

# The Story of the Year

It was the end of January; a frightful snowstorm was raging; the snow whirled and swirled through streets and alleyways; the outsides of the window panes were as if pasted over with snow, it crashed down in heaps from the roofs, and people were buffeted back and forth, they ran, they flew and dashed into each other's arms, held on to each other for a moment and so managed for a while to gain a foothold. Carriages and horses were as if dusted with powder, the servants stood with their backs to the carriages and pushed backwards into the wind, the pedestrians stayed all the time in the shelter of the carriages, which only slowly slid off through the deep snow; and when the storm had finally died down and a narrow path cleared alongside the houses, people stood still there when they met; none of them felt like taking the first step, by treading to the side into the deep snow so that the other person could slip past. They stood there in silence, until finally, after what was like a tacit agreement, each of them sacrificed one leg and let it sink into the piled-up snow.

Towards evening, everything was completely still, the sky looked as if it had been swept and made taller and more transparent, the stars seemed brand-new, and some of them were so blue and bright, – and it froze so hard that it creaked, – it was quite possible that the uppermost layer of snow would be so strong the next morning that it could bear the house sparrows; they would soon be hopping around, up or down, where the snow had been shovelled, but there was precious little food to be found, and they felt really frozen.

'Cheep!' one said to another one, 'and this is what people call the New Year! it's even worse than the old one! so we might just as well have kept that instead. I am discontented, and with good reason!'

'Yes, people went around noisily greeting the New Year,' said a little sparrow, numb with the cold, 'they banged pots against doors and were beside themselves with joy that the old year was over and done with! and I was pleased about it too, for I expected us to get warm days, but nothing became of that; it's freezing even harder than before! The humans must have got their timing of the year all wrong!'

'They have!' a third one said, who was old and white on top; 'they now have something that they call an almanac, it's something of their own invention, and everything is meant to follow it! but it doesn't. When spring comes, that's when the year starts, that's the way of nature, and that's how I reckon things!'

'But when will spring come?' the others asked.

'It will come when the stork comes, but everything about him is very uncertain, and here in the town there's no one who knows anything about it, they know a lot more out in the country; shall we fly out there and wait for it? Out there one is closer to spring.'

'That's all very well!' one of them said that had been cheeping away without really saying anything. 'Here in the town I've certain comforts that I am afraid of missing out there. Nearby in a courtyard there's a human family that have very sensibly come up with the idea of fixing three or four flowerpots to the wall with a large opening inwards and the base outwards, and a hole has been cut in it which is so large that I can fly in and out; there I and my husband have a nest, and from it all our young have flown out. The human family have of course arranged all this so as to have the pleasure of looking at us, otherwise they would hardly

have done so. They sprinkle breadcrumbs, also for their own pleasure and then we have food! One is somehow provided for; – and so I think that I and my husband intend to stay put! although we are very discontented, – but we'll stay put!

'And we're flying out into the country to see if spring won't soon be coming!' and off they flew. And it was really a hard winter out in the country, a couple of degrees colder than in the town. The sharp wind swept over the snow-covered fields. The farmer, with large mittens on, sat on his sleigh and slapped his arms round his chest to get the cold out of them. The whip lay in his lap, the skinny horses trotted so the steam rose from them, the snow creaked, and the sparrows hopped in the tracks and froze: 'cheep! when will spring come? It's taking so long!' 'So long!' it rang out over the fields from the highest hill, covered with snow; and it was possibly an echo one heard, but it could also perhaps be the strange old man who sat on top of the snowdrift in all weathers; he was quite white, just like a farmer in a white homespun coat, with long white hair, a white beard, quite pale and with large, clear eyes.

'Who's the old man over there?' the sparrows asked.

'I know!' an old raven said who was sitting on the gatepost and who was condescending enough to recognise the fact that we are all God's creatures, great and small, and therefore was prepared to enter into conversation with the sparrows and give them an explanation. 'I know who the old man is. It is Winter, the old man from the past year, he isn't dead, as the almanac says, oh no, he is actually the guardian of young Prince Spring, who will soon be coming. Oh yes, Winter is the one who rules the roost. Caw! you're almost creaking with the cold, you small ones!'

'Well, isn't that what I was saying!' the smallest of them said, 'the almanac is simply a human invention, it's not in tune with nature! they should leave such things to us, for we're finer creatures than they are!'

And one week passed and almost two; the wood was black, the frozen lake lay there so heavy and looked like lead that had set; the clouds, well, they weren't clouds, they were damp, ice-cold mists that hung over the countryside; the large black crows flew in flocks, without uttering a cry, it was as if everything was asleep. – A ray of sunshine glided across the lake, and it gleamed like molten tin. The layer of snow over the fields and up on the hill did not glisten as before, but the white figure, Winter himself, was still sitting there gazing constantly southwards; he didn't notice at all that the carpet of snow seemed to sink into the ground, that here and there a small patch of green emerged, and that there then were crowds of sparrows.

'Chirrup! Chirrup! is Spring now on its way?'

