

Baroness Orczy



Old Hungarian Fairy Tales

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Preface

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There lies before me, as I write, a quaint old book; from this little book—torn and soiled, its edges all gone—nearly all the stories in this volume are drawn.

In their earliest childhood Hungarian children hear the story of “Forget-me-Not” (Nfelejts), the history of the “Twin Hunchbacks” (A Rét Törpe), and the doings of the wicked Sultana in the “Magic Cat” (A Büvos Macska.)

In my little book is the shell of these stories told simply and in few words. Who was the originator of them? I do not think any one knows, for I have found in many instances the same incidents occurring in the fairy tales of most nations. A modified form of the vain fairy Narcissa is revived in “Little Snow White,” and “Riquet with the Tuft” has, if I mistake not, an incident similar to that in “The Twin Hunchbacks.” But then again, who has ever traced the origin of all the proverbs and jokes that exist, and have existed for generations, in two score or more Eastern and Western, Latin, Teutonic, or Slavonic languages?

Old Hungarian legends, just like old Hungarian music, have to the national mind no palpable origin, though Jókay or Gaal have rewritten the former and Liszt or Brahms have familiarized the world with the latter. The following little collection has helped me in my childhood to pass many pleasant hours, so I now give them to my little English readers—embellished by many drawings—in the hope that they may derive as much pleasure from this little volume of magic and adventure as I did from my old torn copy of

“Népmesék.”

Emmuska Orczy

Uletka and the White Lizard

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In a certain country there dwelt a prince whose name was Elkàbo. He had a dear little daughter called Uletka, who was a most sweet child. She and her father lived quite alone in an old castle with four towers, that stood in a beautiful glade in the centre of a great forest.

Uletka was a most dainty and lovely little maid, her wings—she had wings, being related to a fairy—had grown quite strong, and glistened in the sunshine, reflecting all the colours of the rainbow. So sweet and graceful was little Uletka, that perhaps you would imagine she had no faults. Unfortunately she had one, which a wicked and revengeful fairy, who was offended with Nastia, her mother, had endowed her with, and this was the dreadful fault of Curiosity.

This wicked fairy, whose name was Mutà, had done even worse than this. She it was who had lured poor Nastia to destruction. In the forest was a great lake, overshadowed by trees, and covered over with water-lilies and lotus, while round its edge grew tall rushes. One day, when Nastia was walking by the shore of this lake, Mutà hid herself in the water, and calling out for help, pretended she was in danger of drowning. Nastia crept out on the great leaves of the water-lilies and grasped Mutà's hands, whereupon the spiteful fairy dragged her down to the bottom. Poor Nastia could not swim, besides which, Mutà held both her hands. She tried to struggle and to call for help, but it was useless, and thus she drowned. Prince Elkàbo, her husband, and all

the neighbours, searched for her everywhere, and when they reached the edge of the lake they saw her body floating far off among the lotus flowers. As they watched she slowly changed into a most beautiful snow-white water-lily.

Elkàbo wept bitterly, and even the birds ceased to sing. A kingfisher, who was sitting on a flag-leaf, cried out to him that it was the work of the wicked fairy, Mutà. Then Elkàbo mounted his horse and quickly sought audience of the Queen of the Fairies, who lived at the furthest end of the country in a palace of crystal that had been erected among the mountains. He told her and all her courtiers, wise men and magicians, what misfortune had befallen him. Mutà's evil deed excited general indignation throughout the court, and the Queen ordered that the fairy should be transformed into a white lizard, which her head magician immediately proceeded to do. Then Her Majesty decreed that if Elkàbo could catch the lizard, he might be allowed to retain it captive until his little daughter, Uletka, who was then a baby, should release it with her own hands. In the event of this happening not even the Fairy Queen herself could prevent Mutà from resuming her natural form, together with her evil powers.

So Elkàbo returned home and searched day and night, travelling far and wide, until, at last, far away in Japan, he found the white lizard, hidden away under a cluster of orchids. He captured it and fastened it in a little cage made of silver wire, and every day he fed it himself, and would let no one else come near it. But as time went on Elkàbo grew afraid that Uletka might open the cage, as she was such a

very inquisitive little girl. So he built a small tower near the edge of the lake, and there hung the cage, and every day he went down to the tower and fed the lizard with his own hands. The key of the tower he always wore suspended from his neck by a little gold chain, and no one but himself knew the secret of the tower by the lake.

Now Uletka was excessively curious, and often she would wander round the tower and turn the handle of the door, and fret because she always found it locked. She dared not ask her father any more about it, for she had done so once, and then she thought that she never had seen her dear, kind father so angry before.

At last, one day, Elkàbo was obliged to go on a journey, and as Uletka was getting quite a big girl, he felt he could safely entrust her with the key of the tower. He was going to be away two or three days, and told her that in the meanwhile she must go up every day to the tower and take with her a small bowl of bread. Uletka promised to obey her father implicitly, and really meant to keep her promise. Nevertheless, no sooner had Elkàbo departed than Uletka, unable to check her curiosity, started off to see the wonderful lizard in the tower by the lake. She opened the door with a trembling hand, and there, in a cage made entirely of silver wire, was the loveliest lizard she had ever seen. It ran up and down the cage and played with a straw that Uletka held out. She was quite enchanted, and remained a long time watching it play.

“What a lovely fairy you are,” the lizard said suddenly.

Uletka was not at all astonished at hearing the lizard talk. It was so very pretty, that she at once knew it must be a