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*The Nightingale* was written by Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875), and was translated from the Danish by M. R. James (1862-1936) as part of his *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* (1930).

*Title:* Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories — The Nightingale

*Author:* Andersen, Hans Christian (1805-1875)

*Translator:* James, Montague Rhodes (1862-1936)

*Date of first publication:* 1930

*Place and date of edition used as base for this ebook:* London: Faber and Faber, 1953

*Date first posted:* 23 December 2008

*Date last updated:* 17 June 2014

Faded Page ebook#20081210

This ebook was produced by: David T. Jones, Mark Akrigg & the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

# The Nightingale

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories [1930], translated by M. R. James)

In China, as you know, the Emperor is a Chinaman, and all the folk he has about him are Chinamen too. It's many years ago now, but that is exactly the reason why it is worth while to listen to the story, before it's forgotten. The Emperor's palace was the most splendid in the world, wholly and entirely made of fine porcelain, very costly, but so brittle and risky to touch that one had to take very great care. In the garden the most extraordinary flowers were to be seen, and to the most magnificent of all little silver bells were tied, so that nobody might pass by without noticing the flower. Yes, everything was most carefully thought out in the Emperor's garden, and it extended so far that the gardener himself did not know the end of it. If you went on walking you came into a beautiful forest with tall trees and deep lakes. The forest went right down to the sea, which was blue and deep. Large ships could sail right in beneath the branches, and in the branches there lived a Nightingale, which sang so divinely that even the poor fisherman, who had so much else to think about, stopped and listened when he was out at night pulling up his fishing nets and happened to hear the Nightingale. "Lord, how pretty it is!" he said; but then he had to attend to his business, and forgot the bird. Still, the next night when it sang again, and the fisherman came out here, he said once more: "Lord, how pretty it is!"

From all the countries in the world travellers came to the Emperor's city and were amazed at the palace and the garden; but when they came to hear the Nightingale, they all said: "After all, this is the best thing." And the travellers told of it when they got home, and clever people wrote many a book about the City, the Palace and the Garden, but they did not overlook the Nightingale: it was put at the head of everything, and those who could make poetry wrote the loveliest poems all about the Nightingale in the forest by the deep lake.

The books went all over the world, and some of them came, once upon a time, to the Emperor, too. He was sitting in his golden chair reading and reading, and every minute he nodded his head, for it pleased him to hear the splendid description of the City and the Palace and the Garden. "Yet, the Nightingale is the best thing of all," was written there.

"What's this?" said the Emperor. "The Nightingale? Why, I know nothing whatever about it! Is there such a bird in my Empire—not to say in my garden? I never heard of it! This is what one can get by reading."

So he called his Marshal, who was of such high rank that when anyone inferior to him made bold to address him or ask him a question, he never made any reply but "P", which means nothing at all. "It appears that there is a most remarkable bird here, called a Nightingale," said the Emperor. "It is stated to be the very best thing in my vast realm! Why has no one ever told me anything about it?"

"I have never before heard it spoken of," said the Marshal; "it has never been presented at Court."

"I desire that it shall come here to-night and sing before me," said the Emperor. "Here is the whole world aware of what I possess, and I know nothing of it!"

"I have never before heard it spoken of," said the Marshal; "I must search for it, I must find it."

But where was it to be found? The Marshal ran up and down all the staircases, and through the halls and passages, but no one of all the people he met had heard tell of the Nightingale, and the Marshal ran back to the Emperor and said that it certainly must be an invention of the people who wrote books. "Your Imperial Majesty could never imagine the things people write; all manner of inventions, and something which is called the Black Art."

"But the book in which I read this", said the Emperor, "was sent to me by the high and mighty Emperor of Japan, so it cannot be an untruth. I *will* hear the Nightingale! It must be here to-night. It has my most exalted favour, and if it does not come, the whole court shall have its stomachs stamped upon, when it has dined!"

"Tsing-pe!" said the Marshal; and ran again up and down all the staircases and through all the halls and passages; and half the court ran with him, for they did not at all wish to have their stomachs stamped upon. There was ever such a hue and cry after this remarkable Nightingale, which was known to the whole world, but to nobody at the court.

