



The Christmas Troll  
*and Other Yuletide Stories*

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MAGICAL CREATURES – A WEISER BOOKS COLLECTION

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CLEMENT A. MILES

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Clement A. Miles

Varla Ventura

Magical Creatures

A Weiser Books Collection

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## Things That Go Bump in the Night before Christmas

What young child doesn't love the din of Christmas? The lights in shop windows and holiday hum, a promise of bellies full of cookies and piles of presents. And when most of us think of Christmas we think of a bearded man in a red suit, jolly and adept at delivering toys. We accept his magical elfin assistants and flying abilities in a way that goes almost unquestioned, chalking it up to the "magic of the season." And when we think of holiday horrors it is usually high prices or forgotten presents, perhaps a burnt Christmas ham.

What would your children say if you whispered tales to them not of Christmas cheer and sightings of the elusive Santa Claus, but stories of a different kind of magic altogether? What if you told them that at the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve, curious things happen: Wells run with blood. Animals talk. Buried treasures are revealed and water turns to wine. And if you warned them of witches that leapt from roof to roof, or ghosts that hung about the chimneys waiting to visit them in the dark of the night, would they still anticipate the winter holidays in the same way?

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century author Clement A. Miles was a historian and an amateur anthropologist of sorts. His 1912 collection of Christmas traditions he deemed "both Pagan and Christian" is not just a cross-cultural look at the origins of Santa Claus. Here you will find werewolves, bogeys, and trolls. You will find curses and hexes and imminent death, rituals of the dead and goblin offerings. You will be warned of The Devil and cautioned against laziness.

Beware the Scandinavian Christmas Troll! They love to dance and drink through the night on Christmas Eve. If you are in Bavaria, take heed of the Berchte—a wretched bogey who cuts the stomachs open of naughty children. And at all costs, do not walk outside alone should you ever find yourself in Greece during the Twelve Days of Christmas. For there lurks the most horrid beast of all: the *Kallikantzaroi* or *Karkantzaroi*, a horrid half-human, half-animal monstrosity that plays tricks and ravages households, often leaving the occupants dead. Some say it is a mortal man transformed into a beastly creature, others say it is manifested from the supernatural beyond.

So enter these pages with caution, dear reader. Though you may think that this is a delightful collection of legends and lore, you will likely be traumatized by the thoughts of some of the many magical creatures that lurk out there at Yuletide, waiting for children and grown-ups alike.

Merry Meet,

Varla Ventura

San Francisco, 2011

# Christmas Eve and the Twelve Days

Christkind, Santa Klaus, and Knecht Ruprecht—Talking Animals and other Wonders of Christmas Eve—Scandinavian Beliefs about Trolls and the Return of the Dead—Traditional Christmas Songs in Eastern Europe—The Twelve Days, their Christian Origin and Pagan Superstitions—The Raging Host—Hints of Supernatural Visitors in England—The German *Frauen*—The Greek *Kallikantzaroi*.

## The Yule Log

The Log as Centre of the Domestic Christmas—Customs of the Southern Slavs—The *Polaznik*—Origin of the Yule Log—Probable Connection with Vegetation-cults or Ancestor-worship—The *Souche de Noël* in France—Italian and German Christmas Logs—English Customs—The Yule Candle in England and Scandinavia.

## Christmas Eve.

Christmas in the narrowest sense must be reckoned as beginning on the evening of December 24. Though Christmas Eve is not much observed in modern England, throughout the rest of Europe its importance so far as popular customs are concerned is far greater than that of the Day itself. Then in Germany the Christmas-tree is manifested in its glory; then, as in the England of the past, the Yule log is solemnly lighted in many lands; then often the most distinctive Christmas meal takes place.

We shall consider these and other institutions later; though they appear first on Christmas Eve, they belong more or less to the Twelve Days as a whole. Let us look first at the supernatural visitors, mimed by human beings, who delight the minds of children, especially in Germany, on the evening of December 24, and at the beliefs that hang around this most solemn night of the year.

First of all, the activities of St. Nicholas are not confined to his own festival; he often appears on Christmas Eve. We have already seen how he is attended by various companions, including Christ Himself, and how he comes now vested as a bishop, now as a masked and shaggy figure. The names and attributes of the Christmas and Advent visitors are rather confused, but on the whole it may be said that in Protestant north Germany the episcopal St. Nicholas and his Eve have been replaced by Christmas Eve and the Christ Child, while the name *Klas* has become attached to various unsaintly forms appearing at or shortly before Christmas.

We can trace a deliberate substitution of the Christ Child for St. Nicholas as the bringer of gifts. In the early seventeenth century a Protestant pastor is found complaining that parents put presents in their children's beds and tell them that St. Nicholas has brought them. "This," he says, "is a bad custom, because it points children to the saint, while yet we know that not St. Nicholas

but the holy Christ Child gives us all good things for body and soul, and He alone it is whom we ought to call upon.”

The ways in which the figure, or at all events the name, of Christ Himself, is introduced into German Christmas customs, are often surprising. The Christ Child, “Christkind,” so familiar to German children, has now become a sort of mythical figure, a product of sentiment and imagination working so freely as almost to forget the sacred character of the original. Christkind bears little resemblance to the Infant of Bethlehem; he is quite a tall child, and is often represented by a girl dressed in white, with long fair hair. He hovers, indeed, between the character of the Divine Infant and that of an angel, and is regarded more as a kind of good fairy than as anything else.

In Alsace the girl who represents Christkind has her face “made up” with flour, wears a crown of gold paper with lighted candles in it—a parallel to the headgear of the Swedish Lussi; in one hand she holds a silver bell, in the other, a basket of sweetmeats. She is followed by the terrible Hans Trapp, dressed in a bearskin, with blackened face, long beard, and threatening rod. He “goes for” the naughty children, who are only saved by the intercession of Christkind.

