

# THE KING'S DRUMMER

Once upon a time there lived a young man who was a soldier in the King's army. He was cheerful and brave and loved by his companions, and he soon became the King's drummer. He played the drum so well that when he left the army he was allowed to keep his instrument.

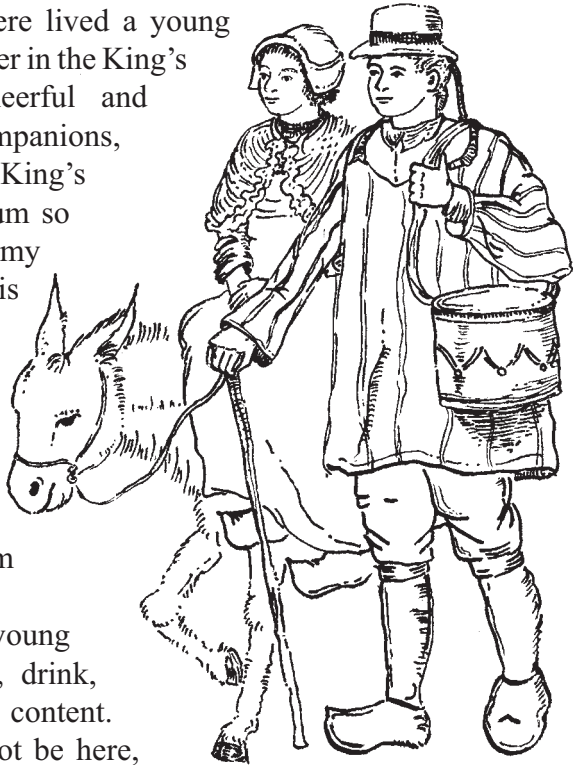
He set off home, and as he walked he played gaily on his drum. One night he lost his way in a forest and a hermit who lived in a little hut offered to give him shelter.

"Make yourself at home, young man," said the hermit. "Eat, drink, and sleep to your heart's content. Tomorrow morning I will not be here, for I get up very early. I advise you to be on your way before the sun rises, or else you will not be able to leave."

"Why, who will stop me?" asked the soldier. "I am afraid of no one."

"With the sun's first rays, a great serpent coils itself round the tree outside my door, and stays there till sunset;" said the hermit. "It is protecting the King's daughters who wash their undergarments and bathe in yonder pool."

The next morning the hermit left before dawn, but the soldier was tired and slept on until the sun was high in the sky. When he awoke he opened the door, to see if what the hermit had said was true. He stepped back with a cry of horror. A mighty snake hung from the branches of an oak. It glared and darted out its forked tongue. If he stepped forward it would slay him, so he could not leave the hut. Suddenly he saw his drum.



"This may be able to help me," he said. He began to beat it with great vigour, and the noise echoed through the forest like thunder. Birds hid in the trees, and the serpent uncoiled itself and slithered away into the forest.

That evening the hermit returned and asked the soldier what had happened.

"Oh, I frightened off the serpent," said the soldier.

"Indeed? Then you have done what no one else could do," said the hermit.

"Did you see the King's daughters?"

"No," said the soldier, "I was too busy with my drum."

"Then keep your eyes open tomorrow," said the hermit.

When the sun rose next morning the soldier was at the door of the hut. The serpent came up to the tree but when the soldier played a few rolls on his drum it hastened away. At the same time the King's daughters came down to the pool. They were all very beautiful, and shone like stars. They were so alike that each girl wore a different coloured ribbon about her arm, so that people could tell them apart. The eldest wore a red ribbon, the second a white and the third a blue.

"Which of the three girls is the best?" said the soldier to the hermit.

"The one in the middle – with the white ribbon," said the hermit.

"Very well, then I will make her my wife," said the soldier. When he looked closer he saw that the second sister had a pair of wings on her back, but he had chosen her, and he could not change his mind.

On the third day the soldier chased away the serpent, and crept down to the pool. He hid amongst some willows and when the maidens came out of the water he seized his chosen bride by the arm. Her sisters gave cries of terror and ran away.

"What do you want, young man?" asked the second daughter.

"I mean you no harm, beautiful princess," said the soldier. "All I ask is your hand in marriage."

"Gladly," replied the maiden. "When can I become your wife?"

"This very day," said the soldier. "Here is a hermit to bless the union."

