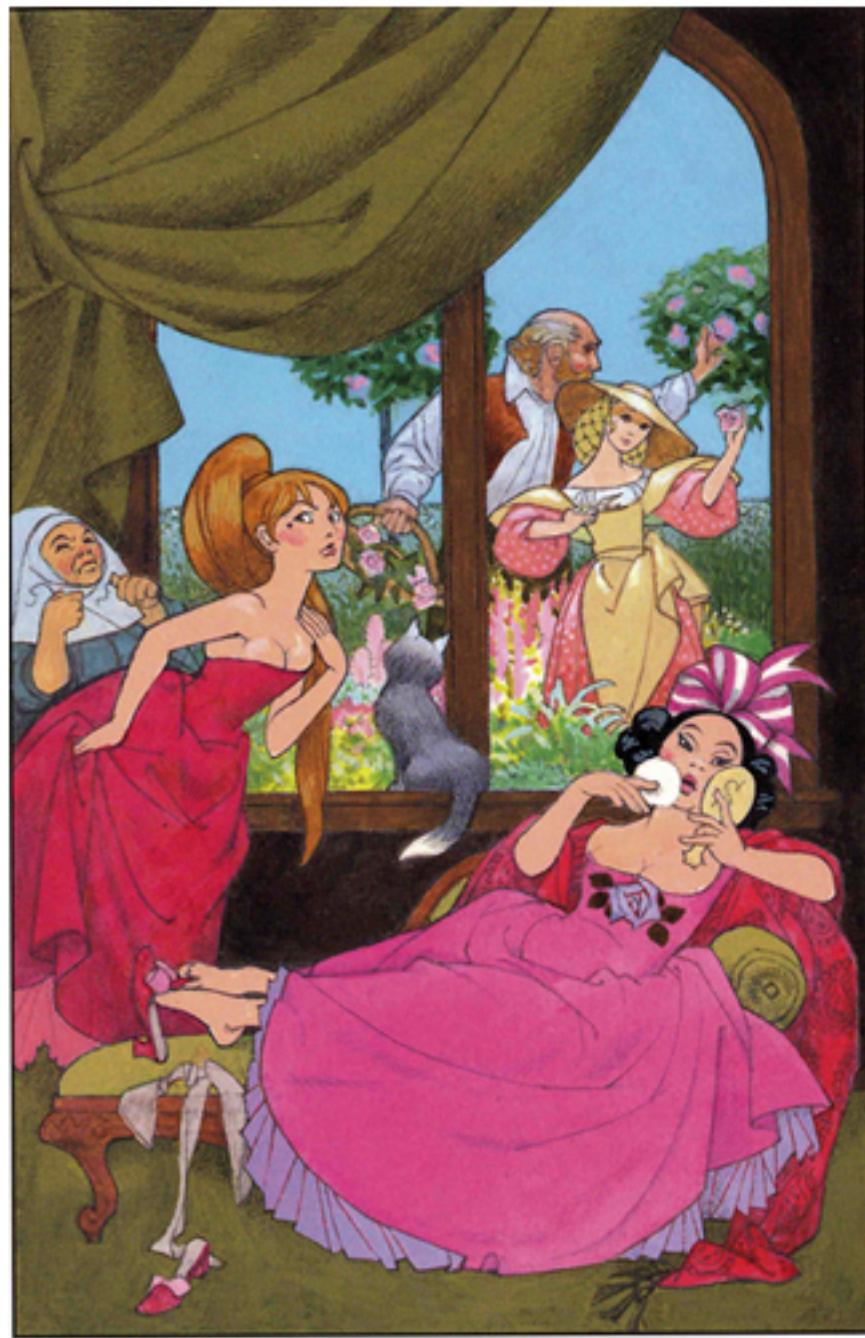


Once upon a time there lived a rich merchant whose wife had died, leaving him to raise their three daughters. The two oldest girls were spoiled and vain, and wasted their father's money on expensive clothes and trifles; but the youngest was kind and modest, and had such lovely features that she was known as Beauty. The young girl was her father's favorite and was greatly admired by all the handsome young men in the surrounding countryside, and on account of this she was hated by her jealous and idle older sisters.



