

The Magic Mirror

Henry Fox Talbot

On Arnstein's lofty and majestic brow,
Where the lone Eagle builds her eyrie now—
Where the dark cliffs ne'er echo human tread,
And drear and wild the trackless forests spread—
Where lightning-shatter'd rocks lie bleak and rude,
And Silence reigns, and dismal Solitude . . .
A wond'rous Building rose in days of old!
(The tale to me an aged peasant told.)

Stranger! he said:—It was before my days . . .
There! on that crag it stood where now you gaze!
Nay, doubt me not, but listen . . . you shall hear
Its story, full of mystery and fear;
For dark its fate, and awful is the tale
Whose memory lingers in this peaceful vale.

O'er those wild rocks—at Midnight's gloomy
hour—
A stern Magician waved his wand of pow'r,
And as he spoke the Spell which mortal ear
May not, except with fearful peril, hear,
In Runic rhymes of strange unearthly sound,
The Pow'rs of Darkness gather'd list'ning round.

Spirits! he said, that viewless round me sweep,
I call ye hither from the boundless Deep
To do my service. On this mountain height
Build ye a Castle, with its wall of might
Fairer than aught that in the world hath been,
Or that a dreamer's eye hath ever seen,
In feudal pride far gleaming o'er the land . . .
Such is my pleasure! such is my command!
And woe betide ye, if the morning sun
When he ariseth, find the work undone!

Scornful they heard—nor heeded the command—
Obey! he cried, and raised his threat'ning wand!
A murmur rose around, and sunk again,
'Twas like the roaring of the troubled Main,
With wrath the wizard saw his pow'r defied . . .
Dare ye resist me? . . . Must I tame your pride,
Rebellious Slaves! . . . A wild and piercing Cry
Burst from the darkness of the midnight sky,
And rushing on him like the Whirlwind's blast,
Vengeance! they scream'd . . . This moment is thy
last!

In haste he drew a circle's magic form
Ere all around him blew the frantic storm,
And close, and closer still, about his breast
He wrapt his robe with wond'rous Signs impress,
And words spoke quick and earnestly . . . their
sound
Was in the howling of the wild wind drown'd,
Hover'd around the form of nameless things,
Sounded the rushing of a thousand wings,
Rain gush'd in floods, and drear the tempest
wall'd . . .

Yet slow—at length—the powerful Spell prevail'd!
Less shrill the wind swept o'er the blasted heath,
Less piercing now were heard the screams of death,
The stormy gusts more faint and feeble rose,
Then ceased . . . and all around was stern Repose.
Slaves, to your Task! in Triumph loud he said—
The baffled rebels the command obey'd,
They toil'd the long and wear winter night . . .
The work was ended ere the morning light.

With ramparts frowning o'er the mountain side,
A glorious Castle shone in banner'd pride.
The massy walls that compass'd it around
With tow'rs and lofty battlements were crown'd.
The Donjon Keep o'er all majestic rose
As if it lour'd defiance on its foes.

Within were courts and feudal banquet halls,
And lavish Fancy deck'd their sculptur'd walls.
Where giant weapons hung display'd around,
And anler'd heads, the chase's trophies, frown'd.
And blazon'd shields, and imaged tapestry rare,
And banners waving on the lazy air.
Those halls of grandeur and baronial pride
A meek and lowly Chapel rose beside.
It was a peaceful and monastic fane—
Dim flow'd the light through every pictur'd pane—
It breath'd Religion's calm and tranquil sway,
And Silence linger'd in its cloisters gray.

A thousand Architects had reared the pile
In many a varied and conflicting style . . .
Here shone the Grecian—perfect symmetry—
There sprung the Gothic, lofty, bold, and free—
While mingling forms of Asiatic taste,
Domes and tall minarets, the building graced—
And mystic obelisks, whose signs of old
In Egypt's land the fate of kings foretold—
And many a structure—admirably fair—
That form'd or fancied Mortal builder ne'er!
Here crystal fountains danced in sportive play,
And gardens fair in long perspective lay:
There tow'rs on tow'rs arose grotesquely piled,
So beautiful was Arnstein's fortress wild!

