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QUERCUS ALBA

THE VETERAN OF THE OZARKS





Quercus Alba, conqueror, towers dominant, invincible, above the tops of his overpowered antagonists; . . . stands there to-day, a giant four feet in diameter, rising, white and clear, sixty feet above the head of puny man, before the first branches diverge.

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QUERCUS ALBA

THE VETERAN OF
THE OZARKS

BY

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CHICAGO

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QUERCUS ALBA

THE VETERAN OF THE OZARKS



QUERCUS ALBA

THE VETERAN OF THE OZARKS

HOW do I, the chronicler, know the truth of the tale I am to tell? The question is a fair one; yet I shall not answer, because I cannot. Moreover, no man in the same position could answer. If I were to reply at all it would be by asking a question in turn; and that random query

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would perhaps be thus: How do you yourself know you live? The details of the narrative then you specify: How do you vouch for their accuracy? And again I counter with a new inquiry, any one of a multitude,—this, let us say: How do you personally know that the boulder you see stranded and alien on the open prairie far away from a kindred formation was transported on the advancing wave of a prehistoric glacier?

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Were you there to chronicle its coming, or mortal man your ancestor? Yet in your own soul you know you live; and the boulder is there, a thousand miles from its native ledge—and you do not doubt the manifest.

Likewise, in this chronicle of the life-romance of a white oak the evidence stands; a tangible thing which I have seen for myself, and which you can see for yourself if you care to take the trouble.

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Similarly every incident of its past career you can yourself see duplicated separately in other trees living amid like conditions in other sections of forest. There is no imagination required in telling a tale of Nature. Her laws are unchangeable; and a given result inevitably presupposes certain events having occurred. They cannot be fancied or falsified, or the result would give the romanticist the lie. They simply were; and the obvious

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fact that a man or men could not have been present to record the sequence of incidents running through generations of human lives can not alter their fundamental truth. Unlike those of man, the biographies of plants and of so-called lower animals have nothing to explain or to render consistent. Their lives are an open page to which a simple knowledge and love of Nature are the cipher-key.

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In the vegetable as in the animal world, what is oblivion for one individual is opportunity for another. Thus, when in that long-ago day there broke the storm that carried destruction to the group of veterans crowning the plateau of a misnamed Ozark mountain, it meant life and possibilities infinite to the scattered acorns on the ground beneath. Had that storm not come at the time it did come, the tale of this particular white oak

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would have been brief,—brief as the lives of its predecessors season after season were when they germinated only to die again beneath the deadly shade of the parent limbs. But now, when the storm passed and the warm sun shone anew, it was to beat upon the forest floor for the first time in generations, as man reckons time. For at last the mighty had fallen, victims of the decrepitude of age and of their own ponderous weight. Coeval, simi-

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larly senile, the group fell as they had lived, together, under the relentless mandate of Nature, who respects not age if it be useless, and enforces her sentence by the medium of the unusual. Prostrate, their great trunks twisted and torn by the impact of the fall, their withered leaves dropping like rain with every passing breeze, their tale was told. Like human beings, from earth they had come, and similarly to earth they were re-

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turning, as certainly as relentless Nature's laws and the passage of time.

In midsummer it was that the storm took place, the only time of year when the catastrophe could have been complete, when foliage was full, and the power of wind and storm in consequence most formidable.

Following within a week, the summer sun and the heavy summer rains had done their work, and

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only the bare branches arose as shade. Between them, fair upon the moist, fertile, forest floor, fell the hot rays. Under their influence thousands of tiny seedlings, product of the previous season's acorn crop, hitherto struggling for life, began to respond, and like puny sun-starved children of city slums, of a sudden transported to the realm of sunlight, took on life and the color of health. Here and there other acorns, hitherto dor-

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mant, felt the same instant call of life, and germinating, sent tender green shoots upward to mingle with their mates. During the remainder of that season and until the late coming of frost, they grew all and mightily. That they should do so was inevitable, for every condition favored them, had been prepared by preceding generations of their kind. The forest floor was neither too wet nor too dry; the soil was fertile as a prepared bed

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from ages of decaying leaves; every mineral salt that baby trees demand was present in abundance. As certainly as though they were human and the favored offspring of the rich, the world—their world—was theirs for the taking; and one and all they prospered and grew until, with the coming of Autumn, the plateau was a mat of green with their shoots.

Until frosts came upon the land they were alone and unmolested,

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as much so as if the world were in its infancy and they the sole occupants. Then, at the time of falling leaves and falling seeds, came the invasion. Surrounding the open space cleared by the storm, stretching on every side until the earth met the sky, was unbroken forest; and from this came the strange horde. From veterans and tall standards bordering the edge of the clearing, falling acorns bounded on obstructing limbs and fell among

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the little seedlings far out in the clearing. Near at hand was a clump of pines, and, whirling in the wind as they fell, came showers of dainty cones. A great hard maple added its quota of feathery seeds. Squirrels and birds, unconsciously aiding Nature's scheme of distribution, when they fancied they were only selfish in the labor, added and scattered other seeds until every tree in the surrounding forest was represented in that nursery battle-field,

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until every foot of earth had its latent possibilities of life. Then, and not until then, the cycle of the seasons was complete, and while the mild Arkansas Winter passed, vegetable life was dormant.

