



3

*A Knock
in
the
Night*

A new day was dawning across the dunes. In the distance the sun-shot mist was rising from the bog lands. The north chimney at Gravsted sent a tendril of smoke trailing off into the morning, as though it, too, had gone in search of the goat which the flaxen-haired Siri was seeking. "Come along home," she called impatiently when she found it. "Don't you know a new day has come?"

As she led the goat back to the cottage to be milked, Siri made a discovery that sent her rushing into the house, crying, "Mother! Erik! The baby storks have hatched!"

They all hurried out into the yard. There stood the father stork flapping his wings excitedly. Erik scrambled up the ladder. He had to see for himself if something had come out of the deep-pitted white eggs that had been laid in the nest so long ago. As he did so, the father stork flew away to search for small fish in the salt marsh.

It was plain the mother stork was not anxious for company, but since Siri and Erik had brought her small fish and eels while she was sitting on her eggs and had spoken kind words to her, she had obligated herself. So she stood beside her nest and kept a careful watch over it, while Erik clambered up to the rim and peered in.

"Three!" he shouted to the two below. "There are three grey-white young ones in the nest as downy as ducklings."

"What are they doing?" Siri asked impatiently.

"The little ones are snapping their beaks open and begging for food."

"Maybe the mother and father are not giving them enough to eat," said Siri. "So come off the roof, so we can go to school and get the children to help us find bugs for them."

"No, the little storks can't eat that. The mother stork has to chew everything for them first," Mother explained.

"No wonder they're hungry and almost starving to death," said Erik. He and Siri set off over the fields in such a hurry that King Christian the Builder had to run to catch up with them. In their eagerness to get to school as fast as possible, they cut right across the Mound Hill. It wasn't difficult for the chicks to get over it, but King Christian the Builder was too fat to hurry. He called to the children to wait, but they'd forgotten him. All they had in their minds were the young storks on the chimney.

When they reached school and told the others about the young storks, everyone was eager to know what they ate. "Insects and minnows, I guess," Erik said, "at least while they're small. When they get larger, they eat frogs."

At noon everyone found something to take to the storks on the roof at Gravsted. They carried their lunches and ate them on the way. And every step they took, their thoughts were on the stork family that had been so foolish as to settle on the chimney at Gravsted when wagon wheels had been raised for them on every other gaard in the village.

"My grandfather had a stork family that built a nest on his roof once," Pelle said. "They came back every single year for twenty years and built on the same nest. Some years their young ones of the year before came back with them and tried to get the nest away from them. Then they had to fight for it, but the old ones always won."

"If they built on top of their nest twenty years in a row, it must have been almost as high as a house," said Aage.

"It was," Pelle declared.

The children said nothing, but they put little stock in what Pelle said. They had learned from experience that what he and his people had was always bigger and better than what anyone else had. So it was only to be expected that the storks that had belonged to their family would have nests as high as a house.

Mother stork was sitting on her nest warming her three little ones when the children arrived from the school. She had to get off the chimney and look out over the eaves before she could believe that such a disaster as this had come to visit her.

"We'll get a tin from the house and put all our insects and things in it," Siri said. "Then Erik can climb up the ladder and give it to her."

The mother stork met him at the eaves with wrath in her eyes, but when she saw the purpose of his mission she selected a few items off the plate and promptly swallowed them. So it appeared the little ones in the nest would have to get it secondhand, after all.

The school children stood below and shrilled with delight when they saw their offerings had been accepted. Some of the boys were also determined to clamber up the ladder and have a look in the nest, but Mother said the children would have to wait until the young storks were a few weeks older.

After watching the mother and father stork stalking about their nest for a few more minutes, the children set out for school again, chattering excitedly about the little newcomers.

"Three storks," said Pelle. "That's nothing. The ones that built on my grandfather's chimney had six little storks in their nest."

"Well they certainly didn't have them all in the same year," Siri said, "because storks don't have more than three young ones a year. They can't feed more than that."

It was not until school was dismissed for the day that the children suddenly began to wonder where King Christian the Builder was.

"Who had him at noon?" Siri wanted to know.

No one had carried him at noon, and no one had seen him that day. Siri and Erik became panic stricken. They ran around the schoolhouse and down to the sea, calling and calling, but they couldn't find the missing duckling.

