

Richards Laura Elizabeth Howe

The Golden-Breasted Kootoo



Laura Richards

The Golden-Breasted Kootoo

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Laura E. Richards

The Golden-Breasted Kootoo / and Other Stories

THE GOLDEN-BREASTED KOOTOO

PART I

ONCE upon a time – and a good time it was – there lived a king. I do not know exactly what his name was, or just where he lived; but it doesn't matter at all: his kingdom was somewhere between Ashantee and Holland, and his name sounded a little like Samuel, and a little like Dolabella, and a good deal like Chimborazo, and yet it was not quite any of them. But, as I said before, it doesn't matter. We will call him the King, and that will be all that is necessary, as there is no other king in the story.

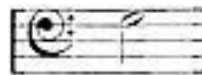
This King was very fond of music; in fact, he was excessively fond of it. He kept four bands of music playing all day long. The first was a brass band, the second was a string band, the third was a rubber band, and the fourth was a man who played on the jews-harp. (Some people thought he ought not to be called a band, but he said he was all the jews-harp band there was, and that was very true.) The four bands played all day long on the four sides of the grand courtyard, and the King sat on a throne in the middle and transacted affairs of state. And when His Majesty went to bed at night, the grand chamberlain wound up a musical-box that was in his pillow, and another one in the top bureau-drawer, and they played "The Dog's-meat Man" and "Pride of the Pirate's Heart" till daylight did appear.

One day it occurred to the King that it would be an excellent plan for him to learn to sing. He wondered that he had never thought of it before. "You see," he said, "it would amuse me very much to sing while I am out hunting. I cannot take the bands with me to the forest, for they would frighten away the wild beasts; and I miss my music very much on such occasions. Yes, decidedly, I will learn to sing."

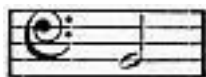
So he sent for the Chief Musician, and ordered him to teach him to sing. The Chief Musician was delighted, and said they would begin at once. So he sat down at the piano, and struck a note. "O



King," he said, "please sing this note." And the King sang, in a loud, deep voice, The Chief Musician was enchanted. "Superb!" he cried. "Magnificent! Now, O King, please



to sing *this* note!" and he struck another note: The King sang, in a loud, deep



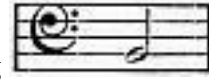
voice, The Chief Musician looked grave. "O King," he said, "you did not quite understand me. We will try another note." And he struck another: The King sang, in a loud,



deep voice, The Chief Musician looked dejected. "I fear, O King," he said, "that you can never learn to sing." "What do you mean by that, Chief Musician?" asked the King. "It is your business to teach me to sing. Do you not know how to teach?" "No man knows better," replied the Chief Musician. "But Your Majesty has no ear for music. You never can sing but one note."

At these words the King grew purple in the face. He said nothing, for he was a man of few words; but he rang a large bell, and an executioner appeared. "Take this man and behead him!" said the King. "And send me the Second Musician!"

The Second Musician came, looking very grave, for he had heard the shrieks of his unhappy superior as he was dragged off to execution, and he had no desire to share his fate. He bowed low, and demanded His Majesty's pleasure. "Teach me to sing!" said His Majesty. So the Second Musician sat down at the piano, and tried several notes, just as the Chief Musician had done, and



with the same result. Whatever note was struck, the King still sang

Now the Second Musician was a quick-witted fellow, and he saw in a moment what the trouble had been with his predecessor, and saw, too, what great peril he was in himself. So he assumed a look of grave importance, and said solemnly, "O King, this is a very serious matter. I cannot conceal from you that there are great obstacles in the way of your learning to sing – " The King looked at the bell. "But," said the Second Musician, "they can be overcome." The King looked away again. "I beg," said the Second Musician, "for twenty-four hours' time for consideration. At the end of that time I shall have decided upon the best method of teaching; and I am bound to say this to Your Majesty, that IF you learn to sing – " "What?" said the King, looking at the bell again. "That WHEN you learn to sing," said the Second Musician hastily, – "*when* you learn to sing, your singing will be like no other that has ever been heard." This pleased the King, and he graciously accorded the desired delay.

Accordingly the Second Musician took his leave with great humility, and spent all that night and the following day plunged in the deepest thought. As soon as the twenty-four hours had elapsed he again appeared before the King, who was awaiting him impatiently, sitting on the music-stool. "Well?" said the King. "Quite well, O King, I thank you," replied the Second Musician, "though somewhat fatigued by my labors." "Pshaw!" said the King impatiently. "Have you found a way of teaching me to sing?" "I have, O King," replied the Second Musician solemnly; "but it is not an easy way. Nevertheless it is the only one." The King assured him that money was no object, and begged him to unfold his plan. "In order to learn to sing," said the Second Musician, "you must eat a pie composed of all the singing-birds in the world. In this way only can the difficulty of your having no natural ear for music be overcome. If a single bird is omitted, or if you do not consume the whole pie, the charm will have no effect. I leave Your Majesty to judge of the difficulty of the undertaking."

Difficulty? The King would not admit that there was such a word. He instantly summoned his Chief Huntsman, and ordered him to send other huntsmen to every country in the world, to bring back a specimen of every kind of singing-bird. Accordingly, as there were sixty countries in the world at that time, sixty huntsmen started off immediately, fully armed and equipped.

