

DECEMBER 6 WIDELY OBSERVED IN EUROPE AS ST. NICHOLAS DAY

(By Ethel-Jane W. Bunting)
December 6 is St. Nicholas Day. To the children of many parts of Europe and Vienna in particular, it is as important a day as Christmas is to us.
The night of the 5th, St. Nicholas visits each good child and leaves a basket of sweets and cookies outside the window or door. Bad children are visited by a semipagan, semi-religious creature called "Krampus" who in many ways resembles the

Devil as we know him and whose visiting card is a bunch of supple switches. For several days before the 6th, hawkers stand on the street corners selling bundles of switches, many of which have been dipped in silver paint and tied with red paper ribbon.
Before the war it was possible to purchase highly elaborate cookies and candles in the shape of St. Nicholas and Krampus, and baskets made of cookies dough iced and decorated with colored paper pictures. But last year—1946—(and we can be sure that 1947 will be no better) the delectable baskets, like everything else in Vienna, were only samples, exhibited in the larger delicatessen windows. However, there was

a small sign beneath various items of cakes and candies listing the ingredients necessary for each item. With the actual sugar, butter and flour, purchased previously on the black market, and a goodly number of shillings besides one could "order" the desired pastries, but in a crepe paper basket only!

"Krampus" Night
The evening of the 5th is "Krampus" night. Somewhat resembling our Halloween in spirit, children dress up and ring door bells, chasing whoever answers the door and generally try to scare rather than actually destroy property. Although Krampus' costume can be anything dark worn with a terrifying mask—he invariably carries switches and a clanking chain.

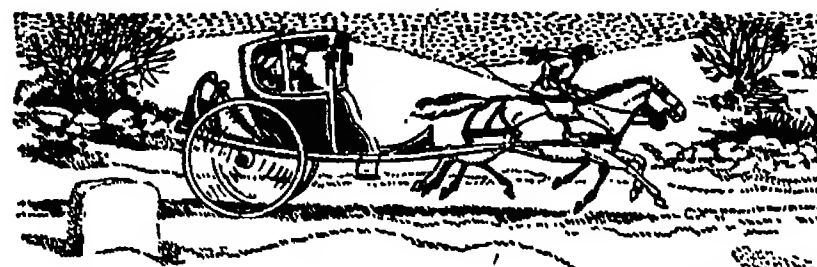
St. Nicholas is always dressed as the saint with stole and mitre and crook, and his costume varies only in quality and color. He usually makes his public appearance at a "party" on or about the 5th or 6th, and, depending on family tradition, Krampus trails his chains along in his shadow.

The children gather in the living room very soberly and quiet. When they are all there, a bell is heard in the dining room or hall, and the door opens and in comes St. Nicholas, blessing the children as he enters and they in turn making their manners. Krampus plays the part of the mischievous annoyance. He walks be-

hind St. Nicholas taking grotesque positions—his mask is already beyond improvement in grotesqueness. He switches the air and any child within range, he shakes his finger threateningly and even pinches when he gets a chance.

Prayer Book in Hand
St. Nicholas with prayer book in hand and well stocked with current sins of all present, approaches a child and says: "Greta, you have not remembered to help Mutil with the baby, nor did you share your candy with Gari." Poor Greta, overwhelmed, admits her faults and promises not to be wicked again. For penance St. Nicholas makes her recite a prayer or a verse, hands her a little bag of sweets (since the war is over the bag more often than not is filled with nuts and an apple) and goes on to the next child. When each child has been given his bag, St. Nicholas often gives a short "lecture" on the virtues of being good.

Through it all, Krampus keeps up his horseplay until finally St. Nicholas speaks gruffly to him and he cowers in a corner, much in the same manner as the Spirit of Goodness wins out over the Devil in the Miracle plays. Giving his blessings the saint departs as he came, and the last one hears of him is the tinkling of his little bell. The minute the door is closed, bedlam reigns among the children who open their bags and start stuffing the contents. Refreshments are served and then games are played.



Merry Christmas
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