



The Merry Spinster

ARICH EXECUTIVE HAD THREE CHILDREN; SHE had other things besides, but for the purposes of this story, we will not concern ourselves with the rest of her inventory. Being a woman of sense and careful husbandry, she kept them well, always with an eye on the return of her investments. The two younger children were fine-looking; the eldest had weak eyes. When she was little she was called "the little Beauty" in jest, but she did not seem to notice the insult and answered to the name. Now she would answer to nothing else. She had no sense of

when she was being praised or slighted. Instead, she read books, which did her no good whatever. She was twenty-eight and mostly useless.

Her two younger siblings had an instinctive sense of their own value and knew how to enjoy themselves. They went out of the house almost every day to school, to make modest purchases out of their discretionary accounts, to visit friends, to attend parties, concerts, civic engagements, and so forth, and they made themselves happy. They also read books, but only when they wished to and not because they were without alternatives; they answered to their given names. They did not mind Beauty's being mostly useless. They liked her anyway.

All at once, the executive lost most of her assets—her cash and cash equivalents, her securities and marketable investments—along with most of her inventory. She lost almost everything except for a vacation home she used as a rental property some distance from the city, and so turned out the tenants, who had not thoroughly reviewed their lease before signing, in an owner-move-in eviction.

Beauty was, perhaps surprisingly, more galled at the loss of the family fortune than her younger siblings, who had inarguably made more and better use of it. They, for their part, were concerned primarily with the happiness that money had bought them, and people who are determined to be happy can be happy anywhere. But Beauty had always found that the scarcer she made herself, the less life troubled her, so she began to get up at four in the morning to

clean out the front rooms and get breakfast ready for the family. No one remarked on it, and so gradually she ceased to think of it as work and began to think of it as part of her nature. After she had done her work, she read, and continued to profit as little by it as she ever had. She still answered only to Beauty; in fact, she insisted upon it long after her siblings had found it necessary to continue making the same joke at her expense.

“You are *determined* to drudge,” her brother, Sylvia, said one evening as she insisted on washing his coffee cup for him by hand. The family was all sitting in the same room they had eaten dinner in, and by this time, they had almost grown used to the practice. “We have a dishwasher,” he went on, “and I know you know how to use it as well as anybody.”

“Let her alone,” Catherine said without looking up from the newspaper. “Beauty is determined not to thrive, and if you take the coffee cups from her, she might murder us all in our beds, just to have something to tidy up.”

“I like to do it,” Beauty said. “To clean the cups, I mean, not the bit about murdering you in your beds.”

“What a tedious line that’s becoming,” their mother said. “I wish you would come up with something new to lie about, dearest. But you can take my coffee cup too, just the same, if it’s important to you.”

They continued more or less in the same vein for a year, when their mother, who had been cutting down on expenses by working remotely and hazarding her freelance earnings

in speculation, learned that several of her recent investments had paid off handsomely and that the family could expect to reacquaint itself with money. Beauty's younger siblings nearly lost their minds with excitement as their mother prepared to visit her offices in the city once again.

"You *will* spit in the faces of all our old friends who turned their backs on us when we became poor, I hope, or else I will do something shocking and disgrace you," Sylvia said.

"We were never poor; we have a dishwasher," their mother remarked mildly. "And no one turned their backs on us. You've had five weekend guests in the last two months alone."

"I know," Sylvia said. "But I've always *wanted* to be able to spit in someone's face for turning their back on me for losing my fortune, and this may be as close as we're ever going to get."

"If it means that much to you, I can try to lose this money, too," their mother said.

"No," he said, after a moment's consideration, "although I appreciate your supporting my dreams. I'd rather you bring me back something extravagant and unnecessary and terribly expensive."

"All right."

"*Disgustingly* extravagant. *Vulgar.*"

"I'll do my best."

"Filthy."

"Sylvia," their mother said.

"*Filthy*," he said again firmly, and waggled his eyebrows until she smiled at him.

"I would be satisfied with a Packard," Catherine said, putting down the newspaper. "Or even a Citroën."

"Only one?" Sylvia joked, still waggling.

"Do not store up for yourself treasure on earth, Sylvia," Catherine said primly, "where moth and rust corrupt, and where thieves break in and steal. I'll take one now, and save the other for my birthday."

"What will you have, Bea?" their mother asked, having long ceased to humor her eldest child's perverse insistence on the name Beauty. "You should be rewarded for neither waggling your eyebrows like an imp nor for creasing the newspaper before I get the chance to read it, unlike certain of my other children."

