

Beauty

Robin McKinley

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Also by Robin McKinley
Praise for BEAUTY
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About the Book

Beauty has never lived up to her name. Pale, thin and awkward, she has no interest in pretty gowns or handsome suitors, and spends her days lost in the books that are her most treasured friends.

But all that is about to change. For when Beauty's father loses his way in the dark forest and finds himself in the clutch of a terrible Beast, Beauty becomes entangled in a story more bewitching than any she has ever read: one of bitter revenge, dangerous magic, a powerful curse and of a love so transcendent that it can reveal the true beauty in everything.

A captivating retelling of *Beauty and the Beast* from Newbery Medal-winning author Robin McKinley.

Beauty

A RETELLING OF THE STORY OF
BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

ROBIN MCKINLEY



*To my mother,
because it will be a long wait
for KILKERRAN;
and to both Mr Rochesters,
for aiding Mahomet to go
to the mountain.*

PART ONE





Chapter One

I WAS THE youngest of three daughters. Our literal-minded mother named us Grace, Hope, and Honour, but few people except perhaps the abbot who had baptized all three of us remembered my given name. My father still likes to tell the story of how I acquired my odd nickname: I had come to him for further information when I first discovered that our names meant something besides you-come-here. He succeeded in explaining grace and hope, but he had some difficulty trying to make the concept of honour understandable to a five-year-old. I heard him out, but with an expression of deepening disgust; and when he was finished I said: 'Huh! I'd rather be Beauty.' He laughed; and over the next few weeks told everyone he met this story of his youngest child's precocity. I found that my ill-considered opinion became a reality; the name at least was attached to me securely.

All three of us were pretty children, with curly blond hair and blue-grey eyes; and if Grace's hair was the brightest, and Hope's eyes the biggest, well, for the first ten years the difference wasn't too noticeable. Grace, who was seven years older than I, grew into a beautiful, and profoundly graceful, young girl. Her hair was wavy and fine and luxuriant, and as butter-yellow as it had been when she was a baby (said doting friends of the family), and her eyes were long-lashed and as blue as a clear May morning after rain (said her doting swains). Hope's hair darkened to a rich chestnut-brown, and her big eyes turned a smoky green. Grace was an inch or two the taller, and her skin was rosy where Hope's was ivory-pale; but except for their

dramatic colouring my sisters looked very much alike. Both were tall and slim, with tiny waists, short straight noses, dimples when they smiled, and small delicate hands and feet.

I was five years younger than Hope, and I don't know what happened to me. As I grew older, my hair turned mousy, neither blond nor brown, and the baby curl fell out until all that was left was a stubborn refusal to co-operate with the curling iron; my eyes turned a muddy hazel. Worse, I didn't grow; I was thin, awkward, and undersized, with big long-fingered hands and huge feet. Worst of all, when I turned thirteen, my skin broke out in spots. There hadn't been a spot in our mother's family for centuries, I was sure. And Grace and Hope went on being innocently and ravishingly lovely, with every eligible young man - and many more that were neither - dying of love for them.

Since I was the baby of the family I was a little spoilt. Our mother died less than two years after I was born, and our little sister Mercy died two weeks after her. Although we had a series of highly competent and often affectionate nursemaids and governesses, my sisters felt that they had raised me. By the time it was evident that I was going to let the family down by being plain, I'd been called Beauty for over six years; and while I came to hate the name, I was too proud to ask that it be discarded. I wasn't really very fond of my given name, Honour, either, if it came to that: It sounded sallow and angular to me, as if 'honourable' were the best that could be said of me. My sisters were too kind to refer to the increasing in-appropriateness of my nickname. It was all the worse that they were as good-hearted as they were beautiful, and their kindness was sincerely meant.

Our father, bless him, didn't seem to notice that there was an egregious, and deplorable, difference between his first two daughters and his youngest. On the contrary, he used to smile at us over the dinner table and say how

pleased he was that we were growing into three such dissimilar individuals; that he always felt sorry for families who looked like petals from the same flower. For a while his lack of perception hurt me, and I suspected him of hypocrisy; but in time I came to be grateful for his generous blindness. I could talk to him openly, about my dreams for the future, without fear of his pitying me or doubting my motives.

