

The World's Fairest Rose

Hans Christian Andersen

There was once a mighty Queen, in whose gardens were found the most glorious flowers at all seasons of the year and from all countries of the world. But best of all she loved roses, and therefore she had all possible varieties of this flower, from the wild dog rose, with its apple-scented green leaves, to the most splendid roses of Provence. They grew along the walls of the castle, wound around pillars and window frames, and spread into the passages and along the ceilings of all the halls; and the roses were varied in fragrance, form, and color.

But there were sorrow and mourning in those halls now, for the Queen lay upon a sickbed, and the doctors declared she must die.

"Yet there is still one thing that can save her," said the wisest of the doctors. "Bring her the world's fairest rose, the one that is the expression of the brightest and purest love. If that can be brought before her eyes before they close, she will not die!"

Now, young and old came from everywhere with roses, the fairest from each garden. But none was the right sort. The flower had to come out of the Garden of Love, but which was the rose there that expressed the brightest and purest love?

And the poets sang of the world's fairest rose; each one named his own. And word was sent throughout the land to every age, every station in life, every heart that beat with love.

"No one has yet named the flower," said the wise old man. "No one has pointed out the spot where it bloomed in its glory. It is not the rose from the coffin of Romeo and Juliet, or from the grave of Valborg, though these shall ever be fragrant in song and tales. It is not the rose that bloomed forth from Winkelried's bloodstained lance, or from the sacred blood that flows from the breast of the hero who dies for his country, though no death is sweeter than that, and no rose redder than that blood. Nor is it that magic flower in the pursuit of which men in their quiet chambers devote many long and sleepless nights and much of their fresh life—the magic flower of science."

"I know where it blooms," said a happy mother, who came with her tender child to the Queen's bedside. "I know where the world's fairest rose is found! The rose that is the expression of the brightest and purest love blooms on the cheeks of my sweet child when it opens its eyes after a refreshing sleep and smiles at me with all its love!"

"Fair indeed is that rose, but there is still a fairer," said the wise man.

"Yes, one much more beautiful," said another of the women. "I have seen it; a brighter, more sacred rose does not bloom, but it was pale as the petals of the tea rose. I saw it on the cheeks of the Queen herself! She had laid aside her royal crown and through the long, dreary night she carried her sick child in her arms. She wept, kissed him, and said a prayer to God for him as only a mother prays in the hour of her anguish!"

"Holy and wonderful in its might is the white rose of a mother's grief, but it is still not the right one."

"No, the world's fairest rose I saw at the altar of the Lord," said the pious old bishop. "I saw it shine like the face of an angel. The young maidens went to the Lord's altar to renew the promises of their baptism, and roses were blushing and shining on their fresh cheeks. A young girl stood there; with all the purity and love of her young spirit she looked up to God. That was the expression of the highest and purest love!"

"May her love be blessed!" said the wise old man. "But not one of you has yet named to me the world's fairest rose."

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There came into the room a child, the Queen's little son. Tears were in his eyes and on his cheeks, and he carried a great open book; its binding was of velvet, held with huge silver clasps.

"Mother!" said the little one. "Oh, hear what I have read!"

And the child sat beside the bed and read from the book of Him who had suffered death on the cross to save mankind, even those not yet born.

"Greater love there is not!"

And a roseate color spread over the Queen's cheeks, and her eyes again became big and clear, for she saw the loveliest rose rise from the leaves of the book, the image of the rose that sprang from the blood of Christ shed on the cross.

"I see it!" she said. "He who sees this, the world's fairest rose, shall never die!"

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