



"Sinterklaas"

the Dutch children's friend

According to the calendar, the sixth of December is the special day of Saint Nicholas, bishop of Myra, in Asia Minor. This patron saint of "boys, young men and sailors" (in Dutch: "jongens, jonge mannen en matrozen") has according to legend performed many miracles; he probably lived in the fourth century A.D. and has often been identified with Nicholas, bishop of Pindara (situated close to Myra) who died in 564, the sixth century A.D. Thus it has been assumed that the details relevant to the bishop of Myra's life are, in fact, a summary of both namesakes.

Originally a popular saint in the Eastern Christian Church, during the Middle Ages his fame spread to the West (notably Italy where, in the year 1087 his relics were taken by South Italian seafarers) and finally, by means of trading contacts of the Hanseatic merchants, to the North as well. This explains how the Dutch city of Amsterdam came to adopt Saint Nicholas as its city patron in the fourteenth century.

There is no country in the world where the festival of "Saint Nicholas" is celebrated in quite the same way as in Holland and, to a certain degree, in Flanders, the Dutch speaking half of Belgium. One afternoon, late in November, when the European winter is already making its presence felt, "Sint Nicolaas" arrives from Spain by small steamer, usually a tug, right opposite the large "Sint Nicolaas Kerk" (Saint Nicholas Church) in Amsterdam. Clad in red mitre, red tabbard, white bib, with flowing full white beard and carrying his huge golden bishop's staff, this imposing figure rides his white mare through the main streets of Amsterdam, surrounded on foot by a small army of "Zwarte Pieten" ("Black Peters"), his Moorish

helpers who look somewhat like medieval knights in civilian dress. This is a fantastic spectacle which no girl or boy will want to miss! I can vividly recall, as though it happened yesterday, how, as a small boy, I was completely entranced by this very imposing scene; and, of course, I had no idea that "Sinterklaas" and his helpers were, in fact, well known Dutch actors all dressed up for the occasion.

In the days between his arrival and the evening of 5th December every child in the country (Christian, Jew or otherwise) makes sure to be a "good girl" or a "good boy". Sinterklaas is the friend of all children without distinction; the religious aspect is totally absent, and this is what makes the Dutch version of Saint Nicholas, bishop of Myra, so unique. At night, every boy and girl places one shoe or stocking under the chimney stack with or without some grass or carrots for the horse. And hopefully, the next morning on arising, the shoe or stocking is filled with a small present or coin thrown down the chimney by one of the "Black Peters" while "The Good Saint" passed over the rooftop on his white mare, during the night. An empty shoe or stocking could be a foreboding of Saint's anger with a "naughty" child!

The culmination of this period is the evening of the 5th December, commonly called "Sinterklaasavond" (St. Nicholas Eve), or sometimes called "Strooiavond" (Sprinkle Eve) when the whole family are gathered around the living room table in expectation for "De Sint" (The Saint) to call. Then, just as mum has gone to get something from the kitchen (our poor mum, she always misses out on exciting things!) there is a thunderous pounding on the front door. Everybody, the children in front, runs, no, rushes to see who is there. And, to everyone's surprise a whole box full of presents has been left at the door. Mother comes out of the kitchen and asks what all the commotion is about. She says, with a sheepish look on her face, that "she has not heard anything". How strange, even a turtle during its hibernation would have woken up from the noise!

So the evening is spent unwrapping presents, often accompanied by a little rhyme or personal message. Usually everyone gets his or her initial as a chocolate letter. There is something for everybody..... EXCEPT the "naughty" children and adults who are held in suspense until the last moment. In the end nobody has been forgotten. It is cold outside and the children as well as the adults are sipping hot cocoa and eating such delicacies as "speculaas" (a bastardisation of the words spice and Sinterklaas), "taai taai" and marzipan. Every now and then, when poor mum has just gone to the kitchen again, a black gloved hand throws "pepernoten" (pepper nuts, but they are not peppery at all, just nicely spiced) into the room, creating quite a scramble among the kids. It is all very exciting. The atmosphere at that moment is not very easy to describe in words. It is a true family affair which, of course, many a "Dutchie" in Australia never tends to forget, even if he or she lived to the ripe old age of one hundred years.

The next day is "Sint's" (The Saint's) Birthday. In reality it was Saint Nicholas' death day, but who cares about a triviality like that. The main thing is that children only have to go to school to collect even more presents and sit on Sinterklaas' lap. Now isn't that good! Except, of course, for that naughty boy who is chased by Peter and given a friendly spanking with "de roe" (the birch). But, once more, no child is forgotten. And after receiving their presents, all the children have the day off.

Only one mystery remains: I have, to this day, never been able to find out exactly WHEN and HOW Saint Nicholas returns to Spain every year. This is not legend, but reality. And it seems that no Dutch child has ever pondered over this important aspect of the celebration of Saint Nicholas; where does he and his helpers go after the 6th of December? But, then again, who cares? As long as he comes back every year without fail and with the presents! What would life be without some very special kind of celebration? And what would life be for the Dutch children without their beloved "Sinterklaas"?

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