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*The Mirror Maker's Secret*  
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sample translation

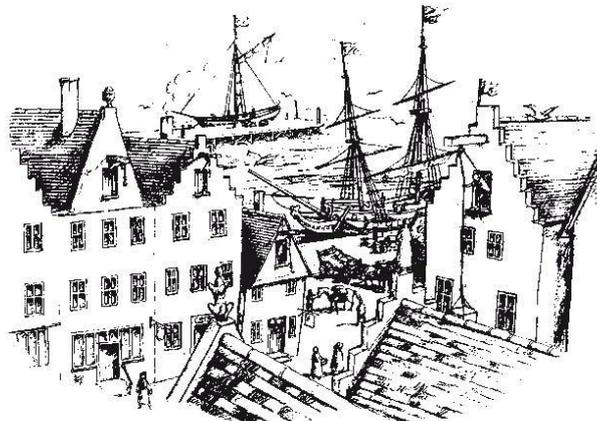
***The Mirror Maker's Secret***  
***A thrilling historical adventure set in Amsterdam and London***



## Amsterdam

~ Ein Tuchmacher unter Verdacht ~

### Part 1, Amsterdam: A clothmaker under suspicion



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[...]

## **Chapter two**

It was almost dark outside by the time Nik had entered all the merchandise into the book. His mother paid the workers downstairs, and he made one final count of the sacks and chests that the men had hauled up into the storerooms on ropes. Nik shut the large book and ran his fingers over the smooth leather. It was softer than the scratched-up books in the chest by his bed, which told of the adventures of researchers and explorers over the last century. Because his father spent many hours each day holding the ledger in his hands, he had had it bound in the finest calf's leather.

Nik went downstairs into the work room and put the book on the desk. His father, Jan van Leeuwenhoek, was sitting in an armchair by the window, staring out. Nik went to him and laid a hand on his shoulder. The evening had bathed the street in a hazy light. By and by, the reflections of the lanterns being lit in the neighbouring houses began to flicker on the water of the canal. His father turned his head towards him, and his gaze travelled up Nik's arm to his face. Jan's nose was pink and shiny, and his watery eyes were shot through with red lines. His unkempt dark brown hair stood up in all directions. Nik smiled. He had inherited his father's stubborn, curly hair and usually looked just as untidy as he did.

"Matthijs?"

At the sound of the name, Nik froze. His brothers' names had not been spoken aloud since the funeral. His father looked at him expectantly. Nik cleared his throat, wanting to tell him how much he missed the two of them, and that he would have given anything to have them here now. But the words stuck in his throat. His brothers weren't coming back. Ever. He took his trembling hand from his father's shoulder and hid it behind his back. He cleared his throat again. Then he shook his head sadly. There was nothing he could say or do to ease his father's grief. He didn't even know how to get rid of the tight feeling in his own chest that made him shudder whenever he thought about his little brothers. But his father's grief for his beloved sons had almost made Jan lose his mind. Every day he sat in the high-backed armchair behind his desk – but he didn't do any work. He didn't usually know what day of the week it was, or what time of day. Sometimes he looked up when Nik came into the room to fetch the ledgers and help his mother, who was making a single-minded effort not to break down. Then a hopeless smile flitted across his father's face. But when Nik came near, disappointment would chase it away again, and his father would sink back into this terrible state, staring wide-eyed into space day after day, letting life pass him by. Today, too, he turned his gaze away from his son and stared back at the window pane, where his tired face was reflected.

Quietly, Nik left the room and went out into the street. He sat down on the canal bank, dangling his feet over the water. Lost in thought, he started picking little stones out of the cobbled surface of the street and throwing them into the canal.

As darkness fell, the hectic activity in the streets subsided. The constant rumble of wheels over the paving stones, and the racket of the craftsmen were silenced. The water lapped quietly against the stone-built canal banks, and the smoke and heat of the day hung sluggishly in the narrow alleyways.

A door swung open, but Nik didn't turn round. Soft footsteps padded over the cobbles behind him, and Benthe sat down beside him. In the dim light of the lanterns, he could see her red cheeks glowing from the heat of the oven, and she smelled of sweet pastry.