"Maybe he went home," someone suggested. So they all raced over the fields to Gravsted, but Mother said she hadn't seen him since he ran along after them to school that morning.

The truth burst on them all with sickening suddenness. King Christian had disappeared! Siri and the small girls in the first grade cried. Their duckling was lost. What if they never found him?

"Don't cry," said Mother. "Go back over the fields and look for him. I'm sure nothing worse has happened to him than that he's fallen into a hole."

So the children set out in search of the missing duckling. They were all silent, because this was a sorrow that touched them all. "I guess this is the beginning of things," said Aage. His voice sounded so doleful and tragic that all the children demanded to know what he meant.

"There is more than one who has seen the light at the Great Mound in the night, and that is a warning."

"A warning of what?" Erik demanded.

"My father says the Spirit of the Mound is sending out a fire warning to the people on Gravsted to move off. If they don't, a calamity will come to them."

"Do you think the calamity is that we'll never find King Christian the Builder again?" little Trunta wanted to know.

"Maybe, because my father says misfortune drove off all the other owners of the place before Siri and Erik's mother bought it."

"You mean superstition drove them off," Erik cut in angrily. "Dead people don't bother the living because they've gone home to God, or at least that's where they should be."

The children said nothing more. A sudden hopelessness, however, possessed them; something they'd never felt before. They knew what their parents said at home about the lights that the villagers had seen among the Viking graves at Gravsted.

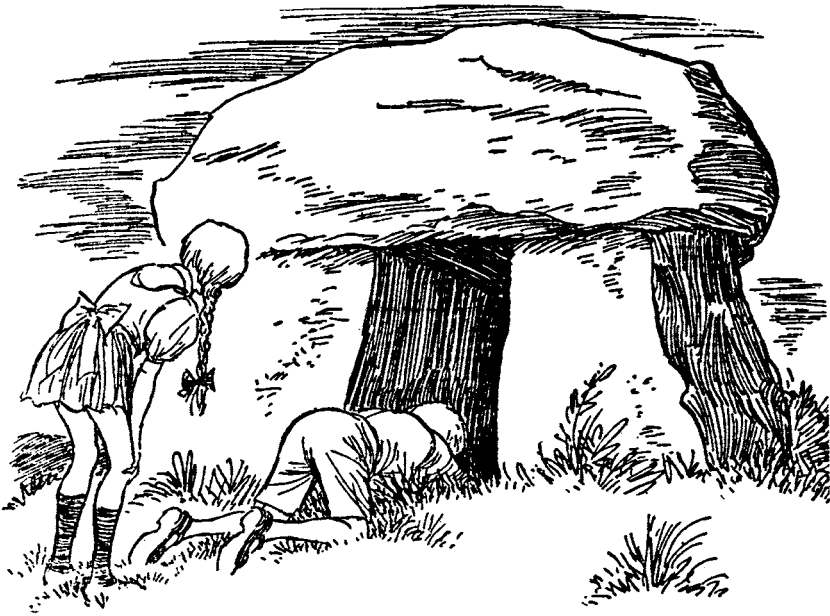
Suddenly it occurred to Erik that he and Siri, in their eagerness to get to school as fast as possible that morning, had run across the pasture where the dolmen¹ was standing. "We have to go there and look for the duckling," Erik decided. Off they rushed, but the rest of the children wouldn't go with them.

Whatever fear the two from Gravsted had for themselves, they forgot in their anxiety for the duckling. As they ran calling from place to place, their minds were racked with guilt, because they'd become so interested in the young storks that they'd forgotten about their beloved King Christian the Builder. "If we can't find him," sobbed Siri, "it's our own fault. We should've carried him to school."

Before them the high stones of the dolmen stood dark and gaunt against the evening sky. They'd never gone near it before, but this night they ran up the hill, ignoring their fears. Suddenly they heard a sound. "What is it?" Siri asked with both hope and fear in her voice.

