

The Story of the Year

Hans Christian Andersen

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Intermediate

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It was far in January, and a terrible fall of snow was pelting down. The snow eddied through the streets and lanes; the window-panes seemed plastered with snow on the outside; snow plumped down in masses from the roofs: and a sudden hurry had seized on the people, for they ran, and flew, and fell into each others' arms, and as they clutched each other fast for a moment, they felt that they were safe at least for that length of time. Coaches and horses seemed frosted with sugar. The footmen stood with their backs against the carriages, so as to turn their faces from the wind. The foot passengers kept in the shelter of the carriages, which could only move slowly on in the deep snow; and when the storm at last abated, and a narrow path was swept clean alongside the houses, the people stood still in this path when they met, for none liked to take the first step aside into the deep snow to let the other pass him. Thus they stood silent and motionless, till, as if by tacit consent, each sacrificed one leg, and stepping aside, buried it in the deep snow-heap.

Towards evening it grew calm. The sky looked as if it had been swept, and had become more lofty and transparent. The stars looked as if they were quite new, and some of them were amazingly bright and pure. It froze so hard that the snow creaked, and the upper rind of snow might well have grown hard enough to bear the sparrows in the morning dawn. These little birds hopped up and down where the sweeping had been done; but they found very little food, and were not a little cold.

“Piep!” said one of them to another; “they call this a new year, and it is worse than the last! We might just as well have kept the old one. I’m dissatisfied, and I’ve a right to be so.”

“Yes; and the people ran about and fired off shots to celebrate the new year,” said a little shivering sparrow; “and they threw pans and pots against the doors, and were quite boisterous with joy, because the old year was gone. I was glad of it too, because I hoped we should have had warm days; but that has come to nothing—it freezes much harder than before. People have made a mistake in reckoning the time!”

“That they have!” a third put in, who was old, and had a white poll; “they’ve something they call the calendar—it’s an invention of their own—and everything is to be arranged according to that; but it won’t do. When spring comes, then the year begins, and I reckon according to that.”

“But when will spring come?” the others inquired.

“It will come when the stork comes back. But his movements are very uncertain, and here in town no one knows anything about it: in the country they are better informed. Shall we fly out there and wait? There, at any rate, we shall be nearer to spring.”

“Yes, that may be all very well,” observed one of the sparrows, who had been hopping about for a long time, chirping, without saying anything decided. “I’ve found a few comforts here in town, which I am afraid I should miss out in the country. Near this neighbourhood, in a courtyard, there lives a family of people, who have taken the very sensible notion of placing three or four flower-pots against the wall, with their mouths all turned inwards, and the bottom of each pointing outwards. In each flower-pot a hole has been cut, big enough for me to fly in and out at it. I and my husband have built a nest in one of those pots, and have brought up our young family there. The family of people of course made the whole arrangement that they might have the pleasure of seeing us, or else they would not have done it. To please themselves they also strew crumbs of bread; and so we have food, and are in a manner provided for. So I think my husband and I will stay where we are, although we are very dissatisfied—but we shall stay.”

“And we will fly into the country to see if spring is not coming!” And away they flew.

Out in the country it was hard winter, and the glass was a few degrees lower than in the town. The sharp winds

swept across the snow-covered fields. The farmer, muffled in warm mittens, sat in his sledge, and beat his arms across his breast to warm himself, and the whip lay across his knees. The horses ran till they smoked again. The snow creaked, and the sparrows hopped about in the ruts, and shivered, "Piep! when will spring come? it is very long in coming!"

"Very long," sounded from the next snow-covered hill, far over the field. It might be the echo which was heard; or perhaps the words were spoken by yonder wonderful old man, who sat in wind and weather high on the heap of snow. He was quite white, attired like a peasant in a coarse white coat of frieze; he had long white hair, and was quite pale, with big blue eyes.

"Who is that old man yonder?" asked the sparrows.