The only comfort I had in being my sisters' sister was that I was 'the clever one.' To a certain extent this was damning me with faint praise, in the same category as accepting my given name as an epithet accurately reflecting my limited worth - it was the best that could be said of me. Our governesses had always remarked on my cleverness in a pitying tone of voice. But at least it was true. My intellectual abilities gave me a release, and an excuse. I shunned company because I preferred books; and the dreams I confided to my father were of becoming a scholar in good earnest, and going to University. It was unheard-of that a woman should do anything of the sort - as several shocked governesses were only too quick to tell me, when I spoke a little too boldly - but my father nodded and smiled and said, 'We'll see.' Since I believed my father could do anything - except of course make me pretty - I worked and studied with passionate dedication, lived in hope, and avoided society and mirrors.

Our father was a merchant, one of the wealthiest in the city. He was the son of a shipwright, and had gone to sea as a cabin boy when he was not yet ten years old; but by the time he was forty, he and his ships were known in most of the major ports of the world. When he was forty too, he married our mother, the Lady Marguerite, who was just seventeen. She came of a fine old family that had nothing but its bloodlines left to live on, and her parents were more than happy to accept my father's suit, with its generous bridal settlements. But it had been a happy marriage, old

friends told us girls. Our father had doted on his lovely young wife - my two sisters took after her, of course, except that her hair had been red-gold and her eyes amber - and she had worshipped him.

When I was twelve, and Grace was nineteen, she became engaged to our father's most promising young captain, Robert Tucker, a blue-eyed, black-haired giant of twenty-eight. He set sail almost immediately after their betrothal was announced, on a voyage that was to take three long years but bode fair to make his fortune. There had been a Masque of Courtesy acted out among the three of them - Robbie, Grace and Father - when the plans for the voyage and the wedding had first been discussed. Father suggested that they should be married right away, that they might have a few weeks together (and perhaps start a baby, to give Grace something to do while she waited the long months for his return) before he set sail. The journey could be delayed a little.

Nay, said Robbie, he wished to prove himself first; it was no man's trick to leave his wife in her father's house; if he could not care for her himself as she deserved, then he was no fit husband for her. But he could not yet afford a house of his own, and three years was a long time; perhaps she should be freed of the constraints of their betrothal. It was not fair to one so fair as she to be asked to wait so long. And then of course Grace in her turn stood up and said that she would wait twenty years if necessary, and it would be the greatest honour of her life to have the banns published immediately. And so they were; and Robbie departed a month later.

Grace told Hope and me at great length about this Masque, just after it happened. We sat over tea in Grace's rose-silk-hung sitting room. Her tea service was very fine, and she presided over the silver urn like a grand and gracious hostess, handing round her favourite cups to her beloved sisters as if we too were grand ladies. I put mine

down hastily; after years of taking tea with my sisters, I still eyed the little porcelain cups askance, and preferred to wait until I could return to my study and ring for my maid to bring me a proper big mug of tea, and some biscuits.

Hope looked vague and dreamy; I was the only one who saw any humour in Grace's story - although I could appreciate that it had not been amusing for the principals - but then, I was the only one who read poetry for pleasure. Grace blushed when she mentioned the baby, and admitted that while Robbie was right, of course, she was a weak woman and wished - oh, just the littlest bit! - that they might have been married before he left. She was even more beautiful when she blushed. Her sitting room set her high colour off admirably.

Those first months after Robbie set sail must have been very long ones for her. She who had been the toast of the town now went to parties very seldom; when Hope and Father protested that there was no need of her living like a nun, she smiled seraphically and said she truly didn't wish to go out and mix with a great many people any more. She spent most of her time 'setting her linen in order' as she put it; she sewed very prettily - I don't believe she had set a crooked stitch since she hemmed her first sheet at the age of five - and she already had a trousseau that might have been the envy of any three girls.

So Hope went out alone, with our chaperone, the last of our outgrown governesses, or sponsored by one of the many elderly ladies who thought she was just delightful. But after two years or so, it was observed that the incomparable Hope also began to neglect many fashionable gatherings; an incomprehensible development, since no banns had been published and no mysterious wasting diseases were whispered about. It was made comprehensible to me one night when she crept into my bedroom, weeping.

I was up late, translating Sophocles. She explained to me that she had to tell someone, but she couldn't be so selfish as to bother Grace when she was preoccupied with Robbie's safety - 'Yes, I understand,' I said patiently, although privately thought Grace would be the better for the distraction of someone else's problems - but she, Hope, had fallen in love with Gervain Woodhouse, and was therefore miserable. I sorted out this curious statement eventually.

Gervain was an estimable young man in every way - but he was also an ironworker in Father's shipyard. His family were good and honest people, but not at all grand, and his prospects were no more than modest. He had some ideas about the ballasting of ships, which Father admired, and had been invited to the house several times to discuss them, and then stayed on to tea or supper. I supposed that this was how he and my sister had met. I didn't follow Hope's account of their subsequent romance very well, and didn't at all recognize her anguished lover as the reserved and polite young man that Father entertained. At any rate, Hope concluded, she knew Father expected her to make a great match, or at least a good one, but her heart was given.