In the Mittelmark the name of *de hêle* (holy) *Christ* is strangely given to a skin- or straw-clad man, elsewhere called Knecht Ruprecht, Klas, or Joseph. In the Ruppin district a man dresses up in white with ribbons, carries a large pouch, and is called *Christmann* or *Christpuppe*. He is accompanied by a *Schimmelreiter* and by other fellows who are attired as women, have blackened faces, and are named *Feien* (we may see in them a likeness to the Kalends maskers condemned by the early Church). The procession goes round from house to house. The *Schimmelreiter* as he enters has to jump over a chair; this done, the *Christpuppe* is admitted. The girls present begin to sing, and the *Schimmelreiter* dances with one of them. Meanwhile the *Christpuppe* makes the children repeat some verse of Scripture or a hymn; if they know it well, he rewards them with gingerbreads from his wallet; if not, he beats them with a bundle filled with ashes. Then both he and the *Schimmelreiter* dance and pass on. Only when they are gone are the *Feien* allowed to enter; they jump wildly about and frighten the children.

Knecht Ruprecht, to whom allusion has already been made, is a prominent figure in the German Christmas. On Christmas Eve in the north he goes about clad in skins or straw and examines children; if they can say their prayers perfectly he rewards them with apples, nuts and gingerbreads; if not, he punishes them. In the Mittelmark, as we have seen, a personage corresponding to him is sometimes called “the holy Christ”; in Mecklenburg he is “rû Klas” (rough Nicholas—note his identification with the saint); in Brunswick, Hanover, and Holstein “Klas,” “Klawes,” “Klas Bûr” and “Bullerklas”; and in Silesia “Joseph.” Sometimes he wears bells and carries a long staff with a bag of ashes at the end—hence the name “Aschenklas” occasionally given to him. An ingenious theory connects this aspect of him with the *polaznik* of the Slavs, who on Christmas Day in Crivoscian farms goes to the hearth, takes up the ashes of the Yule log and dashes them against the cauldron-hook above so that sparks fly. As for the name “Ruprecht” the older mythologists interpreted it as meaning “shining with glory,” *hruodperaht*, and identified its owner with the god Woden. Dr. Tille, however, regards him as dating only from the seventeenth century. It can hardly be said that any satisfactory account has

as yet been given of the origins of this personage, or of his relation to St. Nicholas, Pelzmärte, and monstrous creatures like the *Klapperbock*.

In the south-western part of Lower Austria, both St. Nicholas—a proper bishop with mitre, staff, and ring—and Ruprecht appear on Christmas Eve, and there is quite an elaborate ceremonial. The children welcome the saint with a hymn; then he goes to a table and makes each child repeat a prayer and show his lesson-books. Meanwhile Ruprecht in a hide, with glowing eyes and a long red tongue, stands at the door to overawe the young people. Each child next kneels before the saint and kisses his ring, whereupon Nicholas bids him put his shoes out-of-doors and look in them when the clock strikes ten. After this the saint lays on the table a rod dipped in lime, solemnly blesses the children, sprinkling them with holy water, and noiselessly departs. The children steal out into the garden, clear a space in the snow, and set out their shoes; when the last stroke of ten has sounded they find them filled with nuts and apples and all kinds of sweet things.

In the Troppau district of Austrian Silesia, three figures go round on Christmas Eve—Christkindel, the archangel Gabriel, and St. Peter—and perform a little play before the presents they bring are given. Christkindel announces that he has gifts for the good children, but the bad shall feel the rod. St. Peter complains of the naughtiness of the youngsters: they play about in the streets instead of going straight to school; they tear up their lesson-books and do many other wicked things. However, the children's mother pleads for them, and St. Peter relents and gives out the presents.

In the Erzgebirge appear St. Peter and Ruprecht, who is clad in skin and straw, has a mask over his face, a rod, a chain round his body, and a sack with apples, nuts, and other gifts; and a somewhat similar performance is gone through.

If we go as far east as Russia we find a parallel to the girl Christkind in *Kolyáda*, a white-robed maiden driven about in a sledge from house to house on Christmas Eve. The young people who attended her sang carols, and presents were given them in return. *Kolyáda* is the name for Christmas and appears to be derived from *Kalendae*, which probably entered the Slavonic languages by way of Byzantium. The maiden is one of those beings who, like the Italian Befana, have taken their names from the festival at which they appear.

No time in all the Twelve Nights and Days is so charged with the supernatural as Christmas Eve. Doubtless this is due to the fact that the Church has hallowed the night of December 24-5 above all others in the year. It was to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks *by night* that, according to the Third Evangelist, came the angelic message of the Birth, and in harmony with this is the unique Midnight Mass of the Roman Church, lending a peculiar sanctity to the hour of its celebration. And yet many of the beliefs associated with this night show a large admixture of paganism.

First, there is the idea that at midnight on Christmas Eve animals have the power of speech. This superstition exists in various parts of Europe, and no one can hear the beasts talk with impunity. The idea has given rise to some curious and rather grim tales. Here is one from Brittany:—

“Once upon a time there was a woman who starved her cat and dog. At midnight on Christmas Eve she heard the dog say to the cat, ‘It is quite time we lost our mistress; she is a regular miser. To-night burglars are coming to steal her money; and if she cries out they will break her head.’ ‘Twill be a good deed,’ the cat replied. The woman in terror got up to go to a neighbour's house; as she went out the burglars opened the door, and when she shouted for help they broke her head.”

Again a story is told of a farm servant in the German Alps who did not believe that the beasts could speak, and hid in a stable on Christmas Eve to learn what went on. At midnight he heard surprising things. “We shall have hard work to do this day week,” said one horse. “Yes, the farmer's servant is heavy,” answered the other. “And the way to the churchyard is long and steep,” said the first. The servant was buried that day week.

It may well have been the traditional association of the ox and ass with the Nativity that fixed this superstition to Christmas Eve, but the conception of the talking animals is probably pagan.

Related to this idea, but more Christian in form, is the belief that at midnight all cattle rise in their stalls or kneel and adore the new-born King. Readers of Mr. Hardy's “Tess” will remember how this is brought into a delightful story told by a Wessex peasant. The idea is widespread in England and on the Continent, and has reached even the North American Indians. Howison, in his “Sketches of Upper Canada,” relates that an Indian told him that “on Christmas night all deer kneel and look up to Great Spirit.” A somewhat similar belief about bees was held in the north of England: they were said to assemble on Christmas Eve and hum a Christmas hymn. Bees seem in folk-lore in general to be specially near to humanity in their feelings.

