

THREE KINDS OF MILK

A TALE FROM THE SWISS ALPS

by

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A long, long time ago in the Hasli region of Switzerland, high upon the Breithorn Alp, a herdsman and dairyman was grazing his cows for the summer, just like he did every year. His name was Res. Every evening, when the sun started turning golden, he would run around jumping and shouting and crying out for joy so that the sound echoed loudly off the cliffs all around. But his singing was raw and ungainly and the tone was shrill and piercing. Because, you see, at that time the beautiful yodeling that we know today had not yet resonated through the Swiss Alps.

One evening, after the sun had sunk below the mountain tops and Res was finished with his jubilant shrieking, he went into the hut, climbed up to the hay loft and stretched himself out on his straw mat. He was very tired from the long day's work and soon he fell into a deep and peaceful slumber; but not for long. In the middle of the night he was suddenly awakened by a noise. It seemed to him that he could hear the fire sizzling downstairs. He rubbed his eyes and quickly slid off the mattress—and looked! But he just as quickly, and almost lame with fear, looked away again. My Lord, my Lord! What did he see!

God as his witness, there stood three strange men and they were just getting a fire going and had reached for the big, cast-iron kettle used for making cheese, and were hanging it up over the now crackling fire and starting to stir the embers to get the fire going more, even though the door was still barred and locked.

Res just wanted to call out: “What d’ya boys think yer doin’ there?” The first shock of seeing them in the hut had now given way to anger. But then he saw what kind of gentlemen they were and the words died on his lips. One was a huge, solid man with a body like a tree trunk and a beard as scruffy as pine needles and fire-red and he had on a shirt like a dairyman wears. He was standing by the hearth and adjusting the big kettle. The second one brought water and firewood to the hearth, shoved a pile of wood on the fire and stirred it up from time to time so that the flames and sparks flew. He was a tall, haggard

man with black hair and a big mustache and he was wearing a green hunting jacket and had a leather bag hanging from his shoulder. The third one was a delicate, pale boy with a snow-white face, fine hair and eyes as blue as the sky. He was helping the big one prepare everything; carrying the pails of fresh milk from the side-room and emptying them into the kettle until it was full. Then the red one turned the hanging kettle around and around over the fire until the creaking noise made Res think the roof was going to collapse. But then, a cold shiver went up and down Res's spine (as if he was not already in a state of shock) and his hair stood up on end. Because when it was time to thicken the milk, the big man winked to the haggard man and he reached into his leather bag and sprinkled (the thunder rolled!) blood-red casein (cheese-starter) into the kettle and the big, red-bearded one stirred with all his might until the hut was shaking.

In the meantime, the pale boy had gone noiselessly outside and was standing before the hut. Just then, Res heard sounds and tones, singing, jubilation, joyful cries such as he had never heard in all his days nor would he have believed they were possible. "Yoholiohu yolihe yoholiloya" sounded forth from the hut into the darkness. The notes were powerfully thundered out to the rock formations and cliff walls, sometimes floating high up, sometimes deep down, sometimes soft, sometimes loud, so that they echoed back from the faraway glaciers as if a huge chorus was singing in unison. It was like being surrounded with vibrant song and sounds, and coming from the middle, the full tones of all the cow bells and the clear music of tambourines. Res had such a feeling of well-being, but at the same time such a tugging at his heart, that tears came to his eyes. It was just like that, just like I'm telling you.

Then the light-skinned one came back inside. He took hold of a long, curved horn, all wrapped round with stems and roots, that he had stood in a corner. He took it and went outside once again in front of the hut and let the sound go out once more into the starry night the same way as before only this time it went through the horn. The sound, the echo, the music, the song, the clang, I can't begin to tell you how extraordinary and how beautiful it was. One time it would thunder and shake and shiver just as when a gale blows through the gorge and bends the eaves. Then it sounded like a breeze rushing over the tops of the high pine forest. Suddenly it seemed as though one could hear the bubbling brook, the rushing stream, the quiet spring, or the tumbling waterfall pounding from a great distance. Another time it sounded as though the church bells were ringing or a whole herd of stately cows, wearing their bells, were peacefully grazing side by side. And he heard that the dairy herd was coming closer and closer to the hut to listen. Suddenly he felt as though his heart would burst. And tears of bliss and sweet sorrow ran down his cheeks.

