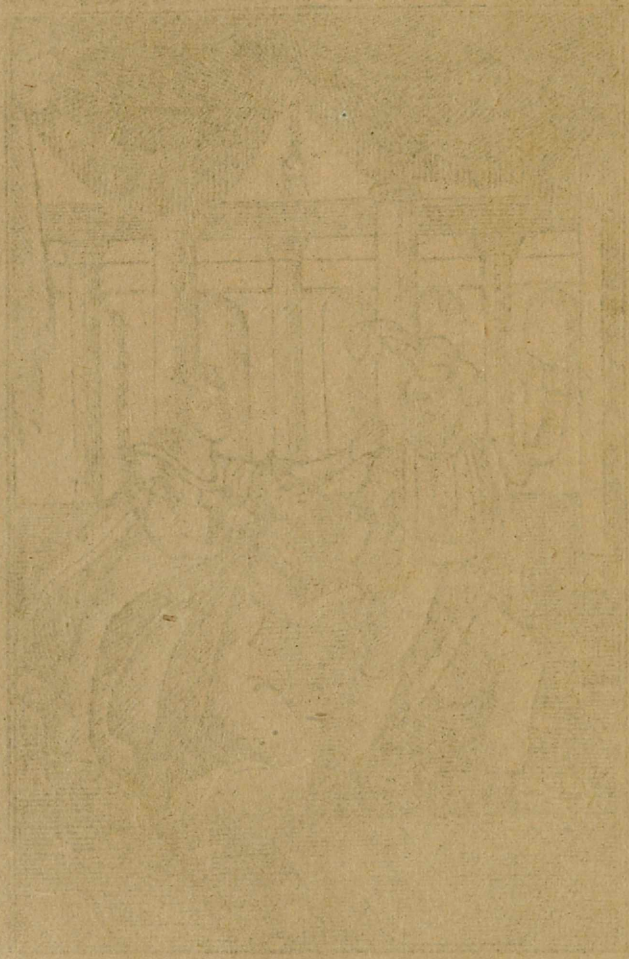


BLUE BEARD.

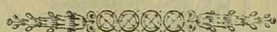


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BLUE BEARD.



A LONG time ago, and at a considerable distance from any town, there lived a gentleman, who was not only in possession of great riches, but of the largest estates in that part of the country. Although he had some very elegant mansions on his estates, he generally resided in a magnificent castle, beautifully situated on a rising ground, surrounded with groves of the finest evergreens, and other choice trees and shrubs.

The inside of this fine castle was even more beautiful than the outside; for the rooms were all hung with the richest damask, curiously ornamented; the chairs and sofas were covered with the finest velvet, fringed with gold; and all his table-dishes and plates were either of silver or gold, finished in the most elegant style. His carriage and horses might have served a king, and perhaps were finer than any monarch's of the present day. The gentleman's appearance, however, did not altogether correspond with his wealth; for to a fierce disagreeable countenance was added an ugly blue beard, which made him an object of fear and disgust in the neighbourhood, where he usually went by the name of Blue Beard.

There resided at some considerable distance from Blue Beard's castle, an old lady and her two daughters, who were people of some rank, but by no means wealthy. The two young ladies were very pretty, and the fame of their beauty having reached Blue Beard, he determined to ask one of them in marriage. Having ordered a carriage, he called at their house, where he saw the two young ladies, and was very politely received by their mother, with whom he begged a few moments' conversation.

After the two young ladies left the room, he began by describing his immense riches, and then told her the purpose of his visit, begging she would use her interest in his favour. They were so lovely, he said, that he would be happy to get either of them for his wife, and would therefore leave it to their own choice to determine upon the subject, and immediately took his leave.

When the proposals of Blue Beard were mentioned to the young ladies by their mother, both Miss Anne and her sister Fatima protested, that they would never marry an ugly blue man, and particularly one with such a frightful blue beard; besides, although he possessed immense riches, it was reported in the country, that he had married several beautiful ladies, and nobody could tell what had become of them.



Their mother said, that the gentleman was agreeable in his conversation and manners; that the ugliness of his face, and the blue beard, were defects which they would soon be reconciled to from habit; that, his immense riches would procure them every luxury their heart could desire; and he was so civil, that she was certain the scandalous reports about his wives must be entirely without foundation.