"I know who he is," quoth an old raven, who sat on the fence-rail, and was condescending enough to acknowledge that we are all like little birds in the sight of Heaven, and therefore was not above speaking to the sparrows, and giving them information. "I know who the old man is. It is Winter, the old man of last year. He is not dead, as the calendar says, but is guardian to little Prince Spring, who is to come. Yes, Winter bears sway here. Ugh! the cold makes you shiver, does it not, you little ones?"

"Yes. Did I not tell the truth?" said the smallest sparrow: "the calendar is only an invention of man, and is not arranged according to nature! They ought to leave these things to us, who are born cleverer than they."

And one week passed away, and two passed away. The frozen lake lay hard and stiff, looking like a sheet of lead, and damp icy mists lay brooding over the land; the great black crows flew about in long rows, but silently; and it seemed as if nature slept. Then a sunbeam glided along over the lake, and made it shine like burnished tin. The snowy covering on the field and on the hill did not glitter as it had done; but the white form, Winter himself, still sat there, his gaze fixed unswervingly upon the south. He did not notice that the snowy carpet seemed to sink as it were into the earth, and that here and there a little grass-green patch appeared, and that all these patches were crowded with sparrows.

"Kee-wit! kee-wit! Is spring coming now?"

"Spring!" The cry resounded over field and meadow, and through the black-brown woods, where the moss still glimmered in bright green upon the tree trunks; and from the south the first two storks came flying through

the air. On the back of each sat a pretty little child—one was a girl and the other a boy. They greeted the earth with a kiss, and wherever they set their feet, white flowers grew up from beneath the snow. Then they went hand in hand to the old ice man, Winter, clung to his breast embracing him, and in a moment they, and he, and all the region around were hidden in a thick damp mist, dark and heavy, that closed over all like a veil. Gradually the wind rose, and now it rushed roaring along, and drove away the mist with heavy blows, so that the sun shone warmly forth, and Winter himself vanished, and the beautiful children of Spring sat on the throne of the year.

“That’s what I call spring,” cried each of the sparrows. “Now we shall get our rights, and have amends for the stern winter.”

Wherever the two children turned, green buds burst forth on bushes and trees, the grass shot upwards, and the corn-fields turned green and became more and more lovely. And the little maiden strewed flowers all around. Her apron, which she held up before her, was always full of them; they seemed to spring up there, for her lap continued full, however zealously she strewed the blossoms around; and in her eagerness she scattered a snow of blossoms over apple trees and peach trees, so that they stood in full beauty before their green leaves had fairly come forth.

And she clapped her hands, and the boy clapped his, and then flocks of birds came flying up, nobody knew whence, and they all twittered and sang, “Spring has come.”

That was beautiful to behold. Many an old granny crept forth over the threshold into the sunshine, and tripped gleefully about, casting a glance at the yellow flowers which shone everywhere in the fields, just as they used to do when she was young. The world grew young again to her, and she said, “It is a blessed day out here to-day!”

The forest still wore its brown-green dress, made of buds; but the thyme was already there, fresh and fragrant; there were violets in plenty, anemones and primroses came forth, and there was sap and strength in every blade of grass. That was certainly a beautiful carpet on which no one could resist sitting down, and there accordingly the young spring pair sat hand in hand, and sang and smiled, and grew on.

A mild rain fell down upon them from the sky, but they did not notice it, for the rain-drops were mingled with their own tears of joy. They kissed each other, and were betrothed as people that should marry, and in the same

moment the verdure of the woods was unfolded, and when the sun rose, the forest stood there arrayed in green.

And hand in hand the betrothed pair wandered under the fresh pendent ocean of leaves, where the rays of the sun gleamed through the interstices in lovely, changing hues. What virgin purity, what refreshing balm in the delicate leaves! The brooks and streams rippled clearly and merrily among the green velvety rushes and over the coloured pebbles. All nature seemed to say, "There is plenty, and there shall be plenty always!" And the cuckoo sang and the lark carolled: it was a charming spring; but the willows had woolly gloves over their blossoms: they were desperately careful, and that is wearisome.

