

The Penguin Book of French Short Stories

VOLUME I

FROM MARGUERITE DE NAVARRE TO MARCEL PROUST

EDITED BY

PATRICK MCGUINNESS



The Penguin Book of French Short Stories

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THE
PENGUIN BOOK

of

FRENCH SHORT STORIES

VOLUME 1

PATRICK McGUINNESS



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Introduction

The reader opening this anthology will quickly realise that short stories come in different shapes and sizes. I mention this at the outset because short stories have been the subject of many theories and definitions over the centuries, often considerably longer than the stories themselves. These theories and definitions prescribe on matters of length, of subject, of voice and point of view, or on how the short story should handle time, place and action. We are told that the short story explores a single mood or situation; that it aims for a single effect; that it must finish with a click, like a box snapping shut; or we are told the opposite – that it must end on ambiguity or tension. The short story should resolve. It should refuse resolution. It must tie up its loose ends, it must close on suspenseful ellipses ...

Luckily, it is easier – as well as more enjoyable – to read short stories than to define them. This is just as well, because the French short story tradition is rich and innovative and contains as many classic examples of the genre as it does oddballs, eccentrics and radical misfits. While there are plenty of both in these pages, it is nonetheless useful to establish some parameters – if only to see how far writers can stretch, blur or subvert them.

Though the words ‘short’ and ‘story’ impose basic requirements and raise basic expectations, these are, fortunately, permissive. They are also dependent on period and culture: a thirty-page short story in the nineteenth century reads very differently from a thirty-page short story in the twenty-first. There are also practical questions: at what point does a short story edge over into a novella? Or, at the other end of the scale, how to differentiate between a very short short story and a prose poem, or what we call today ‘microfiction’ or ‘flash fiction’, forms which existed long before the names arrived to bed them down among our literary categories? And who decides on these labels? Is it the author? The publisher? The marketing department?

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Rather than focusing on ‘page count’ and ‘word limit’ as undifferentiated slabs of matter from which the short story hews its duration, it would better serve to think of it as a genre that puts the reader in a unique relationship with time. Stories are woven into our lives, but not all stories weave in the same way. Whether it’s a medieval audience listening to a tale that has been transmitted orally over generations, or a commuter reading a piece of fiction among the advertisements and lifestyle features in their magazine, the short story fits in and around a day made up of different kinds of time, attention and activity.

In 1966, the Hungarian writer István Örkény published a volume of what he called ‘one-minute stories’. In his preface – which he described, with demystifying practicality, as ‘handling instructions’ – he writes:

While the soft-boiled egg is boiling or the number you are dialing answers (provided it is not engaged, of course) you have ample time to read one of these short stories which, because of their brevity, I have come to think of as one-minute stories.

Though each age imagines itself busier than the last, the short story is the genre that has most ingeniously adapted to the competing claims on our time and attention. It can insert itself into the cracks in our timetables and infiltrate our slack hours. The most productive thinking about short stories starts out from the question of time rather than the fact of length or size. Thirty pages will always be thirty pages, but one minute is never just one minute.

More than half a century before Örkény, Félix Fénéon had gone even further: his ‘three-line novellas’, several of which are included in this anthology, are masterpieces of suggestive compression. They can be read in a matter of seconds, though their effect is much harder to measure. Decanted from the ‘fait divers’ or the ‘news in brief’ section of regional newspapers, and then rewritten with wit and waspish aplomb, these brisk, lapidary tales expand in inverse proportion to the number of words they contain.

Fénéon’s skill lies in showing us how much irony, social observation, pathos and drama a writer can fit into a few words. One of his most barbed ‘novellas’ goes as follows: ‘Verniot, septuagenarian beggar from Clichy, has

died of hunger. 2000 francs were hidden in his mattress. But let's not generalize.' At twenty words long, we have a novel's worth of plotlines and psychological questions, and a narrative voice whose ironic final observation leaves us at once amused and uncomfortably implicated. Fénéon is an extreme example, but he shows us that the best short stories use their length as a resource, rather than just inhabiting it as a limit: they combine the immediacy of theatre, the compression of a poem and the latitude of a novel.

A further advantage of the short story is uninterruptedness, the way it can be read (or heard) in one sitting. Although some people can sit for longer than others, we all know what we mean by 'a sitting': an arrangement between the mind and the body, between the limits of our attention span and the moment pins and needles set in. The playwright August Strindberg claimed that the one-act play was the most effective kind of drama because it lacked intervals, and because, as he put it, the audience was 'prisoner' for the duration. Something similar can be said of the short story: that it shares with the one-act play the pressure of an imminent ending as it bears down upon the *nowness* of reading or listening.

