

The Story of the Year

Hans Christian Andersen

It was in the latter part of January, and a heavy snowfall was driving down. It whirled through the streets and the lanes, and the outsides of the windowpanes seemed plastered with snow. It fell down in masses from the roofs of the houses. A sudden panic seized the people. They ran, they flew, and they fell into each other's arms and felt that at least for that little moment they had a foothold. The coaches and horses seemed covered with sugar frosting, and the footmen stood with their backs to the carriages, to protect their faces from the wind.

The pedestrians kept in the shelter of the carriages, which could move only slowly through the deep snow. When the storm at last ceased, and a narrow path had been cleared near the houses, the people as they met would stand still in this path, for neither wanted to take the first step into the deep snow to let the other pass. So they would stand motionless, until by silent consent each would sacrifice one leg and, stepping aside, bury it in the snowdrift.

By evening it had grown calm. The sky looked as if it had been swept and had become very lofty and transparent. The stars seemed quite new, and some of them were wonderfully blue and bright. It was freezing so hard that the snow creaked, and the upper crust of it was strong enough by morning to support the sparrows. These little birds were hopping up and down where the paths had been cleared, but they found very little to eat and were shivering with cold.

"Peep," said one to another. "They call this the new year, but it's much worse than the old one! We might just as well have kept the other year. I'm completely dissatisfied, and I have a right to be, too!"

"Yes," agreed a little shivering sparrow. "The people ran about firing off shots to celebrate the new year. And they banged pans and pots against the doors, and were quite noisy with joy because the old year was over. I was glad too, because I thought that meant we would have warm days, but nothing like that has happened yet. Everything has frozen much harder than before! People must have made a mistake in figuring their time!"

"They certainly have," a third added - an old sparrow with a white topknot. "They have a thing they call a calendar, something they invented themselves, and everything has to be arranged according to that, but it doesn't work. The year really begins when the spring comes; that's the way of nature, and that's the way I reckon it."

"But when will spring come?" the others wailed.

"It will come when the stork comes back! But his plans are very uncertain; here in town they don't know anything about them. People out in the country are better informed. Let's fly out there and wait. At least we'll be that much closer to spring."

Now, one of the sparrows who had been hopping about for a long time, chirping, without saying anything very important, spoke up. "That's all very well, but I've found some comforts here in town that I'm afraid I'd miss in the country. In a courtyard quite near here a family of people have had the very sensible idea of placing three or four flowerpots against the wall, with their open ends all turned inward and bottoms pointing out. In each pot they've cut a hole, big enough for me to fly in and out. My husband and I have built a nest in one of those pots, and we have raised all our young ones there.

"Of course, the people just did it to have the fun of watching us; otherwise they surely wouldn't have done it; and to please themselves further they put out crumbs of bread. That gives us food, and thus we are provided for. So I think my husband and I will stay

here - though we're very dissatisfied, mind you. Yes, I guess we'll stay."

"But we'll fly out into the country, to see if spring isn't coming," cried the others.

And away they flew.

Now, in the country the winter was still a little harder, and the temperature a few degrees lower, than in town. Sharp winds swept across snow-covered fields. The farmer, his hands muffled in warm mittens, sat in his sleigh with his whip on his knees and beat his arms across his chest to keep himself warm. The lean horses ran until steamy smoke seemed to rise from them. The snow creaked with the cold, and the sparrows hopped around in the ruts and shivered. "Peep! When will spring come? It's taking a very long time about it!"

"Very long," sounded a deep voice from the highest snowcovered hill, far across the field. Perhaps it was an echo, or perhaps the words had been spoken by a strange old man who was sitting, in spite of wind and weather, on the top of a high drift of snow. He was all white, with long hair, a pale face, and big clear eyes, dressed like a peasant in a coarse white coat of frieze.

"Who is that old fellow over there?" demanded the sparrows.

"I know who he is," said an old raven sitting on a fence rail. Now, this raven was wise enough to know that we are all like little birds in the sight of the Lord, so he wasn't above speaking to the sparrows and answering their question.

"Yes, I know who the old man is. He's Winter, the old man of last year. He isn't dead, as the calendar says; no, he is guardian to little Prince Spring, who is coming. Yes, Winter rules here now. Ugh! The cold makes you shiver, doesn't it, you small creatures?"

"Yes," replied the smallest sparrow. "Didn't I tell you? The calendar is only a stupid invention of men, and isn't arranged according to nature. They ought to leave that sort of thing to us; we're born much more sensitive than they are."

So one week passed away; yes, almost two weeks went by. The forest was black, and the frozen lake still lay hard and stiff, looking like a sheet of lead. The clouds, like damp cold mists, lay brooding over the land, while the great black crows flew in long silent lines. It was as if nature were sleeping.

Then a sunbeam glided over the surface of the lake, and it shone like melted tin. The snowy blanket over field and hill did not glitter quite so coldly. But still the white form of King Winter sat, his gaze fixed unswervingly toward the south. He did not notice that the snowy carpet seemed to sink very slowly into the earth itself and that here and there little grass-green patches were appearing. But the sparrows crowded into these patches, chirping, "Peep! Peep! Is spring coming now?"

