

JOHN MORRESSY

REFLECTION AND INSIGHT

WITH SPOT'S HELP, KEDRIGERN wrestled the large awkward bundle carefully into the cottage as Princess looked on with anxious interest. It was wrapped in heavy cloths, tied securely, and from the amount of grunting the wizard was doing, it was of considerable weight.

"Is it very heavy?" she asked.

"Very," he said, putting it down gingerly and taking a deep breath.

"You're lucky you had Spot to help you."

He rubbed his lower back and groaned. "Even with Spot's help, I was tempted to use a levitation. I should have. My back will ache for a week."

"What is it?"

He smiled and began to untie the cord that encircled the bundle like the strands of a great web. That done, he turned back the folds of thick cloth, pausing with his hand on the last one. "You're going to love this. A pity it's promised to a client, Sigert of the Nine Shallow Ponds. But I'm looking for another, for us."

"What is it?" she repeated, her interest increasing.

He flung back the last cloth and spread his arms in a gesture of revelation, beaming at her all the while.

"A mirror?" she said.

"That's right, my dear. You've often said that you'd like to have one by the door."

"Only a little one, so I can check to see that my coronet is on straight, and my wings aren't all bunched up under my cloak. This one is...it's sort of elaborate, isn't it?"

"This is no ordinary mirror, my dear."

"I can see that. It's very nice, really," said Princess, leaning closer to the surface and studying her reflection. "No warps or wiggly places in the glass."

"It's a magic mirror."

She took two steps back and looked at him sharply. "I've had one bad experience

with a magic mirror, and I don't want another. Don't bother getting one for us, please."

"Moggrople's was a unique problem. And it involved five mirrors. This is only a single mirror, and all it does is talk."

"I don't care. I don't want a tricky mirror around the house."

Crestfallen, Kedrigern said, "I thought that something like this might be nice for those times when I'm away on business and you have no one to talk to but Spot."

"I appreciate the thought, but no." She took his hand, smiled to soothe his feelings, and said, "Anyway, talking mirrors must be very rare. And terribly expensive."

Kedrigern gestured airily. "I got this one for a song. An incantation, actually. Against pains in the joints."

"Well, you won't find another on such terms, I'm sure. Besides, I'd sooner talk to Spot when you're away than to a mirror," said Princess.

"Whatever you say, my dear. But as long as it's here, why don't you take a look."

She smoothed down her dark blue gown, straightened her coronet, and stepped before the mirror. She half turned, fluttered her wings, then rose from the floor and did a slow pirouette.

"It's a very nice mirror," she said.

"Say something to it."

She frowned. "What does one say to a mirror?"

"How about 'Here's looking at you'?"

Princess gave him a pained glance. She pursed her lips thoughtfully, and after a time said, "Mirror, how do I look?"

The surface of the mirror shimmered like a pool in a gentle breeze. Colors flashed and flickered across it, then slowly faded. A silvery voice said, "How do you look? Very good, for a woman your age."

Princess's hand shot up, snatched the cloth, and flung it over the face of the mirror. "That will be quite enough out of you," she snapped in a voice cold enough to frost the glass. Turning to Kedrigern, she said, "A hand mirror will suffice. A silent one," and fluttered from the room.

"As you wish, my dear," he called after her.

He was relieved by her decision. An attractive and serviceable hand mirror was easily obtained. Talking mirrors were hard to come by and very nearly priceless, even when the seeker was well-known and much respected, with extensive contacts in the magical community. He could not expect to be lucky twice.

After receiving Sigert's plea for assistance, it was months before Kedrigern even got wind of a faint rumor of a magic mirror, and many more before he actually traced it down, ascertained its provenance, and satisfied himself of its authenticity. Haggling over the price dragged on for two more months, and might have taken longer if the owner, an aging seneschal, had not been stricken with a painful bout of rheumatism. Transporting the mirror intact to his cottage took Kedrigern another full month. The whole operation consumed so much time, in fact, that there was none left for the usual full-scale safety check. The mirror was to be a surprise birthday present for Sigert's queen, and only if he departed for the Kingdom of the Nine Shallow Ponds the very next morning and encountered no obstacles along the way could Kedrigern hope to deliver the mirror on Brissault's birthday.

