

The Blue Flower and Other Stories

By

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Preface

Sometimes short stories are brought together like parcels in a basket. Sometimes they grow together like blossoms on a bush. Then, of course, they really belong to one another, because they have the same life in them.

The stories in this book have been growing together for a long time. It is at least ten years since the first of them, the story of *The Other Wise Man*, came to me; and all the others I knew quite well by heart a good while before I could find the time, in a hard-worked life, to write them down and try to make them clear and true to others. It has been a slow task, because the right word has not always been easy to find, and I wanted to keep free from conventionality in the thought and close to nature in the picture. It is enough to cause a man no little shame to see how small is the fruit of so long labour.

And yet, after all, when one wishes to write about life, especially about that part of it which is inward, the inwrought experience of living may be of value. And that is a thing which one cannot get in haste, neither can it be made to order. Patient waiting belongs to it; and rainy days belong to it; and the best of it sometimes comes in the doing of tasks that seem not to amount to much. So in the long run, I suppose, while delay and failure and interruption may keep a piece of work very small, yet in the end they enter into the quality of it and bring it a little nearer to the real thing, which is always more or less of a secret.

But the strangest part of it all is the way in which a single thought, an idea, will live with a man while he works, and take new forms from year to year, and light up the things that he sees and hears, and lead his imagination by the hand into many wonderful and diverse regions. It seems to me that there are two ways in which you may give unity to a book of stories. You may stay in one place and write about different themes, preserving always the colour of the same locality. Or you may go into different places and use as many of the colours and shapes of life as you can really see in the light of the same thought.

There is such a thought in this book. It is the idea of the search for inward happiness, which all men who are really alive are following, along what various paths, and with what different fortunes! Glimpses of this idea, traces of this search, I thought that I could see in certain tales that were in my mind,--tales of times old and new, of lands near and far away. So I tried to tell them, as best as I could, hoping that other men, being also seekers, might find some meaning in them.

There are only little, broken chapters from the long story of life. None of them is taken from other books. Only one of them--the story of *Winifried and the Thunder-Oak*--has the slightest wisp of a foundation in fact or legend. Yet I think they are all true.

But how to find a name for such a book,--a name that will tell enough to show the thought and yet not too much to leave it free? I have borrowed a symbol from the old

German poet and philosopher, Novalis, to stand instead of a name. The Blue Flower which he used in his romance of Heinrich von Ofterdingen to symbolise Poetry, the object of his young hero's quest, I have used here to signify happiness, the satisfaction of the heart.

Reader, will you take the book and see if it belongs to you? Whether it does or not, my wish is that the Blue Flower may grow in the garden where you work.

AVALON,
December 1, 1902.

The Blue Flower

The parents were abed and sleeping. The clock on the wall ticked loudly and lazily, as if it had time to spare. Outside the rattling windows there was a restless, whispering wind. The room grew light, and dark, and wondrous light again, as the moon played hide-and-seek through the clouds. The boy, wide-awake and quiet in his bed, was thinking of the Stranger and his stories.

"It was not what he told me about the treasures," he said to himself, "that was not the thing which filled me with so strange a longing. I am not greedy for riches. But the Blue Flower is what I long for. I can think of nothing else. Never have I felt so before. It seems as if I had been dreaming until now--or as if I had just slept over into a new world.

"Who cared for flowers in the old world where I used to live? I never heard of anyone whose whole heart was set upon finding a flower. But now I cannot even tell all that I feel--sometimes as happy as if I were enchanted. But when the flower fades from me, when I cannot see it in my mind, then it is like being very thirsty and all alone. That is what the other people could not understand.

"Once upon a time, they say, the animals and the trees and the flowers used to talk to people. It seems to me, every minute, as if they were just going to begin again. When I look at them I can see what they want to say. There must be a great many words that I do not know; if I knew more of them perhaps I could understand things better. I used to love to dance, but now I like better to think after the music."

Gradually the boy lost himself in sweet fancies, and suddenly he found himself again, in the charmed land of sleep. He wandered in far countries, rich and strange; he traversed wild waters with incredible swiftness; marvellous creatures appeared and vanished; he lived with all sorts of men, in battles, in whirling crowds, in lonely huts. He was cast into prison. He fell into dire distress and want. All experiences seemed to be sharpened to an edge. He felt them keenly, yet they did not harm him. He died and came alive again; he loved to the height of passion, and then was parted forever from his beloved. At last, toward morning, as the dawn was stealing near, his soul grew calm, and the pictures showed more clear and firm.

