

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Tale of Knight Bluebeard**

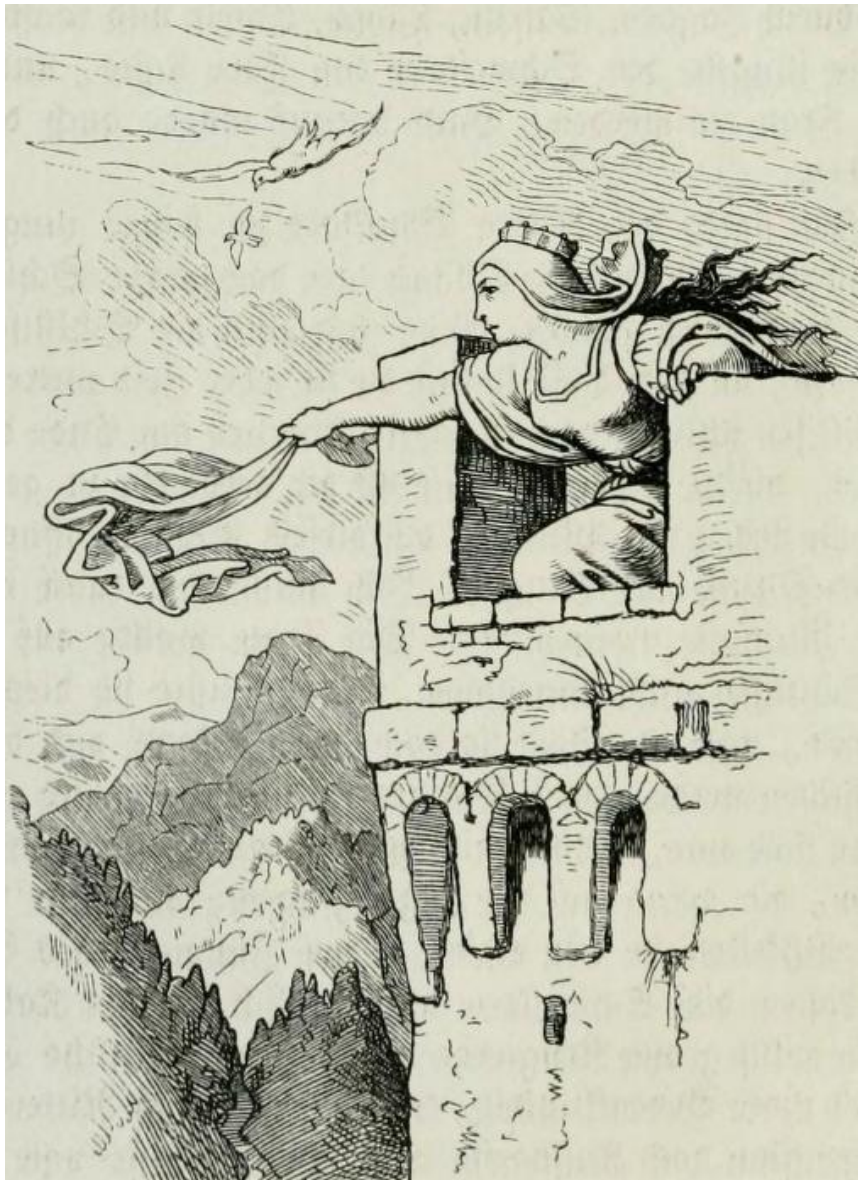
Once upon a time there was a powerful knight who was rich in money and goods and lived off the fat of the land at his castle. As he had a blue beard, he was called simply Knight Bluebeard; his real name was actually something else, but it had been lost. This knight had already married more than once, but the rumour had spread that all of his wives had died in rapid succession without anyone having actually heard anything about their illnesses. Now Knight Bluebeard had a mind to marry once again, and among his neighbours was a noblewoman who had two beautiful daughters and several chivalrous sons, and these siblings loved one another most tenderly. Now when Knight Bluebeard wished to marry one of these daughters, neither of them particularly desired this, for they feared the knight's blue beard and were unwilling that they should be parted. But the knight invited the mother, the daughters and the brothers – each and every one of them – as guests to his beautiful large castle, where he supplied them with so much pleasant diversion, and gave them so much amusement through hunts, meals, dances, games, and other festivities, that in the end the younger sister plucked up her courage and decided to become Knight Bluebeard's wife. Soon afterwards the wedding was celebrated with great splendour.