Fénéon's three-line novellas appeared in the daily newspaper *Le Matin* between 1903 and 1937 and remind us that everyday life is a mine of scenarios as full of drama, mystery, absurdity and plot twists as the most *outré* fiction. They also remind us that the literary short story – a piece of artistically-designed and mostly (but not exclusively) fictional prose – is just one strand of narrative in a world saturated with stories. It is no coincidence that the high point of the modern short story – the nineteenth and early twentieth century – is also a high point in print media, in news and reportage, and in an experience of speed and connectivity that, despite changes in technology, remains remarkably consistent with today's. Newspapers and magazines were hospitable to the short story and the first readers of many of the stories in this anthology encountered them in a patchwork of different kinds of narrative: news stories, court reports, 'true crime', gossip columns, journalistic scoops, political commentary and philosophical tales. They will also have picked them out from the mixed page: advertisements, recipes (which are also stories), polemics, letters, puzzles, notices and personal ads. The short story is a pragmatic, nimble genre, responsive and topical, reaching the parts of a culture other genres

cannot, and reaching them fast. Where the novel stretches across our days and accompanies us through them, the short story thrives in the busy ecosystem of everyday narratives and everyday reading habits. Several of the stories in this anthology reflect that: there are stories in the form of news items, political or philosophical parables, topical polemics, dialogues and monologues, letters, psychological case studies, dream-notation and even a multiple-choice questionnaire. There are fine-tuned classics of the ‘well-made’ tale and works that seem to conform to no genre, or sit proudly and unfazed between genres.

Volume One begins with a bawdy, innuendo-laden tale from Philippe de Laon’s *One Hundred New Tales*, written between 1464 and 1467. The final story in Volume Two dates from the early 2000s, written by Virginie Despentes, one of the most thrilling and taboo-breaking contemporary French writers.

Laon’s *One Hundred New Tales* have been described both as ‘the first French literary work in prose’ and as ‘a museum of obscenities’. Although only the first of these judgments was a compelling argument for their inclusion, the second reminds us that the short story is not some remote high-cultural object to be entombed in a university syllabus, but a diversion and an entertainment. Both *One Hundred New Tales* and Marguerite de Navarre’s *The Heptameron*, from which the volume’s second story ‘The Substitute’ is taken, are inspired (like Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*) by Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*. They follow their model in setting stories told by diverse voices into an overarching frame narrative. In *The Decameron*, travellers who have been thrown together by circumstances tell stories as they escape the Black Death. In *The Canterbury Tales*, they are travelling on a pilgrimage. In *The Heptameron*, they are in an abbey, waiting for the bridge that will bear them to safety to be completed. What these early examples of storytelling have in common is sophistication and playfulness, tricky narrators and slippery perspectives. From the very start, the short story is testing its limits, pushing the boundaries, defying expectations.

These classic tales also show us that once we are together, around a table or in a room, and once we have assured ourselves of food and shelter, we want stories. The earliest storytellers show us that stories are our first

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non-physical need, and what medieval and Renaissance audiences have in common with today's readers and listeners is the understanding that we are narrative creatures: that whatever our ends and goals, however full our agendas and busy our days, there will always be time for stories.

The advantage of beginning the anthology with *The Heptameron* is that it opens up the field to include more than just the classics from the Golden Age of the short story. To have started with Voltaire or Diderot, and moved smoothly to Colette and Marcel Aymé via Maupassant and Balzac, would have been to impose an artificial beginning on a thrillingly messy and hybrid tradition. Diverging from the familiar path, this anthology contains hitherto untranslated sixteenth-century stories by Jean-Pierre Camus and François de Rosset. These garish, sensational narratives, nicknamed 'histoires sanglantes' or 'bloody tales', are the ancestors of today's 'true crime' genre.

As we move through the centuries, we encounter works, many of them little known in English, that might be considered to stretch the definition of a story. But the short story has never been a pure, clear-cut genre, and I have been fascinated by the way in which classic stories share so much of their narrative DNA with other forms of writing: the prose poem, for instance, with Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Charles Cros, who are included here; or with strange dream-narratives such as Xavier Forneret's 'A Dream'. In Forneret's short tale, the nineteenth century's fascination with the unconscious, and with the sleeping mind's bizarre connectivity, is distilled into a single, surreal text. As Forneret claimed: 'Since I write while I'm dreaming, you can read me while you're sleeping.' No wonder the surrealists claimed him as a trailblazing predecessor. Closer to the twenty-first century, Simone de Beauvoir's 'Monologue' or Béatrix Beck's 'The Adam Affair', a dialogue between God and a particularly obtuse Adam, give the short story the dynamism of drama.

