



# THE MAN WHO CUT DOWN TREES

ERISYCHTHON PAYS A TERRIBLE PRICE

*I*n the days when even the trees worshipped the gods of Rome, their first love was for Ceres, goddess of harvests, guardian of the seasons, bringer of fruitfulness. All the length and breadth of the Roman world, copses and spinneys were held sacred to Ceres: no one was permitted to cut them down.

Erisychthon, though, when he looked at a tree did not see green-robed priestesses, hands upraised in praise, swaying in elegant dance. He saw firewood.

In fact he shouldered his axe and whistled his way to a circle of ancient oaks, and there he began to hack at one so hard that the whole copse shuddered.

“Don’t, Erisychthon!” cried passers-by. “Don’t cut down the sacred oak! Ceres will be angry!”

“What do I care how the gods feel? A tree is a tree. It’s good for nothing but acorns in the summer and firewood in the winter. Now get out of my way and let me work.”

Thud, thud, thud: his great axe bit deep into the tree, and red flecks stained his tunic.



## THE MAN WHO CUT DOWN TREES

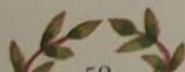
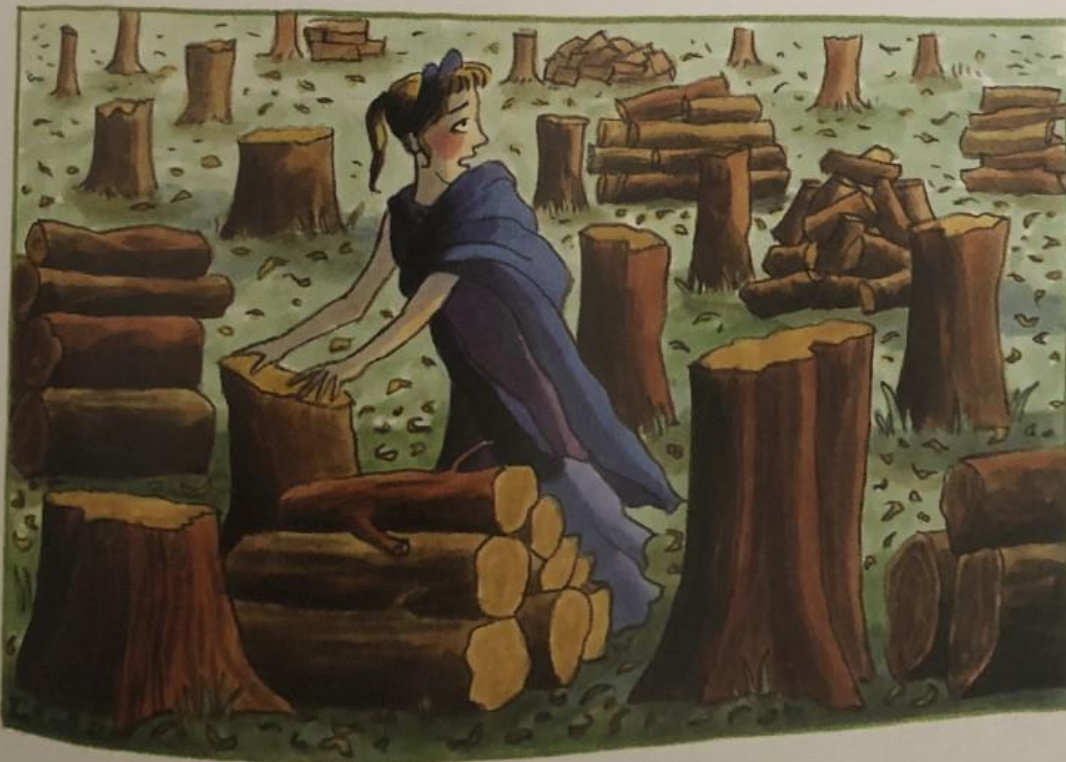
"The tree is bleeding, Father!" cried his little daughter Melia.  
"You are murdering the tree!"

"Sap. Nothing but sap," said the woodcutter, who did not believe that trees could bleed. "Are you as stupid as the rest of these superstitious fools?"

The oak tree groaned in agony as the axe cleaved to her innermost ring, to the oldest central timber. The crowd began to jeer and throw clods of earth, trying to make him stop, but Erisychthon only came after them with his axe and chased them away. Then, with a great noise like a ship foundering, the oak tree fell, spilling its green tresses along the ground.

