



Urs Faes

**The Twelve Days of Christmas**

(Original German title: Raunächte)

84 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 10 September 2018

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He placed one foot in front of the other, as if every step had to leave its impression in the snow that fell on this late afternoon, eddying flakes in the grey that settled on the porches and gables of the town, past which he had walked, strangely unaffected, from the station along the main street and towards the hill, disconcerted that the streets were no longer those along which he had once walked as a child. Only at the edge of the town did he stop and look for signs of anything that would have been familiar after the many years he had been away.

He gazed into the misty grey from which the shrouded trunks, the tops of the dark fir trees rose as if they were hung, suspended, from invisible clotheslines.

It wasn't until then that he heard the rippling of the water, found the railings of the bridge, the sign for the inn, the Schwarzer Adler – the black eagle – the gaping, empty space where the path branched off, up the valley, a narrow, steep path along the stream, where the willows sagged low under the weight of the snow. A sense of familiarity came over him like an old melody, as if something he had been missing all these years had suddenly returned.

Every Saturday they had taken this path, his father, mother, Sebastian, with the others from Schottenhöfen: the weekly visit to church. He had paused briefly in the parish church in Zell, remembering his mother, and Minna. She had loved the Madonna, had often, when the day became too much for her, simply taken off: 'I'm going to Our

Lady of the Chain, the walk will be a mini pilgrimage.’ She had recounted the legends surrounding the church, and the ones about Lene. After all these years, he heard Minna’s voice; there she was. Strange. But undeniable.

The strings of lights on Zell’s main street had reminded him that Christmas was coming, that he had some shopping to do.

He hadn’t brought anything. His brother didn’t like presents. He flinched briefly: that’s if they’d even see each other.

His hands clutched the straps of his rucksack, which wasn’t heavy – dry gloves, two bread rolls, his water bottle. It would be enough to get him as far as the inn, where his luggage, sent ahead so he could make his way through the landscape on foot, was waiting, an hour perhaps, even if he walked slowly, stopped from time to time to take in the hilly terrain sloping up the valley with its dark fir trees, which stood dense and silent, darkening the daylight, making a lullaby of the treetop murmurings. He wanted to walk slowly, towards the houses, the huts, the stables, the sheds that rose out of the snowy grey, to find his feet as the feeling of familiarity gradually returned, a feeling of coming home that he had long missed – ever since he’d left.

He liked the countryside, even if it was no more than a memory after so many years: the autumn days especially, when it was time to bring in the harvest, when the fruit of the apple trees gleamed, Boskoops, Jonagolds, the grapes on the hillsides were plump, the chestnuts bursting with fruit, the potato tops growing wild and yellow in the furrows and the sun plunging through the crowns of the trees already shedding their leaves, weaving its way through the bushes, making dust motes dance, haloing the forest’s larches and oaks as they cast off their needles and leaves. And he out in it with his brother, with Sebastian, long before the fight.

Together they had listened down into the ravine, which stretched away from the Grafenberg, to the ravens cawing in the silence, in the days when the fields lay fallow and bare, the beech leaves had turned a dark brown and the weeping willows coalesced into a sombre grove.

For a moment he hoped that in coming back he would find his way into this forsaken yet familiar landscape again. Would find his way home? The names themselves evoked a sense of familiarity, the Kuhhornkopf, thrusting out of the grey walls of mist,

the Hasenberg, the trails through the Hullert farm up to the Vogt auf Mühlstein inn, whose name concealed ancient secrets of its own.

Here, Sebastian and he had often sat, legs spread, on the bench with their father, in a companionable silence that never once suggested that one day they might argue, not even about Minna.

He stopped now, listened, followed the mist that swept through the branches and along the stream, down the valley. There they had built dams, launched boats and watched them drift, gnats buzzing at their heads, friendly dragonflies darting about the banks.

Was he looking for something that had been lost over the years? The idea of something that was no longer there, that memory couldn't furnish: something buried, frozen in terror, in rage?

They had often lost themselves in these bushes that lined the banks, in these boyhood hunting grounds that were theirs alone: he and Sebastian, out in the woods, with wooden axe and bow, hunting bears and buffalo, and sometimes scrapping and scuffling, but always devoted, loving brothers. Until the day everything changed.

