



The Three Citrons: The Story of a Prince Who Climbed the Glass Hill

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Easy

14 min read

Once upon a time there was an aged king who had an only son. One day he called the prince to him and said: “My son, you see that my head is white. Soon I shall be closing my eyes and you are not yet settled in life. Marry, my son, marry at once so that I can bless you before I die.”

The prince made no answer but he took the king’s words to heart and pondered them. He would gladly have done as his father wished but there was no young girl upon whom his affections were set.

One day when he was sitting in the garden, wondering what to do, an old woman suddenly appeared before him.

“Go,” she said, “to the top of the Glass Hill, pluck the Three Citrons, and you will get a wife in whom your heart will delight.” With that she disappeared as mysteriously as she had come.

Her words went through the prince’s soul like a bright dart. Instantly he determined, come what might, to find

the Glass Hill and to pluck the Three Citrons. He told his father his intention and the old king fitted him out for the journey and gave him his blessing.

For a long time the prince wandered over wooded mountains and desert plains without seeing or even hearing anything of the Glass Hill and the Three Citrons. One day, worn out with his long journey, he threw himself down in the shade of a wide-spreading linden tree. As his father's sword, which he wore at his side, clanked on the ground, twelve ravens began cawing from the top of the tree. Frightened by the clanking of the sword, they raised their wings and flew off.

The prince jumped to his feet. "Those are the first living creatures I have seen for many a day. I'll go in the direction they have taken," he said to himself, "and perhaps I'll have better luck."

So he traveled on and after three days and three nights a high castle came in view.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, pushing joyfully ahead. "I shall soon have human companionship once more."

The castle was built entirely of lead. The twelve ravens circled above it and in front of it stood an old woman leaning on a long leaden staff. She was a Yezibaba. Now you must know that a Yezibaba is an ugly old witch with a hooked nose, a bristly face, and long scrawny hands. She's a bad old thing usually, but sometimes, if you take her fancy, she's kind.

This time when she looked the prince over she shook her head at him in a friendly way.

"Yi, yi, my boy, how did you get here? Why, not even a little bird or a tiny butterfly comes here, much less a human being! You'd better escape if life is dear to you, or my son, when he comes home, will eat you!"

"No, no, old mother, don't make me go," begged the prince. "I have come to you for advice to know whether you can tell me anything about the Glass Hill and the Three Citrons."

"No, I have never heard a word about the Glass Hill," Yezibaba said. "But wait until my son comes. He may be able to tell you something. Yes, yes, I'll manage to save you somehow. Go hide under the besom and stay there until I call you."

The mountains rumbled and the castle trembled and Yezibaba whispered to the prince that her son was coming.

“Phew! Phew! I smell human meat! I’ll eat it!” shouted Yezibaba’s son while he was still in the doorway. He struck the ground with his leaden club and the whole castle shook.

“No, no, my son, don’t talk that way. It’s true there is a pretty youth here, but he’s come to ask you about something.”

“Well, if he wants to ask me something, let him come out and ask.”

“Yes, my son, he will, but only when you promise me that you will do nothing to him.”

“Well, I won’t do anything to him. Now let him come out.”

The prince hidden under the besom was shaking like an aspen leaf, for when he peeped through the twigs he saw an ogre so huge that he himself would reach up only to his knees. Happily the ogre had guaranteed his life before Yezibaba ordered him out.

“Well, well, well, you little June bug!” shouted the ogre. “What are you afraid of? Where have you been? What do you want?”

“What do I want?” repeated the prince. “I have been wandering in these mountains a long time and I can’t find what I’m seeking. So I’ve come to you to ask whether you can tell me something about the Glass Hill and the Three Citrons.”

Yezibaba’s son wrinkled his forehead. He thought for a moment and then, lowering his voice a little, he said: “I’ve never heard of any Glass Hill around here. But I tell you what you do: go on to my brother in arms who lives in the Silver Castle and ask him. Maybe he’ll be able to tell you. But I can’t let you go away hungry. That would never do! Hi, mother, bring out the dumplings!”

Old Yezibaba placed a large dish on the table and her giant son sat down.

“Well, come on! Eat!” he shouted to the prince.

When the prince took the first dumpling and bit into it, he almost broke two of his teeth, for the dumpling was made of lead.

“Well,” shouted Yezibaba’s son, “why don’t you eat? Doesn’t the dumpling taste good?”

“Oh, yes, very good,” said the prince, politely, “but just now I’m not hungry.”

“Well, if you’re not hungry now you will be later. Put a few in your pocket and eat them on your journey.”

So, whether he wanted them or not, the prince had to put some leaden dumplings into his pocket. Then he took his leave of Yezibaba and her son and traveled on.