'Spring!' it rang out over field and meadow and through the black-brown woods, where the moss gleamed freshly green on the tree trunks; and through the air, from the south, the first two storks came flying; on the back of each there sat a lovely little child, a boy and a girl; and they kissed the earth in greeting, and wherever they placed their feet, white flowers grew up out of the snow; hand in hand they walked up to the old ice-man, Winter, lay down at his breast as a new greeting, and immediately all the three of them were hidden and the entire landscape hidden; a thick, damp mist, so dense and heavy, enveloped everything. – A moment later the air stirred, – the wind rushed off, with strong gusts, and chased away the mist, the sun shone so warmly, – Winter itself had vanished, the lovely children of Spring sat on the throne of the year.

'Now *that* I call New Year!' the sparrows said. 'Now we'll once more enjoy our rights and be compensated for the harsh Winter.'

Wherever the two children turned, green buds burst forth on bushes and trees, the grass grew taller, the cornfields became increasingly vivid green. And all around her the little girl threw flowers; she had a profusion of them in her skirt, they seemed to thrust themselves forward, her skirt was always full, no matter how eager she was to scatter them, – in her hurry she shook a whole flurry of flowers over apple and peach trees, so that they stood there in all their glory even before they had really got green leaves.

And she clapped her hands and the boy clapped, and then out came birds, one didn't know where from, and all of them chirruped and sang: 'Spring has come!'

It was lovely to see. And many an old woman came out of her door in the sunshine, shook herself, looked over at all the yellow flowers that the whole meadow was resplendent with, just as in her own young days; the world became young again, 'it's a wonderful day outside here!' she said.

And the wood was still brown-green, bud by bud, but the woodruff was out, so fresh and so fragrant, the violets were in full bloom, and there were anemones, primroses and cowslips, yes, in every blade of grass there was vigour and vitality, and it was a magnificent carpet on which to sit, and there sat Spring's young pair and held each other's hands and sang and smiled and grew more and more.

A gentle rain descended from the sky over them, they didn't notice it, the raindrop and the tear of joy merged into one and the same drop. The bride and bridegroom kissed each other, and that instant the wood came into flower. – When the sun rose, all the woods were green! And hand in hand the bridal couple walked under the roof of freshly hanging leaves, where only the rays of sunlight and the deep shadows offered alternatives to the green. A virginal purity and a refreshing scent were in the fine leaves! brightly and vivaciously river and stream purred among the velvet-green reeds and over the mottled stones. 'It is utterly eternal and everlasting and so it will remain!' all of Nature said. And the cuckoo sang and the lark called, it was lovely Spring once more; although the willow trees wore woollen mittens around its flowers, for they were so terribly cautious, and that is boring!

And days passed and weeks passed, the heat almost seemed to tumble down; waves of hot air passed through the corn, which grew more and more yellow. In the woodland lakes the white lotus of northern climes spread out its large green leaves across the surface of the water and the fish sought shade under them; and on the leese of the wood, where the sun scorched down on the farmer's wall and thoroughly warmed through the roses already in bloom, and the cherry trees hung heavy with juicy, black, almost sun-hot fruit, there sat the lovely lady of Summer, she who we saw as a child and as a bride; and she looked across at the rising, dark clouds that, in wave-like shapes, like mountains, black-blue and heavy, lifted themselves higher and higher; from three sides they came; more and more, like a petrified up-turned sea, they sank down towards the wood, where everything – as at a touch of a wand – had fallen silent; every light breeze had dropped, every bird stayed silent, there was a solemnity, an expectation in all of Nature; but on the roads and paths people hurried, driving, riding and walking, to get a roof over their heads. – Then suddenly there was a gleam, as if the sun were coming out, blinking, blinding, consuming everything, and it turned dark once more in a rolling roar; the water poured down in torrents; it became night and it became light,

silence and thunder. The young brown-feathered reeds in the bog moved in long waves, the branches of the forest were hidden by watery mists, darkness came and light came, silence and thunder – Grass and corn lay as if flattened, washed away, as if they would never raise themselves again. – Suddenly the rain was no more than single drops, the sun shone, and from blade and leaf the drops of water sparkled like pearls, the birds sang, the fish frisked in the river water, the mosquitoes danced and out on a stone in the briny, whisked sea-water sat *Summer* himself, the powerful man with strong limbs and dripping-wet hair, – rejuvenated by his fresh bath, he sat there in the warm sunshine. Around him all of Nature was rejuvenated. Everything stood luxuriant, strong and beautiful; it was Summer, warm, delightful Summer. And delicious and sweet was the scent that came from the lush field of clover, the bees hummed there around the old moot; the brambles twined up around the altar stone which, washed by the rain, gleamed in the sunlight; and out to it flew the queen bee with her swarm and produced wax and honey. No one saw this except *Summer* and his buxom wife; for them the altar table was decked with Nature's votive offering.

And the evening sky gleamed as if of gold, no church dome has so rich a glow, and the moon shone between sunset and sunrise. It was Summer.