After a while Knight Bluebeard said to his young wife: "I must go on a journey, and I am handing over to you the care of the whole castle, dwelling and demesne; with all that appertains thereto. And here are the keys to all the rooms and apartments, you may enter any of these at any time. But this little golden key fits the backmost cabinet at the end of the large suite of apartments. This room, my dearest, I must forbid you to enter, as you hold

my love and your life dear. If you were to open this cabinet, the most terrible punishment would await you for your curiosity. I would then have to separate your head from your body with my own hand!” – After these words the wife did not want to accept the little golden key, but she had to, in order to keep it safe; and so she parted from her husband with the promise that it would never occur to her to unlock and enter that cabinet.

When the knight had gone, the young wife received a visit from her sister and her brothers, who liked to go hunting; and now the treasures in the many, many rooms of the castle were scrutinised with delight every day, until the sisters came to at the cabinet. Although the wife was herself burning with curiosity, she was dead set against opening it, but her sister laughed at her scruples, thinking that Knight Bluebeard was keeping the most precious and valuable of his treasures hidden inside from pure caprice. And so the key was placed, with some trepidation, in the lock, and the door instantly flew open with a dull thud; and in the sparsely lit room were visible – a hideous sight! – the bloody heads of all the previous wives of Knight Bluebeard, who had been as helpless to resist the urging of curiosity as the present wife, and whom the evil man had all decapitated with his own hand. Shocked to death, the wife and her sister shrank back; in her horror the wife had dropped the key, and when she picked it up there were bloodstains on it which could not be rubbed off, and the attempts to shut the door again were equally unsuccessful, for the castle was enchanted, and in the meantime horns announced the arrival of riders before the castle gate. The wife breathed a sigh of relief, believing it to be her brothers whom she was expecting back from the hunt, but it was Knight

Bluebeard himself, who had nothing better to do than to ask after his wife; and when she stepped up to him, pale, trembling, and thrown into confusion, he asked about the key. She went to fetch the key, and he followed hot on her heels; and when he saw the stains on the key, then his behaviour changed completely, and he yelled: "Wife, you must now die by my hand! I let you have control over everything! Everything was yours! Your life was rich and beautiful! And your love for me was so slight, you reprobate wench, that you did not heed my single slight request, my solemn command? Prepare yourself for death! It's all over for you!"



Filled with horror and scared to death, the wife hurried to her sister and asked her to swiftly climb up to the tower battlements and look out for their brothers and, the moment she caught sight of them, to give them a distress signal, while she threw herself to the ground and supplicated God for her life. And in between her pleas she cried: "Sister! Don't you see anyone yet?" – "No one!" rang the disconsolate answer. – "Wife! Come down!" yelled Knight Bluebeard. "Your respite is over!"

"Sister! Don't you see anyone?" screamed the trembling wife. – "A cloud of dust – but oh, it is sheep!" answered the sister. – "Wife! Come down, or I'll come for you!" yelled Knight Bluebeard. "Mercy! I'll be right down! Sister! Don't you see anyone?" – "Two knights are approaching on their steeds, they saw my signal, they are riding like the wind."

"Wife! Now I'm coming for you!" thundered Bluebeard's voice, and he came up the steps. But the wife found courage, slammed her room-door shut, and held it fast, while she and her sister screamed for help at the top of their voices. Meanwhile the brothers rushed over like lightning, stormed up the steps and arrived on the scene just when Knight Bluebeard burst the door open and invaded the room with drawn sword. A short fight, and Knight Bluebeard lay dead on the floor. The wife was saved, but it was long before she could recover from the consequences of her curiosity.