

THE OAK OF RIA

Traditional tale from the Pyrenees, collected by H. CHauvet

Close to the new railway station of Ria, a few meters away from the mas Marie, there was a sturdy and ancient oak which foliage shadowed the national road. It was the king of the surrounding trees, the forebear still green, the torso of a giant that neither the winds nor the storms could bend ; a high and proud head defying the elements ; powerful and gnarled arms that protected many generations.

Who knows how deep in the ground were spread its powerful roots, the numerous tentacles of this gigantic oak ? Who even knows in which times its mysterious legend was set ? At least it sends back to the times when the Encantades ruled sovereign in the Roussillon, and more exactly around Prades.

These malicious witches were given supernatural powers by Hell. They teased their victims, cursed them, spread the worst pains in the area, inspired the inhabitants of the place a deep terror. Under cover of darkness, they accomplished their evil spells. As the old clock stroke the twelve chimes of midnight, they gathered around the gorges of *en Gourné*, the deepest pit between Ria and Villefranche. There they washed their clothes, then disappeared led by the three sisters Analgès, the most audacious and wrinkled of them. Misfortune to those they chose for the accomplishment of their sinister deeds. They inflicted the worse humiliations and let painful memories of their passing.

In vain the peasant, armed to the teeth, were running after them around the countryside. The cheerful gang of the *Encantades* always was going towards the group of green oaks standing on two rows along the big road. On the command of one of the Encantades : "*Pet sus fulla, Aybre en amont*" (« foot on leaf, on top of the tree ») they were disappearing in the leafy branches. One could have heard the rustle of leaves clattering and branches wailing, as if a fleet of birds had landed on those trees. After this, the nature was going back to its silence until the infuriating peasants were arriving. They were passing under the oaks, but didn't look for the witches in the middle of the leaves and the acorns.

One cold night, so cold that the peasants could hardly hold their sticks and their pitchfork, as they were passing under the oaks, their hats – they had pulled down over their ears – disappeared by magic, stolen by the mysterious witches. Roars of laughter rang out in the air and the poor frightened farmers went back to the village as fast as they could.

One day however one of the oak protested. He was the youngest and the frailest. He spoke to his elders and showed his indignation.

_ « We cannot any longer be the accomplices of these horreful witches who torture these harmless peasants. Their infernal actions cannot led to our approval. I suggest we do not give them shelter. Let's ban them forever. »

Disapproving shouts welcomed this suggestion. The oaks were surprised by the boldness and the brazenness of the young complainant. One of the oak answered :

_ « We do not have to feel for these damned woodcutters who strip us of our branches and acorns. A pity if they suffer. We put up with the bad weather after all, without a word. »

_ « You are egoists, yelled the young oak, I will act alone, but I will act. »

And, bravely, he forbid the *Encaladas* to hide in his foliage. He even threatened them to reveal their shelter.

The witches disdainfully challenged the frail tree at first. But, following the wise advice of the badessa, they decided to change the place of their refuge. Before leaving for good, they wanted to reward the oaks whose protection, loyalty and discretion had been so precious.

_ « We are ready to give you the brightest gifts, they said to the protecting trees. Speak up and your wishes will come true ».

A group of oaks cried out : « The trees from the nearby hills live happy because their leaves are thin and glaring:we would like to have golden leaves ».

The wind brought a harmonious sound of voices saying : « Our foliage is dull, give us crystal leaves ».

Finally a nightingale conveyed the desires of the most distant oaks who asked for more tender, perfumed thornless leaves.

In the split of a second, all the oaks got satisfaction. Alone the rebellious tree kept its old foliage. The *Encantades*, mocking, formed a frenzied circle around him and left : they had their revenge.

The morning after, smugglers passed by on the road and saw the dazzling golden leaves on which the sunrays were playing. One of them climbed on the tree and gave to his fellows the precious metal he was picking by handful. The smugglers filled up their pockets, their bags and their coats, without being troubled, and disappeared in the mountain. The tramontana blew with force and the crystal leaves fell and broke. The silvery sound produced attracted some goats that were grazing in a nearby field. As they raised their muzzles towards the oaks of perfumed leaves, the shepherd climbed in the trees and stripped the leaves of to satisfy his flock.

In no time, the oaks were completely naked. Only the little oak spared by the *Encantades* kept his natural foliage. He arouse jealousy among his proud neighbours who wilted one after the other.

After a while, the *Encantades* went by the big road towards Ria. They were sorry about the misfortune of the oaks they had rewarded. They fought between themselves, shifting the responsibility on each other. They beat up each other and disappeared forever. This is how the country was freed from the *Encanladas* who were harmless if they were separated.

And the little green oak, who proved himself so brave, was praised by all the inhabitants of Ria, of Villefranche and from the surrounding villages. He grew bigger in the midst of a general veneration. Never the decision was taken to replant oaks around him.