

Golden Boy

The drummer's wife was in church, gazing at the new altar, crowded with icons and adorned with carved little cherubs. How pretty they were! Both those painted on canvas, with golden halos around their heads, and those carved from wood, then painted and gilded. Their tiny hairs shimmered with gold; it was a wonder how beautiful it all was! But the sunbeams were even more beautiful! How they shone between the dark trees as the sun set! What bliss it was to gaze upon that divine face! And the drummer's wife lost herself watching the red sun, thinking meanwhile of the little one the stork would soon bring her. She awaited him with joy, and while looking at the red sun, she wished for just one thing: that its radiance might reflect upon her little one; at least, that the child might resemble one of the shining cherubs on the altar!

And so, when she finally did hold the newborn infant in her arms and lifted him to show his father, it turned out the child truly did resemble a cherub: his hair shimmered with gold; upon it seemed to rest the glow of the setting sun.

"My golden boy, my treasure, my sunshine!" exclaimed the mother, kissing the radiant curls. In the drummer's little room, music seemed to thunder, singing rang out, joy, merriment, life, and noise reigned supreme! The drummer began beating such a roll on his drum that it shook the walls! The drum—a large fire alarm drum—thundered thus: "Redhead! The boy has red hair! Listen to what the drumhead says, not the mother! Tram-tam-tam!"

And the whole town said the same as the drum.

The boy was carried to church and baptized. Well, there was nothing to object to regarding the name: the child was named Peter. The whole town and the drum called him "Redheaded Drummer's Peter," but the mother kissed her son's golden hair and called him "the golden boy."

Many names had been scratched into the clayey slope beside the road.

"Glory! It means something!" said the drummer, and scratched there his own name and his son's.

Swallows arrived; during their wanderings they had seen inscriptions far more enduring, carved upon rocks and temple walls in Hindustan, inscriptions telling of mighty, glorious rulers; but these were so ancient that no one could any longer read them, no one could pronounce those immortal names.

Glory! A famous name!

The swallows made their nests on the slope, digging little holes in the soft clay; rain and bad weather also helped erase the scratched names. Soon disappeared the names of the drummer and Peter too.

"Peter's name lasted a year and a half anyway!" said the father. "Fool!" thought the fire drum, but said only: "Dur-dur-dur-dum-dum-dom!"

Redheaded Drummer's Peter was a lively, cheerful boy. He had a wonderful voice; he could sing and sang like a bird in the forest, knowing no melodies, yet melody emerged all the same.

"He will be a choirboy!" said the mother. "He will sing in church, stand beneath those lovely gilded little cherubs whom he resembles so much!"

"Red cat!" said the town wits. The drum often heard this from the neighbors.

"Don't go home, Peter!" shouted the street urchins. "Or you'll sleep in the attic, and the upper floor will catch fire! Your fire drum will have work to do!"

"Beware of drumsticks!" said Peter, and small as he was, he bravely marched straight at the boys and punched the nearest one in the belly. That one flew up heels over head; the rest took to their legs as fast as God allowed!

The town musician, so important, so distinguished—he was the son of the court confectioner—took a great liking to Peter, often summoned him, placed a violin in his hands, and taught him to play. The boy showed talent; something better than a mere drummer was bound to come of him—the town musician thought so!

"I shall be a soldier!" said Peter himself. He was still a little lad, and it seemed to him that nothing in the world was finer than wearing a uniform and a saber and marching to command: one-two, one-two!

"You'll learn to march to the drum! Tram-tam-tam!" said the drum.

"It would be fine if he rose to become a general!" said the father. "But then there must be war!"

"God forbid!" said the mother.

"We have nothing to lose!" remarked the father.

"And our little boy?" objected the mother.

"Well, just think, if he returns from war a general!"

"Missing an arm or a leg! No, let my golden boy remain whole!"

"Tram-tam-tam!" thundered the fire drum, and all the drums thundered. War began. The soldiers marched off to campaign, and with them went Drummer's Peter, "the red crown," "the golden boy"! The mother wept, while the father already saw his son famous; the town musician, however, believed Peter ought not to go to war but should serve art at home.

"Red crown!" said the soldiers, and Peter laughed, but if anyone said: "Fox skin!" he bit his lip and looked away, letting those words pass unheard.

The boy was quick, straightforward, and cheerful, and "a cheerful disposition is the best marching flask," said his old comrades.

