

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Retold by Adèle Geras

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A VERY long time ago, in a distant land, there lived a merchant. His wife had been dead for many years, but he had three daughters and the youngest was so lovely that everyone who saw her wondered at her beauty. Her name was Belle, and she was as good and kind a child as any man could wish for. When a storm at sea sank all but one of the merchant's ships, the family was left with very little money, and Belle was the only one of the three sisters who never complained.

"We shall have to clean the house now," sighed the eldest. "And cook as well, I daresay."

"No more pretty new clothes for us," moaned the second sister. "And no maid to dress our hair each morning and prepare our baths each night."

"We are young and strong," said Belle, "and we shall manage perfectly well until Father's last ship comes to port."

"You are a silly goose," said the older girls. "Hoping when there is so very little hope. The last ship probably went down with all the rest, taking our wealth with it."

Spring turned to summer, and towards the end of summer came news that the merchant's last ship had indeed been saved and was now docked in the small harbour of a town not three days' ride from his house.

"I shall set out at once," he said, "and return within the week. Fortune has smiled on us at last, and I am in the mood to celebrate. What gifts shall I bring you, daughters, from the grand shops that I shall surely see on my journey?"

"Something that sparkles like a star," said the eldest. "A diamond, I think."

"Something that glows like a small moon," said the second daughter. "A pearl to hang around my neck."

Belle said nothing.

"And you, my little one," said the merchant. "What would delight your heart?"

“To see you safely back in this house after your travels would please me more than anything,” said Belle. “But if I have to choose a gift, then what should like is one red rose.”

As soon as the merchant finished his business in the harbour, he set off for home. His saddle-bags were filled with gold coins, for he had sold everything that had been on board the last of his ships. Even after buying a diamond for one daughter and a pearl for another, there was plenty of money left.

“But,” he said to himself, “there are no red roses anywhere in the town. I must look about me as I ride, and perhaps I shall see one growing wild.”

The merchant made his way home, lost in daydreams of how he would spend his new-found wealth. Dusk fell and soon the poor man realized that he had strayed from the roadway and that his horse was making its way down a long avenue of black trees towards some lights that were shining in the distance.

“This must be a nobleman’s country estate,” said the merchant to himself. Through tall wrought-iron gates, he saw the finest mansion he had ever laid eyes on. There was a lamp burning at every window.

Having no one else to talk to, the merchant said to his horse, “The gentleman to whom all this belongs is at home, beyond a doubt, and a large party of guests with him, it would seem. Perhaps he will extend his hospitality to one who has strayed from his path. Come, my friend. I will dismount and we will walk together up this handsome drive.”

The gates opened as the merchant touched them. When he reached the front door, he said to his horse, “Wait here for a moment, while I announce myself.”

He stepped over the threshold, but there was no one there to greet him, and a thick white silence filled every corner of the vast hall.

“Is anyone here?” cried the merchant, and his own voice came back to him, echoing off the high walls.

He went outside again quickly and said to his horse, “Come, we will find the stable, my friend, for everyone in the house seems to have disappeared. Still, it is a beautiful place. Perhaps I shall find a maid in the kitchen who will give me a morsel of food and

show me a bed where I may spend the night, for we shall never find our way back to the highway in the dark.”

The stable was comfortable and clean, and the merchant fed his horse, and settled him in one of the empty stalls.

Then he returned to the house, thinking that by now someone would have appeared.

There was no one to be seen, but a delicious smell of food hung in the air. Yes, thought the merchant, that door, which was shut, is now open, and someone is serving a meal.

He walked into this new room and saw one place laid at a long table. He saw a flagon of wine and one glass, and many china plates bearing every sort of delicacy a person could desire.

“Is there anyone here to join me in this feast?” said the merchant to the embroidered creatures looking down at him from the tapestries on the walls, but there was no reply, so he sat down at the table and ate and drank his fill.

“I think,” he said aloud, “that I have come to an enchanted dwelling, and I shall now take this candlestick and see what lies upstairs. Perhaps a kind fairy has made a bed ready for me, and a bath as well.”

