

# **Knickerbocker Hall; or, The Origin of the Baker's Dozen**

James Kirke Paulding

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Little Brom Boomptie, or Boss Boomptie, as he was commonly called by his apprentices and neighbors, was the first man that ever baked new-year cakes in the good city of New-Amsterdam. It is generally supposed that he was the inventor of those excellent and respectable articles. However this may be, he lived and prospered in the little Dutch house in William-street, called, time out of mind, Knickerbocker Hall, just at the outskirts of the good town of New-Amsterdam.

Boomptie was a fat comfortable creature, with a capital pair of old-fashioned legs; a full, round, good-natured face; a corporation like unto one of his plump loaves; and as much honesty as a Turkish baker, who lives in the fear of having his ears nailed to his own door for retailing bad bread. He wore a low-crowned, broad-brimmed beaver; a gray bearskin cloth coat, waistcoat, and breeches, and gray woollen stockings, summer and winter, all the year round. The only language he spoke, understood, or had the least respect for, was Dutch and the only books he ever read or owned, were a Dutch Bible, with silver clasps and hinges, and a Dutch history of the Duke of Alva's bloody wars in the low countries. Boss Boomptie was a pious man, of simple habits and simple character; a believer in "demonology and witchcraft," and as much afraid of *spooks* as the mother that bred him. It ran in the family to be bewitched, and for three generations the Boompties had been very much pestered with supernatural visitations. But for all this they continued to prosper in the world, insomuch that Boss Boomptie daily added a piece of wampum or two to his strong box. He was blessed with a good wife, who saved the very parings of her nails, and three plump boys, after whom he modelled his gingerbread babies, and who were every Sunday zealously instructed never to pass a pin without picking it up and bringing it home to their mother.

It was new-year's eve, in the year 1655, and the good city of New-Amsterdam, then under the special patronage of the blessed St. Nicholas, was as jovial and wanton as hot spiced rum, and long abstinence from fun and frolic, could make it. It is worth while to live soberly and mind our business all the rest of the year, if it be only to enjoy the holidays at the end with a true zest. St. Nicholas thrice blessed soul! was riding up one chimney and down another, like a locomotive engine, in his little one-horse wagon, distributing cakes to the good boys, and whips to the bad ones; and the laugh of the good city, which had been pent up all the year, now burst forth with an explosion that echoed even unto Breuckelen and Communipaw.

Boss Boomptie, who never forgot the main chance, and knew from experience that new year's eve was a shrewd time for selling cakes, joined profit and pleasure on this occasion. He was one minute in his shop, dealing out cakes to his customers, and the next laughing, and tipping, and jiggling, and frisking it with his wife and children in the little back room, the door of which had a pane of glass that commanded a free view of the shop. Nobody, that is, no genuine disciple of jolly St. Nicholas, ever went to bed on new-year's eve. The Dutch are eminently a sober discreet folk; but somehow or other, no people frolick so like the very dickens when they are once let loose, as your very sober and discreet bodies.

By twelve o'clock the spicy beverage, sacred to holidays at that time, began to mount up into Boss Boomptie's head, and he was vociferating a Dutch ditty in praise of St. Nicholas with marvellous discordance, when just as

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the old clock in one corner of the room struck the hour that ushers in the new-year, a loud knock was heard on the counter, which roused the dormant spirit of trade within his bosom. He went into the shop, where he found a little ugly old thing of a woman, with a sharp chin, resting on a crooked black stick, which had been burnt in the fire and then polished; two high sharp cheek-bones; two sharp black eyes; skinny lips, and a most diabolical pair of leather spectacles on a nose ten times sharper than her chin.

"I want a dozen new-year cookies," screamed she, in a voice sharper than her nose.

"Vel, den, you needn't speak so loud," replied Boss Boomptie, whose ear being just then attuned to the melody of his own song, was somewhat out-raged by this shrill salutation.

"I want a dozen new-year cookies," screamed she again, ten times louder and shriller than ever.

"Duyvel I ant teaf den," grumbled the worthy man, as he proceeded to count out the cakes, which the other very deliberately counted after him.

"I want a dozen," screamed the little woman; "here is only twelve."

"Vel den, and what the duyvel is twelf put a dozen?" said Boomptie.

"I tell you I want one more," screamed she in a voice that roused Mrs. Boomptie in the back room, who came and peeped through the pane of glass, as she often did when she heard the boss talking to the ladies.

Boss Boomptie waxed wroth, for he had a reasonable quantity of hot spiced rum in his noddle, which predisposed a man to valor.