And days passed and weeks passed. – The shiny scythes of the harvesters glinted in the cornfields, the branches of the apple tree were bowed low with red and yellow fruit; the hops smelt delightful and hung in large bunches, and under the hazel bushes, where the nuts sat in heavy clusters, the man and his wife rested, Summer with his solemn wife.

'What richness!' she said, 'everywhere abundance, home-grown and good, and yet, I don't know quite why, I long for – rest, – quietude! I don't know the right word for it! – Now all the fields are being ploughed again! Humans wish to make the land yield more and more! – See the storks arriving in large numbers and following the plough at a distance; the bird of Egypt that once bore us through the air! Do you remember when both of us as children entered these countries of the North? – We brought flowers with us, lovely sunshine and green woods, those the wind has now treated badly, they are turning brown and darkening like the trees of the South, but do not, as they do, bear golden fruit!'

'Do you want to see such?' Summer said, 'then rejoice!' and he raised his arm and the leaves of the wood were coloured with red and with gold, a magnificence of colour came over all the woods; the rosebush gleamed with its bright-red hips, the elder branches hung with large, heavy umbels of black-brown berries, the wild chestnuts fell when ripe out of their black-green shells, and within the wood the violets flowered a second time.

But the Queen of the Year became more and more quiet, more pale. 'There's a chill in the air!' she said, 'the night has damp mists! – I long for – the Land of Childhood!' –

And she saw the storks fly away, each and every one! and she stretched her hand out after them. – She looked up at the nests, which stood empty, and in one of them the long-stalked corn-flower grew and in another the yellow wild radish, as if the nest existed simply as a protection and a fence for it; and the sparrows came up there.

'Cheep! where did the fine folk go! they can't stand being blown on, so they've left the country! Have a good journey!'

And the leaves of the wood turned deeper and deeper yellow and one after the other drifted down, the autumn gales roared, it was now late Autumn. And on the bed of yellow leaves the Queen of the Year lay gazing with mild eyes at the twinkling star, and her husband stood

beside her. A gust of wind caught the leaves – it subsided again, then she was gone, but a butterfly, the last one of the year, flew through the cold air.

And the damp mists came, the biting wind and the dark, longest nights. The King of the Year stood with snow-white hair, but he was unaware of this, he thought it was the snowflakes that were falling out of the clouds; a thin layer of snow lay over the green fields.

And the church bells rang out Christmastide.

'The birth-day bells are ringing!' the King of the Year said, 'soon the new pair of rulers will be born, and I, like her, will be granted rest! Rest in the twinkling star!'

And in the fresh green pine wood, where the snow lay, the Christmas angel stood and consecrated the young trees that were to be at its celebration.

'Joy in the home and under the green branches!' the old King of the Year said, the weeks had aged him into a snow-white old man, 'the time approaches for me to rest, the young pair of the year are now to have crown and sceptre!'

'Though the power is yours!' the Christmas angel said. 'Power and not rest! Let the snow lie like a warm blanket over the young seed! learn to put up with another being praised while you are yet ruler, learn to be forgotten and yet to be alive! your hour of freedom will come when Spring comes!'

'When will Spring come!' Winter asked.

'It will come when the stork comes!'

And with white locks and a snow-white beard Winter sat there, ice-cold, old and bent, but strong, like the winter storm and the power of ice, high up on the hill's snowdrifts and looked out towards the South, just as the previous Winter had sat and gazed. – The ice creaked, the skaters wove their way on the gleaming lakes, and the ravens and crows were a fine sight against the white background, no wind stirred. And in the still air Winter tightened his fists, and the ice between the countries became fathoms deep.

Then the sparrows came back again from the town and asked: 'Who is that old man over there?' And the raven sat there again, or one of his sons, which is exactly the same, and it said to them: 'it is Winter! the old man from the previous year. He isn't dead, as the almanac says, but guardian of the Spring that will come!'

'When will Spring come!' the sparrows said, 'for then we will have plenty of time, and a better regime! the old one was no good.'

And in silent thought *Winter* nodded to the leafless, black wood, where every tree showed the lovely form and contours of the branches; and under the winter nap the ice-cold mist of the clouds descended, – the ruler dreamt of the time of his youth and manhood, and when dawn came, the whole wood was coated in beautiful hoar frost, it was Winter's dream of Summer; sunshine caused the frost to sift down from the branches.

'When will Spring come?' the sparrows asked.

'Spring!' rang out like an echo from the hills where the snow lay. And the sun shone with more and more warmth, the snow melted, the birds chirruped: 'Spring is coming!'

And high through the air came the first stork, the second followed it; on the back of each there sat a lovely little child, and they descended onto the open field and kissed the earth, and they kissed the old, still man and, like *Moses* on the mountain, he vanished, borne off in a cloud of mist.

The Story of the Year was over.

'That's all very well!' the sparrows said, 'and all very beautiful too, but it's not according to the almanac, which means it's all wrong!'