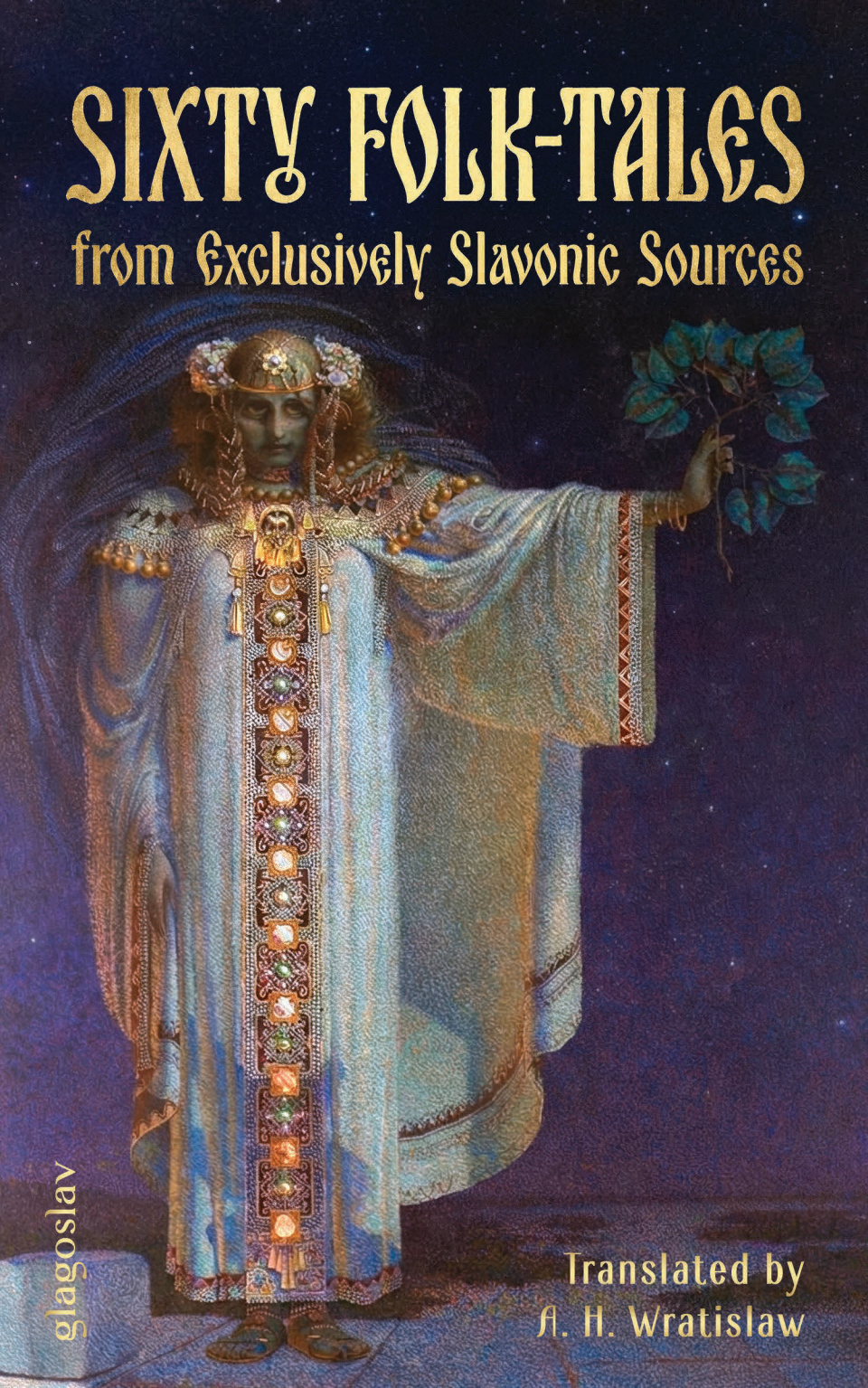
SIXTY FOLK-TALES

from Exclusively Slavonic Sources



Translated by
A. H. Wratislaw

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SIXTY FOLK-TALES

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Sixty Folk-Tales
From *Exclusively Slavonic Sources*

Selected from the anthology of Karel Jaromír Erben

Translated, with Brief Introductions and Notes,
by A. H. Wratislaw, M.A.