Joy dwell not often in that lordly tow'r,
For o'er at night dark clouds would o'er it low'r,
And shrieks and threatening murmurs seem to say,
His Phantom Builders were not far away.
Care at such times would cloud the Owner's
brow.

Words would he speak whose meaning none did
know:
Yet Fear, if such he felt, he knew to hide,
For stern Resolve was his, and stubborn Pride.
Of royal splendour was his festal board,
Where all around was rich Abundance pour'd:
And many a gallant knight and noble dame
To share the Castle's revelry there came:
But more would gaze upon its turrets high . . .
Then sigh the cross . . . and mournfully pass by.

II
Twice fifteen years had roll'd in peace away—
Now old, and nigh to death, the Wizard lay,
With his last breath he summon'd to his side
Bertha, his only child, his joy, his pride.
Daughter! he said, this castle's stern command
Must soon be trusted to thy feeble hand:

I may not tell thee Who its builders were!
Not of this Earth . . . then O my child beware,
And heed a father's dying counsel well!
In days of yore I fram'd a charmed Spell,
Which like a shield o'er this enchanted ground,
Sheds its protecting influence around.
Not that by this alone I caus'd to rise
The might Fabric that around thee lies,
(Far other secrets rais'd its banner'd wall.)
But in this Talisman they center all!
Tis like the Clasp of a mysterious Chain,
Which if though rendest . . . all the links are vain.

Behold yon Mirror . . . well! . . . In Secrecy
What it concealeth, seek not Thou to see.
Tempt not the Spirits of the woeless Deep,
Long wouldst thou pourue it and thy folly weep!
Raise not the veil . . . a thousand forms of Death
And overwhelming Ruin lurk beneath!
But if thou dost . . . 'twere easier in that hour
To chain the wild winds, than arrest Their pow'r!

Thine are these tow'rs, and all this fair domain
Of wide-spread forest and of fertile plain:
Rule as thou wilt—but let my words prevail,
And never, never lift that dreadful Veil!
His voice grew faint, and ere the morrow's sun
His eyes were dim—his earthly race was run.

III
A month—but surely Chronicles must err—
O! could not Prudence watch a single year?
One thoughtless month o'er Bertha's head had
flown.

Since that fair heritage she call'd her own—
Already Pleasure droop'd her languid wing,
The weary hours Amusement ceased to bring,
For ahi! her days in Folly's wild career
She past, nor cared she Wisdom's voice to hear.
Fill'd was her castle with the gay and proud,
And flatterers came, a mercenary crowd:
In song and dance, in feast and wassail high,
The hours were spent, and idle revelry.

It chanced one time that she remain'd alone,
For over was the feast . . . the guests were gone:
It was the bright and sunny month of May,
The hours seem'd long . . . she wearied of the day,
She traversed every hall, then went again,
For Pleasure seeking . . . seeking it in vain . . .
When through the Chamber dim she chanced to
pass.

Where that dark curtain veil'd the Fatal Glass,
A sudden wish arose . . . she long'd to see
But fear'd her father's words of mystery,
She stopp'd . . . drew nearer to behold the veil . . .
Touch'd it . . . then fell again her courage fail!
Three times she paused . . . but ahi! the veil was
thin,
A glorious Light was streaming from within!

It seems so lovely! Need I fear? she cries,
And with rash hand she flung its folds aside!

IV
What show'd the Mirror? In an azure sky
The Sun was shining, calm and brilliantly,
And on as sweet a Vale he pour'd his beams
As ever smiled in youthful poet's dream:
With murmur soft, a hundred mazy rills
In silver tracks meander'd down the hills
And fed a crystal Lake, whose gentle shore
Was grassy bank with dark woods shadow'd o'er.

Far in the midst a lovely Isle there lay,
Where thousand birds of Indian plumage gay
Flutter'd like sparkling gems from tree to tree,
And caroll'd wild, with Nature's minstrelsy.
A Temple's fair proportion graced the Isle,
The rippling waters that around it smile
Reflect its columns in their sportive play
And glitter in the sun's unclouded ray.

