



PRINCESS MARCASSA

Once upon a time there lived a king of France who had three sons. The two elder sons were strong and handsome, but the youngest was weak and sickly. He spent all day sitting in the corner of the fireplace, and for this reason he became known as Luduenn (*from the Breton word 'ludu' for cinder or ash*).

The old King had fallen ill and nobody could cure him. At last a magician arrived, who said that he would not get better until he had touched the Drédaine bird, in its golden cage.

“Where is this bird?” asked the King.

“In Princess Marcassa’s castle, which lies beyond the Red Sea,” said the magician. “It is surrounded by three high walls, and the three courtyards are guarded by giants, seven foot high, and dragons, who can breathe fire seven leagues round about.”

“Who will go to such a castle, to fetch me the bird?” asked the King, with a sigh.

“I will, Father,” said the eldest son.

He took gold and silver, mounted on the best horse in the stables, and set out with the words:

“If I do not return in a year and a day, it is because I am no longer alive.”

He travelled so swiftly that he soon came to Bro-Saoz (*Land of the Saxons i.e. England*). He asked the way to the castle of Princess Marcassa, but people only laughed at him. He went to stay at an inn, and found such merry companions there that he did not leave until his money ran out.

When the year and a day had passed away, and the eldest son did not return, the second son asked permission to go in quest of the Drédaine bird. His father gave him gold and silver and he soon reached the same inn as his brother. He too remained there, and led the same life.

The year and a day passed away, and seeing that his brother did not return, Luduenn went to his father, who was growing more ill by the day.

“Father,” he said, “I wish to look for my brothers and the Drédaine bird.”

“You, my child?” said the old man. “Stay at home to close my eyes when I die. You will never succeed where your two brothers have failed.”

But Luduenn still wished to go. His father gave him a little money, but much less than he had given his other sons. Luduenn went to the stables, and took a dromedary that travelled seven leagues an hour.

He soon reached the town where his two brothers were living, and asked everyone if they knew the way to the castle of Princess Marcassa. People replied that they had never heard of it except from the two young princes, who led a merry life at the inn. Luduenn was overjoyed to hear that his brothers were still alive, and hurried to meet them. They welcomed him, stole his money, and sent him on his way.

Poor Luduenn went on, his heart heavy at his brothers’ unkind treatment, but thanks to his dromedary, he travelled very swiftly.

One night he found himself in a great wood. Wild animals could be heard all about, and growing afraid, he climbed a tree. From its branches he saw a little light, and he climbed down and made towards it. It was a candle, shining through the window of a little hut, made from branches and dry grass. In it was a little old woman.

“Please, grandmother, may I stay here for the night?” he said.

“I cannot take you in my child,” said the old woman. “For I have no bed.”

“I can sleep on the hearthstone, grandmother,” said Luduenn.

“Very well, come in, for I feel sorry for you,” said the old woman.

Luduenn tied his dromedary to a post, and entered the hut.

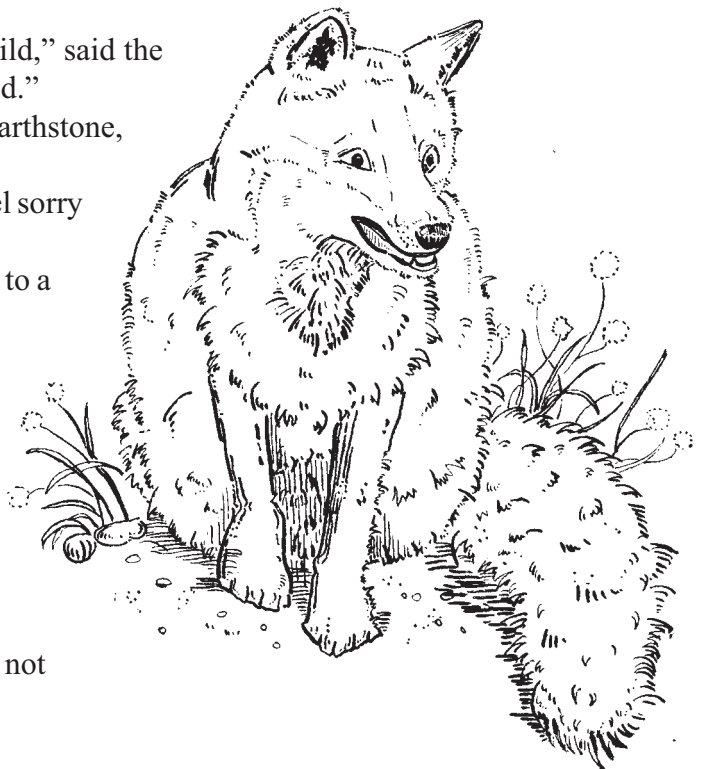
“How bad it smells in here,” he said, holding his nose.