"Vel den," said he, "you may co to de duyvel and get anoder, for you won't get it here."

Boomptie was not a stingy man; on the contrary, he was very generous to the pretty young damsels who came to buy cakes, and often gave two or three extra for a smack, which made Mrs. Boomptie peevish sometimes, and caused her to watch at the little pane of glass when she ought to have been minding her business like an honest woman.

But this old hag was as ugly as sin, and the little baker never in his whole life could find it in his heart to be generous to an ugly woman, old or young.

"In my country they always give thirteen to the dozen," screamed the ugly old woman in the leather spectacles.

"And where de duyvel is your gountry?" asked Boomptie.

"It is nobody's business," screeched the old woman. "But will you give me another cake, once for all?"

"Not if it would save me and all my chineration from peing pewitched and pedemonologized time out of mind," cried he in a great passion.

What put it into his head to talk in this way I don't know; but he might better have held his tongue. The old woman gave him three stivers for his cakes, and went away, grumbling something about "living to repent it," which Boss Boomptie didn't understand or care a fig about. He was chock full of Dutch courage, and defied all the ugly old women in Christendom. He put his three stivers in the till and shut up his shop, determined to enjoy the rest of the night without further molestation.

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While he was sitting smoking his pipe, and now and then sipping his beverage, all at once he heard a terrible jingling of money in his shop, whereupon he thought some local caitiff was busy with his little till. Accordingly, priming himself with another reinforcement of Dutch courage, he took a pine knot, for he was too economical to burn candles at that late hour, and proceeded to investigate. His money was all safe, and the till appeared not to have been disturbed.

"Duyvel," quoth the little baker man, "I pelieve mine *vrouw* and I have bote cot a zinging in our heads."

He had hardly turned his back when the same jingling began again, so much to the surprise of Boss Boomptie, that had it not been for his invincible Dutch courage, he would, as it were, have been a little frightened. But he was not in the least; and again went and unlocked the till, when what was his astonishment to see the three diabolical stivers, received from the old woman, dancing and kicking up a dust among the coppers and wampum, with wonderful agility!

"Haggins Van Swoschagin!" exclaimed he, sorely perplexed, "de old duyvel has cot into dat old sinner's stivers, I tink." He had a great mind to throw them away, but he thought it a pity to waste so much money; so he kept them locked up all night, enjoining them to good behavior, with a design to spend them next day in another jollification. But the next day they were gone, and so was the broomstick with which it was the custom to sweep out the shop every morning. Some of the neighbors coming home late the night before, on being informed of the "abduction" of the broomstick, deposed and said, that they had seen an old woman, riding through the air upon just such another, right over the top of the little bake-house; whereat Boss Boomptie, putting these odds and ends together, did tremble in his heart, and he wished to himself that he had given the ugly old woman thirteen to the dozen.

Nothing particular came to pass the next day, except that now and then the little Boompties complained of having pins stuck in their backs, and that their cookies were snatched away by some one unknown. On examination it was found that no marks of the pins were to be seen; and as to the cookies, the old black woman of the kitchen declared she saw an invisible hand, just as one of the children lost his commodity.

"Den I am pewitched, sure enough!" cried Boomptie, in despair; for he had too much of "demonology and witchcraft" in the family not to know when he saw them, just as well as he did his own face in the Collect.

On the second day of the year, the 'prentice boys all returned to their business, and Boomptie once more solaced himself with the baking of the staff of life. The reader must know that it is the custom of bakers to knead a great batch at a time, in a mighty bread-tray, into which they throw two or three little apprentice-boys to paddle about, like ducks in a mill-pond, whereby it was speedily amalgamated, and set to rising in due time. When the little caitiffs began their gambols in this matter, they one and all stuck fast in the dough, as though it had been so much pitch, and to the utter dismay of honest Boomptie, behold, the whole batch rose up in a mighty mass, and the boys sticking fast on the top of it!

"Der dapperh ed updragon!" exclaimed little Boomptie, as he witnessed this catastrophe; "de duyvel ish got into de yeast dis time, I tink."

The bread continued to rise till it lifted the roof off the bake-house, with the little 'prentice-boys on the top, and the bread-tray following after. Boss Boomptie and his wife watched this wonderful rising of the bread in dismay, and in proof of the poor woman being bewitched, it was afterwards recollected that she uttered not a single word on this extraordinary occasion. The bread rose and rose, until it finally disappeared, boys and all, behind the Jersey hills. If such things had been known at that time, it would have been taken for a balloon; as it was, the people of Bergen and Communipaw thought it was a waterspout.