With the help of Spot and a very small levitation spell he stowed the mirror safely in a wagon, surrounding it with padding and protective spells. Princess chose not to accompany him on the journey. "In the first place," she explained, "I am a princess, not a freight-handler. And in the second place, from what you've told me, the Kingdom of the Nine Shallow Ponds is not a happy place. I don't want to take along, slow, uncomfortable journey just to be surrounded by gloom."

"I intend to dispel the gloom, my dear."

But she had decided, and was adamant. After a brief but tender farewell, he set out just before dawn, aching and yawning, comforted only by the thought of a generous fee and a chance to save a marriage.

The weather was benign and his journey was uneventful. Kedrigern had ample time to ponder the misfortunes of the royal couple. Having won the confidence of both king and queen, he had been made privy to all the details.

Sometime in their third decade together, no one could say exactly when, things began to go wrong between King Sigert and Queen Brissault. Petty quarrels swelled into full-blown arguments. Familiar mannerisms became irritants. Casual phrases elicited barbed responses. Angry silences sometimes lasted for days, and only a state occasion would have Sigert and Brissault speaking to one another again, albeit coolly and formally.

Sigert, who still loved his wife deeply, tried to figure out where things had gone wrong. He could not. He consulted his counselors and advisors and the wisest men in the kingdom, and while they were able to suggest a number of causes, they could not agree on a solution. They were in accord on war, taxes, and ceremonials, but not on domestic relations. Some said that women required flattery; others prescribed extravagant gifts, separate palaces, or beheading.

In the end, they were no help.

Unknown to the king, Brissault, who loved her husband every bit as much as he loved her, was following the same course, except that she was consulting with wise women. But they were no more help than the wise men. A venerable nun told her that men at any age were still small boys in many ways -- a fact she well knew. One learned woman suggested aloofness, another submission, a third poison. No one offered advice that she found acceptable.

A year passed, and then another, and the domestic tension remained unresolved. One winter morning, after particularly sharp words over breakfast, Sigert wandered through the palace deep in gloomy thought. Muttering under his breath, he trudged aimlessly up flights of stairs and paced down corridors long unvisited. Eventually he found himself standing before a familiar door. Lost in his brooding, he had come to his old nursery. Memory bade him enter. The chamber faced the east, and the early sunlight gave it a cheerful air. The bright pictures on the walls, the toys that lay scattered at random, and the old story books aroused a pleasant nostalgia.

He picked up a dusty book of tales that lay nearby and settled in the window seat where he had spent so many happy childhood hours. Leafing through the book, he came upon the story of the magic mirror. It had been one of his favorites, and he read it once again, hoping to recapture some of the innocent wonder of those days. He paused after completing it, cried out in gratitude, and immediately reread it. After the second reading, he hugged the book to his breast and laughed aloud. Here was the solution. He would give Brissault a mirror as a birthday present, a magic mirror that would make her appear forever young and beautiful. Such a rare and encouraging gift would demonstrate the feelings he could not seem to express otherwise. She would be happy again. Their quarreling would end and they would be reconciled forever.

Having no knowledge of magic himself, he summoned Kedrigern, who had worked effective and timely spells for his father, and for himself in his youth, and entrusted the work of finding and acquiring the mirror to him. While at the castle, Kedrigern had picked up another assignment. He was pleased to be wrapping both up with a single journey.

As time ran on, Sigert grew uneasy. When Kedrigern presented himself at the castle on the very morning of Brissault's birthday to announce that the mirror awaited their majesties' pleasure, the king was elated.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"I've had it placed in the queen's bedchamber, Your Majesty," said the wizard.

"Her Majesty is in the great hall right now, accepting a present from the Goldsmiths' guild. The Saddlers are arriving after them, and then the Fishmongers. Her Majesty always bathes and changes her clothes after a meeting with the Fishmongers." Sigert paused to do some mental calculation. "We've got about an hour. Let's go and inspect this mirror," he said, rising.

The mirror stood in the center of the queen's bedchamber. It was very tall, rising from a massive silver base inlaid with precious stones. It was covered with a richly embroidered cloth.

"Remove the cloth. We want to see the mirror," said the king.

Kedrigern dismissed the servants, then removed the heavy cloth himself. It took a bit of effort.

"Why didn't you have the servants do that?" Sigert asked.

"Just a precaution, Your Majesty. I don't want them looking into the mirror until I've had a chance to test it out."

Sigert took a step back, away from the mirror. "Have you brought a dangerous object into this palace without testing it?"