“Yes,” said the old woman.

“It is my husband. He has been dead eight days, and his body is still here.”

“Why do you not bury him?” said Luduenn.

“Alas, my child. I have not money to pay for the burial.”



“I am not rich, grandmother, but tomorrow morning I will pay for him to be buried,” said the Prince.

The next morning he went to the men in the village.

“Here is the money that you asked of the old woman in the forest,” he said to them. “Take it, and bury her husband straight away.”

The corpse was buried, and Luduenn walked by the old woman’s side behind the coffin.

He continued on his way, and came to a great, barren plain. As he was travelling over it he saw that he was being followed by a white fox.

“I wonder why this animal is following me?” he thought to himself.

At the far side of the plain, the fox began to speak to him:

“Are you looking for the Drédaine bird?” it said.

“Yes dear creature – can you give me tidings of it?” said Luduenn.

“I can,” replied the fox. “You are not far from it now. Can you see that castle on the mountain? The Drédaine bird is in there, and this is what you must do to capture it. The castle is surrounded by three walls and inside each wall is a courtyard, which you must pass through. The first courtyard is full of serpents, toads and poisonous reptiles; in the second courtyard are serpents and tigers, and in the third courtyard are serpents and giants, who guard all the doors into the castle.

“They all sleep from eleven to the last stroke of noon, and you can walk past them, and even tread on them, without their awakening. Once you are



in the castle you will pass through three magnificent apartments and in the fourth (I will not tell you what you will find in the first three) is the Drédaine bird in its golden cage which hangs from the ceiling by three gold chains. He too will be asleep. Close by, a sabre hangs from a golden nail. Take it, cut through the three chains, and carry off the bird in its cage. But, do not forget, all this must be done by the last stroke of noon, otherwise the doors will close on you, and you will never return.”

Luduenn thanked the fox for his advice, and continued on his way.

He arrived at the castle when eleven was chiming. The door stood open, and he passed through the first courtyard. Enormous serpents and other reptiles lay over the ground, but they did not awaken. It was the same in the second and third courtyards, and his courage nearly forsook him at the sight of such hideous monsters. At last, however, he reached the entrance to the castle itself. No one was in the first room, but on a table there stood a loaf of good white bread. He was hungry, and cut himself a large piece. To his wonder, the loaf did not become any smaller, and he put it in his pocket saying:

“This might come in useful on my journey.”

In the second room he found a tankard of wine, with a glass beside it. He drank one glassful, then another, and then another. When he had finished, he put the tankard in his pocket and went into the third room.

In this room lay a beautiful princess, fast asleep on a purple and gold bed. He gazed at her, open-mouthed, and then he took off his shoes, tiptoed up to her side, and kissed her. She did not awaken and, bearing in mind the fox’s advice, he went on to the fourth room.

In this room he found the Drédaine bird, fast asleep in its cage. He saw the sabre hanging from the wall, and on its blade he read these words:

“He who owns me can kill ten thousand men with the edge of my blade and with the other side he can cut whatever he pleases.”

“Very good!” said Luduenn, and seizing the sabre he cut the three chains with three powerful strokes – slash, slash, slash! He seized the cage and, sabre in hand, ran out of the castle and through the three courtyards. As he crossed the threshold of the last courtyard, midday began to strike. He leapt onto his dromedary, which was waiting at the door, and set off with the speed of the wind.

When the Princess, the giants, and the serpents awoke, they knew immediately that the bird had been stolen. The serpents began to shoot forth flames, and the giants set off in pursuit of the thief. Luduenn and his dromedary had their hair singed, but the dromedary was guided by the

white fox who ran ahead of them, and travelled so fast that they soon left the castle's dominions behind.

The white fox immediately disappeared, and Luduenn continued on his way.

At the far side of the great plain Luduenn stopped at a large inn. He asked for the best food and drink they possessed, but the bread was not to his liking and he sent for the innkeeper.

"Your bread is worthless," he said.

"What do you mean?" said the innkeeper. "There is no better in the land, and it is eaten by the King himself."

Luduenn pulled out the loaf that he had taken from the castle.

"I have a better here," he said, and cut the innkeeper a slice.

The innkeeper liked it so much that he asked for another piece. Luduenn cut it for him, and showed him that the loaf grew no smaller.

