The Seven Wives of Bluebeard

by Anatole France

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Title: The Seven Wives of Bluebeard

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Editor: J. Lewis May

Bernard Miall

Translator: D. B. Stewart

Release date: May 9, 2008 [eBook #25411] Most recently updated: February 24, 2021

Language: English

Other information and formats: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/25411

Credits: Produced by David Widger

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John Lane Company MCMXX

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THE SEVEN WIVES OF BLUEBEARD

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CHAPTER I

THE strangest, the most varied, the most erroneous opinions have been expressed with regard to the famous individual commonly known as Bluebeard. None, perhaps, was less tenable than that which made of this gentleman a personification of the Sun. For this is what a certain school of comparative mythology set itself to

do, some forty years ago. It informed the world that the seven wives of Bluebeard were the Dawns, and that his two brothers-in-law were the morning and the evening Twilight, identifying them with the Dioscuri, who delivered Helena when she was rapt away by Theseus. We must remind those readers who may feel tempted to believe this that in 1817 a learned librarian of Agen, Jean-Baptiste PÃ©rÃ©s, demonstrated, in a highly plausible manner, that Napoleon had never existed, and that the story of this supposed great captain was nothing but a solar myth. Despite the most ingenious diversions of the wits, we cannot possibly doubt that Bluebeard and Napoleon did both actually exist.

An hypothesis no better founded is that which Consists in identifying Bluebeard with the Marshal de Rais, who was strangled by the arm of the Law above the bridges of Nantes on 26th of October, 1440. Without inquiring, with M. Salomon Reinach, whether the Marshal committed the crimes for which he was condemned, or whether his wealth, coveted by a greedy prince, did not in some degree contribute to his undoing, there is nothing in his life that resembles what we find in Bluebeard's; this alone is enough to prevent our confusing them or merging the two individuals into one.

Charles Perrault, who, about 1660, had the merit of composing the first biography of this seigneur, justly remarkable for having married seven wives, made him an accomplished villain, and the most perfect model of cruelty that ever trod the earth. But it is permissible to doubt, if not his sincerity, at least the correctness of his information. He may, perhaps, have been prejudiced against his hero. He would not have been the first example of a poet or historian who liked to darken the colours of his pictures. If we have what seems a flattering portrait of Titus, it would seem, on the other hand, that Tacitus has painted Tiberius much blacker than the reality. Macbeth, whom legend and Shakespeare accuse of crimes, was in reality a just and a wise king. He never treacherously murdered the old king, Duncan. Duncan, while yet young, was defeated in a great battle, and was found dead on the morrow at a

spot called the Armourer's Shop. He had slain several of the kinsfolk of Gruchno, the wife of Macbeth. The latter made Scotland prosperous; he encouraged trade, and was regarded as the defender of the middle classes, the true King of the townsmen. The nobles of the clans never forgave him for defeating Duncan, nor for protecting the artisans. They destroyed him, and dishonoured his memory. Once he was dead the good King Macbeth was known only by the statements of his enemies. The genius of Shakespeare imposed these lies upon the human consciousness. I had long suspected that Bluebeard was the victim of a similar fatality. All the circumstances of his life, as I found them related, were far from satisfying my mind, and from gratifying that craving for logic and lucidity by which I am incessantly consumed. On reflection, I perceived that they involved insurmountable difficulties. There was so great a desire to make me believe in the man's cruelty that it could not fail to make me doubt it.

These presentiments did not mislead me. My intuitions, which had their origin in a certain knowledge of human nature, were soon to be changed into certainty, based upon irrefutable proofs.

In the house of a stone-cutter in St. Jean-des-Bois, I found several papers relating to Bluebeard; amongst others his defence, and an anonymous complaint against his murderers, which was not proceeded with, for what reasons I know not. These papers confirmed me in the belief that he was good and unfortunate, and that his memory has been overwhelmed by unworthy slanders. From that time forth, I regarded it as my duty to write his true history, without permitting myself any illusion as to the success of such an undertaking. I am well aware that this attempt at rehabilitation is destined to fall into silence and oblivion. How can the cold, naked Truth fight against the glittering enchantments of Falsehood?

018 (133K)

CHAPTER II

SOMEWHERE about 1650 there lived on his estate, between CompiÃ¨gne and Pierrefonds, a wealthy noble, by name Bernard de Montragoux, whose ancestors had held the most important posts in the kingdom. But he dwelt far from the Court, in that peaceful obscurity which then veiled all save that on which the king bestowed his glance. His castle of Guillettes abounded in valuable furniture, gold and silver ware, tapestry and embroideries, which he kept in coffers; not that he hid his treasures for fear of damaging them by use; he was, on the contrary, generous and magnificent. But in those days, in the country, the nobles willingly led a very simple life, feeding their people at their own table, and dancing on Sundays with the girls of the village.

