

The Oak and the Reed

by Jean de La Fontaine

The oak one day address'd the reed:--

"To you ungenerous indeed
Has nature been, my humble friend,
With weakness aye obliged to bend.
The smallest bird that flits in air
Is quite too much for you to bear;
The slightest wind that wreathes the lake
Your ever-trembling head doth shake.

The while, my towering form
Dares with the mountain top
The solar blaze to stop,
And wrestle with the storm.

What seems to you the blast of death,
To me is but a zephyr's breath.
Beneath my branches had you grown,
Less suffering would your life have known,
Unhappily you oftenest show
In open air your slender form,
Along the marshes wet and low,
That fringe the kingdom of the storm.
To you, declare I must,
Dame Nature seems unjust."

Then modestly replied the reed:

"Your pity, sir, is kind indeed,
But wholly needless for my sake.
The wildest wind that ever blew
Is safe to me compared with you.
I bend, indeed, but never break.
Thus far, I own, the hurricane
Has beat your sturdy back in vain;
But wait the end." Just at the word,
The tempest's hollow voice was heard.
The North sent forth her fiercest child,
Dark, jagged, pitiless, and wild.
The oak, erect, endured the blow;
The reed bow'd gracefully and low.

But, gathering up its strength once more,
In greater fury than before,
 The savage blast
 O'erthrew, at last,
That proud, old, sky-encircled head,
Whose feet entwined the empire of the dead!