

"The Magic Mirror"

A fairy tale from Aleksandr Afanas'ev's collection

Translated by Seth Graham

[Source: "Volshebnoe zerkal'tse" (№ 211). *Narodnye russkie skazki A.N. Afanas'eva*. 3 vols. Moscow: GIKhL, 1957. Vol. 2. 126-33.]

In a certain kingdom, in a certain land, there lived a widowed merchant. He had a son, a daughter, and a brother. One day the merchant was getting ready to sail to foreign lands to sell various goods. He planned to take his son with him and leave his daughter at home. Before leaving, he summoned his brother and said to him: "I leave my entire household in your hands, dear brother, and I beg you to look after my daughter. Teach her to read and write, and don't let her misbehave!" Then the merchant bid his brother and his daughter farewell and set off on his journey. The merchant's daughter was already of age and possessed such indescribable beauty that you could not find her equal if you walked around the whole world! Her uncle began to have unclean thoughts that would not give him peace day or night. He made advances toward the maiden, telling her, "You'll either sin with me or you won't live on this earth! I'll kill you and then run away myself!..."

The girl ran towards the bathhouse with her uncle on her heels, and when she got there she grabbed a basin full of boiling water and soaked him from head to toe. He was laid up for three weeks and almost didn't recover. A terrible hatred gnawed at his heart and he began to think of ways he could repay the trick with one of his own. He thought and thought, and finally wrote his brother a letter: your daughter is up to no good, she gets around, never sleeps at home, and doesn't listen to me. The merchant received the letter, read it, and became very angry. He told his son, "Your sister is shaming the whole family! She deserves no mercy: I want you to go home this very minute and chop the incorrigible girl into little bits and bring me her heart on this knife. Then our family name won't be the laughing stock of good people!"

The son took the sharp knife and headed for home. He arrived in his hometown in secret, without anyone knowing, and began to investigate: how was the merchant's daughter really living? Everyone unanimously praised her as a quiet, modest, god-fearing, obedient girl. Having heard all this, he went to see his sister. She was overjoyed and welcomed him with hugs and kisses: "Dear brother! How did the Lord bring you this way? How is our dear father?" "Oh, dear sister, don't be so quick to rejoice. My homecoming is not a happy one: father sent me with orders to chop your pale body into little pieces and bring him your heart on this knife."

The sister burst into tears. "My God," she said, "why such cruelty?" "I'll tell you why!" said her brother, and told her about their uncle's letter. "Oh, brother, I haven't done anything wrong!" The merchant's son listened as she told him what had happened, and then he said, "Don't cry, little sister! I know that you're not at fault, and even though father told me not to accept any excuses, I still won't punish you. Better if you pack your things, leave our father's house, and go wherever your eyes lead you. God won't abandon you!" The merchant's daughter didn't think about it for very long. She packed for her journey, bid farewell to her brother, and left. Where to, even she did not know. Meanwhile her brother killed a stray dog, cut out its heart, stuck it onto the end of the sharp knife, and took it to his father. As he handed over the

dog's heart he said, "There, I've fulfilled your parental command and executed my sister."
"Served her right," replied his father, "a dog like her deserved a dog's death!"

For a long time or a short time the beautiful maiden wandered the wide world, and finally she went into a thick forest. The trees were so tall she could barely see the sky. She walked through the forest and suddenly emerged into a large clearing. In the clearing was a white palace made of stone surrounded by an iron fence. "I'll pay a visit to that palace," thought the girl, "not everyone is mean, after all, so it should be all right." She entered the palace, but didn't see a human soul in the halls. She was just about to turn back when suddenly two mighty *bogatyrs* [Russian knights of lore] galloped into the courtyard and entered the palace. They saw the maiden and said, "Hello, beauty!" "Hello, honorable knights!" "Look, brother," one of the *bogatyrs* said to the other, "we were bemoaning the fact that we had nobody to look after things at home, and God sent us a little sister." The *bogatyrs* let the merchant's daughter live with them, called her their sister, gave her the keys to the palace, and made her the mistress of the whole place. Then they took out their sharp sabers, stood chest to chest, and made a vow: "If one of us dares to encroach on our sister's honor, the other will hack him up without mercy with his saber."