Now it happened that the merchant suddenly lost his fortune when several of his trading ships were lost at sea, and the family was forced to move to the country. The two oldest daughters loudly complained at having to give up their lavish lifestyle, but Beauty tried to make the best of things, and to be of service to her father.

After about a year the merchant received word that one of his ships, long thought to be sunk, had suddenly appeared at a distant harbor. Setting off to claim his property, the merchant promised to bring each daughter back whatever she desired. The two oldest sisters demanded expensive clothing, but Beauty requested only a rose.

Upon his arrival at the port, however, the merchant found his ship had been seized at the order of those to whom he owed money, and he was forced to return home empty-handed. On his way back, riding alone through a remote mountain country, he found himself lost in a terrible storm. Just as he was despairing of ever seeing his daughters again, the merchant caught a glimpse of a distant light.



As the merchant drew near to the light, he discovered that it came from a vast, brightly lit castle. To his amazement he could find no one within, although in a grand banquet hall he found a roaring fire and a splendid meal prepared, with only one place set at the table. Shivering and hungry, he warmed himself at the fire and ate his fill, then dropped off to sleep in a magnificent bed that he found in a nearby chamber.

When the merchant awoke the next day he was amazed to find a handsome new set of clothes laid out for him. Making his way outside he found himself in a rose garden in full bloom. At the sight of the flowers the merchant remembered Beauty's request, and he happily plucked the most handsome blossom he could find.

Suddenly a gruff voice behind him boomed, "How dare you!" and the merchant turned to find himself confronted by a grotesque, though well-dressed, Beast.



The Beast explained that he was the master of the castle, and that the roses were his one joy in the world. "The penalty of your crime shall be death! Prepare to meet your maker!" growled the Beast.

The merchant pleaded for his life, explaining that he had no idea of the value the Beast placed on his flowers, but only wished to please his young daughter.

"Very well," replied the Beast, "I shall give you a choice. If your daughter will give her life in your place, I will spare you. You must give your word that, three months from now, either you or she will return to pay for the rose!"

The merchant sadly agreed, and then rode home to tell his children his sorrowful news. When Beauty heard of her father's agreement with the Beast, she insisted on going in his place. Realizing that he could not leave his other children alone in the world with no support, the merchant reluctantly led his favorite daughter to the castle gate at the appointed time.



To Beauty's surprise, the Beast did not immediately take her life, but instead ushered her into his palace as an honored guest. She was shown to a lovely set of rooms with her name on the door. Left alone, the girl discovered beautiful clothing as well as books and other amusements prepared for her. Beauty thought it curious that these had been provided, unless the Beast intended to keep her alive for some time.

Beauty quickly became accustomed to life in the Beast's palace. She was alarmed, however, to find that the Beast was in love with her, and would request her hand in marriage every day. Beauty did not wish to hurt the Beast, of whom she had grown fond, but she was unwilling to marry such a hideous creature.



After three months Beauty became restless and homesick, and began to worry about her father. Seeing her concern, the Beast agreed to allow her to return home for a visit, but made Beauty promise she would return to him after eight days.

Beauty's father was overjoyed to see her, and begged her to stay longer than the brief time allowed by the Beast. The girl felt it would not harm the Beast if she stayed a few days longer than planned, but soon after the eight days had passed she dreamed she saw the Beast lying near death in his garden.

Returning in haste to the Beast's castle, Beauty found the creature exactly as she had dreamed. Full of pity, she agreed to marry him, and was amazed to find the Beast suddenly transformed into a handsome prince. This was his true form, he explained, for an evil fairy had enchanted him, and only by Beauty's love was he freed from the awful curse.

