Radúz and L’udmila

A traditional Slovak Folktale, collected by Pavol Dobsinsky, translated by David L. Cooper

Once there was a king. The king had three sons and one daughter. “Eh, wife,” he said one day to the queen, “we’re a few too many. We should do something, or nothing will come of us. You know what? Let’s send one of our sons into the world. Let him seek work and make his way as best he can.” “Well,” said the queen, “I like the idea as well. Perhaps it would be best if we sent Radúz.” “Quite right,” answered the king. “I was also thinking of him. So, send him on his way! Maybe he’ll get on in the world somehow.” And off they sent him.

Radúz took leave of his parents and went over hill and dale for many days until he finally came to a dense forest where there was a house. He thought: “I’ll announce myself here. Maybe they’ll take me into service.” Three people lived in that house: a witch, her husband the warlock, and one pretty girl

named L’udmila.

“God grant you fortune, good people!” Radúz said in obeisance as he stepped into the room.

“And to you,” answered the witch. “What brings you here?”

“I’ve come to seek work. Won’t you take me on?”

“Oh, son,” said the witch, “everyone would like his bread, but few know how to earn it. What kind of work do you know?”

“Well, whatever you give me. I’ll just work to the best of my abilities. I’ll certainly make an effort.”

The witch had little desire to take him on, but the warlock persuaded her, and in the end she agreed. Radúz rested up from the journey through the night. In the morning when he awoke, he went to the witch.

“What kind of work will you give me today, my hostess?” The witch measured him from tip to toe and led him to a certain window.

“Look out that window,” she said. “What do you see there?”

“What do I see? I see a glade in the forest.”

“Well, here, take this wooden hoe. You’ll go to that glade, dig it up and plant trees, but in such a way that they grow, blossom, and bear fruit by morning. In the morning you’ll bring me the ripe fruit. And now away with you!”

Radúz worried his head when he came to the glade: “What should I do? Why, who has heard of such a thing, such work with a wooden hoe and in such a short time!” He began to dig, but had hardly struck three times when the hoe broke. He saw that nothing would come of the work, so he threw aside the handle and sat down beneath a beech tree and, vexed, idled away the time there.

Meanwhile the witch had boiled up some frogs and ordered L’udmila to take them to the servant for his lunch. L’udmila knew what was up, and so she picked a moment when the witch went out of the room and took a wand that was on the table, taking careful note of how the wand had been lying. She also thought, “How will that poor boy eat frogs? I’ll take my lunch with me and give it to him.”

So she left to see Radúz and found him sitting vexed under that beech. “Eh,” she said, “don’t worry! It’s true, the lady sent you boiled frogs for lunch, but I tossed them out on the ground thinking it wouldn’t be proper for you to eat them. Instead I brought you my lunch. Never fear about the work,” she continued. “Behold this wand! I’ll strike the ground here with it and everything will grow and blossom and bear fruit by morning, as the lady ordered.”

Then Radúz didn’t know how to thank L’udmila enough. L’udmila struck the ground with the wand, and fruit-beanng trees immediately were planted, grew, blossomed, and bore fruit. Radúz cheered up immediately and ate what she had brought him. He spoke with her and would have continued conversing until evening, but she had to hurry home.

In the morning Radúz brought the fruit and gave it to the witch. She hadn’t thought that he would complete the task and just shook her head. “Well, and what kind of work will you give me today?” said Radúz after a bit.

The witch led him to another window and asked him what he saw there. “What do I see? Just a rocky knoll overgrown with thorns.”

“Well then, take the hoe from behind the door and go there! Clear it for me and plant vines, and in the morning bring grapes.”

Radúz went and began to clear the knoll. He had hardly given one good blow with the wooden hoe when it flew into three pieces. “What’ll you do, sinful man?” he thought to himself. He threw the handle aside and sat down on the rocks, vexed, for he couldn’t even imagine completing the work by morning. So he sat pensively for a long time and waited to see what would happen.

At home the witch cooked him a pot of snakes and near lunchtime said, “L’udmila, get ready and take this food to the servant.” L’udmila obeyed and straight-away took with her both the wand and her own lunch.