On certain occasions, however, they gave splendid entertainments, which contrasted with the dullness of everyday life. So it was necessary that they should hold a good deal of handsome furniture and beautiful tapestries in reserve. This was the case with Monsieur de Montragoux.

His castle, built in the Gothic period, had all its rudeness. From without it looked wild and gloomy enough, with the stumps of its great towers, which had been thrown down at the time of the monarchy's troubles, in the reign of the late King Louis. Within it offered a much pleasanter prospect. The rooms were decorated in the Italian taste, as was the great gallery on the ground floor, loaded with embossed decorations in high relief, pictures and gilding.

At one end of this gallery there was a closet usually known as "the little cabinet." This is the only name by which Charles Perrault refers to it. It is as well to note that it was also called the "Cabinet of the Unfortunate Princesses," because a Florentine painter had portrayed on the walls the tragic stories of Dirce, daughter of the Sun, bound by the sons of Antiope to the horns of a bull, Niobe weeping on Mount Sipylus for her children, pierced by the divine arrows, and Procris inviting to her

bosom the javelin of Cephalus. These figures had a look of life about them, and the porphyry tiles with which the floor was covered seemed dyed in the blood of these unhappy women. One of the doors of the Cabinet gave upon the moat, which had no water in it.

The stables formed a sumptuous building, situated at some distance from the castle. They contained stalls for sixty horses, and coach-houses for twelve gilded coaches. But what made Guillettes so bewitching a residence were the woods and canals surrounding it, in which one could devote oneself to the pleasures of angling and the chase.

Many of the dwellers in that country-side knew Monsieur de Montragoux only by the name of Bluebeard, for this was the only name that the common people gave him. And in truth his beard was blue, but it was blue only because it was black, and it was because it was so black that it was blue. Monsieur de Montragoux must not be imagined as having the monstrous aspect of the threefold Typhon whom one sees in Athens, laughing in his triple indigo-blue beard. We shall get much nearer the reality by comparing the seigneur of Guillettes to those actors or priests whose freshly shaven cheeks have a bluish gloss.

Monsieur de Montragouz did not wear a pointed beard like his grandfather at the Court of King Henry II; nor did he wear it like a fan, as did his great-grandfather who was killed at the battle of Marignan. Like Monsieur de Turenne, he had only a slight moustache, and a chin-tuft; his cheeks had a bluish look; but whatever may have been said of him, this good gentleman was by no means disfigured thereby, nor did he inspire any fear on that account. He only looked the more virile, and if it made him look a little fierce, it had not the effect of making the women dislike him. Bernard de Montragoux was a very fine man, tall, broad across the shoulders, moderately stout, and well favoured; albeit of a rustic habit, smacking of the woods rather than of drawing-rooms and assemblies. Still, it is true that he did not please

the ladies as much as he should have pleased them, built as he was, and wealthy. Shyness was the reason; shyness, not his beard. Women exercised an invincible attraction for him, and at the same time inspired him with an insuperable fear. He feared them as much as he loved them. This was the origin and initial cause of all his misfortunes. Seeing a lady for the first time, he would have died rather than speak to her, and however much attracted he may have been, he stood before her in gloomy silence. His feelings revealed themselves only through his eyes, which he rolled in a terrible manner. This timidity exposed him to every kind of misfortune, and, above all, it prevented his forming a becoming connection with modest and reserved women; and betrayed him, defenceless, to the attempts of the most impudent and audacious. This was his life's misfortune.

Left an orphan from his early youth, and having rejected, owing to this sort of bashfulness and fear, which he was unable to overcome, the very advantageous and honourable alliances which had presented themselves, he married a Mademoiselle Colette Passage, who had recently settled down in that part of the country, after amassing a little money by making a bear dance through the towns and villages of the kingdom. He loved her with all his soul. And to do her justice, there was something pleasing about her, though she was what she was a fine woman with an ample bosom, and a complexion that was still sufficiently fresh, although a little sunburnt by the open air. Great were her joy and surprise on first becoming a lady of quality. Her heart, which was not bad, was touched by the kindness of a husband in such a high position, and with such a stout, powerful body, who was to her the most obedient of servants and devoted of lovers. But after a few months she grew weary because she could no longer go to and fro on the face of the earth. In the midst of wealth, overwhelmed with love and care, she could find no greater pleasure than that of going to see the companion of her wandering life, in the cellar where he languished with a chain round his neck and a ring through his nose, and kissing him on the eyes and weeping. Seeing her full of care, Monsieur de Montragouz himself

became careworn, and this only added to his companion's melancholy. The consideration and forethought which he lavished on her turned the poor woman's head. One morning, when he awoke, Monsieur de Montragoux found Colette no longer at his side. In vain he searched for her throughout the castle.

The door of the Cabinet of the Unfortunate Princesses was open. It was through this door that she had gone to reach the open country with her bear. The sorrow of Bluebeard was painful to behold. In spite of the innumerable messengers sent forth in search of her, no news was ever received of Colette Passage.

