Once upon a time there lived a man who possessed fine houses in town and in the country, dishes and plates of silver and gold, furniture all covered in embroidery, and carriages all gilded; but unfortunately the man’s beard was blue, and this made him so ugly and fearsome that all the women and girls, without exception, would run away from him. Nearby there lived a noble lady, who had two daughters of the greatest beauty. The man asked her permission to marry one or other of them, leaving it to her to decide which daughter she would give to him. Neither of them wanted him, and each said that the other one could be his wife, for they could not bring themselves to marry a man with a blue beard. What put them off even more was that he had already been married several times, and nobody knew what had become of the wives.

Bluebeard, in order to get better acquainted, took them and their mother, with three or four of their best friends, and some young men who lived in the neighbourhood, to visit one of his country houses, where they stayed for a whole week. They had outings all the time, hunting parties, fishing trips, and banquets; nor did they ever go to sleep, but spent all the night playing practical jokes on one another; and they enjoyed themselves so much that the younger of the two sisters began to think that their host’s beard was not as blue as it had been, and that he was just what a gentleman should be. As soon as they were back in town, it was settled that they should marry.

After a month had passed, Bluebeard told his wife that he had to go away for at least six weeks to another part of the country, on an important business matter. He told her to make sure that she enjoyed herself properly while he was away, to invite her
friends to stay and to take them out into the country if she wanted to, and not to stint herself wherever she was. ‘Here are the keys of the two big store-rooms,’ he said, ‘the keys for the cupboards with the gold and silver dinner service that is not for every day, and for my strongboxes with my gold and silver coins, and for my jewel-boxes, and here is the master key for all the rooms. As for this small key here, it will unlock the private room at the end of the long gallery in my apartment downstairs.* You may open everything and go everywhere, except for this private room, where I forbid you to go; and I forbid it to you so absolutely that, if you did happen to go into it, there is no knowing what I might do, so angry would I be.’ She promised to obey his commands exactly; and he kissed her, got into his carriage, and set off on his journey.

Her neighbours and friends came to visit the new bride without waiting to be invited, so impatient were they to see all the expensive things in the house; they had not dared to come while her husband was there, because of his blue beard, which scared them. And off they went to look at the bedrooms, the sitting-rooms, and the dressing-rooms, each one finer and more luxurious than the one before. Then they went up to the store-rooms,* and words failed them when they saw how many beautiful things there were, tapestries, beds, sofas, armchairs, side-tables, dining-tables, and mirrors so tall that you could see yourself from head to foot, some with frames of glass, some of silver, and some of silver-gilt, which were the most beautiful and splendid that they had ever seen. They kept on saying how lucky their friend was and how much they envied her; she, however, took no pleasure in the sight of all this wealth, because of the impatience that she felt to go and open the door to the private room downstairs.

So keen was her curiosity that, without reflecting how rude it was to leave her guests, she went down by a little secret staircase at the back; and she was in such a hurry that two or three times
she nearly broke her neck. When the door of the little room was in front of her she stood looking at it for a while, remembering how her husband had forbidden her to open it, and wondering whether something bad might happen to her if she disobeyed, but the temptation was strong and she could not resist it; so she took the little key and, trembling all over, opened the door. At first she could see nothing, because the shutters were closed. After a few moments, she began to see that the floor was all covered in clotted blood, and that it reflected the bodies of several women, dead, and tied up along the wall (they were the wives whom Bluebeard had married, and whose throats he had cut one after the other). She nearly died of fright, and the key, which she had taken out of the lock, fell out of her hand.

When she had recovered herself a little, she picked up the key again, and locking the door behind her she went upstairs to her room to try to collect her thoughts, but she was unable to, because the shock had been too great. She noticed that the key was stained with blood, and although she cleaned it two or three times the blood would not go away. However much she washed it, and even scoured it with sand and pumice, the blood stayed on it; it was a magic key, and there was no way of cleaning it completely: when the blood was removed from one side, it came back on the other.

Bluebeard returned from his journey that very night, saying that while he was still on his way, he had received letters telling him that the business he had gone to arrange had already been settled to his advantage. His wife did all she could to make him believe that she was delighted at his returning so soon. The next day, he asked for his keys back, and she gave them to him, but her hand was trembling so much that he easily guessed what had happened.