He went on and on for three days and three nights. The farther he went, the more inhospitable became the country. Before him stretched a waste of mountains, behind him a waste of mountains with no living creature in sight.

Wearied with his long journey, he threw himself on the ground. His silver sword clanked sharply and at its sound twenty-four ravens circled above him, cawed in fright, and flew away.

“A good sign!” cried the prince. “I’ll follow the ravens again!”

So on he went as fast as his legs could carry him until he came in sight of a tall castle. It was still far away, but even at that distance it shone and flashed, for it was built of pure silver.

In front of the castle stood an old woman, bent with age, and leaning on a long silver staff. This was the second Yezibaba.

“Yi, yi, my boy!” she cried. “How did you get here? Why, not even a little bird or a tiny butterfly comes here, much less a human being. You’d better escape if life is dear to you, or my son, when he comes home, will eat you!”

“No, no, old mother, he won’t eat me. I bring greetings from his brother of the Leaden Castle.”

“Well, if you bring greetings from the Leaden Castle you are safe enough. Come in, my boy, and tell me your business.”

“My business? For a long time, old mother, I’ve been looking for the Glass Hill and the Three Citrons, but I can’t find them. So I’ve come to ask you whether you could tell me something about them.”

“No, my boy, I don’t know anything about the Glass Hill. But wait until my son comes. Perhaps he can help

you. In the meantime hide yourself under the bed and don't come out until I call you."

The mountains rumbled and the castle trembled and the prince knew that Yezibaba's son was coming home.

"Phew! Phew! I smell human meat! I'll eat it!" bellowed the mighty fellow. He stood in the doorway and banged the ground with his silver club until the whole castle shook.

"No, no, my son," said Yezibaba, "don't talk that way! A pretty little chap has come bringing you greetings from your brother of the Leaden Castle."

"Well, if he's been at the Leaden Castle and came to no harm, he'll have nothing to fear from me either. Where is he?"

The prince slipped out from under the bed and stood before the ogre. Looking up at him was like looking at the top of the tallest pine tree.

"Well, little June bug, so you've been at my brother's, eh?"

"Yes," said the prince. "See, I still have the dumplings he gave me for the journey."

"I believe you. Well, what do you want?"

"What do I want? I came to ask you whether you could tell me something about the Glass Hill and the Three Citrons."

"H'm, it seems to me I used to hear something about them, but I forget. I tell you what you do: go to my brother of the Golden Castle and ask him. But wait! I can't let you go away hungry. Hi, mother, bring out the dumplings!"

Yezibaba brought the dumplings on a large silver dish and put them on the table.

"Eat!" shouted her son.

The prince saw they were silver dumplings, so he said he wasn't hungry just then, but he'd like to take some with him for the journey.

"Take as many as you want," shouted the ogre. "And give my greetings to my brother and my aunt."

So the prince took some silver dumplings, made suitable thanks, and departed.

He journeyed on from the Silver Castle three days and three nights, through dense forests and over rough mountains, not knowing where he was nor which way to turn. At last all worn out he threw himself down in the shade of a beech tree to rest. As the sword clanked on the ground, its silver voice rang out and a flock of thirty-six ravens circled over his head.

“Caw! Caw!” they croaked. Then, frightened by the sound of the sword, they flew away.

“Praise God!” cried the prince. “The Golden Castle can’t be far!”

He jumped up and started eagerly off in the direction the ravens had taken. As he left a valley and climbed a little hill he saw before him a beautiful wide meadow in the midst of which stood the Golden Castle shining like the sun. Before the gate of the castle stood a bent old Yezibaba leaning on a golden staff.

“Yi, yi, my boy,” she cried to the prince, “how did you get here? Why, not even a little bird or a tiny butterfly comes here, much less a human being! You’d better escape if life is dear to you, or my son, when he comes home, will eat you!”

“No, no, old mother, he won’t eat me, for I bring him greetings from his brother of the Silver Castle!”

“Well, if you bring greetings from the Silver Castle you are safe enough. Come in, my boy, and tell me your business.”

“My business, old mother? For a long time I’ve been wandering over these wild mountains in search of the Glass Hill and the Three Citrons. At the Silver Castle they sent me to you because they thought you might know something about them.”

“The Glass Hill? No, I don’t know where it is. But wait until my son comes. He will advise you where to go and what to do. Hide under the table and stay there till I call you.”

The mountains rumbled and the castle trembled and Yezibaba’s son came home.

“Phew! Phew! I smell human meat! I’ll eat it!” he roared. He stood in the doorway and pounded the ground with his golden club until the whole castle shook.

“No, no, my son,” said Yezibaba, “don’t talk that way! A pretty little fellow has come bringing you greetings from your brother of the Silver Castle. If you won’t harm him, I’ll call him out.”