Monsieur de Montragoux was still mourning her when he happened to dance, at the fair of Guillettes, with Jeanne de La Cloche, daughter of the Police Lieutenant of CompiÃ¨gne, who inspired him with love. He asked her in marriage, and obtained her forthwith. She loved wine, and drank it to excess. So much did this taste increase that after a few months she looked like a leather bottle with a round red face atop of it. The worst of it was that this leather bottle would run mad, incessantly rolling about the reception-rooms and the staircases, crying, swearing, and hiccoughing; vomiting wine and insults at everything that got in her way. Monsieur de Montragoux was dazed with disgust and horror. But he quite suddenly recovered his courage, and set himself, with as much firmness as patience, to cure his wife of so disgusting a vice, Prayers, remonstrances, supplications, and threats: he employed every possible means. All was useless. He forbade her wine from his cellar: she got it from outside, and was more abominably drunk than ever.

To deprive her of her taste for a beverage that she loved too well, he put valerian in the bottles. She thought he was trying to poison her, sprang upon him, and drove three inches of kitchen knife into his belly. He expected to die of it, but he did not abandon his habitual kindness.

"She is more to be pitied than blamed," he said.

One day, when he had forgotten to close the door of the Cabinet of the Unfortunate

Princesses, Jeanne de La Cloche entered by it, quite out of her mind, as usual, and seeing the figures on the walls in postures of affliction, ready to give up the ghost, she mistook them for living women, and fled terror-stricken into the country, screaming murder. Hearing Bluebeard calling her and running after her, she threw herself, mad with terror, into a pond, and was there drowned. It is difficult to believe, yet certain, that her husband, so compassionate was his soul, was much afflicted by her death.

Six weeks after the accident he quietly married Gigonne, the daughter of his steward, Traignel. She wore wooden shoes, and smelt of onions. She was a fine-looking girl enough, except that she squinted with one eye, and limped with one foot. As soon as she was married, this goose-girl, bitten by foolish ambition, dreamed of nothing but further greatness and splendour. She was not satisfied that her brocade dresses were rich enough, her pearl necklaces beautiful enough, her rubies big enough, her coaches sufficiently gilded, her lakes, woods, and lands sufficiently vast. Bluebeard, who had never had any leaning toward ambition, trembled at the haughty humour of his spouse. Unaware, in his straightforward simplicity, whether the mistake lay in thinking magnificently like his wife, or modestly as he himself did, he accused himself of a mediocrity of mind which was thwarting the noble desires of his consort, and, full of uncertainty, he would sometimes exhort her to taste with moderation the good things of this world, while at others he roused himself to pursue fortune along the verge of precipitous heights. He was prudent, but conjugal affection bore him beyond the reach of prudence. Gigonne thought of nothing but cutting a figure in the world, being received at Court, and becoming the King's mistress. Unable to gain her point, she pined away with vexation, contracting a jaundice, of which she died. Bluebeard, full of lamentation, built her a magnificent tomb.

This worthy seigneur overwhelmed by constant domestic adversity, would not perhaps have chosen another wife: but he was himself chosen for a husband by

Mademoiselle Blanche de Gibeaumex, the daughter of a cavalry officer, who had but one ear; he used to relate that he had lost the other in the King's service. She was full of intelligence, which she employed in deceiving her husband. She betrayed him with every man of quality in the neighbourhood. She was so dexterous that she deceived him in his own castle, almost under his very eyes, without his perceiving it. Poor Bluebeard assuredly suspected something, but he could not say what. Unfortunately for her, while she gave her whole mind to tricking her husband, she was not sufficiently careful in deceiving her lovers; by which I mean that she betrayed them, one for another. One day she was surprised in the Cabinet of the Unfortunate Princesses, in the company of a gentleman whom she loved, by a gentleman whom she had loved, and the latter, in a transport of jealousy, ran her through with his sword. A few hours later the unfortunate lady was there found dead by one of the castle servants, and the fear inspired by the room increased.

Poor Bluebeard, learning at one blow of his ample dishonour, and the tragic death of his wife, did not console himself for the latter misfortune by any consideration of the former. He had loved Blanche de Gibeaumez with a strange ardour, more dearly than he had loved Jeanne de La Cloche, Gigonne Traignel, or even Colette Passage. On learning that she had consistently betrayed him, and that now she would never betray him again, he experienced a grief and a mental perturbation which, far from being appeased, daily increased in violence. So intolerable were his sufferings that he contracted a malady which caused his life to be despaired of.