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Little Boss Boomptie was quite disconsolate at the loss of his bread and his 'prentice-boys, whom he expected never to see again. However, he was a stirring body, and set himself to work to prepare another batch, seeing his customers must be supplied in spite of "witchcraft or demonology." To guard against such another rebellious rising, he determined to go through the process down in the cellar, and turn his bread-tray upside down. The bread, instead of rising, began to sink into the earth so fast, that Boss Boomptie had just time to jump off before it entirely disappeared in the ground, which opened and shut just like a snuff-box.

"Myt de stamme van dam!" exclaimed he, out of breath, "my pread rises downwards dis time, I tink. My customers must go without to-day."

By and by his customers came for hot rolls and muffins; but some of them had gone up, and some down, as little Boss Boomptie related after the manner just described. What is very remarkable, nobody believed him; and doubtless if there had been any rival baker in New-Amsterdam, the boss would have lost all his customers. Among those that called on this occasion, was the ugly old woman with the sharp eyes, nose, chin, voice, and leather spectacles.

"I want a dozen new-year cookies!" screamed she as before.

"De geude Schiyver Torgouldigit beast!" muttered he, as he counted out the twelve cakes.

"I want one more!" screamed she.

"Den you may co to de duyvel and kit it, I say, for not anoder shall you have here, I tell you."

So the old woman took her twelve cakes, and went out, grumbling as before. All the time she staid, Boomptie's old dog, who followed him wherever he went, growled and whined, as it were, to himself, and seemed mightily relieved when she went away. That very night, as the little baker was going to see one of his old neighbors at the *Maiden's Valley*, then a little way out of town, walking, as he always did, with his hands behind him, every now and then he felt something as cold as death against them, which he could never account for, seeing there was not a soul with him but his old dog. Moreover, Mrs. Boomptie, having bought half a pound of tea at a grocery-store, and put it into her pocket, did feel a twitching and jerking of the paper of tea in her pocket every step she went. The faster she ran, the quicker and stronger was the twitching and jerking, so that when the good woman got home she was nigh fainting away. On her recovery she took courage, and pulled the tea out of her pocket, and laid it on the table, when, behold, it began to move by fits and starts, jumped off the table, hopped out of doors, all alone by itself, and jiggged away to the place from whence it came. The grocer brought it back again, but Madame Boomptie looked upon the whole as a judgment for her extravagance, in laying out so much money for tea, and refused to receive it again. The grocer assured her that the strange capers of the bundle were owing to his having forgot to cut the twine with which he had tied it; but the good woman looked upon this as an ingenious subterfuge, and would take nothing but her money. When the husband and wife came to compare notes, they both agreed they were certainly bewitched. Had there been any doubt of the matter, subsequent events would soon have put it to rest.

That very night Mrs. Boomptie was taken after a strange way. Sometimes she would laught about nothing, and then she would cry about nothing; then she would set to work and talk about nothing for a whole hour without stopping, in a language that nobody could understand; and then all at once her tongue would cleave to the roof of her mouth so that it was impossible to force it away. When this fit was over, she would get up and dance double-trouble, till she tired herself out, when she fell asleep, and waked up quite rational. It was particularly noticed, that when she talked loudest and fastest, her lips remained perfectly closed, and without motion, or her mouth wide open, so that the words seemed to come from down her throat. Her principal talk was railing against Dominie Laidlie, the good pastor of Garden-street church, whence every body concluded she was possessed by a devil. Sometimes she got hold of a pen, and though she had never learned to write, would scratch and scrawl

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certain mysterious and diabolical figures, that nobody could understand, and every body said must mean something.

As for little Boss Boompie he was worse off than his wife. He was haunted by an invisible hand, which played him all sorts of scurvy tricks. Standing one morning at his counter, talking to one of the neighbors, he received a great box on the ear, whereat being exceeding wroth, he returned it with such interest on the cheek of his neighbor, that he laid him flat on the floor. His friend hereupon took the law of him, and proved to the satisfaction of the court that he had both hands in his breeches pockets at the time Boss Boompie said he gave him the box on the ear. The magistrate, not being able to come at the truth of the matter, fined them each twenty-five guilders for the use of the dominie.

