

# THE MECHANICAL BIRD



Written by:

*Judy Spencer*

# THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there was a boy who lived with his mother in a pretty village very near a great castle. The boy's father had died when he was just a baby, and though the boy and his mother were very poor, they were happy. The mother was the finest seamstress in the whole village, and the boy was always smiling and laughing. He was clever as well as kind-hearted. When he wasn't helping his mother with her work, he would fix the broken toys of all the village children.

One day, a messenger came from the great castle that sat on a hill overlooking the village. The messenger told the poor mother that she would receive a special visitor the next morning. "But there must be no one here, you must be quite alone," the messenger warned, "or you will be punished by the king himself."

Quaking, the poor woman instructed her son to hide in his room until the mysterious visitor had come and gone. She closed all the windows and drew the curtains as the messenger had bid her. Then she sat in her chair, amidst all the bolts of bright cloth and patterned cottons, and the bobbins wound with thread of every color imaginable, and shook, fearful of what this strange visitor could possibly want from a village seamstress.

Although the boy had promised his mother to hide himself safely away in his room all morning, he was far too lively and curious to stay in bed when there was such excitement going on in the shop below. He crept

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

downstairs, and when his mother was occupied in the kitchen for a moment, he hid himself in the cupboard which stood in her workroom. Presently, a carriage pulled up outside. The curtains were drawn so no curious passerby could see the mysterious occupant. Four of the king's royal guard rode four big grey horses alongside the carriage.

A heavy knock sounded on the seamstress' door. "Open the door!" the king's messenger commanded, and the seamstress did as she was told. In walked the messenger and the four guardsmen and a small, veiled figure.

"Are we alone?" the messenger asked.

The seamstress answered that they were. The messenger removed the veil and heavy dark cloak to reveal a beautiful little girl, the king's daughter, whom no one in the village had ever seen. The queen had died when the little girl was just an infant, and the king was so afraid that some evil would befall the only child of his beloved queen that he kept the child hidden from sight. He allowed her no playmates, except for the dolls she whispered her secrets to, and an old cat who slept in the palace kitchen. Although she was quite alone in the big castle, the little princess could look down from her window in the palace and see the village children laughing and playing in the square.

For the princess' birthday, the king asked his daughter, as was his custom, what she wanted, for he loved her dearly and wanted her to have anything her heart desired, no matter how costly and rare.

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

"I want," the princess answered without hesitation, " a little blue dress with all sorts of animals and flowers embroidered around the hem, such as the village children wear, and thick white stockings, such as they have, and a stout grey cloak of good wool."

The king did his best to persuade her that such clothing was unsuitable for a princess, but the little princess wanted nothing else, and finally, the king agreed. He sent his messenger to inquire who had sewn the pretty clothes the village children wore, and in a very short time, the messenger was sent to the door of the seamstress.

The princess repeated her request for a blue dress, white stockings, and a good grey cloak. The seamstress did not ask any more questions, but took the princess into the workroom to take her measurements. The little princess stood patiently at first, but soon she began to fidget and asked the seamstress for a cup of water. Her voice was as sweet and clear as a bell, and the seamstress at once took up the cup that her own son drank his morning milk from and went outside to the well.

"Ah, me!" the princess sighed, "how lonely I am! If only I had someone to play with, I would be perfectly happy."

All this time, the seamstress' son had stayed quietly hidden in the cupboard. He could hear every word that was spoken, but could see nothing . The princess' sweet voice enchanted him so that he felt he had to see her or die. "No harm will be done if I open the cupboard door just a little," he

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

thought and did so, but he could only see her golden hair. "If I open the door just a little more," the boy thought, "where's the harm in that?"

But the princess had her face turned away from the cupboard and the boy could still see nothing but her shining hair. "If I make a small sound, a little scratch-scratch on the door, she will think it is a little mouse," the boy decided, "and she will look at me."

So he scratch-scratched on the door, and either the princess was too sad to listen, or she did not hear, so he scratch-scratched again. Still, she did not look up, and so the boy scratch-scratched like a very big mouse, and the cupboard door opened and the boy tumbled out, right at the princess' feet.

"Oh!" she said in great surprise, and then she smiled at the boy.

