

THE SPECTACULAR GIFT (a Moorish tale)

Tell Me a Story by Amy Friedman and Meredith Johnson

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ONCE upon a time, a king had three handsome and clever sons. They loved their father, and they loved each other, but, alas, when they grew to be of marrying age, all three brothers fell in love with the same young woman, a princess from a neighboring village. The three princes decided to visit the princess's father and ask him to choose the son he liked best. Whoever the king chose would marry the princess.

The first son bowed low to the king and said, "Sir, I wish to marry your delicate daughter, the princess."

The second son bowed lower and said, "Good king, I too wish to marry your daughter. I promise I will be a fine husband."

And the third prince bowed lower still and said softly, "Dear king, I love the shy princess with all my heart, and if you give me your permission to marry her, you will make me the happiest man in all the world."

The king looked at all three lads and saw that each was good and true. He did not wish to favor one over the other, and so he devised a contest. "Whichever of you brings to me the most spectacular gift will marry my daughter," he said.

And so the princes set off into the world to search for a spectacular gift for the king. They traveled together for a while and then, on the far side of the highest mountain, they parted ways.

The eldest prince walked at once into the city, for he believed the city held the most spectacular things in the world. He walked along the cobbled streets, looking closely into every shop and stall. He examined exquisite jewels, marvelous music boxes, sets of fine china. Each gift was beautiful, but none was more spectacular than all the rest.

When he came upon a merchant selling rugs, he smiled at the rug seller and said, "I seek the most spectacular gift in the world."

"Ahh," said the merchant, "then you'll want to purchase this carpet." He pointed to a thin, worn rug that lay at his feet.

The prince scowled. "That rag?" he said. "It is nothing, and certainly it is not spectacular."

The merchant smiled slyly. "Good prince, if you step upon this rug, it will take you anywhere you wish."

The prince shook his head. "Do you think I am a fool?" he asked. "I've heard merchants' tales before."

"Allow me to show you," said the merchant, and taking the prince by the arm, he stepped upon the rug. "Now tell me, where in the world would you most like to travel?" he asked.

The prince smiled and said, "I would like to be at the palace gates where my beloved lives."

In the wink of an eye, the rug took off and traveled faster than wind to the palace gates. When they arrived, the prince stared in wonder, but before he could say a word, the merchant said, "Return," and as soon as the word had left his mouth, they were back in the city, beside the merchant's stall.

"I'll take it," said the prince, and he gave the merchant every coin he had.

Meanwhile, the second prince decided to go to a village for his gift. When he arrived, he saw a merchant staring into the bright sky with a telescope. "Sir, I am looking for the most spectacular gift in the world."

"Then you're in luck!" cried the merchant. "Look through this telescope and you will see all the wonders of the world."

The prince bent over and looked through the telescope, and there he saw his brother in the city, buying a worn, ragged rug.

"I'll take it," said the second prince, and gave the merchant all his money, for he was certain he had the most spectacular gift in the world.

The third prince was walking slowly along the country roads, humming to himself, for he believed that the countryside held the world's riches. He came to an old woman who sat on the side of the road selling apples. "Good woman," said the prince, "do you have anything for a hungry lad to eat?"

The woman looked up, smiled, and handed him a brown, wormy apple.

The prince frowned. "But I would like a red, juicy apple," he said, and so the woman bent over and searched through her baskets. At last she found a glistening, ripe apple.

"How much?" asked the prince.

"All your money," said the old woman.

"What madness is this?" cried the prince. "All my money for a single apple?"

"Sir," the old woman said calmly, "this is no ordinary apple. It will cure the sick of every illness. Watch."

With that she stood and took the prince by the hand and led him down the road until they came upon a sick old man who sat beside a tree, groaning with pain. The woman touched the old man's face with the apple, and a moment later he jumped up, healthy and strong.

"I am well!" he cried delightedly, and kicked his heels in the air.

The prince was so impressed he reached into his satchel and pulled out all his coins. "I'm happy to buy your apple," he said, "for certainly this is the most spectacular gift in the world."

When all three princes had returned home, each showed the others his gift, and each said, "Now here is the most spectacular gift in the world."

"Let us look through your telescope, brother," said the youngest prince, "and we shall see our beloved and her father." He bent over and looked through the telescope, and suddenly he began to tremble. "Brothers," he cried, "I see our princess and she is lying in her bed, deathly ill."

"Quickly," said the eldest prince, "climb upon my carpet and we will ride to save her."

All three princes climbed upon the rug and — whoosh! In an instant they arrived at the palace. They ran to the princess's room, and the youngest prince touched the apple to her poor, pale face. A moment later she was perfectly well.

Now all three princes turned to the king. "Tell us, sir, which of our three gifts is most spectacular? If not for this telescope, we never would have known our beloved was ill. And without this magical rug, we would not have arrived in time to save her. And without this magical apple, we would not have been able to heal your daughter. So you decide. Which of these three gifts is most spectacular?"

The king shook his head. "A most difficult decision," he said. "I don't know what to do."

At this the princess sat up in her bed and smiled, and her rosy cheeks bloomed brightly. "Father, I wish to choose my husband for myself. I love the youngest prince, and it is he I want to wed."

And, of course, that was the end of that. The youngest prince and the princess married, and the two older brothers went out into the world. Each prince found a woman he loved, and they too wed. And forever afterward they shared their happiness and, also, their spectacular gifts.