IT was the first of January, and a terrible fall of snow was pelting down and whirling through the streets and lanes. The roofs of the houses were covered with large white masses, and it lay in white heaps on the window sills.
Everybody seemed to be in a great hurry; they ran, jostled against each other, fell into each other's arms, holding fast for a moment, as long as they could stand safely. Coaches and horses looked as if they had been frosted with sugar. The footmen stood with their backs against the carriages, so as to turn their faces from the wind. Everybody looked cold, and everybody was cold. But at last the storm abated, and a narrow path was soon swept clean in front of the houses, and when two persons met in this path both would stand still, for neither liked to step aside in the deep snow. There they would stand for a few minutes, and then, as if by tacit consent, they each sacrificed a leg and buried it in the deep snow, and passed on
Soon troops of children were seen to issue from the door-ways, all muffled up in warm cloaks and furs, dragging their sleds after them, and so [18] joyous and happy it made one feel warm to look at them. Towards evening the wind ceased to blow, the sky looked so lofty and transparent, while the stars shone with new brightness and purity.
The frozen snow crackled under foot, and was quite firm enough to bear the sparrows, who hopped upon it in the morning dawn. They searched for food in the paths which had been swept, but there was little food to be found, and they were terribly cold.
"Tweet, tweet," said one cold little fellow to another one; "they call this New Year, but I think it worse than the old one; we might just as well have kept the old year. I am quite unhappy, and have a right to be so."
"Yes you have! and yet the people ran about and fired off guns, shouted and rang bells to usher in the New Year," said a little shivering sparrow. "They threw things against the doors, and were quite beside themselves with joy, because the old year had disappeared. I was glad, too, because I supposed the warm weather, or at least warm days would come, but my hopes have come to nothing, it freezes harder than ever. I think mankind have made a big mistake in reckoning time."
"That they have," said an old wise looking sparrow, with a white topknot, "they have something they call a calendar, it's an invention of their own, and everything must be arranged according to it, but it won't do. When spring comes, then the year begins. It is the voice of nature, and I reckon by that."
"But when will spring come?" asked they all.
"It will come when the stork returns, but he is very uncertain and seldom visits the city, so the people here know nothing about it. In the country they have more knowledge. Shall we fly away there and wait? We shall be nearer to spring, certainly."
"That may be all very well," said another sparrow, who had been hopping about for a long time chirping, but not saying anything of any consequence, "but I have found a few comforts here in town, which I'm [19] afraid I would miss out in the country. Here in this neighbourhood, lives a good kind family, who has been so sensible as to place two or three flower pots against the wall in the court yard, so that the openings are all turned inward, and the bottom of each points outward. In the latter, a hole has been cut, large enough for me to fly in and out. I and my husband have built a nest in one of these pots, and all our little ones, who have now flown away, were brought up in there. The good people of course, made the whole arrangement that they might have the pleasure of seeing us, and taking care of us. It seems to please the little children very much, to strew bread crumbs for us, and so we have food and ought to be very thankful and consider ourselves well provided for. So I think we will stay where we are, even if spring does come sooner in the country," said the old sparrow, and the other sparrows spread their wings and flew away to the country.
"Now, the little sparrows had never been in the country, except in the summer, and they supposed the fields were always green, the sun always shining, and the clear brooks running full of water, and great was their surprise and disappointment, to find it even colder, by a few degrees, than in town. The sharp winds blew over the snow-covered fields. The farmer, wrapped in warm clothing, sat in his sleigh, and beat his arms across his chest to keep off the cold. The horses ran till they smoked, and frightened the poor little sparrows, as they sat dolefully on the top rail of the fence. Then they hopped down into the wheel ruts hoping to find something to eat, and shivered, crying, "Tweet, tweet, when will spring come?" It is very long coming.
"Very long, indeed," sounded over the field from the nearest snow-covered hill, and the little sparrows hopped on to the fence rail and looked over towards the hill, to see who it was that had spoken, and there sat a wonderful old man, up high on a heap of snow, regardless of wind, and weather. He had a pale face, large clear blue eyes, and long white hair, which the wind played hide and seek with, and he was dressed in icicles.
"Who can that old man be?" asked the sparrows of an old raven, who also sat on a fence near them.
"Why, that is Old Winter, the old man of last year, he is not dead yet, as the calendar says, but acts as guardian to the little Prince spring, who is coming after awhile. Winter rules here still, and he makes you fairly shiver, little ones, does he not?"
"There, did I not tell you so," said the white top-knot sparrow. "The calendar is only an invention of man's, and they know nothing about nature, they ought to have asked some of the birds, as they know all about such tings," and down he hopped into the ruts again, saying, "Tweet, tweet."
The poor little sparrows waited one week, then another, and another, and thought they would surely freeze before spring would come. The forests looked dark, the lake was frozen till it looked like on sheet of lead, and over the land hung damp icy mists. Large black crows flew about in silence; it was as if all nature slept.
At length a sunbeam glided over the lake, and it shone like burnished gold. The white form of Old Winter sat there still, but the sun began to shine, and danced and sparkled over his dress of icicles, until it finally disappeared; patches of green grass appeared here and there, and these were soon covered with sparrows, saying, "Tee wit, tee wit, is spring coming at last?"
Spring! How the cry resounded over field and meadow, and through the dark brown woods, where the fresh green moss gleams on the trunk of the trees, and from the South came the first two storks, flying through the air, and on the back of each, sat a lovely little child. They greeted the earth with a kiss, and wherever they placed their feet, white flowers sprung up through the snow.
Hand in hand, the two golden-haired children approached Old winter, embraced him and clung to his breast, and as they did so, they were enveloped in a deep mist, dark and heavy, that closed over them a veil. The wind arose with a mighty rustling, and cleared the mist away, then the sun shone out warmly. Winter had vanished, and the two beautiful children of spring sat on the throne of the year.
"This is really a New Year," cried the sparrows. "Now we shall be happy and warm once more."