

THE DRUM

by Elinor Wikler

Since early morning the pod-shaped boats had been there, swarming like brown insects around the cruise ship.

They clustered in the turquoise bay, some heaped with straw bags, hats and baskets trimmed in violent reds and greens and purples, others littered with trays, bowls and carvings, raw-yellow, brown-stained.

The boats swayed gently against each other. The black men straddling them squinted up at the faces lining the ship's rail. They cupped their hands around their mouths.

"Hey, Chahley ... Hey, my frien' ... Hey, missus, "they called, "You like a hat? One dolla'. Only one dolla' !"

It was the last port before the return trip to New York. Tea was being served on the promenade deck. A small crowd had gathered on the side of the ship where the clutter and clamor of the boats was going on. Someone had lowered a rope. People were fishing things up, looking them over, sending them back. Here and there a dollar was sent down, and a tray, a hat, a carved head pulled up, sold.

At the edge of the crowd at the rope, a fat man in a red and purple flowered shirt leaned against the rail. He and the small boy beside him wore straw hats stenciled boldly, "Shop at La Belle Creole."

The boy wriggled to a perch on the rail.

"Look! They're diving for money, Dad! Give me a quarter?"

"A quarter!" The man laughed. "Listen, son, you throw in a quarter and *I'll* dive for it:" He swung the boy off the rail, set him on the deck, and gave him a pat on the behind.

"Now stay down here, where it's safe," he said. "And keep that hat on. This sun's wicked."

Spellbound, the boy stared down at the black bodies slithering seal-like in and out of the swirling water.

"I wish I had a quarter," he sighed.

"*Agh!* his father said, "if they want money, let them work for it. You got to watch these natives. They'd take the shirt right off your back if they got a chance."

"They don't have many clothes," the boy murmured.

"Where they come from," his father nodded toward the gray-green hills that encircled the bay, "They don't need clothes, these jungle bunnies."

"*Jungles*," whispered the boy. He gazed across the water and felt for his father's hand. "There's witch doctors over there, I bet. With scary drums. Bongo drums. I bet there's snakes there, too!" He wriggled closer. "Hey, Dad, I like this place. Some day... some day you and me could go hunt around those mountains. Just you and me?"

"Yeah, son... " The fat man turned to watch a passenger in a terry-cloth robe who was untying a woman's straw hat from the rope.

"Hey, Joe," he called, "what did you give them for the hat?"

"They wanted two-fifty for it in the town. I got it here for a buck and a half."

The fat man chuckled. "Joe, you got murdered!" He reached for the hat, examined it, handed it back. "Listen," he tapped Joe's shoulder, "you wait for sailing time. *Then* you offer the guy a buck. He'll take it!"

"Yeah? Well... " Joe stared uneasily after his wife, who had tied the hat under her chin and ambled off in her tight stretch pants and gold sandals. He took a glass of iced tea from the tray of a passing steward. "Been ashore?" he asked.

"Yeah," the fat man shrugged, "nothing there. Now, Puerto Rico we enjoyed. But *this* place... " He jerked his head toward the misted foothills, where soft-colored rooftops gleamed through the haze. "Filth, that's all!" He shook his head, dug at his back pocket for his handkerchief and mopped his neck. "If they want to live like a bunch of pigs," he said, turning away from the rail, "let them!"

"Dad!" The boy was at his side, tugging. "Drums! They got *drums*!"

"Joe, you remember my son? My big boy?" the man said.

"Drums!" the boy insisted, pulling at his arm. His father looked down.

"A drum from here?" he chuckled, with a wink at Joe, "that we don't need; not these drums. They wouldn't last a week. Come on, be a good boy, say hello to Mr. Miller."

"But Dad, Dad, they're real *bongo* drums!" The boy hopped around his father's arm. "With fur on them!"

"With bugs in the fur, too, I bet! Come on. Go take your shower; get ready for dinner. Mr. Miller and Daddy are going to have a drink. How about it, Joe, a quick one?"

"But, *Dad ...* "

"You heard me, son."

"He'll forget it," the fat man said to Joe as they moved toward the bar. "I'll buy him a real drum in New York; the genuine, first-class thing."

