Once upon a time there lived a very rich widow, with whom lived three children--a handsome stepson; his sister, who was marvellously beautiful; and her own daughter, passably good-looking.

All three children lived under the same roof, but, as is often the case where there are step-parents, they were treated very differently. The lady's own daughter was bad-tempered, disobedient, vain, and of a tell-tale disposition: yet she was made much of, praised, and caressed. The step-children were treated very harshly: the boy, kind-hearted and obliging, was made to do all sorts of hard unpleasant work, was constantly scolded, and looked upon as a good-for-nothing. The step-daughter, who was not only exceedingly pretty but was as sweet as an angel, was found fault with on all occasions, and her life made utterly miserable.

It is, after all, but natural to love one's own children better than those of others, but the feeling of love should be governed by the laws of fairness. Now this wicked woman was blind to the faults of the child she loved, and to the good qualities of her husband's children, whom she hated.

When in a bad temper she was fond of boasting of the handsome fortune she intended securing for her own daughter, even though the step-children should be unprovided for. But, as the old proverb says, "Man proposes, but God disposes." We shall therefore see how things turned out.

One Sunday morning, before going to church, the step-daughter went into the garden to pick some flowers for decorating the altar. She had only gathered a few roses when, looking up, she saw quite close to her three young men robed in dazzling white garments. They sat on a bench shaded by shrubs, while near them was an old man who asked her for alms.

She felt rather nervous before the strangers, but when she saw the old man she took her last penny from her purse and gave it him. He thanked her, and raising his hand over the girl's head, said to the men: "This orphan girl is pious, patient under misfortune, and kind to the poor, with whom she shares the little she has. Tell me what you wish for her."

The first said, "I wish that when she weeps her tears may be changed into so many pearls."

"And I," replied the second, "that when she smiles sweet roses may fall from her lips."

"My wish," said the third, "is that whenever she dips her hands into water there shall appear in it shining gold-fish."

"All these gifts shall be hers," added the old man. And with these words they vanished.

The maiden was filled with awe, and fell on her knees in prayer. Then her heart was filled with joy and peace, and she went back into the house. She had scarcely crossed the threshold when her stepmother came forward, and looking at her...
sternly, said, "Well, where have you been?"

The poor child began to cry, when--marvel of marvels--instead of tears, pearls fell from her eyes.

Notwithstanding her rage, the stepmother picked them up as quickly as possible, while the girl smiled as she watched her. And as she smiled roses fell from her lips, and her stepmother was beside herself with delight.

The girl then went to put the flowers she had gathered in water; and as she dipped her fingers in it while arranging them, pretty little gold-fish appeared in the bowl.

From that day these marvels were constantly occurring; the tears were changed into pearls, the smiles scattered roses, and the water, even if she dipped but the tips of her fingers in, was filled with gold-fish.

The stepmother softened and became more gentle, while little by little she managed to draw from her step-child the secret of these gifts.

So next Sunday morning she sent her own daughter into the garden to gather flowers, under pretence of their being for the altar. When she had picked a few, she raised her eyes and saw the three young men sitting on a low seat, while near them stood the little old man with white hair, begging for alms. She pretended to be shy before the young men, but at the beggar's request drew from her pocket a gold piece, and gave it him, evidently much against her will. He put it in his pocket, and turning to his companions, said: "This girl is the spoilt child of her mother; she is bad-tempered and naughty, while her heart is hardened against the poor. It is easy to understand why, for the first time in her life, she has been so generous to-day. Tell me what gifts you would wish me to bestow upon her."

The first said, "May her tears be changed into lizards."

"And her smile produce hideous toads," added the second.

"And when her hands touch the water may it be filled with serpents," said the third.

"So let it be," cried the old man. And they all vanished.

The poor girl was terrified, and went back to tell her mother what had happened. And it was even so; for if she smiled hideous toads fell from her mouth, her tears were changed into lizards, and the water in which she dipped but the tips of her fingers was filled with serpents.

The stepmother was in despair, but she only loved her child the more, and hated the orphans with a yet more bitter hatred. Indeed, she worried them to such an extent that the boy determined to put up with it no longer, but to seek his fortune elsewhere. So he tied up his belongings in a handkerchief, took a loving farewell of his sister, commending her to God's care, and left his home. The great world lay before him, but which path to take he knew not. Turning to the cemetery where his parents lay side by side, he wept and prayed, kissed the earth that covered them three times, and set off on his travels.

