

Twelve Passengers

The frost crackled sharply; the sky was starry; the air seemed frozen solid.

"Boom!"—a pot shattered against the door. "Pop!"—a shot greeted the New Year. It was New Year's Eve, and the clock had just struck twelve. "Tra-ta-ta-ra!" The mail arrived. At the city gates stopped the mail coach, which had brought twelve passengers; no more could fit inside; every seat was taken. "Hooray! Hooray!" rang out from the houses where people had gathered to celebrate the arrival of the New Year. Everyone rose from the table with full glasses in hand and began drinking to the coming of the New Year, saying: "Happy New Year, happy new fortune!"—"May you have a splendid wife!"—"May you have more money!"—"An end to old squabbles!"

Such were the wishes exchanged! People clinked glasses, while the coach that had brought the guests, the twelve passengers, at that very moment halted at the city gates.

Who were these gentlemen? They carried with them both passports and luggage, gifts for you and for me, for everyone in the city. Who then were these guests? What did they want here, and what had they brought with them?

"Good morning!" they said to the sentinel at the gate.

"Good morning!" he replied, "the clock has already struck twelve. Your name? Your rank?" asked the sentinel of the first man who climbed out of the coach.

"Look at the passport!" he answered. "I am—I!" He was a sturdy fellow, wearing a bear-fur coat and fur boots. "I am the one on whom so many people rely. Come to me in the morning, and I'll give you a tip! I toss money about, give presents, throw balls! Thirty-one balls! I cannot spend more nights than that. My ships, true enough, are frozen in, but my office is warm. I am a merchant; my name is January. I carry nothing but accounts."

Then the second man climbed out—a master of entertainments, a theater director, an organizer of masquerades and other merry diversions. In his luggage was a huge barrel.

"From this, during Shrovetide, we shall beat out something better than a cat!" (An old custom long observed in Denmark: a cat is placed inside a barrel, and people beat the barrel with all their might until finally the bottom is knocked out, and the cat, as if crazed, leaps out.—Translator's note.) he said. "I love to cheer others, and

myself too, by the way! For I have been allotted the shortest term! I am given only twenty-eight days; though sometimes an extra day is thrown in! But never mind! Hooray!"

"No shouting!" declared the sentinel.

"Me? I am Prince Carnival, though I travel under the name of February!"

The third man emerged; his appearance was most Lenten, yet he held his head high: for he was related to the Forty Martyrs and served as a weather prophet. Well, this is not a lucrative position, so he praised abstinence. In his buttonhole bloomed a bouquet of violets, only tiny-tiny ones!

"March, march!" shouted the fourth, pushing the third. "March, march! March to the guardhouse, where they're drinking punch! I can smell it."—Yet this was untrue: April cared for nothing but fooling around—he began with that. He looked like a carefree lad, seldom busy with affairs, mostly celebrating. His mood eternally played now rising, now falling, now falling, now rising. Rain and sunshine, moving out of the house, moving into the house (See note, vol. 1, p. 196).—"I also serve as a lodging commissioner, summoning people both to weddings and to funerals, ready both to laugh and to weep! In my suitcase I have summer clothes, but it would be foolish to wear them! Yes, here I am! For show I strut about in silk stockings and a muff!"

Then a lady stepped down from the coach.

"Miss May!" she introduced herself. She wore a light summer dress and overshoes; the dress was silk, beech-green, anemones in her hair; she smelled so strongly of wild jasmine that the sentinel could not endure it and sneezed.

"Bless you!" she said by way of greeting. How charming she was! And what a singer! Not a theatrical one, but a free, forest singer; nor one of those who sing in pleasure tents; no, she wandered through the fresh green forest and sang for her own delight. In her reticule lay "Wood Engravings" by Christian Winter (Christian Winter—one of the outstanding Danish lyric poets.)—they would rival in freshness the beech forest—and "Little Verses" by Richard (Christian Richard—the same.)—these fragrant as wild jasmine itself!

"Now comes a young lady!" cried voices from the coach. And a lady stepped out. Young, elegant, proud, lovely! She gave a feast on the longest day of the year, so that guests would have time enough to finish the numerous dishes. Her means allowed her to travel in her own carriage, but she had come in the coach along with everyone else, wishing to show that she was not at all haughty. But of course, she did not travel alone: she was accompanied by her younger brother July.

July—a stout fellow; dressed for summer, in a Panama hat. He carried with him a very small supply of traveling clothes: in such heat, why bother! He had taken with him only bathing drawers and a cap.

After him emerged Mother August, a wholesale fruit merchant, owner of numerous orchards, a farmer in a crinoline. She was stout and hot-blooded, attended to everything herself, even personally serving beer to the workers in the fields. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread," she would say. "So says the Bible! But in autumn—you are welcome! We shall hold a party outdoors, a feast!" She was a fine woman, a housekeeper beyond compare.

Following her came another man, a painter by profession. He intended to show the forests that leaves could change color, and into what wonderful hues, if he so wished! Let him take up his work, and the forests would become speckled with red, yellow, and brown leaves. The painter whistled like a black starling, and he was a master at his craft! A hop branch adorned his beer mug—he generally knew a thing or two about decorations. All his luggage consisted of a palette with paints.

The tenth passenger climbed out, a landowner. His thoughts concerned nothing but plowing, sowing, harvesting, and hunting pleasures. He carried a gun and a dog, and nuts rattled in his bag. Click! Click! He had heaps of luggage, including even an English plow. He said something about agriculture, but he was hardly heard because of the coughing and blowing of the next passenger—November.

What a cold he had, a terrible cold! Instead of a handkerchief, he had to equip himself with an entire bedsheet! And yet, according to him, he still had to accompany maidservants taking up new positions! Well, the chill would quickly pass once he began chopping firewood. And he certainly would do that—for he was the foreman of the woodcutters' guild. In the evenings he carved ice skates, knowing that this cheerful footwear would soon be needed.

The last passenger stepped out—Grandmother December, holding a warming pan in her hands. She shivered from the cold, but her eyes sparkled like stars. She carried in a flowerpot a little fir tree. "I have nurtured it, grown it for Christmas Eve! It will be large—from floor to ceiling, adorned with lit candles, gilded apples, and colorful nets filled with treats. The warming pan heats no worse than a stove; I shall take from my pocket a book of fairy tales and read aloud. All the children in the room will fall silent, but the dolls on the tree will come alive, the wax angel atop it will flutter its gilded wings, fly down, and kiss everyone in the room—both little ones and grown-ups, and even the poor children standing outside the doors, praising Christ and the Star of Bethlehem.

"Now the coach may depart!" said the sentinel. "The whole dozen is here! Let the next one approach."

"Let these twelve enter first!" said the duty captain. "One at a time! The passports remain with me. Each passport is issued for one month; upon expiration of the term, I shall make a note concerning each one's conduct. Step forward, Mr. January! Will you please enter?"

And he entered.

When the year ends, I shall tell you what these twelve passengers have brought to you, to me, and to everyone else. As yet I do not know this, nor do they themselves know—such extraordinary times have come upon us!