



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Three Lemons

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A certain sultan was very proud of his son. The young man was handsome and cheerful and had never done a bad deed. He was very popular at the court, especially among the noble ladies who served the sultan. The prince was courteous and honest, but as the years went by and the young man still showed no interest in a woman, the sultan became confused.

"My son, why don't you choose a bride? It's time for you to get married and become a father before I pass away. It shouldn't be difficult to find a woman among all these beautiful ladies? I would certainly know if I were in your position."

The young prince looked at him thoughtfully. "I am looking for more than one of them can give me, father," he replied, "but if you really want me to find a woman, I will make a long journey to find a princess whom I can love. She must be fresh and beautiful as the morning dew, white as snow, and as pure as an angel."

"Very well, my son," the sultan replied. "I wish you luck and a safe return." And so the prince set out.

The air was crisp with frost and the sun shone on the glistening crystals of snow. The waves, in the distance on the coast, seemed to beckon to him so he hurried to the coast where a beautiful ship was anchored. Invisible hands drew him aboard and when his feet touched the deck, the anchor was raised and the ship sailed out.

The ship sailed for three days and three nights over the sea and was steered by a shadowy captain who did not speak a word. On the fourth day, it came to a stop at a small island. The prince was very surprised when he saw his favorite horse come out of the hold. He led the horse to the shore and when he turned around to look at the ship, it had completely disappeared.

The island seemed uninhabited, and the cold was so severe that he could hardly hold the reins. Yet he rode on until he came to a small white house that lay on a hilltop, unprotected from the wind. He knocked on the door and hoped for a warm fire and perhaps some food. An old woman, with long snow-white strands of hair, opened the door and stared at him curiously.

"I am looking for a woman, and she must be a good mother," said the prince. "She must be the most beautiful princess in the world. Can you tell me where I can find her?"

The old woman closed the door halfway. "You won't find her here," she said. "For I am Winter and this is my kingdom. My sister Autumn may be able to help you, but I have no time for thoughts of love. You will find her if you go straight ahead."

The prince thanked the old lady and climbed onto his horse, hoping that Autumn would at least give him a bed and some food. After a while, the snow gave way to a completely different landscape. Clusters of lush fruit hung from the trees. The fields of wheat were golden, and the squirrels were busy storing nuts for the winter. Then he saw, near the forest, a small brown house. He knocked on the door and a woman with long dark hair and eyes like sloes appeared. She had rosy cheeks and looked kindly, but she did not invite him in.

"What are you looking for, young man?" she asked in a soft voice.

"I am looking for a woman," he replied shortly.

"Ah," she exclaimed, "then I cannot help you. My name is Autumn and I am far too busy with fruit picking to have time for things like love and marriage. My sister Summer is full of dreams, and maybe she can help you."

She closed the door, and the prince had no choice but to continue his journey. Along the way, he saw that the grass along the side of the road was very high, and the fields were strewn with ripened grain. The air was warm, and the sun shone brightly. He was glad when he finally saw a small yellow house, which lay in the shade of a cluster of trees. As he knocked on the door, he heard a waterfall in the distance and hoped to quench his thirst soon. A stately woman with chestnut locks opened the door.

"I'm sorry I can't help you," she said when he told her the purpose of his journey, "because I'm very busy too. Hurry to my sister Spring, she is the friend of many lovers and will surely help you."

So the prince continued his journey until he saw a small green house surrounded by blooming lilacs. Hyacinths, violets, daffodils, and fragrant lilies bloomed beneath the windows. When he knocked on the door, a small lady with yellow hair and eyes of soft deep violet appeared.

"Please have mercy on me," he said. "Your sisters have sent me to you. I'm looking for a woman who is as fresh and beautiful as the morning dew, as white as snow and as pure as an angel."

"You ask a lot," Spring said with a smile, "but I'll do my best for you. Come in and

rest, you must be tired and hungry." And to his great delight, she led him inside.

When he had eaten and drunk enough, she brought him three lemons on a crystal tray. There was a beautiful silver knife beside them, and a golden cup on the tray.

"These are magical gifts," she said. "Guard them carefully. Now return to your own home and go to the great fountain in the palace garden. When you are sure you are alone, cut open the first lemon with the silver knife. Then a lovely princess will appear immediately. She will ask for water. If you offer her some right away, in this golden cup, she will stay with you and become your wife. But if you hesitate, even for a second, she will disappear into nothingness, and you will never see her again."

"I will probably not be so foolish," said the prince, "but if I do, will I have no wife at all?"

"Then you must cut open the second lemon," Spring replied gravely, "and exactly the same thing will happen. If you hesitate this time too, and she disappears, you have one last chance with the third lemon. If your wit fails you for the third time, you will die without a partner."

The prince thanked her and rode with great expectations through the kingdoms of Summer, Autumn, and Winter, back to the coast. There lay the stately ship again, and with favorable winds, he quickly reached the palace. He hurried into the palace garden and filled the golden cup with water from the fountain. Then he cut open the first lemon. Barely had he done so when a charming princess appeared, asking him, with a shy look, for some water.

"I'm thirsty," she murmured. "Will you let me drink from your golden cup?"

The prince could only look at the lovely girl in admiration and did not move. And the girl disappeared with a reproachful gesture. He lamented his foolishness in vain. With much regret, he peeled the skin off the second lemon. Again, a beautiful girl appeared.