And days went by and weeks went by, and the heat came as it were whirling down. Hot waves of air came through the corn, that became yellower and yellower. The white water-lily of the north spread its great green leaves over the glassy mirror of the woodland lakes, and the fishes sought out the shady spots beneath; and at the sheltered side of the wood, where the sun shone down upon the walls of the farmhouse, warming the blooming roses, and the cherry trees, which hung full of juicy black berries, almost hot with the fierce beams, there sat the lovely wife of Summer, the same being whom we have seen as a child and as a bride; and her glance was fixed upon the black gathering clouds, which in wavy outlines—blue-black and heavy—were piling themselves up, like mountains, higher and higher.

They came from three sides, and growing like a petrified sea, they came swooping towards the forest, where every sound had been silenced as if by magic. Every breath of air was hushed, every bird was mute. There was a seriousness—a suspense throughout all nature; but in the highways and lanes, foot passengers, and riders, and men in carriages were hurrying on to get under shelter. Then suddenly there was a flashing of light, as if the sun were burst forth—flaming, burning, all-devouring!

And the darkness returned amid a rolling crash. The rain poured down in streams, and there was alternate darkness and blinding light; alternate silence and deafening clamour. The young, brown, feathery reeds on the moor moved to and fro in long waves, the twigs of the woods were hidden in a mist of waters, and still came darkness and light, and still silence and roaring followed one another; grass and corn lay beaten down and swamped, looking as though they could never raise themselves again. But soon the rain fell only in gentle drops, the sun peered through the clouds, the water-drops glittered like pearls on the leaves, the birds sang,

the fishes leaped up from the surface of the lake, the gnats danced in the sunshine, and yonder on the rock, in the salt, heaving sea water, sat Summer himself—a strong man with sturdy limbs and long dripping hair—there he sat, strengthened by the cool bath, in the warm sunshine. All nature round about was renewed, everything stood luxuriant, strong and beautiful; it was summer, warm, lovely summer.

And pleasant and sweet was the fragrance that streamed upwards from the rich clover-field, where the bees swarmed round the old ruined place of meeting: the bramble wound itself around the altar stone, which, washed by the rain, glittered in the sunshine; and thither flew the queen-bee with her swarm, and prepared wax and honey. Only Summer saw it, he and his strong wife; for them the altar table stood covered with the offerings of nature.

And the evening sky shone like gold, shone as no church dome can shine; and in the interval between the evening and the morning red, there was moonlight: it was summer.

And days went by, and weeks went by. The bright scythes of the reapers gleamed in the corn-fields; the branches of the apple trees bent down, heavy with red-and-yellow fruit. The hops smelt sweetly, hanging in large clusters; and under the hazel bushes where hung great bunches of nuts, rested a man and woman—Summer and his quiet consort.

“What wealth!” exclaimed the woman: “all around a blessing is diffused, everywhere the scene looks homelike and good; and yet—I know not why—I long for peace and rest—I know not how to express it. Now they are already ploughing again in the field. The people want to gain more and more. See, the storks flock together, and follow at a little distance behind the plough—the bird of Egypt that carried us through the air. Do you remember how we came as children to this land of the North? We brought with us flowers, and pleasant sunshine, and green to the woods; the wind has treated them roughly, and they have become dark and brown like the trees of the South, but they do not, like them, bear fruit.”

“Do you wish to see the golden fruit?” said the man: “then rejoice.” And he lifted his arm, and the leaves of the forest put on hues of red and gold, and beautiful tints spread over all the woodland. The rose bush gleamed with scarlet hips; the elder branches hung down with great heavy bunches of dark berries; the wild chestnuts fell ripe from their dark husks; and in the depths of the forests the violets bloomed for the second time.

