made - no less. The cooper promised him the exact number of barrels made of the particular oak to be finished a few weeks before Christmas and he set to work. The cooper's promise was as good as gold for everyone knew him to be a man of his word. Never had he broken it.

Autumn was coming to an end and the cold winds of winter were approaching. The cooper used his pine wood to heat the house and his forge, saving the harder woods for his barrels. The winds continued and soon brought snow. The cooper continued his work and began to burn the beech and then the cedar for heat. The snow piled and the cold deepened and endured. The cooper could see that his wood was thinning and he would soon need more firewood to heat his workshop. He went to the door to see about traveling to town to purchase more wood - but when he opened it, it was clear that he would go nowhere. The snow was knee deep and the wind was bitter and biting. He could not travel in such conditions. He had to stay.

The dilemma was also clear. He had wood. He had a pile of wood. He had a pile of rare winter white oak wood that would burn hot and long. But the cooper was a man of his word and would rather be cold than be late on his promise. The cooper believed a man's word was all he really had in this life and to break one's promise was to break his soul. So what could he do? He continued to work. He cut staves, carved headboards, hammered hoops, and pounded it all into place. He would light fires in the morning to warm the wood and his tools and then he would work without pause. He would work until his hands were too cold to hold the tools. Then he would climb into his cot and pile on the quilts. There he would eat his cold supper and fitfully sleep a cold night's sleep. Every day he would see his firewood pile get smaller - but his situation never changed. He would not use the oak. So he used less firewood. And the cooper and his workshop got colder and colder. His situation became desperate.

Though the cooper lived alone and had had no visitors for some time, his sacrifice was not unnoticed. In fact, the cooper did not realize it, but everything the cooper did in his day and night was respectfully regarded by a very old wood being or wood nymph that was guardian to the old tree outside his workshop. You see, everything in nature has a little being that watches over it - wood nymphs, grass fairies, wind sprites crystal gnomes - they populate the natural world around us. They care for their trees, plants, stones, and such but after a while, they can also take an interest in people. Such was the case with this wood nymph. The tree outside the workshop had been there for a very long time. The cooper's grandfather had protected it when he built the workshop long ago. There were other trees then but over the years all of them became either barrels or firewood. Now there was only one tree. And the wood nymph was well aware of why its tree had been spared.

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You see the tree that stood outside the cooper's workshop was indeed, a winter white oak – a very old and very large winter white oak. A perfect winter white oak that would normally be a cooper's dream. So many barrels could be made from such a tree. And yet the tree had never been cut. The tree remained where others were cut down. This was not the intention. The cooper's grandfather tended the tree with the express purpose of using it for barrels. He knew the tree was rare and that it would be an investment well returned when the time came to cut it down. But over the years the tree became part of his life. His son and daughter climbed the tree, they hung a swing from one of its branches. They gathered its acorns every year. The tree grew taller and the grandfather became older. In time he died and his daughter often sat under the tree thinking of him. She married a barrel maker and they spent many days working together in the workshop. In time they had a son – the cooper – and he grew up climbing the tree, swinging in the swing, and loving its beauty and form. The winter oak was part of his family. It was with him when he carved his first headboard and cut his first stave. Truly, it was his oldest friend. And now, an old man alone in the country – it was his only friend. He would never cut down the tree. Even if he was in danger of freezing from a lack of firewood.

The oak tree nymph knew this. The nymph also knew that the cooper did not have enough wood to finish his order. The nymph could see that the cooper was in danger of sacrificing his life for an obligation he could not meet. And so the oak tree nymph decided to do something that was not at all common in the fairy world, she decided to help him.

You see, fairies are very practical folk. They are focused and attentive to the natural world and seldom get involved in the affairs of people. They understood that people need things and that sometimes a tree must be cut down or a field plowed. These things are not lamented – it is simply the way of things. But this tree nymph had a special relationship with the man. She respected his resilience, his strength, and his integrity. They had a lot in common. Nymphs are a lot like their trees and this winter white oak nymph knew what it was to enduring and true.

So she decided to help the cooper.

And she immediately knew how. From the top branches of the grand winter oak, the nymph whispered into the wind. The wind fairies took the whisper and sent it in all directions, swirling and dipping, then climbing and twisting through trees, over mountains, along frozen ponds, and eventually to the ears of fellow well-known in the forests of that land.

He was a woodsman of high regard, able to find trees that others could not. Able to find his way through any forest, even at night, even in a storm. No one knew how he was able to do such things – some said he was a part fairy. And they weren't entirely wrong – for though he was entirely a person, he was sensitive to the fairy world. He had a deep respect for the fairy folk and wished to honor them in everything he did. Before he would cut down a tree, he would talk to the fairy that cared for it. He would explain why it must be done and ask for the fairy's blessing.

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Then we would wait to receive it. The woodsman never saw any of his fairy friends, but he could hear them. Their messages came in the wind and they were as faint as a whisper. The woodsman would be still and silent until he heard the whisper and then he always heeded what was said.

Such was the case when the winter white oak nymph's whisper came to his ears. The woodsman was looking for a place to sleep. It was late and it was snowing. He was looking for a safe place out of the snow – a rocky ledge, a carved-out bank, or a wide spruce canopy. He stood still for a while waiting to hear the whispers until one came. The whisper said there was a house, a workshop, and it was this way. He heeded the whisper as he always did and pulled his sled filled with wood cut from the forest along.

It took most of the night but in time he made it to the cooper's workshop and knocked loudly on the door. The cooper, stiff with the cold came slowly to the door and opened it. When he saw the big man nearly frozen, covered in snow he invited him in immediately. He apologized for the cold and went to the stove to use his last few logs of beech to warm his guest. When the fire was hot, the cooper warmed some stew and handed it to the woodsman. He was very grateful.

They enjoyed the fire together for some time. But soon the beech logs were gone and all that remained was the oak staves. The cooper would never use the oak for himself, but a guest was a different matter entirely. He got up and took several of the oak staves – those he had prepared for the order of barrels and walked to the fire. As he was about to toss them in, the woodman spoke up.

"Wait – I am not a tradesman but I can see that the oak you hold was not meant to burn. Save your oak, cooper. And instead, take this gift."

Then he got up and went outside. When the door opened again, he tossed log after log of maple, hickory, ash, and beech into the workshop. The cooper and the woodsman piled it until it nearly reached the ceiling. There was enough wood there for the rest of the winter and into the spring.

The cooper wished to pay the woodsman but he refused. Keeping a man from freezing was worth at least a pile of wood, he said. They spent the rest of the night talking and laughing. They had much to talk about – both spending so much time alone.

And in the morning, it was time for the woodsman to go. They held hands and thanked each other for lodging and for wood – both men feeling blessed by the other. Then the cooper in the warmth of his workshop went back to work – sure to finish on time and sure to keep his word. The woodsman could see that the cooper would be safe for the winter and set to pulling his empty sled behind him. As he was about to take his sled down, into the village he paused to listen. He felt a whisper approach in the soft morning breeze. It was the same voice that found him the night previous deep in the woods to the North. It was the voice of the winter oak nymph. The whisper said "Thank you"

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He turned to see the cooper's workshop in the distance - and what he saw surprised him.

He saw the workshop with the glow of heat inside and the steady train of smoke coming from the chimney - but that did not surprise him. It was the tree. He could see that the tree was an oak. A white oak. A winter white oak - a rare tree indeed - but it was its shape that surprised him. Its branches had formed over the years to resemble two long arms. And the arms were stretched out around the workshop like it was a child. It was the gesture of a mother. The woodsman smiled and raised his hand to say goodbye and then continued down the hill.