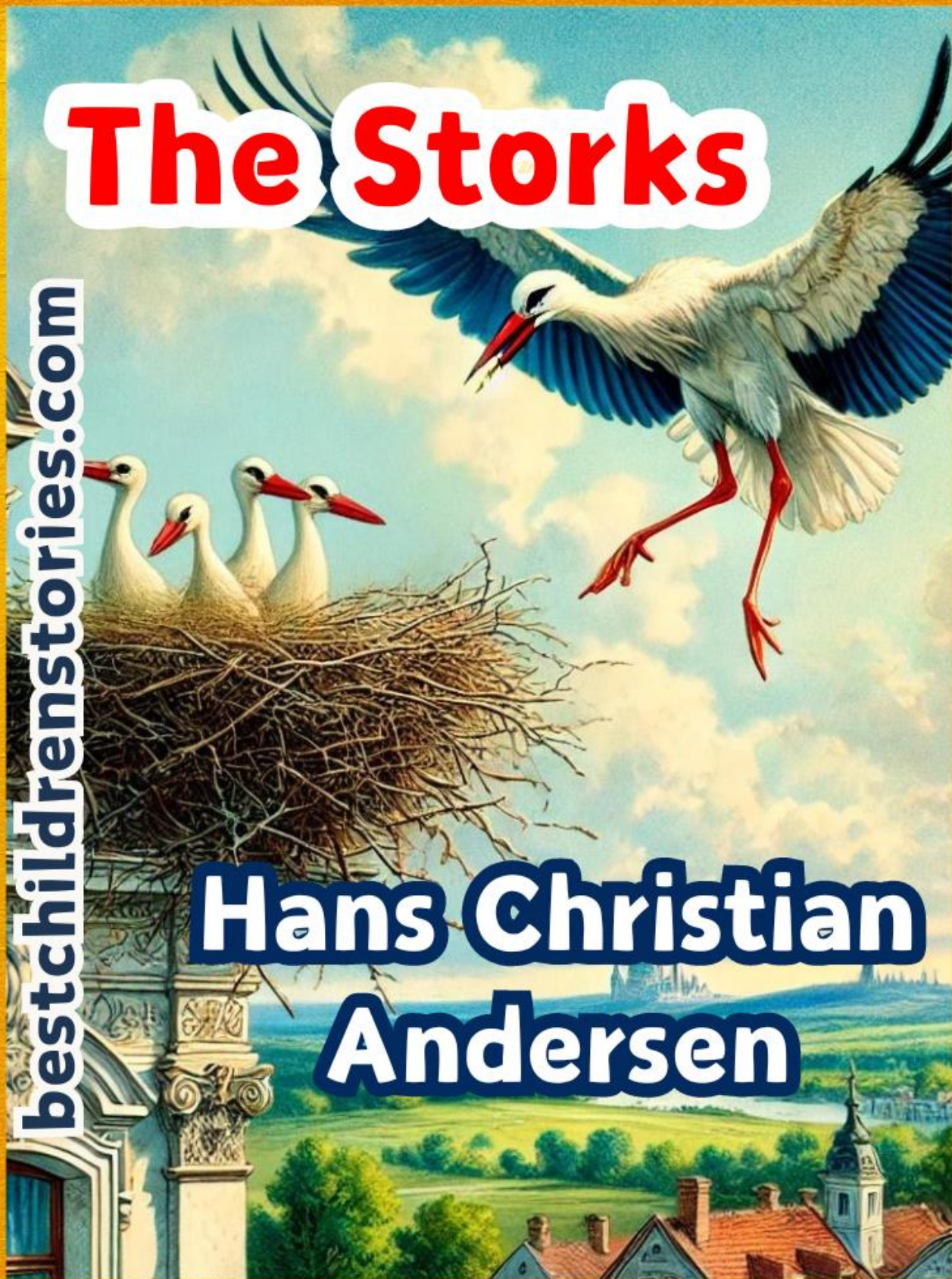


The Storks

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Hans Christian
Andersen



Children's Stories

The Storks

By Hans Christian Andersen

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The Storks

On the roof of a house situated at the extremity of a small town, a stork had built his nest. There sat the mother-stork, with her four young ones, who all stretched out their little black bills, which had not yet become red. Not far off, upon the parapet, erect and proud, stood the father-stork; he had drawn one of his legs under him, being weary of standing on two. You might have fancied him carved in wood, he stood so motionless. ‘It looks so grand,’ thought he, ‘for my wife to have a sentinel to keep guard over her nest; people cannot know that I am her husband, they will certainly think that I am commanded to stand here—how well it looks!’ and so he remained standing on one leg.



In the street below, a number of children were playing together. When they saw the storks, one of the liveliest amongst them began to sing as much as he could remember of some old rhymes about storks, in which he was soon joined by the others—

‘Stork! stork! long-legged stork!

Into thy nest I prithee walk;

There sits thy mate,

With her four children so great.

The first we’ll hang like a cat,

The second we’ll burn,

The third on a spit we’ll turn,

The fourth drown dead as a rat!’

‘Only listen to what the boys are singing,’ said the little storks; ‘they say we shall be hanged and burnt!’

‘Never mind,’ said the mother, ‘don’t listen to them; they will do you no harm.’

But the boys went on singing, and pointed their fingers at the storks: only one little boy, called Peter, said ‘it was a sin to mock and tease animals, and that he would have nothing to do with it.’

The mother-stork again tried to comfort her little ones. ‘Never mind,’ said she; ‘see how composedly your father is standing there, and upon one leg only.’

‘But we are so frightened!’ said the young ones, drawing their heads down into the nest.

The next day, when the children were again assembled to play together, and saw the storks, they again began their song—

‘The first we’ll hang like a cat,

The second we’ll burn!’

‘And are we really to be hanged and burnt?’ asked the young storks.

‘No indeed!’ said the mother. ‘You shall learn to fly: I will teach you myself. Then we can fly over to the meadow, and pay a visit to the frogs. They will bow to us in the water, and say, “Croak, croak!” and then we shall eat them; will not that be nice?’