It seemed as if he were walking alone through the deep woods. Seldom the daylight shimmered through the green veil. Soon he came to a rocky gorge in the mountains. Under the mossy stones in the bed of the stream, he heard the water secretly tinkling downward, ever downward, as he climbed upward.

The forest grew thinner and lighter. He came to a fair meadow on the slope of the mountain. Beyond the meadow was a high cliff, and in the face of the cliff an opening like the entrance to a path. Dark was the way, but smooth, and he followed easily on till he came near to a vast cavern from which a flood of radiance streamed to meet him.

As he entered he beheld a mighty beam of light which sprang from the ground, shattering itself against the roof in countless sparks, falling and flowing all together into a great pool in the rock. Brighter was the light-beam than molten gold, but silent in its rise, and silent in its fall. The sacred stillness of a shrine, a never-broken hush of joy and wonder, filled the cavern. Cool was the dripping radiance that softly trickled down the walls, and the light that rippled from them was pale blue.

But the pool, as the boy drew near and watched it, quivered and glanced with the ever-changing colours of a liquid opal. He dipped his hands in it and wet his lips. It seemed as if a lively breeze passed through his heart.

He felt an irresistible desire to bathe in the pool. Slipping off his clothes he plunged in. It was as if he bathed in a cloud of sunset. A celestial rapture flowed through him. The waves of the stream were like a bevy of nymphs taking shape around him, clinging to him with tender breasts, as he floated onward, lost in delight, yet keenly sensitive to every impression. Swiftly the current bore him out of the pool, into a hollow in the cliff. Here a dimness of slumber shadowed his eyes, while he felt the pressure of the loveliest dreams.

When he awoke again, he was aware of a new fulness of light, purer and steadier than the first radiance. He found himself lying on the green turf, in the open air, beside a little fountain, which sparkled up and melted away in silver spray. Dark-blue were the rocks that rose at a little distance, veined with white as if strange words were written upon them. Dark-blue was the sky, and cloudless.

All passion had dissolved away from him; every sound was music; every breath was peace; the rocks were like sentinels protecting him; the sky was like a cup of blessing full of tranquil light.

But what charmed him most, and drew him with resistless power, was a tall, clear-blue flower, growing beside the spring, and almost touching him with its broad, glistening leaves. Round about were many other flowers, of all hues. Their odours mingled in a perfect chord of fragrance. He saw nothing but the Blue Flower.

Long and tenderly he gazed at it, with unspeakable love. At last he felt that he must go a little nearer to it, when suddenly it began to move and change. The leaves glistened more brightly, and drew themselves up closely around the swiftly growing stalk. The flower bent itself toward him, and the petals showed a blue, spreading necklace of sapphires, out of which the lovely face of a girl smiled softly into his eyes. His sweet astonishment grew with the wondrous transformation.

All at once he heard his mother's voice calling him, and awoke in his parents' room, already flooded with the gold of the morning sun.

From the German of Novalis.

The Source

I

In the middle of the land that is called by its inhabitants Koorma, and by strangers the Land of the Half-forgotten, I was toiling all day long through heavy sand and grass as hard as wire. Suddenly, toward evening, I came upon a place where a gate opened in the wall of mountains, and the plain ran in through the gate, making a little bay of level country among the hills.

Now this bay was not brown and hard and dry, like the mountains above me, neither was it covered with tawny billows of sand like the desert along the edge of which I had wearily coasted. But the surface of it was smooth and green; and as the winds of twilight breathed across it they were followed by soft waves of verdure, with silvery turnings of the under sides of many leaves, like ripples on a quiet harbour. There were fields of corn, filled with silken rustling, and vineyards with long rows of trimmed maple-trees standing each one like an emerald goblet wreathed with vines, and flower-gardens as bright as if the earth had been embroidered with threads of blue and scarlet and gold, and olive-orchards frosted over with delicate and fragrant blossoms. Red-roofed cottages were scattered everywhere through the sea of greenery, and in the centre, like a white ship surrounded by a flock of little boats, rested a small, fair, shining city.

