

**THE SHOEMAKER'S APRON;
A SECOND BOOK OF
CZECHOSLOVAK FAIRY
TALES AND FOLK TALES**

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The shoemaker's apron; a second book of Czechoslovak fairy tales and folk tales by Parker Fillmore & Jan Matulka

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PARKER FILLMORE & JAN MATULKA

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THE SHOEMAKER'S APRON

*A Second Book of Czechoslovak
Fairy Tales and Folk Tales*

RETOLD BY
PARKER FILLMORE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
AND DECORATIONS BY
JAN MATULKA



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NOTE

THE stories in this volume are all of Czech, Moravian, and Slovak origin, and are to be found in many versions in the books of folk tales collected by Erben, Nemcova, Kulda, Dobsinsky, Rimavsky, Benes-Trebizsky, Miksicek. I got them first by word of mouth and afterwards hunted them out in the old books. My work has been that of retelling rather than translating since in most cases I have put myself in the place of a storyteller who knows several forms of the same story, equally authentic, and from them all fashions a version of his own. It is of course always

the same story although told in one form to a group of children and in another form to a group of soldiers. The audience that I hope particularly to interest is the English-speaking child.

Some few of the stories—such as Nemcova's very beautiful *Twelve Months* and Erben's spirited *Zlatovlaska* and to a less degree Nemcova's hero tale, *Vitazko*—are already in such definitive form that it would be profanation to "edit" them. They—especially the first two—have been told once and for all. But the same cannot be said of most of the other stories. Nemcova's renderings are too often diffuse and inconsequential, Kulda's dry, pedantic, and homiletic. Erben, the scholarly old archivist of Prague, seems to me the greatest literary artist of them all. His chief interest in folklore was philological, but he was a poet as well as a scholar and he carried his versions of the old stories from the realm of crude folklore to the realm of art.

A small number of the present tales have appeared in earlier English collections coming, nearly always, by way of German or French translations. In the one case they have been squeezed dry of their Slavic exuberance and in the other somewhat dandified. So I make no apology for offering them afresh.

Variants of most of the tales are, of course, to be found in other countries. Grimm's *The White Snake*, for instance, is a variant of *Zlatovlaska*. My rule of selection has been to take stories that do not have well-known variants in other languages. I have to confess that *The White Snake* is very well known, but here I break my own rule on account of the greater beauty of the Slavic version.

In Grimm there are also to be found variants of *A Gullible World* (*The Shrewd Farmer*), *The Devil's Little Brother-in-Law* (*Bearskin*), *Clever Manka* (*The Peasant's Clever Daughter*), *The Devil's Gifts* (*The Magic Gifts*), *The Candles of Life* (*The Strange Godfather and Godfather Death*), *The Shoemaker's Apron* (*Brother Jolly*). In all these tales the same incidents are presented but with a difference in spirit and in background that instantly marks one variant Teutonic and its fellow Slavic. Moreover, as stories, the German versions of these particular tales are neither as interesting nor as important as the Slavic versions.

Both German and Slavic versions go back, in most cases, to some early common source. Take *Clever Manka*, for instance, and its German variant, *The Farmer's Shrewd Daughter*. *Clever Manka* is very

popular among the Czechs and Slovaks and is considered by them especially typical of their own folk wisdom and folk humor. And they are right: it is. But it would be rash to say just how early or how late this story began to be told among the peoples of the earth. The catch at the end appears in a story in the Talmud and at that time it has all the marks of a long and honorable career. The story of the devil marrying a scold, another great favorite with the Slavs, also has its Talmudic parallel in the story of Azrael, the Angel of Death, marrying a woman. The Azrael story contains many of the incidents which are used in different combinations in some half-dozen of the folk tales in the present collection. And yet when comparative folklore has said all that it has to say about variants and versions the fact remains that every people puts its own mark upon the stories that it retells. The story that, in the Talmud, is told of Azrael is Hebrew. The same story passed on down the centuries from people to people appears finally as *Gentle Dora* or *Katcha and the Devil* or *The Candles of Life* and then it is essentially Slavic in background, humor, and imagination.

Besides its fairy tales and folk tales the present volume contains a cluster of charming little nursery

tales and a group of rollicking devil tales. It is intended as a companion volume to my earlier collection, *Czechoslovak Fairy Tales*. Together these two books present in English a selection of tales that are fairly representative of the folk genius of a small but highly gifted branch of the great Slav people.

P. F.

May, 1920.