The physicians, having employed various medicines without effect, advised him that the only remedy proper to his complaint was to take a young wife. He then thought of his young cousin, AngÃ¨le de La Garandine, whom he believed would be willingly bestowed upon him, as she had no property. What encouraged him to take her to wife was the fact that she was reputed to be simple and ignorant of the world. Having been deceived by a woman of intelligence, he felt more comfortable with a fool. He married Mademoiselle de La Garandine, and quickly perceived the falsity

of his calculations. AngÃ¨le was kind, AngÃ¨le was good, and AngÃ¨le loved him; she had not, in herself, any leanings toward evil, but the least astute person could quickly lead her astray at any moment. It was enough to tell her: "Do this for fear of bogies; comes in here or the were-wolf will eat you;" or "Shut your eyes, and take this drop of medicine," and the innocent girl would straightway do so, at the will of the rascals who wanted of her that which it was very natural to want of her, for she was pretty. Monsieur de Montragouz, injured and betrayed by this innocent girl, as much as and more than he had been by Blanche de Gibeaumex, had the additional pain of knowing it, for AngÃ¨le was too candid to conceal anything from him. She used to tell him: "Sir, some one told me this; some one did that to me; some one took so and so away from me; I saw that; I felt so and so." And by her ingenuousness she caused her lord to suffer torments beyond imagination. He endured them like a Stoic. Still he finally had to tell the simple creature that she was a goose, and to box her ears. This, for him, was the beginning of a reputation for cruelty, which was not fated to be diminished. A mendicant monk, who was passing Gulllettes while Monsieur de Montragouz was out shooting woodcock, found Madame AngÃ¨le sewing a doll's petticoat. This worthy friar, discovering that she was as foolish as she was beautiful, took her away on his donkey, having persuaded her that the Angel Gabriel was waiting in a wood, to give her a pair of pearl garters. It is believed that she must have been eaten by a wolf, for she was never seen again.

After such a disastrous experience, how was it that Bluebeard could make up his mind to contract yet another union? It would be impossible to understand it, were we not well aware of the power which a fine pair of eyes exerts over a generous heart.

The honest gentleman met, at a neighbouring chÃ¢teau which he was in the habit of frequenting, a young orphan of quality, by name Alix de Pontalcin, who, having been robbed of all her property by a greedy trustee, thought only of entering a convent. Officious friends intervened to alter her determination and persuade her to accept the hand of Monsieur de Montragoux. Her beauty was perfect. Bluebeard,

who was promising himself the enjoyment of an infinite happiness in her arms, was once more deluded in his hopes, and this time experienced a disappointment, which, owing to his disposition, was bound to make an even greater impression upon him than all the afflictions which he had suffered in his previous marriages. Alix de Pontalcin obstinately refused to give actuality to the union to which she had nevertheless consented.

In vain did Monsieur de Montragoux press her to become his wife; she resisted prayers, tears, and objurgations, she refused her husband's lightest caresses, and rushed off to shut herself into the Cabinet of the Unfortunate Princesses, where she remained, alone and intractable, for whole nights at a time.

The cause of a resistance so contrary to laws both human and divine was never known; it was attributed to Monsieur de Montragoux's blue beard, but our previous remarks on the subject of his beard render such a supposition far from probable. In any case, it is a difficult subject to discuss. The unhappy husband underwent the cruellest sufferings. In order to forget them, he hunted with desperation, exhausting horses, hounds, and huntsmen. But when he returned home, foundered and overtired, the mere sight of Mademoiselle de Pontalcin was enough to revive his energies and his torments. Finally, unable to endure the situation any longer, he applied to Rome for the annulment of a marriage which was nothing better than a trap; and in consideration of a handsome present to the Holy Father he obtained it in accordance with canon law. If Monsieur de Montragoux discarded Mademoiselle de Pontalcin with all the marks of respect due to a woman, and without breaking his cane across her back, it was because he had a valiant soul, a great heart, and was master of himself as well as of Guillettes. But he swore that, for the future, no female should enter his apartments. Happy had he been if he had held to his oath to the end!

031 (133K)

CHAPTER III

SOME years had elapsed since Monsieur de Montragoux had rid himself of his sixth wife, and only a confused recollection remained in the country-side of the domestic calamities which had fallen upon this worthy seigneur's house. Nobody knew what had become of his wives, and hair-raising tales were told in the village at night; some believed them, others did not. About this time, a widow, past the prime of life, Dame Sidonie de Lespoisse, came to settle with her children in the manor of La Motte-Giron, about two leagues, as the crow flies, from the castle of Guillettes. Whence she came, or who her husband had been, not a soul knew. Some believed, because they had heard it said, that he had held certain posts in Savoy or Spain; others said that he had died in the Indies; many had the idea that the widow was possessed of immense estates, while others doubted it strongly. However, she lived in a notable style, and invited all the nobility of the country-side to La Motte-Giron. She had two daughters, of whom the elder, Anne, on the verge of becoming an old maid, was a very astute person: Jeanne, the younger, ripe for marriage, concealed a precocious knowledge of the world under an appearance of simplicity. The Dame de Lespoisse had also two sons, of twenty and twenty-two years of age; very fine well-made young fellows, of whom one was a Dragoon, and the other a Musketeer. I may add, having seen his commission, that he was a Black Musketeer. When on foot, this was not apparent, for the Black Musketeers were distinguished from the Grey not by the colour of their uniform, but by the hides of their horses. All alike wore blue surcoats laced with gold. As for the Dragoons, they were to be recognized by a kind of fur bonnet, of which the tail fell gallantly over the ear. The Dragoons had the reputation of being scamps, a scapegrace crowd, witness the song:

"Mama, here the dragoons come, Let us haste away."

