

THE BLUE ROSE

ONCE upon a time there lived in China a wise Emperor, whose daughter was remarkable for her perfect beauty. Her feet were the smallest in the world; her eyes were long and slanting, and as bright as brown onyxes, and when you heard her laugh it was like listening to a tinkling stream, or to the chimes of a silver bell. Moreover, the Emperor's daughter was as wise as she was beautiful, and she chanted the verse of the great poets better than any one in the land. The Emperor was old in years; his son was married and had begotten a son; he was, therefore, quite happy about the succession to the throne, but he wished before he died to see his daughter wedded to some one who should be worthy of her.

Many suitors presented themselves at the palace, as soon as it became known that the Emperor desired a son-in-law, but when they reached the palace, they were met by the Lord Chamberlain, who told them the Emperor had decided that only the man who found and brought back the Blue Rose should marry his daughter. The suitors were much puzzled by this order. What was the Blue Rose, and where was it to be found? In all a hundred and fifty suitors had presented themselves, and out of these, fifty at once put away from them all thought of winning the hand of the Emperor's daughter, since they considered the condition imposed to be absurd.

The other hundred set about trying to find the Blue Rose. One of them—his name was Ti-Fun-Ti, he was a merchant and immensely rich—went at once to the largest shop in the town and said to the shopkeeper: "I want a blue rose, the best you have."

The shopkeeper, with many apologies, explained that he did not stock blue roses. He had red roses in profusion, white, pink, and yellow roses, but no blue rose. There had hitherto been no demand for the article.

"Well," said Ti-Fun-Ti, "you must get one for me. I do not mind how much money it costs, but I must have a blue rose."

The shopkeeper said he would do his best, but he feared it would be an expensive article and difficult to procure.

Another of the suitors, whose name I have forgotten, was a warrior and extremely brave; he mounted his horse, and taking with him a hundred archers and a thousand horsemen he marched into the territory of the King of Five Rivers, whom he knew to be the richest king in the world and the possessor of the rarest treasures, and demanded of him the Blue Rose, threatening him with a terrible doom should he be reluctant to give it up.

The King of the Five Rivers, who disliked soldiers, and had a horror of noise, violence, and every kind of fuss (his bodyguard was armed solely with fans and sunshades), rose from the cushions on which he was lying when the demand was made, and, tinkling a small bell, said to the servant who straightway appeared, "Fetch me the Blue Rose."

The servant retired and returned presently bearing on a silken cushion a large sapphire which was carved so as to imitate a full-blown rose with all its petals.

"This," said the King of the Five Rivers, "is the Blue Rose. You are welcome to it."

The warrior took it, and after making brief, soldier-like thanks, he went straight back to the Emperor's palace, saying that he had lost no time in finding the Blue Rose. He was ushered into the presence of the Emperor, who as soon as he heard the warrior's story and saw the Blue Rose which had been

brought, sent for his daughter and said to her: "This intrepid warrior has brought you what he claims to be the Blue Rose. Has he accomplished the quest?"

The Princess took the precious object in her hands, and after examining it for a moment, said: "This is not a rose at all. It is a sapphire; I have no need of precious stones." And she returned the stone to the warrior, with many elegantly-expressed thanks. And the warrior went away in discomfiture.

When Ti-Fun-Ti, the merchant, heard of the warrior's failure, he was all the more anxious to win the prize. He sought the shopkeeper and said to him: "Have you got me the Blue Rose? I trust you have; because if not, I shall most assuredly be the means of your death. My brother-in-law is chief magistrate, and I am allied by marriage to all the chief officials in the kingdom."

The shopkeeper turned pale and said: "Sir, give me three days, and I will procure you the Blue Rose without fail." The merchant granted him the three days and went away. Now the shopkeeper was at his wit's end as to what to do, for he knew well there was no such thing as a blue rose. For two days he did nothing but moan and wring his hands, and on the third day he went to his wife and said: "Wife, we are ruined!"

But his wife, who was a sensible woman, said: "Nonsense! If there is no such thing as a blue rose we must make one. Go to the apothecary and ask him for a strong dye which will change a white rose into a blue one."

So the shopkeeper went to the apothecary and asked him for a dye, and the chemist gave him a bottle of red liquid, telling him to pick a white rose and to dip its stalk into the liquid and the rose would turn blue. The shopkeeper did as he was told; the rose turned into a beautiful blue and the shopkeeper took it to the merchant, who at once went with it to the palace, saying that he had found the Blue Rose.

He was ushered into the presence of the Emperor, who as soon as he saw the blue rose sent for his daughter and said to her: "This wealthy merchant has brought you what he claims to be the Blue Rose. Has he accomplished the quest?"

