

*THE STORY OF BENSURDATU*

THERE was once a king and a queen who had three wonderfully beautiful daughters, and their one thought, from morning till night, was how they could make the girls happy.

One day the princesses said to the king, 'Dear father, we want so much to have a picnic, and eat our dinner in the country.'

'Very well, dear children, let us have a picnic by all means,' answered he, and gave orders that everything should be got ready.

When luncheon was prepared it was put into a cart, and the royal family stepped into a carriage and drove right away into the country. After a few miles they reached a house and garden belonging to the king, and close by was their favourite place for lunch. The drive had made them very hungry, and they ate with a hearty appetite, till almost all the food had disappeared.

When they had quite done, they said to their parents: 'Now we should like to wander about the garden a little, but when you want to go home, just call to us.' And they ran off, laughing, down a green glade, which led to the garden.

But no sooner had they stepped across the fence, than a dark cloud came down and covered them, and prevented them seeing whither they were going.

Meanwhile the king and queen sat lazily among the heather, and an hour or two slipped away. The sun was dropping towards the horizon, and they began to think it

was time to go home. So they called to their daughters and called again, but no one answered them.

Frightened at the silence, they searched every corner of the garden, the house, and the neighbouring wood, but no trace of the girls was to be found anywhere. The earth seemed to have swallowed them up. The poor parents were in despair. The queen wept all the way home, and for many days after, and the king issued a proclamation that whoever should bring back his lost daughters should have one of them to wife, and should, after his death, reign in his stead.

Now two young generals were at that time living at the court, and when they heard the king's declaration, they said one to the other: 'Let us go in search of them; perhaps we shall be the lucky persons.'

And they set out, each mounted on a strong horse, taking with them a change of raiment and some money.

But though they inquired at every village they rode through, they could hear nothing of the princesses, and by-and-by their money was all spent, and they were forced to sell their horses, or give up the search. Even this money only lasted a little while longer, and nothing but their clothes lay between them and starvation. They sold the spare garments that were bound on their saddles, and went in the coats they stood up in to the inn, to beg for some food, as they were really starving. When, however, they had to pay for what they had eaten and drank, they said to the host: 'We have no money, and naught but the clothes we stand up in. Take these, and give us instead some old rags, and let us stay here and serve you.' And the innkeeper was content with the bargain, and the generals remained, and were his servants.

All this time the king and queen remained in their palace hungering for their children, but not a word was heard of either of them or of the generals who had gone to seek for them.

Now there was living in the palace a faithful servant



THE THREE PRINCESSES WERE LOST

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of the king's called Bensurdatu, who had served him for many years, and when Bensurdatu saw how grieved the king was, he lifted up his voice and said to him: 'Your majesty, let me go and seek your daughters.'

'No, no, Bensurdatu,' replied the king. 'Three daughters have I lost, and two generals, and shall I lose you also?'

But Bensurdatu said again: 'Let me now go, your majesty; trust me, and I will bring you back your daughters.'

Then the king gave way, and Bensurdatu set forth, and rode on till he came to the inn, where he dismounted and asked for food. It was brought by the two generals, whom he knew at once in spite of their miserable clothes, and, much astonished, asked them how in the world they came there.

They told him all their adventures, and he sent for the innkeeper, and said to him: 'Give them back their garments, and I will pay everything that they owe you.'

And the innkeeper did as he was bid, and when the two generals were dressed in their proper clothes, they declared they would join Bensurdatu, and with him seek for the king's daughters.

The three companions rode on for many miles, and at length they came to a wild place, without sign of a human being. It was getting dark, and fearing to be lost on this desolate spot they pushed on their horses, and at last saw a light in the window of a tiny hut.

'Who comes there?' asked a voice, as they knocked at the door.

'Oh! have pity on us, and give us a night's shelter,' replied Bensurdatu; 'we are three tired travellers who have lost our way.'

Then the door was opened by a very old woman who stood back, and beckoned them to enter. 'Whence do you come, and whither do you go?' said she.

'Ah, good woman, we have a heavy task before us,'

answered Bensurdatu, 'we are bound to carry the king's daughters back to the palace!'