"How is he doing?" asked Benthe after a while.

Nik shook his head.

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“Has he still not spoken to you? It’s almost six months ago now...” Benthe fell silent. “It’ll be seven months tomorrow.” Nik flung a stone as big as his fist into the brown water. Over the last few weeks, he had often wished he could take each day as it came like Benthe did. His little brothers had never cared what time it was, either, and had begun a new adventure every morning. But they didn’t dream of the big, wide world like Nik did. For them, a house filled with oriental spices and expensive fabrics was paradise. And if they should feel the need for more excitement, they went and played on the harbour until a labourer who worked for their father grabbed them by the collar and delivered them back to the merchant’s house, along with the goods.

Nik sighed. He had to content himself with spending a few moments in the morning and evening looking out to sea. Instead of setting sail and discovering foreign lands, he had to enter the date in the thick ledger every day with blue ink, watching time trickle away and life mercilessly take its course, even though his little brothers were no longer there.

[...]

Finally it was silent outside.

Nik slowly crawled towards the gap and pushed against the hatch from the inside. Nothing moved. He tried to get his fingers between the two flaps, but there wasn’t room. He swore. The light from the streetlamps fell through the crack and illuminated a narrow path between the householder’s goods. Nik searched for little pieces of wood or nails, but he couldn’t find anything he could put through the gap to lift the latch.

He was shut in, with no idea whose house this was that he had taken refuge in.

### **Chapter three**

When Nik’s eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, he recognised the outlines of crates and sacks more clearly, and felt his way between them to the other end of the room. A crate as tall as a man stood against the wall, giving off a floury, damp smell. He put his hand between the boards and pulled out a potato. It was larger than the little bulbs his father had brought back from Italy, and its surface felt smoother. Nik listened. It sounded like Luuk and his friends were looking for him in another alley, and there was no sound of the wagoner in the street outside the cellar window, either.

He closed his eyes. There was a smell of pepper, lemons and cured meat. Nik walked around, pushing his hands deep into the sacks of corn, dried peas and lentils. He had run eastwards from his house, crossing two canals, but he couldn’t have ended up in a merchant’s cellar. No trader would store his wares in the way this householder did. Barrels, chests and sacks stood alongside each other in the room willy-nilly, without any care for the smell of the foods or their need for air or darkness. Only a rich craftsman wanting to impress his guests with food from foreign lands could be so careless with expensive goods.

[...]

When the light suddenly began to come into the cellar from the other side, Nik’s shadow fell on the gap, and he whirled around in fright. Next to the potato crate there was a door into another cellar room. Through the gaps between the boards came the flickering light of a candle. In its glow, Nik examined the walls of his hiding place. To the left and right of the gap

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that led to the street were two small, sooty window panes, though he couldn't see any kind of catch to open them with. He pushed against the glass, but couldn't press it out of its frame.

In the next room, there was a grinding sound, and a door creaked. Nik spun round again, then ducked behind the sacks of peas and waited.

Three men were standing with their backs to Nik in front of some shelves of produce.

"It's an honour for me to host you here until you can move into your house," one of them purred. His velvet robe was stretched tight across his plump back. The shoulders of the others were only half as broad, although they were both wearing padded travelling cloaks with large hoods. "My brother told me the most wonderful things about your research," the fat householder added in a whisper, following his comment with a giggle.

"Did he, now?" the man's voice creaked like an old iron door. Nik shuddered.

"Well, he lived in London a long time: he was dealing in writings and rare treasures from the Orient. He got hold of the odd rare piece for Flambert," he chattered on.

Although the men had their backs to him, Nik could well imagine the householder's round, smirking face. The fat man rocked back and forth cheerily on the balls of his feet as he spoke, and kept spreading his arms to accentuate his thoughts with one gesture or another.

"Flambert let him have some of the most beautiful cloths that were made in the experiments." The householder stopped his cheerful rocking. "Did Flambert come to Amsterdam with you?"

