

Who, then, is the happiest

What wonderful roses! said the sunbeam. And every bud will bloom and become just as wonderful a rose! They are all my children! My kisses brought them to life!

No, they are my children! said the dew. I sprinkled them with my tears!

And it seems to me that they are my own dear children! said the rosebush. You are only their godfather and godmother, who gave my little ones each what you could.

My lovely children! all three exclaimed together and wished every flower every happiness. Yet only one of them could prove the happiest of all, and one the least happy.

Who exactly?

I shall find that out! said the wind. I fly everywhere, penetrate the narrowest cracks, know what happens both inside and outside houses.

Every rose heard it, every bud understood what was said.

A sorrowful mother in mourning came into the garden and plucked one fresh, half-opened rose which seemed to her the most beautiful of all. The mother brought the flower into a quiet, silent room where, just a few days before, her cheerful, joyous little daughter had been playing. Now the girl lay still, like a sleeping marble statue, in a black coffin. The mother kissed the dead child, kissed also the half-opened rose, and laid it upon the girl's breast, as if hoping that the fresh flower, sanctified by a mother's kiss, would make her little heart beat again.

And the rose indeed bloomed fully, proudly unfolding its petals, which trembled with the joyful thought: With what love has the path of my life been illuminated! It is as though I have become a human child—a mother has kissed me and blessed me on my way—to an unknown land! And I shall go there, resting upon the breast of the dead! Surely, I am the happiest of all my sisters!

Then an old woman who weeded the garden beds came into the garden; she too admired the beauty of the bush and could not take her eyes off the largest, fully opened rose. One more drop of dew and one more hot day, and—the petals will fall! Thus reasoned the woman, and decided that the rose had shown off enough—it was time to derive some use from it. So she picked the flower, wrapped it in newspaper, and carried it home to embalm it with salt along with other roses

and mix it with dried blue lavender—what a marvelous fragrant mixture it would make! Only roses and kings receive such honor as embalming!

The highest honor has fallen to my lot! said the rose which the weeder had picked. I am the happiest! I shall be embalmed!

Then came two young men; one an artist, the other a poet. Each picked for himself a beautiful rose.

The artist depicted the blooming rose upon canvas, so that it saw itself as in a mirror.

In this way, said the artist, it will live for many years, during which millions upon millions of roses will wither and die.

I have been luckier than all! said the rose. I have attained the highest happiness!

The poet gazed at his rose and wrote verses about it, an entire poem in which he expressed everything he read upon its petals. An immortal poem emerged—"Album of Love."

He has made me immortal! said the rose. I am the happiest! But among this multitude of beautiful roses there was one which somehow stood apart from the others; by chance—perhaps a happy one—it had a flaw: it sat crookedly on its stem, its petals were not quite symmetrically arranged, and from the center of its calyx peeked a small curled green leaf. Such flaws do occur even in roses.

Poor child! said the wind, kissing it on the cheek, and the rose thought he was greeting and honoring it. It itself felt that it was formed somewhat differently from the other roses, that a green leaf peeked out from its calyx, but it regarded this not as a flaw but as a distinction. Then a butterfly fluttered onto it and kissed its petals; this was a suitor, yet it did not hold him back. Then came an enormous grasshopper; he settled upon another rose and began amorously rubbing his legs—a sign of love among grasshoppers. The rose on which he sat did not understand this; but the rose with the flaw—the curled green leaf—did understand. It was precisely at her that the grasshopper stared, and his eyes seemed to say: I would eat you out of sheer love! And indeed, it is well known that no love can go further than this: one disappears into the other! But the rose had not the slightest desire to disappear into this jumper.

On a starry night a nightingale sang.

It is for me he sings! said the rose with the flaw, or with the distinction. And why am I constantly distinguished in everything from my other sisters? Why precisely has this distinction fallen to my lot, thanks to which I have become the happiest?

Just then two gentlemen entered the garden; they were smoking cigars and discussing roses and tobacco: was it true that roses cannot endure tobacco smoke—that they turn green? An experiment ought to be conducted. But they spared the most beautiful roses and took for the experiment the rose with the flaw.

Here is a new distinction! it said. I am already excessively happy! I am the happiest of the happiest!

And it turned entirely green from this realization and from the tobacco smoke.

One of the roses, just beginning to open and perhaps the most beautiful on the whole bush, occupied a place of honor in a bouquet skillfully arranged by the gardener. The bouquet was taken to an important young gentleman, owner of the house and garden, and he carried it with him in his carriage. The rose sat among other flowers and greenery like a queen of beauty. And thus it found itself at a brilliant festival. Everywhere sat elegantly dressed men and ladies, bathed in the light of thousands of lamps. Music thundered, the theater was awash in a sea of light. Amid enthusiastic cries from the audience, a young dancer—the public's favorite—fluttered onto the stage, and a whole shower of flowers rained down at her feet. The bouquet with the rose, shining in its center like a precious stone, fell also at her feet. The rose felt all the honor, all the boundless happiness that had befallen it, but then the bouquet touched the floor, its stem snapped, it flew out of the bouquet and rolled across the floor. It did not get to fall into the hands of the heroine of the celebration—it rolled behind the scenes. There the stagehand saw it and picked it up. It was so lovely, smelled so wonderfully, but it had no stem! He took it and placed it straight into his pocket, then later carried it home. There the rose found itself in a small glass of water and lay in it all night. Early in the morning it was placed on the table before an old grandmother who sat helplessly in an armchair. How she admired the beautiful rose without a stem, how she delighted in its fragrance!

Yes, you did not land on the luxurious table of an important young lady, you came to a poor old woman! But here you replace an entire rosebush! How lovely you are!

And the old woman looked at the flower with childish joy, probably recalling thereby her own long-vanished youth.

There was a little hole in the windowpane! recounted the wind. I easily slipped through it and saw with what youthful brilliance the old woman's eyes shone as she

admired the rose without a stem in the glass of water. I know which of the roses was the happiest of all! I can tell this!

Thus every rose had its own story, each believed itself the happiest, and indeed, blessed is he who believes!... Yet the last rose on the bush still considered itself the very happiest.

I have outlived them all! I am the last, the only, the dearest child of the father!

And I am the father of them all! said the rosebush.

No, I am! objected the sunlight.

No, I am! said the wind and the weather in one voice.

Each has its own rights over them! said the wind. And each shall receive its share! And he scattered the petals, sprinkled with dewdrops shining in the sun's rays. And something fell to my lot too! he added. I learned the story of every rose and shall carry them throughout the world!

So then, which of the roses is the happiest? Yes, you tell me this, I have said enough!