But you might have searched in vain through His Majesty's two regiments of Dragoons for a bigger rake, a more accomplished sponger, or a viler rogue than

Cosme de Lespoisset. Compared with him, his brother was an honest lad. Drunkard and gambler, Pierre de Lespoisse pleased the ladies, and won at cards; these were the only ways of gaining a living known to him.

Their mother, Dame de Lespoisse, was making a splash at Motte-Giron only in order to catch gulls. As a matter of fact, she had not a penny, and owed for everything, even to her false teeth. Her clothes and furniture, her coach, her horses, and her servants had all been lent by Parisian moneylenders, who threatened to withdraw them all if she did not presently marry one of her daughters to some rich nobleman, and the respectable Sidonie was expecting to find herself at any moment naked in an empty house. In a hurry to find a son-in-law, she had at once cast her eye upon Monsieur de Montragoux, whom she summed up as being simple-minded, easy to deceive, extremely mild, and quick to fall in love under his rude and bashful exterior. Her two daughters entered into her plans, and every time they met him, riddled poor Bluebeard with glances which pierced him to the depths of his heart. He soon fell a victim to the potent charms of the two Demoiselles de Lespoisse. Forgetting his oath, he thought of nothing but marrying one of them, finding them equally beautiful. After some delay, caused less by hesitation than timidity, he went to Motte-Giron in great state, and made his petition to the Dame de Lespoisse, leaving to her the choice of which daughter she would give him. Madame Sidonie obligingly replied that she held him in high esteem, and that she authorized him to pay his court to whichever of the ladies he should prefer.

"Learn to please, monsieur," she said. "I shall be the first to applaud your success."

In order to make their better acquaintance, Bluebeard invited Anne and Jeanne de Lespoisse, with their mother, brothers, and a multitude of ladies and gentlemen to pass a fortnight at the castle of Guillettes. There was a succession of walking, hunting, and fishing parties, dances and festivities, dinners and entertainments of every sort. A young seigneur, the Chevalier de Merlus, whom the ladies Lespoisse

had brought with them, organized the beats. Bluebeard had the best packs of hounds and the largest turnout in the countryside. The ladies rivalled the ardour of the gentlemen in hunting the deer. They did not always hunt the animal down, but the hunters and their ladies wandered away in couples, found one another, and again wandered off into the woods. For choice, the Chevalier de la Merlus would lose himself with Jeanne de Lespoisse, and both would return to the castle at night, full of their adventures, and pleased with their day's sport.

After a few days' observation, the good seigneur of Montragoux felt a decided preference for Jeanne, the younger sister, rather than the elder, as she was fresher, which is not saying that she was less experienced. He allowed his preference to appear; there was no reason why he should conceal it, for it was a befitting preference; moreover, he was a plain dealer. He paid court to the young lady as best he could, speaking little, for want of practice; but he gazed at her, rolling his rolling eyes, and emitting from the depths of his bowels sighs which might have overthrown an oak tree. Sometimes he would burst out laughing, whereupon the crockery trembled, and the windows rattled. Alone of all the party, he failed to remark the assiduous attentions of the Chevalier de la Merlus to Madame de Lespoisse's younger daughter, or if he did remark them he saw no harm in them. His experience of women was not sufficient to make him suspicious, and he trusted when he loved. My grandmother used to say that in life experience is worthless, and that one remains the same as when one begins. I believe she was right, and the true story that I am now unfolding is not of a nature to prove her wrong.

Bluebeard displayed an unusual magnificence in these festivities. When night arrived the lawns before the castle were lit by a thousand torches, and tables served by men-servants and maids dressed as fauns and dryads groaned under all the tastiest things which the country-side and the forest produced. Musicians provided a continual succession of beautiful symphonies. Towards the end of the meal the schoolmaster and schoolmistress, followed by the boys and girls of the village,

appeared before the guests, and read a complimentary address to the seigneur of Montragoux and his friends. An astrologer in a pointed cap approached the ladies, and foretold their future love-affairs from the lines of their hands, Bluebeard ordered drink to be given for all his vassals, and he himself distributed bread and meat to the poor families.

