

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS TREE



Henry van Dyke, 1852-1933
Historical Fiction, 8th Century Story
Reading Time, Approx. 20 minutes

Henry van Dyke was born in Pennsylvania to a prominent Presbyterian minister. As a child, he spent a great deal of time outdoors with his father who instilled in him a love of nature. Van Dyke carried this passion for God's creation throughout this life, and it would appear in much of his later writing.

Van Dyke was also academically inclined. He earned a B.A. from Princeton University in 1873, an M.A. in 1876, and a seminary degree in 1877. He then traveled to Germany to study for two years at the University of Berlin. When he returned to America in 1879, he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister. His first pastorate was at United Congregational Church, in Newport, Rhode Island, and during his time there, he married Ellen Reid. Over the years, the couple had nine children.

In 1883, van Dyke accepted a position as pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, where he would remain for the next 17 years. While pastoring, he also published several books, mostly on topics of religion. One book, however, was devoted to literature, *The Poetry of Tennyson* (1889). This publication would eventually be considered van Dyke's greatest contribution to scholarship, and it established him as "an outstanding figure in the literary world."¹

Though van Dyke had a wonderful family and an adoring church congregation, he experienced a time of great personal grief around the year 1892.² He described it as a year "full of sickness and sorrow" and many sleepless nights.³ Most likely, the loss of his father, a man whose counsel and companionship he cherished into adulthood, was a significant source of van Dyke's grief. Yet out of this difficult period, one of his best-known stories, *The Story of the Other Wise Man* (1896), came to his mind. It is a story about a fictional character named Artaban, a wise man, who fails to meet up with his companions, because he stops to help a man in need. Artaban then has to journey alone to find the King of the Jews, but he is prevented time and again when he pauses to assist others. As Artaban is about to die after many years of searching, he hears the heavenly voice of Jesus confirming that through his service to others, he served Christ himself. "His treasures were accepted" and he "had found the King."⁴

Van Dyke gives the following account in his preface to *The Story of the Other Wise Man*:

"[Though the story] came to me suddenly and without labor, there was a great deal of study and toil to be done before it could be written down. An idea arrives without effort; a form can only be wrought out by patient labor. If your story is worth telling, you ought to love it enough to be willing to work over it until it is true – true not only to the ideal, but also to the real. The light is a gift; but the local color can only be seen by one who looks for it long and steadily. Artaban went with me while I toiled through a score of volumes of ancient

history and travel. I saw his figure while I journeyed on the motionless sea of desert and in the strange cities of the East.”⁵

In the end, van Dyke’s labor produced a beautiful piece of historical fiction. His careful research is evident in every detail of his story. And on a subsequent Christmas, van Dyke created his next great piece of historical fiction, *The First Christmas Tree* (1897). Interestingly, both stories were first read aloud to his congregation in New York as sermons.

By all accounts, van Dyke was a teacher at heart, and in 1900, he accepted a position as a professor of English literature at Princeton University. With the exception of a few overseas assignments, van Dyke taught until he retired in 1923. While at Princeton, van Dyke remained active with his denomination. He chaired the committee that wrote the first Presbyterian printed liturgy, *The Book of Common Worship of 1906*, and in 1907, he wrote the wonderful hymn “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee” set to the music of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*. The hymn was first published in the *Presbyterian Hymnal* in 1911 and also appeared in van Dyke’s collection of poems that same year. The words beautifully illustrate van Dyke’s appreciation of God’s creation. Here are the first two stanzas of the “Hymn of Joy”:

“Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, praising Thee their sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!

