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The Christmas Thorn of Glastonbury

Francis Jenkins Olcott

There is a golden Christmas legend and it relates how Joseph of Arimathea—that good man and just, who laid our Lord in his own sepulcher, was persecuted by Pontius Pilate, and how he fled from Jerusalem carrying with him the Holy Grail hidden beneath a cloth of samite, mystical and white.

For many moons he wandered, leaning on his staff cut from a white-thorn bush. He passed over raging seas and dreary wastes, he wandered through trackless forests, climbed rugged mountains, and forded many floods. At last he came to Gaul where the Apostle Philip was preaching the glad tidings to the heathen. And there Joseph abode for a little space.

Now, upon a night while Joseph lay asleep in his hut, he was wakened by a radiant light. And as he gazed with wondering eyes he saw an angel standing by his couch, wrapped in a cloud of incense.

"Joseph of Arimathea," said the angel, "cross thou over into Britain and preach the glad tidings to King Arvigarus. And there, where a Christmas miracle shall come to pass, do thou build the first Christian church in that land."

And while Joseph lay perplexed and wondering in his heart what answer he should make, the angel vanished from his sight.

Then Joseph left his hut and calling the Apostle Philip, gave him the angel's message. And, when morning dawned, Philip sent him on his way, accompanied by eleven chosen followers. To the water's side they went, and embarking in a little ship, they came unto the coasts of Britain.

And they were met there by the heathen who carried them before Arvigarus their king. To him and to his people did Joseph of Arimathea preach the glad tidings; but the king's heart, though moved, was not convinced. Nevertheless he gave to Joseph and his followers Avalon, the happy isle, the isle of the blessed, and he bade them depart straightway and build there an altar to their God.

And a wonderful gift was this same Avalon, sometimes called the Island of Apples, and also known to the people of the land as Ynis-witren, the Isle of Glassy Waters. Beautiful and peaceful was it. Deep it lay in the midst of a green valley, and the balmy breezes fanned its apple orchards, and scattered afar the sweet fragrance of rosy blossoms or ripened fruit. Soft grew the green grass

beneath the feet. The smooth waves gently lapped the shore, and water-lilies floated on the surface of the tide; while in the blue sky above sailed the fleecy clouds.

And it was on the holy Christmas Eve that Joseph and his companions reached the Isle of Avalon. With them they carried the Holy Grail hidden beneath its cloth of snow-white samite. Heavily they toiled up the steep ascent of the hill called Weary-All. And when they reached the top Joseph thrust his thorn-staff into the ground.



And, lo! a miracle! the thorn-staff put forth roots, sprouted and budded, and burst into a mass of white and fragrant flowers! And on the spot where the thorn had bloomed, there Joseph built the first Christian church in Britain. And he made it "wattled all round" of osiers gathered from the water's edge. And in the chapel they placed the Holy Grail.

And so, it is said, ever since at Glastonbury Abbey—the name by which that Avalon is known to-day—on Christmas Eve the white thorn buds and blooms.

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