"I don't know," Erik managed to say, "but it might be our duckling." The two stood still and listened. "The sound is coming from the dolmen," he added. They advanced

1 Dolmen: A grave made of stones raised on end, with a ledge of stone across the top.



cautiously toward the ancient tomb. Erik felt nervous, but he didn't draw back as he said, "I think the duck has fallen in there and maybe can't get out. I'll have to crawl in and try to get him." He got down on all fours and crept into the opening, which yawned darkly between the two upright blocks of granite. "It looks like there might be a cave in there," he said.

They shared the same fear; if there was a cave behind that narrow opening, Erik might have to crawl into it. Their mother had told them that dolmens were community graves. There might be skeletons in there. Erik hesitated before he crawled any further; then another terrified and spent little cry reached him. Come what may, he meant to get the duckling.

He felt around in the darkness. His hand came in contact with soil that had been freshly turned. Then he touched something soft and trembling. "I've got him!" Erik

shouted and backed out of the hole, tenderly clutching the frightened and soil-worn King Christian.

When they were out in the fading light again, they saw that the down of the duckling was packed with damp soil. "I guess he's been trying all day to get out of there, only to fall back into the hole again," said Erik. "I felt a whole big mound of soft dirt inside. I guess some animal's been digging there. It's a good thing it didn't find the duckling, or we might've lost him."

"Poor little thing. Just think, he hasn't had anything to eat today," said Siri. Both of them set off for home on the run.

They saw their mother coming to meet them. They'd been away for so long that she'd become anxious about them. "We found him!" Erik greeted her joyously. "He'd fallen into the opening of the dolmen so I had to crawl in and get him out."

"Erik, you didn't actually crawl in there?" Mother cried in alarm.

The children stared at her in surprise. "Why, what's wrong about doing that?" Erik asked. "Didn't you say we never have anything to fear from the dead?"

"Certainly not from the dead," said Mother, "but from the grave itself. Don't you realize that the supports of that grave were put in there over a thousand years ago? The whole thing can crumble just from a breath of air. You might have gotten in there and had the whole weight of stone fall down on you. Promise me you'll never do anything like that again, no matter what gets into that grave."

"I know what I'm going to do right away," announced Erik. "I'm going to take some boards up there and block the entrance so no other creature that belongs to us will ever fall in again."

At that moment Siri discovered her mother had a letter in the pocket of her apron. "You've heard from someone. Is it from Grandfather?" she asked excitedly.

"It is," Mother said, "and he sends a clipping from an old Copenhagen paper, which should be of interest to us if there's anything to it. Grandfather believes the Great Mound on our property is the grave of Eirek Goldenbeard, a Viking chief. He says if it is, there may be Viking treasure buried there."

She handed the clipping to the children. They read that a new saga² had been found relating the adventures of Eirek Goldenbeard. It also gave an account of the costly funeral of the chief when he was mound-laid in Askested.

"Askested?" echoed Erik. "Wasn't that around here somewhere?"

"Yes," said Mother, "the town below us is supposed to be on the site of old Askested."

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had a Mound with treasure inside it!" Siri cried.

"It's very unlikely," replied Mother. "Every century since the year 890, when the King died, there've been grave robbers. I doubt very much that this tomb has been left unrifled for so long."

"Grandfather is a Professor of Archaeology. Do you suppose he'd open up the Mound and learn what's inside it?" Siri asked, her eyes sparkling with eagerness.

"Grandfather has been saving up money ever since I can remember, so he would have enough to open a Mound when he found the right one," Mother explained. "I doubt if he could find a better specimen anywhere in Denmark than our Great Mound here at Gravsted."

With the possibility of their grandfather coming to their farm this summer, Siri and Erik could hardly wait to get King Christian the Builder fed and bathed before they sat down to write him a letter urging him to come to Gravsted as soon as school was out. After many attempts and much discussion they finally wrote:

2 Saga: narrative story about legendary people and events.

*Dear Bedstefar:*³

We're inviting you to come and open our big Viking Mound this summer. King Christian the Builder fell into the dolmen today and couldn't get out. Erik had to crawl in and get him. The roof could have fallen in but it didn't. The Great Mound is as long as a city block in Copenhagen, so we're sure you'd be satisfied with it. A stork family has laid sticks across our chimney and built a nest on top of them, which is supposed to be good luck. We think that since we have a fine Viking Mound in our family now, you should come and dig in it, instead of going and digging in somebody else's. Siri and I, Erik, have a spade each, so we'll be glad to help you dig. Our respects to you, and hoping you are the same.