But the hermit did not wish to marry them without the aid of six other hermits who lived in the forest. It was very hard to find them, for they lived in the remotest parts of the wood, and they did not like to leave their hermitages.

The soldier set off and after a year he had found them all. As his friend the hermit had said, they would not leave their homes, so he began to play upon his drum. At last the noise grew unbearable, and the hermits agreed

to accompany him.

After the wedding the soldier was filled with a longing to see his village and family again.

“Go, my children,” said the hermit, “and do not forget your old friend. The way is long and difficult. I will give you my donkey – you can have no better companion. I ask only one thing. Do not make him travel between sunset and sunrise, and never beat him.”

The young couple set out and journeyed on for five days. The donkey was very obedient and as fleet as the wind. At nights they stopped where they were and slept as best they could. They were not far from home when, one evening, they found themselves in a sunken path. It was very muddy, and they tried to make haste, but the sun set, and the donkey stopped. They could not sleep where they were – what were they to do?

“Come on, you silly animal!” cried the soldier, and struck the donkey on the haunches. No sooner had he done so, but the donkey threw him off into the mud and bolted, and his wife soared up into the sky.

The soldier had to walk back to the hermit's hut, along long and difficult paths. When he arrived, he found that his wife had also returned to the hermitage. He wanted to take her home with him, but the hermit would not allow it.

“You may have her in a year's time,” he said. “Return home, and in a year she will join you. Do not sleep on your return journey, for if you do you will forget all that has happened.”

The poor soldier bade his wife farewell and set off home. He only stopped to dip his bread into the clear water of the springs, but after three days he became very tired. He sat down by an oak tree and fell asleep. When he awoke he had forgotten everything. He only remembered that he was a soldier on his way home from the army.

There was great rejoicing when he arrived in the village and all the young girls admired his courage and good looks. Before the year was over he became betrothed to a rich heiress.

Meanwhile, the true bride was longing to rejoin her husband. Finally, the year came to an end, and the hermit gave her permission to leave.

“Here,” he said, “take these three boxes. Each one contains a beautiful dress. Use them wisely and all will be well.”

The true bride set off, and when she neared her husband's home she put on the first dress. Soon she met her husband himself, out walking with his betrothed.

“What a beautiful dress,” said the maiden. “Tell me, young woman, what

will you take for it?"

"It is not for sale, it can only be won," said the true bride.

"What are the conditions?"

"You must allow me to spend the night in the room next to your future husband."

The maiden agreed and that night the true bride was shown into the room beside her husband's. The soldier's servant was watching over him as he slept, and all night long he heard a whispering voice.

"Have you forgotten the hermit and your drum and the serpent? Have you forgotten the King's daughter, whom you lost and whom you were to see again after a year?"

The soldier did not hear, for his betrothed had given him a sleeping draught, and he slept on soundly. He was surprised when, next morning, his servant told him what had happened.

"What did the voice say?" he asked.

"I cannot tell you," said the servant, "it would trouble you."

The next day the true bride put on her second robe, and once again met the soldier and his betrothed.

"Will you give me this dress on the same conditions?" said the maiden.

"Yes, I will," said the true bride.

That night the servant heard the same voice, but now it was tearful.

"Have you forgotten the hermit and your drum and the serpent? Have you forgotten the King's daughter, whom you lost and whom you were to see again after a year?"

The soldier was fast asleep, but next morning he asked the servant to repeat to him what he had heard. He was filled with wonder, and swore to get to the bottom of the mystery.

On the third day he and his betrothed once again met the true bride. She was wearing an even more beautiful dress and the maiden could not resist it.

"Will you give me that dress if I let you spend a night in the room beside my husband's?"

"Yes, I will," said the true bride.

That night the servant replaced the soldier's sleeping draught with a harmless drink and the soldier heard the whispering voice.

"Have you forgotten the hermit and your drum?"

"Your drum!" The word reminded the soldier of everything he had forgotten.

He remembered the hermit, the serpent, and the King's daughter who

had become his wife and who was now two feet away from him, trying, through her tears to knock at the door of his heart.

There were great festivities to celebrate the happy couple's reunion. The betrothed was given the three dresses to make up for her disappointment, and I myself was given a bowl of cider and as many loaves of white bread as I could take away with me.

*Told by M. Méliau Le Cam, from Pluméliau*