“All Thy works with joy surround Thee, earth and heaven reflect Thy rays,
Stars and angels sing around Thee, center of unbroken praise.
Field and forest, vale and mountain, blooming meadow, flashing sea,
Chanting bird and flowing fountain, call us to rejoice in Thee.”⁶

In addition to his contributions to literature and to the church in America, van Dyke was also a gracious representative of his country overseas. In 1908, van Dyke traveled to the University of Paris to work as a visiting lecturer. By 1913, President Woodrow Wilson, a friend and former classmate of van Dyke, appointed him as the ambassador to the Netherlands and Luxemborg. Shortly thereafter, World War I broke out, and American citizens throughout Europe rushed to Holland seeking refuge. Van Dyke was well suited for the job of comforting these distraught Americans and caring for their spiritual well being. Furthermore, according to a biography by Juliet Iwelumor, “Although he was inexperienced as an ambassador, van Dyke conducted himself with the skill of a trained diplomat, maintaining the rights of all American refugees in Europe and organizing work for their relief.”⁷ As the war came to a close in 1918, van Dyke returned to the U.S. and joined the chaplain’s corps of the U.S. Naval Reserve. He served as lieutenant commander and wrote an introduction to the Navy Chaplain’s manual (1918).

Van Dyke returned to Princeton in 1919 and continued teaching until his retirement in 1923. When he passed away 10 years later, he left behind a vibrant legacy, not only in print, but in the lives of thousands of people who were personally touched by his leadership as a pastor, a teacher or an ambassador. Furthermore, the people who knew him most intimately, his family, only served to confirm the excellence of his character. His son, Tertius, published a biography in 1935 to honor his father's memory.

The following excerpt is from Henry van Dyke's historical fiction story, *The First Christmas* (1897). It recounts one of the most famous events in the life of Winfried (around 672 – 754), a man who served as a missionary to pagan Germanic tribes. History records that Winfried, named Boniface in 719 by Pope Gregory II, boldly confronted the pagan god Thor by challenging him to strike him dead when he cut down his "holy tree."⁸ As he started to chop down the oak, a great wind miraculously blew it over. When the people saw that Thor did not harm Winfried, they accepted his message about the one true God. This "felling of Thor's Oak" is commonly regarded as the beginning of German Christianization beyond the borders of the Roman Empire; it is also widely associated with the origin of the Christmas tree. Van Dyke's careful historical research is evident in this dramatic fictional account. The excerpt begins after Winfried and his companions, less than 20 men, have traveled through difficult terrain in a fervent attempt to reach a pagan tribe by Christmas Eve. They arrive at the Oak of Thor just in time.

¹ Iwelumor, Juliet. "Henry van Dyke." Pennsylvania State University Library, Biographies. Retrieved October 17, 2008: http://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/bios/Van_Dyke__Henry.html. Much of the biography for van Dyke is drawn from this source.

² Montgomery, Elizabeth Rider. *The Story Behind Great Stories*. Robert M. McBride & Company, 1947, p. 194.

³ Van Dyke, Henry. *The Story of the Other Wise Man*. Paraclete Press, 1984, Preface, p. x.

⁴ Van Dyke, Henry. *The Story of the Other Wise Man*, p. 48.

⁵ Van Dyke, Henry. *The Story of the Other Wise Man*, Preface, p. xii.

⁶ Van Dyke, Henry. *The Poems of Henry van Dyke*. C. Scribner's Sons, 1913, p. 332.

⁷ Iwelumor, Juliet.

⁸ Farmer, David. *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 66.

Withered leaves still clung to the branches of the oak, torn and faded banners of the departed summer. The bright crimson of autumn had long since disappeared, bleached away by the storms and the cold. But tonight these tattered remnants of glory were red again, ancient bloodstains against the dark blue sky. For an immense fire had been kindled in front of the tree. Tongues of ruddy flame, fountains of ruby sparks, ascended through the spreading limbs and flung a fierce illumination upward and around. The pale, pure moonlight that bathed the surrounding forests was quenched and eclipsed here. Not a beam of it sifted through the branches of the oak. It stood like a pillar of cloud between the still light of heaven and the crackling, flashing fire of earth.

