

“The Little Scarlet Flower”

Sergei Aksakov (1791–1859)

In a certain realm, in a certain land, there lived a wealthy merchant, a man of great means.

Much wealth had he of every kind—gold and silver treasure, pearls and precious stones, costly wares from far-off lands. And this merchant had three daughters, each more lovely than words can tell, but the youngest was the fairest of all. He loved his daughters more than his entire fortune—more than his pearls and precious stones, more than his gold and silver treasure. His love was great, for his wife was dead and he had nobody else to love. Though he loved his elder daughters, he loved his youngest daughter best because she was the kindest and most loving to her father.

One day, this merchant made ready to sail across the sea with his wares, to the ends of the earth. Before departing, he said to his dear daughters, “O my kind and sweet and tender daughters, I take my ships to trade in lands across the sea. Whether I be long on my way I cannot say, but I bid you live in virtue and peace while I am gone. Then I shall bring you back whatever gifts your hearts desire. And I give you three days to make your choice; then you shall tell me what gifts you desire.”

For three days and nights they considered, then came to their father and told him of the gifts they each desired. The first daughter bowed low to her father, and spoke thus, “Sire, my dear beloved father, bring me no gold or silver brocade, no black sable, no wondrous pearls. Bring me, I pray thee, a golden crown set with precious stones, such that shines as the full moon or the bright sun, such that turns the dark of night into the light of day.”

The honest merchant thought awhile, then said, “So be it, daughter mine, I shall bring you just such a crown. I know a man across the sea who can get it for me. It belongs to a foreign princess and is concealed in a stone chamber buried deep in a mountain of stone, seven yards down behind three iron doors with three German locks. The task is not an easy one, but my fortune knows no bounds.”

Next, his second daughter bowed low and said, “Sire, my dear beloved father, I want no gold or silver brocade, no black Siberian sable, no wondrous pearl necklace, no golden crown with precious stones. Bring me a mirror of Eastern crystal, so pure and perfect I may behold all the beauty under the sun, such that when I look into it I may never grow old, my maidenly beauty shall increase.”

The honest merchant became thoughtful; then he said, “So be it, daughter mine, I shall bring you a crystal mirror such as you describe. There is just such a mirror belonging to the daughter of the King of Persia, a young princess whose beauty no tongue can describe, no pen can depict, no mind can imagine. The mirror is hidden in a stone tower, tall and strong, that stands on a mountain cliff seven hundred yards high. And the mirror is kept behind seven iron doors with seven German locks. Three thousand steps lead up to the tower and on every step stands a Persian warrior guarding the treasure day and night, each wielding a mighty sword of sharp steel. And the keys to those iron doors hang on a

belt around the princess’s waist. But I know a man across the sea who can get me that mirror. This task is harder than your sister’s, but nothing is beyond my fortune.”

Then the youngest daughter bowed low to her father and spoke thus, “Sire, my dear beloved father, I want no gold or silver brocade, no black Siberian sable, no wondrous necklace, no bejeweled crown, no crystal mirror. Bring me, I pray, the Little Scarlet Flower, the most beautiful thing in the whole wide world.”

The honest merchant pondered even harder than before. How long it took him, I cannot tell, but finally he made up his mind. He kissed his beloved youngest daughter, and thus he spoke, “Well, you have set me a task harder than your sisters. When a person knows what to seek, he may surely find it; but how can he find that which he knows not? Red flowers are not hard to find, but how am I to know which is the most beautiful in the whole wide world? I shall do my best, but be not angry if I cannot please you.”

Dispatching his good and kind daughters to their maidenly bedchambers, he began to prepare for his voyage to a distant realm across the seas. Whether he was long making ready I cannot say—it is quicker to tell the tale than do the deed—but eventually he departed on his voyage.

He arrived in foreign parts, traded in unknown realms, sold his wares at thrice their value and bought others at three times less. He bartered ware for ware, and received gold and silver in the bargain, then loaded his ships with gold coin and sent them home. He obtained the cherished gift for his eldest daughter, the golden crown set with precious stones that turn the dark of night into the light of day. And he found the cherished gift for his second daughter, the crystal mirror which reflects all the beauty under the sun, which is such that she who looks into it never grows old, but grows ever younger. Yet nowhere could he find the cherished gift for his youngest and dearest daughter, the Little Scarlet Flower, whose beauty is greater than anything in the whole wide world.

In the gardens of tsars and kings and sultans he came upon many red flowers of greater beauty than tales can tell or words can relate. But no one could assure him that a particular flower was the most beautiful in the world. Nor was he sure himself. As he journeyed on his way with his loyal servants, over shifting sands and through dense forests, he was suddenly set upon by robbers, infidels they were, Turks and Indians and suchlike. In the face of such adversity, the honest merchant left behind his rich caravans and loyal servants and fled into the dark forests.