"I've checked it for curses and trick spells, Your Majesty. I can assure you that it's perfectly safe."

Sigert looked relieved. "That's better. What else do you have to do before we can use it?"

"Well, I know it talks. I have to determine whether it has other powers, and if it does, which ones we want to utilize. The man who sold me the mirror didn't know much about it. He wasn't even certain that it was magic, but I could tell right away."

The king looked less relieved. "Could it be dangerous?"

"Not dangerous, Your Majesty. At worst it might be...." Kedrigern paused to search for a less alarming term and at last said, "Unpredictable. Tricky. Surprising."

"We do not like surprises in our palace," said Sigert, frowning. "We want nothing untoward to happen to Her Majesty."

"There is no danger, I assure you, Your Majesty."

The king pondered. Over the years, besides putting on weight, Sigert had become pompous and self-important, but he was no more so than other kings, and less so than many. He really did love Brissault, and wanted to make her happy once again. He lacked not good will, but comprehension. He simply could not understand how a woman married to him and reigning at his side could be unhappy.

He studied the mirror, extending a hand to touch the frame but stopping short of actual contact. He concealed his hesitation under a spacious gesture and said, "It's nicely made. We like all those little cherubs and ribbons and bands of flowers."

"Exquisite, isn't it? You don't often get that kind of workmanship in a magic mirror. People seem to think that if it's magic, it doesn't have to look good," Kedrigern said, frowning at the thought of such an unprofessional attitude.

Sigert ventured a quick peek into the mirror. He turned to the wizard, frowning. "The glass is foggy. Are you sure you got a good mirror?"

"Oh, it's perfectly fine, Your Majesty. There's a small spell on it, to discourage the idle and the curious."

"Well, get it off, so Her Majesty can use the thing."

Kedrigern murmured a few words and moved his hands in an intricate gesture. The glass cleared. King and wizard saw their reflections. "Looks good to us. What powers do you think it has?"

"First and foremost, it's a speaking mirror." Raising his hands and gesturing, purely for dramatic effect, Kedrigern said to the mirror, "Speak to me, mirror."

A shimmer ran over the reflections. The thin silvery voice said, "Speak to you?"

"Yes, speak. You're a talking mirror."

"A talking mirror," the mirror said.

"Tell us a story," said the king.

"A story?" repeated the mirror.

"Yes, do that."

"I'll do that."

"And don't repeat everything we say," said the king.

The mirror was silent for a time, as if rehearsing. Then, with another shimmer over the reflected figures, it began to speak. "Once there were three bears, Papa Bear, Mama Bear, and Baby Bear, and they lived in a house in the woods. A little girl named Goldilocks was --"

"Is that the best you can do?" the king interrupted.

"Best I can do," said the mirror.

"You're repeating again," Kedrigern said.

After a pause, the mirror said, with manifest effort, "I am a mirror. That's what I'm supposed to do."

"We find it annoying. Stop it this minute," said the king. "Do you hear? That is a royal command. Stop repeating. Be original."

Their images wavered and dissolved. For a moment, the glass was entirely empty; then new images appeared. Sigert screamed, staggered back, and covered his eyes. Kedrigern blanked the mirror with a quick emergency spell and steadied himself against a chair. He took a few deep breaths to calm his nausea. The king peeked out at him from between his fingers, then pointed to the mirror. "What were those things in there?" he said in a strained whisper. "Can they get out?"

"No danger of that, Your Majesty. They're imaginary."

"What kind of imagination could conjure up monstrosities like those?" said the king, shuddering.

"The mirror's. It was obeying your command."

"Our command?" the king cried, going pale.

"Your Majesty told it to be original."

"We did not command it to terrify us. If it tries anything like that ever again, we will have it smashed to smithereens. Does it understand?"

Kedrigern observed the tremulous patterns on the darkened face of the mirror. "It does, Your Majesty."

Sigert stood arms akimbo, looking hard at the mirror. "We begin to doubt that this was a good idea," he said. "It might be best to smash the thing anyway. Magic mirrors are too tricky for our liking."

"Trickiness is their nature, Your Majesty."

"And yet it is a unique object, and we do not wish to give it up."

"Not many of these around, Your Majesty. This may be the only one in existence. It would be a shame to have to destroy it."

The mirror was by this time displaying a dazzling pattern of swirls and zigzags, and the frame could be seen to tremble ever so slightly. In a subdued voice, it said, "I will obey Your Majesty to the best of my ability. Please do not smash me."