Erisychthon began to chop at the next tree, and the next.

Not until all the trees lay lopped and logged did Ceres happen by and see the crime Erisychthon had committed. She saw the leaves like spilled teardrops; she saw the blood on the grass, and she wondered what manner of man had done this to living, holy trees. "Only an empty man, a heartless man, a hollow man could have done this," she concluded.



"All that work has made me hungry," said Erisychthon as he reached home. He ate all the cheese on the table and all the fruit in the bowl, but still he felt hungry.

So he ate all the olives on the tree outside, all the barley in the hopper, all the milk in the cow. It only seemed to make him hungrier. He ate not only his own supper but his daughter's too, complaining, "Why such small portions? I'm still famished!"

Filling his purse with money, he went to the market and bought whole haunches of venison, whole sides of bacon, whole trestles of smoked fish. But though he ate everything he bought, within the hour he was still ravenous with hunger.

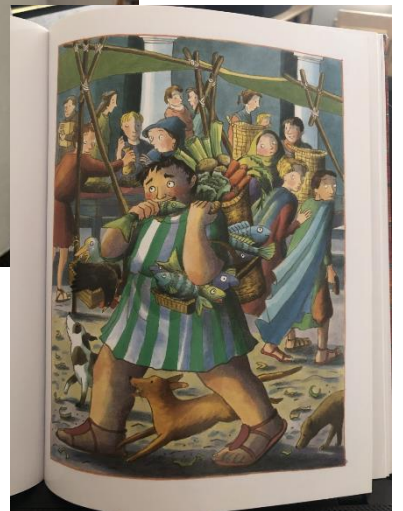
He spent all the money he had – borrowed as much as anyone would lend him – and then began selling his possessions – his cloak, his donkey, his axe. But though he was able to buy all the vegetables in the market, all the fish off the boats, though he dragged home a whole ox to roast and raided his neighbours' orchards at night, Erisychthon could not satisfy the gnawing hunger that rumbled in his stomach.

"Father! Father! There is nothing left to sell!" cried his daughter, watching him cram his mouth with swill from the pig's trough (the pig had been eaten long since). "Pray to the gods to take this terrible hunger of yours away!"

But Erisychthon only looked at her with a glistening eye and said, "I hear a young slave-girl fetches a good price."

Tossing Melia over his shoulder, he carried her, crying and pleading, down to the bay where the slave ships moored. "Wait here till I find someone to buy you," he said indistinctly, chewing on a mouthful of shellfish. When he had gone, Melia raised her face to the sky and her hands to her face. "O you gods, take pity on me! Must I pay for my father's foolishness?"

A wave curled upward out of the sea, a crook of Neptune's sea-blue finger, encircling Melia's feet. Suddenly she was no longer wearing dress



and shawl, but a rough canvas tunic and oiled woollen leggings. The hands against her face were gnarled and rough. When Erisychthon returned with a slave merchant, he saw only a fisherman standing by the shore. "Where's my daughter? Where did she run off to?"

"No one here but me," replied Melia, and her voice emerged deep and gruff. Erisychthon cursed furiously while the slave merchant put the bag of gold back into his pocket.

"No, please! I must have food! I'm starving!" Erisychthon begged.

The man looked him up and down contemptuously, this big, paunchy, red-faced glutton chewing on a live crab.



Alone on the beach once more, Erisychthon wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He tasted the salty tang of his own sweat. He could not help himself. Instinctively he took a bite. It hurt: he yelped with pain. But

## THE MAN WHO CUT DOWN TREES

at least his mouth was full. Maddened with hunger, he raced along the beach, but he had scoured it clean of all crustaceans, all seaweed, had robbed the gulls of their usual meal of rubbish scraps, and still he was hungry! Licking the bite in his hand, he tasted the salty savour of blood and took another, larger bite, this time out of his fat forearm.

“Come quickly, someone! It’s my father! You have to stop him! He is eating ...” Melia caught hold of people as she ran along the village street. “It is too horrible! You have to come and stop him!”

They followed her willingly enough: they had no grudge against Melia, who was a pleasant, devout little thing. So they ran with her down to the beach. But by the time they got there, there was nothing to be seen of her father. You see, Erisychthon had eaten his last meal, down to the very last crumb – gobbled himself up, arm by leg by rib by hair, and left nothing for the crabs.

Ceres was revenged on the man who had cut down her trees.