The question is not 'what is a short story?' but 'what can a short story *be*?'. French thought has a reputation for classifying and defining, and French literary history is the home of '–isms': Naturalism, Symbolism, Surrealism, Existentialism, to name just a few movements that enjoyed worldwide influence. This fondness for categorizing has the unexpected and paradoxical effect of giving writers more categories to blur. When Diderot titled his story 'This Is Not a Story' and included 'a character

whose role is more or less that of the reader', he was breaking down the fourth wall. When, 200 years later, Raymond Queneau wrote 'A Tale for Your Shaping' as a questionnaire in which the reader chooses outcomes, he was playing with the complex interrelationship between formal structure and readerly expectation in a similar spirit. That playfulness can be seen in the work of OuLiPo, or 'Ouvroir de littérature potentielle' ('Workshop of Potential Literature'), a group of writers that included Queneau, Italo Calvino and Georges Perec, who exploited the inventive licence granted by writing to particular rules and constraints. It can also be seen in the more ludic strains of French literary theory, in the work of Roland Barthes, and in that other dominant '–ism', Structuralism: an understanding that the rules themselves are the best route to subverting the rules. It would not be too much to say that the fondness for categorizing is exactly what makes the French literary tradition so varied and experimental.

With Voltaire, Diderot and Sade, the short story is both a self-aware genre, sophisticated and amusing, and a place to think – an opportunity for reflection, to test political and social ideas. In Voltaire's 'Micromégas', an early science-fiction story that is also a philosophical parable, an extra-terrestrial character is used to make us see ourselves from the outside. Funny, absurd, by turns intellectually playful and serious, Voltaire gives humanity – or at any rate French humanity – the sort of cultural out-of-body experience that enables it to scrutinize itself. Seriousness and play are not incompatible, and the French short story from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries has often directly or obliquely engaged in philosophical and social concerns.

Of the many continuities in this anthology, the reader will notice how the French short story is imbricated in its culture, in the febrile politics of its time. It has addressed injustice and discrimination, and often intervened publicly in the big debates. From Voltaire testing the tolerance of the French state and official religion to Victor Hugo's 'Claude Gueux', about the barbarism of the death penalty, writers have used the short story not just for its brevity but for the ways in which it circulates. More widely and quickly disseminated than novels and more easily digested than political tracts, it blends the efficacy of polemic with the attractions of entertainment.

Another continuity the reader will notice is the relationship between the ordinary and extraordinary, and the French short story's attraction to

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the ‘fantastic’. Traditionally understood as a nineteenth-century speciality, its roots lie earlier and its offshoots extend into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This anthology contains classics such as Gautier’s ‘The Mummy’s Foot’ and Mérimée’s ‘The Venus of Ille’, along with lesser-known masterpieces such as Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s moving story ‘Véra’, in which, through a sustained refusal to believe in his wife’s death, a widower succeeds in returning her to life (or does he . . .?). The ‘fantastique’ is one of the dominant genres and thrives on bringing the everyday and the extraordinary into explosive contact. In Marcel Aymé’s ‘The Man who Walked Through Walls’ and Jacques Sternberg’s ‘The Execution’, fantastical events are told in such matter-of-fact, deadpan prose that the flatness of the narration accentuates rather than dulls the narrative. Meanwhile, writers such as Renée Vivien and Claude Cahun are the heirs of Perrault and his fairy tales, and Jules Verne’s science fiction is in the lineage of Voltaire’s space travel. While all this speaks to a desire for escapism and supernatural thrill, it reflects something more serious in all of us: the feeling that there is more to life than just the here and now. We may think of the ‘fantastic’ and related genres – science fiction, horror, gothic – as expressions of our need for an ‘*au-delà*’, a ‘beyond’, in a utilitarian and post-religious age.