He went upstairs, and saw that there, too, the lamps had been lit, so that he had no need of his candle. He opened the first door on a long corridor and found himself in the most sumptuous of bedrooms. The sheets were made of silk, and soft towels had been laid out on the bed. He could see curls of steam drifting from an adjoining chamber, and as he pushed open the door, he discovered a bath, ready for him to step into.

“Whoever you are,” said the merchant to the velvet curtains that had been drawn across the windows, “you are the most thoughtful of hosts. I can smell the lavender oil you have sprinkled in the bath . . . Maybe in the morning you will show yourself and I will be able to thank you properly.”

The merchant bathed and went to bed and fell into a dreamless sleep. When he woke up, the curtains had been pulled back, the sun was shining, and a tray with his breakfast upon it had been placed on a small table near the window. A fine set of clothes had been prepared for him, and he put it on and marveled at how well it fitted. At first

he could not find his own travel-stained garments, but they had been washed and dried and pressed and lay folded beside his saddle-bags, which he had left beside the front door the previous night.

“I must go home,” he thought to himself. “However pleasant this place may be, I must return to my children. I shall fetch my horse from the stable and set off at once.”

The gardens of the mansion were a small paradise. Seeing them spread out before him reminded the merchant that he still had not found a red rose for Belle.

“In this garden,” he thought, “there may still be red roses, even though autumn is nearly upon us. I shall pick just one, if I see some, and be gone.”

Flowers still bloomed in the garden, but the merchant had to walk along many paths before he came to a bush covered with red roses that had just blossomed. He chose the plumpest and smoothest; the most luscious and velvety of all the flowers he could see, and snapped it off the bush.

At that moment, an anguished roar filled the air and there, towering over him, was the most hideous creature the merchant had ever seen; a being from the worst of his nightmares; something that could not be human even though it stood upright and wore a man’s clothes and spoke in a man’s voice.

“Ungrateful wretch!” this Beast said. “All that I have done for you: fed you and clothed you and sheltered you ... all that is not enough. No, you must steal a bud from my most precious rosebush. There is no punishment but death for such ingratitude.”

The merchant began to weep.

“I did not mean it as theft,” he said. “The owner of this place—you—I knew how kind you must be. I thought a rosebud was but a trifling thing after all the wonders you had lavished on me. It is a present for my youngest daughter. I promised her a red rose before I set out on my journey, or I would never have touched anything that belonged to you. I beg you, spare my life.”

“You must not judge by appearances,” said the Beast. “I love my roses more than anything in the world, and a red rose is no trifling thing to me. Now you have plucked one for your child. I will spare your life, but only on this condition. One of your daughters must return with you in a month’s time, and you must leave her here forever. She must come of her own free will, and bear whatever fate awaits her in this place. If none of your children will make this sacrifice for you, then you yourself must return

and be punished for your crime. Go now. I will wait for you and for whichever daughter may choose to accompany you.”

When the merchant reached his home, he wept as he told the story of the enchanted mansion and of what he had promised the Beast. His two elder daughters glanced first at the jewelled necklaces he had brought them and then at one another, but not a word did they utter.

Belle smiled and said, “Dry your tears, Father. It was for the sake of my red rose that you ventured into the garden, so I shall go with you and with pleasure.”

The cold came early that autumn. As Belle and her father made their way back to the Beast’s mansion, snow began to fall, and by the time they reached the wrought-iron gates, it seemed as though white sheets had been spread over the whole landscape. The merchant’s heart was like a stone in his breast, and Belle was trying to cheer him as they drew near the house.

“You must not worry about me, Father, for if you do, it will make me very unhappy. I know that my happiness is your dearest wish, so for my sake, let your spirits be high. I want to remember you smiling.” Belle smiled at her father, as if to set him an example. She said, “This is a very handsome building, and from all that you told me about the Master of this place, he seems to be a kind and hospitable creature. I do not see anything so terrible in living here, if your life is to be spared as a consequence.”

“You have not seen the Beast,” said the merchant, shivering. “Oh, you will change your tune when you do, my dear.”

