

# Beauty Mark of the Beast

By Jeffrey R. Paine

Once upon a time, although not nearly sufficiently long enough ago nor far enough away, there lived a beast.

Not a natural beast, mind you, like a wolf or a bear or a badger or an auroch, but a magical beast, an enchanted beast—okay, a vain, look-down-his-nose-at-everyone prig of a young man. He was noble-born, in fact a prince (second cousin twice removed) in the loosely bound and far-flung kingdom ruled by King Reginald The Really Nice, but he was not very noble. He sneered at his fellow lords who practiced *noblesse oblige* with their subjects. He mistreated anyone and everyone and everything of lower rank.

Even among his equals or betters, he was mostly rude and arrogant.

“What a rude and arrogant little bastard,” King Reginald the Really Nice said to his closest sycophants during a hunt one day. “Are you sure he’s one of *ournobles*?”

“Unfortunately yes, my liege,” replied one of his councilors.

The King thought for a moment, then said, “Let’s see if the King of Abalon would be interested in invading through the prince’s valley when next he tests our borders, eh?”

“Very good, my liege,” the councilor replied.

The attack was arranged, but only a bit of bad weather, which delayed the timely arrival of King Reginald The Really Nice’s forces, and a fusillade of

AK-47s (illegally acquired through some of the prince's darker connections to a more-recent nonfiction article), prevented a long and hard-fought battle that would have reduced the prince's polity to rubble and allowed Mighty King Milty of Abalon to liberate the realm from the prince's unkindly rule.

The Prince's humor was dark, capable of glee only at the expense of others less fortunate, delighting in such pastimes as overcharging toll on travelers on the road through his principality, mugging King Reginald The Really Nice's messengers and tax collectors, and mistreating his own subjects.

The prince was a ruthless businessman, taking advantage of his land's strategic location near the crossroads between several other kingdoms and principalities: the majority of his wealth derived from his thriving toll-and-protection business.

One day some months following the failed invasion, one of the prince's Toll Patrol, a special unit of his joint military/police force, spied a haggard old crone hobbling down the roadway.

"Old woman," he said, accosting her. "You must pay the toll to use this road."

"Must I?" asked the old woman, "I seem to be doing pretty well. I've walked several miles so far, and I haven't paid yet."

"Sarcasm doesn't help you. Allow me to rephrase," said the soldier, with a grimace at the old, oft-repeated joke. "The Prince pays to maintain this roadway. In order to cover those expenses, those who use the road are expected to pay to Prince a minor sum in recompense..."

“And what minor sum might that be?” the old woman asked, leaning back as far as she dared before she might tumble over backwards, to peer up into the face of the rather ugly ruffian in a smart blue suit before her.”

“Three ducats,” he said.

“Ducats?” she asked.

“Ducats,” he replied. “Three of them. One hundred and twenty pestasters, or fifty-one farlings.”

“I’m sorry,” replied the old lady, shaking her head. “I’m from the old country. What’s that in Reejils?”

Temporarily taken aback, the low-ranking officer mumbled something.

“What’s that, sonny?” she asked.

“Well, let’s see, there are three rods in a furlong and sixteen ounces in a pint—or is that eight ounces in a cup?—uh, no wait, it’s eight pints to a pound, isn’t it, so that a pound is four shillings, or a hundred pence, which converts to a quarter hectare. Multiply that by 454 grams in a kilogram....”

“Oh, never mind,” rasped the old woman, rolling her eyes. “What a public education gets you these days,” she mumbled under her breath. Then, to the policeman, she continued, “I have no intention of paying a toll. The Prince has no right to charge to maintain the road and ‘protect’ travelers in the woods.” The way she said it, the officer was sure that he could hear the quotation marks around the word “protect.”

“So you refuse to pay?” asked the toll officer.

“Oh, you *are* a quick one, you are, sonny!” she said.

“Then I must arrest you,” he said, slapping a pair of handcuffs onto her wrists. He also deftly, as a man with great practice in the procedure, bound her feet and gagged her, and set her into the back of his wain. At a fair pace, then, he trundled off toward the Prince’s castle, deep within the forest.

At the castle, he carried the woman swiftly into the Prince’s hearing chamber. He pulled on a cord, which caused a great bell to ring. A few disinterested citizens, obviously just roused from a slumber, entered from a side door and took their seats as observers or in the jury box. A moment later, the Prince, in his full court regalia, entered from a hidden door behind his throne, and sat down.

“Bring the prisoner forward,” yawned a half-hearted crier, “and may God and the Prince have mercy on you,” he added with a chuckle.

Before the Prince or the policeman had a chance to speak, the foreman of the jury stood up and said in a loud voice, “We the jury find the defendant guilty!”

“Now, Harry,” intoned the Prince. “I know you’re impatient, this being your first trial and all as head juror, but please wait to pronounce your sentence until after we take care of the formalities.”

