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# *The Story of the Year*

by

# Hans Christian Andersen

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

It was late in January, and a fearful snowstorm. The snow came flying in a drifting whirl through streets and lanes. The outside of the window-panes was fairly plastered over with it, and it plumped down from the roofs in masses, and caused a stampede among the people. They rushed, they flew into each other's arms, clasped each other tight for a moment, and for just so long got a firm foothold. Carriages and horses were powdered all over; the servants turned their backs to the carriages and rode backwards against the wind, foot passengers took care to keep in the lee of some cart which could only move slowly along in the deep snow; and when at last the storm sank to rest, and a narrow path had been cleared along the house-fronts, people when they met face to face stood still in it. Neither liked to take the first step and walk into the deep snow, so that the other could step by. Silent they stood, till finally by a sort of tacit agreement, each of them sacrificed one leg and let that plunge into the snowdrift.

Towards evening it became dead calm. The sky looked as if it had been swept and made more lofty and transparent: the stars looked brand new, and some of them were ever so blue and bright—and there was a cracking frost—anyhow, the top layer of snow managed to become so hard that by the morning it could bear the sparrows. They hopped about, up here and down there, wherever any shovelling had been done, but little enough could they find to eat, and how they did freeze!

"Twit!" said one of them to another. "This is what people call the New Year. Why, it's worse than the old one; we might just as well have stuck to that. I'm dissatisfied with the whole thing, and I've every reason to be."

"Yes, just now the humans were running about, shooting in the New Year," said a little small frost-nipped sparrow; "they smashed pots against the doors and were clean out of their wits with delight at the old year having gone; and I was glad too, for I expected we should get some warm weather. But nothing's come of it all; it's freezing a deal harder than before. The humans have got wrong in their reckoning."

"That they have," said a third. He was old, and white on the top of his head. "They've got hold of something they call the Almanack. It's some of their own invention, I suppose, and everything's to go according to that; only it doesn't. When the Spring comes, then the year will begin. That's Nature's order, and that's what I go by."

"But when will the Spring come?" asked the others.

"It'll come when the stork comes: but there's a good deal of uncertainty about him, and here in the town there's nobody that knows anything about it. They understand that better out in the country. Shall we fly out there and wait? One'll be nearer the Spring there."

"Yes, that may be all very well," said one of them who had gone about chirping for some time without really saying anything. "I've got some advantages here in the town which I'm afraid I might miss out there. Round here is a house with a family of humans who've had the very sensible notion of building three or four flower-pots into the wall with the big mouth inside and the bottom out, and in the bottom there's been cut a hole big enough for me to fly in and out of. I and my husband have got a nest there, and all our young ones have flown out of that. The human family have, of course, arranged it all so as to have the pleasure of looking at us, else they'd never have done it. They throw out breadcrumbs, too—for their own satisfaction—and so we get our food: one is provided for in a kind of way—and so I think I shall stop, and my husband too—though we're very much dissatisfied—still, we shall stop."

"And we shall fly out into the country to see whether the Spring isn't coming." And off they flew.

And out in the country it was proper winter: freezing several degrees harder than in the town. The keen wind blew far over the snow-covered fields. The farmer with his great mittens on sat in his sledge and beat himself with his arms to get the cold out of them. His whip lay across his lap; the skinny horses galloped till they smoked again: the snow crackled, and the sparrows hopped in the ruts and froze. "Twit, when's the Spring coming? It stays so long."

"So long!" rang a voice far over the fields from the high slope covered with snow. And it might have been an echo that

one heard; or, again, it might have been the voice of the strange old man who sat there on the top of the snowdrift in the wind and weather. He was quite white—like a farmer in a white frieze coat—with long white hair, white beard, very pale, with large bright eyes.

"Who's that chap over there?" asked the sparrows.

"I know that," said an old Raven who was sitting on the gate-post, and who was condescending enough to recognize that we are all little birds in God's sight, and so entered into talk with the sparrows and explained matters. "I know who that old chap is. That's Winter, the old man from last year. He's not dead, as the Almanack says; no, he's more like a regent for the little Prince Spring, who's coming. Yes, Winter holds the reins. Ugh, it makes you crackle, don't it, little ones?"

"Yes, now, isn't that just what I was saying?" said the littlest sparrow. "That Almanack's nothing but a make-up of the humans: it isn't arranged according to Nature. They ought to leave that to us—us that's organized more delicate!"

And a week went by—almost two weeks. The wood was black, the frozen lake lay heavily still and looked like lead that has cooled. The clouds—no, they were not clouds, they were wet ice-cold mists—hung over all the land. The big black crows went in flights without a caw. It seemed as if all things slept. . . . There shot a sunbeam out over the lake, and it shone like molten tin. The snow on the fields and on the slopes did not glisten as it used—but the white shape, Winter himself, still sat there with his gaze turned steadily towards the South. He took no note of how the snow carpet sank, as it were, into the earth, how here and there a little grass-green space emerged, and in a moment was alive with sparrows.