"So beautiful and fresh as the morning dew and as white as snow," exclaimed the prince in ecstasy. And again, he was too enraptured to heed her request for a cup of water. He only came to his senses when she too had vanished, and he lamented his foolishness once more. With trembling fingers, he cut open the third lemon, and a princess appeared again. The prince closed his eyes so that he would not be blinded by her extraordinary beauty and immediately offered her the golden cup. The girl brought the cup to her lips with an enchanting smile

and drank it empty. The prince now laughed out loud with joy. He had finally found the bride he was seeking!

No summer morning was more beautiful and fresh than she, her white skin shone like snow, and her expression was as pure as that of an angel. He pulled her next to him on the flowery bank, held her hand and looked into her eyes.

"Will you be my wife?" he whispered, and to his joy, she answered: "Yes."

When he came to his senses, he was somewhat disappointed to see that she was wearing a very simple dress. She wore no necklace, and the prince felt that something was missing to bring out her true beauty.

"You deserve a much prettier dress, my dearest," he exclaimed. "Wait here, and I will get a white satin dress and a pearl necklace for you from the palace."

But the princess knew that she did not need jewelry to enhance her beauty, and she did not want him to leave her. However, the prince insisted, and she agreed to stay by the fountain while he went home. He hurried away, more in love than he had ever been.

The princess was now all alone and became frightened, so she hid in a tree between the branches. Her body was hidden, but her face shone like a flower and was reflected in the water of the pond. An ugly girl who came to fill her jug looked into the water and, since she had never looked into a mirror before, thought that the beautiful face was hers.

"Oh, how pretty I am," she mumbled. "I am too beautiful to work so hard. I will never fetch water again." She threw away the jug and walked, as proud as a peacock, home.

When she returned, she was sent out again to fetch water. Deborah picked up a jug and grumbled her way back to the fountain. Once again, she saw the face of the princess reflected in the water, and once again, she was proud of what she saw.

"It's true, I am really pretty and sweet, and I will marry a prince and live in a palace." Then she threw away the second jug.

She was sent out a third time with a jug to fetch water. Again, she saw the beautiful flower-like face of the princess in the water. And she shouted triumphantly: "But I am as beautiful and regal as a queen!"

She spoke so loudly that the princess in the branches heard her, and her laughter sounded like a clear bell. The ugly girl looked up and saw her and was speechless with disappointment. She had not seen herself in the water. When she looked at the princess, she wanted revenge. With a false smile, Deborah said kindly: "Good morning, why are you hiding in a tree, dear lady?"

"I am waiting for my prince, who went to get me a satin dress and a pearl necklace," replied the princess shyly.

"Your golden hair is a mess," said the ugly girl. "I'll come to you and smooth it out. You can't look sloppy when your prince arrives."

"How kind of you!" said the princess, and as she bowed her head, the treacherous girl pricked her with a long, sharp pin. The princess fell backwards in pain, but before her body hit the ground, she transformed into a snow-white dove and flew away with mournful cries.

The ugly girl took her place in the tree, and when the prince finally appeared, with his satin dress and necklace, he saw her.

"Where is my dear princess?" he asked. "She is as beautiful and fresh as the morning dew and as white as snow. What have you done to her?"

"Alas! Dear prince," the ugly girl answered sadly, "while you were away, a sorceress came and transformed me into my current form. If you prove your love by making me your wife, I will become a beautiful princess again in three days. But if you abandon me, I must remain ugly forever."

Although he found her very ugly, the prince was an honorable man who kept his word. He called the court ladies who had come with the carriage and instructed them to dress the girl in satin. He pretended not to see their surprise and disgust. Then he rode back with her to his father to present her as his future wife. The sultan was, of course, shocked by her appearance, but when the prince explained the situation, he agreed that he had to marry her and make the best of it.

Meanwhile, the ugly girl wandered through the palace, giving orders everywhere with a loud and harsh voice. As she walked past the window, she saw a slim white dove sitting on the windowsill.

"Kill that bird too," she shouted to the cook, "and cook it for my dinner."

The cook dared not disobey and plunged a sharp knife into the white breast of the dove. Three drops of blood fell from the windowsill onto the courtyard, and from each drop sprang a tiny seed. As if a fairy had waved her wand, they grew into trees with fragrant blossoms, and soon the blossoms turned into golden lemons.

Meanwhile, the prince was searching for his bride.

"She's in the kitchen," said a shocked courtier. The prince walked under the lemon trees. The sight of the fruit gave him a glimmer of hope, and he gathered three beautiful lemons. Then he hurried to his room, filled the golden cup with water, and stuck the silver knife into the first lemon. Just like before, a beautiful

girl appeared. She stretched out her slender hands towards the golden cup.

"Oh no!" he lamented. "You are very charming, but you are not my princess."

Then he cut into the second lemon, and the second princess stood before him. He shook his head at her plea for a cup of water, and she too disappeared. Finally, he sliced open the third lemon, and there she was: his own princess in his arms again. The old sultan was very happy and relieved when he learned that this beautiful girl was his son's true bride. He listened with a frown to everything that had happened and then had the ugly girl brought before him. He asked her what she thought would be an appropriate punishment.

"I deserve death," stammered the ugly girl. The sultan had her taken away, but the princess took pity on her.

"She's just a poor ignorant woman," she said, "Let her go, I beg you. This is what I ask as a wedding gift."

The sultan could not refuse the first request of his new daughter-in-law, and the prince looked at her lovingly.

"I saw that you were as beautiful and fresh as the morning, and as white as snow," he murmured, "and now I know that you are as pure as an angel."

The years that followed brought the prince both sorrow and joy, but above all, much happiness. And he could never look at a lemon again without feeling grateful to Spring, who had given him the magical gifts that allowed him to find his princess.

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