With the coming of the following Spring and the renewed flow of sap, from the dull brown of Winter the plateau again took on the tinge of green, as each little seedling put on its season's dress. At first that was all, until Spring drew into

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Summer; then, had an observer been where no observer was, the first movement of the army of invasion, heretofore passive, could have been seen—the all but simultaneous upward shooting of a multitude of tiny aliens. Among that army which had come many never appeared to answer the call of the roll at this the beginning of the battle. The decaying vegetation upon the forest floor was too deep. Though in the course of

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events they germinated, their roots never reached earth, and in consequence they withered and died. But under beating rain the majority were driven down, down through the soft blanket until their roots grasped the bed of the common mother, and, as their predecessors had done the season before, they grew mightily in the rich loam. Oh, the second season after the catastrophe, the marshalling of the forces for the future battle!

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Following, season after season, new recruits would come, did come; but their advent was too late. Though they could germinate in endless cycle, there their effort would cease; for now that which was their deadliest enemy, shade, had come,—a thing which to the forward was good, for it prevented the evaporation of life-giving moisture, but which to the late arrival meant death alone. Hitherto merely a prelude, the real battle was now on.

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And now, prominent upon the scene, comes little *Quercus Alba*, the white oak seedling, at the beginning of the third cycle. During the seasons past there had been no mutual struggle or rivalry with neighbors, only individual freedom and friendly aid to keep the forest floor moist and fertile. But now, under their rapid growth, conditions were changing. Hitherto free on every side, now little White Oak began to feel the irri-

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tating touch of his neighbors' branches, particularly when the wind blew and the tender arms were in motion. Likewise in the soil beneath, his rapidly spreading roots came in contact with other rootlets similarly searching for the plant food therein contained. Closest to the little oak was a tiny pine, an invader. Almost as near was a brother oak, product of an acorn from the same veteran parent. Already the individuals of

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this clump of three began to interfere, for always their branches brushed each other as they waved. Already between them the battle for life—none the less deadly because it was silent—was on. There was not room for all, but for one alone; and the selection of the one that was to survive was to be made by the eternal law of the fittest.

At first, for a season and another, there seemed little difference

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in strength between them. The soil about all their roots was practically identical, and each drew from it all possible nourishment; desperately, in an effort to outstrip the others in size, each of these now directed its growth more and more upward. Less and less nourishment was going to the interfering side branches, and in consequence they became unhealthy. Also, now, shade from the mingling tops began to fall upon them—

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and shade to a limb or a leaf means death. Gradually, season by season, they grew weaker until finally, when they were completely shaded, they died; and the first step in the natural pruning of the future forest had been taken.

Time had passed while this was taking place—years; and from seedlings the group upon the plateau had arrived at the dignity of saplings. Likewise, with each pass-

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ing year, the struggle for growth had grown fiercer, the necessity for dominance more insistent. And among the thousands of combatants Quercus Alba, no longer little Quercus Alba, but Quercus Alba, the large sapling, was struggling with the rest; yet, though there were still many contingencies which might alter the *dénouement*, an observer could have seen that this particular sapling was in the lead. Just why this was so no man could

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have told, any more than why one brother of a human family grows taller and another remains short. Suffice it to say that it was so.

Kindly Nature had made him more vigorous for growth, more fit than his mates. Already he began to tower above his own brothers at his side; not much, but enough to give the advantage. Still more he dominated the pine, for here the advantages were racial, his kind being ever more tolerant to shade.

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Already, though far distant, the end was in sight.

Again years drifted by; spring rains, summer suns, winter lethargy; and as the prophecy had been, so the fulfilment came to pass. A small pole now, six inches in diameter at the height of a man's breast, *Quercus Alba* was dominant in his own clump. The pine had been long overtopped, and was dying gradually. The oak was

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well shaded, and had ceased to grow, and its leaves were turning pale. Its end was likewise close at hand. Beneath the ground, also, the result was the same: there was no rivalry now, and the roots of Quercus, dominant, spread in every direction. The nourishment that before had fed the three now went to him alone, and he grew more and more rapidly, with the exultant lustiness of a conqueror.

Thus the first battle was won;

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then, almost before it was complete, upon the distant horizon loomed a new necessity, a new challenge for life-combat. For, while these three had been fighting for existence, similar battles had been waged all about; and, as Quercus Alba himself had done, the other victors here and there began to lift their heads above the general level.

Similarly they grew and mightily, each alike from the life-blood

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of the defeated. Growing rapidly, their side branches, spreading wider and wider, began to touch, to interfere. As before, all could not survive—there was not room; and in repeating cycle the familiar battle for upward growth, which meant shade dominance and life itself, was repeated; only now it was a mightier contest, not of thousands but of hundreds, and of stalwart poles instead of tender saplings.