“Better that wild beasts should tear me asunder,” thought he, “than that I should fall into the hands of heathen robbers and spend the rest of my days as their captive slave.”

So he wandered through the dense, nigh impassable forest; and the farther he went, the easier the going became, for the trees and the thick bushes seemed to part to make way for him. Yet when he looked back, he could not stretch forth his hand; he looked to the right, and the undergrowth was so thick that a cross-eyed hare could not have passed; he looked to the left, and that was even worse. The honest merchant was astonished: he could not understand the marvel that was befalling him. He walked on and on along the beaten track that appeared beneath his feet. From dawn to dusk he walked, never hearing

a wild beast roar, a snake hiss, an owl hoot or a bird sing. A deathly silence lay all about him. And then dark night descended making it pitch black all around except for a patch of light beneath his feet. On he walked till midnight and he began to see some kind of glow before him, and he thought, “The forest must be on fire. Why am I heading for a certain death?” He tried to retrace his steps, but he could not move; all around, the forest closed in on him. The only way was forward, along the beaten track. “If that be so,” he thought, “I’ll stay where I am and the glow may go away, pass me by or even go out altogether.” So he stood still and waited. But the glow seemed to come straight towards him lighting up the forest all around. He thought and thought and resigned himself to moving forward: “A man can only die once,” he thought to himself. So the merchant made the sign of the cross and moved on. The farther he went, the brighter grew the light until it was as clear as day. Yet he heard no noise or crackling of a fire. At last he emerged into a wide clearing, and there in the center a fantastic sight met his gaze: neither house nor mansion, but a castle built from precious stones. It blazed and glittered, yet there was no sun, and gold was everywhere to be seen. It was like staring into the brilliant sun, it hurt his eyes to look at it. All the windows of the palace were made from beautiful crystal, and he entered a doorway close to him to the sounds of music playing from inside. He walked up a staircase of white marble and into an enormous room. In this room he found a large table, upon which had been set sweetmeats, foreign wines and meads. He sat at the table without delay, ate and drank his fill, for he had eaten nothing for a whole day. The food was more delicious than words can tell, tempting enough to make a man swallow his tongue. After his long journey through the forest and over the sand, he was famished. On finishing his meal, he rose from the table, but there was no one to thank for the hospitality, no one to whom he might bow in gratitude. Hardly had he risen and looked around than the table and all upon it vanished, as if it had never been. Meanwhile, the music played on without a pause. The honest merchant was filled with wonder at these marvels and miracles, and as he walked through the noble chambers, he thought to himself, “How pleasant it would be to lie down and have some sleep.”

And lo! Before him stood a carved bed of pure gold, on crystal feet, with a canopy of silver fringed with tassels set with pearls, and a mattress as tall as a hill lay upon it, made of soft swans down. This new and wondrous miracle filled the merchant with even greater awe. But he lay down upon the high bed and drew the canopy over him, finding it as soft and fine as silk. It grew dark in the chamber, as at twilight, and the music seemed to fade into the distance. And he thought, “If only I could see my daughters, even in my dreams!” And at that very moment he fell asleep.

When the merchant awoke, the sun was already high above the tallest tree, and he could not at first remember where he was. All night he had dreamed of his daughters, so good and kind and lovely, and he saw in his dream that his two eldest daughters, the oldest and the second-born, were merry and gay, while only his favorite, the youngest daughter, was sad. He saw that his eldest daughters had rich suitors whom they were to wed even without their father’s blessing. But the youngest daughter, the fairest and dearest, would not

hear of suitors until her dear father had returned home. Thus his heart was filled at once with joy and sorrow.

When he rose from his high bed, he found garments set out ready for him, and a fountain of water showered into a crystal bowl. He washed and dressed and marveled no more at each new miracle: tea and coffee stood on a table next to a tray of sweetmeats. Having said grace, he ate his fill, then set out once more to explore the palace, to gaze upon its beauty in the golden sunshine, and all seemed to him more lovely than the day before. Through the open windows he could see wondrous gardens full of fruit and flowers of untold beauty—he longed to walk in those gardens.

Leaving the palace by another staircase, this one of green marble and copper malachite with gilded banisters, he descended straight into the verdant gardens. And there he walked and admired the trees covered in fruit ripe and red, just asking to be eaten, so tempting they made his mouth water. And beautiful flowers blossomed, full and fragrant and bright with every color. Strange birds flitted about, like gold and silver displayed on green and crimson velvet, singing heavenly music. Fountains of water spouted so high a man had to throw back his head to see their tops, and clear springs ran bustling and babbling through crystal channels.

