

DEAN'S
Illustrated Farthing Books.

**THE OAK
AND THE BRIONY.**



LONDON: DEAN & SON,
11, Ludgate Hill.



THE OAK AND THE BRIONY.

A MAJESTIC oak reared his lofty head high above his brethren of the forest, which was his ancient home, or as most would say, his kingdom; for who could look an that tall and spreading form, and say it was not worthy to reign there supreme?

Ages had passed as days over the old oak; children's children had gambled, century after century, around his gray and ancient trunk, while they, the very memory of whose name had fled away, had once, in the fresh joyousness of youth, graven them on the knotted bark; little dreaming that loved and cherished ones, as then they were all, save that frail memorial of them, should pass away and be forgotten. But the giant oak was not immortal, and time's stern fingers had slowly indeed, but alas! too surely, grasped the tree; and while vainly trying to hide his work, the oak felt his power.

Still the gnarled and iron roots stretched out far beyond what was justly their right, and as many a child, while plucking their fringe of moss, stumbled and fell over some unseen straggler, he wondered that his innocent trap, which seemed so far away from the mighty tree, yet owned him as a father. All admired him; the very birds delighted in his boughs (each in itself a tree) as if they were proud to form their home therein. But the praise

of generations had made the proud tree still prouder and more haughty; and as pride makes but few friends, many a jealous companion secretly wished his fall.

In a quiet home, sheltered by a moss-covered root, a little green shoot was born and nurtured; but its tender head was only just raised from among the brilliant bed of green, and the oak saw it not. But when spring's fragrant and balmy breath had kissed it, and summer's mild and fruitful rays had gently lighted on it (for they could but with difficulty pierce the leafy arbour above), the little shoot grew into a healthy plant. Then the oak looked down angrily and scornfully upon it, and said, "Who art thou, that darest to dwell unasked, so near my noble trunk?" And the little plant answered, "Nature chose this favoured spot as my birth-place, unworthy as I am of so royal a shelter. Briony is my name, and I am but a useless weed; yet suffer me, I pray thee, to live on unhurt, and all that is mine of gratitude and love shall be poured

out on thee." Humility often disarms the anger which could ill bear a hasty answer; and the proud tree no longer despised the humble plant which so needed a protecting arm; and he bade her live securely. So the graceful little briony flourished more and more, and the oak



could not but delight in a friend so meek and gentle; for till then his misjudged pride had all but shut out companionship. The friendship of beings so different, was a surprise to all, and an envious tree hinted it was not for long. But the

monarch's heart of iron was softened, and changed not, but loved the creeping plant, while she seemed formed for tender lovingness. And so they lived on, till twice the pendant nests of the wren and the bottletit had been embowered among the acorns, and twice the squirrel had reared her frolicsome young in the same safe retreat.

It was noon of a sultry summer day; a deep gloom, like a thick veil, fell over the face of nature; and ebon clouds flew hither and thither in the dark vault above. The birds folded their scorched and drooping wings. The very insects ceased to hum, as though they too had sought the shelter of their crevices and holes. There was no sound in that wide forest of any living thing. Nature kept an awful stillness, broken only by the slight rustling of a distant aspen, which quivered and trembled even more than was her wont, as if the stricken tree were reminded of the hour of her punishment.

The gentle briony spake not, but clung closer and closer to the oak, for she felt

that August day unnaturally calm and breathless. The startling roar of a loud thunder-clap roused all from their gloomy musings; they knew that the dreaded storm had begun. Scarcely had the last echo died away, when a forked and vivid flash shot quickly through the trees, burning some, and rending others as it passed. It reached the giant oak, and he who had braved the storms for centuries, was blasted at length.

The timid briony, unhurt, tremblingly glanced upwards to her supporter, and saw that his hour was come—the king of the forest was no more.

The storm raged long and fearfully, but at length it was spent; and then the big heavy drops slowly descended: they beat upon the delicate tendrils of the green plant, but she bent them to their force, and saved them.

Before long, the leaves of the oak withered and fell; the acorns strewed the ground, and his gigantic branches were bare. But soon the briony sprung up and re clothed them with her luxuriant foliage, turning

8 THE OAK AND THE BRIONY.

her festoons from bough to bough, and hiding their scathed bark.

She joyed in giving this her humble tribute of gratitude to her withered supporter; and while the trees of the grove rejoiced in his end, the briony only bitterly wept his fall.

So that one kind act of the oak brought a reward; and the little green shoot, which in his strength he had deigned to nurture, lived to crown his leafless boughs with lovely verdure.