The Princess took the flower in her hands, and after examining it for a moment said: "This is a white rose; its stalk has been dipped in a poisonous dye and it has turned blue. Were a butterfly to settle upon it, it would die of the potent fume. Take it back. I have no need of a dyed rose." And she returned it to the merchant with many elegantly-expressed thanks.

The other ninety-eight suitors all sought in various ways for the Blue Rose. Some of them travelled all over the world seeking it; some of them sought the aid of wizards and astrologers, and one did not hesitate to invoke the help of the dwarfs that live underground. But all of them, whether they travelled in far countries, or took counsel with wizards and demons, or sat pondering in lonely places, failed to find the Blue Rose.

At last they all abandoned the quest except the Lord Chief Justice, who was the most skilful lawyer and statesman in the country. After thinking over the matter for several months, he sent for the most skilful artist in the country and said to him: "Make me a china cup. Let it be milk-white in colour and perfect in shape, and paint on it a rose, a blue rose."

The artist made obeisance and withdrew, and worked for two months at the Lord Chief Justice's cup. In two months' time it was finished, and the world has never seen such a beautiful cup, so perfect in symmetry, so delicate in texture, and the rose on it, the blue rose, was a living flower, picked in fairyland and floating on the rare milky surface of the porcelain. When the Lord Chief Justice saw it he gasped with surprise and pleasure, for he was a great lover of porcelain, and never in his life had he seen such a piece. He said to himself: "Without doubt the Blue Rose is here on this cup, and nowhere else."

So, after handsomely rewarding the artist, he went to the Emperor's palace and said that he had brought the Blue Rose. He was ushered into the Emperor's presence, who as he saw the cup sent for his daughter and said to her: "This eminent lawyer has brought you what he claims to be the Blue Rose. Has he accomplished the quest?"

The Princess took the bowl in her hands, and after examining it for a moment, said: "This bowl is the most beautiful piece of china I have ever seen. If you are kind enough to let me keep it I will put it aside until I receive the blue rose. For so beautiful is it that no other flower is worthy to be put in it except the Blue Rose."

The Lord Chief Justice thanked the Princess for accepting the bowl with many elegantly-turned phrases, and he went away in discomfiture.

After this there was no one in the whole country who ventured on the quest of the Blue Rose. It happened that not long after the Lord Chief Justice's attempt, a strolling minstrel visited the kingdom of the Emperor. One evening he was playing his one-stringed instrument outside a dark wall. It was a summer's evening, and the sun had sunk in a glory of dusty gold, and in the violet twilight one or two stars were twinkling like spear-heads. There was an incessant noise made by the croaking of frogs and the chatter of grasshoppers. The minstrel was singing a short song over and over again to a monotonous tune. The sense of it was something like this:—

"I watched beside the willow trees
The river, as the evening fell;
The twilight came and brought no breeze,
No dew, no water for the well,
"When from the tangled banks of grass,
A bird across the water flew,
And in the river's hard grey glass
I saw a flash of azure blue."

As he sang he heard a rustle on the wall, and looking up he saw a slight figure, white against the twilight, beckoning to him. He walked along under the wall until he came to a gate, and there some one was waiting for him, and he was gently led into the shadow of a dark cedar tree. In the twilight he saw two bright eyes looking at him, and he understood their message. In the twilight a thousand meaningless nothings were whispered in the light of the stars, and the hours fled swiftly. When the East began to grow light, the Princess (for it was she) said it was time to go.

"But," said the minstrel, "to-morrow I shall come to the palace and ask for your hand."

"Alas!" said the Princess, "I would that were possible, but my father has made a foolish condition that only he may wed me who finds the Blue Rose."

"That is simple," said the minstrel, "I will find it!" And they said good-night to each other.

The next morning the minstrel went to the palace, and on his way he picked a common white rose from a wayside garden. He was ushered into the Emperor's presence, who sent for his daughter and said to her: "This penniless minstrel has brought you what he claims to be the Blue Rose. Has he accomplished the quest?"

The Princess took the rose in her hands and said: "Yes, this is without doubt the Blue Rose."

But the Lord Chief Justice and all who were present respectfully pointed out that the rose was a common white rose and not a blue one, and the objection was with many forms and phrases conveyed to the Princess.

"I think the rose is blue," said the Princess. "It is, in fact, the Blue Rose. Perhaps you are all colour blind."

The Emperor, with whom the decision rested, decided that if the Princess thought the rose was blue, it was blue, for it was well known that her perception was more acute than that of any one else in the kingdom.

So the minstrel married the Princess, and they settled on the sea-coast in a little green house with a garden full of white roses, and they lived happily for ever afterwards. And the Emperor, knowing that his daughter had made a good match, died in peace.

Source:

Baring, Maurice. "The Blue Rose." *The Blue Rose Fairy Book*. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company. 1911. 31-45. Electronic.