

# #340: NISSE



Image: Christmas postcard created by artist Christian Magnus, 1917. National Library of Norway, [www.nb.no](http://www.nb.no)



Christmas postcard from 1901. Artist unknown. National Library of Norway, [www.nb.no](http://www.nb.no)

One of Norway's most beloved characters, the nisse (plural nisser) is a mythical creature from Norwegian folklore. The nisse was a solitary, mischievous being who secretly protected the household or farmstead from evil and misfortune. This characterization of the nisse as a guardian grew out of the belief that he was the spirit of the first inhabitant of the farm.

Often depicted as a small, elderly man, the nisse typically is shown with a full beard, who is dressed in traditional farmer garb, consisting of a pull-over woolen tunic belted at the waist and knee breeches with stockings. He is usually wearing a knit cap in red or some other bright color. In some Norwegian folktales he has four fingers on each hand, and sometimes has pointed ears and eyes that reflect light in the dark, like those of a cat.

A protective spirit with a mischievous streak, the nisse was thought to reside in the pantry or the barn. Despite his small size, the nisse possessed great strength and had an enormous capacity for work. Usually he took responsibility for the care of the farm animals, with his most treasured animal being a horse. A favorite horse could be

identified because it was one that was especially healthy and well groomed, with its mane and tail braided.

For those farmers that did not treat their nisse with respect or who were lazy or inattentive, a variety of bad luck could befall their farm. Retributions ranged from small pranks to severe punishments like maiming or killing the livestock, or having the farmer suffer a severe or fatal accident. Nisse were thought to leave a farm when respect was lacking, dooming the farm to failure and reducing the farmer to poverty. On the other hand, a clean and orderly farm or house was an indication that the nisse was pleased with how he was being treated.



An illustration made by Gudmund Stenersen of an angry nisse stealing hay from a farmer. © BY-SA 3.0 ([license](#)), uploaded by Hom San ([Wikimedia Commons](#))

Nisse require little from the farmer for whom he worked. He demanded respect and trust of the farmer and a bowl of *rømmegrøt* with butter on top on Christmas Eve. If the nisse did not receive his payment or if the butter was not on top, he might leave the farm, engage in mischief like tying cows' tails together, turning objects upside down or breaking things, or do something more sinister. In an often retold story, a farmer put the butter underneath the porridge. When the nisse thought that the butter was missing, he became very angry and killed the farmer's best cow. Because he was hungry, the nisse ate the porridge anyway and found the butter on the bottom. Full of remorse, he searched local farms to



find an identical cow, and then switched the dead cow for the living one.

The modern nisse tends to be portrayed as much more good-natured and less harmful with his tricks than the traditional nisse. One type of nisse in particular, the *julenisse* (Christmas nisse), is portrayed as an older, good-natured, adult-sized man with a long white beard, wearing a red hat and suit. Considered to be the Norwegian equivalent of Santa Claus, images of the *julenisse* decorate many homes during the Christmas season. Unlike Santa Claus, he does not come down the chimney, but rather comes through the front door with his bag of presents, always asking the children of the household "*Er det noen snille barn her?*" (Are there any good children here?). Sometimes he is said to travel in a sleigh pulled by reindeer, but those reindeer don't fly. Instead of cookies, porridge and butter is traditionally set out for the *julenisse* to enjoy, as was done the years ago on the farm.