A dried codfish was one day thrown at his head, and the next minute his walking-stick fell to beating him, though nobody seemed to have hold of it. A chair danced about the room, and at last lighted on the dinner-table, and began to eat with such a good appetite, that had not the children snatched some of the dinner away, there would have been none left. The old cow one night jumped over the moon, and a pewter dish ran fairly off with a horn spoon, which seized a cat by the tail, and away they all went together, as merry as crickets. Sometimes, when Boss Boompie had money, or cakes, or perhaps a loaf of bread in his hand, instead of putting them in their proper places, he would throw them into the fire, in spite of his teeth, and then the invisible hand would beat him with a bag of flour, till he was as white as a miller. As for keeping his accounts, that was out of the question; whenever he sat himself down to write, his ink-horn was snatched away by the invisible hand, and by and by it would come tumbling down the chimney. Sometimes an old dish-cloth would be pinned to the skirt of his coat, and then a great diabolical laugh heard under the floor. At night he had a pretty time of it. His night-cap was torn off his head, his hair pulled out by handfuls, his face scratched, and his ears pinched as if with red hot pincers. If he went out in the yard at night, he was pelted with brickbats, sticks, stones, and all sorts of filthy missives; and if he staid at home, the ashes were blown upon his supper; and old shoes, instead of plates, were seen on the table. One of the frying-pans rang every night of itself for a whole hour, and a three-pronged fork stuck itself voluntarily into Boss Boompie's back, without hurting him in the least. But what astonished the neighbors more than all, the little man, all at once, took to speak in a barbarous and unknown jargon, which was afterwards found out to be English.

These matters frightened some of the neighbors, and scandalized others, until at length poor Boompie's shop was almost deserted. People were jealous of eating his bread, for fear of being bewitched. Nay, more than one little urchin complained grievously of horrible, out-of-the-way pains in the stomach, after eating two or three dozen of his new-year cookies.

Things went on in this way until Christmas-eve came round again, when Boss Boompie was sitting behind his counter, which was wont to be thronged with customers on this occasion, but was now quite deserted. While thinking on his present miserable state and future prospects, all of a sudden the little ugly old woman, with a sharp nose, sharp chin, sharp eyes, sharp voice, and leather spectacles, again stood before him, leaning on her crooked black cane.

"De Philistynen Onweetende!" exclaimed Boss Boompie, "what too you want now?"

"I want a dozen new-year cookies!" screamed the old creature.

The little man counted out twelve as before.

"I want one more!" screamed she, louder than ever.

"Opgeblazen tynelschildknap!" exclaimed the boss, in a rage; "den want will pe your master."

She offered him three stivers, which he indignantly rejected, saying,

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"I want none of your duyvel's stuyvers begone, Verschvikt Huysvrouw!"

The old woman went her way, mumbling and grumbling as usual.

"By Saint Johannes de Dooper," quoth Boss Boomptie, "put she's a peauty!"

That night, and all the week after, the brickbats flew about Knickerbocker Hall like hail, insomuch that Boss Boomptie marvelled where they all came from, until one morning, after a terrible shower of bricks, he found, to his great grief and dismay, that his oven had disappeared; next went the top of his chimney; and when that was gone, these diabolical sinners began at the extreme point of the gable-end, and so went on picking at the two edges downwards, until they looked just like the teeth of a saw, as may be still seen by people curious enough to look at the building.

"Gesprengkelde! Gespikkelde! on Gepleckteeve!" cried Boss Boomptie, "put it's too pad to have my prains peat out wid my own brickpats."

About the same time a sober respectable cat, that for years had done nothing but sit purring in the chimney-corner, all at once got the duyvel in her, and after scratching the poor man half to death, jumped out of the chimney and disappeared. A Whitehall boatman afterwards saw her in Buttermilk-channel, with nothing but the tail left, swimming against the tide as easy as kiss your hand. Poor Mrs. Boomptie had no peace of her life, what with pinchings, stickings of needles, and talking without opening her mouth. But the climax of the malice of the demon which beset her was in at last tying up her tongue, so that she could not speak at all, but did nothing but sit crying and wringing her hands in the chimney-corner.

These carryings on brought round new-year's eve again, when Boss Boomptie thought he would have a frolic, "in spite of the duyvel," as he said, which saying was, somehow or other, afterwards applied to the creek at Kingsbridge. So he commanded his wife to prepare him a swingeing mug of hot spiced rum, to keep up his courage against the assaults of brickbats. But what was the dismay of the little man when he found that every time he put the beverage to his lips he received a great box on the ear, the mug was snatched away by the invisible hand, and every single drop drunk out of it before it came to Boss Boomptie's turn. Then, as if it was an excellent joke, he heard a most diabolical laugh down in the cellar.

"Saint Nicholas and Saint Johannes de Dooper!" exclaimed the little man in despair. This was attacking him in the very intrenchments of his heart. It was worse than the brickbats.

"Saint Nicholas! Saint Nicholas! what will become of me what sal Ich doon, mynheer?"

