



## THE MISTRESS OF THE COPPER MOUNTAIN

One day two of the men from our village went to take a look at the hay. Their meadows were quite a bit of a way off. Somewhere the other side of Severushka.

It was a Sunday and real hot. That sort of fine weather you get after rain. Both of them worked in the mines, on Gumeshky. They got malachite, and the kind of stone called lapiz lazuli, and sometimes nuggets of copper, and anything else they could find.

One was quite a young fellow, not married yet, but all the same he was pale and tired, with that green look about him. The other was older, and he was quite worn out, his eyes were sunk into his head and his cheeks too. And he never stopped coughing.

It was sweet there in the woods. The birds were singing as happy as you like, the earth smelled good, and the air seemed sort of light. Now, they were both tired, our two. They got as far as Krasnogorsk mine, folks used to get iron ore from it then, and there they lay down on the grass under a rowan, and fell asleep.

But all of a sudden the young one—it was as if someone had nudged him—he woke up. And there in front of him he saw a woman sitting on a pile of ore by a big rock. She'd got her back to him, but you could see from her plait she was a maid. It was a sort of deep black, that plait of hers, and didn't dangle as our maids' do, but lay close and straight down her back. And the ribbons at the end weren't quite red and weren't quite green, they'd something of both. You could see the light shining through them and they seemed to clink a little, like thin leaves of copper. The lad stared at that plait and then went on looking at her. She was not very tall, with a pretty figure, and she was a real fidget—couldn't sit still a minute. She'd bend forward as if she was looking for something under her feet, then she'd sit up again and twist to one side and the other, she'd jump up and wave her hands about, then sit down again. Like a bit of quicksilver, she was. And all the time she kept on talking and talking, but what language it was you couldn't say and who she was talking to you couldn't see. But all the time she had a laugh in her talk. Seemed as if she was feeling real merry.

The lad wanted to say something, then all of a sudden it hit him like a blow over the head. Mercy on us, why, that's the Mistress herself! That's her robe. Why didn't I see at once? It was that plait of hers I kept looking at. . . .

Her robe, now, it was something you'd never see anywhere else. It was all made of silk malachite, that's a kind you get sometimes. It's stone but it looks like silk, you want to take and stroke it.

Here's bad luck, thought the lad. Can I get off before she sees me? . . . He'd heard, you see, from the old folks that the Mistress, the Malachite Maid, liked to beguile folks and fool them.

But he'd barely thought of it when she turned round. She gave him a merry look and then she laughed and said jestingly: "How's this, Stepan Petrovich, will ye stare at a maid's beauty and give naught for the looking? For a peep ye must pay! Come here, closer. Let's talk a bit."

The lad was frightened all right, but he didn't show it. He took hold of his courage. She might be a demon, but all the same she was a maid. Well, and he was a lad, and a lad must think shame to let a maid see him faint-hearted.

"I've no time for chat," said he, "we've slept too long anyway. We're going to take a look at our grass, how it's coming along."

She laughed, then she said: "Have done wi' your make believe. Come here, I tell ye, there's a thing we must talk of."

Well, the lad saw there was no way out. He went up, and she beckoned him to come round the pile of ore to the other side. He went, and there he saw a lot of lizards, more than you could count. And all of them different. Some were green, and some light blue, and some dark blue, every shade and colour, and some were like clay or sand with golden specks. And some shone like glass or mica, and some were like withered grass and some had all sorts of patterns on them.

The maid just sat and laughed. "Don't tread on my soldiers, Stepan Petrovich," she said. "Look how big and heavy you are, and they're but tiny." Then she clapped her hands and all the lizards ran this way and that and left him a clear path.

He came right up to her and stopped, and she clapped her hands again. "Now there's nowhere ye can tread," she said, and she was still laughing at him. "If ye crush my servants—it will be bad."

He looked down and he could not see the earth at all. All the lizards had crowded together, like a patterned floor round his feet. He looked again and—why, it was copper ore! Every sort and finely polished. And there was mica, and blende, and colours like malachite.

"Well, d'ye know who I am now, Stepanushko?" asked the Malachite Maid, and burst right out in peals of laughter. Then she stopped and said: "Don't be afraid. I'll do ye no harm."