The boy's heart melted, for the princess was as beautiful as her voice was sweet. The princess held out her hand, shyly, to help the boy up. Just as he was about to close his hand around hers, the king's messenger and the four guardsmen rushed in and seized the boy.

The struggling boy was carried past his mother, still holding the dripping cup of water, and thrown onto the messenger's horse. Before he knew what had happened, he was standing before the angry king. The boy trembled. He wished only to be home mending the broken toys of the village children, but he stood as bravely as he could.

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

"It is forbidden to look at my daughter," the king thundered. "But you are so young and not at all fierce. Give me your word never to do such a thing again, and I will spare you."

But the boy could not lie. "I love the princess," he said, "for she is my heart's desire and I will have no other."

The king knew he would never have any peace from the boy and told his messenger to kill the boy. Because the king did not wish the princess to learn of this, the king instructed the messenger to lead the boy into the woods far from the village and kill him there, leaving his body for the wild beasts to devour.

At the gate of the palace, the seamstress waited, fearing what her son's fate might be. She saw the messenger's carriage drive up and threw herself at it.

"Have pity, sir!" she cried to the messenger. "Tell me the king has found mercy in his heart for my son."

The messenger turned away sadly, and the poor seamstress knew the worst had happened. "Then find pity in your own heart," she said. "This is the finest thing I have," she said, drawing a golden heart on a fine golden chain from the bodice of her gown, "it is yours, if you will spare my son. Leave him in the forest, put his fate in God's hands, only do not kill my child! Who is to know if he lives or dies out there in the endless forest? Only you and I, and we will not tell." Then she gathered her cloak around her and ran quickly back to the village before anyone could see her.

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

The messenger drove deep into the forest. In his heart he knew he could not kill the boy, but he was terribly afraid of the king. Finally, he opened the carriage door and bid the boy to step out.

The boy knelt down and closed his eyes, expecting at any moment to feel the cold steel of the messenger's sword at his neck.

"You are not to die today," the messenger said, "at least not by my hand. Follow this path through the trees. You will come to a wealthy merchant's home. He is a kind, gentle man and you may well find a good home there for the rest of your days. Return no more to the village."

Tears sprang to the boy's eyes. "To never see my home again, or my mother? And the princess! Oh, my heart's desire!"

"We do not all get our heart's desire," the messenger said harshly. "Go now," he said, and his voice softened, "and take this, it may be useful." he handed the boy the golden heart. "You may sell it for money, or keep it for memory, for in time you will forget, as all men do." With that, he drove away.

At first, the boy was terribly sad and frightened, but he set his feet on the path and soon felt quite cheerful. He was alive, the sun shone brightly through the trees, and the sounds of all the small forest creatures kept him from feeling too lonely.

Just as it was getting dark, the boy came upon the merchant's house, which was not a house at all, but a big tent, silken and bright.

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

"You are lucky to find us here, little wanderer," the merchant said, greeting the boy warmly. "For tomorrow or the next day we may move our tent some place else, such is our way. We go where we can sell our wares, and since we have everything a man, woman, or child could wish to buy, we are very busy! But, we are here tonight, and possibly tomorrow or the day after that, depending on business, so come join us for supper, and spend the night if you like. There's plenty to eat, and plenty of room, and plenty of playmates, too. Children!" He called, and the merchant's seven daughters, from five years old to nearly twenty, began to pour out of the tent, as well as the merchant's wife, who was as plump and cheerful as the merchant himself.

They gave the boy a wonderful dinner, but he was happiest when the youngest daughter brought all her broken toys to him. He sat on the rich rugs scattered across the floor and fixed all the toys, the top that would not spin, the broken dolls, even a toy horse with his mane and tail pulled out. He fixed everything except for a little mechanical bird that would not be fixed. It was a poor toy, not gold, but tin, not hammered and etched with wonderful designs, but plain, ordinary tin. Still, it had a bright eye, and for a little bird of tin, there was something about it that was very much like a real bird.

"Oh, don't bother with that," the youngest daughter said, "it's a poor thing, and I have so many other toys to play with. It never worked from the day my father gave it to me. The old woman he bought it from swore it sang the most wonderful songs, but it has never sung a word to me. Keep it for



## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

yourself if you like, for it's nothing to me," she said, and went off to play with all her mended toys.

