

The Christmas Thorn

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THE visitor to England may see the Glastonbury thorn in many an old English garden. Tradition tells how this thorn blossomed in the spring as did other thorns, and also on Christmas Day, "mindful of our Lord." The story of its first planting upon the hillside at Glastonbury many centuries ago may contain much of romance and folklore, but it carries with it a beautiful lesson especially applicable to the Christmas season. Tennyson says:

"It, the good saint
Arimathean Joseph, journeying brought
To Glastonbury, where the winter thorn
Blossoms at Christmas, mindful of our
Lord."

The following legend of the Christmas thorn is largely taken from an article which appeared some years ago in *Acta Victoriana*, by Edward C. S. Huycke, B.A., LL.B., K.C., now Judge of Peterborough County. Mr. Huycke first describes Glastonbury, a town near the famous battle ground of Sedgemoor, in Somerset County, England. Overlooking the town is a crowning hillside, ordinarily known as Glastonbury Tor. This is a historic and romantic place, with the hamlet of Queen Camel, the ruins of Cadbury Castle, and King Arthur's well, all that is left of the famous Camelot, the home and court of the renowned King Arthur. Quoting literally from Judge Huycke's article:

"And here in the rich, dim city, and on the sacred mount of Camelot, was the mighty hall, which Merlin built for Arthur long ago, the stately under heaven." And in that mighty hall and about the Table Round, King Arthur drew together—

"A glorious company, the flower of men,
To serve as model for the mighty world
And be the fair beginning of a time."

Looking to the northward from Glastonbury Tor, towards the River Severn and British Channel, is a rich flat plateau, surrounded by river, marsh and meadow, formerly the Isle of Avalon or Avilion, meaning the Isle of Apples or the Glass Isle, a spot famed in history by French troubadour, Chaucer and other old English poets, and portrayed upon canvas by the brush of a Millais and a Leighton.

But why so fabled and so famous? Let history answer, or rather, let a combination of history and romance, myth and legend make reply. Again we quote from Judge Huycke's article:

"Baron tells us in his Joseph D'Arimatea, how after the resurrection of our Lord the good Saint Joseph of Arimatea was put in prison by the Romans for befriending the Christ, or more strictly speaking, for having stolen his body, they, of course, denying His resurrection.

"The good Joseph had taken the cup of grael for Holy Grail, and of this another tale which Jesus used at the last supper in the upper room, and in it had caught a few drops of blood from the body of the stricken Christ as He was taken from the cross: this cup and blood he kept as his richest treasure, his latest heritage from the Master he had so fondly loved and so lately served. This blood kept ever alive, ever beating, ever throbbing, as if still in touch with the living heart of God, springing from the fount of all love—human and Divine. Joseph took his treasure to prison with him, and remained there forty-two years, till released by the order of the Emperor Titus. During all this time he scarcely ate or drank, being sustained by the living presence of

his Master, and so happy was he that he declared his years in prison were no longer to him than three days, and could scarcely be persuaded he had been there a longer period.

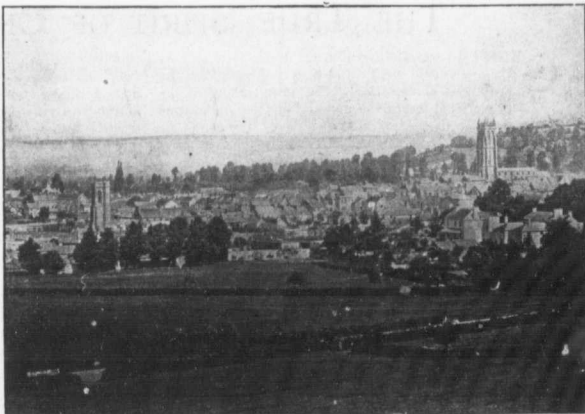
"His wealth having been confiscated, he determined to give his life to the service of his Lord, and placed himself under the direction of St. Phillip. Joseph was directed by a Divine vision in a dream to go to the far westland—to the Island of Avaron, or Avalon (he knew not where it was), there to seek rest for himself, to found a church of Christ and seek a home for his treasure, the grail.

"He sailed away far over the western seas, and finally touched Britain; ascending the Humber, he went off to the south over the shallow waters till his

shown you still in many an English garden."

Joseph, the story goes on, thus encouraged by the Divine approval so miraculously shown, built there a little chapel of wood and woven twigs, the first Christian church in England. Quiet near to its site was afterwards erected the famous Glastonbury Abbey, where the good King Arthur is said to have been buried.

In our own Canada, on the Niagara frontier, also rich in historic associations, is a spot known as "Paradise Grove," where, upon an open heath, lonely and apart, long stood a picturesque clump of thorn trees. Mr. William Kirby, it is said, has traced the planting of these trees, showing them to have been brought originally from Palestine to Avignon—



GLASTONBURY, FROM WEARY-ALL-HILL.

From "Here and There in the Homeland."

ships touched bottom at the foot of Glastonbury Tor. Surrounded by his family and friends he painfully ascended the hill and on the very peak of the Tor paused to look about over the surrounding prospect. Delighted with the view, he determined to make this his home and there build a church for the worship of the Master, and a safe home for the cup containing the holy blood of God.

"So saying, he struck his staff into the ground in token of his intended stay, when lo, before their very eyes, the staff forthwith began to bud and soon put forth both leaves and branches. It struck its roots deep into the earth and was very soon a beautiful thorn tree. It grew and flourished there for many years. Indeed for centuries, and became known far and wide as the Glastonbury thorn, or the Christmas thorn. But why the Christmas thorn? Strange to say, this tree blossomed twice a year, first at Easter, in the spring time, as did other thorns, and secondly, *mirabile dictu*, on Christmas Day as well, 'mindful of our Lord.'

The original tree, according to the legend, was visited by countless pilgrims, who regarded it with adoration and with awe. It was destroyed or died, it is said, about the time of the Reformation, but it was propagated by slips from the parent tree, and Glastonbury thorns will be

descendants, it is averred, of the true Sprit Christi. In his Canadian Idylls Mr. Kirby says:

"Count Bots le Grand sought on a spot of loveliness, 'twas full,
Of sandwort's silvered leaf and stem,
With down of fairy wool,
Hard by the sheltering grove of oak he
set the holy thorn,
Where still it grows, and ever shows
How sharp the crown of scorn.
Christi wort for man, reminding him
what pain for sin was borne."

Although the holy thorn and the Christmas thorn referred to are probably not the same, each is symbolic of the life and atonement of Christ for the sins of men. A London journal is authority for the statement that in the year that the old style of counting time was changed for the new, the Glastonbury thorn blossomed on the old Christmas instead of the new. But whether historical or legendary, the stories of that historic spot where long ago was held King Arthur's Court, of the erection of the first Christian church in this far land over the seas, the legend of the blossoming thorn have their lesson for us at this season.

Judge Huycke says: "Real or mythical, or as is more probable, a combination of the two, obscured by the intervening

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