At last they came on a poor little girl in the kitchen. She said: "O Lord, the Nightingale? I know it well; yes, indeed, how it can sing! Every evening I have leave to carry home leavings from the table to my poor sick mother. She lives down by the shore, and when I'm coming back and am tired and take a rest in the wood, I hear the Nightingale sing. The tears come in my eyes with it: it feels as if my mother was kissing me."

"Little kitchen girl," said the Marshal, "I will promise you a permanent position in the kitchen and leave to see the Emperor dine, if you can guide us to the Nightingale, for it is invited for this evening." So they all set out together for the wood where the Nightingale used to sing. Half the court was there. As they were making the best of their way along a cow began to low.

"Oh!" said the court pages. "Now we can hear it; it's a really remarkable power for such a small animal! I'm quite sure I've heard it before."

"No, that's the cows lowing," said the little kitchen girl. "We're a long way off the place yet."

Then the frogs began croaking in the pond.

"Lovely," said the Chinese master of the palace. "Now I hear her! It resembles small church bells."

"No, that's the frogs," said the little kitchen girl; "but I think we shall hear it very soon now."

Then the Nightingale began to sing.

"That's it," said the little girl. "Hark! hark! And there it sits!" And she pointed to a little grey bird up among the branches. "Is it possible?" said the Marshal. "I could never have imagined it would be like that! And how very shabby it looks! It must certainly have lost its colour at the sight of so many distinguished persons in its vicinity."

"Little Nightingale," the little kitchen girl called out aloud; "our gracious Emperor very much wants you to sing to him."

"With the greatest of pleasure," said the Nightingale, and sang, so that it was a pure delight.

"It resembles glass bells," said the Marshal, "and look at its little throat, how it works it! It is most curious that we should never have heard it before! It will have a great success at court." "Shall I sing once again for the Emperor?" said the Nightingale, who thought the Emperor was there too.

"My excellent little Nightingale," said the Marshal, "I have the great pleasure of being commanded to invite you to a court festival this evening, where you will enchant his exalted Imperial Grace with your charming song."

"It sounds best out in the green wood," said the Nightingale. But it gladly accompanied them when it heard that the Emperor asked for it.

At the palace there was a tremendous smartening up. The walls and floors, which were of porcelain, shone with the light of many thousands of golden lamps. The most beautiful flowers, which really could ring, were set about the windows. There was a running to and fro, and a draught of air, but that made all the bells ring till one couldn't hear one's own voice.

In the middle of the great hall where the Emperor sat, a golden perch was set up, and on it the Nightingale was to sit. The whole court was there, and the little kitchen girl had got permission to stand behind the door, seeing now she had the title of Actual Kitchenmaid. Everybody was in their best state attire, and everybody was looking at the little grey bird. The Emperor nodded to it.

And the Nightingale sang so beautifully that tears came into the Emperor's eyes; the tears ran down his cheeks, and then

the Nightingale sang yet more delightfully, so that it went straight to his heart; and the Emperor was greatly pleased, and said that the Nightingale should have his golden slipper to wear on its neck. But the Nightingale thanked him and said it had already had reward enough.

"I have seen tears in the Emperor's eyes; that is to me the richest of treasures. An Emperor's tears have a marvellous power. God knows I am well paid." And it sang again with that sweet divine voice.

"It is the most lovable coquetterie one can conceive," said the whole suite of ladies, and they put water in their mouths so as to gurgle when anyone spoke to them; they thought that they too were Nightingales. Yes, and the lackeys and chambermaids let it be understood that they also were satisfied, and that means a lot, for they are the most difficult people to suit. In fact, the Nightingale really did make a great success.

It was now to remain at court and have its own cage, and liberty to take exercise out of doors twice in the day time and once at night. It had twelve attendants, each of whom had a silken thread attached to its leg, which they held tight. There really was no satisfaction in these expeditions. The whole City talked of the remarkable bird, and when two people met, one of them would say nothing but "night", and the other said "gale". Whereupon they heaved a sigh and understood each other. Nay, more than eleven pork butchers' children were named after it, but not one of them had a note of music in its body.

One day there arrived a large parcel for the Emperor; on it was written, "Nightingale".

