



NORTH WALES TALES

Carys and the Singing Birds of Harlech Castle

Harlech Castle, North Wales

Long, long ago, when the sea still came right up to the foot of Harlech Castle, a girl named Carys lived in a cottage on the shore.

Every morning she climbed the long flight of stone steps that ran up from the water to the castle gate. In those days, boats could sail straight to the bottom of the steps and pass food up through the water-gate. Carys liked to count the steps as she climbed. She never quite got the same number twice.

The castle was built of local grey stone by King Edward the First, a long while back, between 1282 and 1289. By the time Carys was small it was already very old, with a huge gatehouse and high walls inside walls.

One windy morning, Carys heard something odd at the top of the steps. Birds. Hundreds of little brown birds, sitting all along the battlements. But they were not singing. Each one opened its beak and out came a single, sad note. *Peep*. And then nothing.

An old grey bird hopped down to her.

"We have lost our song," he said. "We used to sing the whole castle awake. Now we can only remember one note each."

Carys thought hard. "One note each," she said slowly. "But there are hundreds of you. If you each sang your one note at just the right moment, you would have a whole tune again."

The grey bird tilted his head. "And who would teach us the right moments?"

"I will," said Carys.

So all that day she walked along the battlements. To the bird on the gatehouse she said, "You begin." To the bird beside him, "You come next." One by one she put their little notes in order, the way you thread beads onto a string.

It took until the sun went pink over the sea. But at last Carys lifted her arm, the way she had seen the choir master do in the village, and brought it gently down.

Peep. Peep-peep. Peeeeeep.

The notes ran along the wall from bird to bird, and joined up, and became a tune. A brave, bright, marching sort of tune that made you want to stand up tall. It rolled out over the castle and down the long steps and across the water.

The birds were so happy they sang it again, and again.

Fishermen far out at sea heard it and smiled. Years and years later, people still remembered that proud Harlech tune. They put words to it and called it "Men of Harlech," and folk sing it to this very day.

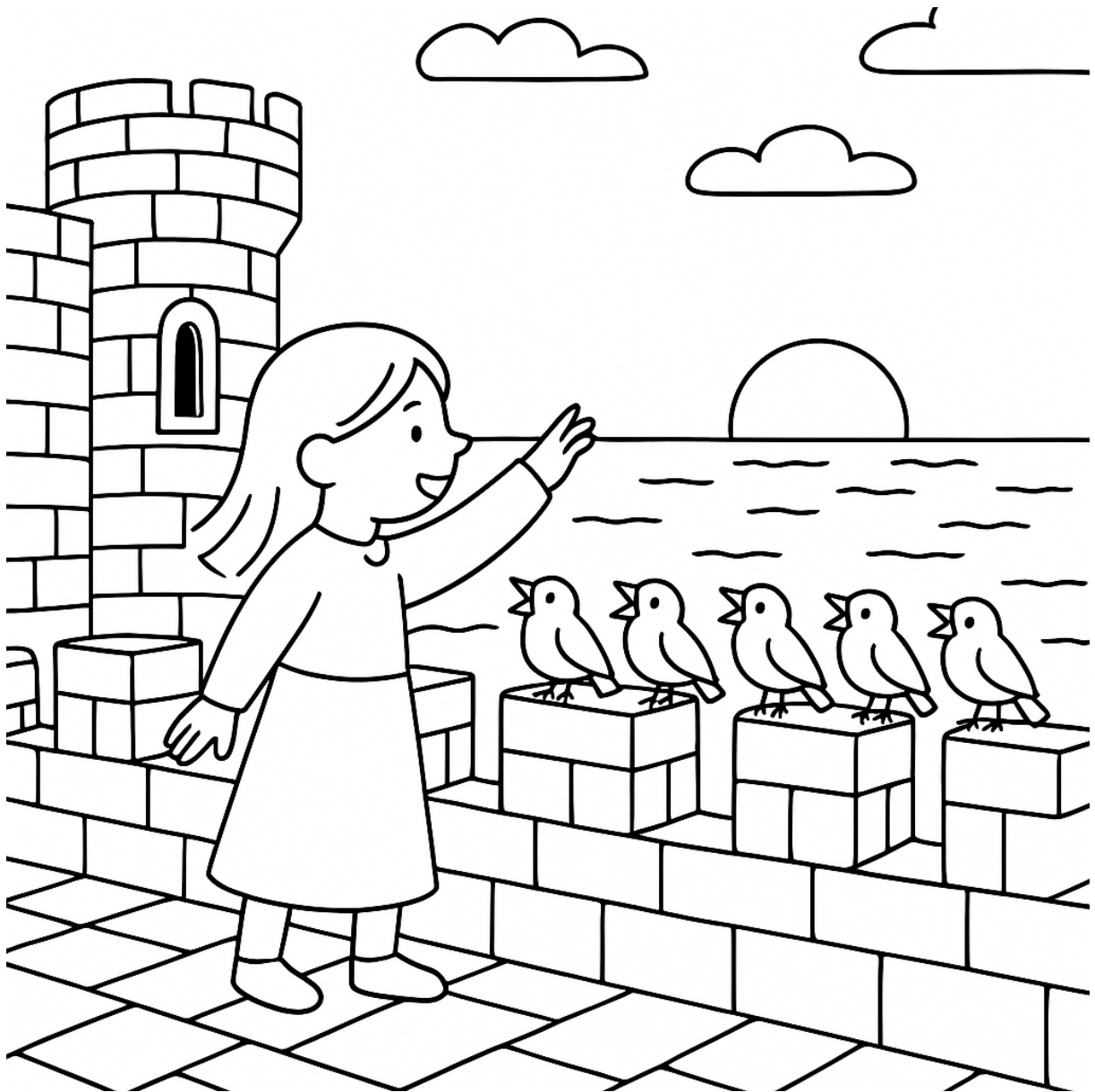
Carys climbed back down her steps that evening, counting as she went. This time she did not mind that the number came out different. Behind her, on the battlements, the birds sang her home.

And if you visit Harlech Castle now, you can climb the same old walls, look out at the sea, and listen. On a windy day, some children say they can still hear the little brown birds practising their one notes, waiting for somebody kind to help them join the song again.

What's real?

- Harlech Castle in Gwynedd, North Wales, was built by King Edward the First between 1282 and 1289.
- Harlech Castle is built of local stone and has a massive gatehouse, with walls set inside walls in a concentric design.
- The sea once came much closer to Harlech Castle, and a water-gate with a long flight of steps led down to the shore so the castle could be resupplied by sea during sieges.
- A siege of Harlech Castle, when Yorkist troops forced its surrender in 1468 during the Wars of the Roses, is remembered in the song 'Men of Harlech'.
- Harlech Castle is a World Heritage Site and is today looked after by Cadw, the Welsh Government's historic environment service.

Now colour it in!



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