"Spring!" It resounded over the field and meadow and through the dark-brown woods, where the green moss was shining on the tree trunks. And through the air, from far away in the south, the first two storks came flying swiftly, carrying on their backs two lovely children, a little boy and a little girl. They greeted the earth with a kiss, and wherever they set their little feet, tiny white flowers pushed up from beneath the snow. Then the children ran hand in hand to the old man of ice, Winter, greeted and embraced him. At that moment they and he and all the field around them were hidden in a thick, damp mist that closed down like a dark, heavy veil. Then the wind rose gradually until it was roaring and drove away the mist with its heavy blast, so that the sun shone warmly, and Winter had vanished, while the beautiful children of spring on the throne of the year.

"That's what I call a new year!" cried the sparrows. "Now we'll again get our rights back and make up for the hard winter!"

Wherever the two children turned, bushes and trees put forth new green buds, the grass shot upward, and the cornfields turned green and became more and more lovely. And the

little maiden strewed flowers all around. She carried them in her apron up before her, and it was always full of them; indeed, they seemed to grow there, for her lap was always full, however wantonly she tossed the flowers about. In her eagerness she scattered a drifting snow of blossoms over the apple trees and peach trees, so that they burst forth in full beauty before their green leaves had fully shown themselves.

Then she clapped her hands, and the boy clapped his, and great flocks of birds came flying - nobody knew where they came from - and all sang, "Spring has come!"

It was beautiful to behold. Many an aged grandmother came out of her doorway into the bright sunshine, gleefully gazing at the bright yellow flowers that dotted the fields just as they used to do when she was young. The world seemed young again to her, and she said, "It is a blessing to be out here today."

The forest still wore its dress of brown-green buds, but the fresh and fragrant bokar was already there. There were violets in abundance; anemones and primroses sprang up; and sap and strength were in each blade of grass. That grass was a marvelous carpet, on which no one could resist sitting, so the young spring couple sat hand in hand, and sang and smiled, and grew taller.

A mild rain fell down on them from heaven, but they scarcely noticed it, for the raindrops were mingled with their own tears of happiness. The bride and bridegroom kissed each other, and at that moment all the verdure of the woods was unfolded, and when the sun rose all the forest was green.

Hand in hand, the betrothed pair wandered under the fresh, hanging canopy of leaves, where the rays of the sun flickered through in lovely, ever-changing green shadows. What virgin purity, what refreshing balm there was in those delicate leaves! Clearly and quickly the brooks and streams rippled over the colored pebbles and among the velvety green rushes. All nature seemed to cry, "There is abundance, and there shall always be abundance!" And the lark caroled and the cuckoo sang; it was beautiful spring. But the willows kept woolly gloves over their blossoms; they were desperately careful of their tender buds, and that is too bad!

So the days and weeks went by, and the heat seemed to whirl down. The corn became more and more yellow as hot waves of air swirled through it. The great white water lily of the north spread its huge green leaves on the mirror surface of the lakes, and the fishes lingered in the shady spots beneath them. At the sheltered edge of the wood, where the sun beat down on the walls of the farmhouse, warming the blooming roses and the cherry trees laden with juicy black berries, which were almost hot from the fierce beams, there sat the lovely woman of summer. She it is whom we have seen as a child and as a bride.

Her gaze was fixed on the rising blue-black, heavy clouds which, in wavy outlines, were piling themselves up like mountains, higher and higher. Growing like a petrified, reversed ocean, they came from three sides, swooping toward the forest, where all sounds had been silenced as if by magic. Every breath of air was stilled; every bird was mute. A grave suspense hung over all nature; and in the highways and lanes people, on foot or horseback or in carriages, hurried toward shelter.

Suddenly there was a flash of light, as if the sun itself had burst forth in a blinding, burning, all-devouring flame! Then darkness again, and a rolling crash of thunder! The rain poured down in sheets. Darkness and flaming light alternated; silence and deafening thunder followed one another. The young, feathery reeds on the moor whipped to and fro in long waves; the branches of the trees were hidden behind a wall of water; and still darkness and light, silence and thunder, alternated. The grass and corn were beaten down by the rain and lay as if they could never rise again.

And just as suddenly the rain died away to a few gentle drops, and the sun shone again. The droplets hung from the leaves like glittering pearls, and the birds sang; the fishes

leaped from the surface of the lakes, and the gnats danced. And there on the rock in the warm sunshine, strengthened by the refreshing rain, sat Summer himself - a strong man with sturdy limbs and long, dripping hair. All nature seemed renewed; everything was luxuriant and beautiful. It was summer, warm, lovely summer.

A pleasant and sweet fragrance streamed up from the rich clover field, where the bees buzzed around the old ruined meeting place. The altar stone, newly washed by the rain, glittered in the sunshine, and the bramble wound its tendrils around it. Thither the queen bee led her swarm, and they busily made their wax and honey. Only Summer saw them; Summer and his lovely wife. For them the altar table was covered with the gifts of nature.

The evening sky shone with more brilliant gold than any church dome can boast; and between the evening and the morning there was moonlight. It was summer.