The honest merchant walked in awe, his eyes racing to and fro to take in all these marvels, and he knew not where to look or what to listen to. Whether he wandered long in this way I cannot say—it is quicker to tell the tale than do the deed. But, all of a sudden, he saw on a grassy mound a flower of scarlet hue; its beauty was more than words can tell or a pen depict. The honest merchant’s heart missed a beat; he drew near to the flower, and he felt its perfume fill the air throughout the garden, like a fragrant stream. And his hands and legs trembled as he cried out joyfully, “This is the Little Scarlet Flower whose beauty is greater than anything in the world, that my beloved youngest daughter asked me to bring!”

With these words, he approached and plucked the Little Scarlet Flower. That same moment, with no black warning cloud, lightning flashed and thunder rolled ‘til the earth shook beneath his feet. And there appeared before the merchant, as from the ground, a creature that was neither beast nor man, a monster covered in hair and terrible to behold. And the monster roared in a savage voice, “What hast thou done? How darrest thou pluck my favorite flower, the sacred flower of my garden? I tended and cherished it more than the apple of my eye, and it was my pleasure every day to behold it. Now thou hast taken all the pleasure out of my life. I am the lord of this palace and garden. I welcomed thee as a guest, dear and honored; I gave thee food and drink and rest. Is this how thou repayest my goodness? Learn then thy bitter fate: for thy crime thou wilt die before thy time!” And a great chorus of savage voices took up the cry, “For thy crime thou wilt die before thy time!”

The honest merchant’s teeth clattered from fright. He looked round and saw on every side, from under every bush and tree, from the water and the ground, a host of evil spirits, all hideous monsters, who were crawling towards him. Falling on his knees before the great and terrible monster, he cried in piteous tones, “Dear Lord and Master, Honest Sir,

Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, I know not how to call thee, I cannot tell. Destroy not my Christian soul for my innocent boldness; have me not cut down and slain, but let me plead with thee. I have three daughters, three fair maidens good and kind, and I promised to bring them each a gift—for the eldest a jeweled crown, for the second a crystal mirror, and for the youngest the Little Scarlet Flower whose beauty is greater than anything in the world. I found the gifts for my eldest daughters, but not for my youngest, no matter where I looked. Then I saw it in thy garden, the Little Scarlet Flower whose beauty is greater than anything in the world, and I thought that such a very wealthy lord, so glorious and mighty, would not begrudge the Little Scarlet Flower for which my dear youngest daughter asked. I repent my crime before thy Majesty. Forgive me, I was foolish and stupid; let me go free to my dear daughters, and let me have the Little Scarlet Flower as a gift for my beloved youngest daughter. I shall pay thee in golden coin, whatever price thou demandest.”

A great roar of laughter rang through the forest, like thunder rumbling in the heavens, and the Beast of the Forest, that Denizen of the Deep, addressed the merchant thus, “I have no need of thy golden coin; I have no room to store my own. Ask no mercy of me, my loyal servants shall tear thee to pieces, into little portions. There is but one way out. I will send thee home unscathed, reward thee with untold treasure, grant thee the Little Scarlet Flower, if thou wilt give me thy word as an honest merchant and a pledge in thy hand that thou wilt send in thy place one of thy daughters. She shall come to no harm; she shall live here in honor and freedom, just as thou hast done in my palace. I am lonely here by myself and wish to have a companion.”

At that, the merchant threw himself upon the damp earth, weeping tears of anguish. When he gazed upon the Beast of the Forest, that Denizen of the Deep, and thought of his daughters good and kind, he cried all the louder, for the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, was indeed exceedingly terrifying. For a long time the honest merchant lay beating the ground and shedding tears, but presently he spoke in pitiful tones, “Honest Sir, Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep! But what if my daughters will not come to thee of their own free will? Should I bind them hand and foot and send them to thee by force? And what way should they take to reach thee? It took me two years to find my way here, by what places, by what paths, I know not.”

The Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, answered, “I want no captive maiden here; let thy daughter come out of love for thee, of her own will and desire. And if thy daughters will not come hither of their own will and desire, then thou must come thyself and I shall have thee put to a cruel death. How to journey hither is not thy concern; I shall give thee this ring from my finger: whoever puts it on the little finger of his right hand will be wherever he wishes in the twinkling of an eye. I grant thee leave to go home for three days and three nights.” The merchant thought long and hard and finally made up his mind, “It is better for me to see my daughters again, give them a father’s blessing and, if they are not willing to save me from death, then I must prepare to meet death as a Christian and return to the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep.”

He spoke his thoughts aloud, as there was no falseness in his heart. Even so, the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep knew what was in his mind, saw he was an honest man and, taking no written pledge from him, took the gold ring off his finger and handed it to the merchant.

