

First published in Sweden by Bokförlaget Opal AB, Stockholm, under the title *Tomtemaskinen* © Sven Nordqvist, 1994

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Published by Hawthorn Press, Hawthorn House,
1 Lansdown Lane, Stroud, Gloucestershire, GL5 1BJ, UK
Tel: (01453) 757040 E-mail: info@hawthornpress.com
www.hawthornpress.com

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English Edition *Findus and the Christmas Tomte* © Hawthorn Press 2018

Cover illustration © Sven Nordqvist 1994

Text and illustrations © Sven Nordqvist 1994

Typesetting in Palatino Linotype by Winslade Graphics

Translated by Nathan Large

Printed by Livonia Print in Latvia 2018, 2019

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data applied for

ISBN 978-1-907359-93-4

Findus and the Christmas Tomte



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Hawthorn Press

Background Notes

In Sweden, where Findus and Pettson live, it is not Father Christmas who brings children their Christmas presents but the Yule Tomte (Jultomten). 'The Tomte', as Swedes call him, is shorter and thinner than Father Christmas and is sometimes seen riding on a goat. He prefers to deliver presents right through the front door. Instead of stealing into the house at night, he comes after dinner on Christmas Eve and asks directly, 'Are there any good children here?'

***Lucia Day**, 13 December, is a popular festival in Sweden. It honours a Sicilian saint whose name Lucia comes from the Latin word for light (lux). Lucia symbolises new hope, reminding Swedes at the darkest time of the year that the days will soon grow longer again. They celebrate with candlelit processions and singing, and a Lucia concert is broadcast live on national radio and TV. A typical celebration is led by a 'Lucia', someone dressed like the saint in a white gown and a red sash and wearing a crown of burning candles. Lucia or her companions may offer something to eat, usually gingerbread biscuits or saffron buns. Children who hold a procession for their parents often serve them breakfast.*

***Christopher Polhem** (also Polhammar) was a Swedish scientist, industrialist and inventor who lived from 1661 to 1751. He was a skilled engineer; in his life he repaired astronomical clocks and worked on mining technology, dams and sluices and canals. He was also an educator and set up a special school called Laboratorium Mechanicum to teach technology and engineering. It was here that he used the 'mechanical alphabet' that Pettson thinks about in this book. This was a series of simple wooden models that showed different types of mechanical movement, such as the transfer of one type of movement into another. Polhem thought that if you knew the mechanical alphabet, you could build any machine you wanted – much like knowledge of the ordinary alphabet allows you to form words and sentences.*



Chapter 1

Snow fell on Pettson's farm. It had fallen for the better part of a week and a white blanket now covered the old house, woodshed, outhouse, henhouse and workshop. The surrounding fields and meadows lay soft and white, and in the forest each branch was trimmed with snow. Everything looked just the way it should when Christmas is near.



Pettson and Findus the cat sat in the kitchen eating porridge for lunch. They watched the snowflakes dance about outside the window.

'Not long until Christmas, Findus,' said Pettson.

Findus was squinting between his thumb-claw and fore-claw and pretending to catch snowflakes.

'Really... How not long?' he said, pinching a snowflake.

'Twenty-four days.'

Findus jerked and stared at Pettson in horror.

'Twenty-four days! But that's ages! A week at least!'

'Not at all, it goes quickly. And there's plenty to do before then. Bake gingerbread, clean, get our Christmas tree and presents –'

'Why can't the Yule Tomte bring us presents?' Findus interrupted him.

'The Yule Tomte? What do you know about him?' Pettson looked with surprise at the cat. He had never spoken of the Yule Tomte before. Cats usually celebrate Christmas without one. But, as we all know, Findus was no ordinary cat.

'I heard that the Yule Tomte comes with Christmas presents. I think he could come to us as well,' said Findus.

'Yes, well. Perhaps he doesn't know we are here,' said Pettson.

'Not know we are here?! But where else would we be!' Findus said, astounded. 'Can't you tell him about us?'

Pettson chewed his porridge to give himself time to think. By all means Findus could believe that the Yule Tomte might come. But he was reluctant to promise too much.

'Hmm... perhaps...' he said at length. 'It's just that contacting him is a bit touch and go. No one knows where he lives. But there's a trick that used to work when I was little. Not always, mind. You never know with the Yule Tomte.'

'Have you been little?' Findus eyed the old man curiously.

'Why certainly,' said Pettson. 'Everyone has.'