*Your daughter's children,
Siri and Erik from Gravsted.*

Although Mother thought it was too late to get a stamp to mail the finished letter, the writers said there was no time to lose. They must get it mailed without delay, before Grandfather decided upon some other Mound. They ran all the way to the Post Office, but luck was against them. The door was locked. "We'll have to find the Postmaster so we can buy a stamp," Erik said. "I'm sure he's at home."

They immediately set out for the house of the Postmaster and banged at the knocker. The Postmaster himself came running to the door, expecting to find a messenger of war standing on his doorstep.

"We need a stamp so we can post this letter right away," Erik explained breathlessly. "The Post Office is closed so we came over here."

"We wondered if you'd sell us a five-öre stamp," added Siri. She held up a coin before the scowling Postmaster, so he could see they were offering him some real business.

When he saw it was only the two children from Gravsted, he frowned and growled, "You're not supposed

3 Bedstefar: Danish for grandfather.

to come here bothering me after hours.” However, he disappeared inside and before long came back with the required stamp.

“What kind of news can you have that is so urgent?” he wanted to know.

“We made a discovery today about our Mound being an important Viking grave, so we want our grandfather to come and excavate it, because he’s a Professor,” Erik declared.

The Postmaster’s face darkened. “What is this I hear? Is there anyone in this parish who would be witless enough to want to desecrate the graves of our forefathers? Let nothing like that happen here, for I warn you I will oppose it to the end.”

The children backed away. “Yes, Herr Postmaster,” they stammered, but, nevertheless, went to the Post Office and mailed their letter. However, as they found their way toward home that evening, their hearts were filled with misgivings that couldn’t be stilled until they told their mother what the Postmaster had said.

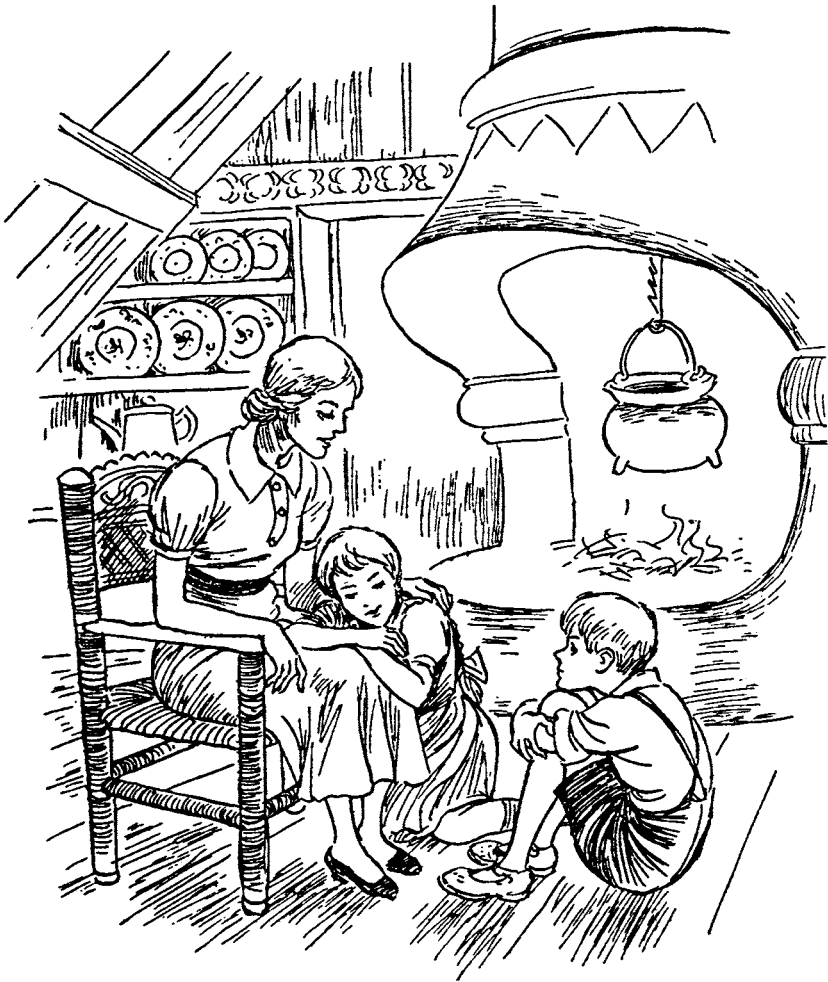
“I’m sorry I didn’t warn you against saying anything to people around here about the Mound,” she said. She put down her sewing long enough to question them more about what they’d said.