"Here now we have another book about our celebrated bird," said the Emperor; but it was not a book, it was a little machine, that lay in a box—an artificial Nightingale made to resemble the live one, but all set with diamonds, rubies and sapphires. As soon as ever the artificial bird was wound up, it could sing one of the strains the real one sang, and its tail moved up and down and glistened with silver and gold. Round its neck hung a little ribbon, and on it was written: "The Emperor of Japan's Nightingale is poor beside that of the Emperor of China."

"That is charming!" said everybody. And the man who had brought the artificial bird immediately received the title of Chief Imperial Bringer of Nightingales.

Now they must sing together; what a duet it will be!

So they had to sing together; but it wouldn't go right, for the real Nightingale sang it its own style, and the artificial bird went off into waltz-tunes.

"No blame attaches to it," said the bandmaster; "it keeps excellent time, and is entirely of my school." So the artificial bird was to sing alone. It made as great a success as the real one, and was, besides, far prettier to look at; it glittered like a bracelet or a brooch.

Three-and-thirty times over did it sing the self-same melody, and yet it was not tired. The people would have liked to hear it over again, but the Emperor said that now the live Nightingale should sing a little—but where was it? Nobody had noticed that it had flown out of the open window, away to its own green wood.

"But what is the meaning of this?" said the Emperor. And all the court people scolded, and said the Nightingale was a most ungrateful creature. "Still, we have the best bird, after all," they said; and the artificial bird had to sing again. It was the thirty-fourth time they had heard the same piece, but they didn't quite know it yet, for it was very difficult, and the bandmaster praised the bird in the highest terms, and assured them that it was superior to the real Nightingale, not only as regards the plumage and the many beautiful diamonds, but also internally.

"For observe, your lordships, and the Emperor above all, with the real Nightingale one can never calculate what will come next, but with the artificial bird all is definite; it is thus, and no otherwise. It can be accounted for; one can open it up and show the human contrivance, how the waltzes are set, how they go, and how one follows on another."

"Exactly what I think," said everybody; and the bandmaster got permission on the following Sunday to exhibit the bird to the people. They too should hear it sing, said the Emperor. And they did hear it, and were as delighted as if they had got drunk on tea (which is the genuine Chinese fashion), and everyone said "oh" and pointed the finger we call lick-pot up in the air and then nodded. But the poor fisherman, who had heard the real Nightingale, said: "It sings pretty enough, and it's like it too; but there's something wanting, I don't know what!"

The real Nightingale was exiled from the land and realm. The artificial bird had a place assigned it on a silk cushion close to the Emperor's bed. All the presents that had been made to it, gold and jewels, lay round it, and it had risen to the title of "High Imperial Nightingale Songster" and in precedence was Number One on the Left Hand Side; for the Emperor accounted that side to be the most distinguished on which the heart lay, and even an Emperor's heart is on the left side. And the bandmaster wrote five-and-twenty volumes on the subject of the artificial bird. The work was very learned and very long, full of the most difficult words in the Chinese language, and everyone said they had read it and understood it; for otherwise they would have been accounted stupid and would have had their stomachs stamped upon.

So things went on for a whole year. The Emperor, the court, and all the rest of the Chinese knew by heart every little cluck in the artificial bird's song, but precisely for that reason they liked it all the better: they could sing with it themselves, and so they did. The street-boys would sing "Zizizi! kluk, kluk, kluk!" and the Emperor sang too: in fact, it was admittedly exquisite.

But one evening, when the bird was singing its best and the Emperor was lying in bed listening to it, something went "snap" inside the bird. Whirr-rr! All the wheels whizzed round, and the music stopped. The Emperor jumped straight out of bed, and had his body physician summoned, but what use was that? They fetched the watchmaker, and after much talk and much examination, he got the bird into order after a fashion. But he said it must be most sparingly used, for it was very much worn in the bearings, and it was impossible to replace them so that you could be sure of the music. That was a sad affliction! Only once a year durst they let the bird sing, and even that was a severe strain. But thereupon the bandmaster made a short oration with plenty of difficult words, and said that it was just as good as before, and accordingly it was just as good as before.

Five years had now passed by, and a really great sorrow came upon the whole country, for at bottom they were very fond of their Emperor, and now he was ill, and, it was said, could not recover. A new Emperor was already chosen, and people stood outside in the streets and asked the Marshal how it went with their Emperor.