‘Why is it’, he asked, ‘that the key to my private room is not here with the others?’
She replied: ‘I must have left it upstairs on my table.’
‘Then don’t forget to give it to me later,’ said Bluebeard.
She made excuses several times, but finally she had to bring him the key. Bluebeard examined it, and said to his wife: ‘Why is there blood on this key?’
‘I know nothing about it,’ said the poor woman, as pale as death.
‘You know nothing about it?’ said Bluebeard; ‘but I do: you have tried to get into my private room. Very well, madam, that is where you will go; and there you will take your place, beside the ladies you have seen.’
She threw herself at her husband’s feet, weeping and pleading to be forgiven, and all her actions showed how truly she repented being so disobedient. So beautiful was she, and in such distress, that she would have moved the very rocks to pity; but Bluebeard’s heart was harder than rock. ‘You must die, madam,’ he said, ‘this very instant.’
‘If I must die,’ she said, looking at him with her eyes full of tears, ‘give me some time to say my prayers to God.’
‘I will give you ten minutes,’ said Bluebeard, ‘and not a moment longer.’
As soon as she was alone, she called to her sister and said: ‘Sister Anne’ (for that was her name), ‘go up to the top of the tower, I beg you, to see if my brothers are coming, for they promised to come today; and if you can see them, make them a signal to hurry.’
Her sister Anne went to the top of the tower, and the poor woman below cried up to her at every moment: ‘What can you see, sister Anne, sister Anne? Is anyone coming this way?’
And her sister would reply: ‘All I can see is the dust in the sun, and the green of the grass all round.’
Meanwhile, Bluebeard, holding a great cutlass in his hand, shouted as loud as he could to his wife: ‘Come down from there at once, or else I’ll come and fetch you.’
‘Please, just a minute longer,’ his wife answered, and immediately called out, but quietly: ‘What can you see, sister Anne, sister Anne? Is anyone coming this way?’

And her sister Anne replied: ‘All I can see is the dust in the sun, and the green of the grass all round.’

‘Down you come at once,’ Bluebeard was shouting, ‘or I will fetch you down.’

‘I’m coming now,’ his wife kept saying; and then she would call: ‘What can you see, sister Anne, sister Anne? Is anyone coming this way?’

And then her sister Anne replied: ‘I can see a great cloud of dust, and it is coming towards us.’

‘Is that our brothers on their way?’

‘Alas! sister, no; it is only a flock of sheep.’

‘Do you refuse to come down?’ shouted Bluebeard.

‘Just a moment more,’ his wife answered, and called out: ‘What can you see, sister Anne, sister Anne? Is anyone coming this way?’

‘I can see,’ she replied, ‘two horsemen riding towards us, but they are still a long way off . . . God be praised,’ she cried a moment later, ‘it’s our brothers; I shall wave to them as hard as I can, so that they will hurry.’

Bluebeard began to shout so loudly that the whole house shook. His poor wife came down, and fell at his feet in tears, with her hair all dishevelled. ‘That will not save you,’ cried Bluebeard; ‘you must die.’ And taking her hair in one hand, and raising his cutlass in the air with the other, he was on the point of chopping off her head. The poor woman, turning towards him and looking at him with despair in her eyes, begged him to give her a minute or two to prepare herself for death.

‘No, no,’ he said, ‘commend your soul to God,’ and raising his arm . . .

At that moment, there was heard such a loud banging at the door that Bluebeard stopped short; the door opened, and at once
the two horsemen came in; they drew their swords and ran straight at Bluebeard. He recognized them for his wife’s brothers: one was a dragoon guard, the other a musketeer;* immediately he ran to escape, but the two brothers went after him so fast that they caught him before he could get out of the front door. They cut him open with their swords, and left him dead. His poor wife was almost as dead as her husband, without even enough strength to get up and embrace her two brothers.

It turned out that Bluebeard had no heirs, so that his wife became the mistress of all his riches. She used some to marry her sister Anne to a young gentleman who had loved her for years; some she used to buy captains’ commissions for her two brothers; and the remainder, to marry herself to a man of true worth, with whom she forgot all about the bad time she had had with Bluebeard.

THE MORAL OF THIS TALE

Curiosity’s all very well in its way,
But satisfy it and you risk much remorse,
Examples of which can be seen every day.
The feminine sex will deny it, of course,
But the pleasure you wanted, once taken, is lost,
And the knowledge you looked for is not worth the cost.

ANOTHER MORAL

People with sense who use their eyes,
Study the world and know its ways,
Will not take long to realize
That this is a tale of bygone days,
And what it tells is now untrue:
Whether his beard be black or blue,
The modern husband does not ask
His wife to undertake a task
Impossible for her to do,
And even when dissatisfied,
With her he’s quiet as a mouse.
It isn’t easy to decide
Which is the master in the house.