The two young ladies, who were as civil as they possibly could be, in order to conceal the disgust they felt at Blue Beard, and to soften their refusal, replied to this effect:—That at present they had no desire to change their situation; but, if they had, the one sister could never think of depriving the other of so good a match, and that they did not wish to be separated.

Blue Beard having called the next day, the old lady told him what her daughters had said; on which he sighed deeply, and pretended to be very much disappointed; but, as he had the mother on his side, he still continued his visits to the family. Blue Beard, knowing the attractions that fine houses, fine furniture, and fine entertainments have on the minds of ladies in general, invited the mother, her two daughters, and two or three other ladies, who were then on a visit to them, to spend a day or two with him at his castle.

Blue Beard's invitation was accepted; and having spent a considerable time in arranging their wardrobe, and in adorning their persons, they all set out for the splendid mansion of Blue Beard.

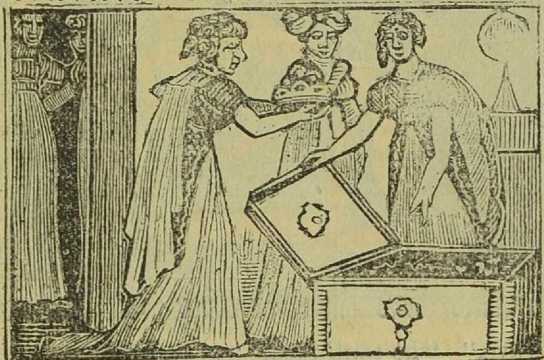
On coming near the castle, although they had heard a great deal of the taste and expense that had been employed in decorating it, they were struck with the beauty of the trees that overshadowed the walks through which they passed, and with the fragrance of the flowers which perfumed the air. When they reached the castle, Blue Beard, attended by a number of his servants in splendid dresses, received them with the most polite courtesy, and conducted them to a magnificent drawing-room.

An elegant repast was ready in the dining-room, to which they adjourned. Here they were again astonished by the grandeur of the apartment and the elegance of the entertainment, and they felt so happy, that the evening passed away before they were aware.

Next day, after they had finished breakfast, the ladies proceeded to examine the pictures and furniture of the rooms that were open, and were astonished at the magnificence that everywhere met their view.

The time rolled pleasantly away, amidst a succession of the most agreeable amusements, consisting of hunting, music, dancing, and banquets, where the richest wines and most tempting delicacies, in luxurious profusion, presented themselves in every direction.

The party felt so agreeable amidst these scenes of festivity, that they continued at the castle for several days, during which the cunning Blue Beard, by every obsequious service, tried to gain favour of his fair guests. Personal attentions, even although paid us by an ugly creature, seldom fail to make a favourable impression, and therefore it was no wonder that Fatima, the youngest of the two sisters, began to think Blue Beard a very polite, pleasant, and civil gentleman, and that the beard, which she and her sister had been so much afraid of, was not so very blue.



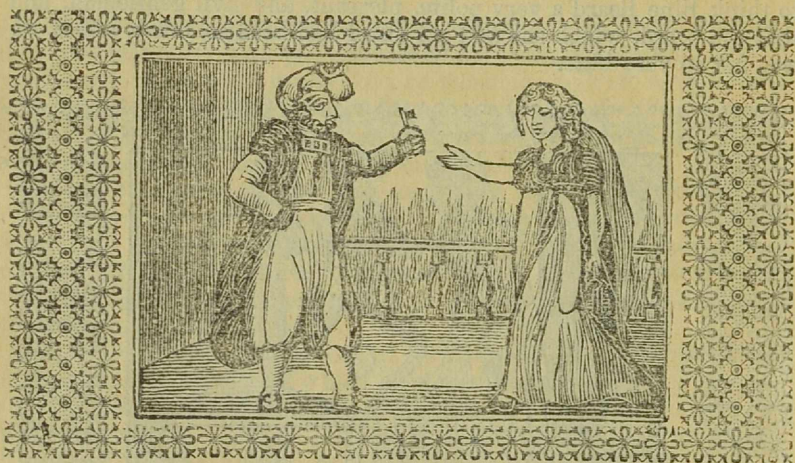
A short time after her return home, Fatima, who was delighted with the attention which had been paid her at the castle, told her mother that she did not now feel any objections to accept of Blue Beard as a husband. The old lady immediately communicated to him the change of her daughter's sentiments.

