

The Gallant Cloakmaker: Selected Tales

Egek Benedek

– 150th Anniversary Edition –

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Elk Bendek

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Elek Benedek

“Benedek Elek was born on September 30, 1859, in Kisbacon. He was a writer, journalist and editor and the founder of Hungarian children’s literature. He began his studies at the college in Székelyudvarhely and completed them at Budapest University... He died on August 17, 1929, pen in hand.” (From the 1972 edition, published in Hungarian in Bucharest by the Ion Kreangă Publishing House.)

2009 sees the 150th anniversary of the birth and the 80th anniversary of the death of the prolific writer Elek Benedek. Practically all of the plots will be familiar to anyone who has read European (or any other) folktales. Here are Puss in Boots and Jack with his beanstalk as well as many other favourite heroes and villains. But these stories have been moulded into an environment unequivocally Hungarian – a Hungary of a century and much longer ago. They are also the products of a master story-teller, and though they may be written down, everywhere the reader feels them come to life with the improvisative twists and turns of the oral tradition. Even the author’s name sounds as though it has been created to be one of his characters, like Lord Otromfotrom.

It has been sheer pleasure to translate this selection from the many tales of Elek Benedek. My thanks go out to Dr. Márta Farkas, who allowed me to borrow the volume from the family villa at the Balaton in order to do so and give me an alibi for antisocial behaviour as I locked myself away.

Martonfa, 20th August, 2009.

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The Tree that Reached the Sky

Once upon a time in a land there never was, across the Briny Ocean, seventy-seven lands away or maybe even further, but anyhow somewhere or other, there lived an aged king. His white beard swept the ground, and if he took one step he tripped two, so old was this king. Yet whatever difficulties age brings, still he loved life, and only one thing better than that: his only daughter, who was so beautiful that you could stare at the sun but not at her. This lovely princess had so many suitors that they knocked one other off their feet, and there were two kings for each finger. The old king would have liked his daughter to find a partner... and then again he wouldn't: for if he thought of his daughter being carried off across the Briny Ocean, never to be seen by him again, his heart hardened and he said to every suitor, "My daughter is young. It can wait."

Even the princess thought that there was time and more before she need take a husband. Each morning she walked out to her garden, and secretly shed bitter tears as she thought that one day she would have to leave behind her the lovely flowers she had planted with her own hand. Who else would tend so lovingly such a delightful garden, full of such beautiful flowers and... yes, of a tree that reached the sky, a tree not to be found in the whole wide world, though her garden had one.

As these thoughts went through the mind of the wonderfully pretty princess, suddenly a whirlwind descended upon the garden, plucking it up into the air so that not a trace was left. When the wind had subsided the princess was sought everywhere, but in vain. The poor old king would have thrown himself into the Danube in his sorrow, had he not tripped upon his beard.

What should they do? Where could they go? Surely the earth had swallowed her up! Yes, the earth. The wind had made it gape open and she had fallen in.

Time passed, and there was no sign of the princess. One night the king saw in a dream that his daughter had been thrust up by the whirlwind into the tree that reached the sky, indeed, into the castle of the nine-headed dragon, who kept her captive and intended to wed his only daughter. You can well believe it, for each leaf of the tree was big enough to hold a country with all its extras included. Now wouldn't it have been good to know which leaf his dear girl was on? Not even his prophets could tell him that.

There was nothing to do but decree throughout the seventy-seven lands that whoever brought back his daughter would receive her hand in marriage and straightway half his kingdom, the other half upon his death.

The decree worked wonders. Princes, dukes and barons came in floods. Each attempted to climb the tree that reached the sky, yet none succeeded: all had to return down before they were halfway up.

The old king was downcast with sorrow. For days he spoke to no-one, and all thought that this woe would be the death of him. But one day a little swineherd came from the king's court and, using the proper formula, said, "Lord and King, I offer you my life and death. Give me leave to climb the tree that reaches the sky. Let my head be stuck on a stake if I do not return with the beautiful princess!"

Great as was the king's sorrow, the palace walls shook as he laughed out loud at the lad's impudence. Two princes were standing by and to be sure they did not laugh, for they were struck with amazement. What did a ragged little swineherd hope for when they, noble princes, had tried their luck in vain? The royal fool was sitting next to the king and grinned from ear to ear. The aged king sought his council.

“What do you think, fool?”

“I think, royal king, that you should throw me out and make this lad your court fool.”

“A mad wind blows through a mad hole!” cried out the swineherd lad, now angry. “I’ll just show you and bring back the princess!”

“Very well,” said the king. “Go, but if you fail to bring back my daughter, just hope that you fall out of a tree and break your neck, because if you don’t, then I’ll have my executioner break it for you!”

All that the swineherd wanted besides was for the king to have the buffalo with the broken horn butchered and seven pairs of moccasins made out of his hide, as well as seven suits, and to give him provisions for seven weeks.