But the fire itself was invisible to Winfried and his companions. Great throngs of people were gathered around it in a half-circle, their backs to the open glade, their faces toward the oak. Seen against that glowing background, it was but the silhouette of a crowd, vague, black, formless, mysterious.

The travelers paused for a moment at the edge of the thicket, and took counsel together.

“It is the assembly of the tribe,” said one of the foresters, “the great night of the council. I heard of it three days ago, as we passed through one of the villages. All who swear by the old gods have been summoned. They will sacrifice a steed to the god of war, and drink blood, and eat horseflesh to make them strong. It will be at the peril of our lives if we approach them. At least we must hide the cross if we want to escape death.”

“Do not hide the cross,” cried Winfried, lifting his staff, “for I have come to show it, and to make these blind folk see its power. There is more to be done here tonight than the slaying of a steed, and a greater evil to be stayed than the shameful eating of meat sacrificed to idols. I have seen it in a dream. Here the cross must stand and be our banner.”

At his command the sled was left in the border of the wood, with two of the men to guard it, and the rest of the company moved forward across the open ground. They approached unnoticed, for all the multitude were looking intently toward the fire at the foot of the oak.

Then Winfried’s voice rang out, “Hail, sons of the forest! A stranger claims the warmth of your fire in the winter night.”

Swiftly, and as with a single motion, a thousand eyes were bent upon the speaker. The semi-circle opened silently in the middle; Winfried entered with his followers; it closed again behind them.

Then, as they looked round the curving ranks, they saw that the hue of the assemblage was not black, but white — dazzling, radiant, solemn. White, the robes of the women clustered together at the points of the wide crescent; white, the glittering chainmail of the warriors standing in close ranks; white, the fur mantles of the aged men who held the central palace in the circle; white, with the shimmer of silver ornaments and the purity of lamb’s-wool, the raiment of a little group of children who stood close by the fire; white, with awe and fear, the faces of all who looked at them; and over all the flickering, dancing radiance of the flames played and glimmered like a faint, vanishing tinge of blood on snow.

The only figure untouched by the glow was the old priest, Hunrad, with his long, spectral robe, flowing hair and beard, and dead-pale face, who stood with his back to the fire and advanced slowly to meet the strangers.

“Who are you? From where do you come, and what do you seek here?” His voice was as heavy and toneless as a muffled bell.

“I am your kinsman, of the German brotherhood,” answered Winfried, “and from England, beyond the sea, have I come to bring you a greeting from that land, and a message from the All-Father, whose servant I am.”

“Welcome, then,” said Hunrad, “welcome, kinsman, and be silent; for what passes here is too high to wait, and must be done before the moon crosses the middle heaven, unless, indeed, you have some sign or token from the gods. Can you work miracles?”

The question came sharply, as if a sudden gleam of hope had flashed through the tangle of the old priest’s mind. But Winfried’s voice sank lower and a cloud of disappointment passed over his face as he replied: “No, miracles have I never performed, though I have heard of many; but the All-Father has given no power to my hands save such as belongs to common man.”

“Stand still, then, you common man,” said Hunrad, scornfully, “and behold what the gods have called us hither to do. This night is the death-night of the sun-god, Baldur the Beautiful, beloved of gods and men. This night is the hour of darkness and the power of winter, of sacrifice and mighty fear. This night the great Thor, the god of thunder and war, to whom this oak is sacred, is grieved for the death of Baldur, and angry with this people because they have forsaken his worship. Long is it since an offering has been laid upon his altar, long since the roots of his holy tree have been fed with blood. Therefore its leaves have withered before the time, and its boughs are heavy with death. Therefore the Slavs and the Wends have beaten us in battle. Therefore the harvests have failed, and the wolf hordes have ravaged the folds, and the strength has departed from the bow, and the wood of the spear has broken, and the wild boar has slain the huntsman. Therefore the plague has fallen on our dwellings, and the dead are more than the living in all our villages. Answer me, my people, are not these things true?”

