



*THE
YOUNG
MAIDEN
AND THE
SPIRIT
OF THE
RIVER*

Once upon a time, a very long time ago, a beautiful valley was governed by a haughty king. He had a wonderful daughter with blond hair like the colour of the sun and grey eyes like the shingles of the river that flowed nearby. The young girl loved her home place and music and her voice was similar to that of a nightingale. As the time had arrived for the princess to find a husband, the king summoned lots of princes from far and wide, in the hope that she would fall in love with one of them, but in vain.

The king was so desperate that he decided to announce a competition, to establish who was really worthy of his daughter's hand. Several noteworthy suitors presented themselves to the king: princes, dukes, marquis, sultans, but also ordinary, less well-to-do young men such as shop owners, carpenters, and cobblers.



Among these was a farmer, a very humble man without high expectations, who worked away on his land and had taken no interest in the court until one day by chance he noticed the extraordinary beauty of the princess who was taking a walk with the king. It was love at first sight for him and therefore he was delighted to hear about the competition and decided immediately to take part.

The day of the first test arrived and the farmer together with all the other contenders arrived at the royal palace.

After a few minutes, the king came out of the castle to announce:
The man who cuts down the most trees in an hour will have the hand of my daughter in marriage.

As soon as the king finished speaking, everyone ran to get their axes before going to the forest. However, the poor peasant didn't own an axe and therefore couldn't take part. He wandered dejectedly certain that he had lost all chances of winning his beloved's hand when without realizing he found himself at the river which kept all the nearby land fertile.

He saw his reflection in the water and noticed that the shingles on the bed of the river were the same colour as the woman's eyes he so much desired. The poor farmer burst into tears and as soon as his tears dropped into the water he heard a deep, clear voice like he had never heard before: Farmer, why are you crying? Who are you? asked the very frightened farmer.

I am the spirit of the river. Your tears woke me up. Now tell me why you are crying, answered the river. I have fallen in love with the princess of this kingdom.

Her father has set a test to win her hand, which is to cut down as many trees as one can in an hour but, unfortunately, I haven't got an axe so

I can never hope to marry her. Don't be so desperate, my good farmer. I can help you. As the river pronounced these words it uprooted a huge number of trees by using the surge of its water to do so and gave them to the farmer.



Thanks to the help of the river the young peasant won the try by far. His stack of wood was much bigger than the others. However, the king, arrogant as he was, didn't want to give his daughter to a poor peasant, and therefore decided that there would be a second test and announced : Seeing the results of the first try, there will be a second one. The man who is able to compose and play the most beautiful melody in a day will win my daughter's hand. All the suitors set to work in the hope that they would be successful this time. The farmer went to the river hoping he would be helped yet again.

Spirit of the river. I beg you. I really need your help. Farmer, you're here again.

What way can I help you?

The king has set a second test.

I can marry the princess only if I'm able to compose and play a more melodious tune than the other contenders. Don't despair, my dear farmer. I shall help you.

The river then made a harp with the branches of an olive tree nearby and taught the peasant how to play it. He learned quickly and composed a marvelous melody.

The day after he played it in the presence of the king and was the outstanding winner.



However, the king - as arrogant as ever - was still not certain about giving his daughter's hand to this very poor man and decided to set a third try and announced :

Seeing the results of the second test, there will be a third one. The person who picks the most beautiful rose of the whole of Sicily in a week will marry my daughter. So all the contenders ran to get their horses and left at once to look for the loveliest rose they could find. The poor peasant

went to the bank of the river again to ask for its help. Spirit of the river. I beg you to help me. Peasant, you're here once again. How can I help you?

The king has set a third test. I can marry the princess only if I can pick the most beautiful rose in the whole of Sicily and take it to the maiden within a week. Don't despair my good farmer.

I will help you.

The river was able to grow a rose by itself so the farmer didn't need to waste time by looking for one. When the rose had grown in all its splendor due to the fertility of the course of the river, all the young man had to do was pick it. The farmer won yet again the third test, thanks to the river.



So, the king finally decided to give his daughter's hand in marriage to him as he proved to be competent and capable.

The wedding ceremony was to be held the following day.

However, the princess was not at all happy as she didn't love the farmer and felt that he was not the right man for her, even though he loved her with great devotion. That evening the young maiden cried her eyes out before falling asleep but during the night she was awoken by the rustling of water.

That evening the young maiden cried her eyes out before falling asleep but during the night she was awoken by the rustling of water. As soon as she opened her eyes she saw her bedroom flooded by the water of the river. In the beginning, she was terrified but as soon as the spirit spoke to her in his deep, clear voice, every trace of fear disappeared. Don't be afraid, the river said to her. I am the river near where you often took walks during your life. I have seen you grow up and become the splendid young lady that you are.



The farmer, who has won your hand by winning the three tests that your father set, does not really deserve you as he only won them thanks to my help. Only I deserve your love. Run away with me and I will make you happy.

The young maiden fell in love with the voice of the spirit of the river at once and decided, without thinking twice, to escape, leaving behind what were to be her arranged marriage and unhappy destiny.

Running away, the two caused a break in the earth. To remember the way in which he and his beloved had finally met, the spirit of the river created some gorges in the form of 'stacks' (wood, the first test), 'harps' (the second test) and 'roses' (the third test).

This place was to be called later
'Gole dell'Alcantara'
by the local people.



...THE END