

The Blue Chrysanthemum

Karel Čapek

(1890–1938)



(My translation of the short story *Modrá chryzantéma*, which was published in *Povídky z jedné kapsy* in 1929.)

So let me tell you – said old Fulinus – how Klára came into the world. It was that time when I was managing Prince Lichtenberg’s park in Lubenec. And the old prince, he was some connoisseur, Mr Čapek, believe me! He used to get mature trees sent over from Veitsch in England, and when it came to Dutch tulip bulbs – seventeen thousand! But that’s by the by. It was when I was walking down the street in Lubenec one Sunday that I met Klára. She was the village idiot – a deaf-mute and as mad as a hatter, but wherever she went she hee-hawed, but hee-hawed like the happiest person in the world. What is it, Mr Čapek, that makes those village idiots so happy? I was just going to get out of her way, so that she wouldn’t give me a kiss, when I noticed she was carrying a bouquet. Just some dill and some common-or-garden weeds from the meadows but, all of a sudden, I noticed something that made me stop in my tracks. In amongst it all, Mr Čapek, that nutty woman had a big, blousy chrysanthemum, which was blue! And what a blue, Mr Čapek! A bit like *Phlox Laphamii*, but with a touch of slate-grey and with a deep-pink border. And the inside was a beautiful saturated blue, like *Campanula Turbinata*. But even that’s not everything. The point is, Mr Čapek, in the case of the *Chrysanthemum Indicum*, a colour like that was – and to all intents and purposes still is – completely unknown! Some years ago I visited old Veitsch, and Sir James was boasting about how, the year before, they’d had a chrysanthemum – imported from China – that had bloomed with a touch of lilac but unfortunately it had died in the winter.

And here was this cackling scarecrow of a woman with a chrysanthemum as blue as the bluest blue you can think of!

So there was Klára, warbling away happily and offering me her bouquet. I gave her a crown and pointed at the chrysanthemum. “Where did you get this from, Klára,” I asked. But although she cackled and neighed enthusiastically I couldn’t get any sense out of her. Even when I tried shouting and gesticulating it was no use. As she was determined to give me a hug I hurried off to the old prince, carrying that priceless blue chrysanthemum. “Your Excellency,” I announced, “this miracle is growing somewhere in the vicinity. Let’s go and look for it!” And he immediately sent an order to harness the horses and to fetch Klára, because we’d decided to bring her with us. But Klára had disappeared somewhere and couldn’t be found. So we spent a good hour standing by the coach and cursing – the prince used to be in the dragoons. And we were still vituperating when, all of a sudden, Klára hove into view and, sticking her tongue out, she thrust a whole bunch of freshly picked blue chrysanthemums at me. The prince gave her a hundred-crown coin, but she was unimpressed and burst into tears – the poor thing had never seen a hundred-crown coin before. So I gave her a one-crown coin to calm her down and she soon began dancing and shouting. But we managed to get her up on the coach-box and then we pointed at the chrysanthemums: “Klára, take us to them!”

Up on the box, Klára was whooping for joy, but you can hardly imagine how scandalised His Excellency Mr Coachman was that he had to sit next to her. Not to mention that the horses were on the point of bolting whenever Klára yelled out. In a nutshell, a devilish journey. But after we’d been going for an hour and a half I said to the prince, “Your Excellency, we must have done at least fourteen kilometres.”

“I don’t mind if we do a hundred kilometres!” he muttered.

“Well,” I said, “but Klára came back with the second bouquet after an hour. So the place can’t be further than three kilometres from Lubenec. At which the prince shouted up to the box, pointing at the blue chrysanthemums as he did so, “Klára, where do they grow? Where did you find them?”

But Klára just pointed ahead and carried on cackling. I suppose she was enjoying the ride. But, dear God! I thought the prince would do her an injury, he had such a temper on him! Meanwhile the foam was dripping from the horses’ mouths, Klára was crowing away, the prince was cursing and I was trying to think how on earth we’d find the blue chrysanthemums. “Your Excellency,” I said, “this is no use. We’ll have to do it without Klára. We’ll get a compass and draw a circle on the map, with a three-kilometre radius from Lubenec. Then we’ll divide it into segments and go looking from house to house.”

“But look here!” said the prince, “there aren’t any parks within three kilometres of Lubenec.”

“That’s alright,” I said. “We’d find bugger-all in a park, unless we were looking for ageratum or kanna. Have a look here at the bottom of the stalk. Can you see that tiny bit of earth? That’s not humus. It’s sticky yellow stuff, most likely manured with human waste. And the leaves are full of pigeon shit, so we’ll have to look somewhere where there are lots of pigeons. Most likely

beside a picket fence, because you can see here on this leaf a little bit of spruce bark that's shaved off. So there we have a definite lead."

"What do you mean?" said the prince.

"Well, simply that we'll have to search every cottage within a radius of three miles. We'll split into four groups: you, me, your gardener and my assistant Vencel, and off we go!"

The next morning the first thing that happened was that Klára brought me another bouquet of blue chrysanthemums. Then I went off to search my patch. I stopped in every pub, drank a glass of warm beer, ate some little cheeses and enquired about blue chrysanthemums. And, Mr Čapek, I can't begin to tell you the awful diarrhoea I had from all that cheese. And it was so hot, as it can be sometimes at the beginning of September, and I had to drag myself to every cottage and put up with the most uncouth behaviour, because the people thought I was either a lunatic, a spy or some official busybody. But, by the evening, one thing was certain: there weren't any blue chrysanthemums in my patch. And they didn't find any in the other three either. Which didn't stop Klára bringing yet another bunch of the things.