Radúz was already impatient for her to arrive, and his heart rejoiced when he saw her coming from far off. “It’s good,” he said, “that you came. See, I’ve been sitting here vexed since morning. The work is beyond me and my hoe broke. If you don’t help me, things will go badly for me.”

“Don’t worry so much,” said L’udmíla. “It’s true, the lady sent you boiled snakes, but I tossed them out on the ground and brought you my lunch. I also brought the wand. We’ll make the vineyard here and tomorrow you’ll bring grapes.”

She gave him his lunch and struck the ground with the wand. Immediately everything was planted, grew, blossomed, and bore grapes. They enjoyed each other’s company a bit longer, then L’udmíla took the pot and the wand and went home.

In the morning Radúz came with grapes. The witch couldn’t believe her eyes. He asked for new work. She led him straight to the third window and told him to look what he saw. “What do I see? Just some large boulders.”

“Well, by morning you have to grind me flour from them and bake bread. If you don’t do it, it will go badly for you!”

Radúz became somewhat afraid that she had threatened him so. But what could he do? So he went about his work. But the fruit and the grapes were spinning in the witch’s head.

“Husband,” she said to the warlock, “it doesn’t seem right. Our girl must be in alliance with the servant, otherwise he’d never manage it by himself. I have to nose it out and then I’ll pay them both back. I’ll go with the lunch myself.”

“Eh!” said the warlock, “what are you saymg? L’udmila is a good girl. We’ve tested her loyalty countless times. There’s no doubt about her. Leave it be. What good is it to spy on them?”

“Well then, husband, you’ll see. It still irks me.”

“Irksome or not,” said the warlock, “that’s enough! You’ll not sin on me that way.” And the witch fell silent.

Meanwhile she cooked up some lizards and sent L’udmila off with lunch. To be sure, L’udmila had caught wind of the old folks’ conspiracy and of what the warlock had grumbled. And that’s why she stole the wand carefully from the table, hid it under her apron, and left with the pot as if she didn’t know a thing.

Radúz was just chipping away at the rocks—but no flour or bread was to be seen. He waited anxiously for L’udmila and finally spotted her hurrying his way. “I was supposed to bring you boiled lizards,” she said from afar, “but it bothered me that they were sending you such a disgusting lunch, so I brought mine instead.” And she gave it to him very willingly. “The lady already suspects that I am helping you, but the old man turned her thoughts to better things. She nearly brought you lunch herself, God forbid! She would have figured out right away what we are doing, and that would have been the end of both you and me.”

“Ah, dear soul, I see what a help you are to me,” said Radúz. “Only how shall I ever repay you?” They would have gladly bantered on for a long time, but L’udmila reminded him that they had to think of his work. So she struck the boulders with the wand and a mill immediately appeared and the millstone ground. Flour poured out in a trough, the bread rose, and the stove burned. Then L’udmila got ready and hurried home.

In the morning Radúz brought bread and the witch nearly exploded from rage. But she said nothing, except: “I see that you’ve managed everything I ordered. Now you can rest up from your work.”

Evening came. The old woman discussed something with the old man and ordered Radúz to fill the kettle with water. When he had brought the water, she set the old man by the kettle to boil the water and to awaken her when it boiled. But L’udmíla brought the old man some powerful wine and he fell asleep from it. Then she came to Radúz and told him, “You see how things stand: they’ll cook you in that kettle if they find you still here in the morning. But I’ll set you free and go with you if you swear to me that you’ll never forget me.”

Radúz gladly swore to that, for he wouldn’t have given her up for the whole world anyway. Then L’udmila spat on one log on the fire, took the magic wand with her, and they hurried away.

The warlock awoke not much later, “Servant,” he said, “are you still sleeping?”

“I’m not,” answered the spittle, “but I’m still stretching.”

After a while the warlock again spoke: “Servant, get up! Give me my boots!”

“Right away, right away!” answered the spittle. “Just wait a bit until I lace up my own boots!”

With that the witch awoke; “L’udmíla, get up! Give me my petticoat and skirt!”

“Right away, right away!” answered the spittle. “Just let me get myself up!”

“Why is it,” asked the witch, “that you are taking so long to get dressed?”

“Straight-away,” answered the spittle.

