

Golden Treasure

Hans Christian Andersen

The drummer's wife went to church and saw the new altar with painted pictures and carved angels. The angels were very beautiful, both those painted on cloth, in all their colors and glory, and those carved in wood, painted and gilded. Their hair shone like gold and sunshine and was beautiful to look at. But God's sunshine was still more beautiful; it glowed bright and red between the dark trees as the sun was setting. And as the woman gazed on the descending sun, her innermost thoughts were about the little child the stork was bringing her. She was radiantly happy as she gazed, and she wished most fervently that her child might be as bright as a sunbeam, or at least look like one of the shining angels on the altarpiece.

And when she actually lifted up her child in her arms to show her husband, it seemed to her that the infant really did resemble one of the angels in the church; at least it had golden hair, hair that had caught the reflection of that setting sun.

"My Golden Treasure, my wealth, my sunshine!" said the mother as she kissed the bright locks; and this sounded like music and song in the drummer's home; there was joy, and lots of life, and celebrating. The drummer beat a whirlwind on his drum, a whirlwind of happiness; the drum, the fire drum shouted, "Red hair! The young one has red hair! Listen, believe the drum and not the mother! Dr-rum-a-lum! Dr-rum-a-lum!"

And all the town agreed with what the fire drum said.

The boy was taken to church and was christened. There was nothing unusual about the name given him; he was called Peter. Everybody in town called him "Peter, the drummer's red-haired boy," but his mother kissed that red hair and called him "Golden Treasure."

In the clayey embankment along the hollow road, many people had scratched their names to be remembered. "Fame," said the drummer. "That's always important." So he, too, scratched his name there and that of his little son. And in the spring the swallows came; in their long travels they had seen many characters cut into rock cliffs, and on the temple walls of India, telling of the great deeds of mighty kings, immortal names so old that no one could even read them now. Name value! Fame! The swallows built their nests in the hollow road, in holes in the embankment. Rain crumbled it and washed away all the names, the drummer's and his little son's with them. "However, Peter's name stayed there for a year and a half," said the father.

"Fool!" thought the fire drum, but it only said, "Dr-rum, dr-rum, dr-rum! Dr-rum-a-lum!"

"The drummer's son with the red hair" was a lively and high-spirited boy. He had a lovely voice; he could sing, and sing he did, as does the bird in the forest: all melody and no tune. He ought to be a choirboy," said his mother, "and sing in the church, standing under the pretty gilded angels whom he looks like."

"Fire cat!" said the town wits. The drum heard it from the neighbors.

"Don't go home, Peter," cried the street boys. "If they make you sleep in the attic your hair will set the thatch on fire, and that will start the fire drum."

"Look out for the drumsticks!" retorted Peter; although he was only a little fellow, he was courageous, and threw his fist right into the stomach of the boy nearest him, knocking his legs from under him; and the others took to their legs - their own legs!

The state musician was proud and haughty; he was the son of a royal servant. He liked Peter and took him home with him for hours at a time, gave him a violin and taught him to play; it seemed to show in the boy's fingers that he would become more than a drummer,

that he would become a state musician.

"I want to be a soldier," said Peter, for he was still a very small fellow and thought it would be the finest thing in the world to shoulder a gun and to march - "One, two! One, two!" - and to wear a uniform and carry a saber.

"You'll learn to obey the drum! Dr-rum-a-lum! Come, come!" said the drum.

"Yes, you may march ahead to become a general," said the father, "but only if there is a war."

"God save us from that!" said the mother.

"We have nothing to lose!" said the drummer.

"Yes, we have my boy!" said she.

"But when he could come home a general!" said the father.

"Without any arms or legs!" said the mother. "No, thank you, I'd rather keep my Golden Treasure whole!"

"Dr-rum! Dr-rum! Dr-rum!" beat the fire drum, and all the drums joined in. War really did come; the soldiers marched out, and the drummer's boy marched with them. "Red-top!" "Golden Treasure!" The mother wept; the father imagined him coming home famous; the state musician thought he would have been better off staying home and studying music.

"Red-top!" the soldiers said, and Peter laughed, but when some of them called him "Foxy" his mouth tightened and he looked straight ahead, as if that name did not concern him. The boy was smart, carefree, and good-humored, and that made him a favorite with his older comrades. Many nights he had to sleep under the open sky, in rain and mist, wet to the skin; but his good humor never failed. His drumsticks beat, "Dr-rum-a-lum! Everybody up!" Yes, he was certainly a born drummer boy.