"Where are these accursed offspring?" Sylvia said. "I'll teach them how to behave themselves."

"Sylvia, would you kindly decommission your eyebrows?" his mother said.

"Since you have the goodness to think of me," Beauty said, "be so kind as to bring me a rose." This was in fact a greater inconvenience disguised as a simple request; in trying not to think of herself, as she so often did, she burdened everybody.

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Their mother left for the city. There was money to be set aside for taxes, and debts to be honored, and plenty of

disputes with the other partners about what was to be done with the remainder, and after several discussions that she sorely wished could have come to blows, she returned home only a *little* richer than she had left. There were a few hours remaining in her journey when she found herself lost on a rarely trafficked road and out of gas. She had to leave the car parked on the shoulder and walk in search of a house with a telephone. It was raining madly, and the wind blew so fiercely that she could not keep her steps in a straight line. Night fell, and she heard the soft fall of footsteps behind her and felt the hot breath of something beside her.

Eventually, she saw a light through a line of trees and made for it, finding herself at the entrance to a great house. It was flooded from top to bottom with lights in every room, but the doorway was dark, with no lamp over it. The gate to the house opened easily enough, but no one came to the door at her knock. She found it unlocked and ventured inside, where she was met with a large hall, a well-established fire in the hearth, a fully dressed table, and not another living soul. She hallooed cheerfully and received no reply, then wandered a bit down the hall in case there was a phone she could use without disturbing anyone, but found nothing. She waited a considerable time, and still nobody came.

She had forgotten to be wary of hospitality with no host and drew near the fire to warm herself, planning just how she would explain herself should the owner of the house find her thus. *For*, she thought, *I can hardly be expected to go back to the car at this hour*, and decided she would be very

charming when she *was* found, to make up for her bad manners.

Since she had already begun to be rude, she thought to herself sometime later, by entering the house and sitting by the fire uninvited, there was no great harm in eating from the dinner laid out on the table. She took a piece of chicken and ate it, and only afterward did she wonder at her own presumption. Then she thought she might like to have a glass of wine, and did not wonder at herself any longer; nothing about her situation seemed especially unusual after that. After a few more glasses, it occurred to her that she might like to explore the grounds. So, taking both the bottle and her courage with her, she went out of the hall, crossed through several grand rooms, all beautifully appointed, until she came to an enclosed courtyard and a garden within it. Passing under a cluster of hothouse roses, she was reminded of Beauty's request and twisted off a branch that held several blossoms; immediately she heard an unwelcome noise behind her and turned.

"How particularly uncivil," said the man—*was* it a man?—to her. "I have saved you from an exceedingly uncomfortable and dangerous night by the side of the road by opening my home to you, and not only have you drunk enough wine for several guests, but I find you stealing my property. I ought to shoot you for your trespass."

She had enough of a flair for the dramatic that she could not help but drop the bottle. "There's no excuse for it," she said.

"Be careful that you don't embarrass yourself."

"Would it insult you very much if I tried to apologize?"

"I am afraid that it would."

"Would an explanation prove equally offensive?"

"It would depend on the explanation, madam."

Now she felt herself on slightly surer footing, since he seemed inclined to allow her to be charming at him. She opened her eyes quite wide and tilted her head in as becoming a manner as she dared, remembering that she was past forty. "It was for my daughter," she said, hoping to sound more like an eccentric rich woman than a desperate and moderately impoverished one. "She had a particular inclination for a rose."

"You are holding several roses," he said.

"You are looking at an indulgent mother," she said, "my good man."

"I am neither of those things," the man-who-was-not-a-man replied, "but you might call me Mr. Beale, and don't bother with any more cute speeches. But you say you have a daughter who is fond of roses, and you look like a woman who is amenable to conducting a bit of business. I will overlook the trespass and I will *not* shoot you"—her knees relaxed considerably at that, much to her embarrassment—"on the condition that she should come here willingly in your place and stay here with me."

"How awful," she said without thinking.

"Yes," he said. "Let's not speak any further about it, but go about your business. You'll find a bedroom down the hall

to your right that will suit you, and in the morning you'll find a car at the front of the driveway ready to take you home."

She began to wish she had not dropped the bottle.

"The Packard," he added before he disappeared. "I didn't have time to locate a Citroën. You have a red wine stain around your mouth."

She was reluctant to offer any of her children, even Beauty, to something so monstrous and polite but she was even more reluctant to be shot, and mothers have given their children to monsters before. The thought caused her great grief, but it was not great enough for her to do anything else; in the morning, feeling not a little guilty from her long and untroubled sleep, she drove the Packard home without looking behind her. It handled like a dream.