After they were gone, the King, who was very impatient, summoned his Wise Men, and bade them look in all the books, and find out how many kinds of singing-birds there were in the world. The Wise Men all put their spectacles on their noses, and their noses into their books, and after studying a long time, and adding up on their slates the number of birds described in each book, they found that there were in all nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine varieties of singing-birds.

They made their report to the King, and he was rather troubled by it; for he remembered that the Second Musician had said he must eat every morsel of the pie himself, or the charm would have no effect. It would be a *very* large pie, he thought, with nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine birds in it. "The only way," he said to himself, "will be for me to eat as little as possible until the huntsmen come back, then I shall be very hungry. I have never been *very* hungry in my life, so there is no knowing how much I could eat if I were." So the King ate nothing from one week's end to another, except bread and dripping; and by the time the huntsmen returned he was so thin that it was really shocking.

At last, after a long time, the sixty huntsmen returned, laden down with huge bags, the contents of which they piled up in a great heap in the middle of the courtyard. A mountain of birds! Such a thing had never been seen before. The mountain was so high that everybody thought the full number of birds must be there; and the Chief Cook began to make his preparations, and sent to borrow the garden roller from John the gardener, as his own was not big enough to roll out such a quantity of paste.

The King and the Wise Men next proceeded to count the birds. But alas! what was their sorrow to find that the number fell short by one! They counted again and again; but it was of no use: there were only nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-eight birds in the pile.

The next thing was to find out what bird was missing. So the Wise Men sorted all the birds, and compared them with the pictures in the books, and studied so hard that they wore out three pairs of spectacles apiece; and at last they discovered that the missing bird was the “Golden-breasted Kootoo.” The chief Wise Man read aloud from the biggest book: —

“The Golden-breasted Kootoo, the most beautiful and the most melodious of singing birds, is found only in secluded parts of the Vale of Coringo. Its plumage is of a brilliant golden yellow, except on the back, where it is streaked with green. Its beak is — ”

“There! there!” interrupted the King impatiently; “never mind about its beak. Tell the Lord Chamberlain to pack my best wig and a clean shirt, and send them after me by a courier; and, Chief Huntsman, follow me. We start this moment for the Vale of Coringo!”

And actually, if you will believe it, the King *did* start off in less than an hour from the counting of the birds. He rode on horseback, and was accompanied only by the Chief Huntsman and the jews-harp band, the courier being obliged to wait for the King’s best wig to be curled.

The poor Band had a hard time of it; for he had a very frisky horse, and found it extremely difficult to manage the beast with one hand and hold the jews-harp with the other; but the King, with much ingenuity, fastened the head of the horse to the tail of his own steady cob, thereby enabling the musician to give all his attention to his instrument. The music was a trifle jerky at times; but what of that? It was music, and the King was satisfied.

They rode night and day, and at length arrived at the Vale of Coringo, and took lodgings at the principal hotel. The King was very weary, as he had been riding for a week without stopping. So he went to bed at once, and slept for two whole days.

On the morning of the third day he was roused from a wonderful dream (in which he was singing a duet with the Golden-breasted Kootoo, to a jews-harp accompaniment) by the sound of music. The King sat up in bed, and listened. It was a bird’s song that he heard, and it seemed to come from the vines outside his window. But what a song it was! And what a bird it must be that could utter such wondrous sounds! He listened, too enchanted to move, while the magical song swelled louder and clearer, filling the air with melody. At last he rose, and crept softly to the window. There, on a swinging vine, sat a beautiful bird, all golden yellow, with streaks of green on its back.

It was the Golden-breasted Kootoo! There could be no doubt about it, even if its marvellous song had not announced it as the sweetest singer of the whole world. Very quietly, but trembling with excitement, the King put on his slippers and his flowered dressing-gown, and seizing his gun, he hastily descended the stairs.

It was early dawn, and nobody was awake in the hotel except the Boots, who was blacking his namesakes in the back hall. He saw the King come down, and thought he had come to get his boots; but the monarch paid no attention to him, quietly unbolted the front door, and slipped out into the garden. Was he too late? Had the bird flown? No, the magic song still rose from the vines outside his chamber-window. But even now, as the King approached, a fluttering was heard, and the Golden-breasted Kootoo, spreading its wings, flew slowly away over the garden wall, and away towards the mountain which rose just behind the hotel. The King followed, clambering painfully over the high wall, and leaving fragments of his brocade dressing-gown on the sharp spikes which

garnished it. Once over, he made all speed, and found that he could well keep the bird in sight, for it was flying very slowly. A provoking bird it was, to be sure! It would fly a little way, and then, alighting on a bush or hanging spray, would pour forth a flood of melody, as if inviting its pursuer to come nearer; but before the unhappy King could get within gunshot, it would flutter slowly onward, keeping just out of reach, and uttering a series of mocking notes, which seemed to laugh at his efforts. On and on flew the bird, up the steep mountain; on and on went the King in pursuit. It is all very well to *fly* up a mountain; but to crawl and climb up, with a heavy gun in one's hand, and one's dressing-gown catching on every sharp point of rock, and the tassel of one's nightcap bobbing into one's eyes, is a very different matter, I can tell you. But the King never thought of stopping for an instant; not he! He lost first one slipper, and then the other; the cord and tassels of his dressing-gown tripped him up, so that he fell and almost broke his nose; and finally his gun slipped from his hold and went crashing down over a precipice; but still the King climbed on and on, breathless but undaunted.

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