For a moment, the Hinterhambach tavern emerged from the mist, which parted, faded to a haze and revealed the embankment, as if a stage curtain had lifted on the edge of the forest and down the hill to the Hullert farm and the small front yard of his childhood home: there it had lain, the doomed, dying animal.

A shiver came over him as he walked. His crimes were catching up with him now, weren't they, as if they had been committed yesterday and not forty years ago, as if everything would come back one day, even their actions from back then: an old photo, two boys, like twins, in a tight embrace, cheek to cheek, with bright, innocent eyes; and one smiling at the other, a laugh, brash and cheeky.

Again he stopped. All quiet. Even the babbling of the stream seemed to him part of the silence that felt not only unfamiliar to him, the city dweller he had become, but almost unnatural. And in this silence, the rustling of the fir trees from Reutegut and occasionally the eerie call of the nocturnal birds.

And the droning? Would he hear it again? These were the very days towards the end of the year when you noticed it about the house and the farm, a quiet droning at the

windows, a movement in the undergrowth and a brief whistle, joined by someone's exclamation of fright. His mother had always heard it, just before Christmas, and had feared it. These Twelve Nights, as she called them, they start with the droning, she said. And she put the wind chime on the balcony, some mistletoe and a sachet of Alpine leek and dried St John's wort. He had always loved the scent, especially when she burned herbs and let the smoke drift through the house, sweet, aromatic and pungent, a hint of thyme, of heather and valerian, scents of apple blossom and resin.

His mother's face had always been there, all those years. Year after year she had told of these nights, the Twelve, the 'Dodecameron', on which disorder threatened, peril provoked by dark powers, the abysses open: a disaster looming, on Saint Thomas' Night, on New Year's Eve, at Epiphany especially. So she put juniper berries in the incense burner, added fir and spruce needles; this calmed her, seemed to give her strength and security. No misfortune would befall her, her or her family.

The disaster that his mother had feared and had hoped her precautions would prevent came to pass. But not at the hands of demons. They had caused it, he and Sebastian, the brothers' quarrel at Hullert. Or had that already been a war? Wind chimes, mistletoe, St John's wort – nothing had helped prevent it, neither mugwort nor sweetgrass, not even the blazing Yule log in the yard.

He raised his head, listened. Nothing. The thin snow fell silently. No droning, no screech owl cry in the ravine, no creaking or cracking.

Back then, when he had left the valley forever, it had been silent, too, a Saturday, shortly after New Year; birds had circled silently – inky migrating flocks, dark droves of crows, now and then a blackbird, a tit. Only once, when he was already stumbling his way towards the city, had a scream rent the air.

It had travelled with him on the long journey across the sea, as did this last look at Hullert ridge with its tall fir tree and the smell of snow and longing that hung over the valley.

Would the fir tree still be there after all these years? And the old fountain at the entrance to the house? With the thin trickle from a leaking pipe, the rust eating its way back from the spout?

Did he belong there?

Where did he belong? Where should he have belonged? At the farm? With Minna?

Could he really go back to that distant world, retrace the steps of his childhood and his origins?

His brother? Would he come? Would they be able to speak again, move past the hatred that had traced a dark path through so many years, through his whole life?

## II

He locked the door behind him, pocketed the key, stopped in the corridor; he reached into his pockets. Did he have everything? Pen, pad? Wallet? And the bag for his brother?

Outside the window, snow was falling again in thick flakes, the early evening blurring contours with its encroaching gloaming, turning the trees to wizened figures, the stream to a taffeta-grey ribbon, the farmsteads to dusky distorting mirrors. The road was already invisible in the whitish grey darkness, bluish towards the forest, black down into the ravine. Childhood country, full of fragrances, full of stories, legends of the evil Holländer-Michel and of mice, which grew out of the gloom of the trees, the meadows and moors, the still, shallow pools and quarry ponds pale as the moon.

The farm below a faint, smudged blot. But the glimmering snow began to fill with images, the leafy greenness of a spring day, the wisteria in the garden, their mother in her headscarf, raking the vegetable patches, Sebastian and he on the bench, throwing their marbles. From the pilgrimage church, up the valley, the bells rang for Vespers and someone came down St James' Way, found refuge in the Chapel of the Candles, a pilgrim seeking retreat.