But the Queen of the Year became more and more silent, and paler and paler. “It blows cold,” she said, “and night brings damp mists. I long for the land of my childhood.”

And she saw the storks fly away, one and all; and she stretched forth her hands towards them. She looked up at the nests, which stood empty. In one of them the long-stalked cornflower was growing; in another, the yellow mustard-seed, as if the nest were only there for its protection and comfort; and the sparrows were flying up into the storks’ nests.[47]

“Piep! where has the master gone? I suppose he can’t bear it when the wind blows, and that therefore he has left the country. I wish him a pleasant journey!”

The forest leaves became more and more yellow, leaf fell down upon leaf, and the stormy winds of autumn howled. The year was far advanced, and the Queen of the Year reclined upon the fallen yellow leaves, and looked with mild eyes at the gleaming star, and her husband stood by her. A gust swept through the leaves; they fell again in a shower, and the Queen was gone, but a butterfly, the last of the season, flew through the cold air.

The wet fogs came, an icy wind blew, and the long dark nights drew on apace. The Ruler of the Year stood there with locks white as snow, but he knew not it was his hair that gleamed so white—he thought snow-flakes were falling from the clouds; and soon a thin covering of snow was spread over the fields.

And then the church bells rang for the Christmas time.

“The bells ring for the new-born,” said the Ruler of the Year. “Soon the new king and queen will be born; and I shall go to rest, as my wife has done—to rest in the gleaming star.”

And in the fresh green fir wood, where the snow lay, stood the Angel of Christmas, and consecrated the young trees that were to adorn his feast.

“May there be joy in the room, and under the green boughs,” said the Ruler of the Year. In a few weeks he had become a very old man, white as snow. “My time for rest draws near, and the young pair of the year shall now receive my crown and sceptre.”

“But the might is still thine,” said the Angel of Christmas; “the might and not the rest. Let the snow lie warmly upon the young seed. Learn to bear it, that another receives homage while thou yet reignest. Learn to bear being forgotten while thou art yet alive. The hour of thy release will come when spring appears.”

“And when will spring come?” asked Winter.

“It will come when the stork returns.”

And with white locks and snowy beard, cold, bent, and hoary, but strong as the wintry storm, and firm as ice, old Winter sat on the snowy drift on the hill, looking towards the south, where he had before sat and gazed. The ice cracked, the snow creaked, the skaters skimmed to and fro on the smooth lakes, ravens and crows contrasted picturesquely with the white ground, and not a breath of wind stirred. And in the quiet air old Winter clenched his fists, and the ice was fathoms thick between land and land.

Then the sparrows came again out of the town, and asked, “Who is that old man yonder?” And the raven sat there again, or a son of his, which comes to quite the same thing, and answered them and said, “It is Winter, the old man of last year. He is not dead, as the almanack says, but he is the guardian of Spring, who is coming.”

“When will spring come?” asked the sparrows. “Then we shall have good times, and a better rule. The old one was worth nothing.”

And Winter nodded in quiet thought at the leafless forest, where every tree showed the graceful form and bend of its twigs; and during the winter sleep the icy mists of the clouds came down, and the ruler dreamed of his youthful days, and of the time of his manhood; and towards the morning dawn the whole wood was clothed in glittering hoar frost. That was the summer dream of winter, and the sun scattered the hoar frost from the boughs.

“When will spring come?” asked the sparrows.

“The spring!” sounded like an echo from the hills on which the snow lay. The sun shone warmer, the snow melted, and the birds twittered, “Spring is coming!”

And aloft through the air came the first stork, and the second followed him. A lovely child sat on the back of

each, and they alighted on the field, kissed the earth, and kissed the old silent man, and he disappeared, shrouded in the cloudy mist. And the story of the year was done.

“That is all very well,” said the sparrows; “it is very beautiful too, but it is not according to the almanack, and therefore it is irregular.”

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