A hoarse sound of approval ran through the circle. A chant, in which the voices of the men and women blended, like the shrill wind in the pine trees above the rumbling thunder of a waterfall, rose and fell in rude cadences.

*O Thor, the Thunderer
Mighty and merciless,
Spare us from smiting!
Heave not thy hammer,
Angry, against us;
Plague not thy people.
Take from our treasure
Richest Of ransom.*

*Silver we send thee,
Jewels and javelins,
Goodliest garments,
All our possessions,
Priceless, we proffer.
Sheep will we slaughter,
Steeds will we sacrifice;
Bright blood shall bathe
O tree of Thunder,
Life-floods shall lave thee,
Strong wood of wonder.
Mighty, have mercy,
Smile as no more,
Spare us and save us,
Spare us, Thor! Thor!*

With two great shouts the song ended, and stillness followed so intense that the crackling of the fire was heard distinctly. The old priest stood silent for a moment. His shaggy brows swept down over his eyes like ashes quenching flame. Then he lifted his face and spoke.

“None of these things will please the god. More costly is the offering that shall cleanse your sin, more precious the crimson dew that shall send new life into this holy tree of blood. Thor claims your dearest and your noblest gift.”

Hunrad moved nearer to the group of children who stood watching the fire and the swarms of spark-serpents darting upward. They had heeded none of the priest’s words, and did not notice now that he approached them, so eager were they to see which fiery snake would go highest among the oak branches. Foremost among them, and most intent on the pretty game, was a boy like a sunbeam, slender and quick, with blithe brown eyes and laughing lips. The priest’s hand was laid upon his shoulder. The boy turned and looked up in his face.

“Here,” said the old man, with his voice vibrating as when a thick rope is strained by a ship swinging from her moorings, “here is the chosen one, the eldest son of the Chief, the darling of the people. Harken, Bernhard, will you go to Valhalla, where the heroes dwell with the gods, to bear a message to Thor?”

The boy answered, swift and clear: “Yes, priest, I will go if my father bids me. Is it far away? Shall I run quickly? Must I take my bow and arrows for the wolves?”

The boy’s father, the chieftain Gundhar, standing among his bearded warriors, drew his breath deep, and leaned so heavily on the handle of his spear that the wood cracked. And his wife, Irma, bending forward from the ranks of women, pushed the golden hair from her forehead with one hand. The other dragged at the silver chain about her neck until the rough links pierced her flesh, and the red drops fell unheeded on her breast.

A sigh passed through the crowd, like the murmur of the forest before the storm breaks. Yet no one spoke save Hunrad:

“Yes, my Prince, both bow and spear you shall have, for the way is long, and you are a brave huntsman. But in darkness you must journey for a little space, and with eyes blindfolded. Are you afraid?”

“I fear nothing,” said the boy, “neither darkness, nor the great bear, nor the were-wolf. For I am Gundhar’s son, and the defender of my people.”

Then the priest led the child in his garment of lamb’s wool to a broad stone in front of the fire. He gave him his little bow tipped with silver, and his spear with shining head of steel. He bound the child’s eyes with a white cloth, and bade him kneel beside the stone with his face to the east. Unconsciously the wide arc of spectators drew inward toward the centre, as the ends of the bow draw together when the cord is stretched. Winfried moved noiselessly until he stood close behind the priest.

The old man stooped to lift a black hammer of stone from the ground — the sacred hammer of the god Thor. Summoning all the strength of his withered arms, he swung it high in the air. It poised for an instant above the child’s fair head—then turned to fall.

One keen cry shrilled out from where the women stood: “Me! Take me! Not Bernhard!”

The flight of the mother toward her child was swift as the falcon’s swoop. But swifter still was the hand of the deliverer.

Winfried’s heavy staff thrust mightily against the hammer’s handle as it fell. Sideways it glanced from the old man’s grasp, and the black stone, striking on the altar’s edge, split in two. A shout of awe and joy rolled along the living circle. The branches of the oak shivered. The flames leaped higher. As the shout died away the people saw the lady Irma, with her arms clasped round her child, and above them, on the altar-stone, Winfried, his face shining like the face of an angel.