After all the others had gone to bed that night, the boy was still awake, trying to fix the mechanical bird. He opened the hollow metal chest of the bird and saw that it had no heart. He took the little golden heart and set it inside the bird's chest. At once, it came to life! It hovered, wings beating, and sang a joyous song. Then it flew into the boy's pocket and nestled there.

The next morning, after breakfast, the merchant said to the boy. "Come! You are a cheerful boy, and good company. Join us. We must move on today, come with us. There is always enough to eat and you will want for nothing."

"I cannot," the boy said sadly, "for I am in love with a beautiful princess, and I must find a way to win her."

"The Queen of the Dark Land could help you," the youngest daughter said. Her sisters all tried to shush her, but the boy insisted on hearing her out. "The Dark Land lies not far from our tents," the child said. "The Dark Queen is a great and powerful sorceress. Surely she could help you win your princess."

"Then I must go and see her," the boy said.

"Oh, the Queen of the Dark Land is an evil creature," the merchant said. "She does not honor her promises, and no one who enters the Dark Land is ever heard from again. It is a Land as silent as Death. Oh, do not go! Stay here with us!"

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

"Yes, stay!" all the merchant's family cried, but the boy knew he had to go. He thanked the merchant and went on his way, deep into the forest.

The mechanical bird flew out of his pocket and perched on the boy's shoulder where it sang merrily. Soon, they came to a great wall of thorns so high the boy could not see over it, and so wide, he could not walk around it. He reached out his hand and pricked his finger on the thorns. "Let me in!" he cried in desperation, "I must see the Queen of the Dark Land!"

There was a soft rumble, and the wall of thorns parted just enough to let the boy enter without harm. Beyond the thorns, all was darkness, darkness like a cold cave, or like the deepest forest at night, without even the stars for comfort. Even the little mechanical bird was afraid and crept back into the boy's pocket.

Then a great light blinded them, and the Queen of the Dark Land appeared, as beautiful as anything you can imagine. She wore a gown of deepest blue and purple, and around her neck hung a silver key, as delicate as a spider's web. But her eyes were cold and grey as stone.

"Why have you come here?" she demanded.

"Great Queen, I know how powerful your magic is. Surely you can help me win the princess who is my heart's desire."

"I do what it pleases me to do," the Queen said, "and magic is not to be had for the asking."

"But I have no money," the boy quavered.

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

"There's more to life than money," the Queen replied. "You look to be a useful boy. Perhaps you can help. Then it would only be fair and natural for me to help you. In the middle of my kingdom is a lake, deep and still as a silvery mirror. Beneath the water, I once lost a ball when I was little. It was blue as the night sky with bright stars all around it, and it pleased me well when I was a child. Nothing since then has pleased me as much. Bring me the ball and I will help you win your princess."

"But it is so dark here!" the boy cried. "I should never be able to find my way."

"I will give you candles, enough for seven days," the Queen said. "Return to me then, with my childhood toy." Saying this, she gave the boy seven candles, instructing him that each would burn for a full day, from sunrise to sunset. She also gave him seven matches, one for each candle. Then she vanished.

In the darkness, the boy managed to light the first candle. With the mechanical bird guiding him, he set off for the lake.

After they had travelled many hours, the candle had almost burnt down to nothing. The boy was about to light a second candle, when the bird spoke.

"Little master, be careful," it said.

The boy was at first surprised to hear the bird speak. "Well," he said to himself, "if a little tin bird can fly and sing, I suppose it is no great feat to talk."

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

"Without light you are lost here," the bird said, "and the Queen knows that. You must make your candles last. Let this be your night. Sleep now, and fear nothing. I must go now, but I will return in the morning and wake you with my song to light your second candle." And the bird flew off.

The boy wrapped his cloak around him and knew nothing else until the bird's joyful song woke him the next morning. Morning in the Dark Land was as black as night, and the boy's heart sank when he thought he might never see his home again. But he lit his second candle, and its small flame and the bright song of the mechanical bird soon cheered him, as if a small part of the sun were inside his heart, warming him and giving him courage.