So the beautiful maiden lived with the *bogatyrs*. Her father in the meantime finished buying goods overseas, returned home, and a short while later remarried. The new wife of the merchant was an indescribable beauty. She had a magic mirror into which you could look and find out what was happening and where. One day the *bogatyrs* were getting ready to go out hunting. They instructed their sister: "Make sure you don't let anyone in while we are gone!" They said goodbye and left. At that very moment the merchant's wife was gazing into her mirror, admiring her own beauty. She said, "There is none more beautiful than I in the whole world!" But the mirror replied, "You are fair, there is no doubt! But you have a stepdaughter who lives in the thick forest with two *bogatyrs*, and she is fairer still!"

The stepmother did not like these words at all. She summoned a mean old woman. "Here," she told the servant, "take this ring and go into the thick forest. There you will find a white stone palace. In that palace lives my stepdaughter. Bow to her and give her the ring, and tell her it is a present from her brother!" The old woman took the ring and set off for the forest. She arrived at the white stone palace, where the beautiful maiden saw her and ran out to meet her. She was keen to learn news from her native land. "Hello, granny! How did the Lord bring you here? Is everyone alive and well?" "They live and chew bread! Your brother asked me to inquire about your health and to give you this ring as a gift. Here, put it on!" The maiden was so happy, happier than words can describe. She took the old woman inside, gave her all sorts of food and drink, and told her to give her regards to her brother. In an hour the old woman pushed off for home, and the maiden admired the ring and decided to put it on. She did, and right away fell over as if dead.

The *bogatyrs* returned home and entered the courtyard, but their sister did not come out to meet them. What was the matter? They went to her room and found her lying there dead, not saying a word. The *bogatyrs* began to grieve; death had taken the very thing that was most beautiful of all! "We must dress her in new clothes and put her in a coffin," they said. They began to prepare her and one of them noticed a ring on the maiden's hand. "We can't bury her with this ring, can we? We had better take it off and keep it as a memento." They took off the ring and immediately the fair maiden opened her eyes, gasped, and came to life. "What has happened to you, little sister? Did someone come to visit you?" the *bogatyrs* asked. "An old woman I know from home came and gave me a ring." "Oh, you're so disobedient! Not for nothing did we tell you not to let anyone in when we're not here. See that you don't do it again!"

A short while later the merchant's wife again looked into her mirror and found out that her stepdaughter was still alive and beautiful. She summoned the old woman and gave her a ribbon, saying, "Go to the white stone palace and give my stepdaughter this gift. Tell her it's from her brother!" The old woman came to see the maiden again, persuaded her with all sorts of clever words, and gave her the ribbon. The girl was overjoyed and tied the ribbon around her neck. Right away she fell onto the bed as if dead. The *bogatyrs* returned from their hunt, saw their sister lying dead, and began to dress her in new clothes. They took off the ribbon and she opened her eyes, gasped, and came to life. "What happened, little sister? Was the old woman here again?" "Yes," she said, "the old woman from home came again and brought me a ribbon." "Oh, what will we do with you, little sister? We begged you not to let anyone in when we are gone!" "Forgive me, dear brothers! I couldn't help myself! I wanted to hear news from home!"

A few days passed and again the merchant's wife looked into her mirror. Again her stepdaughter was alive. She summoned the old woman. "Here," she said, "take this strand of hair! Go to my stepdaughter and kill her once and for all!" The old woman bided her time until the *bogatyrs* went out hunting and again went to the white stone palace. The fair maiden saw her through the window and couldn't help herself. She jumped up to meet the old woman: "Hello, granny! How does God find you today?" "Still alive, deary! I've dragged myself out into the world to come see you." The fair maiden led her into the palace, gave her all sorts of food and drink, asked about her relatives, and told her to give her regards to her brother." "Alright," said the old woman, "I will. And you, deary, you probably have nobody to search your head for lice, do you? Let me do it for you!" "Go ahead, granny!" She began to pick at the fair maiden's head and braided the enchanted strand into her hair. The maiden fell right over as if dead. The old woman cackled and left quickly so nobody would catch her.

