

The Storks

Hans Christian Andersen

On the roof of the last house in a little village was a stork's nest. The mother stork sat in it with her four young ones, who stuck out their heads with their little black beaks. (You see, their beaks had not yet turned red as they would in time.) And a little way off, all alone on the ridge of the roof, stood Father Stork, very upright and stiff. He was really a sentry on guard but, so that he would not be entirely idle, he had drawn up one leg. My, how grand he looked, standing there on one leg! So still you might have thought he was carved from wood!

"It must look pretty fine for my wife to have a sentry standing by her nest!" he thought. "People don't know I'm her husband; they'll think I'm a servant, ordered to stand here on guard. It looks very smart, I must say."

So he went on, standing on one leg.

A crowd of children were playing down in the street, and, as soon as they saw the storks, one of the boldest boys, followed by the others, began to sing the old song about storks. They sang it just as their leader remembered it:

*"Stork, stork, long-legged stork,
Off to your wife you'd better fly.
She's waiting for you in the nest,
Rocking four young ones to rest.
"The first he will be hanged,
The second will be stabbed,
The third he will be burned,
And the fourth will be slapped!"*

"Just listen to what they are saying!" cried the little stork children. "They say we're going to be hanged and burned!"

"Don't pay any attention to that," replied the mother stork crossly. "Don't listen to them, and then it won't make any difference."

But the boys went on singing and pointing mockingly at the storks with their fingers. Only one boy, whose name was Peter, said it was a shame to make fun of the birds, and he wouldn't join the others.

The mother stork tried to comfort her children. "Don't let that bother you at all," she said. "Look how quietly your father is standing, and only on one leg, too!"

"But we're very much frightened!" insisted the young storks, and they drew their heads far back into the nest.

Next day, when the children came out to play and saw the storks, they began their song again:

*"The first he will be hanged,
The second will be burned!"*

"Are we really going to be hanged and burned?" asked the young storks.

"No, certainly not", replied their mother. "You're going to learn to fly! I'll teach you. Then we'll fly out over the meadows and visit the frogs; they'll bow down to us in the water and sing, 'Co-ax! Co-ax!' and then we'll eat them up. That'll be a lot of fun!"

"And then what?" asked the young storks.

"Then the storks from all over the country will assemble for the autumn maneuvers," their mother continued. "And it is of great importance that you know how to fly well then, for if you can't, the general will stab you dead with his beak; so when I start to teach you, pay attention and learn well."

"Oh, then we'll be stabbed, just the way the boys say! And listen, there they go, saying it again!"

"Never mind them; pay attention to me," said Mother Stork. "After the big maneuvers, we'll fly away to the warm countries, oh, so far away from here, over mountains and forests. We'll get to Egypt, where they have four-cornered houses of stone that come up to a point higher than the clouds. They call them pyramids, and they're even older than a stork could imagine. They have a river there too, that runs out of its banks, and turns the whole land to mud! We walk about in that mud, eating frogs."

"Oh!" cried the young storks.

"Yes, indeed. It's wonderful there. You don't do anything but eat all day long. And while we're so comfortable there, back here there isn't a green leaf left on the trees, and it's so cold that the clouds freeze to pieces and fall down in little white rags."

She meant snow of course, but she didn't know any other way to explain it to the young ones.

"And do the naughty boys freeze to pieces, too?" asked the young storks.

"No, they don't quite do that," their mother replied. "But they come pretty close to it, and have to sit moping in a dark room. But we, on the other hand, fly about in foreign lands, among the flowers and in the warm sunshine."

Some time passed, and the young storks grew large enough so that they could stand up in the nest and look at the wide world around them. Every day Father Stork brought them beautiful frogs and delicious little snakes and all sorts of dainties that storks like. And how they laughed when he did tricks to amuse them! He would lay his head entirely back on his tail, and clap his beak as if it were a rattle. And then he would tell them stories, all about the marshes that they would see some day.

At last one day Mother Stork led them all out onto the ridge of the roof.