At ten o'clock, for fear of the evening dew, the company retired to the apartments, lit by a multitude of candles, and there tables were prepared for every sort of game: lansquenet, billiards, reversi, bagatelle, pigeon-holes, turnstile, porch, beast, hoca, brelan, draughts, backgammon, dice, basset, and calbas. Bluebeard was uniformly unfortunate in these various games, at which he lost large sums every night. He could console himself for his continuous run of bad luck by watching the three Lespoisse ladies win a great deal of money. Jeanne, the younger, who often backed the game of the Chevalier de la Merlus, heaped up mountains of gold. Madame de Lespoisse's two sons also did very well at reversi and basset; their luck was invariably best at the more hazardous games. The play went on until late into the night. No one slept during these marvellous festivities, and as the earliest biographer of Bluebeard has said: "They spent the whole night in playing tricks on one another." These hours were the most delightful of the whole twenty-four; for then, under cover of jesting, and taking advantage of the darkness, those who felt drawn toward one another would hide together in the depths of some alcove. The Chevelier de la Merlus would disguise himself at one time as a devil, at another as a ghost or a were-wolf in order to frighten the sleepers, but he always ended by slipping into the room of Mademoiselle Jeanne de Lespoisse. The good seigneur of Montragoux was not overlooked in these games. The two sons of Madame de Lespoisse put irritant powder in his bed, and burnt in his room substances which emitted a disgusting smell. Or they would arrange a jug of water over his door so that the worthy seigneur could not open the door without the whole of the water being upset upon his head. In short, they played on him all sorts of practical jokes, to the diversion of

the whole company, and Bluebeard bore them with his natural good humour.

He made his request, to which Madame de Lespoisse acceded, although, as she said, it wrung her heart to think of giving her girls in marriage.

The marriage was celebrated at Motte-Giron with extraordinary magnificence. The Demoiselle Jeanne, amazingly beautiful, was dressed entirely in point de France, her head covered with a thousand ringlets. Her sister Anne wore a dress of green velvet, embroidered with gold. Their mother's dress was of golden tissue, trimmed with black chenille, with a parure of pearls and diamonds. Monsieur de Montragoux wore all his great diamonds on a suit of black velvet; he made a very fine appearance; his expression of timidity and innocence contrasting strongly with his blue chin and his massive build. The bride's brothers were of course handsomely arrayed, but the Chevalier de la Merlus, in a suit of rose velvet trimmed with pearls, shone with unparalleled splendour.

Immediately after the ceremony, the Jews who had hired out to the bride's family and her lover all these fine clothes and rich jewels resumed possession of them and posted back to Paris with them.

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CHAPTER IV

FOR a month Monsieur de Montragoux was the happiest of men. He adored his wife, and regarded her as an angel of purity. She was something quite different, but far shrewder men than poor Bluebeard might have been deceived as he was, for she was a person of great cunning and astuteness, and allowed herself submissively to be ruled by her mother, who was the cleverest jade in the whole kingdom of France. She established herself at Guillettes with her eldest daughter Anne, her two sons, Pierre and Cosme, and the Chevalier de la Merlus, who kept as close to Madame de Montragoux as if he had been her shadow. Her good husband was a little annoyed at

this; he would have liked to keep his wife always to himself, but he did not take exception to the affection which she felt for this young gentleman, as she had told him that he was her foster-brother.

Charles Perrault relates that a month after having contracted this union, Bluebeard was compelled to make a journey of six weeks' duration on some important business. He does not seem to be aware of the reasons for this journey, and it has been suspected that it was an artifice, which the jealous husband resorted to, according to custom, in order to surprise his wife. The truth is quite otherwise. Monsieur de Montragouz went to Le Perche to receive the heritage of his cousin of Outarde, who had been killed gloriously by a cannon-ball at the battle of the Dunes, while casting dice upon a drum.

Before leaving, Monsieur de Montragoux begged his wife to indulge in every possible distraction during his absence.

"Invite all your friends, madame," he said, "go riding with them, amuse yourselves, and have a pleasant time."

He handed over to her all the keys of the house, thus indicating that in his absence she was the sole and sovereign mistress of all the seigneurie of Guillettes.

"This," he said, "is the key of the two great wardrobes; this of the gold and silver not in daily use; this of the strong-boxes which contain my gold and silver; this of the caskets where my jewels are kept; and this is a pass-key into all the rooms. As for this little key, it is that of the Cabinet, at the end of the Gallery, on the ground floor; open everything, and go where you will."

Charles Perrault claims that Monsieur de Montragoux added:

"But as for the little Cabinet, I forbid you to enter that; and I forbid you so expressly that if you do enter it, I cannot say to what lengths my anger will not go."