The short story is also a place where authors experiment with themes and styles that are at an angle to the work for which they are best known. Thus Apollinaire, the great modern poet of *Calligrammes* and *Alcools*, appears here with a short story about a man with the gift of blending in with his surroundings. Émile Zola, the Naturalist author of the twenty-novel Rougon Macquart cycle, features with a sharp and prescient story about advertising and the media. His fellow one-time Naturalist, Joris-Karl Huysmans, the decadent-turned-catholic author of *Against Nature*, is represented by the bleakly comic tale of Mr Bougran, a sacked bureaucrat who cannot bear to retire. A taste of the *fin de siècle* and decadent period is offered in a range of stories, from the erotic and depraved tales of Rachilde and Jean Lorrain to Marcel Schwob’s harrowing war story, ‘The *Sans Gueules*’.

Some of the major twentieth century writers I would have wished to include – notably Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Georges Simenon and Jean Giono – were unavailable for reasons of copyright, but I have also sought to expand the range of authors traditionally available to the

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English-speaking audience. As well as the canonical and the classic (Colette, Marguerite Duras, Marguerite Yourcenar, Georges Perec, Françoise Sagan), I have included authors who are less familiar to readers in the anglosphere. These include Emmanuel Bove, Béatrix Beck, Charles-Albert Cingria, Jacqueline Harpman, Madeleine Bourdouxhe and Thomas Owen, as well as contemporary writers such as Gilles Ortlieb, Ananda Devi and Christian Garcin. In the works of Birago Diop, Boualem Sansal, Leïla Sebbar and Assia Djebbar, among others, the short story brings its unique focus to bear on the legacies of colonialism and the cultural, linguistic and religious fault lines of contemporary France and its former colonies. Many authors are translated here for the first time; their work enriches not just the French literary tradition, but the range of French writing available in English.

I think of every story not just as a standalone fiction, but as part of a whole, a busy, imbricated set of contexts. In theatrical terms, I like to imagine the ‘noises off’ behind and to the side of them. They may be free-standing works of art but they are not sealed off from the worlds that produced them. They are also little keys to their cultures, their times and places: from Renaissance France to the multicultural global *francophonie* of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

My aim in this selection has been to entertain, to provide variety and to reveal the unexpected continuities between different periods and different literary traditions. I have aimed for variety among the stories and diversity among the authors. The pluralism of my definition of the short story is matched by the pluralism of my definition of French, and I include many writers from the francophone world. I have chosen writers substantially published in France, or resident there, or writers who are part of the literary culture in terms of their publishing houses, their eligibility for prizes, or their media presence. Here, too, I have been permissive: though they have all written French short stories, none of the authors in these pages has been required to show their passport or provide proof of residence.

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PHILIPPE DE LAON

The Husband as Doctor

It is well known that in the province of Champagne you are sure to meet heavy and dull-witted persons, which has seemed strange to many persons, seeing that the district is so near to the country of Mischief. Many stories could be told of the stupidity of the Champenois, but this present story will suffice.

In this province, there lived a young man, an orphan, who at the death of his father and mother had become rich and powerful. He was stupid, ignorant and disagreeable, but hard-working and knew well how to take care of himself and his affairs, and for this reason, many persons, – even people of condition, – were willing to give him their daughter in marriage.

One of these damsels, above all others, pleased the friends and relations of our Champenois, for her beauty, goodness, riches, and so forth. They told him that it was time he married.

‘You are now,’ they said, ‘twenty-three years old, and there could not be a better time. And if you will listen to us, we have searched out for you a fair and good damsel who seems to us just suited to you. It is such a one – you know her well;’ and they told him her name.

The young man, who cared little whether he was married or not, as long as he lost no money by it, replied that he would do whatever they wished. ‘Since you think it will be to my advantage, manage the business the best way you can, and I will follow your advice and instructions.’

‘You say well,’ replied these good people. ‘We will select your wife as carefully as though it were for ourselves, or one of our children.’

To cut matters short, a little time afterwards our Champenois was married; but on the first night, when he was sleeping with his wife, he, never

having mounted on any Christian woman, soon turned his back to her, and a few poor kisses was all she had of him, but nothing on her back. You may guess his wife was not well pleased at this; nevertheless, she concealed her discontent.

This unsatisfactory state of things lasted ten days, and would have continued longer if the girl's mother had not put a stop to it.

It should be known to you that the young man was unskilled in the mysteries of wedlock, for during the lifetime of his parents he had been kept with a tight hand, and, above all things, had been forbidden to play at the beast with two backs, lest he should take too much delight therein, and waste all his patrimony. This was wise of his parents, for he was not a young man likely to be loved for his good looks.

As he would do nothing to anger his father or mother, and was, moreover, not of an amorous disposition, he had always preserved his chastity, though his wife would willingly have deprived him of it, if she had known how to do so honestly.