Often he had to spend nights under the open sky, get soaked to the bone by rain and bad weather, yet cheerfulness never left him; the drumsticks beat out merrily: "Tram-tam-tam! On the march!" Yes, he was born a drummer!

The day of battle arrived; the sun had not yet risen, but dawn had already broken; the air was cold, yet the fighting was fierce. A thick fog stood, but gunpowder smoke was thicker still. Bullets and grenades flew over heads and into heads, into bodies, into arms and legs, yet the soldiers pressed forward. Now one, now another of them fell, struck in the temple, pale as chalk. But the little drummer did not turn pale; harm had not yet found him, and he glanced cheerfully at the regimental dog leaping ahead so carefree, as though all around were play, as though cannonballs were merely balls!

"March! Forward!" This command was translated onto the drum, and such a command is not taken back, yet here it had to be taken back—reason commanded it! Thus the order was given to beat retreat, but the little drummer did not understand and continued beating: "March! Forward!" And the soldiers obeyed the drumhead. Splendid was that drum roll! It won the battle for those ready to retreat.

The battle cost many their lives; grenades tore flesh to shreds, ignited haystacks into which the wounded crawled to lie there abandoned for many hours, perhaps—for life! But what good is it to think of such horrors! And yet one does think of them—even far from the battlefield, in a peaceful town. The drummer and his wife likewise ceased not to think of them: Peter was after all at war!

"And I'm tired of this whining!" said the fire drum.

It was on the very day of the battle; the sun had not yet risen, but it was already light; the drummer and his wife slept—they had lain awake long the night before,

talking about their son: he was there, "in God's hands." And so the father dreamed that the war had ended, the soldiers had returned, and upon Peter's breast hung a silver cross. The mother dreamed that she stood in church, gazing at the carved and painted cherubs with golden curls upon the icons, and saw among them her dear "golden boy." He stood in white raiment and sang so wonderfully as only angels sing! Then he began ascending with them into heaven, gently nodding his head to his mother...

"My golden boy!" she cried out and awoke. "So then, the Lord has called him to Himself!" And she leaned her head against the bed curtain, folded her hands, and wept. "Where does he rest now? In some huge common grave? Perhaps in a deep bog? No one knows his grave! No one will say a prayer over it!" And from her lips escaped a soundless "Our Father"... Then her head sank onto the pillow, and the weary mother fell asleep.

Days passed; life flowed on, thoughts grew!

Day inclined toward evening; over the battlefield stretched a rainbow, resting one end in the forest, the other in the deep bog. People believe that where the end of the rainbow rests, treasure is buried, gold. There indeed lay gold—"the golden boy." No one thought of the little drummer except his mother; that is why this dream came to her.

Days passed; life flowed on, thoughts grew!

Yet not a single hair had fallen from his head, not a single golden hair!

"Tram-tam-tam, and he comes to you!" the drum might have said, the mother might have sung, had she expected her son or seen in a dream that he was returning.

With songs, with cries of "hurrah," crowned with fresh

with greenery, the soldiers were returning home. The war had ended, peace was concluded. The regimental dog ran ahead, describing great circles, as if it wished to lengthen its path threefold.

Days and weeks passed, and then Peter entered his parents' little room. He was tanned like a savage, but his eyes and face shone brightly. His mother embraced him, kissing him on the lips, on the eyes, on his red hair. Her boy was with her again! True, he had returned without the silver cross on his chest, as his father had dreamed, but whole and unharmed, something his mother had not even dared to dream. What joy there was! They laughed and wept together. Peter even embraced the old drum.

"You are still here, old friend!" he said, while his father beat a loud, merry roll upon the drum.

"One would think, truly, there is a fire in the house!" said the fireman's drum. "The crown all aflame, the heart aflame, the 'golden boy' has returned! Tram-tam-tam!"

And then? What then? Ask the town musician!

"Peter has outgrown the drum! Peter will outgrow me too!" he said, even though he was the son of the court confectioner! Yet everything Peter learned in half a year would take another man a whole lifetime.

There was something so open, so heartfelt about the drummer's son. And his eyes and hair shone so brightly—this no one could deny.

"He really ought to dye his hair!" said the neighbor. "The police chief's daughter managed it excellently, and she became a bride!"

"Yes, but her hair turned green at once, like algae, and she will have to dye it forever!"

"So what! She has means enough for that!" replied the neighbor. "And Peter has them too! He visits the most distinguished families, even the burgomaster himself; he teaches Miss Lotta to play the piano!"