The door opened at their touch, just as it had before.

“We have come,” the merchant called out, “as I promised.”

His words floated up towards the ceiling, but no one appeared.

“Come,” said the merchant. “Let us go into the banqueting hall and eat, for we have had a long journey, and you must be hungry, my dear.”

Two places had been set at the table. Belle and her father were eating with heavy hearts when the Beast came silently into the room. It was only when he spoke that Belle caught sight of him, hidden in the shadows by the door.

Is this the daughter,” said the Beast, “who comes here in your place?”

“Yes, I am,” Belle answered for her father. “My name is Belle and I am happy to be in such a beautiful house, and happy to be of service to my father.”

“You will not be so happy,” said the Beast, “once you have looked upon my face. It will fill you with horror and haunt all your dreams.”

For her father’s sake, Belle knew she had to be brave. She said, “I have heard your voice, sir, and it is as low and sweet a voice as any man ever spoke with. Your face holds no terrors for me.”

The Beast stepped out of the shadows by the door, and the light of all the lamps in the room fell on his face. Belle’s hands flew to cover her eyes, to shield them from the hideous sight, and it was with great difficulty that at last she peeped between her fingers at the Beast.

“Now,” he said, “are you as ready as you were a moment ago to spend your days with me?”

Belle was quiet for a full minute, then she said, “I will become used to looking at you, sir, and then I will not flinch as I did just now. You must forgive me for my cruelty. It was the unexpectedness of seeing you for the first time. I shall not hide my eyes again.”

The Beast bowed. “You are as kind as you are beautiful. Everything I own, everything in this place is yours to do with as you will. I shall keep out of your sight, except for one hour in the evening, when I will come into the drawing-room for some conversation. For the present, I beg the two of you to enjoy this last night together, for tomorrow your father must leave and return home. I bid you both goodnight.”

The next morning, after her father had gone, Belle wept for a long time. Then she dried her eyes and said to herself, “Crying will not help me, nor despair. I must strive to enjoy everything there is to enjoy, and find the courage to endure whatever I have to endure.”

She decided to explore the mansion, and found that everything she looked at had been designed to please her. There were books in the library, a piano in the music room, paints and pencils for her amusement, a wardrobe full of the most beautiful clothes that anyone could wish for, and everywhere invisible hands that made all ready for her and smoothed her way.

Beside her bed, on a small table, there lay a looking-glass and a note which read:

“Whatever you may wish to see will in this glass reflected be.”

Belle picked up the little mirror and wished that she might see her family and know how they fared, but the images that appeared made her so homesick, that at once she put the glass away in a drawer and tried to forget all about it.

And so Belle passed her days pleasantly enough, and every evening as the clock struck nine, the Beast came and sat beside her in the drawing-room.

At first, Belle dreaded this time, and the sound of the Beast’s footsteps on the marble floors made her tremble with fear. But when he sat down, his face was in shadow, and as they talked, Belle’s fears melted away, and the hour passed too quickly. Soon, she began to long for the evening, and to wish that she might spend time with the Beast during the day.

One night, as the candles guttered and flickered, the Beast stood up to take his leave of her.

Belle whispered, “Stay a little longer, sir. It is very lonely and quiet without you, and this hour is so short.”

The Beast sat down again, and said, “I will gladly stay for as long as you wish, but there is a question I must ask you and I shall ask this question every night and you must answer me honestly.”

“I would never lie to you, sir,” said Belle, “for you are the best and most generous of creatures.”

“Then tell me, Belle, would you consent to marry me?”

“Oh, no, sir!” cried Belle, and her hands flew to her mouth and she shuddered in disgust. “No, I could never marry you. I am sorry to say this after all your kindness to me, but oh, no, do not ask such a thing of me, I implore you!”

The Beast turned away from the light.

“I apologize for causing you distress,” he said, “but I must ask this question every night.”

Time went by. Belle and the Beast spoke of everything: of dreams and songs and poems and flowers and wars and noble deeds and merriment. They spoke of wizards and dragons and magic and marvels, of clouds and mountains and distant empires. They

discussed kings and emperors, architecture and farming, families and animals. The only subject they never mentioned was love.