With a New Introduction by Jack Monro

Cover image "La Prophétesse Libuše"
by Karel Vítězslav Mašek (1893)

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GLAGOSLAV CLASSICS

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Foreword

The Living Voice: On Wratislaw's Sixty Folk-Tales from Exclusively Slavonic Sources

I. The Book Before You

The volume you hold in your hands is something of a quiet miracle. It is the fruit of one Victorian scholar's determination to open a door that, in his own day, was very nearly shut: the door between the English-speaking world and the vast, deep, and largely unexplored storehouse of Slavonic folklore. Albert Henry Wratislaw—Fellow and Tutor of Christ's College, Cambridge; headmaster of two distinguished English schools; Corresponding Member of the Royal Bohemian Society of Sciences; and, above all, a lifelong and passionate student of the Slavonic peoples, their languages, and their literatures—first published this collection in 1889, under the imprint of Elliot Stock, at 62 Paternoster Row in the City of London. It has never, since that day, wholly disappeared from the shelves of folklorists, Slavicists, and lovers of fairy tales; yet for much of the intervening century and more it has languished in a kind of scholarly twilight, known to specialists, cited in bibliographies, but seldom read for its own sake, and almost never presented to the broader public that Wratislaw himself hoped to reach. The present edition is an attempt to restore this notable book to the light, and to invite a new generation of readers—whether scholars, students, or simply anyone drawn to the ageless spell of a well-told tale—to discover its riches anew.

WESTERN SLAVONIANS

BOHEMIAN STORIES

These stories are translated from the language of the Slavonic inhabitants of nearly three-fourths of Bohemia, the 'Czechs,' as the Poles write the word, or 'Chekhs,' if we adopt the nearest orthographical approximation to it that the English alphabet allows us to make. This nation had an early literary development, commencing before the foundation of the University of Prague (Praha) by the Emperor Charles IV. in 1348. For a long time after that epoch the Bohemians could justly claim the title of the best educated nation in Europe. They produced a prose writer—Thomas of Stitny, whose first original work was published in 1377—whose equal is not to be found in English literature till the age of Queen Elizabeth. In the Thirty Years' War (1620) the people and literature of Bohemia were crushed for more than two centuries, the population being reduced during that terrible war from over four millions to eight hundred thousand.

The Bohemian language itself is a very remarkable one. It possesses both accent and quantity independent of each other, like Latin and Greek. Thus it is difficult for a foreigner to read aloud or to speak, for, if he attends carefully to the accent, he is liable to neglect quantity, and if he attends to quantity, he is likely to slur over the proper accentuation of words. It, as well as Polish, employs a sibilated r, which in many words is difficult to pronounce. It also writes semi-vowels, especially r, without a vowel; so that many syllables appear as if there were

no vowel in them. But this it is sufficient to notice once for all, as it causes no real difficulty in pronunciation.

The fairy-tales relating to the kindly or malevolent superhuman inhabitants of the woods are peculiar and striking. In No. 5 these imaginary beings are represented under the latter, and in No. 6 under the former aspect.

Two waters, one of death and the other of life, are found in the Bohemian stories, just as in the Russian ones—a point wherein the Slavonic tales regularly differ from those of Western Europe, which only acknowledge the water of life. As Mr. Ralston remarks ('Songs of the Russian People,' p. 97): 'When the "dead water" is applied to the wounds of a corpse, it heals them, but before the dead body can be brought to life, it is necessary to sprinkle it with the "living water."'

I.—LONG, BROAD, AND SHARPSIGHT

There was a king, who was already old, and had but one son. Once upon a time he called this son to him, and said to him, 'My dear son! you know that old fruit falls to make room for other fruit. My head is already ripening, and maybe the sun will soon no longer shine upon it; but before you bury me, I should like to see your wife, my future daughter. My son, marry!' The prince said, 'I would gladly, father, do as you wish; but I have no bride, and don't know any.' The old king put his hand into his pocket, took out a golden key and showed it to his son, with the words, 'Go up into the tower, to the top story, look round there, and then tell me which you fancy.' The prince went without delay. Nobody within the memory of man had been up there, or had ever heard what was up there.

When he got up to the last story, he saw in the ceiling a little iron door like a trap-door. It was closed. He opened it with the golden key, lifted it, and went up above it. There there was a large circular room. The ceiling was blue like the sky on a clear night, and silver stars glittered on it; the floor was a carpet of green silk, and around in the wall were twelve high windows in golden frames, and in each window on crystal glass was a damsel painted with the colours of the rainbow, with a royal crown on her head, in each window a different one in a different dress, each handsomer than the other, and it was a wonder that the prince did not let his eyes dwell upon them. When he had gazed at them with astonishment, the damsels began to move as if they were alive, looked down upon him, smiled, and did everything but speak.