In the corridor, the dark wood of the walls gleamed; he shuffled slowly towards the window, almost bumping into one of the pairs of antlers that jutted out into the corridor; he turned to them nervously, frightened by the shadowed eyes that fixed him threateningly from the whites of the bones; he leapt aside.

At the window, he leaned his forehead against the glass. The shimmering stream wound its way through the willow trees. He had often sat there with Sebastian, sometimes they had climbed up to the Jägereckle.

And down there, the home farm – Hullertfluh – craned its pointed roof to the fir trees.

Now he heard the voices coming up from the restaurant, glasses clinking, chairs scraping: dinner. The landlord served up – cold meats and kirsch for people who wanted something simple, black pudding or knuckle of pork with brown bread for those with empty, rumbling stomachs, or the warming, comforting ‘Riebelesuppe’. The landlord was proud of his menu, which was probably why it hadn’t changed for decades. Someone could have risen from their grave and ordered without even looking at it.

The landlord had bemoaned the fact that there weren’t likely to be any out-of-town guests at this time of the year, but he stayed open for the locals, who were particularly happy to gather there now, especially the ones who lived on the farms in pairs or even alone, like Sebastian. There were quite a few of them. They would often come for a drink or a sandwich before Christmas, though Sebastian seldom or never did. But maybe this year. Not only the land is lonely in the snow.

He was still standing at the top of the stairs, waving amicably at the antlers now, noticing the bluish fuzz of the lint at the edges of the bones. He blew on them, coughed and stared out again at the flakes, which cloaked whatever had once had contour or colour.

He heard kitchen noises, a sizzling followed by a barrage of smells, of lard, onion steam, puréed vegetables, then shuffling steps, the creaking of the wooden floor.

You all right?

The landlord looked up at him questioningly. He raised his hand to greet him, walked slowly down the stairs, towards the open mouths. He shook the outstretched hands, heard the names, sat down at the table, drank to the day and the end of the year, to all the past that lay behind them.

Sebastian’s brother from Hullert, is it?

His brother, yes, Manfred.

Been gone a long time.

He nodded.

Over there.

The heavy-limbed man, who introduced himself as the farmer at Schattenhöfen, followed by ‘the name’s Lutz,’ wore a thick, rather baggy, felted cardigan, the elbows reinforced with leather patches. He surveyed him with piercing, keen eyes.

Sebastian’s brother from Hullertfluh then.

He took a swig from his drink.

Cold out, could get even colder, snow in the next few days too, Twelve Nights now.

For a moment, everyone looked out of the window into the white darkness.

The kobolds, emptying their sacks of flour.

Lutz laughed coarsely.

So you want to see your brother then?

He nodded at the man again.

He lives by himself over there, it's rare that you'd see him. Afraid of the Hambachers. Afraid of everyone.

We're afraid too.

The landlord said this a little too loudly, as if needing to stifle his anxiety. There's enough to be afraid of these days, nothing out there except disaster, war, carnage. The evil spirits are everywhere, even if you don't believe in them. And now another winter's closing in hard, you can't even get out into the woods.

The landlord drank deep.

No wonder the spirits are banging about in the ravine, Lutz said to the group. They're on the move again, the dead.

It's creaking up there, Lutz pointed to the ceiling, just like in the old days.

Oh, come on, nothing's creaking.

The landlord's tone was angry. It's just the winter making you bad-tempered, because you can't get out into your woods and you resent it.

They wreak their havoc during the Twelve Nights, Lutz interrupted defiantly, everyone knows that, they're milling up at the Mühlstein, that's why you can hear all that creaking and screeching.

Can't you hear the moaning out there? They're descending on us.

There was no moaning to be heard, only a door slamming and feet stamping.

Evening, gentlemen.

The newcomer nodded to the group, brushing the snow out of his thinning hair.

Evening, Sacristan, they grunted in chorus.

Landlord, it's time you slaughtered the pig and served it up for the Christmas dinner.

Lutz laughed again, a roar.

Enough already, Lutz, what a load of nonsense.

