

## The Legend of the Dwarf

A story of the Mayans of Yucatan, retold by Rohini Chowdhury

The *Legend of the Dwarf* is a story of the Yucatec Mayans, the Mayan people who live in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico. The story is set in the ancient Yucatan city of Uxmal, where even today the ruins of a great palace or temple can be seen, which is the Dwarf's House of the story. The old woman is probably the Rain-Goddess, and the Dwarf the Man of the Sun. In Yucatan dwarfs were sacred to the Sun, and often sacrificed to him.

Many hundreds of years ago, there lived an old woman, all alone in a tiny hut. She had no children, and no one to ask after her. The old woman would weep night and day for a child, but of course, with no result. One day she took an egg, wrapped it carefully in cotton cloth, and put it in a corner of her hut. Night and day the old woman looked after the egg, in the hope that maybe it would give her a child. But nothing happened, and every day the old woman grew more and more unhappy.

One morning, as she went to look at the egg, she found that it had broken – and in its shell sat the tiniest, loveliest baby boy that anyone could imagine. The baby saw the old woman and smiled and held out its tiny arms. The old woman was delighted – here at last was the child she had wanted for so long.

The old woman loved the child dearly, and looked after it so carefully and so well, that by the time it was a year old it could walk and talk as well as any grown up. But for some strange reason, no one knows what, the baby stopped growing. He remained as tiny as a one-year old for the rest of his life. He began to be called the 'Dwarf'.

The old woman did not care. She still loved the baby devotedly. 'You will be a great king one day, my child,' she told him, sure that the baby was destined for great things.

One day the old woman said to the Dwarf, 'Go to the king's palace, my son, and challenge him to test his strength against yours.'

The Dwarf protested. 'How can I challenge the king, mother?' he said horrified. 'He is greater and much stronger than I.'

But the old woman insisted, and the Dwarf was forced to do as she said.

The king smiled at the child's challenge, and asked him to lift a heavy stone. The Dwarf went weeping to the old woman. 'How can I lift that heavy stone?' he asked.

'If the king can lift it, so can you,' said the old woman, and sent him back to the palace.

And sure enough, the Dwarf was able to lift the heavy stone.

The king gave him many more tasks to do, but anything the king could do, the Dwarf could do as well.

When the king saw that this tiny little child could do whatever he himself could do, he was afraid, and very angry. He decided to get rid of the child by asking him to do something impossible.

'Build me a palace taller and higher and more magnificent than any in my city,' the King commanded the Dwarf. 'You must do this in one night. If the palace is not ready by tomorrow morning, you will die.' The King thought that the Dwarf would never be able to fulfill his command, and so would lose his head.

The Dwarf was terribly frightened. He ran home to the old woman and wept. 'How will I ever build a palace that high or that magnificent?' he cried. 'I will surely die tomorrow.'

The old woman comforted the child and said, 'Go to sleep, my son. It will be done by the morning.' The Dwarf did as his mother said, and went to sleep.

The next morning he woke up in a beautiful palace, taller, higher and more magnificent than any in the king's city. This is the palace the ruins of which can still be seen in the city of Uxmal.

When the king looked out of his window that morning, he saw the new palace towering up to the sky. He was amazed. 'I must think of another way to get rid of him,' he thought.

The king then sent for the Dwarf and asked him to collect two bundles of cogoiol, a sort of hard wood. 'With one bundle I shall strike you on the head,' said the king to the dwarf. 'And if you survive, you may strike me on the head with the other.'

The Dwarf ran back to his mother, weeping and wailing. 'The king wants to kill me,' he said. 'For how can I survive a blow on my head with a bundle of hardwood?'

The old woman told the child not to worry. She gave him two bundles of cogoiol and, placing a tortilla on his head, sent him back to the king.

The king had assembled all his ministers and the nobles of his court for what he hoped would be his triumph over the Dwarf. He took his bundle of wood and hit the Dwarf hard on his head with it. In fact, he hit the Dwarf so hard that the bundle of hardwood splintered into a hundred pieces. But the Dwarf stood unharmed.

Now the king was frightened. He tried to get out of the contest, but the ministers and noblemen insisted he keep his end of the bargain. They insisted the Dwarf hit the king with his bundle of wood.

The Dwarf did so, and at once the king died.

The assembled nobles and ministers and the people of the city who had come to watch the contest declared the Dwarf to be their new king. The old woman's wish had come true – her little child was now a great king.

After this the old woman disappeared. But it is said, that far away in the village of Mani, there is a deep well leading to an underground passage. In this passage, beside a river and shaded by a great tree, sits an old woman with a serpent by her side. She sells water, but accepts no money. But be careful before you buy her water, for she wants your babies in return, innocent children which her serpent devours.

This old woman is the Dwarf's mother.