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The railing was almost deserted now. But the boy did not leave.

Down in the narrow bark boat, a black man in a straw hat flashed a white smile at the boy who hung over the rail. The muscles of his arms moved like water under his torn blue shirt, and his fingers flew, spread wide over the surface of a tall, bright drum. It was yellow wood, and shiny, with painted slashes like lightning zigzagging up and down its sides; blood red; ghost white. And around the taut skin top, like a wild animal's mane, was a collar of thick, black fur.

"*Boom, ta-ta-ta, ... ta, bo-o-o-m-m!*" The notes were like thunder coming, soft and wild. The boy heard the sound rumble off to the hills and come back. He thought of dark faces, smeared white, of high bright feathers, of slinking snakes, of monkeys. All of the man's body was moving, even his bare toes.

"Hey, my frien', hey kid," the black man called in a sweet, wet voice.

"Me?" The boy hesitated, then thumped himself on the chest. "*ME?*"

The man set the drum down on the shallow floor of the boat. He wiped an arm across his brow.

"You. You my frien'. Huh?" He picked up a smudged plastic jug and tied it deftly to the over-hanging rope.

"Man, it's hot!" he said. "I needs water, boy."

"Sure," the boy said quickly, "sure!" The empty jug came up easily, with little light bumps against the side of the ship. On deck, the boy worked at the knot, but his eyes stayed on the drum. He wet his lips.

"Did you make that drum?"

"Sure!" The black man grinned. "Take long time for make drum. Take lotsa days. I make lotsa drum."

The boy picked up the jug.

"Wait! Wait for me!" he called.

In a few minutes the boy came back, breathing hard, hugging the weight of the filled jug. Carefully, he lowered it. The man drank greedily, tilting back until his hat rolled off into the bottom of the boat.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, squinted, and with a pink-gummed smile, saluted.

"You my frien!?"

"Yeah! I'm your friend." The boy settled himself proudly on the rail. "I got you real cold water from the bathroom down the deck near the lounge."

He stared at the drum. "What kind of fur is that on that drum?"

"Goatskin." The man's long fingers caressed the shaggy rim.

"Goats! You ... *kill* them?"

The man laughed. "Sure, man! Eats them!"

The boy nibbled a thumbnail. "Do you ... eat ... any other animals?"

"Monkeys."

"*Monkeys!*" The boy's eyes flew open. He leaned forward, and ran a tongue along his lips. "Where are they? Where are the monkeys?"

His eyes followed the dark arm that pointed to the hills.

"Honest? *You really do? Eat monkeys?*"

"Sure, boy, no kiddin'."

The boy shrank back, his hand over his mouth. The man bent over, laughing. He shook his head and hugggd himself.

"Sure! Monkey stew. Good to eat! Monkey stew OK! No kiddin', kid!"

The boy jumped to the deck. "Stew, stew, monkey stew, mon-key *stew!*" he chanted. It was a beat; it was a dance. He moved in rhythmic circles, one arm angled behind him, the other shading his eyes. He bent, he straightened; his feet scudded over the deck in a toe-heel patter.

Mon-key stew, thumped the drum under the slapping black fingers. "Come on kid!" laughed the man. The sun blazed down; the dance slowed. The boy tumbled himself down onto the deck, rolled over on his back and fanned himself with his hat. Suddenly he was up again, at the rail.

"Hey, monkey stew," he called, "listen; I got an idea!" He rummaged in his pocket and came up with a handful of silver paper-wrapped squares.

"Soap! Here!" He tossed them to the reaching man. "It has the name of this ship on it," he said, "lots more in the bathroom. They give you all you want."

The man looked pleased. He piled the squares carefully, like blocks, next to him on the weather-beaten seat. The boy cleared his throat. "Listen! Would you ... would you give me the drum for those?"

"Soap?" The man scratched his head. "Sure, soap ... and money."

"How ... how much?"

"Five dolla'."

"I haven't got any money."

"You gotta pop? You gotta boss?"

