

Robert W. Buchanan (1841-1901)

4 *The Ballad of the Stork*

(Scandinavia.)

The widow on the storm-tost shore of Denmark had her home,
Under the shade of pleasant woods, close to the salt sea-foam;
But little peace was in the hut, and grief was at the door,
For day and night the widow's thoughts were tossing far from shore.

To Him whose white foot stills the waves and bids the storm be done, 5
The widow prayed upon her knees, to send her back her son;
For GOD had sent a watery wind to blow the boy away,
And to the Indies he had sailed all on a summer's day.

'See, mother, mother!' cried the lad, 'thou hast not land nor gold;
The dun cow, fastened to its ring, grows dry and waxes old,— 10
But, running silver from this cup, the water says to me,
'What fool would starve ashore when wealth is on the shining sea!''

And sticking in his cap a sprig of green, he kissed her lips,
And sprang away that summer day, and rowed among the ships;
And, weeping, on the beach she stands,—sails fill and pennons fly,— 15
He stands on deck, and waves his cap—and the great ship goes by.

Three years she waited wearily, and watched with weary eyne,
And spun upon the threshold as she searched the straight sea-line;
And pale she tossed on bed o' straw, and heard the waters moan,
And day still came and went at sea, and still she was alone. 20

Ah, little one! ah, wilful one! now are ye fast asleep!
The waters roar around your bones under the dreadful deep:
Your sleep is in the dark cold depths,—you cannot turn nor cry;
No mother now may keep you warm, or kiss you where ye lie.'

To kirk she hied full wearily upon each holy day, 25

Yet little peace the kirk could give—she had no heart to pray;
But in September, when they read the tale of other years,
About the widow's son of Nain, her heart was full to tears.

Then to the hut she weeping turned, and wearied on once more,
And sadly watched the tall ash tree that grew beside her door; 30
For there a Stork had made his home for many a year, and he
Was now an ancient Stork, and knew full many a far countree.

For every autumn on the roof he stood and waved his wing,
Then cloudwards rose, and in the wind went southward travelling;
And every spring on stately wing back to the hut he hied, 35
Far as the Red Sea had he fared, with summer for his guide.

And now the widow saw him rise, less fleet of wing and strong,
For now he was an ancient Stork, nor would his years be long.
'Ah me!' she thought; 'with thee, old friend, my laddie played full sweet—
Green leaves he tied around thy neck, and gave thee food to eat. 40

'Perchance thy sharp round eye hath seen what still is hid from me—
My little one afloat and dead upon a glassy sea.
Here hast thou dwelt for many a year, and we have watched thy nest,
But thou art powerless in thy turn to help my heart to rest.'

How! powerless? GOD's mild will to work what thing is quite unmeet? 45
Where is the widow's wandered son? wrapt in his winding-sheet?
Nay, on Morocco's blazing shore with slaves behold him stand,—
Weeping, he shakes a chain, and looks towards his native land.

He heeds not yonder sweet-eyed slave, who smiles to soothe his pain,
Nor yonder fat and turbaned Turk, who holds him in his chain; 50
He thinks upon his mother's hut, he bites his bitter lips,
He strains his eyes, and in a mist of tears he sees the ships.

But suddenly he stares amazed, for near him on the sand,
With long spare legs and ancient air, he sees a stranger stand—
A Stork, a grim and ancient Stork, full dim and dull of e'e, 55

The picture of the Stork he knew within his own countree.

‘Ah! could it be indeed my old brave comrade travelling?
He hath the same bright beak and feet, the same black ruffled wing;
I seem to know the very walk, the solemn stately pace,
And I could almost swear he hath some memory of my face.’ 60

’Tis spring again in Denmark, and all is green once more,
‘Spring comes again! the stork has come!’ they cry upon the shore;
And all the folk wear feast-day dress, and the good priest is there;
And with the rest the widow stands, and looks into the air.

It is the Stork, the ancient Stork,—he lights upon the ground: 65
‘Oh, see!’ they cry, ‘around his feet a paper tightly bound.’
They loose it then with eager hands, they open it and read,—
The widow screams, for here is wrought a miracle indeed!

‘O mother, here I dwell alive, but held in slaverie,
So gather, gather gold, and send a ransom o’er the sea. 70
If this should reach thy hands, bless GOD, who sent the bird to me.’—
And all the rest was guidance how to send and set him free.

Oh, who that Sabbath was so pinched as grudge from out his store
A silver mite to fill the plate they placed at the kirk door,
The cow-girl brought the piece of gold that was to buy a gown, 75
The beggar slyly neared the plate, and threw his beggings down.

Now in his mother’s hut again the sailor sits once more,
Content to cast a fisher’s net, nor wander far from shore.
But blessings on the ancient Stork, and honours three times three,
Who followed summer round the world, and set the sailor free! 80

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