

Tales of Hans Christian Andersen

THE NIGHTINGALE

Adapted by Kate Stonham

The Emperor of China lived in the finest palace in the world. It was made of the purest, most precious porcelain and was so delicate that if you touched anything you had to be very careful not to break it.

The garden was full of lovely flowers with pretty silver bells tied to them. It was beautifully designed – and it was so big even the gardener had no idea where it ended. But if you kept on walking, you would come to a green forest with tall, lofty trees.

The forest ran all the way to the deep blue sea, where great ships sailed under the shadow of swaying tree branches...and in one of these trees lived a nightingale. She sang so beautifully that even the poor fisherman would stop mending his nets to listen.

'How sweet that song is!' he would sigh whenever he heard it.

Travellers from all over the world came to the Emperor's city to admire his palace and garden. Some even wrote poems and books about the wonders they had seen and heard. Most wonderful of all, they wrote, was the nightingale who lived in a forest near the deep sea.

One day, a gift arrived from the mighty Emperor of Japan. It was one of the books that had been written about the palace and garden. As he sat in his golden chair, the Emperor was delighted to read how beautiful and impressive they were.



But when he came to the words '...the nightingale is the most beautiful of all', he looked puzzled.

'Nightingale? I have never heard of a nightingale in my garden!' he said to his Lord-in-Waiting. 'How come the whole world knows about this except me?! I want you to find this bird and bring it to me so I can hear it sing for myself!'

The Lord-in-Waiting looked high and low for the mysterious nightingale. He went up stairs and down, through halls and passages, asking everyone he passed, but no-one had heard of it. Then just as he was about to give up, a little kitchen maid came up to him.

'I know the nightingale!' she said. 'Every evening I go home to care for my sick mother who lives by the seashore. When I return to the palace, I stop in the forest to rest and listen to the nightingale's song. Oh, it's so lovely it brings tears to my eyes! Come with me, I will take you to her.'

All the palace servants followed as the kitchen maid led the way through the garden.

'There she is!' said a young courtier. 'What a very loud noise for such a small creature!'

'That's a cow, not a nightingale,' replied the kitchen maid. 'We have a long way to go yet...'

They carried on walking.

'I can hear her!' said a serving girl. 'Her song sounds like tinkling church bells.'

'Hmmm, those are frogs,' laughed the maid. 'But quiet now, we're getting close...'

'Look! There she is', said the maid - and she pointed to a little grey bird perched on the bough of a tree.

'What an exquisite sound!' said the Lord-in-Waiting. 'But – er - I wasn't expecting such a small, plain, simple creature. Never mind. Most excellent Nightingale!' he called out. 'Our most gracious Emperor wishes you to sing to him. Will you come to the palace with us?'

'My song sounds best in the green wood,' answered the nightingale. 'But I will do as you ask.'

The palace was specially decorated for the great occasion. The walls and floors of porcelain glittered in the light of a thousand lamps and beautiful flowers with little bells stood in the corridors. In the centre of the great hall was a golden perch for the nightingale to sit on.

The whole court was present, including the kitchen maid. As the Emperor nodded to the little grey bird to begin, all eyes turned to watch...

The nightingale sang so sweetly that tears started rolling down the Emperor's cheeks. 'Oh, how glorious!' he cried. 'Please, wear my gold slipper round your neck as a token of my thanks'.

'I have seen tears in the Emperor's eyes,' answered the nightingale. 'That is a powerful gift – the greatest of them all', and she sang even more enchantingly than ever. Everyone loved the nightingale's singing so much that the Emperor decided she was to stay at the palace.

The little bird was placed inside a specially made cage and twice a day she was allowed to fly round the room with a silken string attached to her leg. She may have lost her freedom – but the whole of China was talking about her. Whenever people met, one said 'nightin', and the other said 'gale.'

Then one day, the Emperor received a large parcel with the word 'Nightingale' written on it. 'Ah - another book about our famous bird!' he said. But when his servants opened it, a magnificent casket was revealed...

Inside the casket - was a nightingale. Only this nightingale wasn't real...



Made of metal with a key to wind it up, this bird was clockwork. But what a *magnificent* clockwork bird it was, covered in diamonds, rubies and sapphires with a tail of silver and gold. Round its neck was a piece of ribbon with a note. 'A nightingale from the Emperor of Japan – though it cannot compare with *your* nightingale,' the note read.

When the clockwork bird was wound up, it moved its tail up and down and sang out loud. 'Ahhh! Such an enchanting sound!' sighed the Emperor. 'Bring me the real nightingale so they can sing together – what a duet *that* will be!'

But the two birds didn't sound as good together as the Emperor had hoped. The clockwork nightingale's song was mechanical and rather harsh compared to the natural beauty of the real bird's song...

The clockwork bird had just one, rather complicated tune that it sang over and over – thirty three times to be exact - before it needed winding up again. But the Emperor's Music Master was full of praise.