'Oh, unhappy creatures,' cried she, 'you know not what you are doing! The king's daughters were covered by a thick cloud, and no one knows where they may now be.'

'Oh, tell us, if you know, my good woman,' entreated Bensurdatu, 'for with them lies all our happiness.'

'Even if I were to tell you,' answered she, 'you could not rescue them. To do that you would have to go to the very bottom of a deep river, and though certainly you would find the king's daughters there, yet the two eldest are guarded by two giants, and the youngest is watched by a serpent with seven heads.'

The two generals, who stood by listening, were filled with terror at her words, and wished to return immediately; but Bensurdatu stood firm, and said: 'Now we have got so far we must carry the thing through. Tell us where the river is, so that we may get there as soon as possible.' And the old woman told them, and gave them some cheese, wine, and bread, so that they should not set forth starving; and when they had eaten and drunk they laid themselves down to sleep.

The sun had only just risen above the hills next morning before they all woke, and, taking leave of the wise woman who had helped them, they rode on till they came to the river.

'I am the eldest,' said one of the generals, 'and it is my right to go down first.'

So the others fastened a cord round him, and gave him a little bell, and let him down into the water. But scarcely had the river closed above his head when such dreadful rushing sounds and peals of thunder came crashing round about him that he lost all his courage, and rang his bell, if perchance it might be heard amidst all this clamour. Great was his relief when the rope began slowly to pull him upwards.

Then the other general plunged in ; but he fared no better than the first, and was soon on dry ground again.

‘ Well, you are a brave pair ! ’ said Bensurdatu, as he tied the rope round his own waist ; ‘ let us see what will happen to me. ’ And when he heard the thunder and clamour round about him he thought to himself, ‘ Oh, make as much noise as you like, it won’t hurt me ! ’ When his feet touched the bottom he found himself in a large, brilliantly lighted hall, and in the middle sat the eldest princess, and in front of her lay a huge giant, fast asleep. Directly she saw Bensurdatu she nodded to him, and asked with her eyes how he had come there.

For answer he drew his sword, and was about to cut off the giant’s head, when she stopped him quickly, and made signs to hide himself, as the giant was just beginning to wake. ‘ I smell the flesh of a man ! ’ murmured he, stretching his great arms.

‘ Why, how in the world could any man get down here ? ’ replied she ; ‘ you had better go to sleep again. ’

So he turned over and went to sleep. Then the princess signed to Bensurdatu, who drew his sword and cut off the giant’s head with such a blow that it flew into the corner. And the heart of the princess leapt within her, and she placed a golden crown on the head of Bensurdatu, and called him her deliverer.

‘ Now show me where your sisters are, ’ he said, ‘ that I may free them also. ’

So the princess opened a door, and led him into another hall, wherein sat her next sister, guarded by a giant who was fast asleep. When the second princess saw them, she made a sign to them to hide themselves, for the giant was showing symptoms of waking.

‘ I smell man’s flesh ! ’ murmured he, sleepily.

‘ Now, how could any man get down here ? ’ asked she ; ‘ go to sleep again. ’ And as soon as he closed his eyes, Bensurdatu stole out from his corner, and struck such a

blow at his head that it flew far, far away. The princess could not find words to thank Bensurdatu for what he had done, and she too placed in his hand a golden crown.

‘Now show me where your youngest sister is,’ said he, ‘that I may free her also.’

‘Ah! that I fear you will never be able to do,’ sighed they, ‘for she is in the power of a serpent with seven heads.’

‘Take me to him,’ replied Bensurdatu. ‘It will be a splendid fight.’

Then the princess opened a door, and Bensurdatu passed through, and found himself in a hall that was even larger than the other two. And there stood the youngest sister, chained fast to the wall, and before her was stretched a serpent with seven heads, horrible to see. As Bensurdatu came forward it twisted all its seven heads in his direction, and then made a quick dart to snatch him within its grasp. But Bensurdatu drew his sword and laid about him, till the seven heads were rolling on the floor. Flinging down his sword he rushed to the princess and broke her chains, and she wept for joy, and embraced him, and took the golden crown from off her head, and placed it in his hand.