It is a widespread idea that at midnight on Christmas Eve all water turns to wine. A Guernsey woman once determined to test this; at midnight she drew a bucket from the well. Then came a voice:—

“Toute l'eau se tourne en vin, Et tu es proche de ta fin.”

She fell down with a mortal disease, and died before the end of the year. In Sark the superstition is that the water in streams and wells turns into blood, and if you go to look you will die within the year.

There is also a French belief that on Christmas Eve, while the genealogy of Christ is being chanted at the Midnight Mass, hidden treasures are revealed. In Russia all sorts of buried treasures are supposed to be revealed on the evenings between Christmas and the Epiphany, and on the eves of these festivals the heavens are opened, and the waters of springs and rivers turn into wine.

Another instance of the supernatural character of the night is found in a Breton story of a blacksmith who went on working after the sacring bell had rung at the Midnight Mass. To him came a tall, stooping man with a scythe, who begged him to put in a nail. He did so; and the visitor in return bade him send for a priest, for this work would be his last. The figure

disappeared, the blacksmith felt his limbs fail him, and at cock-crow he died. He had mended the scythe of the *Ankou*—Death the reaper.

In the Scandinavian countries simple folk have a vivid sense of the nearness of the supernatural on Christmas Eve. On Yule night no one should go out, for he may meet uncanny beings of all kinds. In Sweden the Trolls are believed to celebrate Christmas Eve with dancing and revelry. "On the heaths witches and little Trolls ride, one on a wolf, another on a broom or a shovel, to their assemblies, where they dance under their stones.... In the mount are then to be heard mirth and music, dancing and drinking. On Christmas morn, during the time between cock-crowing and daybreak, it is highly dangerous to be abroad."

Christmas Eve is also in Scandinavian folk-belief the time when the dead revisit their old homes, as on All Souls' Eve in Roman Catholic lands. The living prepare for their coming with mingled dread and desire to make them welcome. When the Christmas Eve festivities are over, and everyone has gone to rest, the parlour is left tidy and adorned, with a great fire burning, candles lighted, the table covered with a festive cloth and plentifully spread with food, and a jug of Yule ale ready. Sometimes before going to bed people wipe the chairs with a clean white towel; in the morning they are wiped again, and, if earth is found, some kinsman, fresh from the grave, has sat there. Consideration for the dead even leads people to prepare a warm bath in the belief that, like living folks, the kinsmen will want a wash before their festal meal. Or again beds were made ready for them while the living slept on straw. Not always is it consciously the dead for whom these preparations are made, sometimes they are said to be for the Trolls and sometimes even for the Saviour and His angels. (We may compare with this Christian idea the Tyrolese custom of leaving some milk for the Christ Child and His Mother at the hour of Midnight Mass, and a Breton practice of leaving food all through Christmas night in case the Virgin should come.)

It is difficult to say how far the other supernatural beings—their name is legion—who in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland are believed to come out of their underground hiding-places during the long dark Christmas nights, were originally ghosts of the dead. Twenty years ago many students would have accounted for them all in this way, but the tendency now is strongly against the derivation of all supernatural beings from ancestor-worship. Elves, trolls, dwarfs, witches, and other uncanny folk—the beliefs about their Christmas doings are too many to be treated here; readers of Danish will find a long and very interesting chapter on this subject in Dr. Feilberg's "Jul." I may mention just one familiar figure of the Scandinavian Yule, Tomte Gubbe, a sort of genius of the house corresponding very much to the "drudging goblin" of Milton's "L'Allegro," for whom the cream-bowl must be duly set. He may perhaps be the spirit of the founder of the family. At all events on Christmas Eve Yule porridge and new milk are set out for him, sometimes with other things, such as a suit of small clothes, spirits, or even tobacco. Thus must his goodwill be won for the coming year.

In one part of Norway it used to be believed that on Christmas Eve, at rare intervals, the old Norse gods made war on Christians, coming down from the mountains with great blasts of wind and wild shouts, and carrying off any human being who might be about. In one place the memory of such a visitation was preserved in the nineteenth century. The people were preparing for their festivities, when suddenly from the mountains came the warning sounds. "In a second the air became black, peals of thunder echoed among the hills, lightning danced about the

buildings, and the inhabitants in the darkened rooms heard the clatter of hoofs and the weird shrieks of the hosts of the gods.”

The Scandinavian countries, Protestant though they are, have retained many of the outward forms of Catholicism, and the sign of the cross is often used as a protection against uncanny visitors. The cross—perhaps the symbol was originally Thor's hammer—is marked with chalk or tar or fire upon doors and gates, is formed of straw or other material and put in stables and cowhouses, or is smeared with the remains of the Yule candle on the udders of the beasts—it is in fact displayed at every point open to attack by a spirit of darkness.

Christmas Eve is in Germany a time for auguries. Some of the methods already noted on other days are practised upon it—for instance the pouring of molten lead into water, the flinging of shoes, the pulling out of pieces of wood, and the floating of nutshells—and there are various others which it might be tedious to describe.

Among the southern Slavs if a girl wants to know what sort of husband she will get, she covers the table on Christmas Eve, puts on it a white loaf, a plate, and a knife, spoon, and fork, and goes to bed. At midnight the spirit of her future husband will appear and fling the knife at her. If it falls without injuring her she will get a good husband and be happy, but if she is hurt she will die early. There is a similar mode of divination for a young fellow. On Christmas Eve, when everybody else has gone to church, he must, naked and in darkness, sift ashes through a sieve. His future bride will then appear, pull him thrice by the nose, and go away.

