

BLUEBEARD.

ONCE upon a time there lived in an Eastern city a merchant named Abdullah, who had lost so many ships and had so many misfortunes that, try as he would, he seemed to grow poorer and poorer. As soon as he had put by a little money he was sure to lose it all in his next venture.

Abdullah felt his bad fortune all the more because he had a family to keep. His son, Hassan, could look after himself; but it made the merchant sad to think that he could not provide for his two young daughters.

These daughters were both very pretty; but the younger one was the prettiest girl in all the town. Her name was Fatima, and she had eyes as black as sloes and hair that shone like the wings of a raven.

The elder daughter, Anne, was also a very charming girl; and the two loved each other so dearly that they could not bear to be

separated. Although their father had been so unfortunate, he had contrived that his girls should be well brought 'up, and taught to dance and sing, and to behave in becoming fashion; but they had never known the joy of wearing fine clothes and rich jewels to set off their beauty.

One day, when things were at their worst with Abdullah, and it seemed that no good fortune could possibly attend him, a rich stranger called to see him.

The stranger was very gorgeously dressed in a flowing silk robe of brilliant colours and wore chains of dazzling jewels. But there was one very curious and remarkable thing about him. His long beard, instead of being black, or brown, or grey, or white, like other men's, was of a bright blue colour, and for this reason he was known by the name of BLUEBEARD.

Abdullah was greatly surprised to see this wealthy stranger; but he was still more surprised when Bluebeard presently declared that he desired to marry his beautiful daughter, Fatima.

"I have seen the maiden," he said. "I like her pretty looks, and, if she will marry

me, she shall wear the finest of clothes and live grandly in a palace like a princess!"

Abdullah said he would find out what his daughter thought about the matter, and told Bluebeard to call for his answer on the following day.

When Fatima heard the news, she cried in alarm, "What! Marry a man with an ugly blue beard. Not I."

But her father begged her to think how splendid it would be to live like a princess, and how much she could help him in his present troubles by marrying so rich a man. Fatima, who loved her father dearly, thus came to think it was her duty to consent. Besides, she loved pretty clothes and fine jewels, and she certainly felt it would be nice to live in a palace.

So, when the next morning Bluebeard called for his answer, Fatima agreed to marry him. "But," said she, "my dear sister Anne must come with me, for I will never be separated from her!"

Many bridegrooms would have objected to this, but Bluebeard proved most obliging and readily consented. The wedding took place a few days afterwards.

When the day came for her to leave home Fatima wept, for she could not conceal from herself that she did not like the appearance of her husband, and was in fear of him. But her brother Hassan called her aside and promised that he would follow in a few days to see that all was well with her.

Then Bluebeard took Fatima and Anne to his palace, which was some distance out in the country. At first the two sisters were delighted with their new life; the palace was splendid; they had slaves to wait upon their slightest wish; and there seemed no end to the fine robes and beautiful jewels they were free to wear whenever they pleased.

But soon they discovered that Bluebeard was really a very cruel and wicked man. He still continued to treat them fairly, but they were very glad when one day he announced that he was going away for a few days.

Before leaving, he handed to Fatima the keys of the palace, saying that she might use them all and go wherever she pleased. One key, however, she was *not* to use. It was a little one which fitted the door of a chamber which was always kept locked.

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A few hours later Bluebeard took his departure, and Fatima and Anne were left in charge.

They spent several days roaming over the beautiful palace, with its wealth of wonders, and went into every room except that which had been forbidden to them. Then, having little else to occupy their minds, they began to wonder more and more what could be hidden in this mysterious chamber. The more they thought about it, the more curious they became.

At last, one day, Fatima said, "Let us take just *one* peep within! We can easily lock the door again, and Bluebeard cannot possibly know! After all, why shouldn't we look?"

Sister Anne agreed and, after some trouble, they fitted the key into the lock of the secret chamber, and turned it.

The door at once flew open, and the key fell upon the floor. Then the two sisters shrieked with horror at the sight that met their eyes. On the wall at the back they saw a long row of maidens' heads, each hanging from a hook by means of its own hair, and

the floor was stained with the blood of the wretched victims!

Fatima nearly fainted with fright at this fearful sight, but Anne hurriedly dragged her from this chamber of horrors and locked the door again.

The two sisters now knew beyond a doubt that Bluebeard was a cruel and wicked wretch who enticed fair maidens to marry him and then killed them without mercy as soon as he grew tired of them.

They quickly resolved, while there was yet time, to seek safety in flight.

But this proved to be the very day of Bluebeard's return. Even as they spoke he entered the palace and, a few moments later, came into the room. Having glanced round suspiciously he asked for the keys, and then demanded to know from Fatima if she had used the forbidden key.

Fatima was afraid to speak, but Bluebeard at once noticed a spot of blood on the little key and knew that his command had been disobeyed.

"You have entered the forbidden chamber!" he cried, in a rage. "The penalty for that is death!"

But Fatima fell, on her knees and begged so piteously for mercy that even her cruel husband was touched. At last he said he would give her one hour longer to live, and then left the room.

Poor Fatima sank on the floor in despair, moaning and lamenting her hard fate, but Sister Anne went to the window and looked out, hoping that possibly their brother Hassan might choose that very day to visit them. Every now and then Fatima would cry out, "Sister Anne! Sister Anne! do you see any one coming?"

And each time Anne would answer sadly, "No, dear sister! I only see the bees, and the birds, and hear the players in the gardens!"

Quickly the precious moments flew, and just before the hour came to an end Fatima cried more wildly still, "Sister Anne! Sister Anne! do you see any one coming?"

And this time Anne answered joyfully, "Yes, yes, dear Fatima! Some horsemen are riding up to the gates! 'Tis our brother Hassan and his friends!"

At this moment Bluebeard entered the room, and Fatima fled shrieking to the farthest

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corner of the room, begging again and again for mercy.

Bluebeard drew his sword, and was just about to strike when Hassan and his friends dashed into the room, having been directed thither by the wild shrieks of the two girls. Hassan seized the wicked Bluebeard, forced him to his knees, and with one stroke of the tyrant's own scimitar cut off his head.

The brother and sisters rejoiced together, and then went all through the palace. They found hundreds of money-bags and treasure of all sorts. These they bore away, and Fatima and her family were now rich and happy for the rest of their days; and their father, the merchant, had no longer cause to worry about any of his concerns.