

The Dead Princess

Once upon a time there lived a tsar who had to leave his kingdom to fight a war. He left behind his pregnant wife, the queen, who sat patiently by the window waiting for his return. While he was away, she gave birth to a beautiful baby daughter. But the pregnancy and labor had taken their toll, and the queen died the very same day that the tsar finally returned home.



The tsar grieved for a year, but he eventually found a new woman to be the new queen. She was tall, good looking, and had a nice figure. But she was also capricious, jealous, and vain. She liked to look in her mirror, primp her hair, and ask, "Mirror, mirror in my hand, who's the fairest throughout the land?"

The mirror would reply, "My dear, you are the most fair. Your face and look are beyond compare!" The queen would then giggle like a schoolgirl and go back to what she was doing.

The tsar's daughter, meanwhile, grew up into a charming young princess. With her stunning dark eyebrows and flawless complexion, she became even prettier than the queen. It wasn't long before she became engaged with the man of her dreams - the bold and handsome Prince Elisey.

Just after the news of the engagement, the queen again asked her mirror who was the fairest of them all, and the mirror answered, "You are pretty, my dear, but, I must confess, the fairest now is the princess."

The jealous queen threw a fit, cursing at the mirror and throwing it down on a seat. So furious was the queen that she called in a chambermaid and ordered that the princess be taken into the heart of the woods, tied to a tree, and left there for the wolves.

The chambermaid, who would never think of arguing with the queen, led the princess off deep into the dark woods and left her there. But feeling compassion for the young princess, she decided not to tie her to a tree.

The princess wandered about through the night alone, feeling her way among the tall oak trees. In the morning she spotted an old country house. As she neared it, a barking dog approached the frightened princess, sniffed at her feet... and then playfully trotted around her! "Good boy!" the princess said to her new friend.

Then she entered the house and found that no one was at home. Looking inside, she noticed the rich oak furniture in the dining area and the icons of saints adorning the walls. She could tell that good honest folk lived here, and started to feel more comfortable. She wandered through the rest of the house and in the afternoon curled up on a bed to rest.

A short time later the owners of the house, seven hearty knights, returned for the evening. They noticed right away that something was different--their home was all tidied up, neat and clean. The princess came forward, politely bowed to them, and apologized for her disturbance. The knights, who indeed were good-hearted, took her in as if she were their sister.

Days passed peacefully for everyone. When the knights went hunting, the princess would clean the house and prepare their supper. The knights found her to be so sweet and charming that once they asked that she pick one of them to be her husband. She politely refused, saying that she loved them all, but only as brothers. Besides, she said, she had already found the love of her life, Prince Elisey.

Meanwhile, back at the kingdom, the queen sat down at her mirror again, asking who was now fairest. The mirror replied, "You are beautiful, one can't argue. But it is also true, there still exists a beauty rarer. As before, the princess is fairer."

The queen was outraged that her chambermaid had disobeyed her and that the princess wasn't dead. This time she threatened the girl, saying, "If you don't kill her, you yourself won't be allowed to live!"

A short while later the chambermaid, disguised as an old beggar-woman, appeared at the house of the seven knights. The dog barked viciously, not letting her step on the porch. The princess, kind as she was, came out and threw a loaf of bread to the old woman who, in return, gave her a red juicy apple. The dog rushed to the princess, barking as if in warning. But the princess didn't understand and tried to soothe the dog with her gentle touch. Then she went back inside.

Eventually she became very hungry, waiting for the knights to return from their hunt, and she took a small bite from the succulent-looking apple. Suddenly she teetered, fell onto a nearby bench, and took her last breath.

The knights returned home and heard the dog barking wildly. They knew something was wrong, and the minute they opened the door the dog darted into the princess's room. He ate the remaining portion of the apple with one bite and died, forfeiting his life for the sake of the safety of his masters.

The men were filled with grief when they saw the lifeless body of the princess. They wanted to give her a proper funeral at once, but they waited. She looked as if she were in a deep, peaceful sleep, so quiet and fresh she lay. But after three days they gave up hope and put her in a coffin made of crystal. They carried the beautiful princess in her delicate coffin to a small deserted cave.

"Sleep in this coffin," the elder knight said.
"So quickly you have left us. Instead
we are left with just a memory,
as the heavens take your spirit eternally."

On that same day, the wicked queen returned to her mirror and asked who was fairest. "My dear, you are the most fair. Your face and look are beyond compare!" The queen was once again content.

All this time Prince Elisey had been searching for his lost fiancée, roaming the lands far and wide on his mighty steed. He asked the sun and the moon where she was but neither knew. So Elisey asked the wind where she was and - lo and behold - the wind knew and gave him directions on how to get there! Elisey took off for the place immediately.

No words could possibly describe his grief when he arrived there and saw the princess lying so very still in her crystal coffin. Elisey broke down sobbing and, with every ounce of strength in his body, he slammed his fists onto the coffin. The coffin split open and the princess magically sat up, alive once more!

"My, how long I've slept!" she said. Then she saw her fiancé and the two embraced amid tears of joy.

When they returned to the kingdom, Elisey and the princess were married and a grand feast was held, the likes of which the world had never seen before! The vain queen, meanwhile, had died in anguish when she saw that the princess was alive again and had taken back her rightful place as fairest in the land.

-- Written by Alexander Pushkin