Now the prince observed that one of the twelve windows was covered with a white curtain; he drew the curtain to see what was behind it. There there was a damsel in a white dress, girt with a silver girdle, with a crown of pearls on her head; she was the most beautiful of all, but was sad and pale, as if she had risen from the grave. The prince stood long before the picture, as if he had made a discovery, and as he thus gazed, his heart pained him, and he cried, 'This one will I have, and no other.' As he said the words the damsel bowed her head, blushed like a rose, and that instant all the pictures disappeared.

When he went down and related to his father what he had seen and which damsel he had selected, the old king became sad, bethought himself, and said, 'You have done ill, my son, in uncovering what was curtained over, and have placed yourself in great danger on account of those words. That damsel is in the power of a wicked wizard, and kept captive in an iron castle; of all who have attempted to set her free, not one has hitherto returned. But what's done cannot be undone; the plighted word is a law. Go! try your luck, and return home safe and sound!'

The prince took leave of his father, mounted his horse, and rode away in search of his bride. It came to pass that he rode through a vast forest, and through the forest he rode on and on till he lost the road. And as he was wandering with his horse in thickets and amongst rocks and morasses, not knowing which way to turn, he heard somebody shout behind him, 'Hi! stop!' The prince looked round, and saw a tall man hastening after him. 'Stop and take me with you, and take me into your service, and you won't regret it!' 'Who are you,' said the prince, 'and what can you do?' 'My name is Long, and I can extend myself. Do you see a bird's nest in that pine yonder? I will bring you the nest down without having to climb up.'

Long then began to extend himself; his body grew rapidly till it was as tall as the pine; he then reached the nest, and in

a moment contracted himself again and gave it to the prince. 'You know your business well, but what's the use of birds' nests to me, if you can't conduct me out of this forest?' 'Ahem! that's an easy matter,' said Long, and began to extend himself till he was thrice as high as the highest fir in the forest, looked round, and said: 'Here on this side we have the nearest way out of the forest.' He then contracted himself, took the horse by the bridle, and before the prince had any idea of it, they were beyond the forest. Before them was a long and wide plain, and beyond the plain tall gray rocks, like the walls of a large town, and mountains overgrown with forest trees.

'Yonder, sir, goes my comrade!' said Long, and pointed suddenly to the plain; 'you should take him also into your service; I believe he would serve you well.' 'Shout to him, and call him hither, that I may see what he is good for.' 'It is a little too far, sir,' said Long; 'he would hardly hear me, and it would take a long time before he came, because he has a great deal to carry. I'll jump after him instead.' Then Long again extended himself to such a height that his head plunged into the clouds, made two or three steps, took his comrade by the arm, and placed him before the prince. He was a short, thick-set fellow, with a paunch like a sixty-four gallon cask. 'Who are you?' demanded the prince, 'and what can you do?' 'My name, sir, is Broad; I can widen myself.' 'Give me a specimen.' 'Ride quick, sir, quick, back into the forest!' cried Broad, as he began to blow himself out.

The prince didn't understand why he was to ride away; but seeing that Long made all haste to get into the forest, he spurred his horse, and rode full gallop after him. It was high time that he did ride away, or else Broad would have squashed him, horse and all, as his paunch rapidly grew in all directions; it filled everything everywhere, just as if a mountain had rolled up. Broad then ceased to blow himself out, and took himself in again, raising such a wind that the trees in the forest bowed and bent, and became what he was at first. 'You've played me

a nice trick,' said the prince, 'but I shan't find such a fellow every day; come with me.'

They proceeded further. When they approached the rocks, they met a man who had his eyes bandaged with a handkerchief. 'Sir, this is our third comrade,' said Long, 'you ought to take him also into your service. I'm sure he won't eat his victuals for naught.' 'Who are you?' the prince asked him, 'and why are your eyes bandaged? You don't see your way!' 'No, sir, quite the contrary! It is just because I see too well that I am obliged to bandage my eyes; I see with bandaged eyes just as well as others with unbandaged eyes; and if I unbandage them I look everything through and through, and when I gaze sharply at anything, it catches fire and bursts into flame, and what can't burn splits into pieces. For this reason my name is Sharpsight.' He then turned to a rock opposite, removed the bandage, and fixed his flaming eyes upon it; the rock began to crackle, pieces flew on every side, and in a very short time nothing of it remained but a heap of sand, on which something glittered like fire. Sharpsight went to fetch it, and brought it to the prince. It was pure gold.