While all this was going on, the giant had finished his work. He ladled and poured the liquid into three ready pans. But, oh miracle, in the one pan the milk was blood-red, in the other it was grass-green, and in the last pan, the milk was snow-white!

In that moment, the giant called up to Res: “Get down here, boy, and choose which you want, for your sake as well as our own!” Res was shaken to the bone and he felt like the blood was freezing in his veins. But then the pale one came back into the hut and looked up at Res with clear, blue eyes. So, Res took hold of himself and climbed down to stand before the three eerie strangers.

“From one of these pans you must drink, from whichever one you want. But think about it and choose well,” said the red-bearded one in a voice like thunder.

“Look here, if you drink the red then you will be strong all the days of your life and courageous, too. No one will be able to stand against you. You will be master of all on the Earth and can take anything you want by force. No man will be able to defend himself against you. You will be both lord and judge. And, above that, I will give you one hundred wonderful red cows—tomorrow they will already be grazing on your own mountain. And I will give you brown horses and in the valley, a big, beautiful farm with fields and meadows, forests and orchards. Now choose, and take what is yours!”

Res felt a prickling and stinging in all his limbs at these words. Then the green-jacketed man with the mustache stepped forward and spoke in a harsh, almost rusty sounding voice: “Drink from the green pan! Aren’t you already strong enough and can lay all your wrestling opponents on their backs? And what do you want with a hundred cows? One gets sick, and soon you’ll be off to the market with all of them. I’ll offer you something that will last. I will give you the ability to buy everything that strikes your fancy. And you shall be the richest in the land and honored like no other. You shall become the best sharpshooter of all the valleys and be a feared and famous warrior in foreign lands. Princes will crawl for your mercy. The whole world will be yours! Look here and listen how it will be!” And with that the green one emptied his bag: countless shining gold and silver coins poured forth until Res felt his eyes grow fuzzy, his ears begin to ring and all his hairs were bristling.

While all this was going on, the blond boy had been standing in the darkness and leaning on his horn as if lost in a daydream. Now, he lifted his eyes and spoke in a tone as pure and full as a silver-clear bell. His cheeks blushed like the alpine roses on the cliffs and his eyes shone bright: “If you drink out of the white pan, then I will give you my voice, my songs, and my alpenhorn. And tomorrow morning, when the sun comes up, you will be able to sing and yodel and play the alpenhorn just as you heard me doing it. And whomsoever hears you will be of

such joyful heart at the sound of you that they will not forget it their whole life long. You will be precious to God and all people!”

“It’s the white’un fer me,” shouted Res. And he held the pan lightly up to his lips and drank the good, fresh milk.

“You chose well,” spoke the pale boy, “if you had chosen otherwise, then you would have become lost until your death. Hundreds and hundreds of years would have gone by before I could have offered my gifts to another human being. God was with you and encouraged you in your heart.”

And all at once, the three disappeared. The fire in the hearth went out and without realizing it, Res was lying again on his straw mat and sleeping soundly as if nothing had happened. When the sun rose and the birds started twittering and whistling, Res awoke and thought it had all been a dream. But there, in the corner, was the alpenhorn that the pale boy had given him. Res was out of the hut in a flash, stood in the middle of the alpine meadow where the herd was grazing and began to sing and yodel and blow. And what do you know, there came all the cows and ordered themselves in a row and the wildest among them became tame and allowed Res to milk her. And however he tried it, soft or loud, he could sing and yodel and blow the horn just as the blue-eyed one had done it the night before. And from the mountains to the valleys his music echoed to the people, hypnotic and wonderful as the rushing of the rivers and streams or the whispering of the wind through the forests or the thundering of the waterfall from the mountain heights, so that the people who heard it never forgot it their whole lives through.

The cows were reminded of an inborn knowledge how to order themselves into rows at the sound of the yodeling and horn-blowing on that very morning and it has been passed on to each generation to this very day. And the alpine herdsmen have never forgotten how to play the alpenhorn and yodel from the tops of the Swiss Alps.

Translators note: The tradition of playing the twenty-foot long, curved wooden alpenhorns and yodeling from the high mountain peaks is still active in Switzerland today. It is not only done for entertainment or, as in earlier days, to bring in the cows for milking. Many times the music sounds forth from a lonely peak as a blessing for the valley region below and a prayer to God that He continue to protect this beautiful alpine region known as Switzerland as He has for so many centuries. And, it is true that once one has heard this eerie, uncanny, but very beautiful music echoing down from a mountain top, one does not forget it.