



Once upon a time there lived a brave soldier called Armel. He had journeyed through the world for six years, without meeting anyone who was his equal, and at last he grew weary of wandering and decided to return home to his village.

One evening he came to a tumble-down cottage, and saw an old woman at the door spinning.

“Good evening, little mother,” said Armel, bowing respectfully. “Would you be so kind as to tell me where I can find board and lodging for the night?”

“Gladly, my son,” she said. “Take the road on your left that goes up the hill. When you come to the end, you will see a castle. Crows and owls fly about its walls. If you are not afraid, you may go in and you will find a good meal and soft beds. Take care not to sleep too soundly, however, for they say the castle is inhabited by unfriendly spirits. For many hundreds of years a maiden has been imprisoned there, and although many brave men have tried to free her, they all have failed.”

“By my patron, Saint Armel,” said Armel, “this is an adventure after my own heart. Let us hope that I will be more successful than my predecessors.”

He wished the old woman farewell, and set off for the castle. He entered the courtyard and rang the bell in the belfry, but no one appeared. Inside, every room was empty.

“No one seems to be awake here,” said Armel. “I fear that there will be nothing to eat.”

No sooner had he said these words but a table rose up from the floor covered with many dishes. Armel ate and drank his fill, and when he had finished, the table disappeared and a bed appeared in its place. Its sheets and pillows were soft, and the coverlet was edged with lace.

“By my faith,” said Armel, “this is better than the barracks. I shall sleep as well as the King of France tonight.”

However, he had not been in bed a quarter of an hour when he saw a candle coming down the stairs carried by an invisible hand. Armel sat up in bed and cried out:

“Oho – I think you must be the master of this place.”

“Who is there?” asked a girl’s soft voice.

“Come here, and you will find out,” said Armél.

“I cannot – I would frighten you,” the voice replied.

“You will not frighten me,” said Armél. “I have wandered through the world and met with many monsters, but I have never been afraid.”

“Very well,” said the voice, and a figure instantly appeared. It was so ugly that Armél’s hair stood on end in spite of himself.

“There, I knew you would be frightened,” said the figure. “You will never free me.”

“I am not frightened,” said Armél, “only surprised. What do you want me to do?”

“You must spend three nights in this castle. Each night you will be beaten, knocked about and ill treated. You must bear it all without saying a word. In the morning rub the ointment in this pot over yourself, and you will be healed.

Armél promised to do all she said, and soon fell into a deep sleep. At the stroke of midnight he awoke. There was no one to be seen, but angry voices were talking all around his bed. They asked him who he was and why he was there and told him to leave the castle, but he did not say a word. Next, they seized him with invisible hands and shook him until he felt as if every bone in his body was broken. At last he turned to the wall and fell asleep.

Next morning the monstrous figure came to him again, but now it had the head of a beautiful maiden.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thanks to you, I am once more becoming myself. Still, the worst is yet to come. Remember, do not say anything, no matter what happens.”

“I will not forget,” said Armél.

That night the invisible spirits came again. This time the poor soldier was beaten, hung from the ceiling, and finally thrown, more dead than alive, onto his bed. He rubbed the ointment onto his body, and immediately felt as well as ever. The next morning, the figure came to him with the first ray of sunlight. She now had the form of a beautiful young woman down to the waist.

“The final test will be tonight,” she said. “Only a little more courage, my friend, and we will each receive our reward.”

“I will hold out to the last,” said Armél. “On my faith, as a Breton.”

He kept his word, even though he was sorely tried. The angry voices

cried “Speak, speak!!” and rained down blows on his poor body; when they left him he had scarcely enough strength to rub the ointment onto himself.

However, his sufferings were now at an end. Next morning, the maiden came to him, and she had regained her true form.

“How can I thank you?” she asked. “You have freed me from the spirits who have kept me prisoner for hundreds of years. I would like to repay you with my hand in marriage. I will return tonight and become your wife.”

At midnight the maiden entered Armel’s room. He was fast asleep, and even though she told him she would have to leave if he did not wake up,



he could not hear her. At last she sat down and wrote him a note, then she wrapped it in a satin handkerchief and slipped it beneath his pillow. This done, she went away.

In the morning Armél awoke and found the note beneath his pillow. It told him that the maiden had left for the palace of the Sun: unless he could find her in three days, she would have to become the Sun's wife. Without further ado he took up his sword and set out. As he was walking beside a river he saw a great fish thrashing about in the water. Its tail was caught in a net and Armél took pity on it and set it free.

"Thank you friend, for saving me," said the fish. "What can I do for you in return?"

"I do not know," said Armél; "I am looking for my betrothed who has left me for the Sun's palace."

"I have never heard of the Sun's palace," said the fish. "Still, I can take you wherever you like on my back."

Armél went on his way and after a while he came to an old beggar woman kneeling beside the river. She was dying of thirst and was trying to take up water in a leaky clog.

"Oh, godmother," said Armél, "you will never get any water that way. Give me your clog."

He filled the holes with clay, took up some water, and gave it to the old woman.

"God reward you for your kindness, my son," said the old woman. "What can I do for you in return?"

"It is not easy," said Armél. "I am looking for my betrothed who is in the Sun's palace – but I do not know where that is."

"Perhaps I can help you. I can command every bird in Creation, and I am sure one of them will know. Let me summon them."

So saying, she drew forth a golden whistle and blew upon it. The most beautiful birds came from every direction and gathered in a circle about their queen. Unfortunately, none of them had heard of the palace.

Armél was about to wish the wise woman farewell when a great raven flew up carrying a half-gnawed bone in its beak.

"Forgive me, Mistress," he said. "I was at the Sun's wedding preparations, and there was so much to eat that I forgot myself."

"You were at the Sun's palace?" cried Armél. "Could you show me the way?"

"Gladly – but it is two hundred leagues from here, over the forests and the oceans."

“Were it at the end of the world, it would be nothing to me!” said Armél. In great haste, he called the fish, mounted on its back, and, guided by the raven, set off over forests and oceans. He travelled very swiftly and soon came to the end of his journey. It was high time, for the wedding procession was already preparing to leave for the church.

“I will have to keep my eyes open and not lose my head,” thought Armél.

He stood in the middle of the road and when the bride passed by he pulled out the handkerchief she had given him. She stopped and recognised him, but how was she to get away?

“I can see a messenger,” she said. “I think he brings me news of my father. May I go to speak to him?”

“If you wish to, my love,” said the Sun. “Today you may do anything.”

“Thank you for those words,” said the maiden, and before the Sun could recover himself she leapt onto the fish’s back, took the arm of her betrothed and set off at a great speed. The Sun’s attendants pursued them, but in a quarter of an hour they were left far behind.

Free at last, the maiden returned to her castle and celebrated her wedding with Armél. Never were such festivities seen – everyone in the land was invited, and people continued to talk of the marriage for many years. This is how I came to hear of it and could remember it to tell to you, in the hope that you would enjoy it.