Once home, the children crowded around her, and she immediately burst into tears.

"Stop crying, Mother. I don't *mind* that it's only the 'twenty-seven model," Catherine said. "A Packard's a Packard."

"Here are your roses," she told Beauty as she wiped her nose. "I'm afraid they cost a bit more than I thought they would." Then she told them about what happened after her car broke down, about the great house flooded with light, and the dinner table with no guests, and what the owner of the house had said to her when he found her in his garden.

"But that's ridiculous," Sylvia said. "For starters, Beauty isn't worth a single flower, let alone a whole branch's worth.

I'll go live with the Beast, and send Beauty a postcard, if I ever get out of bed."

"He might outrage your virtue," Catherine said.

"I should *hope* so," Sylvia said.

"Better not risk the youngest, and the fairest hope of our family purity besides; I'll go, and I won't send anyone a postcard."

"I don't mind," Beauty said. "If I've been sent for, then I'll go."

"You idiot," Sylvia said, but there was no real rancor in his voice. "Can't you tell when you're being protected?"

"Not especially," Beauty said, which was true.

Their mother, who really loved Beauty very much despite herself, burst into tears again.

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"What could he *want* with her?" Catherine whispered from her bed after she had turned out the lights.

"You don't have to whisper," Sylvia said. "It's not a secret, and Beauty has her own room. She's probably asleep already. I'll bet she sleeps the whole night through, even."

"It just feels like something one ought to whisper about," Catherine whispered.

"Do I have to whisper, too?"

"Not if you don't want to."

"Well, he's demanding, and solitary, and wealthy as the Devil, if he can afford to set a table for an imaginary dinner party every night just in case a disoriented motorist stum-

bles in off the street. And Beauty is ugly and doesn't know how to talk to anyone. So I can only assume it's some sort of elaborate sexual parlor game."

"Be serious, Sylvia."

"Uglier women than Beauty have married, you know."

"Sylvia."

"Not that he's strictly asked her to marry him. But as good as."

"Sylvia."

"Well, they have. And she is. So it's true."

"If it's true, then it doesn't need to be said, does it?"

* * *

Some time passed, and nothing happened, and Beauty's mother, who did not enjoy feeling afraid, began to think that perhaps nothing would come of it after all.

Then: "A man in a mustache is at the door to see Beauty," Sylvia said one afternoon. "He looks as though he were going to speak German at me."

"I don't speak any German," the man said, bristling.

"Well, you look as if you do," Sylvia said, "and that's hardly my fault, is it? Not that it's yours either," he added kindly.

"What man—mustachioed or clean-shaven—would come all the way to our front door just to see one of my children, who are barely fit for public consumption?" their mother shouted from her study. "Send him back, wherever he came from."

"I am here on behalf of Mr. Beale," the man said, although no one had addressed him.

"He's here for Beauty's *assignation*," Sylvia said, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Where shall I put him, Mother?" But his mother did not answer.

"I'd send you to the boathouse to meet her," Sylvia said solemnly to the man at the door, "only we don't have a boat-house any longer."

After Sylvia had been made to apologize—"You don't *really* look like you speak German," he said, "and you may come inside to kidnap my sister, and that's as much politeness as you're going to get out of me"—the man was fixed up with a cup of coffee, which he did not drink, at the kitchen table with the family gathered around him. The man explained what was going to happen to Beauty. He had a contract in his briefcase.

"Is your man Mr. Beale going to do something *shocking* to her?" Sylvia asked hopefully.

"No," the man said. Sylvia kicked the legs of the table.

"I don't know that I want to belong to anyone," Beauty said. "I agreed to go, but this is something else entirely."

"Look at it this way," Catherine said. "Everyone belongs to someone. You're not allowed to belong to yourself. We haven't the money anymore and you never had the sense, and there's no point in pretending otherwise. You can't wait out your turn. You'll have to play, and the longer you put it off, the worse your position gets."

Beauty didn't answer.

"Here's another way to look at it, then," Catherine said. "Right now you belong to everyone in the family, and you can see what a mess that's turned out to be. At least this way you'll only belong to one person. That's something, you know. It's not much, but it is something."

"All right," Beauty said. "I'll go. But I won't have a good time."

"No one's asking you to," Catherine said. "You're the one who insisted on going in the first place, so you're free to be as miserable as you wish to be once you get there."

"Can I bring my books with me?" Beauty asked, and no one objected, which was as good as a yes.

"Call when you can," her mother said, bursting into tears again, even though it had already been agreed that she would be allowed to accompany Beauty to the house and see that she was safely installed there.