It must meanwhile be said that the swineherd hadn’t set out for the tree that reached the sky like a madman. Among his swine there was a dirty little piglet that none of the other herds paid any heed to, and he alone cared for. When this piglet had seen that not a single mother’s son could bring down the king’s daughter, he called out to the swineherd:

“You have been kind to me; now listen to what I have to say, for I want to serve you. Did you know that so far no-one has been able to climb the tree that reaches the sky? And if they did succeed, what would they gain from it? That tree has so many leaves that it would take a whole lifetime just to walk a thousandth of them, and how could you know which one the princess was on? You try too. Have the buffalo with the broken horn butchered, have seven moccasins made out of its hide, and seven suits besides, and keep climbing until the last pair of moccasins and the last suit falls from you in shreds. At that point you will reach an outstretching branch. Go right along to the end and step upon the furthest leaf. On that leaf there is a country – the rest is up to you.”

The swineherd didn't have to be told twice. He went up to the king, and once the king had given his consent there was no more reason to stay, and he began to climb the tree that reached the sky. He took his little axe with him, and where there was no branch he cut steps out of the trunk and thus progressed ever upward. He went by day and by night, and he had already tied on his seventh pair of moccasins when he reached the point where he was closer to the sky than to the ground. He had clambered up in the seventh pair of moccasins for seven whole weeks, when he saw that they had split apart. There he was, by the outstretched branch of which the piglet had spoken. He set out along it. At first things went easily, because it was good and thick, but then it became thinner and thinner. It was beginning to bend under him, and he wondered whether it might not be better to turn back. But that was out of the question! He closed his eyes and said, "Farewell, world!" took a running jump and leapt onto the leaf.

And, well, what did he see when he opened his eyes again? He'd arrived in a true-to-life country! A country just like the one down on the ground, with towns and villages, woods and meadows, water and everything.

Now the swineherd set off, and walked and walked until he reached a castle that span on a diamond leg and had seven thousand windows, just as it had seven thousand staircases. He would have liked to enter the castle, but whenever he stepped upon a staircase it turned over before him. Some thousand stairs turned before him, and try as he might, he always fell back down them.

You can believe that the swineherd was truly angry. He was going to enter that castle if it took him his entire life! He took out his little axe and just as the wooden staircase was turning in front of him, he swung his axe into it, held on fast to the handle and so swung onto the staircase. Now he could easily walk up the stairs, of which there were exactly one thousand. And as he walked in

through the gateway, what was the first thing he should see? Why, the princess!

The princess clapped her hands in startled astonishment and cried out, "How did you get to this place, Johnnie, which not even the birds visit?"

"If you please, I climbed," answered Johnnie. "Now come along with me, your highness, and I'll take you home."

"Oh, do not speak the word, for if the nine-headed dragon with whom I live were to hear it, our lives would be at an end!"

Hardly had the words left her lips when the dragon arrived and caught sight of Johnnie.

"Well who and what is this?" it asked.

"This is my little servant boy," answered the princess. "He couldn't bear to stay below and came up to serve me."

The dragon agreed to let Johnnie stay, and gave him no further tasks but to tend to the poor horse in the stable. But if it should ask for anything he should do the opposite, or it would cost him his life.

Johnnie went out to the stable and looked at the horse, which was such a bag of bones it could not rise from the stable floor. Straightaway he brought it hay and oats, but the horse did not even cast a glance at them. Then he made it a mess of pottage, but the nag did not eat from that either. Johnnie's heart went out to the poor creature, and was lost for an idea to cheer it, but all at once the animal spoke:

"Do not wonder that in my poor condition I turn my head at such fine victuals: I am accustomed to food of another flavour. But my master will not give it to me, for only I know the secret of how to destroy him. And so that I cannot, he wants to starve me to death. Yet I see that you have a good heart. Do what I ask and you will not regret it."

“What shall I do?” asked Johnnie.

“When on Sunday the princess bids you to church do not go, but light the great stack of wood in the courtyard. Leave the rest to me.”

Now the dragon had commanded Johnnie to do the opposite of what the horse desired, but even so he obeyed the horse. On Sunday, when the princess called him, he did not follow her to church but stayed at home and lit the stack of wood in the courtyard. In half an hour the stack was no more than a pile of embers. The horse had a shovel of embers taken across to him, and wonder of wonders ate those burning straw embers down to the last ash! At that his power so returned that he could stand, whereupon he made his way to the great pile of embers. Then Johnnie saw that the horse had five legs. In a trice the horse had eaten all the embers from skin and bone the animal became as fat as a barrel.

Once the horse had returned to its original state of health, it said to Johnnie, “Now, dear master, go into the cellar. There you will find a bridle, a saddle and a sword. Bring them up and then let’s go hunting. But don’t tell anyone why you need them.”

So Johnnie went down to the cellar and took up the gear, but as he was coming up the dragon called out at him.

“Where are you off to with that gear, you gnome of a man? You’ll die for that!”

“Oh, do not kill me, dear master!” begged Johnnie.

“All right, first draw a pitcher of wine from the barrel and we’ll drink that for your sins.”

Johnnie drew a pitcher of wine and they drank it up.

“Now that was something!” said the dragon. “Let’s drink another pitcher for your father’s sins and another for your mother’s. We can’t have you going thirsty into the next world!”