‘Now we must go back to the upper world,’ said Bensurdatu, and led her to the bottom of the river. The other princesses were waiting there, and he tied the rope round the eldest, and rung his bell. And the generals above heard, and drew her gently up. They then unfastened the cord and threw it back into the river, and in a few moments the second princess stood beside her sister.

So now there were left only Bensurdatu and the youngest princess. ‘Dear Bensurdatu,’ said she, ‘do me a kindness, and let them draw you up before me. I dread the treachery of the generals.’

‘No, no,’ replied Bensurdatu, ‘I certainly will not



BENSURDATU ATTACKS THE SEVEN-HEADED SERPENT.



leave you down here. There is nothing to fear from my comrades.'

'If it is your wish I will go up then ; but first I swear that if you do not follow to marry me, I shall stay single for the rest of my life.' Then he bound the rope round her, and the generals drew her up.

But instead of lowering the rope again into the river, envy at the courage and success of Bensurdatu so filled the hearts of the two generals, that they turned away and left him to perish. And, more than that, they threatened the princesses, and forced them to promise to tell their parents *that* it was the two generals who had set them free. 'And if they should ask you about Bensurdatu, you must say you have never seen him,' they added ; and the princesses, fearing for their lives, promised everything, and they rode back to court together.

The king and queen were beside themselves with joy when they saw their dear children once more. But when the generals had told their story, and the dangers they had run, the king declared that they had gained their reward, and that the two eldest princesses should become their wives.

And now we must see what poor Bensurdatu was doing.

He waited patiently a long, long time, but when the rope never came back he knew he had been right, and that his comrades had betrayed him. 'Ah, now I shall never reach the world again,' murmured he ; but being a brave man, and knowing that moaning his fate would profit him nothing, he rose and began to search through the three halls, where, perhaps, he might find something to help him. In the last one stood a dish, covered with food, which reminded him that he was hungry, and he sat down and ate and drank.

Months passed away, when, one morning, as he was walking through the halls, he noticed a purse hanging

on the wall, which had never been there before. He took it down to examine it, and nearly let it fall with surprise when a voice came from the purse saying : ' What commands have you ? '

' Oh, take me out of this horrible place, and up into the world again ; ' and in a moment he was standing by the river bank, with the purse tightly grasped in his hand.

' Now let me have the most beautiful ship that ever was built, all manned and ready for sea.' And there was the ship, with a flag floating from its mast on which were the words, ' King with the three crowns.' Then Bensurdatu climbed on board, and sailed away to the city where the three princesses dwelt ; and when he reached the harbour he blew trumpets and beat drums, so that every one ran to the doors and windows. And the king heard too, and saw the beautiful vessel, and said to himself : ' That must indeed be a mighty monarch, for he has three crowns while I have only one.' So he hastened to greet the stranger, and invited him to his castle, for, thought he, ' this will be a fine husband for my youngest daughter.' Now, the youngest princess had never married, and had turned a deaf ear to all her wooers.

Such a long time had passed since Bensurdatu had left the palace, that the king never guessed for a moment that the splendidly clad stranger before him was the man whom he had so deeply mourned as dead. ' Noble lord,' said he, ' let us feast and make merry together, and then, if it seem good to you, do me the honour to take my youngest daughter to wife.'

And Bensurdatu was glad, and they all sat down to a great feast, and there were great rejoicings. But only the youngest daughter was sad, for her thoughts were with Bensurdatu. After they arose from the table the king said to her, ' Dear child, this mighty lord does you the honour to ask your hand in marriage.'

' Oh, father,' answered she, ' spare me, I pray you, for I desire to remain single.'

Then Bensurdatu turned to her, and said: 'And if I were Bensurdatu, would you give the same answer to me?'

And as she stood silently gazing at him, he added: 'Yes, I am Bensurdatu; and this is my story.'

The king and queen had their hearts stirred within them at the tale of his adventures, and when he had ended the king stretched out his hand, and said: 'Dear Bensurdatu, my youngest daughter shall indeed be your wife; and when I die my crown shall be yours. As for the men who have betrayed you, they shall leave the country and you shall see them no more.'

And the wedding feast was ordered, and rejoicings were held for three days over the marriage of Bensurdatu and the youngest princess.

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