“Well, if my brother didn’t do anything to him, I won’t either.”

So the prince crawled out from under the table and stood before the giant. It was like standing beneath a high tower. He showed the ogre the silver dumplings as proof that he had been at the Silver Castle.

“Well, well, well, my little June bug,” shouted the monstrous fellow, “tell me what it is you want! I’ll advise you if I can! Don’t be afraid!”

So the prince told him the purpose of his journey and asked him how to get to the Glass Hill and pluck the Three Citrons.

“Do you see that blackish lump over yonder?” the ogre said, pointing with his golden club. “That is the Glass Hill. On that hill stands a tree. From that tree hang the Three Citrons which send out fragrance for seven miles around. You will climb the Glass Hill, kneel beneath the tree, and reach up your hands. If the citrons are destined for you they will fall into your hands of their own accord. If they are not destined for you, you will not be able to pluck them no matter what you do. As you return, if you are hungry or thirsty, cut open one of the citrons and you will have food and drink in plenty. Go now with God’s blessing. But wait! I can’t let you go away hungry! Hi, mother, bring out the dumplings!”

Yezibaba set a large golden dish on the table.

“Eat!” her son shouted. “Or, if you are not hungry just now, put some in your pocket and eat them on the way.”

The prince said that he was not hungry but that he would be glad to take some of the golden dumplings with him and eat them later. Then he thanked the ogre most courteously for his hospitality and advice and took his leave.

He trudged quickly on from hill to dale, from dale to hill again, and never stopped until he reached the Glass Hill itself. Then he stood still as if turned into stone. The hill was high and steep and smooth with not so much as a scratch on its surface. Over its top spread out the branches of the magic tree upon which hung the Three Citrons. Their fragrance was so powerful that the prince almost fainted.

“Let it be as God wills!” he thought to himself. “But however the adventure is to come out, now that I’m here I must at least make the attempt.”

So he began to claw his way up the smooth glass, but he hadn’t gone many yards before his foot slipped and down he went so hard that he didn’t know where he was or what had happened to him until he found himself sitting on the ground.

In his vexation he began to throw away the dumplings, thinking that perhaps their weight had dragged him down. He took one and threw it straight at the hill. Imagine his surprise to see it fix itself firmly in the glass. He threw a second and a third and there he had three steps on which he was able to stand with safety!

The prince was overjoyed. He threw dumpling after dumpling and each one of them became a step. First he threw the leaden ones, then the silver ones, and last of all the golden ones. On the steps made in this way he climbed higher and higher until he had reached the very summit of the hill. Then he knelt under the magic tree, lifted up his hands, and into them the Three Citrons dropped of their own accord!

Instantly the tree disappeared, the Glass Hill sank until it was lost, and when the prince came to himself there was neither tree nor hill to be seen, but only a wide plain.

Delighted with the outcome of his adventure, the prince turned homewards. At first he was too happy even to eat or drink. By the third day his stomach began to protest and he discovered that he was so hungry that he would have fallen ravenously upon a leaden dumpling if he had had one in his pocket. But his pocket, alas, was empty, and the country all about was as bare as the palm of his hand.

Then he remembered what the ogre of the Golden Castle had told him and he took out one of the Three Citrons. He cut it open, and what do you suppose happened? Out jumped a beautiful maiden fresh from the hand of God, who bowed low before him and exclaimed:

“Have you food ready for me? Have you drink ready for me? Have you pretty clothes ready for me?”

“Alas, beautiful creature,” the prince sighed, “I have not. I have nothing for you to eat or to drink or to put on.”

The lovely maiden clapped her hands three times, bowed before him, and disappeared.

“Ah,” said the prince, “now I know what kind of citrons you are! I’ll think twice before opening one of you

again!”

Of the one he had opened he ate and drank his fill, and so refreshed, went on. He traveled three days and three nights and by that time he began to feel three times hungrier than before.

“God help me!” thought he. “I must eat something! There are still two citrons and if I cut open one there would still be one left.”

So he took out the second citron, cut it in two, and lo, a maiden twice as beautiful as the first stood before him. She bowed low and said:

“Have you food ready for me? Have you drink ready for me? Have you pretty clothes ready for me?”

“No, lovely creature, I haven’t! I haven’t!”

The maiden clapped her hands thrice, bowed before him, and disappeared.

Now there was only one citron left. The prince took it in his hand, looked at it, and said: “I won’t cut you open until I’m safe at home in my father’s house.”

He took up his journey again and on the third day he came to his native town and his father’s castle. He had been gone a long time and how he ever got back he didn’t know himself.

Tears of joy rained down the old king’s cheeks.

“Welcome home, my son, welcome a hundred times!” he cried, falling on the prince’s neck.

The prince related the adventures of his journey and they at home told him how anxiously they had awaited his return.