"Now", she said, "it's time for you to learn to fly." Oh, how they wobbled and how they tottered, trying to balance themselves with their wings, and nearly falling off the roof!

"Watch me now," their mother called. "Hold your head like this! Move your legs like that! One, two! One, two! That'll help you get somewhere in the world!"

Then she flew a little way from the roof, and the young ones made a clumsy attempt to follow. Bumps! There they lay, for their bodies were still too heavy.

"I don't want to fly," complained the youngest one, creeping back into the nest. "I don't care about going to the warm countries at all!"

"Oh, so you want to freeze to death here, when the winter comes, do you?" demanded his mother. "You want the boys to come and hang you and beat you and burn you, do you? All right, I'll call them!"

"Oh, no! Don't do that!" cried the little stork, and hopped out on the ridge again with the others.

By the third day they could fly a little, and so they thought they could soar and hover in the air without moving their wings, but-when they tried it - bumps!-down they fell! They soon found they had to move their wings to keep up in the air.

That same day the boys came back and began their song again:

"Stork, stork, long-legged stork!"

"Shall we fly down and pick their eyes out?" asked the young storks eagerly.

"Certainly not," replied his (NB! = their) mother promptly. "Let them alone. Pay attention to me. That's much more important. One, two, three! Now we fly around to the right. One, two, three! Now to the left around the chimney. That was very good. That last flap of the wings was so perfect that you can fly with me tomorrow to the marshes. Several very nice stork families go there with their young ones, and I want to show them that mine are much the nicest. Don't forget to strut about; that looks very well and makes you seem important."

"But can't we take revenge on those rude boys first?" asked the young storks.

"Oh, let them scream as much as they like," replied their mother. "You'll fly with the clouds, and way off to the land of the pyramids while they'll be freezing. There won't be a green leaf or a sweet apple here then."

"But we *will* have our revenge!" the young storks whispered to each other, and went on practicing their flying.

Now, among the boys down there in the street, the worst of all was the boy who had begun the teasing song. He was a very little boy, hardly more than six years old, but the young storks thought he was at least a hundred, for he was much bigger than Mother and Father Stork, and how could they know how old children and grownups can be?

The young storks made up their minds to take revenge upon this boy, because he was the first to start the song, and he always kept on. As they grew bigger, they were determined to do something about it. At last, to keep them quiet, their mother had to promise them that they would be revenged, but they were not to learn about it until the day before they left the country.

"First, we'll have to see how you behave at the big maneuvers," she warned them. "If you don't do well, so that the general has to stab you with his beak, the boys will be right, at least in that way. We'll see."

"Yes, you'll see," replied the young ones, and my! how they worked! They practiced every day, until they could fly so neatly and lightly that it was a pleasure to watch them.

At last the autumn came on, and all the storks began to assemble before flying away to the warm countries to get away from the winter up here. What a review that was! All of the young storks had to fly over forests and villages to show how well they had learned, for they had a very long journey before them. And the young storks did so well that their report cards were marked, "Remarkably well, with frogs and snakes!" That was the highest mark, and meant that they could eat frogs and snakes as a prize. And that is what they did!

"Now we will have our revenge!" they cried to their mother.

"Yes," their mother agreed. "What I have thought of will be just the right thing to do. I know the pond where all the little human babies lie until the storks come to take them to their parents. The pretty little babies lie in that pond, dreaming more sweetly than they ever dream afterwards. All parents want a little baby, and every child wants a little sister or brother. Now, we'll go to that pond and bring a little baby sister or brother for each of the children who didn't sing that wicked song or make fun of us. But those that did won't get any."

"But that naughty, ugly boy who began the song?" demanded the young storks. "What shall we do with him?"

"In that pond," said his mother slowly, "there is a little baby that has dreamed itself to death; we'll bring that to him. And then he'll cry because we've brought him a little dead brother. But don't forget that good little boy who said it was a shame to make fun of us! We'll take him both a brother *and* a sister! And since his name is Peter, you shall all be called Peter, too!"

It was done just the way she said. And all the young storks were named Peter, and all storks are called Peter to this very day.