"I'm afraid not. He took a different ship. And where is your brother living these days?" said the second man. There was a sly tone in his voice that unsettled Nik.

He wanted to jump up and warn the householder about his guest. Had he not noticed the man was interrogating him? Couldn't he see how dangerous this man was, even though he was standing there quite calmly?

"My brother died a few weeks ago. God rest his soul," the householder replied in a serious voice. "He picked up one of these wonderful cloths from Flambert in London and then took a ship to Amsterdam. But before they reached the open sea, he died of a fever and boils. Tragic."

Nik's heart began to hammer painfully in his chest.

Something about the story made him prick up his ears, but he couldn't say exactly what it was. Countless people had died over the past few years of fever and boils, and the fate of those who died made Nik sad. But the fat man had told his story as casually as if it was an anecdote from the market, and didn't seem to be mourning his brother's death any more. Nik, on the other hand, immediately saw his dead brothers' pale faces in front of him, and thought of all the efforts he had made after their funeral to find out what had caused the fever. He had gone to apothecaries, surgeons and doctors, asking them whether there was a cure – but if they had given him an answer at all, it contradicted everything he had heard before. One claimed the sickness could only be healed with amber, and was spread by bad winds. Another explained how he had driven off the invisible particles from the skin of a sick man using vinegar. An apothecary swore by the scent of cinnamon to purify the contaminated air, and a surgeon recommended blood-letting, as the boils had been proven to come from a pollution of the blood.

A woman called out from the top of the stairs. Nik didn't hear what she had said, but the householder turned around.

"Find yourselves a good wine. The meal is ready – I'll have it served up so you may fortify yourselves." He tucked a pitcher under his arm and bowed to his guests before disappearing into the stairwell.

## Chapter four

One of the two men reached out and took something off the shelves. The other took a step back. His hands were shaking, and the light wavered irregularly. He was standing close to the door that separated the two rooms. If Nik were to put his hands through the thin bars, he could have touched the man's back. He ducked even lower behind the sacks, keeping his breathing slow and silent.

When he heard the sound of smacking lips, he straightened up a little so he could spy on the room next door again. The man by the shelves was drinking from a jug. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and turned round.

Nik could see his white hair, and lifted his head a bit further to get a look at the second stranger's face. At that moment, the man dropped his lamp. The glass shattered; the man with the deep voice cursed softly, and with two paces he was at his trembling companion's side.

"Stop, Gustav – you must calm yourself." His voice was deep, and he sounded like a wet-nurse talking to a small, frightened child.

"Nobody knows us here. We'll make a new start," he went on, slapping the other man on the back.

"But *he* does," whispered the man who had been addressed as Gustav, pointing to the stairs up from the cellar. The white-haired man shook his head. "He doesn't suspect a thing. We're unusual craftsmen. Artists, even."

Gustav wheezed. "Maybe Flambert suspects as well – and maybe the brother knew that, or even the householder himself. We've ventured into the lion's den." Gustav supported himself on the crate behind him with one arm, and rubbed his narrow back with the other. Between the sacks, Nik tried to shift his weight from one foot to the other without making a sound. But his feet were tingling and his hands, which he was using to prop himself up on the peas, already felt numb. He slowly balled his fingers into a fist and closed his eyes.

"What about Conrad?" asked Gustav. He had righted himself again.

The other man didn't answer.

"What about Conrad?" Gustav repeated.

"He's not going to say anything else." There was a rustle of cloth.

"Did he talk to someone? Did he die because of it? Heinrich, you didn't...?" Gustav sobbed, and then there came a low whimpering sound.

Nik wished he could shut his ears. The man sounded exhausted and desperate, and over the last few months he had already heard too many grown men crying.

But he didn't dare move. He could hardly feel his feet any more.

The white-haired man's deep voice rang out again: "He's dead. Let's not discuss it. We're making a new start here in Amsterdam."

"Heinrich?"

"Yes."

"What did he die of?"

"A knife in the back."

Nik held his breath. A man called Conrad had been murdered and this Heinrich knew a suspicious amount about it!