Yes, he knew how to play! He poured his entire soul into his playing, and wonderful melodies flowed from under his fingers which existed on no sheet of music. He played through all the nights—both light and dark. It was simply unbearable, according to the neighbors and the drum.

He played, while his thoughts carried him higher and higher; wonderful plans swarmed in his head... Glory!..

The burgomaster's daughter, Lotta, sat at the piano; her delicate fingers ran over the keys and struck directly upon the strings of Peter's heart. It seemed to expand within his chest, becoming so very, very large! And this happened not once, not twice, but many times, until one day Peter seized those slender fingers, that beautiful hand, kissed it, and gazed into the girl's large black eyes. God knows what he said to her then! We can only guess. Lotta blushed to her ears but answered not a word: at that very moment a stranger entered the room, the son of a privy councilor; he had a large smooth forehead that reached all the way to the back of his head. Peter sat with them for a long time, and Lotta smiled at him so tenderly.

In the evening, coming home, he spoke of foreign lands and of that harmony which lay for him in the violin.

Glory!

"Tram-tam-tam!" said the drum. "He has quite gone mad! Truly, it is as if there were a fire in the house!"

The next day his mother went to the market.

"Do you know the news, Peter?" she asked upon returning. "Wonderful news! The burgomaster's daughter, Lotta, was betrothed last evening to the son of the privy councilor!"

"It cannot be!" exclaimed Peter, jumping up from his chair. But his mother said "yes"—she had heard this news from the barber's wife, whose husband had heard of the engagement from the burgomaster himself.

Peter turned pale as a corpse and fell onto his chair.

"Good Lord! What is wrong with you?" cried his mother.

"Nothing, nothing! Just leave me!" he answered, while tears streamed down his cheeks like a river.

"My dear little child! My golden one!" said his mother, and she too began to weep. And the drum hummed—of course, to itself: "Lotte ist todt! Lotte ist todt!" (That is, "Lotta is dead."—A stanza from a street song.—Translator's note.) So here is the end of the song!

But the song was not yet ended; it still held many stanzas, wonderful, golden stanzas!

"Just look at her putting on airs, carrying on so!" the neighbor scolded Peter's mother. "The whole world must read letters from her 'golden boy' and newspapers speaking of him and his violin. He sends her considerable money too, which comes in handy now that she is widowed!"

"He plays before kings and sovereigns!" said the town musician. "This fate was not granted to me, but he is my pupil and does not forget his old teacher."

"The father dreamed that Peter returned from the war with a silver cross on his chest, but it is hard to earn one there! But now he has a commander's cross! If only the father had lived to see it!" recounted the mother.

"He is a celebrity!" thundered the fireman's drum, and the entire native town repeated: the drummer's son, red-haired Peter, who as a boy ran about in wooden clogs, the former drummer, the musician who played dances at parties—is a celebrity!

"He played for us before he played in royal palaces!" said the burgomaster's wife. "In those days he was madly in love with our Lotta. He always aimed high! But back then that was sheer impudence on his part! My husband laughed so when he heard of this foolishness. Now our Lotta is a privy councilor's wife!"

Golden were the heart and soul of the poor little lad, the former drummer, who made those ready to retreat march forward and conquer.

In his breast lay a golden treasure, an inexhaustible source of sounds. They flowed from the violin as if it were an entire organ, as if elves of a summer night danced upon its strings. In these sounds echoed both the song of the thrush and the full-toned human voice. This is why his listeners were so enchanted, this is why his fame rang far beyond the borders of his homeland. He kindled in hearts a holy fire, a flame, a whole conflagration of rapture.

"And how handsome he is!" marveled young and old ladies and maidens alike. The eldest among them even started an album for locks of celebrities just to have a pretext to beg a strand of the young violinist's luxurious hair.

And so he returned to the poor little room of the drummer, dressed up, elegant as a prince, happy as a king! His eyes and face shone brightly. His mother kissed him on the lips and wept for joy, while he embraced her and nodded kindly to all the familiar furniture—to the chest upon which stood teacups and flowers in glasses, and to the wooden bench where he had slept as a boy. As for the old drum, he pulled it out, placed it in the middle of the floor, and said:

"Father would certainly have beaten a roll upon it now! So I shall do it for him!"—And he beat such a roll upon the drum that it sounded like hail! And the drum was so flattered by this that its skin simply burst.

"What a strong fist he has!" remarked the drum. "Now I shall keep a memory of him for all my life! And the mother, too, looks as if she might burst from joy looking at her 'golden boy'!"

Here ends the whole story of the "golden boy."