

TRACE

**Traditional Children's Stories for a common
Future**

The story of the Plitvice Lakes

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It was a splendid, hot summer's day. Mysterious silence enveloped the woods. Even the forest birds sought shade and shelter from the scorching heat. Not a single cloud was in the sky, no trace of gentle breeze to cool off the air. The sun stood high above, blazing the dark earth as if kissing it. For weeks heavy heat was tormenting the fields and hills. People and animals, meadows and gardens, all craved for a breath of fresh air and some rain to bring relief. Even the "Black River" that used to gurgle between the steep cliffs went dry. Only a few drops of water remained here and there in the dents in stone, which little birds eagerly sought to quench their parched throats. Once growing so lush, its sweet, green colour delighting travellers, the grass on the lakeside, was withering too.

People came from afar to visit this place, as they knew they should find water and cool off by the "Black River". They prayed for gentle rain, but their prayers were left unanswered. For the longest time the sky denied them mercy, despite their earnest prayers.

But all of a sudden, they heard the sounds of trumpets and pipes coming from the valley. Turning their eyes towards the magical music, they saw a beautiful woman walking through the dried-out riverbed. She wore a black gown; a crown was on her head and a sceptre in her hand. A splendid retinue followed her. Looking upon the wooded mountains and valleys with cool shades, admiring the beautiful scenery, the fair-haired lady turned to her courtiers saying:

'We shall build our palace here.'

Upon hearing this, people suddenly came to life, and started to hail the lady joyfully,

'God bless the Black Queen!'

And sure enough, it was the Black Queen. From the mountain ranges Kapela to Velebit, from the river Una to the grey sea, every child knew about the Black Queen and her gracefulness. Where she dwelled, joy and happiness flourished; wherever she set foot, poverty and misery were unknown. Since ancient times people in areas of Lika and Krbava knew about the Queen. Grey old men often used to tell of her kindness and ability to perform miracles. She was the guardian of the poor; she punished violence and injustice. From her fairy castle in craggy cliffs of Velebit she would sometimes descend to the lush planes of Lika and Gacka valley, touching people with her kindness, bestowing happiness upon them.

'Give us some water, oh noble queen,' beseeched people. 'Please give us water, we and our livestock are dying of thirst, for the drought has ruined our fields and meadows!'

'My dear people! Your fealty and trust I shall reward and provide you with an abundance of water. Right away thirteen lakes, with golden fish, shall spring up here as pride and joy of this countryside.'

At the Queen's command people swiftly put up a wall around the source of the Black River.

Dark clouds soon covered the sky. With thunder and lightning heavy rain fell upon the land,

bringing life to people and animals, to all the fields and meadows. All the night rain kept falling and water kept rising.

Nearing dawn, a violent storm broke, chasing away the clouds, so when the sun rose, the sky was perfectly clear and cloudless. Golden rays of sunshine lit up all of landscape, flickering merrily upon the green peaks and smiling lovingly upon the smooth surface of the lake which sprang into being in the Black River's riverbed. The woods nearby flaunted their fresh greenery, and birds sang happily up on the branches of slender fir trees and centuries old oak trees.

Like a ruddy dawn, there at the new lake's bank, beautiful queen appeared and spoke to the people who gathered here to witness this wonderful miracle:

'My people! Your prayers have been answered, so there you have the first lake which you shall call the lake of prayer—Prošćansko jezero.'

Diligent hands carried stones one by one up the hill, and soon people built a stately queen's palace. Everyone gleamed with happiness, and the "Black queen" kept watch over the scenery like a fairy, delighting in the Plitvice lakes.

And so, days went by. The story of Plitvice lakes and the "Black queen" was passed from mouth to mouth, but no one ever laid eyes upon her again. Great sorrow came over people as word went round that she was dead. Little by little, the palace over the lake Kozjak crumbled away, and the queen was said to have withdrawn into her underground fairy mansions around the lakes Galovac and upper Okrugljak. People made pilgrimages to these places, imploring the queen to show up or at least give them a sign she was alive. One day a pleasant music was heard from the depths of the lake Galovac. Suddenly, its waters rose with a roaring noise and overflowed the cave.

People knew what that swooshing sound meant: it was the sign that Queen was alive. From that time on people have worshipped this waterfall.

At one time a great peril threatened the whole area. A violent squall rose and began to tear down trees and stones. With heavy rain, streams flowed from the hills, carrying the murky water into lakes. It was like judgement day. In mortal dread, people once more turned for help to their good mother, the Black Queen.

'O, kind Queen, grant us your protection and pray to God for us sinners!'

A bolt of lightning flashed across the sky.

Some kind of magical light shone on Galovac waterfall, and the people's venerated queen suddenly came into sight by a cave. Her face was glowing with grace and dignity, and her eyes gleamed with generosity and benevolence; she was a true queen. People fell upon their knees as if she was a saint, and in her sweet voice she spoke:

'People, have faith in God and in your Queen. You are good, devoted, obedient and persevering. Yet, time will come when your perseverance will be swayed. Still, you must not give in, but have trust in God instead. I will watch over you and pray for you.'

'And when shall you, oh fair Queen, again come to our side?' the people asked.

'I shall come', the Queen replied, 'but before my coming great suffering awaits you. As people faithful and loyal to your country and this ruling house, for a long time you will defend Christianity, shedding blood for your ruler and homeland. Grievous wars you shall lead here, fighting to preserve your freedom and your faith. But despite all that evil your faithfulness and fidelity will not sway. When, as a token of joy, bonfires flare up to the sky on mounts Velebit, Plješivica, Kik and other craggy peaks, you will know that I am drawing closer. I will come! Smoke from a steamship on the lake Kozjak will also herald my arrival. And then my people, the sun of a brighter future will shine on you. No more will your cool groves, dreamy valleys and beautiful Plitvice lakes be desolate. Your Queen shall come, my dear people, she will dwell here, and men of gentle birth from all over the world will pay a call to her, to see her and admire the beauties of this country and of the Plitvice lakes. Be faithful and loyal, my people. Always remember that I shall come, and take this golden flower resembling my hair as a keepsake. Watch over that flower, my people, and it shall keep you safe from evil and remind you of your Queen. Farewell!'

And with that, the Queen had left, but her words stayed imprinted in people's hearts.

The flower was also preserved, so now everyone knows about it. Some call it Vladislavka, others Košnjak, while men of letters refer to it as *Gentiana lutea*.

The lakes have healing powers that the Queen bestowed upon them, as well as the river Korana, into which the lakes are pouring.

In their hearts people still hope to see their Queen and hail her in thousand voices,

"Welcome our sweet Queen!"