

# **The Baker's Dozen**

## **A Saint Nicholas Tale**

**Told by Aaron Shepard**

NARRATOR 1: In the Dutch colonial town later known as Albany, New York, there lived a baker, Van Amsterdam, who was as honest as he could be.

NARRATOR 4: Each morning, he checked and balanced his scales, and he took great care to give his customers *exactly* what they paid for—not more, and not less.

NARRATOR 2: Van Amsterdam's shop was always busy, because people trusted him, and because he was a good baker as well. And never was the shop busier than in the days before December 6, when the Dutch celebrate Saint Nicholas Day.

NARRATOR 3: At that time of year, people flocked to the baker's shop to buy his fine Saint Nicholas cookies.

NARRATOR 1: Made of gingerbread, iced in red and white, they looked just like Saint Nicholas as the Dutch know him—

NARRATOR 4: tall and thin, with a high, red bishop's cap, and a long, red bishop's cloak.

NARRATOR 2: One Saint Nicholas Day morning, the baker was just ready for business, when the door of his shop flew open.

NARRATOR 3: In walked an old woman, wrapped in a long black shawl.

WOMAN: I have come for a dozen of your Saint Nicholas cookies.

NARRATOR 1: Taking a tray, Van Amsterdam counted out twelve cookies. He started to wrap them, but the woman reached out and stopped him.

WOMAN: I asked for a dozen. You have given me only twelve.

BAKER: Madam, everyone knows that a dozen *is* twelve.

WOMAN: But *I* say a dozen is *thirteen*. Give me one more.

NARRATOR 4: Van Amsterdam was not a man to bear foolishness.

BAKER: Madam, my customers get *exactly* what they pay for—not more, and not less.

WOMAN: Then you may keep the cookies.

NARRATOR 2: She turned to go, but stopped at the door.

WOMAN: Van Amsterdam! However honest you may be, your heart is small and your fist is tight. *Fall again, mount again, learn how to count again!*

NARRATOR 3: Then she was gone.

NARRATOR 1: From that day, everything went wrong in Van Amsterdam's bakery.

NARRATOR 4: His bread rose too high or not at all.

NARRATOR 2: His pies were sour or too sweet.

NARRATOR 3: His cakes crumbled or were chewy.

NARRATOR 1: His cookies were burnt or doughy.

NARRATOR 4: His customers soon noticed the difference. Before long, most of them were going to other bakers.

BAKER: (*to himself*) That old woman has bewitched me. Is this how my honesty is rewarded?

NARRATOR 2: A year passed.

NARRATOR 3: The baker grew poorer and poorer.

NARRATOR 1: Since he sold little, he baked little, and his shelves were nearly bare. His last few customers slipped away.

NARRATOR 4: Finally, on the day before Saint Nicholas Day, not one customer came to Van Amsterdam's shop.

NARRATOR 2: At day's end, the baker sat alone, staring at his unsold Saint Nicholas cookies.

BAKER: I wish Saint Nicholas could help me now.

NARRATOR 3: Then he closed his shop and went sadly to bed.

NARRATOR 1: That night, the baker had a dream. He was a boy again, one in a crowd of happy children. And there in the midst of them was Saint Nicholas himself.

NARRATOR 4: The bishop's white horse stood beside him, its baskets filled with gifts. Nicholas pulled out one gift after another, and handed them to the children.

NARRATOR 2: But Van Amsterdam noticed something strange. No matter how many presents Nicholas passed out, there were always more to give.

NARRATOR 3: In fact, the more he took from the baskets, the more they seemed to hold.

NARRATOR 1: Then Nicholas handed a gift to Van Amsterdam. It was one of the baker's own Saint Nicholas cookies!

NARRATOR 4: Van Amsterdam looked up to thank him, but it was no longer Saint Nicholas standing there.

NARRATOR 2: Smiling down at him was the old woman with the long black shawl.

NARRATOR 3: Van Amsterdam awoke with a start. Moonlight shone through the half-closed shutters as he lay there, thinking.

BAKER: I always give my customers *exactly* what they pay for—not more, and not less. But why *not* give more?

NARRATOR 1: The next morning, Saint Nicholas Day, the baker rose early.

NARRATOR 4: He mixed his gingerbread dough and rolled it out.

NARRATOR 2: He cut the shapes and baked them.

NARRATOR 3: He iced them in red and white to look just like Saint Nicholas.

NARRATOR 1: And the cookies were as fine as any he had made.

NARRATOR 4: Van Amsterdam had just finished, when the door flew open. In walked the old woman with the long black shawl.

WOMAN: I have come for a dozen of your Saint Nicholas cookies.

NARRATOR 2: In great excitement, Van Amsterdam counted out twelve cookies—

NARRATOR 3: and one more.

BAKER: In this shop, from now on, a dozen is thirteen.

WOMAN: (*smiling*) You have learned to count well. You will surely be rewarded.

NARRATOR 1: She paid for the cookies and started out. But as the door swung shut, the baker's eyes seemed to play a trick on him.

NARRATOR 4: He thought he glimpsed the tail end of a long red cloak.

\* \* \*

NARRATOR 2: As the old woman foretold, Van Amsterdam *was* rewarded. When people heard he counted thirteen as a dozen, he had more customers than ever.

NARRATOR 3: In fact, Van Amsterdam grew so wealthy that the other bakers in town began doing the same.

NARRATOR 1: From there, the practice spread to other towns, and at last through all the American colonies.

NARRATOR 4: And this, they say, is how thirteen became the "baker's dozen"—

NARRATOR 2: a custom common for over a century,

NARRATOR 3: and alive in some places to this day.