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Blue Beard



nce upon a time, there lived a man who owned many splendid properties in the town and in the country, who possessed an abundance of silver and gold plate, handcrafted furniture, the finest porcelain and glass, and coaches studded all over with sapphires. But he was the owner of something else as well – a blue beard which made him so appallingly ugly that women and girls took one look at him and fled.

He had a neighbour, a society lady, who had two fine sons and two daughters who were flowers of beauty. He asked her for one of the girls' hand in marriage and told her she could choose herself which one of them she would give to him as bride. Neither of the girls would have him, though, and

they sent him backwards and forwards, up, down and sideways from one to the other, both adamant they would not marry a man with a blue beard. But there was one thing which repelled them even more and filled them with fear and revulsion. He had already been married to several wives and no one living knew what had happened to them.

Blue Beard, to try and win the girls over, escorted them with my lady, their mama, and three or four other mademoiselles of quality, and some fine young people of the district, to one of his country estates, where they were entertained for eight sumptuous days. So now it was all parties and candles and music and masks; it was hunting and shooting and fishing; it was dancing and feasting and the finest champagne and armagnac. It was *merci, monsieur* and *enchanté*, and *oooh la la*! In fact, everything went so splendidly, that the youngest daughter started to think that the lord of the manor's beard wasn't actually *bleu, mais non*, not really, and that he was a most civilised gentleman.

No sooner were they home than the marriage was held. A month after that, Blue Beard told his wife that he had to travel to a distant country for at least

six weeks, on a matter of extreme importance. He encouraged her to amuse herself while he was away. She was to send for her friends and family, go to the countryside if she wished, and generally have a good time wherever she went. 'Here,' he said, 'are the keys to the two Great Rooms that contain my best and most costly furniture; these grant access to my silver and gold plate, which is to be used sparingly; these open my strong chests, which hold all my money; these my casket of jewels; and this here is the master key that opens all my apartments. But this little one here is the key to the closet at the far end of the great gallery. Open everything and go anywhere, but do not unlock the little closet. I forbid you this – and I want you to know that I forbid you this as night forbids day. If you disobey, there will be no hiding place here from my anger.' She promised to do everything just as he said and so he squeezed her to him, sandpapering her soft cheek with his blue beard, then climbed into his coach and began his journey.

Her friends and family didn't wait to be invited – they were so impatient to see all the splendour of the newlyweds' house. Only her brothers didn't come because their military duties delayed them. But all

the others rushed straight to the two great rooms, flinging wide all the closets and wardrobes to gape and coo at the finery, which got more splendid with every door they opened. They could not say enough about their envy and delight at their friend's good fortune. She, however, paid not the slightest attention to all the treasures, because she was burning up with curiosity about the little closet. She became so consumed by this, that without even thinking how rude it was to abandon her guests, she rushed down the back stairs so recklessly that she could have broken her slender neck three times over.



When she reached the closet door, she hesitated for quite a while, remembering her husband's warnings, and worrying about the consequences if she disobeyed him. But temptation was far too strong for her and she could not resist it. She picked out the little key and opened the door, shaking all over. At first, she could make out nothing clearly at all, because the shutters were all closed. But after a few moments she saw that the floor was spattered with lumps of congealed blood, and upon it lay the bodies of several dead women, each sprawled there, or hanging in her wedding gown. These were the brides that Blue Beard had married and had slaughtered one after another. She nearly died of terror and as she jerked the key from the lock it fell from her hand. She tried to calm herself, picked up the key, locked the door, and hurried up the stairs to her chamber to try to recover. But she was too frightened. Then she noticed that the key to the closet was stained with blood, so she tried three times to scrub it off, but the blood would not come off even though she scoured it with soap and sand. The key was magic, and when she rubbed the blood from one side it would appear again on the other. That evening, when her guests

said their *au revoirs*, she begged her sister to remain.

