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A Legend of Saint Boniface

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On a wild winter night about twelve hundred years ago, the great English missionary Saint Boniface and a score of faithful followers were making their way through the dark forest in a lonely region of Hesse, Germany. They moved slowly, cutting through tangled undergrowth and twisted branches. Their band had come into the wilderness to share the message of the Prince of Peace with the forest peoples of the region — men and women who honored ancient gods, made offerings at sacred trees, and kept the old rites of the northern world.

Since noon they had fought their way through the trees. That morning they had spent at Geismar, where Boniface had spoken to nearly three hundred people gathered in a forest clearing. In simple words he told them of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection, and the promise of a Kingdom of Peace. The crowd listened in breathless silence. Slowly something in them stirred. They came forward, one by one, and knelt at the rough altar where Boniface stood.

"Do you think the people of the forest will hold to the new faith, Father?" asked one of his young companions as they walked.

"I hope so, lad," answered Boniface. "Again and again they must hear the story. It is hard, truly, to leave behind the old ways and trust in an all-loving, merciful Father. We must watch and pray."

"When will we come back to Geismar?"

"Not for a year, I fear. I hope to send other missionaries in the meantime."

The youth rubbed his aching feet. "Are we near the monastery, Father?"

"I believe so. If we don't reach it within the hour, we'll light a fire and sleep under the trees. Courage, lad! This has been a good journey."

A year passed quickly. Boniface and his companions were again among the communities of the Hessian forest. His heart sank when he heard that some who had gathered at Geismar had returned to the old worship. A few had held firm; others had wound the old beliefs together with the new, as vines grow through a fence.

"You're not discouraged, Father?" his companion asked, noticing the apostle's silence.

"Discouraged? Never!" Boniface's eyes lit. "I am deciding where to strike next."

After a moment: "Stop here. My plan is made. Tonight is the pagan yuletide. Several tribes will gather at the thunder-oak of Geismar to make sacrifices. Many who heard us last year will be there. Come — we will go to the sacred tree. Our axes are sharp; our arms are strong. Come!"

The band pushed on with new purpose. An hour's hard walking brought them to the thunder-oak — a vast, ancient tree on a low hill near Geismar. Gathered around it stood several hundred people in a wide semicircle. A dull red fire burned near the sacred tree, and in its wavering light Boniface made out an old priest and a small, fair-haired boy standing beside him.

"As I feared," Boniface whispered. "Forward."

Every eye turned toward the little band of Christians advancing through the crowd. Some faces showed recognition — they had knelt at Geismar a year before.

"Friends," Boniface said, holding up the cross, "we come again, with the message of peace. Let us show you that the old thunder-god holds no power over the God of Love."

He and a companion took up their wood axes and stepped to the great tree. They struck deep into its sides with powerful blows. Then — without warning — a mighty wind came roaring through the forest. The thunder-oak shuddered, swayed, and fell with a tremendous crash, splitting as it struck the ground into four great pieces.



The crowd stood in silence.

Beside one of the fallen sections stood a small fir tree, straight and perfectly unharmed by the storm. Boniface raised his voice:

"Friends — use this fallen timber to build a chapel, as a sign of your new faith." He paused, then pointed to the little fir. "And look at this tree: green in the dead of winter, its branches lifting toward the stars. It is a sign of joy, and peace, and life that never ends. Go no more into the dark forest for the old rites. Take this little tree into your homes, and on Christ's birthday gather around it with songs and loving gifts. Call it the tree of the Christ Child."

They lifted the little fir tree and carried it to the village. Once more, gathered around the tree of the Christ Child, they listened as Saint Boniface told them the

simple, ancient story — peace on earth, good will toward men.

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