



3 The Letter Box

Santa is a sleepy little village in Spain. A priest, who was a very old man, lived in the village. His cottage was near the church and right in the middle of a big orchard.

There were many fruit trees in the orchard. Little boys and girls often came to take the fruit, but the priest never shouted at them or punished them. He only looked at them through his round glasses and smiled. He knew who took away more fruit than the children. The birds did! Hundreds of birds came to peck at the fruit on the trees.

In the spring, the old priest noticed that the birds were busy all day. They built nests in the tree trunks, in the holes of the church walls and in branches outside the priest's window. They hopped in and out of nests with twigs, wool, hay or feathers in their beaks.

New Words



sleepy **quiet and peaceful**
orchard **a field of fruit trees**
noticed **saw**
twigs **very small sticks**
hay **dried grass**

One day, the priest's helper, who was called Maria, burst into his room.

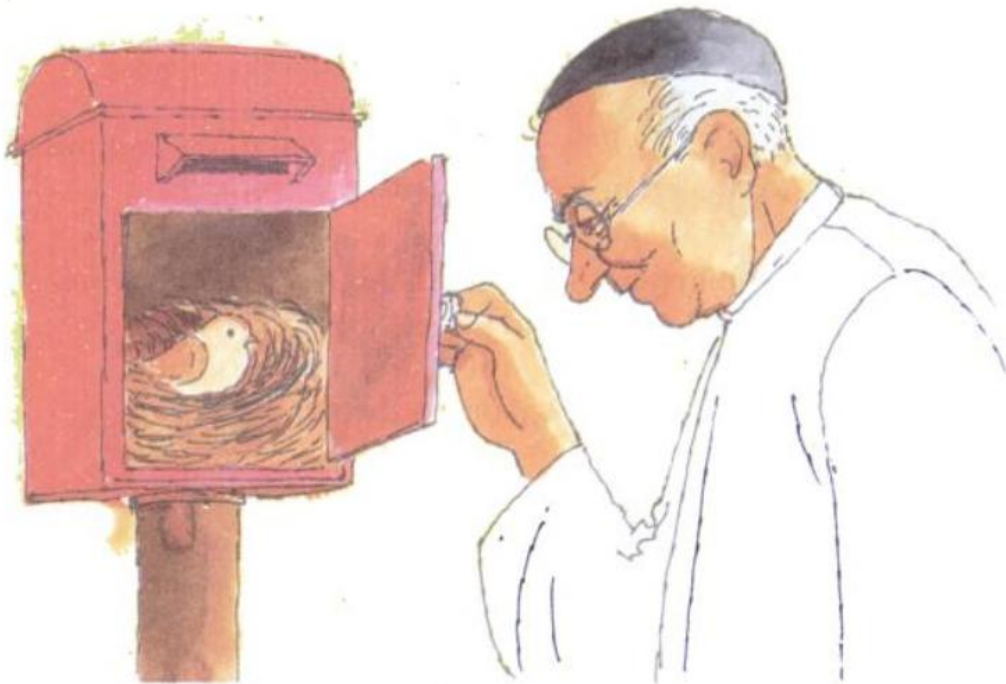
"You will not believe what they are doing!" she cried.

"Who, Maria?"

"The birds," she said.

"What are they doing?"

"They are building a nest in your letter box at the bottom of the garden," she replied. "I opened it to see if there were any letters for you. And what did I see? Bits of hay, paper, twigs and wool!"



New Words >>

burst came in suddenly and very quickly, rushed
bottom of the garden at the end of the garden
sparrow a small, brown bird

The old priest laughed. "They must be sparrows," he said.

He hurried off to look inside the letter box. There he saw two busy, brown sparrows. They were building their nest.



"I know you, my little ones," smiled the priest. "In a few days, you will have three or four brown eggs. When the eggs hatch, you will need three weeks to bring up your family. All right, I will make sure that no one disturbs you."

The old priest carefully locked the letter box. "If I lock the letter box, my little sparrows will be safe," he explained to Maria.

After a few days, only the father sparrow flew in and out of the letter box. "Ah," thought the old priest, "the mother sparrow is sitting on her eggs."

A few more days went by. The priest bent down and put his ear to the letter box.

"They are cheeping!" he cried happily. "The eggs have hatched!"

Now, while the old priest was listening to the birds in his letter box, an important meeting was taking place in Barcelona. The Archbishop and some priests were talking about the old priest of Santa.

"The priest in Santa is too old now," said the Archbishop. "We should send a young priest there instead."

New Words >>

hatch Eggs hatch when they break open and baby birds come out.

bring up look after as the young ones grow

cheeping Cheeping is a sound made by very young birds.

Archbishop a very senior person in the Church

Barcelona a big city on the east coast of Spain

instead in his place



“But the villagers love him,” replied the priests. “Let him work in the village for some more time.”

The Archbishop thought hard. At last, he said, “I know what to do. I will set him a test to find out if he is too old. I will ask him to come to see me in three days. If he comes, I will let him stay in Santa. If he does not come, I will send a new, young priest to Santa.”

The Archbishop picked up his pen and started to write a letter.

The next day, the postman dropped the Archbishop’s letter into the old priest’s letter box. It fell to the bottom of the box and lay beside the nest. No one saw the postman who came to the bottom of the garden and put the letter in the box. No one opened the letter box because they did not want to disturb the sparrows.

For three weeks, the mother sparrow and father sparrow carried food in and out of the letter box. The baby sparrows cheeped louder and louder. Then, one by one, they came to the opening of the letter box and flew away. The priest counted four baby sparrows.

The next morning, the priest went to the letter box at the bottom of his garden. “Toc, toc,” he knocked.

There was no sound. He opened the box. There were no birds inside. But a long, white envelope fell out on to the grass. The priest opened the letter.

New Words >>

envelope the cover you put a letter into





“This came three weeks ago,” he sighed, “but I did not open it. The Archbishop asked me to see him in three days. I have failed his test. Now he will send me away from Santa.” A tear came to his eye.

He looked up and saw the sparrow family. They were sitting in a tree just above the letter box, singing happily.

“Ah well,” he smiled sadly. “I must leave Santa. But, at least, I helped you to bring up your children.”

