Story of the Year

It was the end of January; a terrible blizzard raged; snowy whirlwinds swept through the streets and alleys; snow plastered the windows of houses, fell from the roofs in clumps, and the wind kept driving the passersby along. They ran, flew headlong, until they bumped into each other's arms and stopped for a minute, holding tightly to one another. Carriages and horses were as if powdered; footmen stood on the steps with their backs to the carriages and to the wind, while pedestrians tried to stay in the lee of the carriages under their shelter, the vehicles barely dragging through the deep snow. When finally the blizzard subsided and narrow paths were cleared along the houses, passersby constantly collided and stopped before each other in expectant poses: no one wanted to be the first to step into a snowdrift, yielding the way to another. But then, as if by silent agreement, each sacrificed one leg, lowering it into the snow.

By evening the weather had completely calmed; the sky became so clear, so pure, as if it had been swept out, and even seemed somehow higher and more transparent, while the little stars, as if freshly polished, shone and sparkled with bluish lights. The frost crackled fiercely, and by morning the upper layer of snow had hardened so much that sparrows hopped upon it without sinking in. They darted from drift to drift, jumped onto the cleared paths, but neither here nor there could anything edible be found. The little sparrows were quite frozen.

"Peep!" they said among themselves. "And this is the New Year! It is worse than the old one! It was not worth changing at all! No, we are dissatisfied, and not without reason!"

"And the people, oh the people, what a noise they made welcoming the New Year!" said a little frozen sparrow. "They fired guns, smashed clay pots against doors—in short, they were beside themselves with joy—all because the old year had come to an end! I too was glad at first, thinking that now warmth would arrive; but not at all! It freezes even harder than before! People have evidently lost their wits and mixed up the seasons!"

"Indeed!" chimed in a third—an old sparrow with a gray crest. "They have such a thing—a creation of their own invention—a calendar, as they call it, and they imagine that everything in the world must proceed according to this calendar! Not at all! Spring will come, and then the New Year will begin, but not before; thus it has been ordained in nature once and for all, and I adhere to this reckoning."

"But when will spring come?" asked the other sparrows.

"It will come when the first stork arrives. But he is not particularly punctual, and it is difficult to calculate in advance exactly when he will arrive! However, if one is to find out about this at all, it should not be done here in the city—no one here knows anything properly—but in the countryside! Let us fly there to wait for spring! There it will surely arrive sooner!"

"All this is very well!" said a female sparrow who had long been fluttering about nearby and chirping but had not joined the conversation. "There is only one thing: here in the city I have grown accustomed to certain conveniences, and whether I shall find them in the country I do not know! Here there is a human family; a sensible idea occurred to them—to nail three or four empty flowerpots to the wall. Their upper rims fit tightly against the wall, while the bottoms face outward, and in each bottom there is a small hole through which I freely fly in and out. There my husband and I made our nest, and from there all our chicks flew forth. Naturally, people arranged all this for their own pleasure, to admire us; otherwise they would not have lifted a finger! They throw us bread crumbs—also for their own pleasure—but for us it is nevertheless food! Thus, to some extent we are provided for here, and I think that my husband and I will remain! We too are very dissatisfied, but still we shall stay."

"And we will fly to the country to see if spring is coming!" said the others, and they flew away.

In the village real winter prevailed, and it was perhaps even colder than in the city. A sharp wind swept over the snowy fields. A peasant in large warm mittens rode on a sledge, clapping his hands to knock the frost out of them; the whip lay on his knees, but the emaciated horses trotted along; steam poured from them. The snow squeaked under the runners, while the sparrows hopped in the sledge tracks and froze.

"Peep! When will spring come? Winter drags on something terribly long!"

"Terribly long!" echoed from a high hill covered with snow, rolling across the fields. Perhaps it was only an echo, or perhaps it was the voice of a strange old man sitting on the hill upon a pile of hay. The old man was white as moonlight—with white hair and beard—and dressed in something like a white peasant fur coat. On his pale face his large bright eyes burned intensely.

