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The Legend of the First Christmas Tree

DECEMBER, close to midnight in a German forest, fifteen hundred years ago.

At that time, even as now, the steep sides of the Harz Mountains were carpeted with immense stretches of woods. Here wild animals made their home and men hardly less fierce had their habitations.

Though the sky which spread above the spot could scarce be seen through the thick branches of the oaks, its broad bosom shone bright with stars much as on another night in Judea centuries before.

Signs of life in plenty where the forest was densest. Under interlacing boughs that arched like unto a temple vault over a rounded space covered with velvety turf were a group of white-clad, long-bearded men. Near at hand a giant oak-tree, and by it a large, square stone set low in the ground. On this rude altar blazed a fire. The garb and bearing of the men beside it made plain they were ministers of some mystic cult.

Circled about the ring of which the altar was the centre was gathered an assemblage of men, women and children so large that its numbers were lost in the shadowy background of the woods. The former were mostly tall and wild-featured. Some were clad in rudely woven cloth and others in hides of beasts. Many bore spears, others axes of odd shape, and still more massive clubs whose size, when swung with vigor, boded little good to an enemy. All stood with eyes intent on those by the altar at the foot of the giant oak.

This forest clearing was an open-air temple dedicated to the pagan god Thor, the Hammerer, whose hammer, Mjolner, never fails of its blow. And the oak by whose vast bole the stone-altar is laid is Geismar, revered by Thor's votaries above all its forest kindred as the holiest sanctuary of his rites.

Tonight's is the year's most solemn sacrifice—that of human blood. It is the great festival. For now the winter's sun turns toward the North, symbolical of heat and fire as the vivifying principle of earthly life.

Names given in baptism are frequently prophecies of a child's future.

In God's own good time a lad had been born in England on whom was bestowed the name of Winfred. In the simple Saxon tongue then spoken this meant "Peace-winner" or "Peace-maker."

He grew up, entered the church and became earnest in the saving of souls. He longed to help in the conversion of the benighted peoples of the Continent. His wish was granted. He spent his days preaching the truths of the Cross, and won martyrdom as Boniface, the patron saint of Germany.

In many ways he worked to open the ears, the eyes and the hearts of the incredulous. Victory attended him. Each passing hour saw belief in the old superstitions lessening. He had driven it from place to place, and even here to Geismar—the Thunder Oak—whose sacred trunk Thor chose as his abiding place.

It was near midnight, and all was ready for the crowning ceremony of the festival. A child was to be offered as a propitiation to the heathen divinity. Struck into senselessness by the hammer—Thor's symbol—in the high-priest's hands, the altar's flame would do the rest.

Into the space before the altar was brought the intended victim. His robe of sacrifice showed less white than his boyish face. Fear had paralyzed the tongue and no sound came from his pallid lips. Nor was there murmur of pity in the surrounding throng, naught but eager interest. They bind the youth's eyes with a fillet and place him, with bound arms and bent head, helplessly before the stone.

A moment more and all had been over. The priest of Thor and his associates prepare for the final act. Suspense has the assemblage spellbound. Suddenly from the encircling crowd starts St. Boniface. Whence he came or who he was none knew. The sight of the venerable stranger at such a time cast more than awe over the multitude. Would mortal man dare such profanation?

With stately stride he moves toward the altar. There, with never a word, he snatches the fateful hammer from the poised hand of the astounded priest. Terror seizes each mind as he lifts up the expectant victim and clasps him close with his encircling arm.

A silence as of the grave. Then, with giant strength, one-handed he whirls the hammer above his head and smites the blazing flames. Far and wide fly the star-like sparks and begin to lap with their fiery tongues the sacred oak—the tree of Thor the Hammerer.

Rapidly the flames spread from branch to branch. Now, aroused from their stupor by what they deem the worst of sacrilege, priests and people try to press closer to the daring stranger. In vain. A wall of fire from the burning tree holds them back, while the Saint and child stand upon the altar unscathed as those in the fiery furnace of old.

Nor is it long ere with fearsome crash the Thunder Oak falls a smoking, smouldering mass of embers to the ground.

They cry it is the work of some great God, and drop upon their faces. Hereupon speaks the apostle. He tells them the story of Christ: how He wills no sacrifice of blood, but only of selfishness and sin.

"On this," the words of the legend run, "his eyes caught sight of a fair young fir-tree standing near and lifting up its green crown to Heaven. 'In place of the oak of Thor,' he said, 'behold a living tree with no stain of blood upon it. Be it a sign to you of the new worship. See how it points to the sky! Henceforth for you it shall be the Tree of the Christ-Child. Carry it to the children's hall, for this is the birth-night of the Lord. You shall come no more to forest shades to keep this festival with unholy rites. Instead, hold it in your homes and hearts with kindness and charity, with joy and song and laughter.'"

Thus the pagan oak—hardness of heart—whose roots were fed with sorrow and blood, gave place to the First Christmas Tree, full of never-ending lessons of mercy, gentleness and love. P.H. Doyle.