Blue Beard, who lost no time in paying the family a visit, was in a few days privately married to the young lady, and soon after the ceremony, Fatima, accompanied by her sister, returned to the castle the wife of Blue Beard.

On arriving there, they were received at the entrance by all his retinue, attired in splendid dresses, and Blue Beard, after saluting his

bride, led the way to an elegant entertainment, where every thing that could add to their comfort being prepared, they spent the evening, in the most agreeable manner.

The next day, and every succeeding day, Blue Beard always varied the amusements, and a month had passed away imperceptibly, when he told his wife that he was obliged to leave her for a few weeks, as he had some affairs to transact in a distant part of the country, which required his personal attendance. "But," said he, "my dear Fatima, you may enjoy yourself during my absence in any way that will add to your happiness, and you can invite your friends to make the time pass more agreeably, for you are sole mistress in the castle. Here are the keys of the two large wardrobes; this is the key of the great box that contains the best plate; this of my strong box where I keep my money; and this belongs to the casket, in which are all my jewels. Here also is a master-key to all the rooms in the house; but this small key belongs to the blue closet at the end of the long gallery on the ground-floor.



"I give you leave," "he continued, "to open, or do what you like with all the rest of the castle, except this closet: now, my dear, remember you must not enter it, nor even put the key into the lock. If you do not obey me in this, expect the most dreadful of punishments."

She promised implicit obedience to his orders, and then accompanied him to the gate, where Blue Beard, after saluting her in a tender manner, stepped into the coach, and drove away.

When Blue Beard was gone, Fatima sent a kind invitation to her friends to come immediately to the castle, and ordered a grand entertainment to be prepared for their reception. She also sent a messenger to her two brothers, both officers in the army, who were quartered about forty miles distant, requesting they would obtain leave of absence, and spend a few days with her. So eager were her

friends to see the fine apartments and the riches of Blue Beard's castle, of which they heard so much, that in less than two hours after receiving the notice, the whole company were assembled, with the exception of her brothers, who were not expected till the following day.

As her guests had arrived long before the time appointed for the entertainment, Fatima took them through every apartment in the castle, and displayed all the wealth she had acquired by her marriage with Blue Beard. They then went from room to room, and from wardrobe to wardrobe, expressing fresh wonder and delight at every new object they came to: but their surprise was increased when they entered the drawing-rooms, and saw the grandeur of the furniture. In short, nothing could exceed the richness of what they saw, and they could not help admiring and envying the good fortune of their hostess.

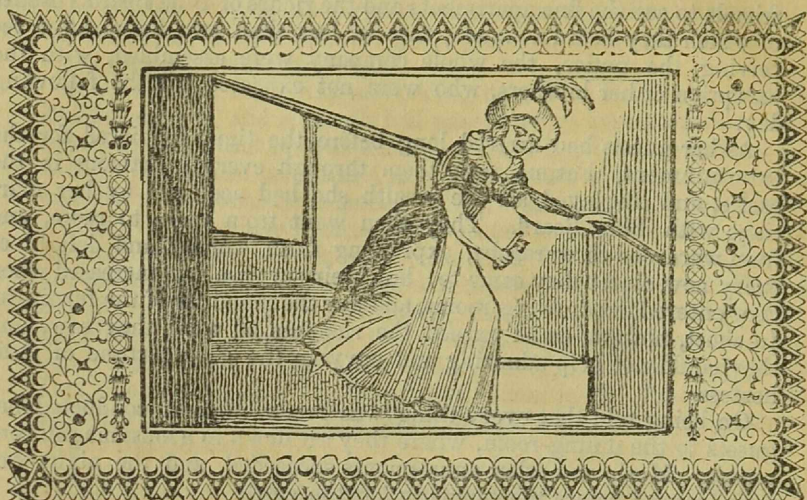
On being told that every thing was ready, Fatima conducted her guests to the dining-room, where they sat down to a most magnificent repast. Music and other amusements succeeded, and the night was far advanced before the company left the castle.

