

THE BLUE MAN

The three white porcelain elephants, who came into my room yesterday while I was not looking, stumped over my coffee cup which was already broken by this blue man.

And who, you may ask, was this blue man? He was a mystery to me and still is so. When I asked him where he came from, all he would say is that he came out of the blue.

Indeed, he did come out of the blue three days ago. I was wandering in my garden when I became suddenly aware he was there. He introduced himself as Neil, and said he had once lived in my house long ago.

I was surprised to hear that; and his name struck a chord in my memory. 'Is not Neil a word for blue in some Indian language – Hindi or Bengali or some such?' I thought to myself.

I am not sure whether he knew what I was thinking or not; but he just smiled, nodded and said: "Yes, I am Neil."

He went on to tell me he wanted to visit the house again and asked if I would mind if he stayed awhile. He did not really give me time to reply before he began thanking me for letting him stay and said he would move into the spare bedroom.

How did he know I had a spare bedroom or where that bedroom was? I never found out.

Neil really was blue; his skin was the same blue as that of the Smurfs. But he was no Smurf. He was taller, more hobbit sized, being a little over a metre in height and was dressed all over in shades of blue and green. He certainly had no tail, however small; nor did he wear a Phrygian cap. He was hatless, revealing thick grey-blue hair, and his face was beardless.

You may also be wondering how three white porcelain elephants could have been moving around in my room. White porcelain elephants, after all, do not normally move. All I can tell you is that by the third day of my blue man's stay, I was not at all surprised by porcelain elephants marching along and stumping over a broken coffee cup or over anything else.

I had been greeted each morning by various porcelain dolls, porcelain elves and porcelain fairies; and they seemed to wander around happily every day, busying themselves about the house. When I asked Neil about this, he merely smiled and said: "I guess they were feeling a bit stiff up there on those shelves. They wanted to stretch a bit and move about."

"But," I had said, "they're *porcelain*. They're not alive; they shouldn't be able to move."

"They look as though they're moving to me," he said with a grin, and added: "I know they're porcelain. But there's the potential for life in all things, even the coldest, hardest stone. You just have to give it chance; let the molecules loosen up a bit, so to speak."

That is all he would say about it. To him it was quite natural that my figurines should move about and speak. I got used to the porcelain owls hooting at night, to the porcelain choir boys singing and so on. So, as I say, yesterday

when I saw the three white porcelain elephants moving around on the floor of my room, I was not surprised even if I had not actually seen them come in.

I was, however, annoyed with Neil for breaking my coffee cup. I really liked that cup and it had still had some coffee in it. The spilt coffee had soon disappeared; a pink porcelain turtle had sucked it all up immediately, leaving, I am pleased to say, no stain behind.

Neil told me he was sorry and I was not to worry. No sooner had the three elephants stumped over the broken cup than Neil called to them in a language I did not recognize. Those elephants turned about and began piecing all the broken bits together, which joined up without glue and with no apparent sign of a break. When they had finished, the three elephants started marching around the cup; they raised their trunks and began chanting:

"Jollifanto, jollifanto, bamba, bamba, bamba, buh!

"Jollifanto, jollifanto, bamba, bamba, bamba, buh!

"Jollifanto, jollifanto, bamba, bamba, bamba, buh!

"Blahgo, blahgo, bam!"

"Blahgo, blahgo, bam!"

"Buh, buh, buh!"

The cup grew brighter and its colours shone. Neil was amused at my look of surprise.

"Ah," he murmured, "the powers of regeneration."

"But," I said in amazement, "the colours are so bright. They seem to glow."

"Yes," he said, "your cup is glowing with happiness. You don't suppose it liked being broken, do you? It was longing to be back together again. Things always want to be whole again; and they would be, you know, if only their true nature, their true inner being, could be restored. Yes, your cup is very, very happy now."

"Brimming over with happiness, I suppose," I replied, grinning. "I guess next it'll start filling up with coffee."

"Where's that coming from?" asked Neil. "I can't work magic, you know."

"But ..." I began.

"I may," he said, interrupting me, "have the gift of releasing latent forces of nature, but to create something out of nothing – that's not possible. That would be magic. Playing with magic is a very dangerous thing for us mortals."

He looked sterner than I had ever seen him before as he added: "No, let nature do its work. Don't ever, ever touch magic!"

"I won't," I assured him. I told him I was sorry for being so annoyed with him for breaking the cup and thanked him for repairing it.

Meanwhile, the elephants had turned about, and were marching back out of the room, chanting: "Jollifanto, jollifanto, bamba, bamba, bamba, buh!" and all the rest of their song.

Their chant reminded me of Hugo Ball's *Elefantenkarawane*. Neil sensed this immediately and, without my saying anything, remarked: "Yes, where do you think Ball got the words? He knew their language. I suppose you thought it was Dadaist nonsense."

I did not answer. There seemed no appropriate answer to give. But I was

getting worried. It was all very well having the porcelain figurines moving around – even better getting broken cups repaired. But how would Celia, my wife, react when she came back and found a blue man, about whom I knew next to nothing, staying in our spare room and all her porcelain figurines moving around, speaking, singing or making other noises?

Celia had been away visiting her sick sister. She had telephoned me the day before yesterday to say that her sister was now on the mend and that she would be coming back on Saturday afternoon – *this* afternoon. I had not, of course, said anything about the blue man or about her figurines. She would not have believed me and would have thought I was either stupidly trying to tease her or was actually going soft in the head. I would wait till she arrived back.

However, soon after the incident with the coffee cup, Neil came to tell me he was sorry but he would be leaving later this morning.

"I have to go back to the blue," he told me enigmatically.

He thanked me for letting him stay and told me not to worry about Celia. How did he know about my wife? How did he know her name?

True to his word, Neil had gone before lunch. The spare room was exactly as it had been before he arrived and all Celia's porcelain figurines were back in their proper places. 'Let us hope he stays away,' I thought to myself.

Celia returned about mid-afternoon. We were pleased to see each other again and she was even more pleased to see how clean and tidy the house was. I did not, of course, mention that Neil and her figurines had had something to do with that!

"You'll never guess what I've got here," she said excitedly, as she was unpacking.

"Another porcelain figurine?" I asked.

"Yes, of course," she said. "But you'll never guess what it is. I've never seen one like it before!"

There in her hand was a perfect miniature, about eight or nine centimetres high, of my blue man. It was perfect in every minute detail. I stared in amazement.

"Yes," she said, obviously very pleased with herself, "it is very unusual, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"I call him Neil," she added.

"Neil?" I said, trying hard to suppress my surprise. "Why Neil?"

"I don't know," she replied. "It just seemed to suit him."

"Oh," I said, not quite knowing what else to reply.

"I know this sounds crazy," she added after a moment, "but it's almost as if the little figurine named himself."

"I think I know what you mean," I replied, as the little figurine gave me a surreptitious wink.