

As sharp as a needle, the sun broke through and shone on the royal palace. How could the sun not shine, on such a happy day? All the dukes and duchesses were there, all the barons and baronets and countesses. Musicians were playing, chefs cooking, and chroniclers scribbling in their history books:

'Today the Princess Beauty is christened, first and beloved child of the king and queen, heiress to the throne. Never has this kingdom of ours seen such celebrations! Here have come wizards and wise men, and fairies of every colour, all with magical gifts for our baby princess . . .'

But no. Look again. One name is not on the list. The Grey Fairy was not invited. 'She has a tongue as sharp as a needle,' the queen had said, when the guest lists were drawn up. 'Must we invite her?'

So now all colours of fairies but grey stood before the cradle and touched the baby with their glittering wands:

'I give her Love.'

'And I give her Laughter.'

'I give her Beauty.'

'And I give her Health.'

Suddenly, a log in the great fireplace spat, and an ember flew out on to the carpet. Up from the ember sprang the Grey Fairy. 'And I say that before she is full grown, she shall prick her finger at a spinning wheel and DIE!' The fairy hurled her curse into the cradle like a handful of rusty nails, and the baby began to cry.

'No, no!' cried the queen.

'Take that back!' roared the king.

'Please!' begged the assembled guests. But the Grey Fairy only turned to grey smoke and curled away up the chimney.



Only one fairy remained who had not yet given her christening gift. Now, this Lilac Fairy raised her wand in blessing over the screaming baby. 'The Grey curse cannot be lifted—but it can be blunted. My gift to you, Princess Beauty, is this: you shall not die but only sleep until a greater magic than mine can wake you!'

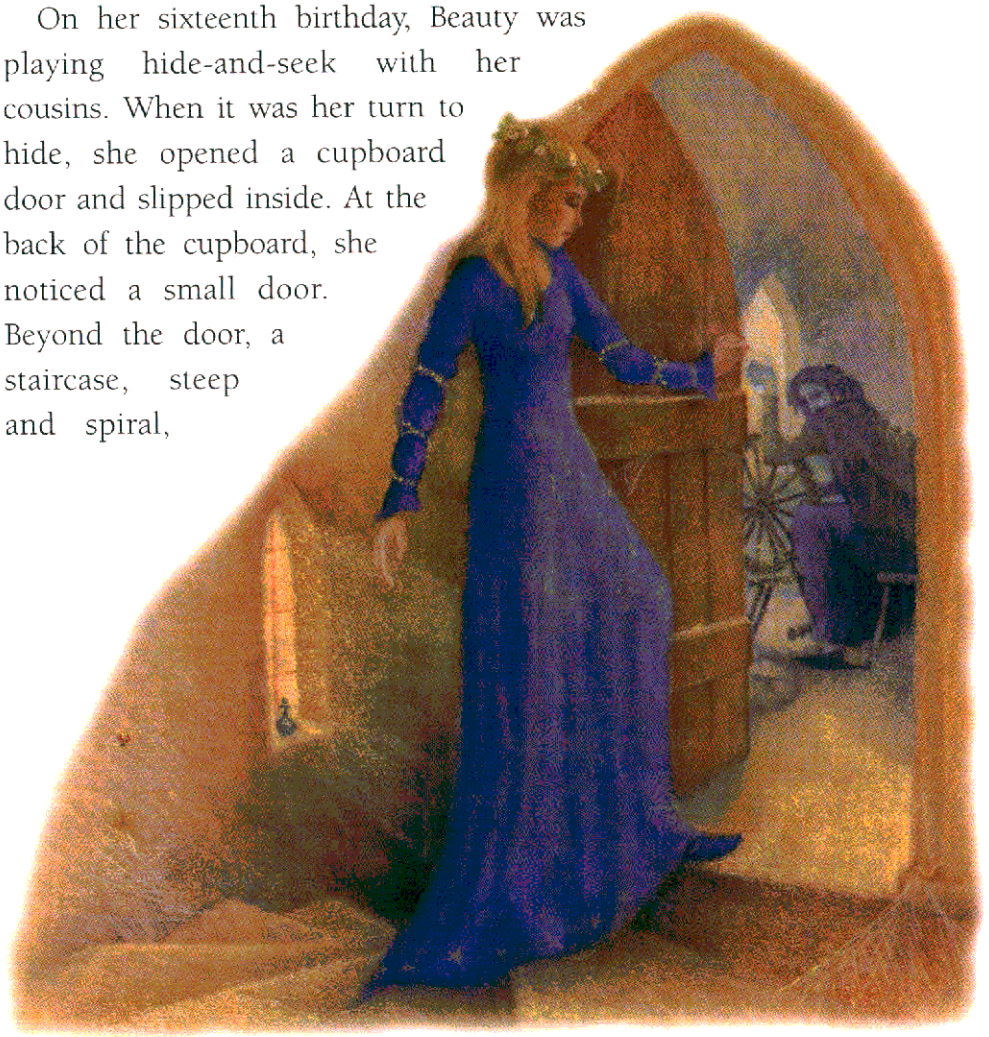
The christening broke up in confusion and panic. Soldiers were sent out through the whole city, through the whole kingdom. 'Destroy all the spinning wheels! Burn them on bonfires!' commanded the king. 'If there are no spinning wheels, she can never prick herself. Hurry! Burn every one! And find the Grey Fairy! Perhaps she can be made to eat her words!'

No trace was found of the Grey Fairy, but spinning wheels by the hundred were smashed and burned, their sharp spindles pulled out like the stings out of wasps. The sheep in the fields went unsheared for want of wheels to spin their wool. But Princess Beauty grew, unharmed, into

a toddler, a girl, a young woman.

Naturally, no one spoke to her about the dreadful matter of the Curse, and thanks to the fairy blessings (and her own good nature) she was the sweetest, most beautiful, most loved princess in the history of the nation.

On her sixteenth birthday, Beauty was playing hide-and-seek with her cousins. When it was her turn to hide, she opened a cupboard door and slipped inside. At the back of the cupboard, she noticed a small door. Beyond the door, a staircase, steep and spiral,



wound up past arrow slits and alcoves draped with cobwebs. And there at the top was a turret room she had never known existed before. The door stood open and from inside came the whirra-whirra-whirr of a wheel, spinning.

'Come in, dearie. Have you never seen a spinning wheel? No? It's for twining wool into thread. Come closer and see how it's done.' The spinner was a woman all in grey. Even her hair and face were grey—like something that has lived out of the sunlight too long. But her grey smile was inviting enough. 'Would you like to try, dearie? Just take hold of the spindle . . .'



'Oh! My finger!' Beauty showed the prick to the grey lady, but the spinner only laughed at the drop of blood on her fingertip. Laughed and laughed and laughed.

Beauty ran back to the door, back down the stairs. But her head was swimming, so that the spiral stair seemed to be unwinding under her feet. She stumbled through the cupboard and out into the hall, holding up her finger: 'Mother! Mother, look!' And then the black and white flagstones heaved like the sea, and Beauty felt herself falling, falling, falling . . .