The historian of Bluebeard in placing these words on record, has fallen into the error of adopting, without, verification, the version concocted after the event by the ladies

Lespoisse. Monsieur de Montragoux expressed himself very differently. When he handed to his wife the key of the little Cabinet, which was none other than the Cabinet of the Unfortunate Princesses, to which we have already frequently alluded, he expressed the desire that his beloved Jeanne should not enter that part of the house which he regarded as fatal to his domestic happiness. It was through this room, indeed, that his first wife, and the best of all of them, had fled, when she ran away with her bear; here Blanche de Gibeaumex had repeatedly betrayed him with various gentlemen; and lastly, the porphyry pavement was stained by the blood of a beloved criminal. Was not this enough to make Monsieur de Montragoux connect the idea of this room with cruel memories and fateful forebodings?

The words which he addressed to Jeanne de Lespoisse convey the desires and impressions which were troubling his mind. They were actually as follows:

"For you, madame, nothing of mine is hidden, and I should feel that I was doing you an injury did I fail to hand over to you all the keys of a dwelling which belongs to you. You may therefore enter this little cabinet, as you may enter all the other rooms of the house; but if you will take my advice you will do nothing of the kind, to oblige me, and in consideration of the painful ideas which, for me, are connected with this room, and the forebodings of evil which these ideas, despite myself, call up into my mind. I should be inconsolable were any mischance to befall you, or were I to bring misfortune upon you. You will, madame, forgive these fears, which are happily unfounded, as being only the outcome of my anxious affection and my watchful love."

With these words the good seigneur embraced his wife and posted off to Le Perche.

"The friends and neighbours," says Charles Perrault, "did not wait to be asked to visit the young bride; so full were they of impatience to see all the wealth of her house. They proceeded at once to inspect all the rooms, cabinets, and wardrobes, each of which was richer and more beautiful than the last; and there was no end to

their envy and their praises of their friend's good fortune."

All the historians who have dealt with this subject have added that Madame de Montsagoux took no pleasure in the sight of all these riches, by reason of her impatience to open the little Cabinet. This is perfectly correct, and as Perrault has said: "So urgent was her curiosity that, without considering that it was unmannerly to leave her guests, she went down to it by a little secret staircase, and in such a hurry that two or three times she thought she would break her neck." The fact is beyond question. But what no one has told us is that the reason why she was so anxious to reach this apartment was that the Chevalier de la Merlus was awaiting her there.

Since she had come to make her home in the castle of Guillettes she had met this young gentleman in the Cabinet every day, and oftener twice a day than once, without wearying of an intercourse so unseemly in a young married woman. It is Impossible to hesitate, as to the nature of the ties connecting Jeanne with the Chevalier: they were anything but respectable, anything but chaste, Alas, had Madame de Montragoux merely betrayed her husband's honour, she would no doubt have incurred the blame of posterity; but the most austere of moralists might have found excuses for her. He might allege, in favour of so young a woman, the laxity of the morals of the period; the examples of the city and the Court; the too certain effects of a bad training, and the advice of an immoral mother, for Madame Sidonie de Lespoisse countenanced her daughter's intrigues. The wise might have forgiven her a fault too amiable to merit their severity; her errors would have seemed too common to be crimes, and the world would simply have considered that she was behaving like other people. But Jeanne de Lespoisse, not content with betraying her husband's honour, did not hesitate to attempt his life.

It was in the little Cabinet, otherwise known as the Cabinet of the Unfortunate Princesses, that Jeanne de Lespoisse, Dame de Montragoux, in concert with the

Chevalier de la Merlus, plotted the death of a kind and faithful husband. She declared later that, on entering the room, she saw hanging there the bodies of six murdered women, whose congealed blood covered the tiles, and that recognizing in these unhappy women the first six wives of Bluebeard, she foresaw the fate which awaited herself. She must, in this case, have mistaken the paintings on the walls for mutilated corpses, and her hallucinations must be compared with those of Lady Macbeth. But it is extremely probable that Jeanne imagined this horrible sight in order to relate it afterwards, justifying her husband's murderers by slandering their victim.

The death of Monsieur de Montragouz was determined upon. Certain letters which lie before me compel the belief that Madame Sidonie Lespoisse had her part in the plot. As for her elder daughter, she may be described as the soul of the conspiracy. Anne de Lespoisse was the wickedest of the whole family. She was a stranger to sensual weakness, remaining chaste in the midst of the profligacy of the house; it was not a case of refusing pleasures which she thought unworthy of her; the truth was that she took pleasure only in cruelty. She engaged her two brothers, Cosme and Pierre, in the enterprise by promising them the command of a regiment.

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CHAPTER V

IT now rests with us to trace, with the aid of authentic documents, and reliable evidence, the most atrocious, treacherous, and cowardly domestic crime of which the record has come down to us. The murder whose circumstances we are about to relate can only be compared to that committed on the night of the 9th March, 1449, on the person of Guillaume de Flavy, by his wife Blanche d'Overbreuc, a young and slender woman, the bastard d'Orbandas, and the barber Jean Bocquillon.