Scarcely had he uttered this pathetic appeal, when there was a sound of horses' hoofs in the chimney, and presently a little wagon, drawn by a little, fat, gray 'Sopus pony, came trundling into the room, loaded with all sorts of knick-knacks. It was driven by a jolly, fat, little rogue of a fellow, with a round sparkling eye, and a mouth which would certainly have been laughing had it not been for a glorious Meerschaum pipe, which would have chanced to fall out in that case. The little rascal had on a three-corner cocked hat, decked with gold lace; a blue Dutch sort of a short pea-jacket, red waistcoat, breeks of the same color, yellow stockings, and honest thick-soled shoes, ornamented with a pair of skates. Altogether he was a queer figure but there was something so irresistibly jolly and good-natured in his face, that Boss Boomptie knew him for the good Saint Nicholas as soon as he saw him.

"Orange Boven!" cried the good saint, pulling off his cocked hat, and making a low bow to Mrs. Boomptie, who sat tongue-tied in the chimney-corner.



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"Wonderdadige Geboote!" said Boss Boompie, speaking for his wife, which made the good woman very angry, that he should take the words out of her mouth.

"You called on St. Nicholas. Here am I," quoth the jolly little saint. "In one word for I am a saint of few words, and have my hands full of business to-night in one word, tell me what you want."

"I am pewitched," quoth Boss Boompie. "The duyvel is in me, my house, my wife, my new-year cookies, and my children. What shall I do?"

"When you count a dozen, you must count thirteen," answered the wagon-driver, at the same time cracking his whip, and clattering up the chimney, more like a little duyvel than a little saint.

"Der dapperhéed updragon!" muttered Boss Boompie. "When you count a dozen, you must count dirteen! Twerndertigduysend destrooper-gender! I never heard of such counting. By Saint Johannes de Dooper, but Saint Nicholas is a great blockhead!"

Just as he uttered this blasphemy against the excellent Saint Nicholas, he saw through the pane of glass, in the door leading from the spare room to the shop, the little ugly old woman, with the sharp eyes, sharp nose, sharp chin, sharp voice, and leather spectacles, alighting from a broomstick at the street-door.

"Dere is the duyvel's kint come again," quoth he, in one of his cross humors, which was aggravated by his getting just then a great box on the ear from the invisible hand. However, he went grumbling into the shop, for it was part of his religion never to neglect a customer, let the occasion be what it might.

"I want a dozen new-year cookies," screamed the old beauty, as usual, and as usual Boss Boompie counted out twelve.

"I want another one," screamed she still louder.

"Ah hah!" thought Boss Boompie, doubtless inspired by the jolly little caitiff, Saint Nicholas. "Ah hah! In opperhoofd en Bevelheffer when you count twelf, you must count dirteen. Hah! hah! ho! ho! ho!" And he counted out the thirteenth cookie like a brave fellow.

The old woman made him a low courtesy, and laughed till she might have shown her teeth, if she had any.

"Friend Boompie," said she, in a voice exhibiting the perfection of a nicely modulated scream "friend Boompie, I love such generous little fellows as you, in my heart. I salute you," and she advanced to kiss him. Boss Boompie did not at all like the proposition; but, doubtless, inspired by St. Nicholas, he submitted with indescribable grace.

At that moment, an explosion was heard inside the little glass pane, and the voice of Mrs. Boompie crying out,

"You false-hearted villain! have I found out your tricks at last?"

"De Philistynér Onweetende!" cried Boss Boompie. "She's come to her speech at last!"

"The spell is broken!" screamed the old woman with the sharp eyes, nose, chin, and voice. "The spell is broken, and henceforward a dozen is thirteen, and thirteen is a dozen! There shall be thirteen new-year cookies to the dozen, as a type of the thirteen mighty states that are to arise out of the ruins of the government of Faderland!"

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Thereupon she took a new-year cake bearing the effigy of the blessed St. Nicholas, and caused Boss Boomptie to swear upon it, that for ever afterwards twelve should be thirteen, and thirteen should be twelve. After which she mounted her broomstick and disappeared, just as the little old Dutch clock struck twelve. From that time forward, the spell that hung over Knickerbocker Hall, was broken; and ever since it has been illustrious for baking the most glorious new-year cookies in our country. Every thing became as before: the little 'prentice boys returned, mounted an the batch of bread, and their adventures may, peradventure, be told some other time. Finally, from that day forward no baker of New-Amsterdam was ever bewitched, at least by an ugly old woman, and a baker's dozen has always been counted as thirteen.