In eastern Europe Christmas, and especially Christmas Eve, is the time for the singing of carols called in Russian *Kolyádki*, and in other Slav countries by similar names derived from *Kalendae*. More often than not these are without connection with the Nativity; sometimes they have a Christian form and tell of the doings of God, the Virgin and the saints, but frequently they are of an entirely secular or even pagan character. Into some the sun, moon, and stars and other natural objects are introduced, and they seem to be based on myths to which a Christian appearance has been given by a sprinkling of names of holy persons of the Church. Here for instance is a fragment from a Carpathian song:—

“A golden plough goes ploughing, And behind that plough is the Lord Himself. The holy Peter helps Him to drive, And the Mother of God carries the seed corn, Carries the seed corn, prays to the Lord God, ‘Make, O Lord, the strong wheat to grow, The strong wheat and the vigorous corn! The stalks then shall be like reeds!’”

Often they contain wishes for the prosperity of the household and end with the words, “for many years, for many years.” The Roumanian songs are frequently very long, and a typical, oft-recurring refrain is:—

“This evening is a great evening, White flowers; Great evening of Christmas, White flowers.”

Sometimes they are ballads of the national life.

In Russia a carol beginning “Glory be to God in heaven, Glory!” and calling down blessings on the Tsar and his people, is one of the most prominent among the *Kolyádki*, and opens the singing of the songs called *Podblyudnuiya*. “At the Christmas festival a table is covered with a cloth, and on it is set a dish or bowl (*blyudo*) containing water. The young people drop rings or other trinkets into the dish, which is afterwards covered with a cloth, and then the *Podblyudnuiya* Songs commence. At the end of each song one of the trinkets is drawn at random, and its owner deduces an omen from the nature of the words which have just been sung.”

## **The Twelve Days.**

Whatever the limits fixed for the beginning and end of the Christmas festival, its core is always the period between Christmas Eve and the Epiphany—the “Twelve Days.” A cycle of feasts falls within this time, and the customs peculiar to each day will be treated in calendarial order. First, however, it will be well to glance at the character of the Twelve Days as a whole, and at the superstitions which hang about the season. So many are these superstitions, so “bewitched” is the time, that the older mythologists not unnaturally saw in it a Teutonic festal season, dating from pre-Christian days. In point of fact it appears to be simply a creation of the Church, a natural linking together of Christmas and Epiphany. It is first mentioned as a festal tide by the eastern Father, Ephraem Syrus, at the end of the fourth century, and was declared to be such by the western Council of Tours in 567.

While Christmas Eve is the night *par excellence* of the supernatural, the whole season of the Twelve Days is charged with it. It is hard to see whence Shakespeare could have got the idea which he puts into the mouth of Marcellus in “Hamlet”:—

“Some say that ever ‘gainst that season comes  
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,  
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;  
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad;  
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,  
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,  
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.”

Against this is the fact that in folk-lore Christmas is a quite peculiarly uncanny time. Not unnatural is it that at this midwinter season of darkness, howling winds, and raging storms, men should have thought to see and hear the mysterious shapes and voices of dread beings whom the living shun.

Throughout the Teutonic world one finds the belief in a “raging host” or “wild hunt” or spirits, rushing howling through the air on stormy nights. In North Devon its name is “Yeth (heathen) hounds”; elsewhere in the west of England it is called the “Wish hounds.” It is the train of the unhappy souls of those who died unbaptized, or by violent hands, or under a curse, and often Woden is their leader. At least since the seventeenth century this “raging host” (*das wüthende Heer*) has been particularly associated with Christmas in German folk-lore, and in Iceland it goes by the name of the “Yule host.”

In Guernsey the powers of darkness are supposed to be more than usually active between St. Thomas's Day and New Year's Eve, and it is dangerous to be out after nightfall. People are led

astray then by Will o' the Wisp, or are preceded or followed by large black dogs, or find their path beset by white rabbits that go hopping along just under their feet.

In England there are signs that supernatural visitors were formerly looked for during the Twelve Days. First there was a custom of cleansing the house and its implements with peculiar care. In Shropshire, for instance, "the pewter and brazen vessels had to be made so bright that the maids could see to put their caps on in them—otherwise the fairies would pinch them, but if all was perfect, the worker would find a coin in her shoe." Again in Shropshire special care was taken to put away any suds or "back-lee" for washing purposes, and no spinning might be done during the Twelve Days. It was said elsewhere that if any flax were left on the distaff, the Devil would come and cut it.

The prohibition of spinning may be due to the Church's hallowing of the season and the idea that all work then was wrong. This churchly hallowing may lie also at the root of the Danish tradition that from Christmas till New Year's Day nothing that runs round should be set in motion, and of the German idea that no thrashing must be done during the Twelve Days, or all the corn within hearing will spoil. The expectation of uncanny visitors in the English traditions calls, however, for special attention; it is perhaps because of their coming that the house must be left spotlessly clean and with as little as possible about on which they can work mischief. Though I know of no distinct English belief in the return of the family dead at Christmas, it may be that the fairies expected in Shropshire were originally ancestral ghosts. Such a derivation of the elves and brownies that haunt the hearth is very probable.

The belief about the Devil cutting flax left on the distaff links the English superstitions to the mysterious *Frau* with various names, who in Germany is supposed to go her rounds during the Twelve Nights. She has a special relation to spinning, often punishing girls who leave their flax unspun. In central Germany and in parts of Austria she is called Frau Holle or Holda, in southern Germany and Tyrol Frau Berchta or Perchta, in the north down to the Harz Mountains Frau Freen or Frick, or Fru Gode or Fru Harke, and there are other names too. Attempts have been made to dispute her claim to the rank of an old Teutonic goddess and to prove her a creation of the Middle Ages, a representative of the crowd of ghosts supposed to be specially near to the living at Christmastide. It is questionable whether she can be thus explained away, and at the back of the varying names, and much overlaid no doubt with later superstitions, there may be a traditional goddess corresponding to that old divinity Frigg to whom we owe the name of Friday. The connection of Frick with Frigg is very probable, and Frick shares characteristics with the other *Frauen*.

All are connected with spinning and spinsters (in the literal sense). Fru Frick or Freen in the Uckermark and the northern Harz permits no spinning during the time when she goes her rounds, and if there are lazy spinsters she soils the unspun flax on their distaff. In like manner do Holda, Harke, Berchta, and Gode punish lazy girls.

The characters of the *Frauen* can best be shown by the things told of them in different regions. They are more dreaded than loved, but if severe in their chastisements they are also generous in rewarding those who do them service.