'It sounds *perfect* to me, your Imperial Majesty!' he announced. 'And with all its little cogs and wheels, it's perfect on the inside too. In fact, it's *so* perfect it should sing all by itself. You never know what a real nightingale is going to sing, but with this bird there will be no unexpected surprises. You get the same tune every time!'

'Maybe you are right,' said the Emperor. 'Besides, it's so much prettier and more sparkly to look at than that small grey bird. Oh – where's it gone?' No-one had noticed the nightingale fly out of the open window, back to the green forest.

'What strange behaviour,' said the Emperor. 'The ungrateful creature' added the Lord-in-Waiting. 'That nightingale is banished from my empire, never to return!' announced the Emperor grandly. 'No matter, for we have the best bird of all right here. Let's listen to it again!'

The next day, the Music Master paraded the clockwork nightingale before a great crowd that had been summoned to hear it sing. Everyone was very impressed – all that is except the poor fisherman. 'It sounds pretty enough,' he thought, 'and the tune is quite similar. But something's not quite right...'

The clockwork bird was placed on a silk cushion by the Emperor's bed and surrounded by gifts of gold and precious stones. Meanwhile, the Music Master wrote a long book full of difficult Chinese words about the wonderful new bird which everyone was made to read it. Before long, they had heard the song so many times they all knew it by heart. 'La la la, zing zing, whirrrr!' – even the Emperor sang along.

But one evening, as he lay in bed listening to the mechanical tune yet again, a harsh noise suddenly interrupted the melody. It sounded like the little wheels and cogs inside the clockwork bird were going wild!

Oh dear. Something definitely wasn't right...

As the singing stopped, the Emperor sprang out of bed. 'Watchmaker!!' he cried. 'My clockwork nightingale has broken and I need you to fix her at once!'

The watchmaker took the metal bird apart and poked and prodded around inside. 'It's sung so much that it's getting worn out, I'm afraid,' he sighed. 'If it gets more damaged, the tune may never play again.'

It was a terrible upset. Although the Music Master pretended to everyone that the bird was fine, from now on, it was only allowed to sing once a year – and even that was risky.

Five years passed and a great sadness slowly fell over China. The people were very fond of their Emperor – but by now he was very ill. So ill that a new Emperor had been chosen to be crowned when he died.

The Emperor lay in his royal bed. He was so cold and pale that everyone thought he was dead. All was silent and still in the empty room. A window stood open and the moon shone down upon his still body and the clockwork bird by his side.

Suddenly, the Emperor called out. 'Music!' he cried faintly. 'Sing, my precious little golden bird! I have given you precious gifts. I have even hung my golden slipper round your neck. Sing! Sing!!'

But the bird stayed silent. Because there was no one to wind it up, it couldn't sing a note.

Suddenly the sound of sweet music came through the open window. Outside, on the bough of a tree, sat the nightingale. 'I heard you were ill,' she said, 'so I have come to sing to you – and bring you hope.'

As she carried on singing, the shadows grew paler and paler. The Emperor moved his arms and legs a little. He was starting to feel a bit better.

Meanwhile, the nightingale carried on singing. She sang of white roses, fresh sweet grass and the perfume of the trees that blew on the breeze...

The Emperor gently opened his eyes. 'Thank you, little bird,' he sighed. 'I banished you from my empire, yet you have banished death from my heart with your sweet song. How can I reward you?'

'You have already rewarded me,' said the nightingale. 'I shall never forget the tears in your eyes the first time I sang to you. That is a powerful gift – the greatest of them all. But sleep now and grow strong and well. I will sing to you again.'

As she sang, the Emperor fell into a sweet sleep. When he woke up, the sun was shining and he felt strong and alert. But not one of his servants was by his side. They still thought he was dead.

'Please, stay with me always,' the Emperor pleaded to the nightingale. 'You need sing only when you want to. Meanwhile I shall break that clockwork bird into a thousand pieces'.

'No, don't do that,' replied the nightingale. 'It kept going for as long as it could. Keep it here. I can't live in the palace and build my nest, but in the evening I will sit on the bough by your window and sing to you...'

I'll make you feel happy - but I will also make you feel thoughtful. I shall tell you about the lives of the people in your empire you never meet – like the poor fisherman and the little kitchen maid. I shall tell you about people who are happy and those who feel sad too.

But you must promise me one thing.'

'Everything!' said the Emperor.

'No – just this one thing,' repeated the nightingale. 'Don't let anyone know you have a little bird who tells you everything. Let's keep it our secret'.

And with that, the nightingale flew away.

When the servants finally arrived to carry their dead Emperor away, they were astonished to see him standing in his fine velvet gown. The colour had returned to his cheeks and he looked fit and healthy.

'Good heavens!' they cried in surprise.

'Good morning!' he answered with a happy smile.