And still, as he left her side, the Beast asked every night, “Will you marry me, Belle?” and Belle would say that she could not.

At first she said it in words, but gradually, uttering the syllables that hurt the Beast so much began to hurt her too, and she found herself unable to speak. After that, she simply shook her head and her heart grew heavier and heavier.

One night, after Belle had spent nearly a year and a half in the Beast’s house, she took the enchanted mirror out of the drawer, and asked to be shown her family at home. What she saw was an old man lying sick and feverish in his bed. She could scarcely recognize her dear father, who had been so tall and strong and who had seemed to her so young. She wept bitterly at the sight.

“I shall ask the Master to let me visit him,” she decided. “He would not refuse me such a favour.”

That evening, Belle wept again as she told the Beast of her father’s illness.

“If you let me go to him, I promise to come back within the week, only I cannot bear to see him suffering.”

“And I cannot bear to see you suffering, my dear one. Take this magic ring with you, and place it on your finger when you wish to return to this place. All you have to do to be in your father’s house is look into the mirror and wish yourself transported.”

“Thank you, thank you, dear sir,” said Belle. “I shall be back with you before you can miss me.”

“And will you marry me, dearest Belle?”

“No, sir,” said Belle. “You know I could never do that.”

“Then goodnight,” said the Beast, “and may you find whatever it is you seek.”

The next morning, Belle woke up in her father’s house. His happiness at her return was so great that his health immediately improved, and even Belle’s sisters were glad to see her. But every night at nine o’clock, Belle found her thoughts turning to the Beast, and she missed their conversations together and their shared laughter.

When the week was over, she was quite ready to leave, but her father's piteous tears persuaded her and she agreed to stay with her family for a few more days. "The Master will not mind," she said to herself, "for he is so kind and gentle."

On the third night of the second week, Belle dreamed of the rose garden. She saw in her dream the very bush from which her father had taken the red rose she had asked for, and under the bush lay the Master. His voice came to her from far away.

"I am dying, Belle," she heard. "Dying for love of you. I cannot live even one more day if you do not come back. You have broken your promise to me, and thus broken my heart . . ."

Belle awoke from the dream at once, cold and terrified.

Quickly, she put on the magic ring and lay back against the pillows.

"Take me back to him," she told the ring, and tears poured from her eyes. "What if I am too late and my Master is dead? Oh, let me be in time. Please let me be in time!"

Belle opened her eyes and she was once more in her bedroom in the mansion. Without even pausing to put slippers on her feet, she ran through the corridors and down the stairs and out of the front door. Breathless, she came to the rose garden, and there on the ground lay the Beast, silent and unmoving. Belle flung herself upon him and took him in her arms.

"Oh, Master, please, please do not die. I cannot, I cannot be too late. How will I ever bear it if you die? Oh, can you not feel my love for you? Come back to life and I will do anything . . . I will marry you gladly, joyously—only speak to me, I beseech you."

Belle's tears fell on the Beast's hair as she kissed his eyes and clasped him to her heart. At last he stirred and Belle looked down at him for the first time. She found she was embracing a handsome young man, and recoiled at once.

"You are not my beloved Master," she cried. "Where is he? I love him. I want to marry him."

"Don't you recognize me?" asked the young man, who indeed did speak with the Beast's own voice. "Don't you know me without the mask of my ugliness? It is I, and you will never call me Master again, but Husband and Friend. I am the same as I ever was, and love you as much as I ever did. You have released me from a dreadful spell laid upon me in childhood by a wicked fairy who was envious of my wealth. She turned

me into a monster until the day a woman would agree to marry me. Can you love me, Belle, as I really am?"

"I will love you," said Belle. "I *do* love you. I have loved you for a long time, though I did not realize it until last night. I love your face, whether it be beautiful or hideous, for it is your face and only an outer shell for your honorable soul."

"Then we shall be happy forever," said the young man. "And the whole world will dance at our wedding."

Belle smiled and took his hand, and they entered their home together.