During the day Fatima was so much engaged, that she never once thought of the blue closet, which Blue Beard had given her such strict commands not to open; but when all the visitors were gone, and she had retired to her chamber, the restrictions that Blue Beard had put upon her not to examine the closet, raised her curiosity to know its contents to such a degree as to be almost irresistible.

She took out the key, and went to consult with her sister on the subject that engrossed all her thoughts. Anne used every argument she could think of to persuade Fatima against the imprudence of her desires in wishing to pry into what Blue Beard had so strictly forbidden, and also reminded her of the threats he had used; but they were all in vain, for her remonstrances only served to raise Fatima's curiosity the higher, and she determined to gratify it, whatever the result might be.

She seized one of the candles, and hurried down the stairs to the fatal closet. After unlocking the door, she remained a few moments undetermined whether to proceed or not, but her curiosity urged her forward; and as she observed nothing to intimidate her, she entered with some little degree of resolution. She had only advanced a few steps, when the most frightful scene met her view, and, struck with horror and dismay, she dropt the key of the closet. She was in the midst of blood; and the heads, bodies, and mutilated limbs of murdered ladies lay scattered on the floor.

Blue Beard's first wife was a bold-spirited woman, with whom he quarrelled soon after marriage; and having in the heat of his anger murdered her, he concealed the body in this blue closet. The rest of his wives, who, like Fatima, could not refrain from indulging their curiosity, he had killed for acting contrary to his express commands; and the key, which was the gift of a fairy, had always betrayed their fatal disobedience.



Fatima, at this horrible sight, trembled violently; but on recovering a little, she summoned sufficient resolution to snatch up the key, lock the door, and leave the closet.

As she went up stairs, her imagination conjured up the ghosts of these murdered ladies to her view, and, a faintness coming over her, she was obliged for a few moments to lean against the banister, to regain strength enough to reach her sister's chamber, to whom she related the whole of her horrid adventure. On her sister inquiring if she locked the door, Fatima produced the key, but it was all covered with blood, and they both turned pale with fear. They spent a great part of the night in trying to clean off the blood from the key, which was the only evidence of Fatima's imprudence; but it was without effect; for though they washed and scoured it with brick-dust and sand, no sooner was the blood removed from one side than it appeared on the other. Fatigued with their exertions, they at last retired to bed.

Fatima rose at a late hour next day, and, after breakfast, she consulted with her sister how she ought to proceed. As Blue Beard was to be absent for some weeks, she thought of making her escape from the castle before his return; but as her brothers were expected in an hour or two, she resolved to tell them what had taken place, and be guided by their advice.—A loud knock at the gate made her almost leap with joy, and she cried, "They are come! they are come!" but what was her consternation when Blue Beard hastily opened the door, and entered! It was impossible for Fatima to conceal her agitation, while Blue Beard mentioned, without seeming to observe her uneasiness, that he had been met by a messenger, who was on the way to the castle to prevent his journey, and therefore his presence there would not now be necessary.

Fatima pretended to be very happy at his sudden return, and said

every thing she could think of to please him; but Blue Beard, who guessed what she had been about, requested his keys, in order, as he said, that he might change his dress. She went to the chamber, and soon returned with the keys, all except the one belonging to the blue closet, and put them into his hand. He took the keys from her with seeming indifference, and, after glancing at them minutely, said, rather sternly, "How is this, Fatima? I do not see the key of the blue closet here! Go and bring it to me instantly."

The poor girl, feeling the crisis of her fate approaching, said, "I will go and search for it," and left the apartment in tears. She went straight to her sister's chamber, where they again tried every means, but in vain, to remove the blood from the key. She continued a few minutes agitated and irresolute, but the voice of Blue Beard calling for her, left no time for consideration, and she was forced to return to the apartment where she had left her husband, and reluctantly to give him the fatal key.

On receiving the key, Blue Beard, after examining it, burst into a terrible rage, and said with great harshness,—“Pray, madam, how came this blood to be here?” “I am sure I do not know,” replied she, trembling and turning pale. “What! do you not know?” cried Blue Beard, in a voice like thunder, which made poor Fatima start with fear; “but I know well! You have been in the forbidden blue closet! And since you are so fond of prying into secrets, you shall take up your abode with the ladies you saw in that closet.”

