

Pines

By Algernon Blackwood

All trees, doubtless, appeal in some measure to the sense of poetry, even in those who are not strictly speaking lovers of Nature; but the pine, for many, seems to have a message more vivid, more vital than the rest as though it possessed some occult quality that speaks not merely to the imagination, or to the general love of Nature *per se*, but directly to the soul. The oak for strength, the ash for mystery, the birch for her feminine grace and so forth; but the pine, like a sharp sword, pierces straight through to that inner sense of beauty which accepts or rejects beyond all question of analysis. The personality of this “common” tree touches the same sense of wonder that is stirred by the presence of a human personality, strong beyond ordinary; and worship is ever subtly linked with wonder.

The analogy is interesting. The pine plants its roots where more showy trees faint and die straight, strong, and sweet to the winds, it flourishes where only gorse, heather, and toughly obstinate things can live. Out of the rock, where there seems not earth enough to feed a violet, it lifts its sombre head undaunted scorched by the sun, torn by the blast, peering into dreadful abysses, yet utterly fearless, and yielding so little that the elements must pluck it up by the roots before they can destroy it. Only lightning can break it. At a height above the sea that means death to other trees, it climbs singing, “rock-rooted, stretched athwart the vacancy”; and even when the main army halts, stragglers are always to be seen, leading forlorn hopes into the heart of desolation beyond. And if, amid the stress of conditions, it cannot look well, it is content to look ill, showing a dwarfed and stunted figure to the skies. Only then, ye elemental powers! what strength in the gnarled roots, what iron resistance in the twisted trunk, what dour endurance in the short, thick limbs! It assumes the attitude of the fighting animal, back to the wall.

High mountains are full of vivid pictures of this courage against Titanic odds. For the pine tree has the courage of its convictions—fine, simple, tenacious—as it has also that other quality of the strong soul: the power to stand alone. “Some say there is a precipice where *one* vast pine is frozen to ruin o’er piles of snow and chasms of ice ’mid Alpine mountains.” No one who has canoed on Canadian lakes and seen those frequent rocky islets, each with its solitary pine, can have ignored that there is something strangely significant in the sight of that slender spire rising out of the heart of loneliness—something that thrills, and thrills deeply, into the region beyond words. Unsheltered, beneath wide skies, remote from its own kind, the tree stands there, splendid in its isolation, straight as a temple column and prepared for any shock. “Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam,” of course—but there is more than the pathos of Heine’s poem in its unapproachable loneliness: there is the spiritual suggestion of personality—this upright, self-sufficing tree upon a rock, buffeted by winds and waves, asking no sympathy and dreading no possible fate. The picture, symbolic of the strong soul, conveys the inevitable parable.

Compared with other trees, too, the pine does not change. One knows, of course, the tips of tender green that come with May and turn a pine wood into a sea of bewildering beauty. But, though deciduous, one is never aware that anything is lost; its branches never thin; it puts out, properly speaking, no buds. And the monotony of a pine forest is merely a defect of its great quality of constancy. In summer its shade is deeper, its recesses more cool than those of other woods; and in winter, just when most trees are leafless and unable to fight, it bears the full weight of the snow and meets the whole force of the destroying winds. It stands to face disaster

when others faint or run. The analogy with man is again striking and complete. Yet its qualities are not merely negative. More than most, it gives out—without reward, often without recognition; for the great forests that sweeten the world with their balsam, and their life-giving odours, stand most often in the deserted regions of the earth, unseen, unknown. And, by their death, they become more useful still, journeying over all the seas. In the true sense, most ascetic of trees, accepting discipline that good may come for others, not for themselves

Like the vital human personality, too, what “atmosphere” it has! What it lends of suggestiveness to the commonest landscape—a few pines clustered on the hill; a sombre group among the green trees in the plain! In the suburban garden even, or rearing its dark crest against the hoardings of the street, how its picturesqueness spreads about it! It is the gipsy among trees, and its perfume, like the wood fire, sets the blood aflame for wandering and for the lonely places of the world. At the sight of it one thinks, perhaps, of the stone pine “into which the forest has whispered its gravest and sweetest thought,” and at the same instant is caught away to that other revelation where it stands by the sea. For, by the shore of southern seas, it betrays a scarcely suspected touch of melancholy, gentle and pathetic in its essence, feminine almost, that makes the heart yearn for lovely and impossible things. One sees it there, rooted among golden sands, and gazing across a waste of purple sea, the wash of whose waves is hardly to be distinguished from the wash of wind through its own branches.