"Why?" Gustav was no longer whimpering, but his voice was little more than a whisper. Heinrich didn't reply.

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"Conrad was worried about all the apprentices who had got sick in his workshop, and he was afraid of Flambert's cloths...all the harm they were suddenly causing...and if we did something wrong..." Gustav began again.

"Be quiet," Heinrich interrupted him. "I don't want to hear it."

"But Heinrich, if we're doing people harm...all those sick people, and the ones who died..."

"Stop it! Thousands of people keel over and die in London every day in their filthy rat-holes. They had boils and fever there before we arrived. It's nothing to do with us."

Nik's heart was hammering wildly in his chest. He turned his head away so that his frantic breathing couldn't be heard on the other side of the door, and wished he could get a better view of the men's faces.

"But maybe..."

"We sold hundreds of cloths, glasses and mirrors. They were works of priceless beauty. You know that, and so do the others."

"But, Heinrich..."

"Conrad was a drinker. He was even afraid of his own apprentices."

"They were dying like flies in his workshop. One after another. He was worried; he told the guild about his suspicions..."

"Be quiet!" Heinrich no longer sounded concerned or comforting. He was angry, and shouting at Gustav. His voice, which moments before had sounded soothing, had grown into a thunderous growl. "We have a dream, and that is the reason for our association. We help each other with ingredients and search for new formulas." As Heinrich went on, his voice grew calmer again. "Don't you remember the longing for something unique that brought us together? Don't you feel it anymore?" He stepped closer to Gustav and took hold of his hands. "I remember you wanted to create something special. It drove you to leave your parents' house, when all they wanted was to protect the status quo. But we, Gustav, we wanted more. We couldn't stop searching for something unusual. Flambert is one of us and so are you. Body and soul. But Conrad lost his way. He put us all in danger..." Then there was silence. Nik still didn't dare move.

"We're not doing any harm," he finally said, quietly.

"Heinrich..."

"We're not doing any harm. And if we are, then those people deserve it. People who have worn cloths that weren't meant for them, or spoken to somebody who shouldn't have heard about it..."

The blood was pounding in Nik's temples, as the man's words came together in his mind to form a terrible suspicion. Then his ankles gave way. He tried to use his arms to steady himself, and grabbed at the wooden slats of a crate. One broke off with a mighty crack, and he fell onto his back. Next door, the men's cloaks rustled, and the lights approached the door.

Nik didn't turn round. He struggled to sit upright and stared at his feet. They were lying, somewhat twisted, beneath his knees, and seemed not to be part of his body any more. He knocked his boots against the floor several times until the numbness started to go away. The feeling returned to his feet with an unpleasant tingling sensation, and Nik leapt up. The men were rattling the latch.

Nik picked up the slat that he had broken off the crate as he fell. It was as long as his arm, and had a pointed end. He was reaching back to hit the hatch with it when he heard wood splintering behind him. The men were kicking down the door.

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Nik struck at the hatch, but it didn't budge. Then he lifted the slat above his head and smashed the pointed end through one of the little windows. The glass shattered and the shards jangled as they hit the street outside. There was another cracking sound behind him. Nik threw the piece of wood to the floor and gripped the window frame with both hands. He could feel the sharp edges of the glass piercing his hands. Warm blood flowed from the wounds and dripped into his shirt sleeves. Nik gritted his teeth. As he heard the door give way behind him, he used all his strength to pull himself through the window. He fell into the street, half a metre below. His knee hurt, but he wasn't going to worry about that. He leapt to his feet and started running. Countless tiny shards of glass stuck into his arms and legs with every step. But Nik didn't dare stop to pull the splinters out. Without looking back, he ran along the street and disappeared round the next corner.

At some point he turned another corner, but he wasn't taking any notice of the houses and lanterns. The blood was rushing in his ears, and he was aware of nothing but the dull thud of his own footsteps on the cobbles. He didn't look round, and met nobody until, by the light of the street lamps, he eventually saw the Magere Brug and the river.

[...]

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