"What kind of old man is this?" asked the sparrows.

"I know him!" said an old crow sitting on a fence. He condescendingly acknowledged that "we are all mere little birds before the Creator," and therefore benevolently undertook to explain the sparrows' bewilderment.

"I know who he is. This is Winter, last year's old ruler. He has not yet died, as the calendar says, and is appointed regent until the appearance of the young prince, Spring. Yes, Winter still rules our kingdom! Ugh! What, you're frozen stiff, aren't you, little ones?"

"Well, didn't I say," remarked the tiniest sparrow, "that the calendar is an empty human invention! It does not correspond to nature at all. And do people possess any instinct whatsoever? They ought to leave the distribution of the seasons to us—we are created with finer, more sensitive feelings!"

A week passed, then another. The forest had already turned black; the ice on the lake began to resemble solidified lead; clouds... no, what clouds?! A сплошной fog enveloped the entire earth. Large black crows flew in flocks, but silently; all of nature seemed plunged into a heavy sleep. But then a sunbeam glided across the lake, and the ice glittered like molten tin. The snow cover on the fields and hills had already lost its brilliance, yet the white figure of old man Winter still sat in the same place, gazing toward the south. He did not notice that the snowy veil was gradually sinking into the earth, that here and there patches of green turf appeared, upon which crowds of sparrows bustled.

"Chirp-chirp! Chirp-chirp! Could it be spring?"

"Spring!" echoed over the fields and meadows, raced through the dark-brown forests where the trunks of old trees were already clad in fresh green moss. And then from the south appeared the first pair of storks. On the back of each sat a lovely child: on one a boy, on the other a girl. Stepping onto the ground, the children kissed it and walked hand in hand, and wherever their footsteps fell, white flowers bloomed directly upon the snow. The children approached old man Winter and clung to his breast. In that same instant, all three of them, together with the entire landscape, vanished in a cloud of thick, damp fog. A little later the wind blew and instantly dispersed the fog; the sun shone brightly—Winter had disappeared, and upon the throne of nature sat the lovely children of Spring.

"Now this is a New Year!" said the sparrows. "Now, presumably, we shall be rewarded for all our winter hardships!"

Wherever the children turned, everywhere bushes and trees became covered with green buds; grass grew higher and higher; grain fields greened more vividly. The girl showered the earth with flowers; her apron held so many blossoms that,

however hastily she scattered them, the apron remained completely full. In a burst of playfulness, the girl sprinkled the apple and peach trees with a veritable rain of flowers, and the little trees stood in full bloom, not even having had time to properly clothe themselves in greenery.

The girl clapped her hands, the boy clapped his too, and suddenly, from nowhere, flocks of little birds came flying, singing and chirping: "Spring has arrived!"

It was delightful to look around! From one cottage, then another, old grandmothers crept out onto the thresholds to stretch their bones in the sunshine and admire the yellow flowers that gilded the meadows just as they had in the distant youth of these old women. Yes, the world had grown young again, and they said: "What a blessed day today!"

But the forest still remained brownish-green; the trees had no leaves yet, only buds; however, on the forest clearings young wild jasmine already fragrated, violets and anemones bloomed. Every blade of grass swelled with life-giving sap; a lush green carpet spread across the earth, and upon it sat a young couple holding hands. The children of Spring sang, smiled, and kept growing and growing.

A warm little rain drizzled from the sky, but they did not notice it: the raindrops mingled with tears of joy

of the bridegroom and the bride. The young couple kissed, and in that very instant the forest clothed itself in green. The sun rose—all the trees stood adorned in luxurious leafy raiment.

Hand in hand, the bridegroom and the bride walked beneath this fresh, dense canopy, where the greens shimmered with thousands of different shades thanks to the play of light and shadow. Virginally pure, tender foliage spread a life-giving fragrance; brooks and rivers chattered loudly and merrily as they wound their way between velvety-green sedges and variegated pebbles. "Thus it was, is, and shall be forever and ever!" all of nature seemed to say. Hark! The cuckoo began to call, the lark's song rang out! Spring was in full swing; only the willows had not yet removed their downy mittens from their blossoms; so cautious were they—simply tedious!