King and wizard exchanged a glance. The king said, "No more fits of creativity. Is that understood?"

"Understood, Your Majesty."

"Shall I clear it now?" Kedrigern asked.

Sigert nodded in assent, and Kedrigern removed the spell. Their reflections appeared.

"Very well, mirror. What else can you do?" Sigert said.

"Aside from what you saw, I can only speak and reflect."

The king looked disappointed. "Can't you make our wife look young and beautiful? We thought you magic mirrors did things like that."

"A common misconception. We cannot, Your Majesty."

The king sighed. "A pity. Her Majesty has been unhappy of late, and we believe that we know the cause. She has always been the fairest in the land, but lately she's been hearing talk of beautiful young princesses in the neighboring kingdoms, and we think that is upsetting her. Making her feel old. Women don't like that. They want to look young and beautiful all their lives," said the king, confidently repeating what several wise men had told him. "A magic mirror that attests to her unfading beauty would do a lot to cheer her up."

"Her Majesty is still a beautiful woman," said Kedrigern.

"Unfortunately, she's excessively self-critical. Always finding little things wrong with her hair or her dress. Wrinkles around the eyes. That sort of thing. We try to be helpful, but we don't seem to do much good. Can't you touch up her image somehow, mirror?"

"I am only a talking mirror. Transformation is not within my power, Your Majesty."

The king sighed again. The mirror was silent. Abruptly, Kedrigern laughed aloud and began to rub his hands together energetically. "No need to worry. I've got the solution," he said.

"You have?" king and mirror asked with one astonished voice.

"I have. Can you memorize a few lines very quickly, mirror?"

"Exact replication is my forte."

"Good. Her Majesty will be here soon. No time to waste."

The wizard rushed to the queen's dressing table, where he copied something onto a scrap of parchment. He then scribbled something else on another scrap, which he tucked into his sleeve. With a conspiratorial grin for the king, he read the first piece to the mirror. They rehearsed for a few minutes, until Brissault was heard entering the bedchamber.

The queen seemed in a good humor. Seeing Sigert and the wizard and the mirror, she gave a little exclamation of surprise and delight. "A birthday present! For

me! Oh, what a lovely mirror! Such an exquisite frame! Sigert, you're a dear, generous man!" she cried.

"This is no ordinary mirror," said the king.

"It's a magic mirror! Isn't it a magic mirror? Just what I've always wanted! Oh, that's so sweet of you!" she said, kissing Sigert on the cheek.

"We're glad you like it," he said.

They hugged, and she kissed him again. "You can be so thoughtful when you really try. But it's all cloudy. I can't see myself in it."

"If Your Majesty will simply repeat this phrase while standing before the mirror," said Kedrigern, handing her the slip of parchment which he had concealed in his sleeve.

She took the parchment, studied it, and said, "Mirror, mirror, standing there, tell me truly: am I fair?"

Lights flickered deep within the mirror. Colors blazed and swooped and curled in diminishing loops, spiraling toward the center, growing ever fainter until finally they cleared and only the queen's reflection showed. From within the glass a deep voice said, "Happily I do my duty: hail to thee, world's reigning beauty!"

"World's reigning beauty? Does that mean that I'm the fairest of them all?" Brissault cried.

"What you see is clearly true: no one's half as fair as you," said the mirror.

Delighted, the queen turned to the king. "Is it really so?" she asked.

He shrugged and said, "We have never known a mirror to lie."

She embraced him, kissed him, and withdrew to her dressing room. At the doorway she turned and said, "Wizard, I would have you stay to instruct me in the properties of this wonderful gift."

Sigert looked smugly at Kedrigern and at their images in the mirror. When the door had closed behind Brissault, and he was certain that she was out of earshot, the king said, "We think we handled that rather well."

"Let's see what the mirror thinks." Turning to the mirror, Kedrigern said, "Tell us, mirror: are we clever?"

In reverent tones, the mirror said, "King and wizard, are you ever! Brilliant king and brilliant mage, keenest thinkers of the age!"

The king winked at the wizard, who returned the wink. Sigert cocked his crown at

a jaunty angle and swaggered from the queen's bedchamber looking very pleased with himself.

In a little while Brissault reentered the room. She looked around to make absolutely certain that she and the wizard were alone, locked the door, and went to the mirror. She folded her arms, and in a stem no-nonsense voice said, "All right, mirror, let's have the truth."