Abashed, the head juror sat back down. “I don’t know why we go through all this every time,” he mumbled in a loud whisper. “Just trying to speed things up around here. It’s always ‘Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!’ but just try to make things more efficient, to speed things up, and what do you get? You get your ears pinned back!”

The Prince, well able to hear Harry’s remarks, ignored them. He turned to the old woman, who was now precariously balanced on the end of the bench, next to the officer of the law. He smiled pleasantly.

"I think we can do without the bindings on this one, Tom," he said to the policeman.

"But, sir!" the lawman protested. "This one's a danger, she is. She blasphemed you!"

"Tom," the Prince said, a jovial quality entering his voice. "You mean to tell me this fine old lady actually spoke my name in vain?"

"Uh, no, wait, I mean, it's, uh...."

"What did she say, Tom?" the Prince asked.

"She said that you don't have the right to charge for road use or to levy 'protection' on travelers, she did!" Tom blurted out.

"Oh, you mean 'treason,' not blasphemy," the Prince explained. "She's no danger, unbind her at once."

"Yeah, treason, that's the word," said Tom, now looking thoughtful and turning to unbind the woman.

"Old woman, we believe in the rule of law here in my little Princedom. Therefore, please allow me to advise you of your rights," said the Prince. "First, and only, you have the right to remain silent. In fact, you have the responsibility to remain silent, because anything you say will count against you in the eyes of this court. We have appointed an attorney to plead on your behalf."

He turned from the woman towards a vibrant young man standing to the side. "Does she understand this, George?"

“Of course I understand this, you dolt,” the woman said. “How can he know if I understand or not?”

“Ooops!” intoned the bailiff. “Apparently she doesn’t understand at all. That’s an additional three years added to any sentence the court will impose.”

“I don’t think she understands, your eminence,” said George. “But I do. She enters a plea of guilty.”

“George, George, George,” scolded the Prince. “We haven’t even read the charges yet. Why is everyone but me so ready to convict this woman without giving her a fair hearing?”

“Because we all know that we’re going to find her guilty,” said Harry, in a loud stage whisper. “So why don’t we dispense with this charade and get on with it.”

“Because, *Harry*,” the Prince said, turning to glower at the foreman, “It just wouldn’t be right. How would you like for us to try you for insubordination right now? Hmmm? How about if we dispense with the niceties of a trial and just ‘get on with it?’”

Harry blanched, said “I’m sorry, Your Grace. I beg your forgiveness, Sire,” he added, falling to his knees. “Please, My Lord,…”

“That’s enough grovelling, Harry,” the Prince said lightly, smiling again, and added, “for now.” Then he continued, “Remember, if you ever get made Prince, which is of course very unlikely, you can do things the way you see fit. Me, I like to follow the law. Make sure everything is done right and proper the first time, that’s what I always say, so there are no mistakes, no grounds for appeals. Now then, what has this old hag done, Tom?”

Tom cleared his throat, and then pronounced in his most officious tones, "This woman...eh, what's your name, ma'am? Gladys? Really? Me mum's named Gladys! No, really! Well, it is a small world. Oh, anyway, Gladys here did refuse to pay toll upon the Prince's road, after having apparently come some distance already upon it, and did blas...no, wait...pronounce treasonous words against you, My Lord, and in addition to that she is short and ugly and obviously unclean, and therefore is a member of the lower class..."

"Tom," the Prince interrupted.

"Yes, Sire?" answered Tom.

"Being from a lower socioeconomic class is not a crime, Tom," said the Prince, leaning forward on his throne.

"No, My Lord," replied Tom, "But it does count against her in sentencing."

"Oh! Right you are. I forgot," said the Prince, sitting back with wry smile. "Now then, George, how does she plead?"

"Guilty, my Lord, on all charges," George said.

"I do not..." Gladys started to say.

"Six more years, Sire," the bailiff intoned.

"We of the jury also find her guilty, My Lord," Harry added.

"That's nine years for speaking out in court, plus nine years in the Prince's service for refusing to pay the toll, plus another six for treason, and five more for the aggravating circumstance of being a peasant...that makes 29 years

total. Sentence is passed,” said the Prince, bringing his gavel down on the arm of his throne. “Bailiff, take her away!”

“All right, that Will be **QUITE ENOUGH!**”

A voice shook the courtroom. The Prince’s citizen’s looked about, trying to find the source.

Tom, who was closest to the source, took two steps backwards. All eyes went first to Tom, then to the beautiful young woman in the sharp earth-tone business suit that perfectly set off her striking green eyes, who stood where the old crone had been.

Then, it seemed that everyone was trying to talk, or more likely, shout, at once.

“**QUIET!**” her voice easily ascended above all others, drowning them out. Silence returned to the chamber.

“I have seen enough,” she said, leveling a glare at the prince that would have slain puppies. “You, M’Lord Prince, and all your citizens, are found wanting. You have abused the privileges of being royalty. You have enriched yourselves by overcharging toll on your roads; and by charging for ‘protection,’ then having your own staff act as highwaymen to rob and enslave those who refuse to buy protection from you. You have thus enriched yourself at the expense of your neighboring kingdoms and principalities, while providing nothing to them in return. You have mocked justice and unfairly treated travelers to hard labor in your fields from your unfair sentences. I will now pronounce sentence upon you!”