Frau Gaude (also called Gode, Gae, or Wode) is said in Mecklenburg to love to drive through the village streets on the Twelve Nights with a train of dogs. Wherever she finds a street-door open she sends a little dog in. Next morning he wags his tail at the inmates and whines, and will not be driven away. If killed, he turns into a stone by day; this, though it may be thrown away, always returns and is a dog again by night. All through the year he whines and brings ill luck upon the house; so people are careful to keep their street-doors shut during the Twelve Nights.

Good luck, however, befalls those who do Frau Gaude a service. A man who put a new pole to her carriage was brilliantly repaid—the chips that fell from the pole turned to glittering gold. Similar stories of golden chips are told about Holda and Berchta.

A train of dogs belongs not only to Frau Gaude but also to Frau Harke; with these howling beasts they go raging through the air by night. The *Frauen* in certain aspects are, indeed, the leaders of the “Wild Host.”

Holda and Perchta, as some strange stories show, are the guides and guardians of the *heimchen* or souls of children who have died unbaptized. In the valley of the Saale, so runs a tale, Perchta, queen of the *heimchen*, had her dwelling of old, and at her command the children watered the fields, while she worked with her plough. But the people of the place were ungrateful, and she resolved to leave their land. One night a ferryman beheld on the bank of the Saale a tall, stately lady with a crowd of weeping children. She demanded to be ferried across, and the children dragged a plough into the boat, crying bitterly. As a reward for the ferrying, Perchta, mending her plough, pointed to the chips. The man grumblingly took three, and in the morning they had turned to gold-pieces.

Holda, whose name means “the kindly one,” is the most friendly of the *Frauen*. In Saxony she brings rewards for diligent spinsters, and on every New Year's Eve, between nine and ten o'clock, she drives in a carriage full of presents through villages where respect has been shown to her. At the crack of her whip the people come out to receive her gifts. In Hesse and Thuringia she is imagined as a beautiful woman clad in white with long golden hair, and, when it snows hard, people say, “Frau Holle is shaking her featherbed.”

More of a bugbear on the whole is Berchte or Perchte (the name is variously spelt). She is particularly connected with the Eve of the Epiphany, and it is possible that her name comes from the old German *giper(c)hta Na(c)ht*, the bright or shining night, referring to the manifestation of Christ's glory. In Carinthia the Epiphany is still called *Berchtentag*.

Berchte is sometimes a bogey to frighten children. In the mountains round Traunstein children are told on Epiphany Eve that if they are naughty she will come and cut their stomachs open. In Upper Austria the girls must finish their spinning by Christmas; if Frau Berch finds flax still on their distaffs she will be angered and send them bad luck.

In the Orlagau (between the Saale and the Orle) on the night before Twelfth Day, Perchta examines the spinning-rooms and brings the spinners empty reels with directions to spin them full within a very brief time; if this is not done she punishes them by tangling and befouling the flax. She also cuts open the body of any one who has not eaten *zemmede* (fasting fare made of

flour and milk and water) that day, takes out any other food he has had, fills the empty space with straw and bricks, and sews him up again. And yet, as we have seen, she has a kindly side—at any rate she rewards those who serve her—and in Styria at Christmas she even plays the part of Santa Klaus, hearing children repeat their prayers and rewarding them with nuts and apples.

There is a charming Tyrolese story about her. At midnight on Epiphany Eve a peasant—not too sober—suddenly heard behind him “a sound of many voices, which came on nearer and nearer, and then the Berchtl, in her white clothing, her broken ploughshare in her hand, and all her train of little people, swept clattering and chattering close past him. The least was the last, and it wore a long shirt which got in the way of its little bare feet, and kept tripping it up. The peasant had sense enough left to feel compassion, so he took his garter off and bound it for a girdle round the infant, and then set it again on its way. When the Berchtl saw what he had done, she turned back and thanked him, and told him that in return for his compassion his children should never come to want.”

In Tyrol, by the way, it is often said that the Perchtl is Pontius Pilate's wife, Procula. In the Italian dialects of south Tyrol the German Frau Berchta has been turned into *la donna Berta*. If one goes further south, into Italy itself, one meets with a similar being, the Befana, whose name is plainly nothing but a corruption of *Epiphania*. She is so distinctly a part of the Epiphany festival that we may leave her to be considered later.

Of all supernatural Christmas visitors, the most vividly realized and believed in at the present day are probably the Greek *Kallikantzaroi* or *Karkantzaroi*. They are the terror of the Greek peasant during the Twelve Days; in the soil of his imagination they flourish luxuriantly, and to him they are a very real and living nuisance.

Traditions about the *Kallikantzaroi* vary from region to region, but in general they are half-animal, half-human monsters, black, hairy, with huge heads, glaring red eyes, goats' or asses' ears, blood-red tongues hanging out, ferocious tusks, monkeys' arms, and long curved nails, and commonly they have the foot of some beast. “From dawn till sunset they hide themselves in dark and dank places ... but at night they issue forth and run wildly to and fro, rending and crushing those who cross their path. Destruction and waste, greed and lust mark their course.” When a house is not prepared against their coming, “by chimney and door alike they swarm in, and make havoc of the home; in sheer wanton mischief they overturn and break all the furniture, devour the Christmas pork, befoul all the water and wine and food which remains, and leave the occupants half dead with fright or violence.” Many like or far worse pranks do they play, until at the crowing of the third cock they get them away to their dens. The signal for their final departure does not come until the Epiphany, when, as we saw in Chapter IV., the “Blessing of the Waters” takes place. Some of the hallowed water is put into vessels, and with these and with incense the priests sometimes make a round of the village, sprinkling the people and their houses. The fear of the *Kallikantzaroi* at this purification is expressed in the following lines:—

“Quick, begone! we must begone, Here comes the pot-bellied priest, With his censer in his hand  
And his sprinkling-vessel too; He has purified the streams And he has polluted us.”

