

The Nightingale

In China, a great many years ago, the Emperor's palace was the wonder of the world. It was made entirely of fine porcelain. In the garden, the rarest flowers bloomed, and to the prettiest ones were tied little silver bells. The Emperor's garden extended to a fine forest where the trees were tall and the lakes were deep. In these trees, a nightingale lived. His song was so ravishing that everyone stopped to listen.

Travelers came to the city of the Emperor. They admired the city, but when they heard the nightingale, they said, "That is the best of all."

Poets wrote magnificent poems about the nightingale, and these books went all the world over. The Emperor of China sat in his golden chair and read, nodding his head in delight over such glowing descriptions of his city, his palace, and garden. *But the nightingale is the best of all.* He read it in print.

He called his Lord-in-Waiting. "They say there's a most remarkable bird called the nightingale," said the Emperor. "They say it's the best thing in all my empire. Why haven't I been told about it?"

"I never heard of him before," said the Lord-in-Waiting. "I'll find him."

"I must hear this nightingale," said the Emperor.

"Tsing-pe!" said the Lord-in-Waiting, and off he scurried up the stairs, through all the rooms and corridors. And half the court ran with him, for no one wanted to be punched in the stomach after supper.

There was much questioning as to the whereabouts of this remarkable nightingale, who was so well-known everywhere in the world except at home. At last, a poor little kitchen girl said,

"The nightingale? I know him well. Yes, indeed, he can sing. It brings tears to my eyes. It's as if my mother were kissing me."

So they went into the forest. Then the nightingale sang.

"Little nightingale," the kitchen girl called to him, "our gracious Emperor wants to hear you sing."

"With the greatest of pleasure," answered the nightingale.

"My song sounds best in the woods," said the nightingale, but he went with them willingly when he heard it was the Emperor's wish.

The palace had been especially polished for the occasion. The porcelain walls and floors shone in the rays of many gold lamps. The flowers with tinkling bells on them had been brought into the halls, and there was such a commotion of coming and going that all the bells chimed away until you could scarcely hear yourself talk.

In the middle of the great throne room, where the Emperor sat, there was a golden perch for the nightingale. The whole court was there, dressed in their best.

The nightingale sang so sweetly that the Emperor's heart melted. Unquestionably, the nightingale was a success. He was to stay at court and have his own cage. He had permission to go for a walk twice a day and once a night. Twelve footmen attended him, each one holding tight to a ribbon tied to the bird's leg. There wasn't much fun in such outings.

One day, the Emperor received a large package labeled "The Nightingale." In the box was an artificial nightingale encrusted with diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. When it was wound, the artificial bird could sing one of the nightingale's songs.

"Isn't that nice?" everyone said.

The imitation bird met with the same success as the real nightingale, and besides, it was much prettier to see, all sparkling like bracelets and breastpins. Three and thirty

times it sang the selfsame song without tiring. No one noticed the real nightingale flying out the open window, back to his home in the green forest.

All the courtiers slandered the nightingale, whom they called a most ungrateful wretch and praised the artificial bird beyond measure.

Five years passed by, and a real sorrow befell the whole country. Their Emperor fell ill, ill unto death. A new Emperor was chosen in readiness.

Cold and pale lay the Emperor. All the courtiers thought he was dead and went to do homage to the new Emperor. The poor Emperor could hardly breathe. It was as if something were sitting on his chest. Opening his eyes he saw it was Death who sat there, wearing the Emperor's crown, handling the Emperor's gold sword, and carrying the Emperor's silk banner.

"Music, music!" the Emperor called. "Sing, my precious little golden bird, sing! I have given you gold and precious presents. Sing, I pray you, sing!"

But the bird stood silent. There was no one to wind it. Death kept staring through his great hollow eyes, and it was quiet, deadly quiet.

Suddenly, through the window came a burst of song. It was the little live nightingale. Death listened, and said, "Go on, little nightingale, go on!"

"But," said the little nightingale, "will you give back that sword, that banner, that Emperor's crown?"

And Death gave back these treasures for a song. The nightingale sang on. It sang of the quiet churchyard where white roses grow. Death longed for his garden and departed.

"Thank you, thank you!" the Emperor said. "Little bird from Heaven, I know you of old. I banished you once from my land, and yet you have sung away Death from my heart. How can I repay you?"

"You have already rewarded me," said the nightingale. "I brought tears to your eyes when first I sang for you. To the heart of a

singer those are more precious than any precious stone."

"You must stay with me always," said the Emperor. "Sing to me only when you please."

But the nightingale said, "Let me come as I will. Then, I shall sit on the spray by your window and sing things that will make you happy and thoughtful too, if you will promise me one thing."

"All that I have is yours," cried the Emperor.

"One thing only," the nightingale asked. "You must not let anyone know that you have a little bird who tells you everything." And away he flew.

The servants came in to look after their dead Emperor—and there they stood. And the Emperor said, "Good morning."