'Don't be silly,' I told her. 'Father only wants you to be happy. He's delighted with the prospect of Robbie as a son-in-law, you know, and Grace might have had an earl.'

Hope's dimples showed. 'An elderly earl.'

'An earl is an earl,' I said severely. 'Better than your count, who turned out to have a wife in the attic. If you think you'll be happiest scrubbing tar out of burlap aprons, Father won't say nay. And,' I added thoughtfully, 'he will probably buy you several maids to do the scrubbing.'

Hope sighed. 'You are not the slightest bit romantic.'

'You knew that already,' I said. 'But I *do* remind you that Father is not an ogre, as you know very well if you'd only calm down and think about it. He himself started as a

shipwright; and you know that still tells against us in some circles. Only Mother was real society. Father hasn't forgotten. And he likes Gervain.'

'Oh, Beauty,' Hope said; 'but that's not all. Ger only stays in the city for love of me; he doesn't really like it here, not ships and the sea. He was born and raised north of here, far inland. He misses the forests. He wants to go back, and be a blacksmith again.'

I thought about this. It seemed like the waste of a first-class ironworker. I was also, for all my scholarship, not entirely free of the city-bred belief that the north was a land rather overpopulated by goblins and magicians, who went striding about the countryside muttering wild charms. In the city magic was more discreetly contained, in little old men and women with bright eyes, who made up love potions and cures for warts in return for modest sums. But if this didn't bother Hope, there was no reason it should bother me.

I said at last: 'Well, we'll miss you. I hope you won't settle too far away - but it's still not an insurmountable obstacle. Look here: Stop wringing your hands and listen to me. Would you like me to talk to Father about it first, since you're so timid?'

'Oh, that would be wonderful of you,' my bright-eyed sister said eagerly. 'I've made Gervain promise not to say anything yet, and he feels that our continued silence is not right.' It was a tradition in the family that I could 'get around' Father best: I was the baby, and so on. This was another of my sisters' tactful attempts at recompense for the way I looked, but there was some truth to it. Father would do anything for any of us, but my sisters were both a little in awe of him.

'Umm, yes,' I said, looking longingly at my books. 'I'll talk to Father - but give me a week or so, will you please, since you've waited this long. Father's got business

troubles, as you may have noticed, and I'd like to pick my time.'

Hope nodded, cheerful again, called me a darling girl, kissed me, and slipped out of the room. I went back to Sophocles. But to my surprise, I couldn't concentrate; stories I'd heard of the northland crept in and disrupted the Greek choruses. And there was also the fact that Ger, safe and sensible Ger, found our local witches amusing; it was not that he laughed when they were mentioned, but that he became very still. In my role of tiresome little sister, I had harassed him about this, till he told me a little. 'Where I come from, any old wife can mix a poultice to take off warts; it's something she learns from her mother with how to hem a shirt and how to make gingerbread. Or if she can't, she certainly has a neighbour who can, just as her husband probably has a good useful spell or two to stuff into his scarecrow with the straw, to make it do its work a little better.' He saw that he had his audience's fixed attention, so he grinned at me, and added: 'There are even a few dragons left up north, you know. I saw one once, when I was a boy, but they don't come that far south very often.' Even I knew that dragons could do all sorts of marvellous things, although only a great magician could master one.

My opportunity to discuss Hope's future with Father never arrived. The crash came only a few days after my sister's and my midnight conversation. The little fleet of merchant ships Father owned had hit a streak of bad luck; indeed, since Robert Tucker had set sail in the *White Raven* three years ago, with the *Windfleet*, the *Stalwart*, and the *Fortune's Chance* to bear her company, nothing had gone right. Shipments were cancelled, crops were poor, revolutions disturbed regular commerce; Father's ships were sunk in storms, or captured by pirates; many of his

warehouses were destroyed, and the clerks disappeared or returned home penniless.

The final blow was a message brought by a weary, footsore man who had set sail as third mate on the *Stalwart* three years ago. The four ships had been driven apart by a sudden storm. The *Stalwart* and the *Windfleet* had been driven up on the shore and destroyed; only a handful of men survived. The *Fortune's Chance* was later discovered to have been taken by pirates who found it lost and disabled after the storm. Of the *White Raven* there was no word, of ship or crew, but it was presumed lost. The captain of the *Windfleet* had survived the wreck of the two ships, but at the cost of a crushed leg that refused to heal. A year ago the sailor who stood now, shredding his hat with his hands, had been sent by that captain with one other man, to try and work their way home and deliver their messages, and an urgent plea for assistance, since written letters seemed to have gone astray. There had been a dozen men left alive when the pair had set out, but their situation, alone in a strange country, was precarious. The sailor's companion had died by foul play, and he had heard nothing of the men he had left since shortly after his departure.