Besides this ecclesiastical purification there are various Christian precautions against the *Kallikantzaroi*—e.g., to mark the house-door with a black cross on Christmas Eve, the burning of incense and the invocation of the Trinity—and a number of other means of aversion: the lighting of the Yule log, the burning of something that smells strong, and—perhaps as a peace-offering—the hanging of pork-bones, sweetmeats, or sausages in the chimney.

Just as men are sometimes believed to become vampires temporarily during their lifetime, so, according to one stream of tradition, do living men become *Kallikantzaroi*. In Greece children born at Christmas are thought likely to have this objectionable characteristic as a punishment for their mothers' sin in bearing them at a time sacred to the Mother of God. In Macedonia people who have a "light" guardian angel undergo the hideous transformation.

Many attempts have been made to account for the *Kallikantzaroi*. Perhaps the most plausible explanation of the outward form, at least, of the uncanny creatures, is the theory connecting them with the masquerades that formed part of the winter festival of Dionysus and are still to be found in Greece at Christmastide. The hideous bestial shapes, the noise and riot, may well have seemed demoniacal to simple people slightly "elevated," perhaps, by Christmas feasting, while the human nature of the maskers was not altogether forgotten. Another theory of an even more prosaic character has been propounded—"that the *Kallikantzaroi* are nothing more than established nightmares, limited like indigestion to the twelve days of feasting. This view is taken by Allatius, who says that a *Kallikantzaros* has all the characteristics of nightmare, rampaging abroad and jumping on men's shoulders, then leaving them half senseless on the ground."

Such theories are ingenious and suggestive, and may be true to a certain degree, but they hardly cover all the facts. It is possible that the *Kallikantzaroi* may have some connection with the departed; they certainly appear akin to the modern Greek and Slavonic vampire, "a corpse imbued with a kind of half-life," and with eyes gleaming like live coals. They are, however, even more closely related to the werewolf, a man who is supposed to change into a wolf and go about ravening. It is to be noted that "man-wolves" (λυκανθρωποι) is the very name given to the *Kallikantzaroi* in southern Greece, and that the word *Kallikantzaros* itself has been conjecturally derived by Bernhard Schmidt from two Turkish words meaning "black" and "werewolf." The connection between Christmas and werewolves is not confined to Greece. According to a belief not yet extinct in the north and east of Germany, even where the real animals have long ago been extirpated, children born during the Twelve Nights become werewolves, while in Livonia and Poland that period is the special season for the werewolf's ravengings.

Perhaps on no question connected with primitive religion is there more uncertainty than on the ideas of early man about the nature of animals and their relation to himself and the world. When we meet with half-animal, half-human beings we must be prepared to find much that is obscure.

With the *Kallikantzaroi* may be compared some goblins of the Celtic imagination; especially like is the Manx *Fynnodderee* (lit. "the hairy-dun one"), "something between a man and a beast, being covered with black shaggy hair and having fiery eyes," and prodigiously strong. The Russian *Domovy* or house-spirit is also a hirsute creature, and the Russian *Ljeschi*, goat-footed woodland sprites, are, like the *Kallikantzaroi*, supposed to be got rid of by the "Blessing of the Waters" at the Epiphany. Some of the monstrous German figures already dealt with here bear

strong resemblances to the Greek demons. And, of course, on Greek ground one cannot help thinking of Pan and the Satyrs and Centaurs.

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## THE YULE LOG

The Log as Centre of the Domestic Christmas—Customs of the Southern Slavs—The *Polaznik*—Origin of the Yule Log—Probable Connection with Vegetation-cults or Ancestor-worship—The *Souche de Noël* in France—Italian and German Christmas Logs—English Customs—The Yule Candle in England and Scandinavia.

The peoples of Europe have various centres for their Christmas rejoicing. In Spain and Italy the crib is often the focus of the festival in the home as well as the church. In England—after the old tradition—, in rural France, and among the southern Slavs, the centre is the great log solemnly brought in and kindled on the hearth, while in Germany, one need hardly say, the light-laden tree is the supreme symbol of Christmas. The crib has already been treated in our First Part, the Yule log and the Christmas-tree will be considered in this chapter and the next.

The log placed on the fire on the Vigil of the Nativity no longer forms an important part of the English Christmas. Yet within the memory of many it was a very essential element in the celebration of the festival, not merely as giving out welcome warmth in the midwinter cold, but as possessing occult, magical properties. In some remote corners of England it probably lingers yet. We shall return to the traditional English Yule log after a study of some Continental customs of the same kind.

First, we may travel to a part of eastern Europe where the log ceremonies are found in their most elaborate form. Among the Serbs and Croats on Christmas Eve two or three young oaks are felled for every house, and, as twilight comes on, are brought in and laid on the fire. (Sometimes there is one for each male member of the family, but one large log is the centre of the ritual.) The felling takes place in some districts before sunrise, corn being thrown upon the trees with the words, “Good morning, Christmas!” At Risano and other places in Lower Dalmatia the women and girls wind red silk and gold wire round the oak trunks, and adorn them with leaves and flowers. While they are being carried into the house lighted tapers are held on either side of the door. As the house-father crosses the threshold in the twilight with the first log, corn—or in some places wine—is thrown over him by one of the family. The log or *badnjak* is then placed on the fire. At Ragusa the house-father sprinkles corn and wine upon the *badnjak*, saying, as the flame shoots up, “Goodly be thy birth!” In the mountains above Risano he not only pours corn and wine but afterwards takes a bowl of corn, an orange, and a ploughshare, and places them on the upper end of the log in order that the corn may grow well and the beasts be healthy during the year. In Montenegro, instead of throwing corn, he more usually breaks a piece of unleavened bread, places it upon the log, and pours over it a libation of wine.

The first visit on Christmas Day is considered important—we may compare this with “first-footing” in the British Isles on January 1—and in order that the right sort of person may come, some one is specially chosen to be the so-called *polaznik*. No outsider but this *polaznik* may

enter a house on Christmas Day, where the rites are strictly observed. He appears in the early morning, carries corn in his glove and shakes it out before the threshold with the words, "Christ is born," whereupon some member of the household sprinkles him with corn in return, answering, "He is born indeed." Afterwards the *polaznik* goes to the fire and makes sparks fly from the remains of the *badnjak*, at the same time uttering a wish for the good luck of the house-father and his household and farm. Money and sometimes an orange are then placed on the *badnjak*. It is not allowed to burn quite away; the last remains of the fire are extinguished and the embers are laid between the branches of young fruit-trees to promote their growth.

