

The Empty Pot



THERE was once an emperor of China who was kind and true and loved dearly by all his people. And he himself loved nothing more than to walk through his gardens and admire the variety of plants which grew there, and the care the gardeners took to make the plants grow ever more beautiful, year on year. If he needed to think, or make an important decision, the emperor would walk alone amongst the plants and trees, finding the peace and quiet he needed.

One day he was out walking when he spotted some pure white camellia flowers. He began to consider what would happen when he died. He had no heir, and would need to appoint a successor before long, for his beard was beginning to whiten, like the white flower itself. Suddenly, an idea came to him.

The emperor put out a decree: he would begin a search for a successor amongst the children of the land, and any child who would wish to be considered should gather at the palace. Children came from far and wide, and amongst them a boy from a humble home in the countryside. A boy who loved nothing more than to tend to the plants in his simple garden and grow food to put on the table.

The emperor walked from his palace to address the children and they fell into silent awe.

‘I am growing old,’ he said, ‘and I have no heir to take my place. So, I am setting a challenge to find my successor. Each child will be given a single seed. In a year, you must bring me what you have grown from that seed. Whichever child has managed to grow the most beautiful plant will be appointed as my successor.’

The boy was excited. Growing plants was his passion and he was sure to stand a chance. As he was handed his single seed, he felt its tiny shape and warmth in his hand, and imagined everything it could be, if only he took the best care of it. As soon as he got home, he found his best pot, cleaned it and filled it with soil. Then carefully, making a small hole in the middle of the earth, he planted the seed, sprinkling a little water over it. The boy waited. He knew that it took patience to grow a plant. And every day he went excitedly to the pot to check to see if he could see the first shoot emerge from the earth.

Days passed, and the boy made sure to water the earth in the pot each day – not too much, not too little. Every day, he peered closely into the pot, waiting for the first sprout of green.

Soon, weeks had passed and still there was sign of anything growing. The boy puzzled over this – perhaps the emperor had given them a particular kind of seed that grew later in the season? Patiently, he waited, watering his plant and moving it into the shade when the sun became too hot. Still, nothing happened.

The boy began to look around, anxiously. Everywhere he looked, a child was watering a flourishing plant in their own pot. And there were all sorts of different plants – big, small, colourful, pale, some with thick stems, some with thin. And still, his seed had not sprouted.

The boy thought to himself, ‘perhaps it is the soil that is no good.’ So, he carefully emptied the pot, found the small seed and then re-planted it into his pot again, in a fresh batch of soil. He sprinkled over some water – and waited.

He waited as the days grew long and hot, making sure his plant had enough water and shade. He waited as the days grew shorter and colder, bringing his pot inside overnight. He picked off pests, shooed away birds. He spent hours staring at the pot, willing it to grow.

The children around him began to show off their beautiful plants, as he hung his head in shame.

Nearly a year had passed since the emperor’s decree. The boy had tried everything he could to get his seed to grow. He sat in front of his pot, wishing for something to happen. His mother came and sat by him.

‘I have tried and tried to grow something from my seed, but nothing is happening. Soon it will be time to take my pot to the emperor and I will have nothing to show him at all! Please, let me stay here and hide my shame!’ he cried.

‘There is nothing to be ashamed of,’ said his mother, softly. ‘You have tried your best, and that is all you can do. Now you must go to face the emperor and tell him what you have done.’

The boy put his head in his hands. He knew he had no choice but to take an empty pot to the palace.

The day arrived that the children flocked to the palace, each with a pot in hand. The plants on display were wonderful, good, strong, blossoming, healthy plants. The boy tried to hide his empty pot from the gaze of the other children.

When the emperor appeared from his palace, a hush fell on the crowd, as he paraded along the line of the children, inspecting each plant in turn. His face looked stern and disappointed. The boy felt even more scared.

Finally, the emperor stood in front of the boy.

‘And what is this?’ the emperor asked, staring hard into the boy’s empty pot.





The boy, trembling, answered:

‘I did everything I could to make the seed grow. I watered it carefully – not too much, not too little – I sheltered it from the sun, protected it from the cold, kept away pests, even changed the soil. But still, my seed did not grow, great emperor. Please – forgive me.’

The emperor paused and looked long at the boy. He stroked his white beard. Then his eyes began to twinkle, his mouth began to form a smile and he took the pot from the boy, raising it aloft for all to see.

‘I set a challenge to grow something beautiful from a seed!’ he exclaimed. ‘And the child who stands before me is the only child who has succeeded in the task. For I gave each and every one of you a seed that had been roasted. A seed that would never grow into anything! Except this –’ and he raised the empty pot above his head even higher. ‘This boy has brought me the most beautiful thing in existence. He has brought me the truth! I have found my new successor!’

And the boy with the empty pot became the new emperor. An emperor who was loved dearly by his people. An emperor who himself loved nothing more than to walk through the palace gardens to stop and admire all that grew there.