The *bogatyrs* came home and went into the palace. They saw their sister lying dead. For a long time they looked her over to see if there was something that should not be there, but they found nothing! So they made a crystal coffin, one so magnificent that you couldn't imagine it, one that exists only in fairy tales. They adorned the merchant's daughter in a brilliant gown, like a bride on her wedding day, and laid her in the crystal coffin. They placed the coffin in the middle of the palace's great hall under a canopy of red velvet with diamond tassels and gold fringes, and hung twelve lanterns on twelve crystal columns. Then they wept bitter tears, for they were seized by a great longing. "What do we have to live for? Let's do ourselves in!" They embraced, said farewell, went up to the highest balcony, held hands, and jumped. They struck the sharp rocks below and thus ended their lives.

Many years passed. A certain prince was out hunting. He went into the thick forest, released his dogs, separated from his huntsmen, and set off alone along an overgrown path. He rode and rode and suddenly found himself in a clearing and saw in the clearing a white stone palace. The prince dismounted, went up the staircase, and looked around the palace chambers. Everywhere he looked the palace was richly adorned, but there was no sign of a mistress' hand anywhere: it was all abandoned long ago! In one hall there stood a crystal coffin and in the coffin lay a dead maiden of indescribably beauty. There was a blush on her cheek and a smile on her lips, as if she were merely asleep.

The prince approached, looked at the maiden, and stood rooted to the spot as if held there by an unseen force. He stood from morning until late evening, unable to tear his eyes from her, with a troubled heart. He was riveted by her maidenly beauty, more wondrous than you could find anywhere on earth! His huntsmen had long been searching for him everywhere, combing the forest, blowing their horns, and shouting for him. The prince stood before the crystal coffin

and did not hear a thing. The sun went down and a thick gloom set in. Only then did he come around. He kissed the dead maiden and went back. "Ah, your highness! Where have you been?" his huntsmen asked. "I was chasing an animal and lost my way." The next day, at first light, the prince went out hunting again. He galloped into the forest, separated from his huntsmen, and by the same path came to the white stone palace. Again he spent the entire day standing by the crystal coffin, not taking his eye off the dead maiden. Only late at night did he turn back for home. The same thing happened on the third day, and the fourth, and the rest of the week. "What's going on with our prince?" the huntsmen wondered, "Let's follow him, brothers, and make sure he's not in any trouble."

So once again the prince went out to hunt, released his dogs in the forest, separated from his entourage, and set out for the white stone palace, this time with the huntsmen on his heels. They came to the clearing, went into the palace, saw the crystal coffin in the great hall, and their prince standing before the maiden. "Your highness! It's no wonder you spent a week in the forest! Now we won't be able to leave until nightfall, either!" They stood in a circle around the crystal coffin looking at the maiden, admiring her beauty, and did not move an inch from morning until late evening. When it was completely dark, the prince addressed his huntsmen: "Do me a service, brothers, a great service: take this coffin with the dead maiden, bring it to my palace, and put it in my bedroom. But do it quietly, so nobody finds out. I'll reward you handsomely, with more gold than you've ever seen." "Reward us as you will, prince, for we are glad to serve you!" said the huntsmen. They lifted the crystal coffin, carried it into the courtyard, mounted it on the horses, and took it to the royal palace. There they put it in the prince's bedroom.

From that day on the prince thought no more about hunting. He sat at home, not setting foot from his bedroom, admiring the maiden. "What is the matter with our son," thought the queen, "It's been so long since he's come out of his room, or even let anyone in. Has a sad longing overtaken him, or maybe some kind of illness? I should go and check on him." The queen entered his bedroom and saw the crystal coffin. What was it doing there? She asked around and gave an order immediately to bury the maiden, as custom demanded, in the damp mother earth.

The prince wept, and then went into the garden and picked some flowers. He took them to where the dead beauty lay and began to comb her light brown hair and adorn her head with the flowers. Suddenly the enchanted strand fell from her braid and the beauty opened her eyes, gasped, sat up in the crystal coffin, and said, "Oh, how long I slept!" The prince's joy was indescribable. He took her by the hand and led her to his father and mother. "God sent her to me!" he said, "I can't live without her for a minute! Pray give us your permission to marry, dear father and mother." "Marry her, son! We shan't go against God's will, and you won't find a greater beauty anywhere in the world!" Tsars don't waste time: on that very day there was a wedding and a great feast.