I don't remember the next few weeks, after the sailor's arrival, too well; nor do I regret that vagueness. I remember only too clearly that Father, who had been young and hearty, in a few days' time came to look his age, which was past sixty; and poor Grace turned as white as cold wax when she heard the news, and went about the house like a silent nightmare, like the poor pale girls in old ballads who fade away until they are nothing more than grey omens to the living. Hope and I took turns trying to persuade our father and eldest sister to eat, and making sure that the fires in their rooms were well built up.

Father made plans to take what little remained to him and us and retire to the country, where we could make shift to live cheaply. His rapid rise in business wealth and

success had been based on his ability to take calculated risks. He had run ventures very near to the line before, and always come about, and so he had refused to believe that he would not come about at the last moment this time too. Consequently, our ruin was complete, for he had kept nothing in reserve. What little he had available to him he used to try and cushion the fall for some of his best men; most of it was sent with the third mate from the *Stalwart*, to try and find the men he had left behind him and help them out of their difficulties. The man left on his return journey less than a week after his arrival, although Father urged him to stay and rest, and send someone else in his stead. But he was anxious to see himself how his fellow crew members fared, and he would have the best chance of finding them again; he did not say it, but we knew that he was also anxious to leave the sight of us and the ruin he had brought to us, although it was none of his creation or blame.

The house and lands were to be auctioned off; the money resulting would enable us to start again. But start what? Father was a broken man; he was now also labelled jinxed, and no other merchant would have anything to do with him, if he could have brought himself to work for another man. He had done no carpentry but trinkets for his daughters since he had given up shipbuilding for more lucrative business over thirty years ago; and he had no other marketable skills.

It was at this low ebb in our thoughts and plans that Gervain came to visit us; this was about a week after the man from the *Stalwart* had told his story. The four of us were sitting silent in the parlour after dinner; usually we talked, or Father or myself read aloud while my sisters sewed, but we had little heart for such amusements now. The auction had already been set, for a day late next week; and Father had begun looking for a little house somewhere far from the city.

Gervain was announced. Hope blushed scarlet, and then looked down quickly at her clasped hands. She had told me two days before that she had refused to see Gervain since the news of our downfall had come. There was no question of his not knowing; the whole city was talking about it. Father's shipyard was being sold first of all to pay off business debts, and all the employees were wondering what their new master would be like, and if they would even still have jobs. Father had been both liked and respected by the men who worked for him - and admired for his daring in business ventures.

Gervain explained the reason for his visit without preamble. He had looked forward, a few weeks ago, to making an offer, soon, for Hope's hand. He understood that everything was suddenly changed; but he thought that he knew his own heart, and dared to trust that he knew Hope's. When he had first wished to marry Hope and she had given him to believe that she would be willing to leave the city for a humbler life if her family consented, he had begun to look for an opening suitable to his skills as a blacksmith, through friends he still had living in the town of his childhood. He had heard just this afternoon of a house, with a shop and a forge and work waiting, in a small town only a few miles from the village he had been born and raised in.

His suggestion was this: That he would be honoured if we would throw our fortune in with his. The house would be a bit small for five, but it could be enlarged; and, he added with a bow to Father, there was a bit of a carpenter's shed with the blacksmith's shop, and work for a good craftsman. He would not press his suit now, and we were not to think that any obligation fell on Hope to marry him as a reward for any trifling service such as he might be able to render us. He was sure that while such service might now seem more than might honourably be accepted, he knew that we only needed an introduction to a new way

of life for us to make our own way, with honour. He would be deeply grateful to us if we allowed him to make that introduction.

Father sat silent for a long moment after Gervain had done. Ger had been offered a seat when he first entered, and had refused it; now he stood as calmly as if he were in his own home waiting for dinner to be served. He was a good-looking man, though no beauty, with brown hair and serious grey eyes; I put his age at around thirty. He had worked for Father about six years, and was proved a steady and honest craftsman.

Father said at last: 'Hope, what this young man has said of you is true?' and Hope, blushing and paling by turns like an autumn sunset seen through wind-shaken leaves, nodded and said, 'Yes, Father.' He raised his head then and looked at Ger, who had not moved but to breathe and follow our father with his eyes. 'Gervain, I do not know if I do the right thing in my reply, for it is a heavy task you ask the burden of, for all your pretty words. But indeed I and my daughters are in sore need of help.' He looked around at us. 'And we will, I think, be most grateful to accept what you offer.'