I wondered greatly how this beauty had come into being on the border of the desert. Passing through the fields and gardens and orchards, I found that they were all encircled and lined with channels full of running water. I followed up one of the smaller channels until it came to a larger stream, and as I walked on beside it, still going upward, it guided me into the midst of the city, where I saw a sweet, merry river flowing through the main street, with abundance of water and a very pleasant sound.

There were houses and shops and lofty palaces and all that makes a city, but the life and joy of all, and the one thing that I remember best, was the river. For in the open square at the edge of the city there were marble pools where the children might bathe and play; at the corners of the streets and on the sides of the houses there were fountains for the drawing of water; at every crossing a stream was turned aside to run out to the vineyards; and the river was the mother of them all.

There were but few people in the streets, and none of the older folk from whom I might ask counsel or a lodging; so I stood and knocked at the door of a house. It was opened by an old man, who greeted me with kindness and bade me enter as his guest. After much courteous entertainment, and when supper was ended, his friendly manner and something of singular attractiveness in his countenance led me to tell him of my strange journeyings in the land of Koorma and in other lands where I had been seeking the Blue Flower, and

to inquire of him the name and the story of his city and the cause of the river which made it glad.

"My son," he answered, "this is the city which was called Ablis, that is to say, Forsaken. For long ago men lived here, and the river made their fields fertile, and their dwellings were full of plenty and peace. But because of many evil things which have been half-forgotten, the river was turned aside, or else it was dried up at its source in the high place among the mountains, so that the water flowed down no more. The channels and the trenches and the marble pools and the basins beside the houses remained, but they were empty. So the gardens withered; the fields were barren; the city was desolate; and in the broken cisterns there was scanty water.

"Then there came one from a distant country who was very sorrowful to see the desolation. He told the people that it was vain to dig new cisterns and to keep the channels and trenches clean; for the water had come only from above. The Source must be found again and reopened. The river would not flow unless they traced it back to the spring, and visited it continually, and offered prayers and praises beside it without ceasing. Then the spring would rise to an outpouring, and the water would run down plentifully to make the gardens blossom and the city rejoice.

"So he went forth to open the fountain; but there were few that went with him, for he was a poor man of lowly aspect, and the path upward was steep and rough. But his companions saw that as he climbed among the rocks, little streams of water gushed from the places where he trod, and pools began to gather in the dry river-bed. He went more swiftly than they could follow him, and at length he passed out of their sight. A little farther on they came to the rising of the river and there, beside the overflowing Source, they found their leader lying dead."

"That was a strange thing," I cried, "and very pitiful. Tell me how it came to pass, and what was the meaning of it."

"I cannot tell the whole of the meaning," replied the old man, after a little pause, "for it was many years ago. But this poor man had many enemies in the city, chiefly among the makers of cisterns, who hated him for his words. I believe that they went out after him secretly and slew him. But his followers came back to the city; and as they came the river began to run down very gently after them. They returned to the Source day by day, bringing others with them; for they said that their leader was really alive, though the form of his life had changed, and that he met them in that high place while they remembered him and prayed and sang songs of praise. More and more the people learned to go with them, and the path grew plainer and easier to find. The more the Source was revisited, the more abundant it became, and the more it filled the river. All the channels and the basins were supplied with water, and men made new channels which were also filled. Some of those who were diggers of trenches and hewers of cisterns said that it was their work which had wrought the change. But the wisest and best among the people knew that it all came from the Source, and they taught that if it should ever again be forgotten and left unvisited the river would fail again and desolation return. So every day, from the gardens

and orchards and the streets of the city, men and women and children have gone up the mountain-path with singing, to rejoice beside the spring from which the river flows and to remember the one who opened it. We call it the River Carita. And the name of the city is no more Ablis, but Saloma, which is Peace. And the name of him who died to find the Source for us is so dear that we speak it only when we pray.

"But there are many things yet to learn about our city, and some that seem dark and cast a shadow on my thoughts. Therefore, my son, I bid you to be my guest, for there is a room in my house for the stranger; and to-morrow and on the following days you shall see how life goes with us, and read, if you can, the secret of the city."