“What can he do to us, Mother?” Siri asked,

“People who have nothing better to do than to meddle in the affairs of others can always find a way to make trouble,” she said. “But say nothing in the future about the clipping in Grandfather’s letter and I’m sure everything will be alright.”

Siri and Erik sat down beside the fire to warm the spring chill out of their fingers. The three-legged kettle was bubbling on the blaze, filled with ölegröd.⁴ Beside it a pan of fresh fish was frying. These familiar sounds and odors seemed to draw them all together and push the rest of the

4 ölegröd: porridge made of ale.



world away. It wasn't long before Siri and Erik forgot there was more to the world than the storks on the chimney and the little family under their own roof.

They felt this peace more deeply than ever as they watched the fire leaping up the chimney shaft. The spring wind moaning around the corners added to the contentment of the three gathered around the blaze. "It's difficult losing anything without gaining something in return," Mother had said once. This night Siri and Erik knew she'd spoken a deep truth.

They were preparing to sit down to their simple meal when there was a sound of steps on the stoop. The next moment there was a rap on the door. There was something about the rap that told the three that whoever stood outside had never rapped on this door before.

Who could have come to their house at this time of night? There was an anxious look in Mother's eyes as she said, "Erik, go and see who it is!"

When he opened the door, there was no one outside at all, only the wind beating at the limbs of the beech overhead. The boy went outside to see if there might be a wagon at the gate, but there was none. He returned into the house with a frown. "We must not have heard anyone after all," he said as he closed the door behind him. But there was a worried look on Mother's face that didn't disappear until they'd finished eating and she'd once more resumed her sewing.

As Siri wiped the last plate and slipped it into its place in the plate rack, she said, "Mother, will you tell us a saga."

"What do you want to hear?" Mother asked. She knew more stories than she could have told in a year of nights.

"Tell us about . . ." Suddenly the light of inspiration glowed brightly in Siri's blue eyes. "Tell us about the first King Christian the Builder." Erik joined in her urging.

Mother began, "The boy known in history as King Christian the Fourth, became King of Denmark and Norway when he was eleven years old."

"Eleven. That's how old I am now," Siri said with a smile.

"He wasn't crowned King until he came of age, however," Mother continued. "In the meantime, he showed a daring spirit and a fine mind that gave promise of his becoming a great King. He had much longer and more difficult lessons to learn than you two. After his book lessons were over, he sat in the council and learned matters of state. Would you like to hear how he helped to bring justice upon a bad noble when he was fourteen years old?"

The children nodded.

“The noblemen of that time were often so powerful that the courts didn’t dare punish them for crimes. One day a man in the powerful Friis family attacked another young nobleman in the street and injured him so badly, he was crippled for life. The case was taken to court, but the court only fined him.

“The prince listened to the judgment. ‘Is there not a stricter law under which this man can be tried?’ he demanded, as he saw how the case was going.

“‘In Skaane there is a law covering an offense of this kind which applies to serfs, your Majesty.’

‘Is, then, a serf in Skaane to have more rights than a nobleman in the rest of Denmark?’ the prince wanted to know.”

“And what happened to the bad noble?” Erik asked.

“He was punished so severely that he never dared cripple anyone else again,” Mother replied.

“Good for the prince! Tell us some more stories about what King Christian did when he was a young man.”

“This story deals with another case that came up in court. A great noble had sued a widow for 9,000 daler⁵ for money he said he’d lent her husband. She said her husband had never borrowed any money from anyone. He produced some papers on which appeared her name, as well as that of her dead husband. The widow said she’d never seen those papers before. But the Court wouldn’t believe her, so she was sentenced to pay the sum. But the widow had spunk.”