Blue Beard had raised his arm to perpetrate the horrible deed, when a dreadful shriek from her sister, who at that moment entered the apartment, arrested his attention. Her sister entreated him to spare the life of Fatima; but he was deaf to her intercession, and the only favour that the relentless tyrant would grant to her entreaties was a respite of a quarter of an hour, that she might make her peace with Heaven before he put her to death.

Blue Beard, after he had promised to allow this, in order to secure his victim during the short space allotted her for prayer, led or rather, dragged her up to a large hall, in the top of the tower of the castle, to which they were followed by the sister.

When alone with her sister, Fatima felt her dreadful situation, and again burst into tears. Fatima's thoughts were now turned to her brothers, whom she expected that day, and she requested her sister to ascend to the top of the tower, to see if there was any appearance of them, for on them her whole expectation of deliverance now rested.

Fatima's sister immediately ascended to the top of the battlement, where she stood, to observe if any one approached the castle, while the poor trembling girl below every minute cried out, “Sister Anne, do you not see any person approaching yet?” Her sister always replied, “There is not a human being in view, and I see nothing but the sun and the grass.”

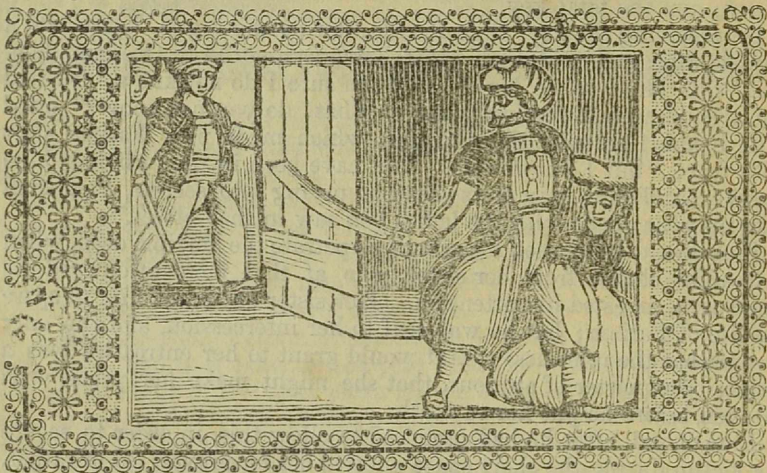
She was upon her knees bewailing her fate, when Blue Beard, in a tremendous voice, cried out, “Are you ready? the time is expired!” and she heard the sound of his footsteps approaching.

She again supplicated him to spare her life, but he refused: and he was proceeding to seize her, when she entreated five minutes longer to finish her prayers. Blue Beard, knowing she was completely in his power, and without the least chance of escape, granted her the five minutes she had requested, and then retired.

Fatima again inquired, "Sister Anne, do you see no one coming yet?" Her sister quickly answered, "I see two men on horseback, but they are still a great way off."

The hope of deliverance made Fatima exclaim, in the ecstasy of the moment, "Thank Heaven! I shall yet be saved, for it must be my two brothers!—my dearest sister, make every signal in your power to hasten them forward, or they will be too late to prevent my fate!"

Blue Beard's patience being now exhausted, he burst open the door in a rage, and seizing her by the hair of the head, was in the act of striking her a blow with his scimitar, when the noise of persons ap-



proaching with hasty steps arrested the progress of his sanguinary arm. Blue Beard had not time to conjecture who the intruders might be, when the door opened, and two officers, with their swords drawn, rushed into the apartment.

Struck with terror, the guilty wretch released his wife from his grasp, and without attempting to resist, he tried to effect his escape; but they pursued, and seized him before he had got above twenty paces from the place. After reproaching Blue Beard with his cruelty, they stabbed him to the heart, and he expired.

Fatima, who had fallen to the ground at the time Blue Beard quitted the hold of her, still lay in the same situation insensible; for the appearance of her brothers, at the moment she expected certain death, had thrown her into a faint, which continued during the whole of the time they were engaged in despatching her husband.

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