Gervain bowed his head. 'Thank you, Mr Huston. I will, if I may, call on you sometime tomorrow, that we may discuss arrangements.'

'Any time that is convenient for you,' said Father, and with a touch of grim humour, added, 'You may be sure of finding me here.'

I don't know what we would have done without Gervain. Since we had first known that the worst had happened, our lives had seemed to come to a halt: We could see no farther than each bleak day's dawning, and the thought of the auction and the end of the life we had known seemed the end of life itself. We drifted through the hours like abandoned ships on a sea without horizon. Gervain's plans, which, after a long afternoon's conversation with our

father, he was careful to explain to all of us, gave us something to think about. He was patient with everything but gloomy forebodings; encouraged questions, told us stories about the hilly, forested land we were going to that he loved so well; and, by his quiet enthusiasm, struck answering sparks of interest in our tired hearts. We had known that we would leave the city and travel, probably far away and out of reach of old friends and associations. Now we knew that we were bound for a little four-room house in a town called Blue Hill, with the deep hills on one side and forests at front and back, and that our journey there was likely to take between six weeks and two months. We even began to take some interest in the practical aspects of the trip as Gervain described horses and wagons and roads.

It was easiest for Hope and me. I was the youngest, I was in love with no one except perhaps Euripides, and while I grieved deeply for my father and for Grace, there was little in the city or our life there that I loved for itself – although rather more that I took for granted, like my own maid and all the books that I wanted. I was frightened of the unknown that we faced, and of our ignorance; but I had never been afraid of hard work, I had no beauty to lose, nor would there be any wrench at parting from high society. I didn't relish the thought of sleeping in an attic and washing my own clothes, but then it didn't fill me with horror either, and I was still young enough to see it in the light of an adventure.

Hope had told me weeks before that Gervain's original plans had included a maid to do the heavy work, and four rooms would have been sufficient if not ample for the two of them (our house in town had eighteen rooms, including a ballroom two stories tall, plus kitchens and servants' quarters). These latter days she was subdued, but there was an air of suppressed excitement about her. Once started on a task that could be finished in one effort, she would accomplish it efficiently enough; but she was absent-

minded about messages, or about remembering to return to a task only partially completed. She confessed to me one night that she felt guilty for feeling so happy: It was very selfish of her to be glad that she was going with Gervain, yet would not be moving away from her family.

‘Don’t be silly,’ I said. ‘Seeing your happiness is what’s holding the other two together.’ Nearly every night, after Grace and Father had gone to bed, Hope and I met, usually in my bedroom, to discuss how ‘the other two’ were doing, and whether there was anything further that might be done for them. And for Hope to ease the tension of being quiet during the day for her father’s and elder sister’s sakes by babbling at length to me about how wonderful Gervain was. ‘Besides,’ I added after a moment, ‘washing your own floors will be enough and plenty of reality for you.’

‘Don’t forget the tarry aprons you prophesied before,’ Hope said, smiling.

No one mentioned goblins or dragons or magicians.



Chapter Two

THE DAY OF the auction came all too soon. The three of us spent it locked up in Grace's sitting room, which had been reserved from the sale proceedings for the use of the family, shivering in each other's arms, and listening to the strange voices and strange footsteps walking in our rooms. Gervain was in charge; Father had been bundled off to spend the day going over records at the shipyard; it was Ger who had the lists of items to be sold and saved, and it was he who answered questions.

At the end of the day, Ger knocked on our door and said gently, 'It's all over: Come out now, and have some tea.' Much of the furniture was left, for we had been left the house and 'fittings' for the two more weeks Ger had estimated it would take us to be packed up finally and gone. But many of the small pieces - Father's Chinese bowl, the smaller Oriental rugs, vases, little tables, the paintings off the walls - were gone, and the house looked forlorn. The three of us wandered from room to room clinging to each other's hands, and silently counting the missing articles in the last sad rays of the setting sun. The house smelled of tobacco smoke and strange perfumes.

Ger, after leaving us half an hour alone, swept us up from the drawing room where we had collapsed at last - it had suffered the fewest depredations of any of the rooms - and said, 'Come downstairs, see what your friends have left you,' and refusing to say more, ushered us down to the kitchen. Father met us on the front stair, gazing at a dark rectangular spot in the wallpaper, and was brought along. Downstairs, on tables and chairs and in the pantry were