"Sure! He's a big boss. He could buy me this whole ship. He could buy me a hundred drums. He says your drum has bugs in it. But I want it." The boy looked thoughtfully at his thumbnail. "You could have my hat ... "

The black man grinned. He shook his head. "I gotta hat." He began a slow, deep tattoo. "Listen, kid, I work for make drum. I needs money," he said, drumming softly, "I needs money."

The boy looked off toward the mountains. He looked at the drum with the wild, black fur edges.

"*Wait*," he called over his shoulder, "*wait!*"

He came back, leading his father to the rail. Joe followed, glass in hand.

"That one, Dad," the boy pointed out, "down there."

The fat man peered down. "Watch this, Joe," he said, "watch this!" He drew a cigarette from its pack and flourished a match to it. He rested an elbow on the rail and slowly exhaled.

"Hey, you." he called, "*parlez-vous francais?*"

The answer came quickly.

"*Oui!*"

"Quanto? ... Spanish," the fat man explained to Joe.

"Five dolla', boss."

"You crazy?" The fat man spotted the jug. "You drunk?"

The black man shook his head. He pointed to the boy.

"Water," he grinned, "the kid gave me water. Hot down here, man."

The fat man turned to his son. "What did you get for the water?"

The boy blinked up. "Get? ... Nothing, I guess. I gave him some soap, too."

"OK, son, now we'll talk business." The fat man turned back to the rail. "Now look!" he waved a dollar at the man in the boat. "You got the soap. Right? You send me up the drum; I send you the dollar."

"Four dolla'", the black man held up four fingers.

"Nossir."

"Listen, boss, I work for make drum. I *work*. That's my frien', your kid." He smiled up at the boy who hung breathlessly over the rail.

"I want it Dad, I want it, I want it," the boy chanted, with his eyes squeezed shut.

"OK, Sam," the fat man called, "tell you what. I send you a dollar ... *and*," he held up a pack of cigarettes, "two of these. Two packs." He took a long drag at his cigarette.

The black man scratched his head. He looked at the fat man's dollar. He looked at the boy. He looked longest at the cigarettes. He crouched forward and squinted up.

"OK boss. You send down dolla'. You send down," he put two fingers to his mouth, "Cigarette. Two pack. OK?"

The fat man folded his arms. "Oh no! Uh-uh, Sam! You send the drum up first."

"Please, Sam," the boy prayed softly, "pleasesam, pleasesam!"

"OK," grinned the black man, "that's my frien' up there, that kid."

He tied the drum to the rope and added a small straw bag for money and cigarettes.

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The boy knelt on the deck beside the red-streaked, white-streaked, shining drum. "It's mine, it's mine, it's mine, mine, mine," he sang to himself. "Oh, Dad," he breathed into the rich dark fur, "Oh, Daddy:"

At the other end of the rope in the small boat, the black man tore open the straw bag. He stared at the pack in his hand. He dug for the cigarettes. He stared at the pack in his hand. His smile faded.

"Hey, Chahley!" he called, jiggling the rope to get the fat man's attention. "Hey, boss, hey Chahley ... "

The fat man glanced down.

"Yeah?"

"Cigarette, boss." The black man scowled. He held up the half-empty pack. He shook it. "They not all here." He waved his other arm. "This one, too, boss:"

"You got water; you got soap. What else do you want?"

"All cigarette."

"Send back my soap!" The fat man pointed to the boy, who had put down the drum and stood rigid at the rail. "Send back my kid's soap!"

There was no answer. The black man put on his hat. He shook his head. He lifted the oars and pulled away from the side of the big ship and nosed toward the far-off hills. "You're no good," he called sadly over his shoulder, "you're no damn' good."

"Hey you," the fat man called, "come back here!"

The small boat moved steadily away.

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At dusk, the great ship began to move. Strings of colored lights swayed on the promenade deck. People clustered at the rail in the fresh breeze, watching bright pinpoints of light appear in the town at the foot of the hills.

Far down the deck, the boy stood alone, watching the mountains move away.

"Here he is, here's my boy!" his father called. "Hey, there, son, where's your drum? Where's your bongo drum? "

The boy wiped at his eyes, so he could see all the hilly blackness before it melted into night. He stood there, not turning, looking straight ahead.

"It's no good now," he answered in a rising voice, "it's no damn' good."