And so time passed. Everyday, the boy walked by candlelight, guided by the mechanical bird. Every night, the bird flew off, telling the boy not to fear. Every morning, the bird returned without fail to wake the boy with songs of sunlight and joy.

The fourth candle had burned halfway down when the boy came to the lake. Even in the darkness, it gleamed like a silvery mirror.

The boy was about to dive in when the water began to churn angrily. The boy held his candle out over the water and saw a huge serpent under the lake, which would surely have killed him had he jumped in.

"I am lost," the boy thought, but the bird began to sing.

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

It had sung many songs to the boy, songs of hope and courage, but this was a song of enchantment. The serpent's eyes closed, and he floated, half-asleep, on the lake's surface.

Then, first taking the precious candles and matches out of his pocket, so they wouldn't get wet, the boy dived in, down to the bottom of the lake. He found the ball, and clutching it, rose to the surface. While the serpent still floated, half-asleep, the boy gathered up his candles and matches. He was about to run away, when he noticed the huge tears glistening in the serpent's eyes.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

"Oh," the serpent sighed, "your song made me feel as if I could feel the sun on my scales again. How I do miss the sun! If only someone could break the spell this place is under, and bring the sun back to my lake!"

"We will do it," the bird promised.

"Do not talk so!" the boy said. "I would help you if I could," he told the serpent, "But I have no magic. Certainly I cannot make the sun shine where it will not."

"Little master," the bird chided him gently, "there are things I know, that you do not. It shall be done," he promised the serpent.

The boy felt badly, because he knew he could not possibly do what the bird had promised, that he gave all of his candles and matches to the serpent, save the half-candle remaining, which he snuffed out to save for a

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

truly desperate time. "There," he thought to comfort himself, "if I cannot give him the light of the sun, I can at least give him candlelight." He started to find his way as best he could in the darkness.

"Little bird," the boy said, "sing me some courage, for mine is all gone."

But before the bird could utter a note, a lizard scampered over the boy's foot. "Little master," the lizard said, "my friend serpent bid me lead you."

The lizard led them to a rabbit, who led them to a field mouse, who led them to a buzzing bee who took them to a firefly, who was the only speck of light in the Dark Land. The firefly led them into the Queen's palace and ignited the candle stub with his cold fire.

"Well," said the Queen, "do you have what you promised me?"

The boy gave her the ball, dark as the night sky and covered with shining stars. "Now give me what you promised me," he said boldly.

"It is yours," she said. "You now have the magic to win your princess."

The boy looked around but he could see no door, no way out of the gloom. "Return me to my village."

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

"Ah," the Queen smiled, "that you did not ask for. Besides, I have grown fond of you, boy, and you are a useful thing. Stay here with me forever, and my love will make you forget the sun."

"I will never forget my princess," the boy said.

"It doesn't matter," the princess answered, "when your candle goes out, you will be trapped here forever."

Already, the candle was beginning to flicker. At once, the bird flew out of the boy's pocket and flew at the Queen, flapping its wings. The boy darted forward and seized the key that hung around the Queen's neck and pulled it free! He ran to the wall of thorns and thrust the key at it. It slipped into a keyhole and turned until it went click! He heard the Queen shrieking in his ear. She grabbed the edge of his cloak and it pulled off his shoulders and he slipped through into....nothing.

All was still and dark. "Am I still in the Dark Land?" he wondered, and then he looked up and saw the stars. He felt in his pocket and there was the little mechanical bird, safe as you please. As he had every night, the bird flew away, promising to return. The boy slept. When he awoke, it was to the joyful song of the mechanical bird.

The boy saw that he was once again at the edge of a lake, but this one was bathed in bright sunlight. He went over to the water to bathe his face and saw, reflected there, not his own face, smooth and beardless, but that of a young man! The reflection disappeared into a hundred ripples as the

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

serpent glided to the surface. "How good to be in the sun," he murmured. Then he saw the boy, now no longer a boy, crying in great distress.

"Time passes differently in the dark land," the serpent said sadly. "Seven years have passed. I would change it if I could, but time has no master and no love for anyone."

The boy tried to speak, but found he could not.

"In the Dark Land," the serpent explained, "people and creatures speak without their voices. You have not spoken in seven years and your tongue has gotten rusty in your head. Your voice will return in time."