'Heigho! you're a fellow that money can't purchase!' said the prince. 'He is a fool who wouldn't make use of your services, and if you have such good sight, look and tell me whether it is far to the iron castle, and what is now going on there?' 'If you rode by yourself, sir,' answered Sharpsight, 'maybe you wouldn't get there within a year; but with us you'll arrive to-day—they're just getting supper ready for us.' 'And what is my bride doing?'

'An iron lattice is before her,
In a tower that's high
She doth sit and sigh,
A wizard watch and ward keeps o'er her.'

The prince cried, 'Whoever is well disposed, help me to set her free!' They all promised to help him. They guided him among the gray rocks through the breach that Sharp-

sight had made in them with his eyes, and further and further on through rocks, through high mountains and deep forests, and wherever there was any obstacle in the road, forthwith it was removed by the three comrades. And when the sun was declining towards the west, the mountains began to become lower, the forests less dense, and the rocks concealed themselves amongst the heath; and when it was almost on the point of setting, the prince saw not far before him an iron castle; and when it was actually setting, he rode by an iron bridge to the gate, and as soon as it had set, up rose the iron bridge of itself, the gate closed with a single movement, and the prince and his companions were captives in the iron castle.

When they had looked round in the court, the prince put his horse up in the stable, where everything was ready for it, and then they went into the castle. In the court, in the stable, in the castle hall, and in the rooms, they saw in the twilight many richly-dressed people, gentlemen and servants, but not one of them stirred—they were all turned to stone. They went through several rooms, and came into the supper-room. This was brilliantly lighted up, and in the midst was a table, and on it plenty of good meats and drinks, and covers were laid for four persons. They waited and waited, thinking that someone would come; but when nobody came for a long time, they sat down and ate and drank what the palate fancied.

When they had done eating, they looked about to find where to sleep. Thereupon the door flew open unexpectedly all at once, and into the room came the wizard; a bent old man in a long black garb, with a bald head, a gray beard down to his knees, and three iron hoops instead of a girdle. By the hand he led a beautiful, very beautiful damsel, dressed in white; she had a silver girdle round her waist, and a crown of pearls on her head, but was pale and sad, as if she had risen from the grave. The prince recognised her at once, sprang forward, and went to meet her; but before he could utter a word the wizard addressed him: 'I know for what you have come; you want to

A NOTE ON KAREL JAROMÍR ERBEN

Karel Jaromír Erben (1811–1870) was one of the foremost Czech scholars, poets, and folklorists of the nineteenth century, and a central figure of the Czech National Revival. Born on 7 November 1811 in Miletín, Bohemia, he studied law at the University of Prague, but his true vocation lay in the recovery and preservation of Czech literary and cultural heritage.

He served for many years as Archivist of the Old Town of Prague – a position that gave him privileged access to the manuscript collections of the Bohemian capital – and devoted himself to the collection of Czech folk songs, ballads, and tales with tireless energy and philological precision. His *Kytice z pověstí národních* ('A Bouquet of National Legends', 1853), a cycle of ballad-poems drawn from folk tradition, is widely regarded as one of the supreme achievements of Czech Romantic literature, and remains a cornerstone of the Czech literary canon to this day.

His *Čítanka slovanská s vysvětlovkami* ('Slavonic Reader with Explanations', 1865) – the immediate source for the present collection – was a monument of pan-Slavonic scholarship: an anthology of one hundred folk tales presented in their original languages and dialects, from Czech and Polish in the west to Bulgarian and Slovenish in the south, designed to demonstrate both the unity and the diversity of the Slavonic cultural world. It is from this anthology that Albert Henry Wratislaw selected and translated the sixty tales contained in this volume.

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In *Sixty Folk-Tales from Exclusively Slavonic Sources*, readers encounter a vibrant world shaped by ancient forests, prophetic maidens, clever peasants, enchanted rulers, and the unseen forces that guide human destiny. Selected from the celebrated anthology of Karel Jaromír Erben, one of the founding figures of Czech folklore studies, these tales preserve the oral traditions of the Slavonic peoples in their most vivid form.

Translated in the nineteenth century by A. H. Wratislaw and now presented with a new introduction, this volume reveals the moral imagination, poetic symbolism, and mythic depth that characterize Slavic storytelling. Echoing the spirit of collectors such as the Brothers Grimm, yet distinct in tone and worldview, these stories speak of fate, justice, transformation, and enduring hope.

The cover image, "La Prophétesse Libuše" (1893) by Karel Vítězslav Mašek, evokes the legendary Czech prophetess Libuše and reflects the Romantic rediscovery of national myth that inspired Erben's work.

An indispensable volume for lovers of folklore, mythology, and the cultural history of Central and Eastern Europe.

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