

The Very First Christmas Tree

by Mariam Morrison Peake

Once upon a time, hundreds and hundreds of years ago, a Roman soldier named Antonius was riding to Jerusalem on a big black horse. The day was hot, the road lay over sun-baked deserts and stony mountain trails, so that by evening both man and horse were hungry, thirsty, and badly in need of rest.

Just as the sun had set, they approached a little village called Bethlehem and there by the roadside stood a small inn with a snug stable. You can imagine how happy they were to see it. Antonius reined in his horse, dismounted, and called for the innkeeper. As soon as a servant had led the horse to the stable where he could be unsaddled, rubbed down and fed, the innkeeper welcomed Antonius and gave him a comfortable room inside the inn.

Now Antonius, like many Roman soldiers, had traveled all over the Roman Empire and had collected many souvenirs. He had bits of moss-green jade from Cathay in the East, finely wrought silver rings from the West, small ivory carvings from Madagascar in the South, and a soft lamb's wool blanket from the Aran Isles. As he unpacked his saddle bags and shook out the shawl, a little Scotch pinecone tumbled out and rolled, unnoticed, under the bed.

When Antonius had washed and brushed the dust from his clothes, he joined the other travelers in the common room for dinner. After eating, Antonius returned to his room and slept soundly all night. In the morning, refreshed, he repacked the saddlebags, mounted his big black horse and rode on toward Jerusalem.

Later that day, when the innkeeper was cleaning the rooms, he swept up the pinecone and threw it on a compost heap near the stable, along with the fruit peels, lamb bones, and dishwater that were thrown there every evening. So it happened that the little Scotch pinecone came to rest in the very place where the soil was rich and moist enough for it to grow.

Years passed, Antonius stayed in Jerusalem, while at Bethlehem, near the stable behind the inn, the Scotch pine grew until it was a tall evergreen.

One December day Antonius was ordered back to Rome. He mounted his big black horse and started once more along the same road. When he came to Bethlehem, he remembered the comfortable inn and then snug stable where he and his horse had stayed before, and he decided to spend the night there again. But, this time the inn was full; not a bed was free. Even the stable was occupied by a man and his wife, who had arrived shortly before. The innkeeper was sorry, but there were so many travelers at this time of year that he could offer no shelter to Antonius or his horse.

So Antonius, who was used to the hardships of soldiering, unsaddled the horse, rubbed him down and tied him to the pine tree beside the stable door. A Scotch pine in Bethlehem? Antonius could hardly believe his eyes. But, he was tired and sleepy, so he wrapped himself in the lamb's wool blanket from the Aran Isles and lay down under the tree where he was soon sound asleep.

He slept for a few hours, then was suddenly awoken by a brilliant light, coming from a star that seemed to be suspended directly over the stable, as if it had been plucked from the sky. Antonius stood up and looked around. The door to the stable opened and he could hear a choir of angels singing around a manger where a newborn infant lay. Just then three shepherds came out of the night bringing lambs as gifts for the child.

Antonius felt a great longing to join them and offer a gift as the others had done, so he went to look in his saddlebags. Alas, he could find no jade from Cathay, no finely wrought silver ring from the West, no carved ivory from the South, and from the North only a bit of a broken pinecone. Looking at it, Antonius remembered the pinecone he brought from the Aran Isles and had lost on his way to Jerusalem years before. That pinecone must have grown into the tall handsome evergreen near the stable door. Now the only thing he had left to give was the lamb's wool blanket; he folded it neatly and started toward the stable door.

But, before he reached the stable, a miracle happened. First, a swarm of silvery butterflies flew out of the night and settled like a garland of tinsel, on the pine tree where they glittered in the starlight. They were joined by a bevy of jewel-colored hummingbirds that darted in and out among the branches, beating their gaudy, iridescent wings. Then, as the night grew cold and Antonius watched in wonder, dewdrops appeared on the tips of the needles, where frost transformed them into shimmering beads of crystal.

Last came hundreds of tiny fireflies, twinkling their little candles on and off until the whole pine tree was wrapped in brilliance.

Finally the star, shining more brightly than before, moved from over the stable and came to rest on the very top of the tree.

This was the gift from a Roman Soldier--the very first Christmas tree, garlanded with butterflies, studded with hummingbirds, sparkling with crystal dewdrops, lighted by fireflies and topped with a heavenly star, to greet the Christ child on the very first Christmas morning.