"Tweet, tweet, is it coming, the Spring?"

"Spring!" It rang out over field and meadow and through the dark brown woodlands where the moss shone fresh and green on the tree-trunks. And through the air came flying from the South the first two storks. On the back of each sat a fair little child—a boy and a girl; and they kissed the earth in greeting; and where they set foot, white blossoms grew up from beneath the snow. Hand in hand they went up to the old ice-man, Winter, and laid themselves on his breast for yet another greeting. And in that instant all three were hidden from sight, and the whole landscape with them: a thick mist, close and heavy, veiled all things. A little after it cleared a wind sprang up. Onward it came, with mighty gusts, and cleared the fog away. The sun shone out warm. Winter himself had vanished. The fair children of the Spring sat on the throne of the Year.

"That's what I call New Year," said the sparrow. "Now, no doubt, we shall get our rights again, and some compensation for the hard winter."

Whichever way the two children turned, green buds shot out from bush and tree, the grass grew taller, the sown fields showed brighter and brighter green, and all about her the little girl scattered flowers. She had multitudes of them in her lap, they seemed to teem forth of it, it was always full, however lavishly she strewed them; in her haste she shook a whole snow-fall of blossom out over the apple and peach trees, so that they stood clad in full beauty before they had properly got their green leaves. And she clapped her hands and the boy clapped his, and out came birds, one could not tell whence, and all of them twittered and sang: "Spring is come!"

It was a lovely sight, and many an old granny came out of her house door into the sunshine and straightened herself up and looked out over the yellow blossoms that decked all the meadows just exactly as they had in her young days. The world had turned young again. "Blessed weather it is out here to-day!" said she.

The forest was still brown-green, bud beside bud, but the woodruff was out, fresh and fragrant, the violets stood there in crowds, and there were anemones, cowslips and oxslips; nay, in every blade of grass was there sap and strength; it was just a brodered carpet to sit upon, and there sat the bride and bridegroom of the Spring and held each other by the hand and sang and smiled and grew.

A gentle rain from heaven fell on them, but they marked it not. The raindrops and the tears of joy were all one. The bride and bridegroom kissed, and in a moment the forest sprang to life. When next the sun rose, all the woods were green.

Hand in hand went the bridal pair beneath the fresh waving roof of leaves, where only the rays of sunlight and the flecking shadows varied the tints of green. A virginal purity and a refreshing fragrance were in the delicate leaves; clear and living babbling river and brook in and out of the velvet-green reeds and over the dappled stones. "Full for ever and always it is and it shall be," said all Nature. And the cuckoo called and the lark sang, and it was pleasant Spring. All the

same, the willows kept woolly mittens over their flowers: they were so horribly cautious, and that is most tiresome.

And so days passed by and weeks passed by, and the heat came sweltering down. Hot waves of air passed through the corn, which grew yellower and yellower. The white lotus of the North on the woodland lakes spread out its great green leaves over the watery mirror, and the fish took shelter beneath them; and on the lee-side of the wood, where the sun blazed on the farmhouse wall and warmed the new-sprung roses through and through—where the cherry-tree boughs hung full of juicy black, almost sun-hot fruit, the beautiful Queen of Summer sat and sang—even she whom we have seen a child and a bride; and she gazed at the dark climbing clouds which in great billows like mountains, blue-black and heavy, were rising higher and higher. From three sides they gathered: then downward and down, like a sea enchanted and turned to stone, they lowered themselves toward the forest, where everything was hushed as under a spell. Every breeze was laid, every bird was still: there was a gravity, an expectation, over all Nature. But on road and path everyone was hurrying—driving, riding or on foot—to get under shelter. All at once it lightened as if the sun had burst forth, dazzling, blinding, consuming, and there was darkness again, with a rolling crash. The rain poured down in torrents—it was night—then day—stillness—then a roar. The young brown-plumaged reeds in the marsh swayed in long billows, the boughs of the forest were veiled in sheets of rain—darkness came—then light—silence—and then a crash. Grass and corn lay beaten down, deluged, as if they could never rise again. Quickly the rain dwindled to single drops, the sun shone out, and from blade and leaf the water-drops glistened like pearls; birds sang, fishes leapt up from the stream, midges danced: and out on a rock in the salt, rain-whipped sea-water sat Summer himself, the strong man with the vigorous limbs, his hair drenched—revived by the cool bath he sat in the hot sunshine. All Nature about him was revived, everything was gay, strong and beautiful. It was Summer, warm lovely Summer.

Fresh and sweet was the scent that came from the thick-grown clover fields. The bees hummed there about the ancient moot-place. The brambles twined upward around the altar stone which, washed by the rain, glistened in the sunshine; and from it out flew the queen bee with her swarm, and made wax and honey. No one saw them but the Summer and his mighty spouse; it was for them that the altar-table stood covered with the thank-offerings of Nature.

And the evening sky gleamed like pure gold—no cathedral dome so nobly decked—and the moon shone betwixt the glow of evening and the glow of dawn. It was summer-time.

