

The Most Beautiful Rose in the World

In the garden of the mighty queen were gathered flowers from all seasons, from all parts of the world; but especially numerous were roses, the queen's beloved flowers, roses of every kind and variety—from wild dog-roses with green, fragrant leaves to the most exquisite roses of Provence. They twined along the palace walls, wrapped around columns and windows, forced their way into corridors, and stretched up to the very ceilings of the palace chambers. What a wondrous diversity of scents, forms, and colors existed in the queen's garden!

Yet within the palace itself reigned sorrow and grief. The queen lay upon her deathbed; the physicians had declared that the hour of her demise was near.

"The only means to save the queen," said the wisest of the physicians, "is to bring her the most beautiful rose in the world, the emblem of the highest, purest love. The queen will not die if she beholds this rose before closing her eyes forever."

And so old and young alike flocked to the queen's bedside bearing the most beautiful roses that ever bloomed in the land, yet among them was not that rose! That rose bloomed in the garden of love! But which one precisely was the emblem of the highest, purest love?

And the skalds sang of the world's most beautiful rose, yet each celebrated his own. Then a cry rang out across the entire country; they appealed to all hearts beating with love, turned to all estates, to all ages!

"No one has yet named the true rose!" said the sage. "No one has indicated where it blooms in all its splendor. It did not grow from the grave of Romeo and Juliet, nor from the tomb of Valborg (Heroine of Oehlenschläger's tragedy 'Axel and Valborg,' whose plot is borrowed from an ancient folk song about the unhappy love of Axel and Valborg. — Translator's note), though roses from their graves shall forever emit fragrance in legends and songs; it grew not from the bloodied spears of Winkelried, nor from the sacred blood gushing from the breast of the hero who died for his fatherland—though indeed there is no death sweeter than this, no rose redder than blood shed for one's country! Nor is it dedicated by the man who devotes his youthful life, spending years upon years, whole days and long sleepless nights, tending the magical rose of science!"

"I know where that rose blooms!" said a happy mother, appearing at the queen's bedside with a tiny child in her arms. "I know where to seek the world's most beautiful rose—the emblem of the highest, purest love. It blooms upon the rosy

cheeks of my dear little one when, refreshed by sleep, he opens his merry eyes and smiles lovingly at me!"

"Beautiful is this rose, yet there exists one still more beautiful!" said the sage.

"Yes, far more beautiful!" said one of the women. "I have seen it. No rose on earth is holier than this, yet it was pale as the petals of a tea rose. I saw it upon the queen's cheeks; she removed her royal crown and walked throughout the long, agonizing night, rocking her sick child, weeping over him, kissing him, and praying for him, as only a mother can pray in hours of mortal fear for a precious child!"

"Holy is the white rose of sorrow, great is its power, yet still this is not that rose!"

"I have seen it, the world's most beautiful rose; I saw it before the Lord's altar!" said the pious old bishop. "It shone like the bright countenance of an angel. Young maidens approached communion to renew the vow given at baptism, and upon their fresh cheeks bloomed crimson and white roses. And there before the altar stood one young maiden; with her entire soul, filled with heavenly purity and love, she ascended to God. Behold—the purest, highest love!"

"Blessed is such love, yet still no one has named the world's most beautiful rose!" said the sage.

Suddenly into the room entered the queen's little son; tears stood in his eyes, his cheeks were wet; he carried in his hands a large open book bound in velvet with silver clasps.

"Mama!" said the child. "Listen to what I have just read!" And the child sat down beside the sick woman's bed and read from the book about Him who voluntarily died upon the cross for the salvation of all people, even for generations not yet born!

"There is no love higher than this!"

And the queen's cheeks flushed with color, her eyes opened wide: she saw that from the pages of the book suddenly grew the world's most beautiful rose, the living likeness of that which sprang from the blood of Christ shed upon the cross!

"I see it!" she said. "And forever shall not die he who has beheld before him this rose, the world's most beautiful rose!"