The witch lost patience and raised her head and she saw only an empty bed. “What the devil, husband, why on my soul, they’re not here! You see their empty beds? They ran off!”

“Perun’s bolt strike them!” answered the warlock.

Then they got up and the witch just grumbled, “That’s your faithful little L’udmila for you. She behaved nicely for you. Just go ahead and believe the

girl the next time, you old stiff!” The old man was chastened. “And now fly after them at once, so you catch them right away and lead them back here.” The old man up and flew off.

With that L’udmila said to Radúz, “My, if my left cheek isn’t burning! Look back, my dear. What do you see behind us?”

“Nothing,” he said, “except one black cloud flying behind us.”

“Well, that’s the old man on a black fairy horse,” said L’udmíla. “Stop here, we have to do something!” And she struck the wand on the ground, which turned into a plowed field. She turned herself into a bunch of wheat and stood him there to reap the wheat and answer wisely when the old man came. Then the old man tore up on the black cloud with a storm and hail, nearly crushing all the wheat.

Radúz and L’udmila

“Ah, old man,” the reaper said to him, “if you don’t crush all the wheat I still may have some profit from it.”

“Why, I’ll leave it for you,” answered the old man and he flew down. “But tell me if you didn’t see two young people run this way?”

“Oh, as long as I’ve been reaping here not a soul has passed this way. But when they were sowing this wheat they say two such passed through here.”

The warlock shook his head, lost himself in the cloud and went home, Radúz and L’udmila went on right away.

“What have you accomplished, husband,” said the witch to the old man, “that you are returning so soon?” And he replied, “Who knows where they went. I didn’t see a soul, just a reaper and some wheat.”

“Well, what do you think? That was them. Ah, to be deceived so! Couldn’t you have at least brought a head of that wheat home? Get after them.” The old man flew off, chastened.

“My,” said L’udmila, “if my left cheek isn’t burning! Look back, Radúz, look what’s happening behind us.”

“Nothing,” he said, “except one grey cloud is flying behind us.”

“Well, that’s the old man on a grey fairy horse. But never fear, just answer wisely!” Then she struck her hat with the wand and it became a little church. She turned herself into a fly and made a bunch of other flies around her. She made Radúz into the hermit of that little church to preach to the flies there.

With that the grey cloud flew up with snow and such a freeze that the roof just cracked. The warlock dismounted from the fairy horse and went to the hermit in the little church. “Haven’t you seen two wayfarers here?” he asked. “One girl and one lad?”

“What would have brought them here?” answered the hermit. “I’ve just been preaching to these flies as long as I’ve been here. Only one time, back when they were building this church, two such passed this way. But you shouldn’t let in so much cold,” he said, “or all my audience will freeze.”

“Well, never fear, I’ll come back. I’ve just wasted my energy so far.” And with that he flew away.

The old woman was waiting for him in the yard, and when she saw him coming alone, she shouted at him right away, “You ninny, you’re not bringing anyone again! Where did you leave them?”

“Where should I leave them if I didn’t see them? Nothing but a little church was there and a hermit was preaching to the flies in it. And I let in so much cold that everything nearly froze at once.”

“Why you fool, that was them. Couldn’t you have at least brought back a shingle? Just you wait, I’ll get them!” With that she up and flew off.

“My, L’udmila said again, “if my left cheek isn’t burning! Look back, Radúz, and see if someone isn’t chasing us.”

“Indeed, a red cloud is catching up to us.”

“That’s the old witch on a red fairy horse. Up to now it’s been easy enough, but now you’ll have to be brave to deceive her. Look, I’ll turn myself into a golden duck and swim about on this sea. You submerge yourself in the water so she won’t burn you, and when she chases me, leap up to her horse and grab him by the halter and then have no fear!”

Radúz and L’udmila

With that the old woman rode up with such flames that everything around burned up. She dismounted from the fairy horse by the sea and began to chase the duck. But it kept enticing her further and further, until it had lured her far away from the horse. Then Radúz leapt out of the sea and grabbed the horse by the halter. The duck flew up to him quickly and turned into a maiden. They mounted the fairy horse and flew away over the sea.