Now, as you know, a prince is a big noise when all's said and done. So he summoned all the policemen, gave each of them a blue-chrysanthemum flower and promised them goodness knows what if they could find where it grew. And policemen, of course, they're educated people, they read the newspapers and that sort of thing. Not to mention that they know every inch of their area and wield considerable influence. And in the end, Mr Čapek, not only the six policemen, but also the night watchmen, the mayors of the local villages, and the schoolchildren and their teachers, together with a group of gypsies, went crawling through every bit of ground within three kilometres, they picked specimens of every sort of plant they could find and brought them back to the palace. I kid you not, there were more flowers than at Corpus Christi, but I don't need to tell you there wasn't one single blue chrysanthemum among them. And we'd kept Klára under watch the whole time: the previous evening she'd run off and, just after midnight, had brought me an armful of blue chrysanthemums. So we'd put her in the local lock-up so she wouldn't pick all the remaining flowers. But we were at our wits' end. It was like a magic trick! After all, the area wasn't that large!

Now I know a man can be coarse when he's in dire straits or when he's met with failure. But when the prince got so furious that he told me I was as big an idiot as Klára, I told him I wasn't going to be sworn at by an old cretin like him and stormed off to catch the train. And I've never been back to Lubenec since then. But when I was sitting in the wagon and the train had got going I burst into tears, just like a little child, Mr Čapek. It was the thought that I was leaving the blue chrysanthemums and would never see one of them again. And so I was looking out of the window, with tears rolling down my cheeks, when all of a sudden I saw something blue beside the track. Mr Čapek, I couldn't help myself: I flew out of my seat and pulled the emergency lever, and promptly went tumbling into the opposite seat. That was how I broke this finger. And when the conductor came running up I bumbled something about how I'd left something behind in Lubenec. And I had to pay a blinking fine before he'd let me get off. So there I was, Mr Čapek, cursing like a navy and hobbling along the track towards that bit of blue. *You idiot*, I told myself. *It's*

probably just autumn asters or some other common-or-garden blue flowers, and you've just paid a king's ransom for the privilege! I went about five hundred metres and I was just thinking that it couldn't have been that far back, that I'd missed it, or that I'd imagined the whole thing, when I saw, on a little embankment, a railway watchman's cottage, and behind the picket fence at the end of his garden there was something blue. And blow me if it wasn't two clumps of the blue chrysanthemums!

"Excuse me!" I shouted out to him over the fence. "Where did you get these flowers?"

"Them blue ones?" said the watchman. "Oh, them's what was left by Čermák, the watchman what was here before me before he passed away. But you can't walk along the track here, Mr! There's a notice what says, 'Walking along the track forbidden'. So what are you up to, walking along the track?"

"How can I get up to you, my friend?" I asked.

"Along the track," he said. "But no-one's allowed to walk along the track. So what are you up to, eh? Clear off, you blasted vagabond! but you're not allowed to walk along the track."

"So how am I meant to, you know, clear off?"

"It's all one to me," the watchman shouted, "but you can't walk along the track."

So I sat down on the bank and had another go: "Would you sell me those blue flowers, my dear fellow?"

"No I won't," he grumbled. "And get your arse out of here! You're not allowed to sit there."

"Why not?" I said. "There's no notice saying I'm not allowed to sit here. You can't walk here, but I'm not walking."

That stopped him in his tracks, so he restricted himself to just cursing at me over the fence. But he must have been a lonely old soul, living out there, and after a while he stopped cursing and started muttering to himself. Half an hour later he came out to have a look up and down the track.

"Right," he said, stopping beside me. "Are you going to clear off out of it or not?"

"I can't," I said. "It's forbidden to walk along the track and there's no other way out of here."

The watchman frowned. "Alright," he said after a while, "when I goes over to the level-crossing gate, get lost along the track. At least I won't see you when you does it." I thanked him profusely and, when he went to the gate, I hopped over the fence into his garden and dug out the two clumps of blue chrysanthemums with his own spade. Yes, Mr Čapek, I stole them. I'm an honest chap, and I've only stolen on seven occasions. Flowers each time.

An hour later I was sitting in a train carrying those stolen blue chrysanthemums home with me. When we went past the watchman's home he was standing there with his little flag and scowling like the devil. I waved at him with my hat, but I think he didn't recognise me.

So you see, Mr Čapek, because of that ENTRY FORBIDDEN sign, it hadn't occurred to anyone, neither to us, nor the policemen, nor the gypsies, nor the children, that that would be a good place to look for the blue chrysanthemums. Such is the power of an ENTRY FORBIDDEN sign, Mr Čapek! For all I know, there may well be blue primroses, or the tree of

knowledge, or golden ferns growing in watchmen's gardens, but no-one will ever find them, because it's strictly forbidden to walk along the track, and that's that. It was only mad Klára who found them, because she was an idiot and couldn't read.

And that's why I gave the blue chrysanthemum the name Klára. I've been struggling with her for fifteen years now. But I seem to have weakened her by giving her good, moist soil – that miserable old watchman didn't water her at all. She had soil like cement in his garden. But the long and the short of it is that she buds in spring, gets mildew in the summer and withers away in August. Just imagine, Mr Čapek, I'm the only person in the world who's got a blue chrysanthemum, but I can't present her! Forget about the Chrysanthemum Bretagne and the Chrysanthemum Anastasia: they've only got a touch of lilac. But Chrysanthemum Klára, Mr Čapek, when finally, one day, she flowers, then she'll be the talk of the whole wide world.