‘And what then?’ asked the little storks.

‘Then all the storks in the country will gather together, and the autumnal exercise will begin. It is of the greatest consequence that you should fly well then; for every one who does not, the general will stab to death with his bill; so you must pay great attention when we begin to drill you, and learn very quickly.’

‘Then we shall really be killed after all, as the boys said? Oh, listen! they are singing it again!’

‘Attend to me, and not to them!’ said the mother. ‘After the grand exercise, we shall fly to warm countries, far, far away from here, over mountains and forests. We shall fly to Egypt, where are the three-cornered stone houses whose summits reach the clouds; they are called pyramids, and are older than it is possible for storks to imagine. There is a river too, which overflows its banks, so as to make the whole country like a marsh, and we shall go into the marsh and eat frogs.’

‘Oh!’ said the young ones.

‘Yes, it is delightful! one does nothing but eat all the day long. And whilst we are so comfortable, in this country not a single green leaf is left on the trees, and it is so cold that the clouds are frozen, and fall down upon the earth in little white pieces.’— She meant snow, but she could not express herself more clearly.

‘And will the naughty boys be frozen to pieces too?’ asked the young storks.

‘No, they will not be frozen to pieces; but they will be nearly as badly off as if they were; they will be obliged to crowd round the fire in their little dark rooms; while you, on the contrary, will be flying about in foreign lands, where there are beautiful flowers and warm sunshine.’

Well, time passed away, and the young storks grew so tall, that when they stood upright in the nest they could see the country around to a great distance. The father-stork used to bring them every day the nicest little frogs, as well as snails, and all the other stork tit-bits he could find. Oh! it was so droll to see him show them his tricks; he would lay his head upon his tail, make a rattling noise with his bill, and then tell them such charming stories all about the moors.

‘Now you must learn to fly!’ said the mother one day; and accordingly, all the four young storks were obliged to come out upon the parapet. Oh, how they trembled! And though they balanced themselves on their wings, they were very near falling.