They stifled Guillaume with a pillow, battered him pitilessly with a club, and bled

him at the throat like a calf. Blanche d'Overbreuc proved that her husband had determined to have her drowned, while Jeanne de Lespoisse betrayed a loving husband to a gang of unspeakable scoundrels. We will record the facts with all possible restraint. Bluebeard returned rather earlier than expected. This it was gave rise to the quite mistaken idea that, a prey to the blackest jealousy, he was wishful to surprise his wife. Full of joy and confidence, if he thought of giving her a surprise it was an agreeable one. His kindness and tenderness, and his joyous, peaceable air would have softened the most savage hearts. The Chevalier de la Merlus, and the whole execrable brood of Lespoisse saw therein nothing but an additional facility for taking his life, and possessing themselves of his wealth, still further increased by his new inheritance.

His young wife met him with a smiling face, allowing herself to be embraced and led to the conjugal chamber, where she did everything to please the good man. The following morning she returned him the bunch of keys which had been confided to her care. But there was missing that of the Cabinet of the Unfortunate Princesses, commonly called the little Cabinet. Bluebeard gently demanded its delivery, and after putting him off for a time on various pretexts Jeanne returned it to him.

There now arises a question which cannot be solved without leaving the limited domain of history to enter the indeterminate regions of philosophy.

Charles Perrault specifically states that the key of the little Cabinet was a fairy key, that is to say, it was magical, enchanted, endowed with properties contrary to the laws of nature, at all events, as we conceive them. We have no proof to the contrary. This is a fitting moment to recall the precept of my illustrious master, Monsieur du Clos des Lunes, a member of the Institute: "When the supernatural makes its appearance, it must not be rejected by the historian." I shall therefore content myself with recalling as regards this key, the unanimous opinion of all the old biographers of Bluebeard; they all affirm that it was a fairy key. This is a point of great

importance. Moreover, this key is not the only object created by human industry which has proved to be endowed with marvellous properties. Tradition abounds with examples of enchanted swords. Arthur's was a magic sword. And so was that of Joan of Arc, on the undeniable authority of Jean Chartier; and the proof afforded by that illustrious chronicler is that when the blade was broken the two pieces refused to be welded together again despite all the efforts of the most competent armourers. Victor Hugo speaks in one of his poems of those "magic stairways still obscured below." Many authors even admit that there are men-magicians who can turn themselves into wolves. We shall not undertake to combat such a firm and constant belief, and we shall not pretend to decide whether the key of the little Cabinet was or was not enchanted, for our reserve does not imply that we are in any uncertainty, and therein resides its merit. But where we find ourselves in our proper domain, or to be more precise within our own jurisdiction, where we once more become judges of facts, and writers of circumstances, is where we read that the key was flecked with blood. The authority of the texts does not so far impress us as to compel us to believe this. It was not flecked with blood. Blood had flowed in the little cabinet, but at a time already remote. Whether the key had been washed or whether it had dried, it was impossible that it should be so stained, and what, in her agitation, the criminal wife mistook for a blood-stain on the iron, was the reflection of the sky still empurpled by the roses of dawn.

Monsieur de Montragoux, on seeing the key, perceived none the less that his wife had entered the little cabinet. He noticed that it now appeared cleaner and brighter than when he had given it to her, and was of opinion that this polish could only come from use.

This produced a painful impression upon him, and he said to his wife, with a mournful smile:

"My darling, you have been into the little cabinet. May there result no grievous

outcome for either of us! From that room emanates a malign influence from which I would have protected you. If you, in your turn should become subjected to it, I should never get over it. Forgive me; when we love we are superstitious."

On these words, although Bluebeard cannot have frightened her, for his words and demeanour expressed only love and melancholy, the young lady of Montragoux began shrieking at the top of her voice: "Help! Help! he's killing me!" This was the signal agreed upon. On hearing it, the Chevalier de la Merlus and the two sons of Madame de Lespoisse were to have thrown themselves upon Bluebeard and run him through with their swords.

But the Chevalier, whom Jeanne had hidden in a cupboard in the room, appeared alone. Monsieur de Montragoux, seeing him leap forth sword in hand, placed himself on guard. Jeanne fled terror-stricken, and met her sister Anne in the gallery. She was not, as has been related, on a tower; for all the towers had been thrown down by order of Cardinal Richelieu. Anne was striving to put heart into her two brothers, who, pale and quaking, dared not risk so great a stake. Jeanne hastily implored them: "Quick, quick, brothers, save my lover!" Pierre and Cosme then rushed at Bluebeard. They found him, having disarmed the Chevalier de la Merlus, holding him down with his knee; they treacherously ran their swords through his body from behind, and continued to strike at him long after he had breathed his last.

Bluebeard had no heirs. His wife remained mistress of his property. She used a part of it to provide a dowry for her sister Anne, another part to buy captains' commissions for her two brothers, and the rest to marry the Chevalier de la Merlus, who became a very respectable man as soon as he was wealthy.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SEVEN WIVES OF BLUEBEARD ***

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