"If you had a loaf like this it would make your fortune," he said.

"Indeed it would – but where am I to find such a loaf?"

"Oh, nowhere, it is the only one of its kind."

"Well, will you sell it to me then? I will give you a hundred écus."

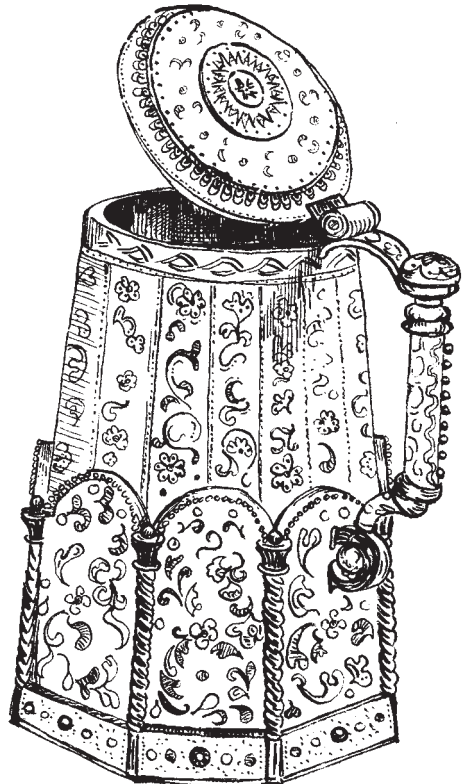
"Very well: you may have it on condition that you return it to its owner, Princess Marcassa, if she ever comes to reclaim it."

The innkeeper thought to himself that no Princess Marcassa would ever come to reclaim the bread, and he paid Luduenn the hundred écus.

Luduenn went on his way and at sunset stopped at another inn. Here he sold the innkeeper the bottomless tankard which he had taken from the castle.

After this he travelled, and travelled until he arrived in Bro-Saoz. He went to the inn in which he had left his brothers and learnt that after they had spent all their money, they had turned to thieving. They had been caught and imprisoned, and were now awaiting their death.

However, the King was waging a terrible war with a neighbouring ruler,



and was too busy to turn his mind to the prisoners.

Luduenn decided to find the King and offer his services. He went to the palace and showed the King his wonderful sabre. He promised to help him to defeat his enemies, if he agreed to pardon his brothers.

The King agreed, and Luduenn marched at the head of the army against the enemy. At the mere sight of the sabre the soldiers fled away, and he won a resounding victory.

The two princes owed many debts, so, to pay them, Luduenn sold his sabre to the innkeeper on the condition that if Princess Marcassa should pass by, he would return it.

The three brothers set off towards France, bearing with them the Drédaine bird in its golden cage. Luduenn carried it at all times, and his two elder brothers began to plot together how they could be rid of him, and take the bird home themselves.

One day they were passing by a deep well and the two elder brothers both leant over to look into it.

“Oh,” they cried. “Look at that pretty flower! Come and see, Luduenn, you have never seen a fairer.”

Luduenn set down his cage and ran to look into the well. His brothers took hold of his feet and threw him in, then they seized the cage, and hurried away on the dromedary.

When they arrived home they found the old King very weak. The sight of the Drédaine bird cheered him a little, and there was feasting and festivities. However, the bird was very sad, and when it was carried into the King’s bedchamber, it grew angry, and uttered terrible cries, and would not allow the old King to touch it. After this the King grew weaker every day, and everyone around him was very concerned.

But what happened to poor Luduenn at the bottom of the well? Fortunately the water was not deep, and the white fox soon came to his aid. He stretched his brush into the well, and it grew and grew until it reached the water. Then he told Luduenn to take hold of it, and he would pull him out.

“Now,” he said, “carry on till you get to your father’s palace. Not far from here you will meet an old beggar man. Give him all your money, and change clothes with him. When you come to your father ask for the humblest position at his court. Do not worry about anything else; all will go well, and the wrongdoers will be treated as they deserve.

‘Do you remember having lodged for the night in the hut of a poor old woman? She could not afford to bury her husband, and do you remember that you paid for the burial?’

“Yes; I remember very well,” said Luduenn.

“Well I am the soul of that poor man, whose last rites you paid for from your own pocket. I have come in this form to show my gratitude to you. Now I will say farewell, for we will not meet again in this world.”

So saying, the white fox disappeared.

Luduenn continued on his way, and soon met the old beggar man. He gave him his money and his clothes, and dressed himself in his rags.