Hardly had the merchant had time to slip it on the little finger of his right hand than he found himself at the gates of his own spacious courtyard; and at that very moment, there arrived his richly-laden caravans and his loyal servants bringing treasure and merchandise thrice the value of what he had taken forth. A great commotion arose within the house, his daughters jumped up from their embroidery frames where they had been embroidering widths of silken cloth with gold and silver thread, and they rushed to embrace their father, hug and kiss him; the two eldest sisters were more doting than the youngest. Presently, they saw that something was amiss, that a secret sorrow lay upon their father’s heart. And his elder daughters asked anxiously whether he had lost his great fortune, but the youngest daughter gave no thought to his fortune, and said, “Your fortune is of no consequence to me; riches can be obtained again. Do reveal to me your heartfelt grief.” And the merchant made answer to his dear daughters, good and kind, “I have not lost my great fortune, but multiplied it three or four fold; another sorrow presses upon me. That I’ll relate to you tomorrow, for today let us make merry.”

He ordered that his iron-bound traveling chests be brought in: for his eldest daughter, he took out the golden crown made from the gold of Araby that neither would fire melt nor water rust set with precious stones; for the second daughter, he took out the gift of the mirror of Eastern crystal; and for his youngest daughter, he took out the gift of the Little Scarlet Flower in a golden vase. The eldest daughters were beside themselves with joy, carried off their gifts to their lofty chambers to try them out to their heart’s delight. But the youngest daughter trembled violently on seeing the Little Scarlet Flower and began to weep, as if her heart would break.

Then her father spoke thus, “What is it, my dear darling daughter? Why do you not take the flower you so desired? There is none finer in the whole wide world.” The youngest daughter took the Little Scarlet Flower, reluctantly it seemed, kissed her father’s hands and shed burning tears of sorrow. By and by, the elder daughters hurried in, still rapturous with delight, having tried out their father’s presents. Then everyone took his place at oaken tables covered with white embroidered tablecloths, laden with choice sweetmeats and meads, and they all set to eating and drinking, refreshing themselves and comforting their father with soothing speeches.

Towards evening, guests began to arrive and the merchant’s house was soon filled with good friends and kinsfolk and lovers of good cheer. ‘Til midnight the company sat and talked, and never had the honest merchant seen so grand an evening of feasting in his home; he, like all the company, marveled whence everything had come: the gold and silver dishes and the fantastic viands such as had never graced his house before.

In the morning, the merchant summoned his eldest daughter, recounted all his adventures, from beginning to end, and asked her if she would save him from a terrible death by going to live with the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep. But the eldest daughter re-

fused outright, saying, “Let it be that daughter who desired the Little Scarlet Flower—let her go and save her father.”

So the honest merchant summoned his second daughter, told her all that had befallen him, from beginning to end, and asked her if she would save him from a terrible death by going to live with the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep. But the second daughter refused outright, saying, “Let it be that daughter who desired the Little Scarlet Flower—let her go and save her father.”

Then the honest merchant summoned his youngest daughter and began telling his story, from beginning to end; yet even before he had time to finish, the beloved youngest daughter fell upon her knees before him and said, “Give me your blessing, Sire, my dear father. I will go to the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, and live with him. It was for me you fetched the Little Scarlet Flower, and it is my duty to rescue you.”

Tears filled the honest merchant’s eyes as he embraced his beloved youngest daughter, and he spoke these words to her, “O my dear, good, kind daughter, youngest and fondest, may a father’s blessing be upon you for saving your father from a cruel death and for going of your own free will and desire to live with the awesome Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep. You will live in his palace, in great splendor and ease, but where that palace is, no one knows and no one can tell, for there is no way to it by horse or foot, not even for bounding beast or swift-flying bird. We shall hear no word or news of you, nor you of us. I know not how I will live out my days of anguish, never seeing your sweet face, nor hearing your tender words I part with you for ever and ever, as if I were burying you alive in the earth.”

And the beloved youngest daughter answered her father, “Weep not, grieve not, Sire, my dear father. I shall live in wealth and ease; I fear not the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, and I shall serve him truly and loyally, fulfill his every lordly wish. I pray, he may take pity upon me. Mourn me not as dead while yet I live—one day, God grant, I shall return to you.”

The honest merchant would not be comforted by her words; he wept and sobbed as though his heart would break. The elder sisters came in haste, their wailing filling the whole house, so sorry they were, if you please, for their dear younger sister. Yet the youngest sister displayed no sign of sorrow, neither wept nor sighed, but made ready for her long uncertain journey; she took with her the Little Scarlet Flower in its golden vase.