Like a swift mountain-flood rolling down its channel, a huge rock tumbling from the hill-side and falling in mid-stream, and the baffled waters, broken and confused, pausing in their flow, dashing high against the rock, foaming and murmuring, with divided impulse, uncertain whether to turn to the right or the left: Even so Winfried’s bold deed fell into the midst of the thoughts and passions of the council. They were at a standstill. Anger and wonder, reverence and joy and confusion surged through the crowd. They knew not which way to move: to resent the intrusion of the stranger as an insult to their gods, or to welcome him as the rescuer of their darling prince.

The old priest crouched by the altar, silent. Conflicting counsels troubled the air. Let the sacrifice go forward; the gods must be appeased. No, the boy must not die; bring the chieftain’s best horse and slay it in his stead — it will be enough; the holy tree loves the blood of horses. Not so, there is a better counsel yet: Seize the stranger whom the gods have led hither as a victim and make his life pay the forfeit of his daring.

The withered leaves on the oak rustled and whispered overhead. The fire flared and sank again. The angry voices clashed against each other and fell like opposing waves. Then the chieftain Gundhar struck the earth with his spear and gave his decision.

“All have spoken, but none are agreed. There is no voice of the council. Keep silence now, and let the stranger speak. His words shall give us judgment, whether he is to live or to die.”

Winfried lifted himself high upon the altar, drew a roll of parchment from his bosom, and began to read.

“A letter from the great Bishop of Rome, who sits on a golden throne, to the people of the forest, Hessians and Thuringians, Franks and Saxons. *In nomine Domini, sanctae et individuae Trinitatis, amen!*”

A murmur of awe ran through the crowd. “It is the sacred tongue of the Romans, the tongue that is heard and understood by the wise men of every land. There is magic in it. Listen!”

Winfried went on to read the letter, translating it into the speech of the people.

“We have sent unto you our Brother Boniface, and appointed him your bishop, that he may teach you the only true faith, and baptize you, and lead you back from the ways of error to the path of salvation. Harken to him in all things like a father. Bow your hearts to his teaching. He does not come for earthly gain, but for the gain of your souls. Depart from evil works. Do not worship the false gods, for they are devils. Offer no more bloody sacrifices, nor eat the flesh of horses, but do as our Brother Boniface commands you. Build a house for him that he may dwell among you, and a church where you may offer your prayers to the only living God, the Almighty King of Heaven.”

It was a splendid message: proud, strong, peaceful, loving. The dignity of the words imposed mightily upon the hearts of the people. They were quieted as men who have listened to a lofty strain of music.

“Tell us, then,” said Gundhar, “what is the word that you bring to us from the Almighty? What is your counsel for the tribes of the woodland on this night of sacrifice?”

“This is the word, and this is the counsel,” answered Winfried. “Not a drop of blood shall fall tonight, except that which pity has drawn from the breast of your princess, in love for her child. Not a life shall be blotted out in the darkness tonight; but the great shadow of the tree that hides you from the light of heaven shall be swept away. For this is the birth night of the Christ, the son of the All-Father and the Savior of mankind. He is fairer than Baldur the Beautiful, greater than Odin the Wise, kinder than Freya the Good. Since he has come to earth the bloody sacrifices must cease. The dark Thor, on whom you vainly call, is dead. Deep in the shades of Niffelheim he is lost forever. His power in the world is broken. Will you serve a helpless god? See, my brothers, you call this tree his oak. Does he dwell here? Does he protect it?”

A troubled voice of assent rose from the throng. The people stirred uneasily. Women covered their eyes. Hunrad lifted his head and muttered hoarsely, “Thor! Take vengeance! Thor!”

Winfried beckoned to Gregor. “Bring the axes, yours and one for me. Now, young woodsman, show your craft! The king-tree of the forest must fall, and swiftly, or all is lost!”