On the next day a great feast was prepared. All the nobles in the land were invited. The tables were spread with food and drink the most expensive in the world and many rich dresses embroidered in gold and studded with pearls were laid out.

The guests assembled, seated themselves at the tables, and waited. Music played and when all was ready, the prince took the last citron and cut it in two. Out jumped a beautiful creature, three times lovelier than the others.

“Have you food ready for me?” she cried. “Have you drink ready for me? Have you pretty clothes ready for me?”

“I have indeed, dear heart!” the prince answered. “I have everything ready for you!”

He led her to the gorgeous clothes and she dressed herself in them and every one present marveled at her great beauty.

Soon the betrothal took place and after the betrothal a magnificent wedding.

So now the old king’s wish was fulfilled. He blessed his son, gave over the kingdom to him, and not long afterwards he died.

The first thing that faced the young king after his father’s death was a war which a neighboring king stirred up against him. So the young king had to bid farewell to the bride whom he had won so dearly and lead his men to battle. In order that nothing happen to the queen in his absence, he built a golden throne for her in the garden beside the lake. This throne was as high as a tower and no one could ascend it except those to whom the queen let down a silken cord.

Not far from the king’s castle lived the old woman who, in the first place, had told him about the Three Citrons. She knew well enough how the young king had won his bride and she was deeply incensed that he had not invited her to the wedding and in fact had not even thanked her for her good advice.

Now this old woman had a gipsy for servant whom she used to send to the lake for water. One day when this gipsy was filling her pitcher, she saw in the lake a beautiful reflection. She supposed it was a reflection of herself.

“Is it right,” she cried out, “that so lovely a creature as I should carry water for that old witch?”

In a fury she threw the pitcher on the ground and broke it into a hundred pieces. Then she looked up and discovered that it wasn’t her own reflection she had seen in the water but that of the beautiful queen.

Ashamed of herself, she picked up the broken pitcher and went home. The old woman, who knew beforehand

what had happened, went out to meet her with a new pitcher.

“It’s no matter about the pitcher,” the old woman said. “Go back to the lake and beg the lovely lady to let down the silken cord and pull you up. Tell her you will comb her hair. When she pulls you up, comb her hair until she falls asleep. Then stick this pin into her head. After that you can dress yourself up in her clothes and sit there like a queen.”

It was easy enough to persuade the gipsy. She took the pitcher and the pin and returned to the lake.

As she drew water she gazed at the lovely queen.

“Oh, how beautiful you are!” she whined, leering up at the queen with an evil eye. “How beautiful you are! Aye, but you’d be a hundred times more beautiful if you but let me comb out your lovely hair! Indeed, I would so twine those golden tresses that your lord would be delighted!”

With words like these she beguiled and coaxed the queen until she let down the silken cord and drew the gipsy up. Once on the throne, the wicked gipsy combed out the golden tresses and plaited them and arranged them until the queen fell sound asleep. Then the gipsy took the pin and stuck it into the queen’s head. Instantly a beautiful white dove flew off the golden throne and not a trace was left of the lovely queen except her rich clothing. The gipsy dressed herself in this, sat in the queen’s place, and gazed down into the lake. But in the lake no lovely reflection showed itself, for even in the queen’s clothes the gipsy remained a gipsy.

The young king waged a successful war against his enemies and made peace. Scarcely had he got home when he hurried to the garden to see whether anything had happened to his heart’s delight. Who can express in words his astonishment and horror when instead of his beautiful wife he saw the evil gipsy!

“Ah, my dearest one, how you have changed!” he murmured and tears flowed down his cheeks.

“Yes, my dear, I have changed, I know I have,” the gipsy answered. “It was grief for you that has broken me.”

She tried to fall on his neck but the king turned quickly away and left her.

From that time forth he had no peace but day and night he mourned the lost beauty of his wife and nothing consoled him.

Grieving in this way and thinking always the same sad thoughts, he was walking one day in the garden when

suddenly a beautiful white dove flew down from a high tree and alighted on his hand. She looked up at him with eyes as mournful as his own.

“Ah, my poor dove,” the king said, “why are you so sad? Has your mate also changed?”

As he spoke he stroked the dove gently on the back and on the head. On the head he felt a little lump. He blew aside the feathers and discovered the head of a pin. He pulled out the pin and instantly the sad dove changed into his own beautiful wife.

She told him what had happened to her, how the gipsy had deceived her and stuck the pin into her head. The king had the gipsy and the old witch caught at once and burnt at the stake.

From that time on nothing happened to mar the king’s happiness, neither the plots of his enemies nor the spite of evil people. He lived in love and peace with his beautiful wife and he ruled his kingdom wisely. In fact he’s ruling it still if he hasn’t died.

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