Days followed days, weeks followed weeks; warmth bathed the earth; waves of hot air penetrated the ears of grain, and they began to turn yellow. The white lotus of the north spread its broad green leaves across the mirror-like surface of forest lakes, and fish hid beneath their shade. On the sunny side of the forest, sheltered from the wind, near the sun-drenched wall of a peasant cottage, where luxurious roses bloomed profusely under the scorching caresses of sunlight and cherry trees

grew, laden with juicy, black, warm berries, sat Summer's beautiful wife, whom we first saw as a little girl, then as a bride. She gazed at dark clouds piling one upon another like tall, black-blue, gloomy mountains; they advanced from three sides and finally hung over the forest like a petrified sea overturned upside down. In the forest everything fell silent, as if by the wave of a magic wand; the breezes lay down, the birds fell mute, all nature froze in solemn expectation, while along the road and the paths people rushed headlong in carts, on horseback, and on foot—all hastening to take shelter from the storm. Suddenly a blinding ray of light flashed, as though the sun had for an instant torn through the clouds, then darkness returned once more and a dull roll of thunder echoed. Water poured from the sky in torrents. Darkness and light, silence and thunderclaps alternated. Over the young reeds, with brown plumes atop their heads, waves rolled upon waves driven by the wind; tree branches vanished entirely behind the dense curtain of rain; light and darkness, silence and thunderous crashes succeeded each other every minute. Grass and grain lay flattened; it seemed they would never again be able to rise. But then the downpour changed into a heavy, sparse rain, the sun peeked out, and large pearls sparkled on blades of grass and leaves; birds began to sing, fish splashed in the water, mosquitoes danced. Upon a stone protruding right at the shore from the salty sea foam sat Summer, a mighty, sturdy, muscular man, warming himself in the sun. Streams of water flowed from his curls, and he looked so refreshed, as though rejuvenated after a cold bath. Rejuvenated and refreshed was all of nature; everything around blossomed with unprecedented splendor, strength, and beauty! Summer had arrived—warm, bountiful summer!

From the clover that had grown thickly in the fields streamed a sweet, life-giving fragrance, and bees buzzed above the site of ancient gatherings. The sacrificial stone, washed by rain, shone brightly in the sun; tenacious blackberry shoots covered it with a dense fringe. The queen bee flew toward it with her swarm; they laid upon the altar the fruits of their labors—wax and honey. No one witnessed the sacrifice except Summer himself and his companion, full of vital force; for them alone were nature's sacrificial gifts prepared.

The evening sky blazed with gold; no church dome could compare with it; from evening dawn until morning dawn the moon shone. It was summer in the courtyard.

And days followed days, weeks followed weeks. Shining scythes and sickles glittered in the fields; apple tree branches bent under the weight of red and golden fruits. Fragrant hops hung in large clusters. In the shade of a hazel bush, sprinkled with nuts nestled in green cradles, rested husband and wife—Summer with his serious, thoughtful companion.

"What luxury!" she said. "What bounty, wherever one looks! How good, how cozy upon the earth, and yet—I know not why myself—I long for... rest, repose... I can find no other words! And already people are plowing the fields again! They eternally strive to obtain more and more! Look, the storks walk along the furrows following the plow... It was they, those Egyptian birds, who brought us here! Do you remember how we flew here, to the north, as children?... We brought with us flowers, sunlight, and green foliage! And now... the wind has nearly stripped it all away; the trees have turned brown, darkened, and resemble southern trees; only they lack the golden fruits that grow there!"

"Do you wish to see golden fruits?" said Summer. "Behold!" He waved his hand—and the forests became speckled with reddish and golden leaves. What magnificence it was! Fiery-red fruits gleamed on rosehip bushes; elder branches covered themselves with large, dark-red berries; ripe wild chestnuts fell spontaneously from their dark-green cradles, and in the forest violets bloomed once more.