The mystery of the pines, too, seems to hold a peculiar quality unapproached elsewhere in Nature: it subdues without terrifying, inspires awe without distress, and is more human than the mystery which belongs to mountains, sea, or desert. The fairies come out from the pine woods; for no other woods conceal so gently, yet hold within their velvety recesses such possibilities of revelation. To meet them unexpectedly is to experience a thrill of subtle suggestion. Among tamer trees, suddenly to come upon these black, vigorous things, contemptuous of soil, independent of sympathy, thriving where others droop or die, is to know a leap of the imagination, an increase of vitality, as when, among a crowd of common souls, one finds a man—strong, radiating confidence and hope. Their very darkness stimulates. One cannot conceive such trees stooping to any kind of show.

“Lowland trees,” says the author of *Modern Painters*, may “show themselves gay with blossoms and glad with pretty charities of fruitfulness,” but the pines “have harder work to do for man and must do it in close-set troops.” While other trees “may turn their paleness to the sky if but a rush of rain passes them by, the pines must live carelessly amidst the wrath of clouds,” and “only wave their branches to and fro when a storm pleads with them, as men toss their arms in a dream. . . . You cannot reach them, cannot cry to them; these trees never heard human voice,” he says, speaking of their inaccessible multitudes among the precipices; “they are far above all sound but of the winds. No foot ever stirred fallen leaf of theirs. All comfortless they stand, between the two eternities of Vacancy and the Rock; yet with such iron will that the rock itself looks bent and shattered beside them—fragile, weak, inconsistent, compared to their dark energy of delicate life, and monotony of enchanted pride—unnumbered, unconquerable.”

And there is no sound in Nature quite so wonderful as that faint spiritual *singing* of pine trees, that gentle whirring of a forest when soft airs are moving—that *säuselnd, susurrement*, whispering. Midway in the wood, of course, a pine forest shouting in a free wind is simply the sea shouting on a sandy shore; close the eyes, and it is impossible to tell the difference; it is tumbling surf, mellowed by distance, tossing, instead of spray, the flying odours of their needles’ frankincense. But when only stray puffs come a-wandering, and other trees are silent, listen at the skirts of a pine grove, and hear those ghosts of sound that fall from nowhere, that thin away

to a mere ghost of sighing, and then come running back to you over the motionless crests. For pines can answer the wind apparently without moving. No other sound can faint as this does—or sing alone; among the stragglers at the edge of the wood you may hear distinct *solos*. Isolated pines respond to a wind you cannot feel; and a tree at your side will sigh and murmur, while another six feet away keeps silent. Almost as though the wind can consciously pick and choose when and where it shall shake “the clinging music from their boughs,” so that “low, sweet sounds, like the farewell of ghosts,” are heard.

Wherever they are found, whether they “fledge the wild ridged mountain steep by steep,” or gather in greater concourse like “fallen flakes and fragments of the night, stayed in their solemn squares,” these trees, for some imaginations at least, seem charged with a potent symbolism. And, from the particular, they sweep the mind across continents to the general. Their shadows rest upon a nation, as Ruskin puts it, and absorb and mould the life of a race.

The Northern people, century after century, lived under one or another of the two great powers of the Pine and the Sea, both infinite.

Whatever elements of imagination, or of warrior strength, or of domestic justice, were brought down by the Norwegian and the Goth against the dissoluteness or degradation of the South of Europe, were taught them under the green roofs and wild penetralia of the pine.”