That's what his father had said, too, when his mother hung her bunches of herbs on the balcony at the winter solstice, tenderly concerned for the house and farm, for man and beast. She once used honey to lure a wasp out of the bath so she wouldn't have to hurt it, carried a slow-worm from the edge of the path into the safety of the grass.

He looked at the group that was becoming ever livelier, and louder, as the men drank deeper.

This is the women's time, growled Lutz, those goddesses Holla and Perchta are already making a racket.

It's nothing to do with processions of women or hordes of ghosts, just snow and a new year soon.

The landlord sounded annoyed, impatient.

And nothing for us men to do except drink till we're sick the next morning.

Cheers.

You drink like a fish anyway.

Give us another beer.

The diminutive figure of his mother flitted through the room with a pan of gleaming dried grasses and berries, ceremoniously, as had been the custom in her family in the upper Rensch Valley.

She had let nothing dissuade her from doing so, not even her father's derision. And she had told them what she knew about the Moospfaff in the wooded massif of the valley, the monk with his pointy beard and his buckled shoes, about the water spirits in the Mummelsee, who rose up from the lake when a thrown stone startled them.

Manfred had often watched his mother, amazed at how earnestly and faithfully she clung to her rituals, refusing to be deterred by anyone, even the priest. This was going too far for him, this burning of herbal concoctions, which she used to bathe the house with smoke, again and again until Epiphany, in the garden, too, where even in heavy snow she burned her herbs.

In the summer she would already be collecting plants, by the stream, in the meadows, in the forest, labelling, drying, juniper, St. John's wort, oregano and wild snapdragon. There was a care in it, a love for all creatures that he admired. 'Altvordern', forebears, that was the word that came to him when he thought about it, keeping the



connection to their ancestors, grandparents and parents, preserving something of them and their lives, and, in doing so, also something of oneself?

Following her forebears' example, she moved about the house and yard, tended her garden, her wisterias, her camellias, with an almost exaggerated care, as if they were living, breathing creatures. Perhaps, although she would never have called it that, it was a kind of worship, a silent gratitude for what she had learned from them.

Sebastian was like their mother; maybe it had been she who had wanted him on the farm, even though he had often behaved clumsily, awkwardly, had antagonised their father, infuriated him.

These brainless donkeys, what a fiasco. And we bow down to them instead of revolting and marching off to fight like we did in the Peasants' War.

Lutz clenched his fist.

How long are we going to keep on just rolling over and accepting things? Are we no better than our own cattle?

A fiasco, repeated Lutz, drank quickly and vehemently, swallowed, choked, his face turned red.

Everyone was silent.

Manfred closed his eyes.

His brother was alone, almost snowed in already. Should he go see and him instead of waiting here? Go over there, knock on the door? Or call him? Go out into this snowy night? St Thomas' Night? To talk of the ghosts in the fir grove and the ghosts of the past, who sometimes, especially since his illness, marched through his dreams, as if something in them remained unfinished, and kept coming back, knocking on the farmyard gate, demanding to be let in, their existence acknowledged; much of his life had remained unfinished. These were his Twelve Nights spirits. He didn't believe in the old ones, he believed in the ones who visited him at night, as terrifying as the hordes of the dead in the fields. And Minna? Was she one of them? She was always there. Cocooned in his memories, in his affection for her that had never died, in the years and decades that passed.

He wouldn't visit Minna's grave.

Lutz slammed his glass on the table.

Aren't you listening, landlord? It's creaking because the world is out of joint, the dead are on the march, the old spirits are stirring.

Ah come on, the dead? Not in this cold. They'd be shivering souls, deep-frozen. Winter's harsh, it's snowing, on your soul, too, Lutz.

The landlord clapped him on the shoulder.

Mock all you like, you'll all be sorry when the Moospfaff turns up and gives you lumbago or your livestock a disease.

I'd prefer if he sent us the mermaid from the Waldsee, we'd welcome her all right.

The sacristan said this indifferently.

It's the Twelve Nights, when the fates decide – salvation or damnation, yours, too, landlord, that's why the spirits are howling, you can hear them, and over there, at Sebastian's, at Hullertfluh farm, they're really moaning.

At Sebastian's?

Manfred looked up questioningly at Lutz.

The landlord hesitated.

Sebastian's gone a bit strange, had too much bad luck.

You call that bad luck?

Lutz's voice sounded mocking again.

