

Dante Alighieri Society of Massachusetts

THE LEGEND OF THE BEFANA



La Befana is one of Italy's oldest and most celebrated legends. The origin of the tradition of La Befana is veiled in mystery and in all likelihood this poetic figure goes back to country legends of pre-Christian times. Tradition depicts her as a benevolent and curved old woman with a hooked nose and a pointed chin.

Each year on January 6, the children of Italy awaken in hopes that La Befana has made a visit to their house. Once she enters a house she leaves a lot of gifts and candies in the stockings of good children, reserving some coal (hard sugar with black food coloring) for bad children, who hopefully will learn a lesson for the following year. This is a significant day to Italians because it marks the end of the Christmas season and the day that the three Wise Men arrived at the manger of the Christ child.

As legend has it, the three Wise Men were in search of the Christ child when they decided to stop at a small house to ask for directions. Upon knocking, an old woman holding a broom opened the door slightly to see who was there. Standing at her doorstep were three colorfully dressed men who were in need of directions to find the Christ child. The old woman was unaware of who these three men were looking for and could not point them in the right direction. Prior to the three men leaving, they kindly asked the old woman to join them on their journey. She declined because she had much housework to do. After they left, she felt as though she had made a mistake and decided to go and catch up with the kind men. After many hours of searching she could not find them. Thinking of the opportunity she had missed, the old woman stopped every child to give them a small treat in hopes that one was the Christ child. Each year on the eve of the Epiphany she sets out looking for the baby Jesus. She stops at each child's house to leave those who were good treats in their stockings and those who were bad, a lump of coal.



*La Befana vien di notte con le scarpe tutte rotte
col capello alla romana: viva, viva la befana!*