Three days and nights soon passed and the time came for the merchant to part with his beloved youngest daughter. He kissed and embraced her, bathed her in hot tears and pronounced his parental blessing upon her. Then, taking from an ironbound casket the ring of the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, he put the ring on the little finger of his dear daughter’s right hand, and she vanished in an instant with all her belongings.

She found herself in the palace of the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, in a high stone chamber; she was lying on a bed of carved gold with crystal feet. Under her was a mattress of swans-down, and over her a coverlet of gold brocade. It was as if she had

lived there all her life, had lain down to sleep and awakened. Sweet music played, such as she had never heard before.

She rose from the bed of down, and saw all her belongings and the Little Scarlet Flower in its golden vase there in the chamber, all set out on tables of green copper malachite. The chamber was richly furnished with much finery and all kinds of wonderful things: there were chairs to sit on, couches to lie on, garments to wear and mirrors to see herself in. One wall was a mirror, another was of gold, a third of silver and the fourth of elephant and mammoth ivory studded with precious gems. “This must be my bedchamber,” she thought to herself.

Wishing to investigate the whole palace, she went forth to examine all the lofty chambers; and she walked for a long time, marveling at all the wonders that she saw. Each chamber was lovelier than the last, and all more beautiful than the honest merchant, her dear father, had described. Then, taking the dear Little Scarlet Flower from its golden vase, she went out into the verdant gardens, where the birds sang her heavenly songs, and the trees and bushes and flowers waved their heads and seemed to bow before her; the fountains of water spouted higher and the clear springs babbled louder as she approached. And she came upon the high place, the grassy mound on which the honest merchant had picked the Little Scarlet Flower, more lovely than anything in the whole wide world. She took the Little Scarlet Flower from its golden vase, wishing to plant it in its former place; but it flew from her hand and attached itself to its former stem, blossoming more resplendently than before. She was much amazed at this miracle of miracles, wonder of wonders, but was happy for her Little Scarlet Flower of which she was so fond. Then, she returned to her palace chambers and, in one of them, found a table set for her. And she thought to herself, “It appears, the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, is not angry, but will be to me a gracious master,”

No sooner had the thought entered her head than words of fire appeared on the wall of white marble, “I am not thy master, but thine obedient slave. Thou art the mistress, and I shall gladly fulfill thine every wish, thine every command.” She read the words of fire and they vanished instantly from the wall of white marble, as if they had never been. Then it came into her head to write a letter to her father and give him tidings of her. Hardly had the thought occurred to her when she saw a gold pen and ink and paper lying before her. And she wrote this letter to her dear father and her beloved sisters, “Weep not for me, nor grieve, for I am living like a princess in the palace of the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep; I neither see nor hear him, but he writes to me in words of fire on a wall of white marble; and he knows my every thought and instantly fulfils my every wish. He calls me the mistress and will not have me call him my lord.”

Scarcely had she written the letter and sealed it with a seal, than the letter vanished from her hands and sight, as if it had never been. The music began to play even more tunefully than before, as sweet meats and meads appeared upon the table in vessels of burnished gold. Though she had never in her life dined all by herself, she sat down cheerfully at the table, ate and drank and refreshed herself, enjoying the dulcet music. After dinner, having

eaten her fill, she lay down to rest; and the music grew softer, that it might not disturb her slumbers.

When she had slept, she rose with light heart ready to walk in the gardens once more, for before dinner she had not managed to see more than half of them, or to behold all the wonders they contained. All the trees, bushes and flowers bent down before her, and the ripe fruit—pears and peaches and juicy apples—tempted her to taste them. After walking for some time, till evening was nigh, she returned to her lofty chambers, and there she saw a table laid with all manner of sweetmeats and meads, all most excellent.

After supper, she went back to the chamber of white marble, where she had read the words of fire on the wall, and again she saw words inscribe themselves on the very same wall, “Is my mistress pleased with her gardens and chambers, with the hospitality and attention?”

And the merchant’s lovely young daughter answered in a happy voice, “Call me not thy mistress; be thou forever my good master, kind and gracious. I shall never disobey thy will; and I thank thee for all thy hospitality. Nowhere in the whole wide world are there such magnificent lofty chambers and verdant gardens. Why then should I not be pleased? Never in my life have I seen such wonders; I still cannot believe it is all true. But there is one thing: I fear to sleep alone; nowhere in thy lofty chambers is there a living soul but me.”

And these words of fire appeared upon the wall, “Have no fear, my lovely mistress. Nor shalt thou sleep alone, for thy handmaid, loyal and true, awaits thee now. Many human souls dwell within these chambers, only thou dost not see or hear them; they all watch over thee, as I do, day and night: we shall not suffer the wind to blow on thee or a speck of dust to settle upon thee.”