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And among the first, again, to recognize and to accept the new challenge was Quercus Alba. Again at either side he felt the slighting touch of hostile companions; this time adversaries worthy of his best effort, for they were oaks like himself; only one was spotted and the other black. All three were apparently equal in size. All were young, as the ages of trees are reckoned, and vital with the lust of life. It was to be a battle royal, the best of

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its kind; for there was space for one and one alone—space to the end.

Again time drifted on. In far-away haunts of men and of civilization wars were waged, conflagrations waxed and waned, policies of nations were developed, and record thereof passed into history. And meanwhile here, buried in the heart of the forest, the relentlessly silent life-struggle went on. And again, as before, when the necessity arose, *Quercus Alba*, the large

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pole, arose nobly to the occasion. Whether it was that his roots were set in more fertile soil, or that fewer insects (which prey upon all trees) retarded his growth, or whether it was because of an innate superiority of vitality which inevitably, as it causes one human to crowd himself above the level of his mates, made this particular tree dominate his fellows, no man can tell. Again the result alone stood out incontrovertible in evi-

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dence. Slowly but surely Quercus Alba was outstripping his darker and his spotted brothers. Slowly but surely his crown arose above other crowns. His blighting, deadly shade fell upon them. Meanwhile the process of natural pruning was going steadily on. Branches at the side, one by one, were strangled and died, and newer layers of cambium—the annual ring growth—covered smoothly the wounds which they had left. But at last, as to

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all battles both of men and of trees, there is an end ; the end of the battle came. A vigorous, healthy standard now, with a trunk eighteen inches in diameter and rising forty feet, clear and white, from forest bed to crown, Quercus Alba, conqueror, towered dominant, invincible, above the tops of his two overpowered antagonists; towered level with or a bit above every other tall conqueror on the plateau—and the long, long battle for the sweet reward of life,

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for the privilege of drifting on gracefully to old age, was done.

Now, at last free from the necessity of battle, free to grow according to the dictates of his own will, there seemed no reason why *Quercus Alba* should not continue to increase in size indefinitely. In the beginning he did so, for the space of a human generation, and still another. In the moist, fertile soil about his roots food was unlimited. Above were sunlight and air with-

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out stint. Neighbors were comfortably near, but friendly now. For all this time he grew, his crown rising season by season higher toward the sky, his girth widening by successive annual rings, his great arms spreading wider and wider. On and on the expansion went, slowly but inevitably, until the last point of development had come, and the giant tree was no longer a standard but a veteran. Then, for some reason, gradually, as

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the growth had augmented, it slowly ceased. Yet for that halt there was a reason, as to all doings of Nature there is an explanation; as to the height a fire engine can throw a stream of water, there is a limit. In each case there is a fundamental law, and unchangeable. This eternal law the great oak experienced and instinctively obeyed—the law of rising sap, which will flow so high and not higher. Like a check it halted growth; a barrier

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which Mother Earth, prodigal of sustenance, was impotent to alter. A thing mature, complete product of a century of struggle and growth, Quercus Alba halted to remain forever passive. For still other generations, if unmolested, while perhaps another nation of surrounding humans should rise and fall, he would remain so; but slowly now, extremely slowly, his life-work done, he would go into decrepitude—as again human beings,

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when maturity arrives and growth ceases, gradually grow senile. Like his parent before him and his parent's parent preceding, destiny would be relentless — only a matter of passing time.

Of that destiny I shall not know, nor you, nor yet our children. For Quercus Alba, the veteran, stands there to-day, a giant, four feet in diameter, rising, white and clear, sixty feet above the head of puny

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man, before the first branches diverge. Calm with the passionless philosophy of age, in knowledge of long past battles fought and won, he looks out over the surrounding valley of the rolling Ozarks, out and out where green and green alone stretches to the horizon, free above the heads of his lesser brothers. Since the time when, a tiny seedling, he sprang up beside the parent stump a new nation has arisen and con-

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quered the great wilderness about; civilization and its wonders have developed as neither ever before developed in the history of man; nations have warred and lapsed into peace; statesmen and scholars have been born, have written of their work on the page of fame, and passed from the arena; yet of it all the great Oak knows nothing, cares nothing. Sufficient to Quercus Alba, the veteran, is it that summer suns come with the

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passing seasons, and that the rains descend in their time. A philosopher, he stands there where we, the puny spectators, can observe and draw the moral or overlook it absolutely, as we please. Despite the long inevitable battle which made existence possible, Quercus Alba has found life its only justification. Though oblivion is likewise inevitable, gathering shape slowly in the dim distance, he will await that end without fear, calm

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as the silent mountains surrounding, calm as the warm Arkansas sunshine that gave him being. For in common sequence is Mother Nature, and ever Mother Nature is good.

THE END







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