“What did she do?” Siri urged.

“I bet she went to the King,” said Erik.

“That’s exactly what she did.”

“And what did the King say?”

5 Daler: old Danish method of counting money. Used from 1625 to 1873.

"He said, 'Let me see the paper on which this agreement was made.' It was found, and he noted that the paper came from a mill that'd been started two years after the date of the agreement."

"How did he know that?" Eric asked.

"Because of the watermark in the paper," said Mother. "He could tell which mill it had come from, and he knew when that mill had been started."

"He was some King!" Erik exclaimed. "We made no mistake in naming our duckling after him! Tell us some more about him. How did he get the name of Builder?"

"He studied his lessons and learned them so well that he became a very wonderful architect. Some of the buildings in Copenhagen, which you have seen, were built by him."

"Which ones?" Siri asked.

"There is the great Bourse, the Round Tower, the Palace of Rosenborg, and the rebuilt Frederiksborg. He laid out the little quarter for sailors in Copenhagen, which you have often seen; and he built Regentsen, the dormitory at the University for poor students. He could build a ship as well as a ship builder. He had a yardstick in his walking cane, and when he went down to the shipyards he used to take it out and measure up the work of his builders, to see how much they knew about their work."

"Tell us more about him," Erik requested.

Mother cast a warning glance at the clock.

"We'll go straight to bed if you'll tell us one more."

"Well, then, I'll tell you how he made the King of Sweden so angry that he died of wrath."

"Did that really happen?" Siri wondered.

"Oh, yes, it happened alright," Mother said. "The Scandinavians in the old days could do nothing better than hate each other. It wasn't until they learned to love one another and help each other in time of stress that they were able to earn the respect of the world. But this happened before they had that much sense."

"Was it another war?" Erik wanted to know.

"Yes, it was. Sweden and Denmark had been fighting about some foolish clause in the succession.⁶ Sweden had lost so many battles that at last the King of Sweden decided he would be a hero, if his soldiers could not be. So he challenged King Christian to fight a duel with him."

"And he lost the duel?"

"No. He was an old man, so King Christian wrote him a letter that said, 'You had better catch a doctor, old man, and have him look after your head piece.' When the King read that letter he became so furious that he died, and King Gustavus Adolphus took his place."

"Gustavus Adolphus?" echoed Siri. "Wasn't he the Swedish King who fought in the Thirty Years War?"

"Yes," said Mother. "He was one of the two greatest kings that Sweden ever had."

"Couldn't you just tell us something about him tonight?" Erik ventured.

"No. Men and women who wish to become great kings and queens, and boys and girls who wish to become great men and women must go to bed early so their minds and bodies will have a chance to grow as they should."

"Just one more question?" Siri begged. "When did King Christian the Fourth live?"

"He was born in 1577 and died in 1648." Then Mother added, "Do you remember what was going on in the rest of the world at that time?"

"I know," Siri spoke up. "He died soon after the Pilgrims landed in the New World, but not until the Swedes had made their first settlement in America on the Delaware River."

That was definitely the end of storytelling for the night. The children thanked their mother. Then, with a little spank behind, they were hurried off to bed.

⁶ Succession: the order in which a person succeeds to the throne.

But when the last ember died out on the hearth, Mother still sat there busily stitching. She felt disturbed and insecure and filled with nameless fears. It was as if strange influences were moving around her. She hadn't felt so filled with premonitions since that night when her husband had brought Herr Adel home and declared he had taken him into his business.

It was this feeling of insecurity that caused her to lay down her sewing to make sure the door was locked. As she got to her feet, she glimpsed something white at the window. It was a face—a human face. Somebody had been standing at the window watching her.

She went cold with fear. She'd been so sure that she was safe here. Did she have an enemy somewhere who was intending to harm her family and herself? Then she thought about the villagers' negative feelings regarding the Great Mound on her farm. Was somebody interested in driving her off this place? If so—why? Whatever happened, she mustn't let the children know she'd seen anything at the window. If news of the Mound spread, she could expect worse things to happen than strange faces at her window. She must warn the children again when morning came.

"It's too bad that article had to appear in the paper," she told herself. "It'll point out to every thief in the country that a fortune in loot may lie hidden under that Mound."