And prints of tiny footsteps on the sand
Betray'd the gambols of some fairy band
Who now were flown, but scatter'd all around
Lay many a rosy chaplet on the ground,
And baskets heap'd with blushing fruits, and
flow'rs
Fragrant as those which bloom'd in Eden's bow'rs,
And golden harps and timbrels cast away,
Spread on the sward in rich confusion lay,
As if that light and airy company
Had shrunk in terror from a Mortal's eye!

In rapture o'er the mirror Bertha hung,
And pleas'd her fancy stray'd those scenes among:
But, as she gaz'd, a dimness seem'd to steal
O'er the bright glass, and slowly to conceal
The distant hills, then rolling up the vale
Shrouded it o'er with Vapours wan and pale.
The Lake, the Mountains, fade in mist away,
And lurid Darkness overspreads the day.

Too late repenting, Bertha tried once more
The Mirror's faded brightness to restore:
Alas! alas! it baffles all her skill,
The vapour on the glass falls thicker still.
To chase away the noxious dew she strives . . .
An instant, see! the shadowy scene revives . . .
But ahi! how changed a picture doth it show
Of desolation, misery, and woe!

Dark frown'd the Sky, all leafless were the
woods,
The brooks were swollen into raging Floods—
The gloomy lake, its beauty now no more,
Rolled long and angry billows to the shore—
Voices, not of human, rose upon the blast . . .
Forms, not of Earth, across the Darkness past . . .
Fly! cried a whisper to her startled ear,
O haste and fly! the Storm of Death is near!

There shone a dazzling flash with Echoes dread
The distant Thunder roar'd . . . and Bertha fled.

V
She fled in terror down the marble stair,
Rush'd through the portal to the open air—
She listens . . . hark! what distant Cries are those?
Haste! they approach thee . . . haste! the Tumult
groweth!
'Tis louder still . . . it bursts in Uproar wild
On every side! the Saints preserve thee, Child!

Through the wide Gate in frantic fear she fled,
She seized the path that down the mountain led,
Nor stopp'd to breathe, for pealing on the wind
Pursuing voices echoed from behind!
A weary league she downward held her flight,
Then spent with toil and fainting with affright
She reached the wild verge of a mountain stream,
And could she cross it . . . hope began to gleam!
No hour was that to shun the desperate leap,
No hour to shrink from Wildbeach's torrent deep:
She sprang into the waves—she stemm'd the
flood—

She clamber'd up the craggy bank and rude,
Flew o'er the plain with wings that Terror gave,
And sought the refuge of Saint Anselm's cave!
Safe on that holy ground, her eyes she rais'd,
And pale with horror on the Castle gaz'd.
The mountain summit like a Furnace glow'd—
Down its rude sides the dazzling Lava flow'd—
A row of fenish Triumph smote her ear,
Borne on the distant gale, The Tow'rs of Fear
She sought, and saw not—darkness o'er them
hung!

But from the gloom the wrathful lightnings sprung
In vivid tracks of blood-red-streaming light . . .
So stern Vesuvius from his mountain height
Darts the wild flashes of indignant ire,
When clouds obscure his Diadem of Fire.

In terror from the view she turn'd her eyes,
And in the Hermit's grove, with tears and sighs,
Till every bead was cold and cold again,
Wearied the Saints with invocations vain!

While thus the hours in grief and anguish pass'd,
The day, the weary day, declined at last:
O'er hill and vale the shades of Evening fell,
And Bertha left the heav'n-protected cell.

No sounds were on the breeze but moanings low,
And dim was sunk that fire's unearthly glow:
Yet still it cast throughout the dreary night
O'er Arnstein's rocks a pale and dying light.
The Morning dawn'd and nothing then was seen
That could have told, those Tow'rs had ever been:
And when the Sun uprose, his cheerful ray
Fell but on shatter'd crags and summits gray.