Unexpectedly, Blue Beard interrupted his journey and came home, saying that he had received a message on the road that the important business he was on his way to deal with was completed to his satisfaction. His wife did everything to act as though she was delighted by his sudden return. The next morning he asked her for the keys, but her hand shook so violently as she gave them to him that he guessed at once what had happened. 'Why is it,' he said, 'that the key to the closet is missing?' 'Oh! I must have left it upstairs on the table,' she said. 'Make sure,' said Blue Beard, 'that you fetch it to me quickly,' and after going backwards and forwards several times, she was forced to bring him the key. Blue Beard turned the key over and over, looking at it very carefully, then said to his wife, 'How did this blood get on the key?' 'I don't know,' answered the poor girl, white as a dead bride. 'You don't know,' said Blue Beard, 'you don't know, but *I* know. You were determined to go into the closet, weren't you? Very well, madame, you shall go in and take your place among the sisterhood you found there.'

At this, she flung herself at her husband's feet and

pleaded pitifully for his forgiveness, swearing that she was sorry and would never disobey him again. Even a stone would have been moved by her beauty and grief, but Blue Beard's heart was harder than any stone. 'You must die, *chérie*,' he said, 'and soon.' 'If I have to die,' she said through her tears, 'then allow me a little time to dress in my bridal shroud.' 'You can have a quarter of an hour,' said Blue Beard, 'but not a second longer.'

As soon as she was alone, she called to her sister and said, 'Sister, I need you to climb up to the top of the tower and see if my brothers are coming. They promised me they would come here today, so if you see them then give them a signal to hurry.' Her sister went up to the top of the tower, and the terrified woman cried out, 'Sister, Sister, do you see anything coming?' And her sister replied, 'I see nothing but the sun making dust and the grass growing green.' Meanwhile, Blue Beard was sharpening and sharpening a huge knife, and chanting horribly:

Sharper, sharper, shiny knife,
Cut the throat of whiny wife!

Then he shouted out, 'Come down at once or I'll come up to you!' 'Just one moment longer, please,' said his wife, 'first I have to fasten my bodice and pull on my silken stockings;' and then she called up very softly, 'Sister, Sister, do you see anything coming?' And her sister said, 'I see nothing but the sun and the dust and the grass.' Blue Beard was sharpening and chanting even more ferociously:

Sharper, sharper, knife so dear,
Slit her throat from ear to ear!

'Get down here now!' he bawled, 'or I'll come up to you.' 'I'm coming,' said his wife, 'I just have to tie my garter and slip on my shoes,' and then she cried out, 'Sister, Sister, do you see anything coming?' 'I see,' answered her sister, 'a great dust rolling in on this side here.' 'Is it my brothers?' 'Oh no, my dear sister! It's just a flock of sheep.' Blue Beard sharpened and chanted even more vigorously:

Now the knife is sharp enough,
And ready for the bloody stuff!

'Come down here now!' he bellowed, 'or I'll be up for you!' 'One last moment,' said his wife, 'I have only my veil to secure and my white kid gloves.' Then she cried, 'Sister, Sister, do you see anything coming?' 'I can see,' she said, 'two horsemen coming, but they are still a long way off. Thanks be to God,' she cried at once, 'it is our brothers! I have made them a sign to gallop.' Blue Beard roared out now so loudly that the whole house shook.

The poor woman came down and collapsed at his feet, with her face jewelled with tears and her hair loose about her shoulders. 'This won't help,' said Blue Beard, 'you must die;' then, grasping her hair with one hand and raising the cutlass with the other, he was about to cut off her head. His wife writhed around and, looking at him with dying eyes, begged him for one last moment to calm herself. 'No, no, no,' he said, 'give yourself over to God!' At this precise moment there came such a thunderous knocking at the gates that Blue Beard froze. The gates were opened and immediately the two horsemen entered. They saw Blue Beard, drew their swords and rushed straight at him. Blue Beard recognised that they were the brothers of his wife – one a dragoon and the

other a musketeer – so he ran for his life. But the brothers were too fast for him and caught him before he even reached the steps to the porch. Then they skewered their swords through his body and left him there dead.

Their poor sister was scarcely more alive than her husband and was too weak to stand and embrace her brothers. Blue Beard had no heirs and so his wife became owner of all his estate. With one part, she gave a dowry to her sister, to marry a young gentleman who had loved her truly for a long time; another part she spent to buy captains' commissions for her brothers, and she used the rest to marry herself to a very kind, clean-shaven gentleman, who soon made her forget the dark time she had spent with Blue Beard.