"The truth?"

"Your Majesty--" Kedrigern cried in alarm, but she cut him short with a gesture and said, "Stay out of this. Come on, mirror. Cut the flattery."

"Flattery?"

"And stop repeating everything I say. Come on, out with it."

The mirror ran through a rainbow of color, then cleared. "The truth. Very well. Your Majesty is twenty-two pounds overweight and badly needs a new hairdresser. And that gown... I wouldn't wrap a dead dog in that to bury it."

The queen stood silent, tapping her foot. She turned to Kedrigern, who shrugged helplessly. "Mirrors can't lie, Your Majesty."

"Oh, can't they? What was all that about 'world's reigning beauty'?"

"Your Majesty is a very beautiful --"

"I've seen my best years, Kedrigern. I'm holding up well, but I'm no longer the world's great beauty. So why did the mirror say so?"

Looking sheepish, Kedrigern said, "Poetic license. As long as it spoke in rhyme. . . ."

"Very ingenious. But remember, you're working for me as well as for Sigert."

Brissault studied her image. After a long and thoughtful pause, she said, "You're right about the gown, mirror. Sigert picked it out, and he has no sense of color. And I've never been completely satisfied with the Royal Hairdresser. But twenty-two pounds?!"

"Your Majesty would look trim if she lost fifteen. But she would look svelte if she lost twenty-two. Trust me."

"Svelte is unnecessary. Trim will do. But I am in no hurry. His Majesty thinks I wish to look like a sixteen-year-old princess. His Majesty is wrong." The mirror shimmered discreetly and said nothing. Brissault went on, "I will have my favorite dresses brought out, and you will tell me frankly how I look in them. I will also try a few new hairdos that I have seen in recent months. And I will cut out pastries at breakfast and have only light sauces with dinner. You will

inform me when I am trim."

"As Your Majesty commands," said the mirror.

"And if His Majesty should ask, tell him I'm delighted to know that I am the fairest in the land. And tell him that he's the kindest and most thoughtful of kings. He'll expect to hear that," said the queen.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"And now you can go to sleep, or do whatever you magic things do when you're not doing magic things," said Brissault. "Kedrigern, you did well. I think this mirror can help solve our problems. Now cover it over. We have private business." When the mirror was obscured, she said, "Did you get the ring?"

From inside his tunic Kedrigern drew forth a small black box. He unlocked and opened it, and placed it in her hands. She looked wistfully on the glittering quincunx of two rubies, two emeralds, and a single diamond, identically cut.

"It would have made such a lovely anniversary present," she said with a sigh.

"The decision is up to you, Your Majesty. I took it on approval."

She gazed on the ring for a long time, then shook her head. "No. It won't do. Sigert is a good man and means well, but he doesn't understand women and probably never will."

She took up the ring, turning it, watching the light that flashed from its facets and glowed in its heart. It was a beautiful piece of work, but its value lay not in beauty alone.

"Perhaps the Ring of Insight will change him," Kedrigern suggested. "It confers perception on the wearer."

"Too much perception. With this ring on his finger, Sigert could not be deceived. Isn't that so?"

"That is the virtue of the ring Your Majesty."

Brissault sighed again, a deeper, sadder sigh. When she learned of the Ring of Insight some years ago it had seemed the perfect gift, an expression of faith and trust that would make her feelings clear to Sigert as words could not, and restore their old relationship. When Kedrigern had informed her that the ring might be available, she had instructed him to acquire it whatever the cost. Now she saw that it was simply not possible to give Sigert the ring. Someday, perhaps, but not yet.

"Sigert will be better off with a present of a nice new set of robes. Something warm and comfortable, with his favorite motif of forget-me-not and dragon worked in gold on the pockets. And a nice pair of matching slippers to wear around the

palace in the evening."

"Thoughtful gifts, Your Majesty. And very useful."

"Take back the ring, Kedrigern."

"Have you no wish to wear it yourself?"

"Never. And if you're sensible, you'll not slip it on your finger."

Kedrigern smiled. "I don't plan to, Your Majesty."

"Very wise of you. Sigert's a good man at heart, and we love one another. We have our little differences, but all things considered, he's been a decent husband." She paused, then added, "And our chances of happiness together will be much improved if we both retain the ability to be deceived now and then."