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The Thunder Oak

Francis Jenkins Olcott

When the heathen raged through the forests of the ancient Northland there grew a giant tree branching with huge limbs toward the clouds. It was the Thunder Oak of the war-god Thor.

Thither, under cover of night, heathen priests were wont to bring their victims—both men and beasts—and slay them upon the altar of the thunder-god. There in the darkness was wrought many an evil deed, while human blood was poured forth and watered the roots of that gloomy tree, from whose branches depended the mistletoe, the fateful plant that sprang from the blood-fed veins of the oak. So gloomy and terror-ridden was the spot on which grew the tree that no beasts of field or forest would lodge beneath its dark branches, nor would birds nest or perch among its gnarled limbs.

Long, long ago, on a white Christmas Eve, Thor's priests held their winter rites beneath the Thunder Oak. Through the deep snow of the dense forest hastened throngs of heathen folk, all intent on keeping the mystic feast of the mighty Thor. In the hush of the night the folk gathered in the glade where stood the tree. Closely they pressed around the great altar-stone under the overhanging boughs where stood the white-robed priests. Clearly shone the moonlight on all.

Then from the altar flashed upward the sacrificial flames, casting their lurid glow on the straining faces of the human victims awaiting the blow of the priest's knife.

But the knife never fell, for from the silent avenues of the dark forest came the good Saint Winfred and his people. Swiftly the saint drew from his girdle a shining axe. Fiercely he smote the Thunder Oak, hewing a deep gash in its trunk. And while the heathen folk gazed in horror and wonder, the bright blade of the axe circled faster and faster around Saint Winfred's head, and the flakes of wood flew far and wide from the deepening cut in the body of the tree.



Suddenly there was heard overhead the sound of a mighty, rushing wind. A whirling blast struck the tree. It gripped the oak from its foundations. Backward

it fell like a tower, groaning as it split into four pieces.

But just behind it, unharmed by the ruin, stood a young fir tree, pointing its green spire to heaven.

Saint Winfred dropped his axe, and turned to speak to the people. Joyously his voice rang out through the crisp, winter air:—

"This little tree, a young child of the forest, shall be your holy tree to-night. It is the tree of peace, for your houses are built of fir. It is the sign of endless life, for its leaves are forever green. See how it points upward to heaven! Let this be called the tree of the Christ Child. Gather about it, not in the wildwood, but in your own homes. There it will shelter no deeds of blood, but loving gifts and rites of kindness. So shall the peace of the White Christ reign in your hearts!"

And with songs of joy the multitude of heathen folk took up the little fir tree and bore it to the house of their chief, and there with good will and peace they kept the holy Christmastide.

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