That night I slept well, as one who has heard a pleasant tale, with the murmur of running water woven through my dreams; and the next day I went out early into the streets, for I was curious to see the manner of the visitation of the Source.

Already the people were coming forth and turning their steps upward in the mountain-path beside the river. Some of them went alone, swiftly and in silence; others were in groups of two or three, talking as they went; others were in larger companies, and they sang together very gladly and sweetly. But there were many people who remained working in their fields or in their houses, or stayed talking on the corners of the streets. Therefore I joined myself to one of the men who walked alone and asked him why all the people did not go to the spring, since the life of the city depended upon it, and whether, perhaps, the way was so long and so hard that none but the strongest could undertake it.

"Sir," said he, "I perceive that you are a stranger, for the way is both short and easy, so that the children are those who most delight in it; and if a man were in great haste he could go there and return in a little while. But of those who remain behind, some are the busy ones who must visit the fountain at another hour; and some are the careless ones who take life as it comes and never think where it comes from; and some are those who do not believe in the Source and will hear nothing about it."

"How can that be?" I said; "do they not drink of the water, and does it not make their fields green?"

"It is true," he said; "but these men have made wells close by the river, and they say that these wells fill themselves; and they have digged channels through their gardens, and they say that these channels would always have water in them even though the spring should cease to flow. Some of them say also that it is an unworthy thing to drink from a source that another has opened, and that every man ought to find a new spring for himself; so they spend the hour of the visitation, and many more, in searching among the mountains where there is no path."

While I wondered over this, we kept on in the way. There was already quite a throng of people all going in the same direction. And when we came to the Source, which flowed from an opening in a cliff, almost like a chamber hewn in the rock, and made a little

garden of wild-flowers around it as it fell, I heard the music of many voices and the beautiful name of him who had given his life to find the forgotten spring.

Then we came down again, singly and in groups, following the river. It seemed already more bright and full and joyous. As we passed through the gardens I saw men turning aside to make new channels through fields which were not yet cultivated. And as we entered the city I saw the wheels of the mills that ground the corn whirling more swiftly, and the maidens coming with their pitchers to draw from the brimming basins at the street corners, and the children laughing because the marble pools were so full that they could swim in them. There was plenty of water everywhere.

For many weeks I stayed in the city of Saloma, going up the mountain-path in the morning, and returning to the day of work and the evening of play. I found friends among the people of the city, not only among those who walked together in the visitation of the Source, but also among those who remained behind, for many of them were kind and generous, faithful in their work, and very pleasant in their conversation.

Yet there was something lacking between me and them. I came not onto firm ground with them, for all their warmth of welcome and their pleasant ways. They were by nature of the race of those who dwell ever in one place; even in their thoughts they went not far abroad. But I have been ever a seeker, and the world seems to me made to wander in, rather than to abide in one corner of it and never see what the rest has in store. Now this was what the people of Saloma could not understand, and for this reason I seemed to them always a stranger, an alien, a guest. The fixed circle of their life was like an invisible wall, and with the best will in the world they knew not how to draw me within it. And I, for my part, while I understood well their wish to rest and be at peace, could not quite understand the way in which it found fulfilment, nor share the repose which seemed to them all-sufficient and lasting. In their gardens I saw ever the same flowers, and none perfect. At their feasts I tasted ever the same food, and none that made an end of hunger. In their talk I heard ever the same words, and none that went to the depth of thought. The very quietude and fixity of their being perplexed and estranged me. What to them was permanent, to me was transient. They were inhabitants: I was a visitor.

The one in all the city of Saloma with whom was most at home was Ruamie, the little granddaughter of the old man with whom I lodged. To her, a girl of thirteen, fair-eyed and full of joy, the wonted round of life had not yet grown to be a matter of course. She was quick to feel and answer the newness of every day that dawned. When a strange bird flew down from the mountains into the gardens, it was she that saw it and wondered at it. It was she that walked with me most often in the path to the Source. She went out with me to the fields in the morning and almost every day found wild-flowers that were new to me. At sunset she drew me to happy games of youths and children, where her fancy was never tired of weaving new turns to the familiar pastimes. In the dusk she would sit beside me in an arbour of honeysuckle and question me about the flower that I was seeking,--for to her I had often spoken of my quest.

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