How shall we interpret these practices? Mannhardt regards the log as an embodiment of the vegetation-spirit, and its burning as an efficacious symbol of sunshine, meant to secure the genial vitalizing influence of the sun during the coming year. It is, however, possible to connect it with a different circle of ideas and to see in its burning the solemn annual rekindling of the sacred hearth-fire, the centre of the family life and the dwelling-place of the ancestors. Primitive peoples in many parts of the world are accustomed to associate fire with human generation, and it is a general belief among Aryan and other peoples that ancestral spirits have their seat in the hearth. In Russia, for instance, "in the Nijegorod Government it is still forbidden to break up the smouldering faggots in a stove, because to do so might cause the ancestors to fall through into hell. And when a Russian family moves from one house to another, the fire is conveyed to the new one, where it is received with the words, 'Welcome, grandfather, to the new home!'"

Sir Arthur Evans in three articles in *Macmillan's Magazine* for 1881 gave a minute account of the Christmas customs of the Serbian highlanders above Risano, who practise the log-rites with elaborate ceremonial, and explained them as connected in one way or other with ancestor-worship, though the people themselves attach a Christian meaning to many of them. He pointed to the following facts as showing that the Serbian Christmas is at bottom a feast of the dead:— (1) It is said on Christmas Eve, "To-night Earth is blended with Paradise" [*Raj*, the abode of the dead among the heathen Slavs]. (2) There is talk of unchristened folk beneath the threshold wailing "for a wax-light and offerings to be brought them; when that is done they lie still enough"—here there may be a modified survival of the idea that ancestral spirits dwell beneath the doorway. (3) The food must on no account be cleared away after the Christmas meal, but is left for three days, apparently for the house-spirits. (4) Blessings are invoked upon the "Absent Ones," which seems to mean the departed, and (5) a toast is drunk and a bread-cake broken in memory of "the Patron Namegiver of all house-fathers," ostensibly Christ but perhaps originally the founder of the family. Some of these customs resemble those we have noted on All Souls' Eve and—in Scandinavia—on Christmas Eve; other parallels we shall meet with later. Among the Slav races the old organization of the family under an elective house-elder and holding things in common has been faithfully preserved, and we might expect to find among the remote Serbian highlanders specially clear traces of the old religion of the hearth. One remarkable point noted by Sir Arthur Evans was that in the Crivoscian cottage where he stayed the fire-irons, the table, and the stools were removed to an obscure corner before the logs were brought in and the Christmas rites began—an indication apparently of the extreme antiquity of the celebration, as dating from a time when such implements were unknown.

If we take the view that ancestral spirits are the centre of the *badnjak* observances, we may regard the libations upon the fire as intended for their benefit. On the sun and vegetation

hypothesis, however, the libations would be meant to secure, by homoeopathic magic, that sunshine should alternate with the rain necessary for the welfare of plants. The fertilizing powers possessed by the sparks and ashes of the Christmas log appear frequently in folk-lore, and may be explained either by the connection of fire with human generation already noted, or, on the other theory, by the burning log being a sort of sacrament of sunshine. It is not perhaps necessary to exclude the idea of the log's connection with the vegetation-spirit even on the ancestral cult hypothesis, for the tree which furnished the fuel may have been regarded as the source of the life of the race. The Serbian rites certainly suggest very strongly some sort of veneration for the log itself as well as for the fire that it feeds.

We may now return to western Europe. In France the Christmas log or *souche de Noël* is common in the less modernized places, particularly in the south. In Dauphiné it is called *chalendal*, in Provence *calignaou* (from *Kalendae*, of course) or *tréfoir*, in Orne *tréfouet*. On Christmas Eve in Provence the whole family goes solemnly out to bring in the log. A carol meanwhile is sung praying for blessings on the house, that the women may bear children, the nanny-goats kids, and the ewes lambs, that corn and flour may abound, and the cask be full of wine. Then the youngest child in the family pours wine on the log in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The log is then thrown upon the fire, and the charcoal is kept all the year and used as a remedy for various ills.

Another account is given in his Memoirs by Frédéric Mistral, the Provençal poet. On Christmas Eve everyone, he says, speaking of his boyhood, sallied forth to fetch the Yule log, which had to be cut from a fruit-tree:—

“Walking in line we bore it home, headed by the oldest at one end, and I, the last born, bringing up the rear. Three times we made the tour of the kitchen, then, arrived at the flagstones of the hearth, my father solemnly poured over the log a glass of wine, with the dedicatory words:

‘Joy, joy. May God shower joy upon us, my dear children. Christmas brings us all good things. God give us grace to see the New Year, and if we do not increase in numbers may we at all events not decrease.’

In chorus we responded:

‘Joy, joy, joy!’ and lifted the log on the fire dogs. Then as the first flame leapt up my father would cross himself, saying, ‘Burn the log, O fire,’ and with that we all sat down to the table.”

In some places the *tréfoir* or *tison de Noël* is burnt every evening during the Thirteen Nights. If put under the bed its charcoal protects the house all the year round from lightning; contact with it preserves people from chilblains and animals from various diseases; mixed with fodder it makes cows calve; its brands thrown into the soil keep the corn healthy. In Périgord the portion which has not been burnt is used to form part of a plough, and is believed to make the seed prosper; women also keep some fragments until Epiphany that their poultry may thrive. In Brittany the *tison* is a protection against lightning and its ashes are put in wells to keep the water good.