The two men took their places facing each other, one on each side of the oak. Their cloaks were flung aside, their heads bare. Carefully they felt the ground with their feet, seeking a firm grip of the earth. Firmly they grasped the axe handles and swung the shining blades.

“Tree-god!” cried Winfried, “Are you angry? This is how we smite you!”

“Tree-god!” answered Gregor, “Are you mighty? This is how we fight you!”

Clang! Clang! The alternate strokes beat time upon the hard, ringing wood. The axe-heads glittered in their rhythmic flight, like fierce eagles circling about their quarry.

The broad flakes of wood flew from the deepening gashes in the sides of the oak. The huge trunk quivered. There was a shuddering in the branches. Then the great wonder of Winfried’s life came to pass.

Out of the stillness of the winter night, a mighty rushing noise sounded overhead.

Was it the ancient gods on their white battle-steeds, with their black hounds of wrath and their arrows of lightning, sweeping through the air to destroy their foes?

A strong, whirling wind passed over the treetops. It gripped the oak by its branches and tore it from its roots. Backward it fell, like a ruined tower, groaning and crashing as it split asunder in four great pieces.

Winfried let his axe drop, and bowed his head for a moment in the presence of almighty power.

Then he turned to the people, “Here is the timber,” he cried, “already felled and split for your new building. On this spot shall rise a chapel to the true God and his servant St. Peter.”

“And here,” said he, as his eyes fell on a young fir tree, standing straight and green, with its top pointing toward the stars, amid the divided ruins of the fallen oak, “here is the living tree, with no stain of blood upon it, that shall be the sign of your new worship. See how it points to the sky. Call it the tree of the Christ-child. Take it up and carry it to the chieftain’s hall. You shall go no more into the shadows of the forest to keep your feasts with secret rites of shame. You shall keep them at home, with laughter and songs and rites of love. The Thunder-oak has fallen, and I think the day is coming when there shall not be a home in all Germany where the children are not gathered around the green fir-tree to rejoice in the birth night of Christ.”

So they took the little fir from its place, and carried it in joyous procession to the edge of the glade, and laid it on the sled. The horses tossed their heads and drew their load bravely, as if the new burden had made it lighter.

When they came to the house of Gundhar, he ordered them to throw open the doors of the hall and set the tree in the midst of it. They kindled lights among the branches until it seemed to be tangled full of fireflies. The children encircled it, wondering, and the sweet odor of the balsam filled the house.

Then Winfried stood beside the chair of Gundhar, on the dais at the end of the hall, and told the story of Bethlehem, of the babe in the manger, of the shepherds on the hills, of the host of angels and their midnight song. All the people listened, charmed into stillness.

But the boy Bernhard, on Irma’s knee, folded in her soft arms, grew restless as the story lengthened and began to prattle softly at his mother’s ear.

“Mother,” whispered the child, “why did you cry out so loud, when the priest was going to send me to Valhalla?”

“Oh, hush, my child,” answered the mother, and pressed him closer to her side.

“Mother,” whispered the boy again, laying his finger on the stains upon her breast, “see, your dress is red! What are these stains? Did some one hurt you?”

The mother closed his mouth with a kiss. “Dear, be still, and listen!”

The boy obeyed. His eyes were heavy with sleep. But he heard the last words of Winfried as he spoke of the angelic messengers flying over the hills of Judea and singing as they flew. The child wondered and dreamed and listened. Suddenly his face grew bright. He put his lips close to Irma’s cheek again.

“Oh, mother!” he whispered very low, “do not speak. Do you hear them? Those angels have come back again. They are singing now behind the tree.”

And some say that it was true; but others say that it was only Gregor and his companions at the lower end of the hall, chanting their Christmas hymn:

All glory be to God on high,
And on the earth be peace!
Good-will, henceforth, from heaven to man,
Begin and never cease.