‘Only look at me,’ said the mother. ‘This is the way you must hold your heads; and in this manner place your feet,—one, two! one, two! this will help you to get on.’ She flew a little way, and the young ones made an awkward spring after her,—bounce! down they fell; for their bodies were heavy.

‘I will not fly,’ said one of the young ones, as he crept back into the nest. ‘I do not want to go into the warm countries!’

‘Do you want to be frozen to death during the winter? Shall the boys come, and hang, burn, or roast you? Wait a little, I will call them!’

‘Oh no!’ said the little stork; and again he began to hop about on the roof like the others. By the third day they could fly pretty well, and so they thought they could also sit and take their ease in the air; but bounce! down they tumbled, and found themselves obliged to make use of their wings. The boys now came into the street, singing their favourite song—

‘Stork! stork! long-legged stork!’

‘Shall not we fly down and peck out their eyes?’ said the young ones.

‘No, leave them alone!’ said the mother. ‘Attend to me, that is of much more importance!—one, two, three, now to the right!—one, two, three, now to the left, round the chimneypot! That was very well; you managed your wings so neatly last time, that I will permit you to come with me to-morrow to the marsh: several first-rate stork families will be there with their children. Let it be said that mine are the prettiest and best behaved of all; and remember to stand very upright, and to throw out your chest; that looks well, and gives such an air of distinction!’

‘But are we not to take revenge upon those rude boys?’ asked the young ones.

‘Let them screech as much as they please! You will fly among the clouds, you will go to the land of the pyramids, when they must shiver with cold, and have not a single green leaf to look at, nor a single sweet apple to eat!’

‘Yes, we shall be revenged!’ whispered they one to another. And then they were drilled again.

Of all the boys in the town, the forwardest in singing nonsensical verses was always the same one who had begun teasing the storks, a little urchin not more than six years old. The young storks indeed fancied him a hundred years old, because he was bigger than either their father or mother, and what should they know about the ages of children, or grown up human beings! All their schemes of revenge were aimed at this little boy; he had been the first to tease them, and continued to do so. The young storks were highly excited about it, and the older they grew, the less they were inclined to endure persecution. Their mother, in order to pacify them, at last promised that they should be revenged, but not until the last day of their stay in this place.

‘We must first see how you behave yourselves at the grand exercise; if then you should fly badly, and the general should thrust his beak into your breast, the boys will, in some measure, be proved in the right. Let me see how well you will behave!’

‘Yes, that you shall!’ said the young ones. And now they really took great pains, practised every day, and at last flew so lightly and prettily, that it was a pleasure to see them.

Well, now came the autumn. All the storks assembled, in order to fly together to warm countries for the winter. What a practising there was! Away they went over woods and fields, towns and villages, merely to see how well they could fly, for they had a long journey before them. The young storks distinguished themselves so honourably that they were pronounced ‘worthy of frogs and serpents.’ This was the highest character they could obtain; now they were allowed to eat frogs and serpents, and accordingly they did eat them.

‘Now we will have our revenge!’ said they.

‘Very well!’ said the mother; ‘I have been thinking what will be the best. I know where the pool is in which all the little human children lie until the storks come and take them to their parents: the pretty little things sleep and dream so pleasantly as they will never dream again. All parents like to have a little child, and all children like to have a little brother or sister. We will fly to the pool and fetch one for each of the boys who has not sung that wicked song, nor made a jest of the storks; and the other naughty children shall have none.’

‘But he who first sung those naughty rhymes! that great ugly fellow! what shall we do to him?’ cried the young storks.

‘In the pool there lies a little child who has dreamed away his life; we will take it for him, and he will weep because he has only a little dead brother. But as to the good boy who said it was a sin to mock and tease animals, surely you have not forgotten him? We will bring him two little ones, a brother and a sister. And as this little boy’s name is Peter, you too shall for the future be called “Peter!”’

And it came to pass just as the mother said; and all the storks were called ‘Peter,’ and are still so called to this very day.

— THE END —

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