Then, the merchant’s lovely young daughter went off to her bed-chamber and there she found her handmaid, loyal and true, standing at her bed; the girl was half-dead with fright, but rejoiced to see her mistress, kissed her lily-white hands and embraced her dainty feet. Her mistress, too, was pleased to see her and set to questioning her about her own dear father, her elder sisters and about her other maids and servants. And then she herself began to describe her own adventures—so that the pair of them did not sleep before the first rays of dawn.

Thus it was the merchant’s lovely young daughter came to live and prosper in her new home. Each day, new expensive robes were laid out for her, such priceless finery that words cannot describe or a pen depict. Each day saw new and varied amusements and diversions: riding through the dark forests in horseless, unharnessed carriages, all to the sound of sweet music, with the trees parting and giving her a wide, wide road to pass over smoothly. And she began to busy herself with maidenly handiwork: she embroidered widths of material in gold and silver and made fringes with finely set pearls; she began to send gifts to her dear father, but she presented the richest width to her kind guardian, to that very Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep. And as the days passed by, she began to go more frequently to the white marble hall that she might utter grateful

speeches to her generous guardian, and read his replies and greetings etched in words of fire upon the wall.

So time passed—the tale is sooner told than the deed is done—and the merchant’s lovely young daughter grew accustomed to her new life and home. Nothing surprised or frightened her any more. She was served by invisible attendants who ministered to her every need and drove her in horseless carriages, played music for her and performed her every command. And she grew daily more fond of her gracious master; she saw that he loved her more than himself and had not called her the mistress for naught, and she longed to hearken to his voice. She longed to converse with him without entering the white marble chamber, without reading the words of fire.

She began to beg and pray, but the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, would not soon consent to her entreaties, for he feared that his voice would terrify her. But she continued to beg and beseech her kind guardian, and he could not refuse her any longer. Finally, he wrote in words of fire for the last time upon the white marble wall, “Come into the garden today, sit in thy favorite arbor that is twined with leaves and branches and blossoms and speak thus: ‘Speak with me, my faithful slave’.”

Barely had a moment passed than the merchant’s lovely young daughter ran into the gardens, entered her favorite arbor twined with leaves and branches and blossoms and sat on the brocade-covered bench. Out of breath, her heart beating wildly like that of a trapped bird, she uttered these words, “Fear not, my kind and gracious master, that thou wilt frighten me with thy voice. After all thy kindnesses, I would not fear a wild beast’s roar. Be not afraid, speak with me.”

She heard the sound of someone sighing behind the arbor, and a terrible voice gave out, wild and snarling, hoarse and gruff, though it was speaking low as yet. And the merchant’s lovely young daughter at first gave a start at the sound of the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, yet she mastered her terror and did not show she was afraid. Presently, she began to listen to his kindly and welcoming words, his wise and prudent speeches, and her heart grew light.

From that time on, there was constant talk between them, nearly the whole day long, as they walked in the verdant gardens or drove through the dark forests or rested in the lofty chambers of the palace. The merchant’s lovely young daughter only had to ask, “Art thou there, my good and gracious master?” And the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, would reply, “I am here, my fair mistress, thy faithful slave, thine eternal friend.” His wild and terrible voice made her afraid no longer, and they would have tender talks that had no end.

Time passed, whether fast or slow, I do not know: the tale is sooner told than the deed is done. But it was not long before the merchant’s lovely young daughter longed to see the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, with her own eyes, and she began to beg and beseech him. For a long time he did not consent, afraid of frightening her—for he truly was a terrible sight to behold, more ugly than words can tell or a pen can depict. The wild creatures, as well as humans, lived in dread of the very sight of him, and would cower in their lairs at his approach. And the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, spoke thus

to her, “Beseech and beg me not, my fair mistress, so delightful to behold, to show thee my horrible face and my misshapen body. To my voice thou art now accustomed; we live together in peace and concord, and scarcely are we ever apart; and thou lovest me for my untold love for thee. Yet if thou shouldn’t see me as I am, hideous and horrible, thou wouldst hate me, unfortunate that I am, and drive me from thy sight; and I should die of grief parted from thee.”

But the merchant’s lovely young daughter would not hearken to his words, and entreated him more earnestly than before, vowing that no terrible monster on earth would frighten her and that she would never cease to love her own kind master; and she said to him, “If thou art old, be then my grandfather; if thou art of middle years, be my uncle; if thou art young, be as my brother; and as long as I shall live, be thou the friend of my heart.”