At that moment he felt something hard in the folds of his tunic, and pressing on his heart. Wondering what it could be, he put in his hand and drew thence a charming portrait of his dearly loved sister, surrounded with pearls, roses, and gold-fish. So great was his astonishment he could hardly believe his eyes. But he was very happy, and kissed the picture over and over again; then, with one more look at the cemetery, he made the sign of the cross and departed.

Now a beautiful story is soon told, but the acts of which it is the sum pass more slowly.

After many adventures of little importance he reached the capital of a kingdom by the sea, and there obtained the post of under-gardener at the royal palace, with good food and wages.

In his prosperity he did not forget his unhappy sister, for he felt very uneasy about her. When he had a few moments to himself he would sit down in some retired spot and gaze upon her portrait with a sad heart and eyes filled with tears.
For the picture was a faithful likeness of her, and he looked upon it as a gift from his parents.

Now the king had noticed this habit of his, and one day while he sat by a stream looking at the picture he came quietly behind him, and glanced over his shoulder to see what he was so attentively regarding.

"Give me that portrait," said the monarch.

The boy handed it him. The king examined it closely, and admiring it greatly, said: "I have never seen such a beautiful face in all my life, never even dreamed of such loveliness. Come, tell me, is the original of the picture living?"

The lad burst into tears, and told him it was the living image of his sister, who a short time since had received as a special mark of favour from God, that her tears should be changed into pearls, her smiles into roses, and the touch of her hands in water should produce beautiful gold-fish.

The king commanded him to write to his stepmother at once and bid her send her lovely step-daughter to the chapel of the palace, where the king would be waiting to marry her. The letter also contained promises of special royal favours.

The lad wrote the letter, which the king sent by a special messenger.

Now a good story is soon told, but the deeds of which it is the sum are not performed so quickly.

When the stepmother received the letter she determined to say nothing about it to her step-child, but she showed it to her own daughter, and talked the matter over with her. Then she went to learn the art of sorcery from a witch, and having found out all it was necessary to know, set off with both of the girls. On approaching the capital, the wicked woman pushed her step-child out of the carriage and repeated some magic words over her. After this she became very small and covered with feathers, then in a moment she was changed into a wild-duck. She began to quack, and made for the water, as ducks do, and swam to a far distance. The stepmother bade her farewell in the following words: "By the strength of my hate may my will be fulfilled. Swim about the banks in the form of a duck, and rejoice in thy liberty. During that time my daughter shall take thy form, shall marry the king, and shall enjoy the good fortune fate destined for thee."

At the conclusion of these words her own child became endowed with all the graces and beauty of her unfortunate step-sister. The two then continued their journey, arriving at the royal chapel at the appointed hour. The king received them with all honours, while the deceitful woman gave away her own daughter, whom the bridegroom believed to be the original of the beautiful picture. After the ceremony the mother went away loaded with presents. The king, as he looked at his young wife, could not understand why he did not feel for her the sympathy and admiration he had felt for the portrait she so much resembled. But it could not be altered now; what is done is done. So he admired her beauty and looked forward to the pleasure of seeing pearls fall from her eyes, roses from her lips, and gold-fish at the touch of her fingers.

During the wedding feast the newly-made bride forgot herself and smiled at her husband; immediately a number of hideous toads escaped from her lips. The king, overcome with horror and disgust, rushed away from her, upon which she began to cry, but instead of pearls, lizards fell from her eyes. The majordomo ordered water to be brought for her to wash her hands, but no sooner had she dipped the tips of her fingers in the bowl than it was filled with serpents that hissed and twisted and threw themselves among the wedding guests. The panic was general, and a scene of great confusion followed. The guard was called in, and had the greatest trouble to clear the hall of the disgusting reptiles.

The bridegroom had taken refuge in the garden, and when he saw the young man coming towards him, whom he thought had deceived him, his anger overcame him, and he struck the poor lad with so much force that he fell down dead.

The queen ran forward sobbing, and taking the king by the hand, said: "What have you done? You have killed my innocent brother. It is neither my fault, nor was it his, that since the wedding I have by some enchantment lost the marvellous power I possessed before. This evil will pass away in time, but time can never restore to me my dear
brother, my own mother's son."

