

THE CASCADE OF FIRE

Long ago, in a country far away, right on the other side of the world, there was a huge desert, so great that no man dared to cross it, for it had been told since time began that it was impossible to find water there, and that anyone who ventured into it would perish.

In the course of time men became more adventurous and began to journey into the desert, equipped with great flagons of fresh water. They found that the desert was indeed empty, bereft of life, with no animals, and hardly any plants except the most miserably shrivelled scrub. The soil was weak and barren, and without any plants to hold it in place, it blew around in dusty clouds.

Yet right in the middle of the desert, where the soil was the very poorest, there grew a glade of the most remarkable trees. They had thick black bark to protect them from the heat, and their leaves were tough and stringy. But once a year they burst into the most beautiful scarlet flowers, which fell in such abundance from the trees that they were called *Cascade of Fire*.

The petals started out a rather dull fawn colour, but after a few days they began to turn orange at the tips, and in just a few days more they were completely changed to fiery scarlet. At the same time they grew heavy, until their own weight pulled them from the tree and they fell vertically to rest in a puddle of fire on the ground beneath, and not even the turbulent, dusty wind could move them on.

People were delighted by the trees' beauty, and carefully collected seeds to take

home, and some of them even dug up whole specimens and transplanted them to their botanical gardens. There they watered them and nourished them, constantly giving them the best compost and protecting them from all kind of disease. The trees were happy to have so much, and grew big and strong, but though they flowered abundantly, the petals never once turned red.

The greatest minds of the horticultural world rose to the challenge, and grew the trees under a wide variety of conditions, feeding them with every fertiliser known to man and, though the trees grew ever larger, the petals steadfastly refused to change colour.

And the men all agreed that it had all been a great waste of time and money, and chopped down all the lovely big trees that they had planted. By that time all the original trees in the desert had long since been taken away by men who coveted their beauty, and so the *Cascade of Fire* was no more, and its beauty was lost forever.

Centuries later scientists analysing dried petals which had been kept in a museum discovered that the petals contained an enzyme which absorbed nitrogen from the air, turning scarlet in the process, which fell to the ground to provide nourishment for the trees in the poor soil of the desert. When the trees were planted in good soil, they no longer needed the nitrogen, and didn't produce the enzyme which turned their petals red.