'Did you have a beard then too?'

'Of course I did. I was just the same, only smaller.'



'How small were you?'

'Let's see... Half a metre or so. Then a whole one...'

Findus giggled, then asked again, 'But what did you do with the Yule Tomte?'

'Right, yes. You list the presents you'd like on a piece of paper, then put it in a snowball,' Pettson explained. 'In the evening you make a snow

lantern in the yard and put the snowball with the list on top. The next morning, if the lantern has collapsed you can be fairly sure the Yule Tomte has taken your list, and so maybe he will come at Christmas.'

Findus bounced excitedly. 'Let's do it!'

All Findus could think to wish for was another ski. Pettson meant to make a pair for him last winter, but he only finished one of them. Then other things got in the way, and come spring and summer the skis were forgotten. But Findus thought Pettson could make the second ski himself. From the Yule Tomte he wanted a surprise. Pettson wrote 'Surprise'.



'And I want him to come to us. Write that as well,' said Findus.

Pettson wrote, 'The Yule Tomte to come at Christmas.'

'There,' he said. 'We'll put it in a snow lantern – when you've finished your porridge.'

'I... saved it for the hens,' said Findus. 'They love lumpy cold porridge. Let's go make the lantern!'



They built it outside the kitchen window so they could see it from the table. Findus put the last snowball in place. In it was his wish list.

'Now we wait until dark before lighting it. The candle won't last otherwise,' said Pettson.

'Won't the Yule Tomte come before then?' wondered Findus.

'No,' said Pettson. 'We need to light it first. And it must be dark. He doesn't like to be seen without good reason.'

For a little cat like Findus, waiting for darkness to come is very hard work. They fetched firewood and cleared snow, yet for all the time this took it was still daylight. Once they were back inside, Findus asked what time it got dark.

'At three – four o'clock.'

'When's three – four o'clock?'

'Not for hours. Just keep an eye on the clock.'

Findus went into the front room and looked at the cuckoo clock on the wall. He sat there for a long time.

'Pettson! It's no use. No matter how much I watch the clock it won't get dark.'

Pettson came in and looked at the clock. It had stopped.

He wound it up and turned the minute hand. Each time the hand pointed straight up he had to stop and wait for the cuckoo to jump out and sing. After much cuckooing the clock was set to half past one.

'When the long hand points straight up and the little hand points at the four, it's four o'clock. It should be dark then,' said Pettson. 'Now go and do something else. A watched pot never boils.'

Findus practised hopping backwards along the settee. Now and then he would look out of the window to see if it was dark yet. Then he would look at the clock again. So slow! he thought. It hardly moved at all.

Finally he climbed on a chair and turned the minute hand. The cuckoo jumped out and sang, first three and then four times. Findus ran to the kitchen where Pettson sat reading the newspaper.

'It's four o'clock and dark now!' he called.

'Time to light the lantern!'

'Not so fast,' said Pettson, peering at the cat over his spectacles. 'I heard what you were up to in there. It's still light. It will be dark when we can no longer see the lantern.'

Findus perched on the table and looked outside. Dusk had started to gather, but not even



Findus could say it was dark yet.

Then again, it wasn't so very visible, that snow lantern, he thought, narrowing his eyes. I've seen other things much more clearly. His eyes were almost shut by now.

'Pettson, I can't see the lantern any more. We should probably light it.'

The old man looked up to see the cat sitting there as if asleep. He sighed and put down his newspaper.

'Time is really dragging today,' he said. 'I'll get the matches.'



Findus was back on the kitchen table, watching the snow lantern glimmering outside. It grew darker and darker, and soon all he could see was the bright room reflected in the windowpane. To see out he lay with his face close to the glass. He wanted to see the Yule Tomte.

'It may take a while,' said Pettson. 'I doubt he will come before bedtime. He's probably hiding behind a tree waiting for you to drop off. Then he'll sneak over.'

Findus pretended to sleep, keeping his eyes open just a crack. He saw the snow lantern's weak light. Everything else was dark. And without his noticing it, his eyes closed all the way and he fell asleep.



Chapter 2

'The Yule Tomte's coming! The Yule Tomte's coming! The snow lantern's collapsed and he's taken my list! I'm getting a surprise!'

Findus had rushed into the henhouse, wild with excitement. It was early morning and the hens were barely awake. They had no idea what the cat was talking about, only that it was something frightful. There was much flapping and cackling.