

# *Beauty*

By Robin McKinley

## **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 minister 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 ivorypale; 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 cooperate 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 spoiled. Our mother died less than two years after I was born, and our little sister Mercy died two weeks after her and 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 inappropriateness 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 any 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 worshiped him.