

The Princess Of Seven Jasmines

A king had an only son. Once, for reasons they couldn't fathom, snakes increased in the kingdom and caused a lot of havoc. The young prince decided to look into the matter himself and fight the snakes. One day, after hunting and killing hundreds of snakes in the nearby forest, he rested under a tree and fell asleep. His servants were all around him. Just then, a great big snake, a seven-hooded snake, began to descend from the branches of the tree under which the prince was sleeping. The servants caught sight of it, drew their swords, and were about to cut it to pieces when the prince woke up and his eye fell on the seven-hooded snake above him. The snake looked at him, eye to eye, and there was a look of great pain in its eyes. The prince asked his servants to do nothing, but to step back. He addressed the snake directly. "O king of snakes, what do you want?" he asked gently.

It replied in a human voice with human words. " *Appa*, for seven long years I've had a terrible headache. I haven't been able to attend to my duties as a king and I haven't been able to discipline my subjects. They are running amok and creating havoc wherever they go."

"Can we do something about your headache? What's the cure?"

The snake said, "If you go seven *yojanas* south of your kingdom, you'll come to a kingdom. The princess is an only daughter of the king there, and she is beautiful and delicate—she weighs only as much as seven blossoms of jasmine. She has never laughed, and when she does, three jasmine flowers will fall from her mouth. If you can bring the middle one of the three to me, and if I can smell its fragrance, my headache will vanish. Then, I promise you, I'll see to it your kingdom will never more be troubled by my snakes."

The prince said, "So it shall be," and set out that very day towards the southern regions. He sent word to his parents that he was going for such and such a job and asked them not to worry about him. As he traveled on, he came to a tank of clear water. He knelt by its bank to quench his thirst and his eye fell on a whole nest of ants that had fallen into the water. Even as they were struggling and drowning, he said, "Poor things!" and with his handkerchief he picked up the whole nest of ants and set them on dry ground. All of them survived. The king of ants was very pleased and grateful. He said to the prince, in the tiniest of voices, "You did us a good turn. We'll never forget it. If you ever need us, think of us, and we'll be there to help you." "That's great," said the prince, and bade them goodbye.

As he moved on, he heard a fearful, strange cry in the forest. He went in search of its source, and soon found himself in front of an enormous giant body lying in the middle of the road. Apparently, some time ago, this giant *rakshasa* had eaten his fill, almost

to bursting, and had fallen asleep, snoring with his mouth open, when a crow flying in the sky with a tamarind fruit had dropped a seed right into his wide-open mouth. The tamarind seed had taken root and grown into a huge tree while he was still fast asleep. By the time the prince arrived on the scene, the giant had woken up, but he couldn't get up or move his mouth even, pinned under the weight of the tree that had grown up there. He was making strange crying and gurgling noises. The compassionate prince cut down the tree, and the giant was able to pull off the roots and the rest of it from his mouth. The giant felt he was saved from a horrible death, and in his joy and gratitude he said to the prince, "If you ever need help in anything, just think of me."

The prince said, "That's good, I certainly will," and moved on. He soon reached the very kingdom the seven-hooded snake had spoken about. There he sent word to the king that such and such a prince from such and such a kingdom had come to visit him and that he had come specially to marry the princess who weighed no more than seven jasmynes. The king summoned him to his presence and was very pleased with the looks and manner of the visiting prince. He said, "No one so far has had the courage to make this long journey and visit our kingdom. You look like someone special. But, if you really wish to marry my daughter, you'll have to succeed in three tasks I'll set."

"Tell me what they are," said the prince.

"We'll pour and mix together a hundred sacks of rice and a hundred sacks of black gram (*uddu*) and give the mixture to you. You must separate them by dawn."

The prince agreed to try, and the king's servants led him to a large room where a huge heap of rice and black gram lay all mixed together, and they left him there for the night. For a while he wondered what he could do, when he suddenly remembered the king of ants, who arrived with the speed of thought with his entire bustling entourage. Before the prince had told them what the task was, they had begun to work, and by morning they had separated the rice from the black gram and arranged them in two heaps. The king came to inspect the work of the prince in the morning, and said, "Bravo! That's a man after my heart. The next thing you have to do is to eat. We'll give you a hundred and one *pallas* of cooked rice and a hundred and one large measures of buttermilk. You'll have to mix them and eat all of it by morning."

As soon as they left him alone with the rice and the buttermilk, he thought of the giant, who arrived at once from nowhere, mixed the buttermilk and the rice, and ate it all up in just three mouthfuls. When the king came to see him in the morning, he was astonished. "Terrific! You did that too. Now for the third task. Today our kingdom celebrates and worships Siva. There's a hill on the northern border and on it there's a

big golden bell. You must go and ring that bell. It can be heard in all the seven kingdoms around here,” said the king, and the prince replied, “Sure, I'm leaving for the hill of the golden bell this minute,” and set out on his task.

When he got there and climbed the hill, he found a golden bell that was so large it looked like another hill on top of the first one. Ordinary mortals could not think of moving it. The prince thought again of the giant, who appeared at once and asked, “What's the matter? You called me again.”

“You must help me one more time, giant. Just pick up this bell and ring it just once. Then you can go.”

“Is that all?” said the giant, picking up the golden bell and ringing it gleefully with all his might, till the seven kingdoms all around rang and shook with the sound of it.

The prince returned and was received with honors by the happy king, who was delighted at finding such a valiant son-in-law. He arranged a festive wedding at once and gave his daughter in marriage to him, loaded the newlyweds with hundreds of gifts, and gave them a splendid send-off with long processions of horses and elephants and all that.

As the prince was coming home with his new bride, the princess who weighed no more than seven jasmynes, they ran into acrobats who were showing monkey-tricks with their trained monkeys. The princess, who had never left the four walls of her palace and was innocent of all experience and had never laughed even once, asked the prince what they were doing.

“O that, that's a monkey show. Let's go see it,” said the prince.

“What's a monkey?” she asked in her innocence.

“See it for yourself,” said the prince, and took her by the hand and led her to the monkey show. She had never seen anything like it: monkeys that looked and acted like little men, somersaulted and walked and begged and played tricks on the audience. She began to laugh, and as she laughed, three divine jasmine flowers fell from her mouth. The prince picked up the middle one and put it safely in his pocket. On their way home, they stopped at the tree where he knew the seven-hooded serpent king would be waiting for him. As soon as the serpent king smelled the jasmine, his seven-year headache disappeared. He was very happy and, as a token of his appreciation, he gave the prince a snake-jewel and said, “If you should ever need me, look into this jewel and think of me. I'll help you overcome any obstacle.”

The prince saluted the serpent king and took his leave. By the time he came back to his kingdom, snakes no longer infested it. They were all gone, as if by miracle. The king, his father, was delighted to hear of his son's many adventures, and he arranged

another gorgeous wedding in his capital for his son and his bride, the princess who weighed no more than seven jasmynes.