But the queen of the year grew ever more silent and pale.

"A chill has blown!" she said. "Damp fogs rise at night. I yearn for our homeland!"

And she gazed after the storks flying southward, stretching out her hands toward them. Then she peered into their emptied nests; in one grew a slender cornflower, in another a yellow charlock, as though the nests had been woven solely to serve as enclosures for them! Sparrows flew in there too.

"Peep! And where have the masters gone? See, a little wind blew upon them—and off they went immediately! Good riddance!"

The leaves on the trees turned yellower and yellower; leaf-fall began; autumn winds rustled—late autumn had arrived. The queen of the year lay upon the ground strewn with yellowed leaves; her gentle gaze was fixed upon the shining stars of heaven; beside her stood her husband. Suddenly a whirlwind arose and whirled the dry leaves into a column. When the whirlwind subsided—the queen of the year was no more; only a butterfly, the last of that year, fluttered in the cold air.

Thick fogs enveloped the earth; cold winds blew; long, dark nights stretched on. The king of the year stood with a head whitened by hoar frost; yet he himself did not know he had turned gray—he thought snow merely powdered his curls! Green fields were covered with a thin snowy veil.

And then bells announced the arrival of Christmas Eve.

"Christmas chimes!" said the king of the year. "Soon a new royal couple will be born, and I shall find rest, soaring away after them to a shining star!"

In a fresh, green pine forest, buried under snow, a Christmas angel appeared and illuminated the young trees destined to serve as symbols of the holiday.

"Joy in human dwellings and in the green forest!" said the aged king of the year; within a few weeks he had transformed into an old man white as moonlight. "The hour of my rest approaches! The crown and scepter pass to the young couple."

"And yet power remains in your hands for now!" said the angel. "Power, but not rest! Cover the young shoots with a snowy blanket! Endure patiently the solemn proclamation of the new ruler, though power still lies in your hands! Bear oblivion patiently, though you still live! The hour of your repose will come when spring arrives!"

"When will spring arrive?" asked Winter.

"When the storks fly from the south!"

And so, gray-haired, gray-bearded, ice-encrusted, old, bent, yet still strong and mighty as snowstorms and blizzards, Winter sat upon a high hill, on a pile of snow, never taking his eyes from the south, just as last year's Winter had done. Ice cracked, snow creaked, skaters glided like arrows over the shining ice of lakes; crows and ravens blackened against the white background; there was not the slightest breeze. Amid this silence Winter clenched his fists, and—thick ice bound all straits.

Sparrows flew again from the city and asked:

"Who is that old man over there?"

On the fence sat the same raven, or perhaps his son—it mattered not—and answered them:

"That is Winter! Last year's ruler! He has not yet died, as the calendar claims, but serves as regent until the young prince—Spring—arrives!"

"When will Spring come?" asked the sparrows. "Perhaps better times will arrive for us once the government changes! The old one is good for nothing!"

And Winter nodded thoughtfully to the bare black forest, where every twig, every bush stood out so clearly, distinctly. And clouds of cold fog enveloped the earth; nature

fell into winter hibernation. The Lord of the Year dreamed of the days of his youth and maturity, and by morning all the forests were clad in a shimmering fringe of frost—this was Summer's dream within Winter; the sun rose, and the fringe crumbled away.

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

"Spring!" echoed from the snowy hill.

And so the sun began to warm ever more warmly, the snow melted, the little birds chirped: "Spring is coming!"

High, high across the heavens flew the first stork, followed by another; on the back of each sat a lovely child. The children stepped onto the fields, kissed the earth, kissed also the silent old man Winter, and he, like Moses from the mountain, vanished into the mist!

The story of the year is ended.

"All this is beautiful and perfectly true," remarked the sparrows, "but it does not follow the calendar, and therefore is good for nothing!"