So the days and weeks went by. The flashing scythes of the reapers glittered in the cornfields, and the branches of the apple trees bent down, heavy with red and yellow fruit. The sweet-smelling hops hung in large clusters, and under the hazel bushes with their great bunches of nuts there rested a man and a woman - Summer and his quiet wife.

"What wealth!" she cried. "There is a blessing all around us; everything looks homelike and good. And yet - I don't know why - I find I am longing for peace and rest - I scarcely know how to express it. Already the people are plowing the fields again, always trying to gain more and more. Look there, the storks are flocking together and following a little behind the plow. They are the birds of Egypt that brought us through the air. Do you remember how we both came as children to this land of the North? We brought flowers with us, and pleasant sunshine, and new green to the woods. The wind has been rough with those trees; they're dark and brown now like the trees of the South, but they do not bear golden fruit like them."

"Do you wish to see the golden fruit?" said Summer. "Then look and rejoice!"

He stretched out his arms, and the leaves of the forest were splendid in red and gold, while beautiful tints spread over the woodland. The rosebush glowed scarlet; the elder branches hung down with great heavy bunches of black-brown berries; the wild chestnuts were ripe in their dark-green husks; and deep in the forest the violets bloomed again.

But the Queen was becoming more and more silent and pale.

"It is growing cold," she said, "and the nights bring damp mists. I am longing for the land of my childhood."

Then she watched the storks fly away, one after the other; and in longing she stretched forth her arms toward them. She looked up at the nests. They were empty. The long-stalked cornflower was growing in one of them; in another was a yellow mustard seed, looking as if the whole nest were there solely for its protection. And the sparrows flew up into the storks' nests, to take possession.

"Peep! What happened to the stork family?" one of them asked. "I suppose they can't bear it when the wind blows on them, so they've left the country. I wish them a happy journey!"

Gradually the forest leaves became more and more yellow, and leaf after leaf drifted down to earth; and the stormy winds of autumn howled; harvesttime was over. The Queen lay on the fallen yellow leaves and looked with lovely mild eyes at the glittering stars above, while her husband stood beside her. Suddenly a gust of wind whirled through the leaves, a shower of them fell again, and the Queen was gone! Only a butterfly, the last of the season, fluttered through the chilly air.

The wet fogs came, the icy winds blew, and the nights became darker and longer. Now the Ruler of the year stood there with snow-white hair, but he was not aware of it. He

thought it was the snowflakes that were falling from the sky.

A thin layer of snow covered the green field, and then the church bells rang for the glad Christmas season.

"The birthday bells are ringing," said the Ruler of the year slowly. "Soon the new King and Queen will be born, and I shall go to my rest as my wife has done; my rest in the gleaming star."

And in the green fir wood, where the white snow lay, there stood the Angel of Christmas, and consecrated the young trees that would adorn the feast.

In a few weeks the Ruler of the year had become a very old man, white as snow. "May there be joy in the room and under the green branches," he said. "My time for rest draws nigh, and the young pair of the new year shall receive my crown and scepter."

"But you are still in power," said the Angel of Christmas, "and not yet shall you be granted rest. Let the snow lie close and warm upon the young seed. Learn to endure that another receive homage while you are still the Ruler. Learn to be forgotten and yet to live. The hour of your release shall come when spring appears!"

"And when will spring come?" said Winter.

"It will come when the stork returns!"

With white locks and snowy beard, cold, bent, and old, but still strong as the winter storm and firm as the glittering ice, old Winter sat high up on the snowdrift on the hill, his gaze fixed toward the south, just as the Winter before him had. The ice and snow creaked with the cold; the skaters skimmed over the smooth lakes; the black ravens and crows looked fine against the white ground; no breath of wind stirred. In that quiet air old Winter clenched his fists, and the ice was fathoms thick between land and land. Then the sparrows flew out again from town, and demanded, "Who is that old man over there?"

And the raven sat on the fence rail again - perhaps a son of the other one, which amounts to the same thing - and answered them. "It is Winter, the old Ruler of last year. He isn't dead as the calendar says, but he's the guardian of spring, which is coming."

"When will spring come?" asked the sparrows. "Then we'll have good times and a better year. The old one was no good at all!"

Winter nodded in silent thought at the leafless black forest, where

every tree showed the graceful form and bend of its branches; and during the winter night icy mists came down from the clouds, and the Ruler dreamed of his childhood and young manhood; and toward the morning dawn the whole wood was clothed in glittering hoarfrost. That was the summer dream of winter, and soon the sun scattered the frost from the branches.

"When will spring come?" asked the sparrows again.

"Spring!" Again that word echoed back from the snow-covered hills. Now the sun shone more warmly, and the snow melted, and the birds sang, "Spring is coming!"

And high through the air came the first stork, with the second close behind him. A lovely child rode on the back of each, and they alighted in an open field and kissed the earth. Then they embraced the silent old man, and, like Moses on the mount, he disappeared, wrapped in cloudy mists. And so the story of the year was ended.

"That's all very well," said the sparrows. "And it's beautiful, too, but it's not according to the calendar, so it must be all wrong!"