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# The Storks

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930], translated by M. R. James)

On the last house of a small town there was a stork's nest. The stork-mother was in it with her four little young ones, who stuck their heads out, with their little black beaks, which hadn't yet turned red. A little way off on the ridge of the roof stood the father stork, very stiff and upright; he had drawn up one leg so as to give himself some little occupation while he stood on guard. You would have thought he was carved out of wood, he stood so still. "It must look very distinguished, I'm sure, my wife having a sentry by her nest," he thought, "people can't possibly know I'm the husband, they're bound to think I'm under orders to stand here. That looks very well." So he continued to stand on one leg.

A pack of children were playing down below in the street, and when they saw the storks, one of the cheekiest of the boys, and then all the rest of them, began to sing the old rhyme about the storks--that is, they sang what they could remember of it:

*Stork, Stork, Stone,  
Fly home to your own,  
Your wife's on her nest  
With four fat young 'uns,  
The first'll be hanged by the neck,  
The second'll be stuck,  
The third'll be burned,  
The fourth'll be overturned.*

"Oh, listen to what those boys are singing," said the little storks, "they're saying we shall be hung and burnt."

"Don't you worry yourselves about that," said the mother stork, "don't listen to it, and then it can't matter."

But the boys went on singing and pointing at the storks: only one boy, whose name was Peter, said it was wrong to make game of animals, and wouldn't join in. The mother stork, too, tried to comfort her young ones. "Don't you worry about it," she said. "Just look how quiet your father's standing there, on one leg too." "But we're so frightened!" said the young ones, and they drew their heads right back into the nest. Next day when the children came out again to play and saw the storks, they began their song. "The first'll be hanged by the neck, the second'll be stuck!" "Shall we really be hanged and stuck?" said the little storks.

"No, certainly not," said their mother, "you'll have to learn how to fly; I shall practise you all right--and then we shall go out into the meadow and pay a visit to the frogs. They'll make us a bow and sing 'ko-aks, ko-aks', and then we'll eat them up. That'll be a real treat."

"And what then?" the little storks asked.

"Why, then all the storks in the whole country will gather together, and then the autumn manœuvres will begin. You'll have to fly very well--that's of the greatest importance; for anyone that can't fly, the General runs him through with his beak and kills him. So you must mind and learn when the drilling begins."

"Then we shall be stuck all the same, as the boys said--and just listen, they're singing it again!"

"Listen to me and not to them," said the mother stork. "After the big manoeuvres we shall fly away to the hot countries--oh, ever so far from here, over forest and mountains. Then to Egypt we shall fly, where there are some three-cornered stone houses that rise up in a peak above the clouds and are called pyramids and are older than any stork can imagine. There's a river there that overflows, so that all the country turns into mud, and you can walk about in the mud and eat frogs."

"Oo!" said all the young ones.

"Yes, indeed, that is beautiful. You don't do anything but eat all day long, and while we're enjoying ourselves so, there isn't a single green leaf on the trees in this country; it's so cold here that the clouds freeze to bits and come tumbling down in little white rags." (It was the snow she meant, but she couldn't explain it any better.)

"And do the naughty boys freeze to bits too?" asked the young ones. "No, they don't freeze to bits, but they come very near it, and they have to sit indoors in a dark room and mope. Whereas you can fly about in a foreign land where there's flowers and hot sunshine."

Some time had passed by, and the young ones were grown so big that they could stand up in the nest and look a long way all round, and the father stork came flying to them every day with nice frogs and little snakes and every kind of stork dainty he could find; and oh, he was amusing when he did tricks for them. He would turn his head right round to his tail and clatter with his beak as if it was a little rattle; and then he would tell them stories, which were all about the marsh.

"Now attend to me! You must be learning to fly," said the mother stork one day: so then all the four young ones had to come out on to the roof ridge. Oh! how they did sway about! How they did balance with their wings and nearly tumble down!

"Look at me, do!" said their mother. "This is how you must hold your heads; this is the way you must place your feet, one, two! one, two! That's what'll help you on in the world." Then she flew a little way and the young ones made a little clumsy jump, and bump! There they lay, they were too heavy in the body.

"I don't want to fly," said one of them, creeping back into the nest, "I don't care about going to the hot countries."

"Do you want to freeze to death here, then, when winter comes? Do you want the boys to come and hang you and burn you and roast you? I'll just go and call them."

"Oh, no!" said the little stork, and he hopped out again on to the roof with the others. On the third day they were able to fly properly for a little, and then they thought they could stay hovering in the air, and they tried to, but bump! Down they came, and they had to ply their wings again. Then the boys came out in the street below and sang their song: "Stork, Stork, Stone."

"Shall we fly down and peck out their eyes?" said the young ones.

"No, let them be," said the mother, "just listen to me, it's much more important. One, two, three! Now fly to the right. One, two, three! Now to the left, round the chimney. That last flap of the wings was so pretty and correct that you shall be allowed to come to the marsh with me to-morrow. There will be several very nice families of storks there with their children. Let me see that mine are the prettiest; and mind you strut, it looks well and makes you respected."

"But aren't we to take revenge on those naughty boys?" asked the little storks. "Let them squall what they please, you'll be flying up in the clouds, and will be in the pyramid country when they'll be freezing, without so much as a green leaf or a sweet apple."

"We will be revenged on them all the same," they whispered to each other. And then there was more drilling.

Of all the boys in the street there was none so naughty at singing rude songs as the very one who had begun it, and he was quite little, not more than six years old; the storks to be sure thought he must be a hundred, he was so much bigger than their father and mother, and what did they know about the age of children and grown-up people? All their revenge must be spent on this one boy, for he had begun, and he kept on at it. The young storks were quite exasperated by him, and the bigger they grew the less could they bear it. At last their mother was obliged to promise them that they should have a revenge, but she wasn't going to take it before the last day they were in that country.

"We must see first how you behave at the great manœuvres. If you fail there, the General will stab you in the breast with his beak, and then the boys will have been right in one way at any rate. So let us see."

"Yes, you shall," they said, and they *did* bestir themselves. Every day they practised, and they flew so charmingly it was a pleasure to see them.

Then autumn came on; all the storks began to gather before they should fly to the hot countries, while we have winter here. Those *were* manœuvres. They were made to fly right over forests and towns, just to see how well they could fly, for indeed it was a long journey they had before them. The young storks did their affair so nicely that they got: "Excellent, with frogs and snakes." This was the highest possible mark, and they were at liberty to eat the frogs and snakes; and so they did.

"Now for our revenge," they said.

"To be sure," said the mother stork. "I have thought of something that will do beautifully. I know where the pond is where all the human children lie till the stork comes and fetches them to their parents. The pretty little children sleep and dream such lovely dreams as never come to them afterwards. All fathers and mothers want a little child like that, and all children want a sister or a brother. Now then, we'll fly to that pond and fetch one for each of the children who didn't sing that naughty song and make fun of storks: the other children shan't have any."

"But the one that began the song, that horrid beastly boy," screamed the young storks, "what are we going to do to him?"

"Why, in the pond there lies a little dead child that has dreamt itself to death; we'll take that to him, and he'll cry because we've brought him a little dead brother. But that good boy--you haven't forgotten him--the one that said 'it's wrong to make game of animals'. We'll bring him a brother and a sister as well; and because that boy's name is Peter, you shall all be called Peter too."

And as she said, so it came about: and therefore all the storks were called Peter, and they are called so to this very day.

[End of *The Storks* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]