

Twelve by the Mail

Hans Christian Andersen

It was very frosty, starry clear weather, quiet and calm.

Bump! A pot was thrown against a door. Bang! Fireworks were shot off to welcome the new year, for it was New Year's Eve; and now the clock struck twelve!

Trateratra! There came the mail. The big mail coach stopped outside the gate to the town. It carried twelve people and couldn't hold more, for all the seats were taken.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" rang out in the houses, where people were celebrating New Year's Eve. They arose with full glasses and drank a toast to the new year.

"Health and good wishes for the new year!" they said. "A pretty little wife! Lots of money! An end to nonsense!"

Yes, these were their wishes for one another, and glasses were struck together, while the mail coach stopped in front of the town gate with the unknown guests, the twelve travelers.

What kind of people were they? They had passports and luggage with them; yes, even presents for you and me and for all the people in the town. Who were these strangers? What did they want, and what did they bring?

"Good morning!" they said to the sentry at the town gate.

"Good morning!" said he, as the clock had struck twelve. "Your name? Your profession?" asked the sentry when the first of them stepped out of the carriage.

"Look in the passport!" said the man. "I am myself!" And a splendid-looking fellow he was, too, dressed in a bearskin and fur boots. "I am the man on whom many people pin their hopes. Come to see me tomorrow, and I'll give you a real new year! I throw dollars and cents about, give presents, and, yes, I even give balls, thirty-one of them; that's all the nights I have to spare. My ships are frozen tight, but in my office it is warm. I am a merchant, and my name is *January*. I have only bills!"

Then came the second. He was a comedian, a theatrical director, the manager of masked balls, and all the amusements you could think of. His luggage consisted of a great barrel.

"We'll beat the cat out of the barrel at carnival time!" he said. "I'll amuse others, and myself, too, for I have the shortest time to live of the whole family; I get to be only twenty-eight days old. Yes, sometimes they throw in an extra day, but that doesn't make much difference. Hurrah!"

"You must not shout so loud!" said the sentry.

"Yes, I may!" said the man. "I am Prince Carnival, and traveling under the name of *February!*"

Now came the third. He looked very much like Fasting itself, but strutted proudly, for he was related to the "Forty Knights," and was a weather prophet. But that is hardly fattening employment, and for that reason he approved of Fasting. He had a cluster of violets in his buttonhole, but they were very small.

"March, March!" shouted the fourth, and pushed the third. "March, March! Into the guardroom; there's punch there! I can smell it!"

But it wasn't true; he only wanted to make an *April* fool of him; thus the fourth began his career in the town. He looked very jolly, did little work, and had lots of holidays.

"Good humor one day and bad the next!" he said. "Rain and sunshine. Moving out and

moving in. I am also moving-day commissioner; I am an undertaker. I can both laugh and cry. I have summer clothes in my trunk, but it would be very foolish to use them now. Here I am! When I dress up I wear silk stockings and carry a muff!"

Now a lady came out of the carriage. "Miss *May*," she called herself, and wore summer clothes and overshoes. She had on a beech-tree-green silk dress, and anemones in her hair, and she was so scented with wild thyme that the sentry had to sneeze.

"God bless you!" she said, and that was her greeting.

She was beautiful. And she was a singer; not of the theater, but a singer of the woodlands; not at county fairs; no, she roamed through the fresh green forest and sang there for her own entertainment. In her handbag she had a copy of Christian Winther's *Woodcuts*, which were like the beech-tree forest itself, and also *Little Poems* by Richardt, which were like the wild thyme.

"Now comes the mistress, the young mistress!" shouted those inside the carriage.

And then out came the lady, young and delicate, proud and pretty. You could easily see that she was born to be a lady of leisure. She gave a great feast on the longest day of the year, so that her guests might have time to eat the many dishes of food at her table. She could afford to ride in a carriage of her own, but still she traveled in the mail coach like the others, for she wanted to show she wasn't too proud. But she didn't travel alone; with her was her elder brother, *July*.

' He was a well-fed fellow, in attire, and with a Panama hat. He had but little baggage with him, because it was a nuisance in the heat. He had brought only his bathing cap and swimming trunks; that isn't much.

Now came the mother, Madam *August*, a wholesale fruit dealer, proprietor of many fish tanks, and landowner, wearing a great crinoline. She was fat and hot, and took an active part in everything; she herself even carried beer out to the workmen in the fields.

"In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread," she said. "That is written in the Bible. Afterward we can have the picnics and dances in the woods and the harvest festivals."

Such was the mother.

Now again came a man, a painter by profession, a master of colors, as the forest soon learned. The leaves had to change their colors - but how beautifully - whenever he wished it; soon the wood glowed with red, yellow, and brown. The painter whistled like the black starling bird, and was a brisk worker. He wound the brown-green hop plants around his beer jug, which decorated it beautifully; indeed, he had an eye for decorating. There he stood with his color pot, and that was all the luggage he had.

Now followed a land proprietor, who was thinking of the grain month, of the plowing and preparing of the land, and, yes, also a little of the pleasures of field sports. He had his dog and his gun, and he had nuts in his game bag. Crack, crack! He had an awful lot of baggage with him, and even an English plow. And he talked about farming, but you couldn't hear much of what he said, because of the coughing and gasping.

It was *November* coming. He had a cold, such a violent cold that he used a bed sheet instead of a handkerchief; and yet he had to accompany the servant girls and initiate them into their winter service, he said; but his cold would go when he went out woodcutting, which he had to do, because he was master sawyer for the firewood guild. His evenings he spent cutting soles for skates, knowing that in a few weeks there would be good use for these amusing shoes.

Now came the last passenger, a little old mother, with her firepot. She was cold, but her eyes sparkled like two bright stars. She carried a flowerpot with a little fir tree growing in it.

"I shall guard and nurse this tree, so that it may grow large by Christmas Eve and reach from the ground right up to the ceiling, and be covered with lighted candles, golden apples, and little cut-out paper decorations. This fire-kettle warms like a Stove. I take the storybook from my pocket and read aloud, so that all the children in the room become quiet. But the dolls on the tree come to life, and the little wax angel on top of the tree shakes its golden tinsel wings, flies down from the green top, and kisses in the room, yes, the poor children, too, who stand outside and sing the Christmas carol about the star of Bethlehem."

"And now the coach can drive again," said the sentry. "We have the twelve. Let another coach drive up!"

"First let the twelve come inside," said the Captain of the Guard, "one at a time. I'll keep the passports. Each is good for a month; when that has passed, I'll write a report of their behavior on each passport. Be so good, Mr. January; please step inside."

And in he went.

When a year has passed, I shall be able to tell you what the twelve have brought you, me, and all of us. I don't know it now, and they probably don't know it themselves, for these are strange times we live in.