"Do not cry for your lost years," the little bird said, creeping out from his master's pocket. "If we all cried for all our lost things, we should be weeping forever."

"Yes," the serpent agreed. "The Dark Queen is not gone; she has merely moved her kingdom, finding this place no longer to her liking. Now, I am king here, and I mean to reward you well."

But the boy, now a young man, wanted only to return to his village as quickly as possible. The serpent asked a beautiful white stag, crowned with silver antlers, to take the boy home. The stag rode all day, and it was nearly dark when the stag reached the gates of the castle. "I can go no further," the stag said to the boy, "for I am a wild thing, and the king's guard will shoot me and roast me for dinner." and he bounded away.

The boy walked up to the palace guardsmen.



# THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

"Who are you?" they demanded, "what do you want here?"

The boy could not yet speak. His appearance was so wild and strange; the guards decided that he must be a sorcerer and promptly took him to a terrible room deep in the dungeon. It had only one small window, way up high. "You will be put to death in the morning," the guards said, "Our king does not suffer evil magicians to go about freely. Will you still say nothing in your own defense?"

But the boy still could not speak.

"You sign your own death warrant," the guards said, and left.

"Well," thought the boy, "at least I am not alone." At that, the little mechanical bird flew out of his pocket and out the high, small window, as it did every night. The boy settled down as best he could in the damp cell, and slept.

When morning came, the little bird had not returned. The boy waited, and waited. Sunlight poured in the small window, and still the bird did not return. The boy knew in his heart that his days had come to an end, and he wept bitter tears.

Presently, the guards came for him. The boy prepared to meet his end bravely. He was taken from the dungeon and led to a different room.

"I am to be killed here," he thought, but instead, he was bathed and shaved, and dressed in rich clothes of white and gold, embroidered over in

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

the finest style. "If I am to die," the boy thought, "at least it is to be cleanly-shaven and well-dressed."

Then, he was taken to another room, one so bright, so flooded with light, that it hurt his eyes and he could not see.

When his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw his own beautiful princess, standing before him, no longer a child, but a young woman. In her cupped hands nestled the little mechanical bird, who flew at once to his master.

"Is it yours?" the princess asked in her sweet voice.

Still having no voice, the boy nodded.

"One night a year for seven years," the princess said, "this little bird came to my window and sang the sweetest song to me. Each time, I begged him to tell me who had taught him such a splendid song, but he only said, I will tell you princess, wait and see. When seven years are up, I will bring my master to thee." She held her hand out to the boy. "I have waited patiently for you and now, you are finally here to be my own dear husband, for you are my heart's desire and I will have no other."

But then, the bird flew up from her hands and rose into the air. It darted through the window, and the boy, now a man, knew where the little bird would lead him.

He and his princess walked out of the castle, along the wide boulevard, to the narrow, winding streets where the shop people lived and the villagers bought all they needed.

## THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

There, a woman, old, yet still strong, swept her front steps clean, her eyes clear and patient. Inside her shop, there were bolts of bright cloth and patterned cottons, and bobbins wound with thread of every color imaginable.

The bird flew right to her and perched on the windowsill. The boy and his bride followed. The old woman looked up at them, surprised to see such grandeur on her own front steps. And then, she looked into the eyes of this young man, a stranger and yet so familiar, and knew he was her own dear son.

The tears fell from both their eyes as they embraced.

“Your love has kept me safe all these years,” the boy said to his mother.

“That is all I ever hoped for,” the mother said, “for since the moment you were born, you have been my heart’s desire, and there could be no other.”

Then, the princess came forward and she, too, was embraced. And so they lived very happily, not in the palace on the hill, where both the princess and the boy, now a man, had found themselves prisoners at different times, or in the seamstress' cottage in the village, but in a fine house by the enchanted lake of the serpent king. As for the poor seamstress, whose golden heart had brought the bird to life, she had her own fine, little house by the lake. The rest of her days were filled with sewing little dresses and shirts for her grandchildren, and she embroidered them with all sorts of

# THE MECHANICAL BIRD

---

Judy Spencer

strange and wonderful creatures, great white stags and fireflies, buzzing bees and serpents and of course, the small figure of a little grey bird, its beak open, caught in the very moment of song.

THE END