In northern Italy also the *ceppo* or log is (or was) known—the Piedmontese call it *suc*—and in Tuscany Christmas is called after it *Festa di Ceppo*. In the Val di Chiana on Christmas Eve the family gathers, a great log is set on the fire, the children are blindfolded and have to beat it with tongs, and an *Ave Maria del Ceppo* is sung. Under the name in Lombardy of *zocco*, in Tuscany of *ciocco, di Natale*, the Yule log was in olden times common in Italian cities; the custom can there be traced back to the eleventh century. A little book probably printed in Milan at the end of the fifteenth century gives minute particulars of the ritual observed, and we learn that on Christmas Eve the father, or the head of the household, used to call all the family together and with great devotion, in the name of the Holy Trinity, take the log and place it on the fire. Juniper was put under it, and on the top money was placed, afterwards to be given to the servants. Wine in abundance was poured three times on the fire when the head of the house had drunk and given drink to all present. It was an old Italian custom to preserve the ashes of the *zocco* as a protection against hail. A modern superstition is to keep some splinters of the wood and burn them in the fires made for the benefit of silkworms; so burnt, they are supposed to keep ills away from the creatures.

In many parts of Germany Yule log customs can be traced. In Hesse and Westphalia, for instance, it was the custom on Christmas Eve or Day to lay a large block of wood on the fire and, as soon as it was charred a little, to take it off and preserve it. When a storm threatened, it was kindled again as a protection against lightning. It was called the *Christbrand*. In Thuringia a *Christklotz* (Christ log) is put on the fire before people go to bed, so that it may burn all through the night. Its remains are kept to protect the house from fire and ill-luck. In parts of Thuringia and in Mecklenburg, Pomerania, East Prussia, Saxony, and Bohemia, the fire is kept up all night on Christmas or New Year's Eve, and the ashes are used to rid cattle of vermin and protect plants and fruit-trees from insects, while in the country between the Sieg and Lahn the powdered ashes of an oaken log are strewn during the Thirteen Nights on the fields, to increase their fertility. In Sweden, too, some form of Yule log was known, and in Greece, as we have seen, the burning of a log is still supposed to be a protection against *Kallikantzaroi*.

As for the English customs, they can hardly be better introduced than in Herrick's words:—

“Come, bring, with a noise, My merry, merry boys, The Christmas Log to the firing: While my good Dame she Bids ye all be free, And drink to your hearts’ desiring. With the last year's Brand Light the new Block, and For good success in his spending, On your psaltries play, That sweet luck may Come while the log is a-teending.”

We may note especially that the block must be kindled with last year's brand; here there is a distinct suggestion that the lighting of the log at Christmas is a shrunken remnant of the keeping up of a perpetual fire, the continuity being to some extent preserved by the use of a brand from last year's blaze.

Another tradition and its origin are thus described by Sir Laurence Gomme:—

“From there being an ever-burning fire, it has come to be that the fire must not be allowed to be extinguished on the last day of the old year, so that the old year's fire may last into the new year. In Lanarkshire it is considered unlucky to give out a light to any one on the morning of the new

year, and therefore if the house-fire has been allowed to become extinguished recourse must be had to the embers of the village pile [for on New Year's Eve a great public bonfire is made]. In some places the self-extinction of the yule-log at Christmas is portentous of evil."

In the north of England in the days of tinder-boxes, if any one could not get a light it was useless to ask a neighbour for one, so frightfully unlucky was it to allow any light to leave the house between Christmas Eve and New Year's Day. The idea of the unluckiness of giving out fire at the Kalends of January can be traced back to the eighth century when, as we saw in Chapter VI., St. Boniface alluded to this superstition among the people of Rome.

In Shropshire the idea is extended even to ashes, which must not be thrown out of the house on Christmas Day, "for fear of throwing them in Our Saviour's face." Perhaps such superstitions may originally have had to do with dread that the "luck" of the family, the household spirit, might be carried away with the gift of fire from the hearth.

When Miss Burne wrote in the eighties there were still many West Shropshire people who could remember seeing the "Christmas Brand" drawn by horses to the farmhouse door, and placed at the back of the wide open hearth, where the flame was made up in front of it. "The embers," says one informant, "were raked up to it every night, and it was carefully tended that it might not go out during the whole season, during which time no light might either be struck, given, or borrowed." At Cleobury Mortimer in the south-east of the county the silence of the curfew bell during "the Christmas" points to a time when fires might not be extinguished during that season.

The place of the Yule log in Devonshire is taken by the "ashen [sometimes "ashton"] faggot," still burnt in many a farm on Christmas Eve. The sticks of ash are fastened together by ashen bands, and the traditional custom is for a quart of cider to be called for and served to the merrymaking company, as each band bursts in the flames.

In England the Yule log was often supplemented or replaced by a great candle. At Ripon in the eighteenth century the chandlers sent their customers large candles on Christmas Eve, and the coopers, logs of wood. Hampson, writing in 1841, says:—

"In some places candles are made of a particular kind, because the candle that is lighted on Christmas Day must be so large as to burn from the time of its ignition to the close of the day, otherwise it will portend evil to the family for the ensuing year. The poor were wont to present the rich with wax tapers, and yule candles are still in the north of Scotland given by merchants to their customers. At one time children at the village schools in Lancashire were required to bring each a mould candle before the *parting* or separation for the Christmas holidays."

In the Scandinavian countries the Yule candle is, or was, very prominent indeed. In West Jutland (Denmark) two great tallow candles stood on the festive board. No one dared to touch or extinguish them, and if by any mischance one went out it was a portent of death. They stood for the husband and wife, and that one of the wedded pair whose candle burnt the longer would outlive the other.

In Norway also two lights were placed on the table. All over the Scandinavian lands the Yule candle had to burn throughout the night; it was not to be extinguished till the sun rose or—as was said elsewhere—till the beginning of service on Christmas Day. Sometimes the putting-out had to be done by the oldest member of the family or the father of the household. In Norway the candle was lighted every evening until New Year's Day. While it foreshadowed death if it went out, so long as it duly burned it shed a blessing with its light, and, in order to secure abundance of good things, money, clothes, food, and drink were spread out that its rays might fall upon them. The remains of the candle were used in various ways to benefit man and beast. Sometimes a cross was branded with them upon the animals on Christmas morning; in Sweden the plough was smeared with the tallow, when used for the first time in spring. Or again the tallow was given to the fowls; and, lastly, in Denmark the ends were preserved and burnt in thundery weather to protect the house from lightning. There is an analogy here with the use of the Christmas log, and also of the candles of the Purification

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