"P," said he, and shook his head.

Cold and pale lay the Emperor in his great stately bed; the whole court believed him dead, and every one of them ran off to pay their respects to the new Emperor. The servants of the bedchamber ran out to gossip about it, and the palace maids had a large coffee party. Everywhere, in all the halls and corridors, cloth was laid down so that footsteps should not be heard, and so everything was very, very quiet. But the Emperor was not yet dead; stiff and pale he lay there in the stately bed with the long velvet curtains and the heavy gold tassels: high up a window stood open, and the moon shone in upon the Emperor and the artificial bird.

The poor Emperor was hardly able to draw his breath; it seemed as if something was sitting on his chest. He opened his eyes, and then he saw that it was Death, who was sitting on his breast, and had put on his golden crown, and was holding in one hand the gold sword of the Emperor, and in the other his splendid banner: and round about, in the folds of the great velvet bed curtains, strange faces pushed themselves out, some quite horrible, others divinely kind. There were all the Emperor's good and evil deeds, looking at him now that Death was seated upon his breast.

"Do you remember that?" whispered one after another. "Do you remember this?" And they told him of many things, so that the sweat broke out on his forehead. "I never knew of that," said the Emperor. "Music! Music! The great drum of China!" he called out, "that I may not hear all they are saying."

They went on, and Death nodded like a Chinaman at everything that was said.

"Music! Let me have music!" cried the Emperor. "You blessed little bird of gold, sing, do sing! I have given you gold and precious things; I myself hung my golden slipper about your neck! Sing, do sing!"

But the bird was silent: there was no one to wind it up, and without that it did not sing. But Death went on looking at the Emperor out of his great empty eye-holes, and everything was still, fearfully still.

At that instant there was heard, close by the window, the most lovely song. It was the little live Nightingale that was sitting on the branch outside. It had heard of its Emperor's need, and so had come to sing to him of comfort and hope: and as it sung, the forms became more and more shadowy. The blood coursed quicker and quicker through the Emperor's weak body, and Death himself listened and said: "Go on, little Nightingale! Go on."

"Yes, if you will give me the splendid gold sword! Yes, if you will give me the rich banner, and give me the Emperor's crown." And Death gave each of the treasures for a song, and the Nightingale still went on singing; and it sang of the quiet churchyard where the white roses grow, where the elder tree smells sweet, and where the fresh grass is moistened with the tears of those who are left. Then a yearning for his garden came upon Death, and he floated out of the window like a cold white mist.

"Thanks, thanks," said the Emperor, "you heavenly little bird, I know you now. I drove you out of my land and realm, and yet you have sung the foul sins away from my bed, and rid my heart of Death. How shall I repay you?"

"You have repaid me," said the Nightingale. "I drew tears from your eyes the first time I sang, and I shall never forget it to you. Those are the jewels that do the heart of the singer good. But sleep now, and become well and strong. I will sing to you."

And it sang, and the Emperor fell into a sweet sleep, a sleep that was kind and healing.

The sun was shining in at the windows on him when he awoke, strengthened and whole. None of his attendants had come back yet, for they believed he was dead, but the Nightingale still sat there singing.

"You must always stay with me," said the Emperor. "You shall only sing when you like, and as for the artificial bird, I'll break it into a thousand bits."

"Don't do that," said the Nightingale; "it has done what good it could, keep it as before. I can't make any home at the palace, but do you let me come here when I like. Then I will sit at evening time on the branch there by this window and sing to you, to make you happy, and thoughtful too. I will sing about the happy and about those who suffer. I will sing of the evil and the good that is about you and is hidden from you. The little singing bird flies far and wide, to the poor fisherman, to the labourers' cottages, to everyone who is far removed from you and your court. I love your heart better than your crown; and yet the crown has about it a perfume of something holy. I will come, I will sing to you; but one thing you must promise me."

"Anything," said the Emperor, as he stood there in his imperial robes, which he had put on himself, and held the sword, heavy with gold, up against his heart.

"One thing I beg of you. Tell no one that you have a little bird that tells you everything. It will be better." And with that the Nightingale flew away.

The attendants came in to see their dead Emperor, and—well, there stood they, and the Emperor said: "Good morning."

[End of *The Nightingale* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]