Long, long did the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, resist her requests, but he could not endure the entreaties and tears of the fair maiden, and at last he said, “I cannot go against thy wishes since I love thee more than myself; I will grant thy wish though I know that I destroy my happiness and will die before my time. Come to the garden in the gray twilight, when the sun is setting behind the forest, and say, ‘Show thyself to me, faithful friend!’ And I will show thee my hideous face and my misshapen body. And if thou canst stay with me here no longer, I shall not wish to keep thee here against thy will in eternal torment; thou wilt find my gold ring beneath the pillow in thy bedchamber. Put it on the little finger of thy right hand, and thou wilt find thyself in thy dear father’s house; and never more shalt thou hear of me.”

Unalarmed and unafraid, the merchant’s lovely young daughter was firm in her resolve. Straight away, not dallying for an instant, she went into the garden to await the appointed hour; and when gray twilight came and the sun was sinking behind the forest, she called, “Show thyself to me, my faithful friend!” And at a distance, the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, showed himself to her; he did but walk across the path, and quickly disappeared into the thick bushes. But when the merchant’s lovely young daughter caught sight of him, she waved her lily-white hands, let out a cry of anguish and fainted upon the path. For dreadful indeed was the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep: his arms were crooked, he had the talons of a wild beast, the legs of a horse, and great camel humps before and behind; he was covered in hair from head to foot, he had a boar’s tusks sticking out of his mouth, a nose curved like an eagle’s beak, and the eyes of an owl.

Having lain there senseless for a long time, the merchant’s lovely young daughter finally came to and heard someone nearby weeping bitterly and sobbing in a pitiful voice, “Thou hast slain me, my beloved fair maiden; no more shall I see thy gracious face; no longer wilt thou even suffer my voice; thus I must die an untimely death.”

And she felt sorry and ashamed, mastered her great fear and timid maidenly heart; then she spoke in a firm voice. “Nay, have no fear, my kind and gracious master; I shall never again be afraid of thine awesome form, I shall not part from thee or forget thy goodness. Now show thyself to me in thy former shape; only because it was the first time was I afraid.”

The Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, showed himself to her in his awesome form, hideous and misshapen, but he did not venture near, however much she called him. They walked together till dark and talked as before with love and wisdom, and the merchant's lovely young daughter felt no fear. Next day, she saw the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, in the bright light of day and although, at first, she took fright on beholding him, she gave no sign of it, and soon her fear was gone. Now they conversed together more than before: the whole day long they were together; at dinner and supper they ate their fill of sweetmeats and refreshed themselves with meads; then they wandered through the verdant gardens and drove through the dark forests in horseless carriages.

And not a little time passed by: the tale is sooner told than the deed is done. But one night, in her sleep, the merchant's lovely young daughter dreamed that her father was lying sick; and an inconsolable grief fell upon her. When the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, saw her in grief and tears, he, too, was sorely grieved and asked the reason for her grief and tears. So she related to him her unhappy dream and begged his leave to visit her dear father and beloved sisters. And the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, pronounced these words, “What need hast thou of my leave? Thou hast my gold ring: put it on the little finger of thy right hand and thou wilt at once find thyself in thy dear father's house. Remain with him as long as thou wilt, but this I say to thee: if thou dost not return at the end of three days and nights, thou wilt not find me on this earth; I shall die that very instant because I love thee more than myself and cannot live without thee.”

She began to reassure him with solemn words and vows that she would return to his lofty palace exactly one hour before the three days and nights expired. Taking leave of her master, kind and gracious, she put the gold ring on the little finger of her right hand and found herself in the spacious courtyard of the merchant, her own dear father. She went up to the high porch of his stone mansion, and all the servants and attendants came running to meet her with a great clamor and shouting; her beloved sisters ran to greet her and, when they saw her, were filled with wonder at her maidenly beauty and her royal apparel. Taking her by her lily-white hands, they led her to her dear father; her father was lying sick, sick and woeful, for he had pined for her day and night, shedding bitter tears. And he could hardly credit his good fortune when he saw his beloved youngest daughter, so good and sweet and fair, and he marveled at her maidenly beauty and her royal apparel. For long they kissed and embraced and comforted one another with tender words. Then she told her dear father and beloved elder sisters of her manner of life with the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, all there was to tell, not withholding a single thing. And the merchant rejoiced at her rich and royal life and marveled that she had grown accustomed to the sight of her terrible master and that she was unafraid of the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep; he himself trembled and shook at the mere memory of him. But the elder sisters were envious of her, hearing of their younger sister's countless riches and the royal power she had over her master, as if he were her slave.

That day passed like a single hour, and the second day went by like a minute; and on the third day the elder sisters set to persuading their younger sister not to return to the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep. “Let him perish, even as he deserves,” they said.