Come on.

The landlord pointed to the dining room.

It's quieter back there.

Manfred followed him, Bettine brought their glasses, closed the door.

Cheers, the landlord said, hesitating again. They quarrelled, Lutz and Sebastian, something about a sick animal, apparently. Since then, Lutz blames everything that happens in the valley on Sebastian. Unfairly.

And what about Sebastian?

The landlord sighed briefly.

A long run of bad luck, as soon as your parents died. First the disease in the livestock, then the business with Minna, going into the hospice, no hope of a cure, and not long after... but you know that already. Enough said. Too much for someone. It'd be too much for us, too.

He paused.

Especially the business with Minna, that was more than someone like him could take.

Was a good wife to him, Minna, always by his side, at work, in the house, but through everything that plagued him, too, through everything that went wrong. A wife and a friend. And then suddenly gone. Silenced. First in the hospice, then under the ground. So unexpected. And then the argument with Lutz. Arguments with everyone. He was even at odds with the farm. With the weather and the animals.

And nobody there anymore.

Not even a child or grandchild to visit him. Friends? Does someone like that have friends? Someone who doesn't go to the pub, doesn't show his face at festivals, not even at the fair. No wonder someone like that gets sick, frail. Bones that can't bear the suffering anymore. Pain, in the lower back first, then in the hips, in the knee. So they limp, too, as if it wasn't enough already, walk slowly, shuffle.

Why?

The curse, he always said, it was his brother's curse.

How's that?

The landlord avoided his gaze, he swallowed.

He had cursed his brother. In anger.

Just a few words said in anger. Out of hurt.

Everyone says things like that. We all get angry sometimes. Nobody believes in curses, do they?

Sebastian does.

The landlord said it lightly, but with certainty.

Hard to believe, so much bad luck. One blow after another. But I'll tell you about that later. Or maybe he'll come and tell you himself.

Does he sometimes come, he looked at the landlord questioningly now, does he sometimes come up to the bar and sit with the other regulars? And what does he say about the farm, about the animals, about himself?

The landlord hesitated.

He doesn't say much, not much at all. Hardly talks when he comes, keeps quiet. Hardly eats. Some soup at most. And doesn't drink much. Moderation. He does everything in moderation. You'd want to shake him sometimes. A proper shake. To shake the indifference, or perhaps it's lethargy, out of him. Maybe that's what annoys Lutz, this

stubborn silence. Like nothing affected him. Must have affected him though, that business with Minna.

The landlord was silent for a moment.

What was it like before? Did he talk when he was a kid? What about later?

He looked at the landlord.

He was a quiet child, but he'd say his piece, at home at the table, not talkative, but still. Private, their mother had said, Sebastian is very private.

He stopped.

What did he know about his brother? What had he been like with Minna? What had they talked about? Was theirs a wordless love? One that didn't need words, sustained by something that went beyond words?

Minna and Sebastian, were they actually lovers?

The landlord looked up, puzzled.

No one really knows. They never came to the bar together, the two of them. You'd see them working together, out in the fields, harvesting potatoes and turnips, or cutting wood. At the fair every now and then. But apart from that?

He stood up quickly.

Work's calling.

They stepped out into the corridor. The landlord disappeared into the kitchen. Manfred looked after him, pushed open the door to the bar, slipped into the fog, waved his hand through the smoke.

There they sat at the wide wooden table, Lutz, who was doing most of the talking, Bunzenbach from Schnaitberg, a farm near Nordrach nestled amongst bright pine trees, so the landlord had said; the sacristan from the pilgrimage church was still there, too, an austere, pastoral figure, in his shirt, clerical collar and waistcoat.

The landlady served up, a platter of scrambled eggs, the potato soup steamed in the pot, there was cheese and sausage, too.

Come and join us, there's plenty of room.

There was something of a rasp in Bunzenbach's voice, he waved as if his arm was an oar, giving him a somewhat frenzied appearance.

He sat down.

Lutz was up in arms about the milk prices, which were still lower than the cost price, nothing but losses.

We're left with no way to make a living, and now even the wood's running out, it's not looking good.

Manfred flinched.

Cheers.

The sacristan raised his glass.

Let's stay positive. Can't hurt. Cheers.