When the witch saw that she began to curse terribly. She cursed Radúz so that he would forget L’udmila the moment he was kissed by someone the first time. And she called out to L’udmila, “You, my girl, you shan’t live with that scoundrel for seven years.” The witch had to complete the entire trip back on foot. She lost all her powers and her husband laughed at her, that she had let herself be so deceived.

Only now did Radúz and L’udmila really fly on that fairy horse, until they arrived at the town where Radúz’s parents lived. “What’s new here?” he asked one townsman they met in the town. “Well, what else?” the townsman answered. “Our king and his sons and daughter died, and only the old queen remains. And all she does is cry constantly for a son who is somewhere out in the world. That’s why we have nothing but quarrels and intrigues over who will be king.”

“They died?” said Radúz. “Well, that’s no good indeed.” Then he left the townsman and called L’udmila aside. “You know what we’ll do? You stay here by this well, for I can’t take you before my mother as you are, in torn clothes. Hide in that thick-spreading tree and wait for me to return. Meanwhile I’ll go in and when they recognize me and make me king I’ll come with nice clothes for you.”

L’udmila agreed and Radúz went into the castle. His mother recognized him immediately and ran to him with outspread arms, hugged him joyfully and tried to kiss him, but he wouldn’t let her. The others also recognized him, proclaimed him king, prepared a great feast, and celebrated happily. Radúz, worn out from the trip, lay down before the others to rest, and when he was sleeping his mother came and kissed both his cheeks. From then on he forgot completely about his L’udmila. He even married another later on.

The abandoned L’udmila lamented a long time, wondering what to do now. She had nowhere to go, poor thing, so she stood herself in the yard of a farmer not far from the castle and grew into a beautiful poplar. The poplar was an ornament for the entire countryside, let alone the yard, and only bothered the king himself. It irked him that he couldn’t see far out of his window. Finally he lost patience and ordered it felled. The farmer begged him not to have the nice tree cut down, but even begging was of no use and the king had the poplar felled.

Not long after that a beautiful pear tree sprouted up right below the castle, and it bore golden pears. When they gathered them in the evening, by morning it was again heavy with fruit. The king had them gathered every day and the tree was very dear to him. But the queen was constantly angry with it. “If only that pear tree would die as soon as possible,” said the queen. “That tree vexes me so.”

The king begged and persuaded her to leave it be, since it was so pretty. But the queen insisted so much that the king had it felled according to her will.

By then the seven years was coming to an end. So L’udmila turned into a golden duck and swam back and forth under the royal window, quacking. The king finally caught sight of it and it occurred to him that he had seen such a duck somewhere before. So he ordered it caught. But there wasn’t a single person who could catch that duck. Then he had fishermen and birders summoned from all over the land, but even they couldn’t catch it. This bothered the king more and more every day.

“If that’s how it is, that no one can do my will,” he said one day, “I’ll try my own luck.” And he set out for the lake and after the duck. The duck led him hither and thither for a long time and he followed right along. Finally he caught her. No sooner did he have her in hand than the golden duck turned into beautiful L’udmila and said, “You certainly rewarded me poorly for my faithfulness! But I’ll forgive you, for it could not have been otherwise.”

The delighted Radúz took his L’udmila to the castle and led her straight to the old queen. “Here’s the one,” he said, “who saved my life so many times. She will be my wife and no other.” He let the other wife go right away and took L’udmila. They held twice as big a wedding and lived together happily—

and they’re still living today, if they haven’t died.

End note:

The end of the tale can also be that L’udmila got into the king’s castle as a seamstress and before Radúz’s eyes turned three magic wands into doves that spoke to him: “Radúz, Radúz, you’ve forgotten your L’udmila.” He remembered her then, sent away his first wife, and took L’udmila.

Or: Radúz long refused to marry, and finally had it proclaimed that he would marry the one who embroidered him the prettiest flower. L’udmila embroidered the prettiest flower and so won him.

Or: She remained hidden in that tree by the well for seven years. Then the king’s oxen were going that way to pasture in the mountains, but they couldn’t pass the tree because L’udmila chanted at them:

“Oxen, oxen, don’t forget your strength like your master his L’udmila true.”

That happened twice. The third time Radúz himself came. L’udmila came down out of the tree and he recognized her, had a beautiful dress brought to her, and so she returned to the castle with him.