But their dear guest, the youngest sister, grew angry with her elder sisters and spoke these words to them, “If I repay my good and gracious master by a cruel death for all his kindness and his ardent, boundless love, then I shall not be worthy of living in this world, and I should be given to wild beasts to tear me apart.”

Her father, the honest merchant, praised her for these noble words, and it was decided that his beloved, youngest daughter, good and kind, would return exactly one hour before the appointed time to the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep. But the sisters were resentful and devised a plan cunning and unkind: they put back by a full hour all the clocks in the house, without the merchant or all his loyal servants and attendants knowing of it.

And when the real hour arrived, the merchant’s lovely young daughter felt pain and heartache, as if something was chafing her, and she looked constantly at her father’s clocks, the English and the German—but they showed it was too early to set off on her distant journey. All the while, her sisters were telling and asking her about this and that, so as to detain her. At last, her heart could bear it no longer; the merchant’s lovely young daughter, her father’s favorite, bade farewell to the honest merchant, her dear father, received his blessing, and bade farewell to her elder sisters, to the faithful servants and the attendants. A minute before the appointed hour, she put the gold ring on the little finger of her right hand and found herself in the white stone palace, in the lofty chambers of the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep. She wondered why he did not meet her, so she cried in a loud voice, “Where art thou, my gracious lord, my faithful friend? Why dost thou not meet me? I have returned earlier than the appointed time by a full hour and a minute.”

No answer came, no greeting hailed her; there was a deathly silence. In the verdant gardens, the birds were not singing their heavenly songs, the fountains of water were not cascading, the clear springs were no longer babbling and no sweet music played in the lofty chambers. The merchant’s lovely daughter was full of foreboding and felt a shudder pass through her heart; she ran through the lofty chambers and the verdant gardens, called her gracious master in a voice of despair—but no answer or greeting or responding call was anywhere to be heard. Then she ran to the grassy mound where grew in beauty her beloved Little Scarlet Flower; and she beheld the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, lying on the mound clasping the Little Scarlet Flower in his misshapen paws. She thought at first he had fallen asleep while awaiting her and was now in a deep slumber. Gently, the merchant’s lovely daughter began to wake him, but he did not hear her; and she began to rouse him more strongly, seizing him by his shaggy paw. Then it was she saw that the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, was not breathing, was lying as one dead...

Her clear eyes grew dim, her legs gave way and she fell to her knees; she put her lily-white arms around the head of her gracious master, that hideous, horrible head, and she cried in a voice of anguish,

“Arise, awake, O friend of my heart, I love thee as my cherished sweetheart!”

No sooner had she uttered these words than lightning flashed on every side, the earth shook from a great clap of thunder, a stone thunder-arrow struck the grassy mound, and the merchant’s lovely young daughter fell senseless to the ground. Whether she lay there for long, I know not; but when she came to, she found herself in a lofty chamber of white marble, sitting on a golden throne encrusted with precious stones. And a young prince, as handsome as a picture, had his arm around her: on his head he wore a royal crown and he was dressed in cloth of gold. And before stood her father and sisters, and around them a kneeling retinue of courtiers all dressed in gold and silver brocade.

And the handsome young prince with the royal crown upon his head spoke thus to her, “Thou didst love me, my peerless beauty, for my kind heart and love for thee; thou didst love me in the form of a misshapen monster. Then love me now in my human form and be my cherished bride. A wicked witch was wrathful with my late father, a great and mighty king, so she stole me away while I was but a child and, by her satanic sorcery and evil power, did turn me into a horrible monster; she laid a spell upon me that I should live in that misshapen form, hideous and terrifying to every man and every creature on God’s earth, until a fair maiden should be found, whatever her birth or position, who would love me in my monstrous form and would wish to be my wedded wife. Then the spell would end and I should once more be a human being, young and pleasing to hold. Full thirty years I lived thus, a monster and a terror, and I enticed to my enchanted palace eleven maidens fair; thou wert the twelfth. Not a single maiden loved me for my tenderness and goodness, for the kindness of the heart. Thou alone didst love me, hideous and misshapen as I was; thou didst love me for my tenderness and goodness, for the kindness of my heart, for my untold love for thee; and thus thou shalt be the wife of a glorious king, the queen of a mighty realm.”

All there assembled marveled at the story, and the courtiers bowed down to the ground. The honest merchant gave his blessing to his beloved youngest daughter and the young royal prince. And the bride and bridegroom were congratulated by the envious elder sisters and all the faithful servants, all the great nobles and the valiant knights. And without more ado a wedding was held and a great feasting began. And the bride and groom lived forever after in great cheer and prosperity.

I too was there, drank mead and yet
Ne’er did get my whiskers wet.

Translated by James Riordan.

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