

### The Emperor and the Nightingale

Long ago, in a far-off land, there lived an Emperor.  
His palace was the most splendid in all the world!  
In the Emperor's garden, the loveliest flowers  
were hung with silver bells, which tinkled as you passed.  
Beyond the garden, a great forest stretched down to the sea.  
And there, high in the trees, lived a little gray bird – a nightingale.

Her song was so glorious that everyone who heard her was astonished!  
Travellers wrote books, and poets wrote verses about her.  
The song of the nightingale was praised above everything else in the empire.  
But, do you know, the Emperor himself had never heard it!

'What's that? – a nightingale?' he said, when the news reached him.  
'Here in my very own garden?'

He called his First Lord, a very grand fellow,  
who only ever said "Pooh!" to anyone less important that dared to speak to him.  
'Find this nightingale,' said the Emperor, 'and bring her here this very night,  
or else you and the whole court shall be trampled underfoot after dinner!'

'Ooh! Aah! Help!' said the First Lord, and off he ran –  
upstairs, downstairs, and all over the palace,  
and the rest of the court ran with him,  
for nobody wanted to be trampled underfoot!

At last they found a little kitchen girl who knew where the nightingale lived,  
and she led them into the forest.

On the way, they heard some cows mooing.  
'Oh!' they cried, 'We have *found* her! What a wonderfully powerful song  
for such a small creature! Of course, we have often heard her before!'  
'No, that's a cow,' said the little kitchen girl. 'We still have a long way to go.'  
After a while, they heard some frogs croaking.  
'That must be her!' they cried. 'How awesome! It sounds like distant bells!'  
'No, those are frogs,' said the little kitchen girl, 'but soon we shall find her.'  
And very soon they did.

Everyone was full of wonder. 'Oh, esteemed little nightingale,' said the First Lord, 'you are hereby invited to the court this evening,  
where His Most Gracious Imperial Highness  
will be enchanted with your song.'

'My song sounds best out in the open, among the trees,'  
said the little gray nightingale.  
But she went with them, because the Emperor wished it.

At the palace everyone scurried and bustled, to prepare for the great occasion.  
The Emperor sat on his throne and the nightingale was given a golden perch.  
The Emperor nodded kindly and the little gray bird began her song.

The little bird's song was so beautiful it brought tears to the Emperor's eyes.  
'You must sing to me every evening,' he said, 'and you shall stay at my court now,  
with your very own silver cage,  
and twelve servants to take you out for a walk every day' –  
which wasn't much fun for a nightingale,  
but she stayed because the Emperor wished it.

And so months and years went by. . . then one day a large parcel arrived at the palace.  
Inside was a present for the Emperor – whatever could it be?  
Quickly they unwrapped it!  
It was a clockwork bird!  
All gold and silver and studded with diamonds and rubies –  
and looking ever so much finer than the little gray nightingale!  
It had a large key sticking out the side, so they wound it up!  
And what do you think happened?  
It sang a little song!  
'Well, my goodness, this is even better than the nightingale!' said everyone.  
The clockwork bird sang the same song thirty-three times without getting tired!

They were all so delighted that they didn't even notice the little nightingale fly quietly away out the window and back to her green trees. . .

And so every day now, the clockwork bird had to sing,  
and all the court praised its marvellous skill.  
Bands took up the tune, paper boys whistled it,  
ladies waltzed to it, parades marched to it! –  
until after years had passed, they all knew every note of its song by heart.

Then one night as the Emperor lay in bed listening. . .  
the clockwork bird had broken down!  
What a calamity!  
The Emperor called in his doctor,  
but of course he could do nothing.  
Then he called in his Watchmaker,  
who took the bird carefully to pieces and put it together again.  
He wound it up. But nothing happened.  
'Sorry,' said the Watchmaker. 'It's worn out.'

The Emperor was so sad, he took to his bed and became ill.  
And he lay there cold and pale and still for so long  
that all the court thought he was dead.  
They left him, and went away to choose a new emperor.

The moon shone down so silently.  
'If only someone would sing to me,' thought the Emperor.  
'Music! Music!' he cried. 'Precious little golden bird, sing, sing!  
I gave you a splendid perch,  
I hung jewels around your neck with my own hands. Sing! Sing!  
But the clockwork bird was quite silent.

Then all at once, through the open window . . . yes, from far away,  
the little gray nightingale had heard the Emperor's cry and had returned.  
There she sat, on a branch close by, singing her wondrous song.

The Emperor's heart beat faster and faster!  
His blood began to flow and sing!  
Tears of joy fell down his cheeks as life returned to him!  
'Thank you, thank you, dear little bird,' the Emperor cried.  
'How can I ever repay you? Please stay with me always,  
and I will smash that useless clockwork bird  
into a thousand pieces!'

'Don't do that,' said the little nightingale. 'It did what it could!  
But you cannot keep me prisoner in a cage –  
the little singing bird must fly everywhere.  
But whenever you need me, I will come and sing to you from this branch.  
I will sing of joy and sorrow, I will sing to make you happy.  
For I love your heart more than your crown, and your tears of joy  
are all the reward I need.  
Now sleep, and grow strong again,  
And I will sing you a lullaby.'

And the Emperor fell into a deep, calm sleep as the nightingale sang –  
all night long, she sang and sang.  
And at dawn, when he was strong and well at last,  
the little bird flew away.

And when the servants came in next day, to bury their dead Emperor,  
he sat up and said, 'Good morning!'