It was a day of battle; the sun was not yet up, but it was morning; the air was cold and the fight was hot; the morning was foggy, but there was a still heavier fog from gunpowder. Bullets and grenades flew overhead and into heads, bodies, and limbs; still the command was "Forward!" One after another sank to his knees with bleeding temple and pale white face. The little drummer boy's color was still healthy; he wasn't hurt at all. With flashing eyes he watched the regimental dog running before him, and the animal was really happy, as if the whole thing were in fun and they were firing the bullets only to play with him.

"March! Forward, march!" was the command given the drummers; but sometimes orders have to be changed, with good reason, and now the word was, "Retreat!" But the little drummer boy still sounded, "March forward!" not understanding that the orders had been changed. The soldiers obeyed the drum, and it was lucky they did, for the mistake resulted in victory.

Lives and limbs were lost in the battle. The grenade tears away the flesh in bleeding fragments; the grenade sets fire to the straw heap where the poor wounded has dragged himself, to lie forsaken for many hours, forsaken perhaps until dead. It doesn't help to think about it, and yet people do think about it even far away in the peaceful town at home. There the drummer and his wife thought of it, for, of course, Peter was in the war.

It was the day of battle; the sun was not yet up, but it was morning. After a sleepless night spent in talking about their boy, the drummer and his wife had finally fallen asleep, for they knew that wherever he was God's hand was protecting him. And the father dreamed that the war was over, that the soldiers came home, and Peter was wearing a silver cross on his breast; but the mother dreamed that she walked into the church and looked at the painted pictures and the carved angels with the gilded hair and that her own dear boy, her heart's Golden Treasure, stood among the angels clad in white, and sang as sweetly as

surely only the angels can sing, and was carried up into the sunshine with them, nodding tenderly to his mother.

"My Golden Treasure!" she cried, and awoke in the same instant. "Now I know that our Lord has taken him!" Then she folded her hands, leaned her head against the cotton bed curtain, and wept. "Where has he found rest? In the wide common grave they dig for so many of the brave dead, or in the deep waters of the marsh? No one will know his grave! No holy words will be read over it!" Silently the Lord's Prayer passed over her lips; her head drooped in fatigue, and she fell asleep.

Days pass by, in wakeful hours and in dreams.

It was toward evening, and a rainbow arched over the battlefield; it touched the edge of the wood and the deep marsh. There is an old saying that where the rainbow touches the earth a treasure lies buried, a golden treasure. And here was one. No one thought about the little drummer except his mother, and that's why she had dreamed of him. Not a hair of his head had been injured, not a single golden hair. "Dr-rum-a-lum, dr-rum-a-lum! There he is, there he is!" would the drum have said, and his mother would have sung, had she seen or dreamed this.

With song and hurrah, and wearing the green leaves of victory, the regiment marched home, when the war was over and peace had come. The regimental dog jumped and ran in wide circles, as though trying to make the journey three times longer.

Days passed and weeks passed, and at last Peter entered his parents' room; he was as brown as a hermit, his eyes bright, and his face as radiant as the sunshine. His mother held him in her arms and kissed his lips, his eyes, his red hair. She had her boy home again; he had no silver decoration on his breast, as his father had dreamed, but then he was unharmed, which his mother had not dreamed. And there was great joy; they laughed and they wept. And Peter embraced the old fire drum. "The old thing is still standing here!" he said. And his father beat a tattoo on it. "There's as much fuss as though there were a big fire in town!" said the drum to itself. "Fire in the roof, fire in the hearts! Golden Treasure! Dr-rum, dr-rum, dr-rum!"

And then? Yes, what then? Just ask the state musician. "Peter has outgrown the drum," he said. "He'll be a bigger man than I." And remember he was the son of a royal servant! But what had taken him a lifetime to learn, Peter had learned in half a year. There was something cheerful about him; his eyes sparkled, and his hair shone - that cannot be denied.

"He ought to dye his hair," said their next-door neighbor. "The policeman's daughter did, and look what it did for her; she was engaged at once!"

"Yes, but a little later her hair turned as green as duckweed, and she has to dye it again and again!"

"Well, she can afford to," said the neighbor woman, "and so can Peter. Doesn't he go into the best houses, even the mayor's, to teach Miss Lotte the harpsichord?"

