

English 231: Detective and Mystery Fiction
Abridged Translation of Charles Perrault's
"The Blue Beard" (1697)

Once upon a time lived a wealthy man whose only flaw was his beard, which was so black that it appeared blue. One of his neighbors had two beautiful daughters; one day he asked the lady to choose which one she would bestow upon him. Neither daughter, however, wanted to marry him, partly because of his scary blue beard and partly because he had had many previous wives who had disappeared without a trace.

To woo the sisters, the Blue Beard gave a week-long party at his country house. The guests had such a wonderful time that the Youngest Daughter began to reconsider Blue Beard's marriage proposal, and, within a month, they were married. About a month later, the Blue Beard departed on a two-month business trip. Before leaving, however, he handed her the keys to every room and cabinet in the house, save one: the key to the closet at the end of the great gallery on the ground floor. He said: "You may open any door in the house except the closet, which I forbid you to look in on pain of death."

After opening all the doors, the young wife became obsessed with the forbidden closet. One day, while her sister was visiting and occupied in another part of the house, she resolved to open it. She hesitated briefly, remembering the penalty for disobedience. But, goaded by temptation, the Wife opened the door. Once her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw the floor was covered with blood from the bodies of several dead women ranged on hooks against the walls. (These were the wives Blue Beard had murdered, one after the other.) As she recoiled in terror, the key fell from her hand and was stained with blood; she picked it up, locked the door, and ran back up to her bedroom. There, however, she discovered that the key was enchanted: when the blood was washed from one side, it reappeared on the other.

When the Blue Beard returned from his journey the next morning, the frightened Wife tried to appear happy to see him. When he asked for the keys, the Wife returned them, but her white face and trembling hand prompted him to notice that the key to the closet was missing. The Wife agreed to search for it, and after much ado was forced to give it to him. Then he knew that she had looked in the closet, and told her, "Madame, your curiosity will be rewarded when you take your place among the Ladies you saw there." Though she threw herself at her husband's feet, weeping and sincerely begging his pardon, promising she would never again disobey him, the Blue Beard was unmoved. He gave her only a few minutes to make her prayers to God.

When alone, she asked her sister Anne to go up to the roof of the house to search for signs of their brothers, who were expected to visit later that day. Anne obeyed her sister, but saw only the sun blazing in the noontime sky. Downstairs she could hear the Blue Beard sharpening his sword and calling to the Wife, "Come down immediately, or I'll come after you." Anne looked out again for signs of the brothers' arrival, but saw only a flock of sheep making a dustcloud on the horizon. Downstairs Blue Beard's shouting grew more violent and insistent. Anne looked out one more time, and saw two horsemen - the brothers! She gave them a sign to make haste, but the Blue Beard now had the Wife in his grasp and took hold of her hair in one hand and the sword in the other.

Suddenly a knocking on the door startled the Blue Beard. The door opened, and into the room dashed the Wife's brothers. The Blue Beard tried to make his escape through a back door, but the brothers overtook him and slashed him to pieces with their swords.

The poor Wife was almost as dead as her husband, and lacked the strength to rise and embrace her brothers. But eventually she recovered, only to find that because Blue Beard had no heirs, she now owned his entire estate. She used part of it to marry her sister Anne and to buy military commissions for her brothers. Then she remarried herself to a very honest gentleman who made her forget the bad times she had passed with the Blue Beard.

*

Moral

Curiosity, despite its attractions,
Too often is the source of many regrets.
Every day a thousand examples prove
That, for both men and women, curiosity is a pleasure
Which fades away as soon as it is enjoyed,
And always costs too dearly.

Other Moral

If you are sensible,
And if you know something of the world,
You are aware that this story
Is a tale of olden times;
You know that husbands are no longer so terrible;
Nor do they demand the impossible;
And even if a husband were once angry and jealous
Around his wife you will see him submit;
And no matter what color his beard may be
It's easy to tell who's the real master.