“Wait!” cried the Prince. “Who are you to pass judgment?”



"I might ask the same question of you," the woman replied with a tight, cold smile. "But it could be that I have the right to do this because I have the power and authority to do it. Is this not the justification you use for your 'assessment' of tolls upon travelers? So from whence does your authority extend?"

"I am a Prince, rightful ruler of this land..."

"I see," she said. "So being of royal blood, however remote and thin, and having succeeded to the position by nepotism, gives you the right to be an arrogant, unfeeling, opportunistic tyrant?"

"Well, I..." said the Prince, uncertain what all the larger words meant.

"Anyway, I will tell you who I am that I can do this," said the woman. "I am the Witch Aruedel, of the Continental Association of Witches, Warlocks and Magicians. The CAWWM has been retained by Amalgamated Continental Royal Families, Inc., Ltd., to rid the land of those nobles that are abusing their positions and powers, and generally giving royalty a bad name."

"My credentials," she added, pulling a thick manila folder from a magic pocket in her blazer and dropping it on the table before the prince.

"My great aunt, once removed, is president of ACRF..." the Prince began.

"Yes," replied the lady. "She said you'd bring that up. She wants you to know that she told us to visit you first. You're something of an embarrassment to the family, you know. They assigned your father to this backwater principedom to get him out of the way. They never expected him, or you, to figure out how to run a royal scam. Frankly, they didn't think your family was up to the task. And more frankly, you obviously have never learned the moral of the story of the Goose with the Golden Eggs. Which, by the way, your great-great-uncle,

twice removed, learned in the original story, so long ago. You've killed your Golden Goose. Now you must pay the piper, to mix metaphors and fairy tales."

"[...]..." stammered the Prince.

"Yes, you," said the witch. "Now be quiet. Your punishment shall be threefold: first, all those you have imprisoned and enslaved shall be released. They will leave your land, taking with them any and every item of value, leaving you and your loyal subjects paupers."

Softly, in the background, but growing louder, one could hear the sudden cries of joy from thousands upon thousands of no-longer enslaved prisoners, followed by laughter and the thudding of running feet as they took to the roads out of the Principedom, carrying with them every item of value. Several passed through the chamber, removing ornaments and everything else that wasn't firmly a part of the building, including the prince's fine clothes and crown.

When the rush had subsided, the witch continued. "Second, your loyal subjects, those who have supported your vicious tyranny, shall be driven out and dispersed throughout the nations. For varying periods, they shall be forced to conduct the lowest, hardest work, until they have learned their lessons and repudiated you and your abominable behavior."

There was suddenly a wailing sound, and a gnashing of teeth and rending of clothes as the loyal subjects, including everyone in the room, were forced upon the road, penniless and at the mercy of everyone else in the world. The dejected stamping of their feet eventually faded from hearing.

"Finally, and this applies specifically to you, Lord Prince, you shall be personally set upon by triplets."

The Prince's private door slammed open and the Princess staggered into the room, pale and rather obviously with child. "My dear," she said. "Our physician informs me that I am quite suddenly pregnant. With triplets. Close your mouth, dear. Isn't it wonderful?"

Catching his breath, the prince said to the witch, "I hate children. Why don't you just turn me into a monster and leave me alone?" He, of course, had intended the sarcastic comment as a rhetorical device. The witch, however, said, "An excellent idea," and with a wave of her wand, he was instantly transformed into most hideous beast one could imagine.

With a shriek, his wife fled from the room, proceeding at a great pace—especially for one so suddenly and completely pregnant—right on out of the principality. "And instead of being forced to live with your suddenly augmented family, they shall be taken to safety, for rehabilitation and retraining.

"You, however, must remain here, until you have learned your lesson, repented your ways, and earned the love of a good person." She paused for a moment, then added, with a sardonic grin. "However long it takes."

"Now then, since the sentence has been passed, I'll be on my way," the witch said, appropriating a broom from a nearby closet. "We'll be seeing you restored to your royal place, I'm sure, in just a few years," she said as she levitated, her laughter echoing away as she disappeared through a window.

As he realized that he had been stripped of all the material things he coveted, and abandoned by all who were in his service, he grew angry and frustrated, his rage mounting and growing until he became blinded by this one emotion, acting truly as a monster, destroying everything he touched, killing everything he could reach, without consideration or regard.

And here we leave the Prince and his Princedom, because nothing much of interest happens there until the rest of the story catches up, some decades later. No one returned to the principality for a good many years. Some said the place was haunted, while others noted its poor location and lack of services. Still others said that lurking within the deep darkness was a hideous beast that would rend animals and visitors alike limb from limb, and then devour the remains. It is said that no one but the disturbed and the foolishly brave ventured into the principality for a good many years. No matter: none who did came out again....

To Be Continued....