"I've packed all your socks, and the shirts that don't make you look washed-out," Catherine said. "The rest I'm going to burn. You have terrible taste in shirts, Beauty." Catherine kissed first Beauty, then their mother, and shoved the suitcase hastily into the car with them.

"Come back anytime you like, Mr. Beale's man," Sylvia shouted as they drove away. "You're welcome to outrage *my* virtue next, but I can't promise I'll have any left, if you dawdle about it."

The house was very quiet after that.

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They took the main road to Mr. Beale's house, and toward evening they saw it lit up like a furnace against the horizon. The house threw off such heat from the enormous fires stoked in each room that it melted all the snow in a great ring around it.

Mr. Beale's man parked the car in the garage, and Beauty and her mother went back into the great hall, where the table was once again set lavishly, as if for an enormous celebration. Her mother had at first no heart to eat, but Beauty set about serving her as if they were at home, and she ended up doing modest justice to a chop and some clear soup. There was the heavy fall of footsteps just outside and the breath of something in the doorway, and then a Beast was with them. Beauty did not turn. Her mother dropped her soup spoon.

"Has she come willingly to me?" the Beast, who was Mr. Beale, asked. "Have you come of your own accord, girl?"

"I think so," she said, which was good enough for everyone involved.

Mr. Beale said, "Good." He turned to her mother. "Woman, go home, and never think of coming here again while I am living. You might have dessert first, before you go."

Then Mr. Beale turned, and then there was the heavy breath of something in the doorway, and then there was the heavy fall of footsteps on the stairs, and then there was nothing.

"I think," Beauty's mother said, shaking a little, "that you had better go home after all, and let me stay here, even if he does want to shoot me."

Beauty said nothing, and her mother hated herself a little for not meaning a word of what she had offered. "I am sorry," she said. She meant *that* sincerely, at least.

"I'll be fine," Beauty said.

Her mother could not help but cry again as she left, but who can cry or even feel sorry forever? Who will not eventually clear themselves of guilt, if they live long enough? She was not so sorry that she could not find pleasure in being free of that house, and she still had two other children. So she went home.

After her mother left, Beauty picked up one of her books and pointed her face at it and turned the pages—almost as if she were reading it. She felt sick and hot from the nearness of the fire, but decided it did not matter, as the Beast (for he was *more* than simply not-quite-a-man, he was *quite* a Beast) was likely to shoot her, or devour her whole, before much longer. Although not all Beasts eat you up in a single night.

However, she thought she might as well walk around the house until she was eaten, or shot, as she could not help admiring it. It was—unusually for such an obviously expensive home—designed with comfort in mind. She was perhaps less surprised than she ought to have been to see a door with the words "Beauty's Library" written over it. She opened the door and found a room of grand proportions, with hundreds of shelves built right into the walls and wrapping all the way around, each one filled with books. There was a pianoforte too, with dozens of music books, but what caught

Beauty's attention was that the books she had brought herself were already shelved with the others, although she had not put them there.

If Sylvia had been there, he might have said: "If Mr. Beale were going to kill me, he would never have gone to such trouble building me a library first, unless he enjoyed inciting confusion as much as he enjoyed killing, in which case he would have." But Sylvia was not there, and Beauty did not think either of those things. She took a book at random from one of the shelves and read these words:

The library is yours.

The books are mine.

Your eyes are your own.

What you read is up to me.

Beauty put the book back onto the shelf and left the room. She found her bedroom (the words "Beauty's Bedroom" were over the door) and sat on her bed. She did not leave her room again until late the next day. In the great hall she found dinner ready, and while she was eating, heard an excellent concert of music, but could not see the players who produced it. She had the strange certainty that she was to be often left alone but never left in private. Her hands shook so that she could not quite bring the fork to her lips without spilling anything, so she set it down. Then she laughed without meaning to.

Later, when she was seated there again for supper, she

heard the sound of Mr. Beale on the stairs, and then he was in the chair beside her. "Beauty," he said, "will you let me watch you eat?"

"It is your house," she answered.

"Not precisely," he said, "not precisely. My house it may be, but you are the mistress here—I have made it so, so it's legitimate—and you need only to tell me to leave, if you find me troublesome, and I will leave you."

"If I am mistress here"—she did not look at him—"why do I have a library full of books I cannot read?"

"Why, Beauty," Mr. Beale said in amazement, tilting her chin so that she had to look at him, "that is simply a matter of the division of labor. You are the mistress of the *house*"—he arranged his mouth in a little smile—"and I am the master of everything that is in it." He dropped her chin and let his hand rest in her lap. "How ugly do you think I am?"