"Forgive me, dear wife; in a moment of irritation I thought he had deceived me, and I wanted to punish him, but did not mean to kill. I regret it deeply, but it cannot be helped now. Forgive me my fault as I forgive yours, with all my heart."

"You have my forgiveness, but I beg you to see that your wife's brother has an honourable burial."

Her wishes were carried out, and the orphan lad, who had passed as her brother, was laid in a handsome coffin. The chapel was hung with black, and at night a guard was placed both inside and out.

Towards midnight the church doors silently opened, and while the guards were overcome by sleep a pretty little duck entered un noticed. She stopped in the middle of the aisle, shook herself, and pulled out her feathers one by one. Then it took the form of the beautiful step-daughter, for it was she. She went up to her brother's coffin and stood gazing at him, and as she looked she wept sorrowfully. Then she put on her feathers again and went out a duck. When the guards awoke they were astonished to find a quantity of fine pearls in the coffin. Next day they told the king that the doors had opened of themselves towards midnight, that they had been overcome by sleep, and that on awakening they had found a large number of pearls in the coffin, but knew not how they got there. The king was very much surprised, especially at the appearance of the pearls, that ought to have been produced by his wife's tears. On the second night he doubled the guard, and impressed upon them the necessity for watchfulness.

At midnight the doors again opened silently as before, the soldiers went to sleep, and the same little duck entered, and, taking out her feathers, appeared as a lovely maiden. She could not help smiling as she looked upon the sleeping soldiers, the number of which had been doubled on her account; and as she smiled a number of roses fell from her lips. As she drew near her brother her tears fell in torrents, leaving a profusion of fine pearls. After some time she put on her feathers and went out a duck. When the guards awoke they took the roses and the pearls to the king. He was still more surprised to see roses with the pearls, for these roses should have fallen from his wife's lips. He again increased the number of the guard, and threatened them with the most severe punishment if they failed to watch all night. They did their best to obey, but in vain; they could only sleep. When they awoke they found, not only roses and pearls, but little gold-fish swimming in the holy water.

The amazed king could only conclude that their sleep was caused by magic. On the fourth night he not only increased the number of soldiers, but, unknown to every one, hid himself behind the altar, where he hung a mirror, through which he could see everything that passed without being seen.

At midnight the doors opened. The soldiers, under the influence of sleep, had let fall their arms and lay on the ground. The king kept his eyes fixed on the mirror, through which he saw a little wild-duck enter. It looked timidly round on all sides, then, reassured at the sight of the sleeping guards, advanced to the centre of the nave and took off its feathers, thus appearing as a young maiden of exquisite beauty.

The king, overwhelmed with joy and admiration, had a presentiment that this was his true bride. So when she drew near the coffin he crept noiselessly out of his hiding-place, and with a lighted taper set fire to the feathers. They flared up immediately, and with such a bright light that the soldiers were aroused. The girl ran towards the monarch, wringing her hands and weeping tears of pearl.

"What have you done?" cried she. "How can I now escape my stepmother's vengeance? For it is by her magic that I have been changed into a wild-duck."

When the king had heard all, he ordered some of his soldiers to seize the wife he had married and to take her right out of the country. He sent others to take the wicked stepmother prisoner, and to burn her as a witch. Both commands were instantly carried out. Meanwhile the girl drew from the folds of her gown three small bottles, filled with three different kinds of water, which she had brought from the sea.

The first possessed the virtue of restoring life. This she sprinkled over her brother, whereupon the chill and rigidity of
death disappeared, the colour came to his face, and warm red blood flowed from his wound. Upon the wound she poured water from the second bottle, and it was immediately healed. When she had made use of the third kind of water he opened his eyes, looked at her with astonishment, and threw himself joyfully into her arms.

The king, enraptured at this sight, conducted the two back to the palace.

So instead of a funeral there was a wedding, to which a large number of guests were immediately invited. Thus the orphan maid was married to the king, while her brother became one of his majesty's nobles. And the magnificence of the wedding feast was greater than anything seen or heard of.

(The end)

Alexander Chodsko's short story: Tears Of Pearls

**By Alexander Chodzko**