And days passed and weeks passed. The bright sickles of the harvesters shone in the cornfields. The branches of the apple trees bent low beneath their red and yellow fruit, the hops smelt delicious, hanging in great clusters, and under the hazel bushes, where the nuts grew in heavy bunches, rested the husband and the wife, Summer and his spouse, grown grave.

"What wealth!" said she. "All round us is blessing, homely and good: and yet I cannot tell why, I long for rest—quiet—I know no word for it. They are ploughing the fields all afresh; more and yet more mankind is after gaining. Look, the storks are gathering in groups and following the plough at a distance—the bird of Egypt, that brought us through the air. You remember the time we two came here as children into the land of the North? We brought flowers, fair sunshine and green leafage. The wind has dealt roughly with them now. They are growing brown and dark like the trees of the South; but they do not, like those, bear golden fruit."

"Is that what you would see?" said Summer. "Then have your pleasure." And he raised his arm, and the leaves of the forest were tinted with red and with gold, a blaze of colour came over all the woodland: the rose bushes shone with fiery hips, the elder-trees were hung with masses of heavy dark berries, the wild chestnuts fell ripened out of the dark-green husks, and within the wood the violets blossomed a second time.

But the Queen of the Year grew yet more quiet and pale. "It blows cold," she said, "the night brings damp mists. I long for the land of my childhood."

And she saw the storks take their flight—every one of them—and she stretched her hands out after them. She looked up at the nests that stood empty; in one the tall cornflower had grown up, in another the yellow charlock, as if the nest were only meant for a shelter and fence for them, and up came the sparrows.

"Twit, what's gone with the gentlefolk? Why, they can't bear the wind blowing on 'em, so they've left the country! A pleasant journey to 'em." Yellower and yellower grew the leaves in the wood: one after another they fell. The storms of Autumn were sounding; it was late in harvest-time. And on the yellow fallen leaves lay the Queen of the Year, gazing with gentle eyes toward the shining stars, and her husband stood by her. A gust of wind whirled up the leaves—they fell

to earth again, and she was gone. Only a butterfly, the last of the year, was fluttering through the chilly air. And the wet mists came and the icy blast, and the long dark nights. The King of the Year stood there with snow-white hair, but he knew it not, he thought it was the snowflakes that fell from the clouds. A thin covering of snow lay far and wide over the green fields.

And the church bells rang out for Christmas.

"The birthday bells are ringing," said the King of the Year. "Soon will the new King and Queen be born, and I shall have won my rest like her—rest in the shining star."

And in the fresh green fir-wood, where the snow lay, the Angel of Christmas stood, blessing the young trees that were to deck his feast.

"Joy in the house and beneath the green boughs," said the old King of the Year—a few weeks had aged him into a snow-white veteran. "The time hastens on towards my rest, and the young couple of the year will soon take the sceptre and crown."

"Still the power is yours," said the Angel of Christmas, "the power and not the rest. Let the snow lie and keep the young seed warm all about you. Learn to endure that homage should be paid to another while yet you are the Prince: learn to be forgotten and yet go on living. The time of your freedom will come when the Spring comes."

"When will the Spring come?" Winter asked.

"It will come when the stork comes."

And with white locks and snow-white hair, Winter sat, cold as ice, old and bent, yet strong as the winter wind and the hardness of ice, high up on the snowdrift of the upland, gazing southward ever, just as the Winter before had sat and gazed. The ice cracked, the snow creaked, the skaters circled on the bright lakes, and ravens and crows stood sharply out against the white background. There was no stir of wind, and in the still air Winter clenched his fists, and the ice grew fathoms thick between shore and shore.

Then out came the sparrows from the town again and asked: "Who's that old man over there?" And the raven sat there again—or a son of his, which comes to the same—and told them: "That's Winter, the old man from last year. He's not dead, as the Almanacks say, but regent for the Spring who's coming."

"When is the Spring coming?" said the sparrows. "When it does, we shall have a good time, and better management. The old one is no good at all."

And in silent thought Winter beckoned to the black leafless wood, where every tree showed clear the beautiful form and curve of its branches; and in their winter slumber the icy mists of the clouds lowered themselves. The Ruler was dreaming of the days of his youth and of his manhood; and towards dawn the whole forest stood fair with hoar frost. It was Winter's dream of Summer. The sunshine melted the snow from the branches.

"When is the Spring coming?" asked the sparrows.

"Spring!" It came sounding like an echo from the upland where the snow lay. The sun shone out, warmer and warmer, the snow shrank, the birds twittered: "Spring is coming!"

And aloft through the air the first stork came flying; a second followed; a fair child sat on the back of each, and they lighted down upon the green field, and they kissed the earth, and they kissed the old silent man, and like Moses on the Mount he vanished, borne away by the misty cloud.

The Story of the Year was finished.

"That's all very fine and large," said the sparrows, "and it's also extremely pretty; but it doesn't agree with the Almanack, so it must be wrong."

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

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