Beauty said nothing.

"Come, you are mistress of your own voice; speak," said Mr. Beale.

Beauty opened her mouth.

"But first remember I am the master of all the words spoken in this house," he said, pressing her hands lightly. "Remember that."

"I think nothing of the kind," she said.

"You may go to bed," he told her, smiling. "I will finish your dinner for you."

Beauty rose to leave. "Please endeavor to amuse yourself in your house," Mr. Beale said after her, "for it belongs

to you, and always will, and I should be very uneasy if you were not happy."

Beauty had nothing to say to that. She went to her bed and lay herself down in it.

* * *

Beauty sat among the books all the next afternoon, but she did not open the books. She did not open the curtains. She let the hours pass over her. That night at dinner, Mr. Beale was especially kind. He inspected every oyster before he would allow one on her plate, and she ate them all. Afterward, he asked her: "Beauty, will you be my wife?"

She was some time before she answered, for she did not yet know which words were not allowed in her house. At last, however, she said, "No, thank you."

Immediately he got up and smothered the fire that had been burning in the hearth. "Good night, Beauty," he said, as cheerful as ever. "Sleep well."

That night, long after Beauty went to bed, she heard the careful press of feet just outside her door. When she woke in the morning, every fireplace in the house was dark, and the carpets and the drapes were full of smoke. When she went to the library, she saw the title on every one of her books had been burned away to ash.

The next night at dinner, Mr. Beale did not enter the room but stood in the doorway. "Beauty," he said gently, "these chairs are for my wife. Are you my wife?"

"No, Mr. Beale," she said.

"Then what right have you to sit on my wife's chair?"

"None, Mr. Beale," she said.

"Where do you think you should sit, Beauty? Remember I want only for you to feel as if you are at home here."

Beauty took her plate and sat on the floor.

* * *

Beauty spent three months in Mr. Beale's house. Every evening Mr. Beale paid her a visit and watched her eat and talked to her. Every night before she went to bed he would ask her to be his wife. One night she said to him, "Perhaps you should stop asking me this."

"You think I should?"

"I think it might make you—*happier*—to not have to hear the same answer, at least for a while. I will stay here with you, and I do like you, and I am grateful to you for all you have given me, but I cannot marry you. I cannot marry anyone."

"I must grieve, then," said Mr. Beale. "What a great misfortune is mine, to love you as I do without hope."

"To be fair," she said, "you did not make our being married a part of the original terms."

"I did not," Mr. Beale said lightly. "More fool I."

"Perhaps you would not like being married to me," Beauty said. "I do not know how to talk to people, and I have terrible taste in shirts."

"If you will not marry me," Mr. Beale said, "perhaps I will die of grief."

Beauty's expression did not change. "I'm so unused to compliments. I'm afraid that I take them quite seriously."

"If you do not marry me," Mr. Beale went on, "it might kill me quite dead, and then this house would have no master at all, and you would belong to no one, and no one would belong to you. For, Beauty, I belong to you quite already. Does this mean nothing to you?"

When Beauty did not answer, he rose and pressed a thumb against her forehead. "Good night, Beauty."

That night, Beauty dragged the blankets off her bed and slept on the floor underneath it. Mr. Beale paced the halls all night, and he called after her, but he could not find her.

"Your poor Beast shall die of grief," he said. "I would not like to make a murderer out of you, dear Beauty."

Beauty did not come out from under the bed.

"Yet I would happily die," he said, "rather than cause you a moment's unease. Is it your wish that I should die, Beauty? Tell me if you wish it. Tell me if you would like me to die and I will do it, Beauty, Beauty, Beauty."

"Or I can beg for my life," he said. "I can beg, Beauty." She pressed her hands against her ears and waited. Then his footsteps fell away and were swallowed up by the house's great silence.

After three days had passed, Beauty came out of her room. Somewhere in the house lay Mr. Beale, and he was either quite dead or keeping himself extremely still. She went first into the kitchen and drank directly from the tap for two and one-half minutes. Then she went looking for

Mr. Beale. She found him lying facedown by the front door. She prodded him with her foot, but he did not move.

Beauty went into the back parlor and telephoned her mother. "Something's wrong with Mr. Beale, Mamma," she said. Then, a bit louder: "I think something's wrong with Mr. Beale. You had better come right away." Then Beauty went into the library and sat down. She did not touch the books, for they still did not belong to her, no matter how dead Mr. Beale may have been; she had never been his wife. She began to write Sylvia a postcard.