

The Sea King's Daughter • By Aaron Shepard

Taken from the picture book *The Sea King's Daughter: A Russian Legend*, told by Aaron Shepard, illustrated by Gennady Spirin, Atheneum, 1997. Copyright © 1997, 2004 Aaron Shepard. May be copied for any noncommercial purpose. *Novgorod* is pronounced "NOV-go-rod." *Sadko* is pronounced "SOD-ko." *Volkhov* is pronounced "VOLE-kove." *Gusli* is pronounced "GOOSE-lee." *Volkhova* is pronounced "VOLE-ko-vah." Visit

"Is there another such city as Novgorod in all the world?" Sadko would say. "Is there any better place to be?" Yet sometimes Sadko was lonely too. The maidens who danced gaily to his music would often smile at him—but they were rich and he was poor, and not one of them would think of being his.

One lonely evening, Sadko walked sadly beyond the city walls and down along the broad River Volkhov. He came to his favorite spot on the bank and set his twelve-string *gusli* on his lap. Gentle waves brushed the shore, and moonlight shimmered on the water.

"My lovely River Volkhov," he said with a sigh. "Rich man, poor man—it's all the same to you. If only you were a woman! I'd marry you and live with you here in the city I love."

Sadko plucked a sad tune, then a peaceful one, then a merry one. The tinkling notes of his *gusli* floated over the Volkhov.

All at once the river grew rough, and strong waves began to slap the bank. "Heaven help me!" cried Sadko as a large shape rose from the water. Before him stood a huge man, with a pearl-encrusted crown atop a flowing mane of seaweed.

"Musician," said the man, "behold the King of the Sea. To this river I have come to visit one of my daughters, the Princess Volkhova. Your sweet music reached us on the river bottom, where it pleased us greatly."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," stammered Sadko.

"Soon I will return to my own palace," said the King. "I wish you to play there at a feast."

"Gladly," said Sadko. "But where is it? And how do I get there?"

"Why, under the sea, of course! I'm sure you'll find your way. But meanwhile, you need not wait for your reward."

Something large jumped from the river and flopped at Sadko's feet. A fish with golden scales! As Sadko watched in amazement, it stiffened and turned to solid gold.

"Your Majesty, you are too generous!"

"Say no more about it!" said the King. "Music is worth far more than gold. If the world were fair, you'd have your fill of riches!" And with a splash, he sank in the river and was gone.