At length he reached his father’s palace. When his eldest brother saw him come into the courtyard he said:

“Send him to mind the swine.”

This was done, and not long after, he became the stable boy. He took such good care of the horses that the King heard of it, and often spoke of him. However, his brothers had recognised him, and they counselled their father to employ him in feeding the Drédaine bird. Since its arrival at the palace the bird had been so bad-tempered that it had pecked anyone who came near it; but when it saw Luduenn it began to sing, and flap its wings for joy. Luduenn took it on his finger, and went with it to the King’s bedchamber. The old man felt a little stronger at hearing it sing, but still the bird would not allow anyone but Luduenn to touch it.

Meanwhile, in the castle of Princess Marcassa, the Princess had given birth to a handsome boy. One day the child asked who was his father, and the Princess replied that she did not know.

“I want to find my father,” said the child. “I will not stop looking until I find him.”

So the boy set out, and his mother went with him.

They stopped to refresh themselves at the inn where Luduenn had left the wonderful loaf. The innkeeper gave them it to eat, and the Princess knew by this that Luduenn had passed that way.

“Give me that bread,” she said to the innkeeper.

“I will not give it away to anyone, unless Princess Marcassa asks me for it herself one day,” said the innkeeper.

“I am Princess Marcassa, and the bread belongs to me, and I will take it.”

So saying, she put it in her pocket. As for the innkeeper, he had already made his fortune from the wonderful loaf.

The Princess and her son continued on their way until they came to the inn where Luduenn had left the bottomless wine tankard. This too they took away with them, and soon arrived in Bro-Saoz. Here they stopped at the inn where Luduenn had left his magic sabre, and they also took that

away with them.

“Take heart, my son,” said the Princess to her child, “we are nearing your father.”

At last they came to Paris, and the Princess informed the King’s servants of her arrival. The old King was delighted and despite his illness he went down into the courtyard and offered to help the Princess out of her golden carriage.

“I will not get out of my carriage,” she said, “until he who carried off the Drédaine bird comes to give me his hand.”

“I am he!” cried the eldest son, stepping forward.

“Very well: tell me how my castle is guarded.”

The eldest son could only say that the castle was surrounded by high walls.

“It is not you!” said the Princess. “Let another come forth.”

The second son now approached.

“It is I,” he said.

“Tell me then, how is my castle guarded?”

But he knew no more better than his brother, and the Princess exclaimed:

“It is not you either; leave us. Let the man who carried off the Drédaine bird be brought to me or I will depart.”

Then Luduenn stepped forward, in the dress of a stable-boy.

“It is I, Princess,” he said.

“Tell me how my castle is guarded.”

“Your castle, Princess, is surrounded by three high walls, and three courtyards. In the first courtyard are serpents and poisonous reptiles; in the second are yet more serpents and lions and tigers; and in the third are giants and serpents who breathe flames seven leagues round about.”

“I see that you do know something,” said the Princess. “But what then?”

“All these animals were fast asleep, and I passed through them unharmed. In the first room of the castle I found a wonderful loaf which did not diminish when I ate it; in the second room was a tankard of wine, which did not empty when I drank from it; and in the third room I saw a Princess, fair as the day, asleep upon a bed of purple and gold.”

“And what did you do then?” asked the Princess.

“After having looked at her for some time open-mouthed, I bent and kissed her.”

“This is all true,” said the Princess, “and here is your son, but go on.”

“I then passed into a fourth apartment and cut down the Drédaine bird with the sabre that I found hanging from the wall by a golden nail. Then I fled, taking with me the bird, the sabre, the wine tankard, and the bread.”

“And where are they?” asked the Princess.

“The bird is here: I left the loaf, the tankard, and the sabre in the inns where I lodged on my way home.”

“I found them there, and took them away with me,” said the Princess. “But now show me the bird.”

Luduenn went to fetch the bird in its golden cage. When it saw the Princess it beat its wings for joy and began to sing so sweetly, and so loudly, that the palace rang with the sound, and every heart was glad – save those of the older brothers.

The Princess opened the cage, took the bird on her finger, and held it out to the King.

“Stroke it with your hand,” she said.

The bird which until now had been so obstinate allowed the old man to touch it, and he was immediately cured and invigorated.

Then the Princess revealed before the whole court the wrongs which had been done to Luduenn by his elder brothers. They were duly punished, and then Luduenn and Princess Marcassa were married. There was great rejoicing and many celebrations, and when the old King passed away, Luduenn became King in his place.

*Told in 1875 by
Marie Manac’h, a
serving woman from
Plougasnou.*