The prince married the merchant's daughter and doted on her. Some time passed and she wanted to visit her father and brother. The prince asked his father. "Alright," said the tsar, "go, my dear children! You, prince, go by land so you can check on the state of affairs in our realm, and your wife will go by sea, a more direct route." They prepared everything for the princess' journey, equipped the sailors, and appointed a general to captain the ship. The princess went aboard and they sailed onto the open sea, while the prince set off by land.

The general saw the fair maiden, coveted her beauty, and began to make advances. What do I have to fear?, he thought, since she was in his hands, and he could do whatever he pleased.

"Love me," he said to the princess, "If you don't, I'll throw you into the sea!" The princess turned away without a reply, her eyes filling up with tears. The general's words were overheard by a sailor, who came to the princess later that evening and told her, "Don't cry, princess! Put on my uniform and I'll dress in your clothes. Go out onto the deck, and I'll stay in your quarters. Let the general throw me overboard, I'm not afraid. I'll just swim to shore, since we're not far from land!" They exchanged clothes and the princess went up onto the deck, while the sailor lay in her bed. At night the general appeared, seized the sailor, and threw him into the sea. The sailor swam and swam and by morning reached dry land. Meanwhile the ship docked and the sailors went ashore. The princess also disembarked, rushed to the market, bought herself a cook's outfit, put it on, and in this disguise went to work as a servant in her own father's kitchen.

A short while later the prince arrived at the merchant's house. "Hello, father!" he said, "Accept me as your son-in-law, for I am married to your daughter. Where is she? Hasn't she arrived yet?" And then the general appeared with news: "Your highness! A great misfortune has befallen us: the princess was standing on the deck when a storm came up and began to rock the ship. She began to swoon and was swept into the sea and drowned!" The prince began to grieve and cry, since he knew there was no return from the bottom of the sea. Her fate had been sealed! The prince stayed with his father-in-law for a few days and then ordered his entourage to prepare for the journey home. The merchant arranged a large farewell banquet. All his relatives and the local merchants and boyars gathered for the feast. His brother, the mean old woman, and the general were there, too.

They ate and drank and refreshed themselves, and one of the guests said, "Honorable friends! Why are we just eating and drinking? That's no good; let us tell tales!" "Alright! Let's!" all the guests shouted, "Who shall begin?" One guest tried but didn't know how, another was no better, and a third's memory had lapsed from the wine. What to do? One guest chimed in and said, "There is a new cook in the kitchen who has been to many foreign lands and seen many marvelous things. He's a master at telling tales!" The merchant sent for the cook. "Entertain my guests!" he said. The cook-princess replied, "What shall I tell, a fairy tale or a true story?" "Tell us a true story!" "Alright, a true story. But with one condition: if anyone interrupts me, they'll get hit on the forehead with my ladle!"

Everyone agreed. The princess began to tell the story of everything that had happened to her. "And so," she said, "there was a merchant who had a daughter, and before he went overseas he entrusted his daughter to his brother's keep. The uncle was full of desire because of her beauty and would not give her a moment's peace..." The uncle realized that she was speaking about him and said, "These are lies, dear people!" "Ah, so you think I'm lying? Here's a ladle to the forehead for you!" Then the story came to the episode with the stepmother and how she questioned her magic mirror, and how the mean old woman went to the white stone castle of the *bogatyr*s, and the stepmother and the old woman shouted in unison: "What nonsense! That's impossible!" The princess hit them on the head with the ladle and continued her story, telling about how she lay in the crystal coffin until she was found by the prince, who brought her back to life and married her, and about how she set off to visit her father.

The general knew he was in trouble and said to the prince, "I'll be going home now, if you please. I feel a headache coming on..." "Sit a while longer," replied the prince, "you'll be alright!" The princess began to tell the story of the general. He couldn't stand it and said, "It's all lies!" The princess whacked him on the head with the ladle. Then she cast off the cook's garments and revealed herself to the prince: "I'm not a cook, I'm your lawful wife!" The prince was overjoyed, and the merchant as well. They rushed to embrace and kiss her. Later they held

a trial. The mean old woman and the uncle were shot by a firing squad. The stepmother-sorceress was tied to a stallion's tail, and the stallion galloped across a field and scattered her smashed bones over the bushes and the gullies. The general was put in prison and his place was taken by the sailor who had saved the princess. From then on, the prince, his wife, and the merchant lived a long and happy life together.