Yes, play he could, play right out of his heart, the most charming pieces that had never been written down in notes. He played on moonlit nights and stormy ones as well. It was difficult to put up with, said the neighbors and the fire drum. He played until his thoughts soared strongly upward, and great plans for the future took shape before him. Fame!

The mayor's daughter, Lotte, sat at the harpsichord, and as her delicate fingers danced over the chords they vibrated in Peter's heart, until it seemed as if it were growing too big for his body. This happened not once, but many times, until one day he seized her delicate hand, kissed it, and gazed into her large brown eyes. Our Lord knows what he said; we others may guess it. Lotte blushed crimson, face and neck, and answered not a word, and just then they were interrupted by strangers, among them the councilor's son,

with his high, smooth forehead. But Peter did not go, and Lotte's kindest glances were for him. At home that evening he talked of going abroad and of the golden treasure that his violin would bring him. Fame! "Dr-rum-a-lum! Dr-rum-a-lum! Dr-rum-a-lum!" said the fire drum. "Now something is surely wrong with Peter; I think the house must be on fire!"

The mother went to market the next day. "Have you heard the news, Peter?" she said, when she returned. "Such wonderful news! The mayor's daughter, Lotte, was betrothed to the councilor's son; it happened last evening!"

"No!" said Peter, and sprang up from his chair. But his mother said yes; she had learned it from the barber's wife, and the barber had it from the lips of the mayor himself. And Peter grew as pale as death and sat down again.

"Lord God! How do you feel?" said his mother.

"Fine, fine. Just let me alone!" he said, but the tears were rolling down his cheeks.

"My sweet child! My Golden Treasure!" said the mother, and cried. But the fire drum grumbled to itself, "Lotte is dead! Lotte is dead! Yes, that song is over now!"

The song was not over; it still had many unsung verses, long verses, the most beautiful, about a life's golden treasure. "What a fuss she makes!" said the next-door neighbor. The whole world has to read the letters she gets from her Golden Treasure, and hear what the newspapers say about him and his violin playing. He sends her money, too, for she needs that, now that she's a widow!"

"He plays before kings and emperors," said the state musician. "That was never my good luck, but at least he was my pupil, and he hasn't forgotten his old master."

"My husband dreamed," said his mother, "that Peter came home from the war with a silver cross on his chest. Well, he does wear a cross now, but it's not a decoration earned in the war; it's an order of knighthood. If his father had only lived to see it!"

"Famous!" said the fire drum, and everybody in his home town said the same. Peter, the red-haired boy of the drummer - Peter, whom they had seen wearing wooden shoes as a youngster, and seen as a drummer boy playing at dances - was now famous.

"He played to us before he played before the kings," said the mayor's wife. "Once upon a time he was crazy about our Lotte; he always aimed high! How my husband laughed when he learned that nonsense! Now Lotte is a councilor's wife."

Yes, there was a golden treasure hidden in the heart and soul of the poor child who as a little drummer boy had beaten "Forward!" to troops supposed to retreat; in his breast was a golden treasure indeed, the gift of music. It resounded from his violin as if an organ were inside, as if all the elves of Midsummer Eve danced along its strings, and one could hear the song of the throstle and the human voice together; his playing enraptured people's hearts, and carried his name throughout all lands, like a great fire, a fire of inspiration. "And he's so handsome, too!" said the young ladies and the old ones as well. Yes, the oldest lady bought herself an album for the locks of celebrities, just so she could beg for a tress from the young violinist's abundant and beautiful hair - a treasure, a golden treasure.

And the son returned to the drummer's humble dwelling, as handsome as a prince, happier than a king, his eyes bright, his face like sunshine. He held his mother in his arms, and she kissed his warm mouth and wept as happily as one can weep with joy. He greeted every old piece of furniture in the room, the chest of drawers with the teacups and flower vases on it and the little cot where he had slept as a child. But he dragged the old fire drum into the middle of the room and said, both to his mother and to the drum, "Father would have beaten a welcome on you today; now I must do it instead!"

So he thundered a regular tempest on the drum, and the old drum felt itself so honored that the skin of the drumhead burst.

"He certainly has a fine fist!" said the drum. "Now I'll always have a souvenir of him. I expect that his mother, too, will burst from joy over her Golden Treasure!"

That's the story of Golden Treasure.