One day the mother of the bride came to her daughter, and asked her all about her husband's state and condition, and the thousand other things which women like to know. To all of these questions the bride replied that her husband was a good man, and she hoped and believed that she would be happy with him.

But the old woman knew by her own experience that there are more things in married life than eating and drinking, so she said to her daughter:

‘Come here, and tell me, on your word of honour, how does he acquit himself at night?’

When the girl heard this question, she was so vexed and ashamed that she could not reply, and her eyes filled with tears. Her mother understood what these tears meant, and said:

‘Do not weep, my child! Speak out boldly! I am your mother, and you ought not to conceal anything from me, or be afraid of telling me. Has he done nothing to you yet?’

The poor girl, having partly recovered, and being reassured by her mother's words, ceased her tears, but yet could make no reply. Thereupon, her mother asked again:

‘Lay aside your grief and answer me honestly: has he done nothing to you yet?’

The Husband as Doctor

In a low voice, mingled with tears, the girl replied, 'On my word, mother, he has never yet touched me, but, except for that, there is no more kind or affectionate man.'

'Tell me,' said the mother; 'do you know if he is properly furnished with all his members? Speak out boldly, if you know.'

'By St John! he is all right in that respect,' replied the bride. 'I have often, by chance, felt his luggage as I turned to and fro in our bed when I could not sleep.'

'That is enough,' said the mother; 'leave the rest to me. This is what you must do. In the morning you must pretend to be very ill – even as though your soul were departing from your body. Your husband will, I fully expect, seek me out and bid me come to you, and I will play my part so well that your business will be soon settled, for I shall take your water to a certain doctor, who will give such advice as I order.'

All was done as arranged, for on the morrow, as soon as it was dawn, the girl, who was sleeping with her husband, began to complain and to sham sickness as though a strong fever racked her body.

Her booby husband was much vexed and astonished, and knew not what to say or do. He sent forthwith for his mother-in-law, who was not long in coming. As soon as he saw her, 'Alas! mother!' said he, 'your daughter is dying.'

'My daughter?' said she. 'What does she want?' And whilst she was speaking she walked to the patient's chamber.

As soon as the mother saw her daughter, she asked what was the matter; and the girl, being well instructed what she was to do, answered not at first, but, after a little time, said, 'Mother, I am dying.'

'You shall not die, please God! Take courage! But how comes it that you are taken ill so suddenly?'

'I do not know! I do not know!' replied the girl. 'It drives me wild to answer all these questions.'

The old woman took the girl's hand, and felt her pulse; then she said to her son-in-law:

'On my word she is very ill. She is full of fire, and we must find some remedy. Have you any of her water?'

'That which she made last night is there,' said one of the attendants.

'Give it me,' said the mother.

She took the urine, and put it in a proper vessel, and told her son-in-law that she was about to show it to such-and-such a doctor, that he might know what he could do to her daughter to cure her.

‘For God’s sake, spare nothing,’ said she. ‘I have yet some money left, but I love my daughter better than money.’

‘Spare!’ quoth he. ‘If money can help, you shall not want.’

‘No need to go so fast,’ said she. ‘Whilst she is resting, I will go home; but I will come back if I am wanted.’

Now you must know that the old woman had on the previous day, when she left her daughter, instructed the doctor, who was well aware of what he ought to say. So the young man carried his wife’s water to the doctor, and when he had saluted him, related how sick and suffering his wife was.

‘And I have brought you some of her water that you may judge how ill she is, and more easily cure her.’

The doctor took the vessel of urine, and turned it about and examined it, then said:

‘Your wife is afflicted with a sore malady, and is in danger of dying unless help be forthcoming; her water shows it.’

‘Ah, master, for God’s sake tell me what to do, and I will pay you well if you can restore her to health, and prevent her from dying.’

‘She need not die,’ said the doctor; ‘but unless you make haste, all the money in the world will not save her life.’

‘Tell me, for God’s sake,’ said the other, ‘what to do, and I will do it.’

‘She must,’ said the doctor, ‘have connection with a man, or she will die.’

‘Connection with a man?’ said the other. ‘What is that?’

‘That is to say,’ continued the doctor, ‘that you must mount on the top of her, and speedily ram her three or four times, or more if you can; for, if not, the great heat which is consuming her will not be put out.’

‘Ah! Will that be good for her?’

‘There is no chance of her living,’ said the doctor, ‘if you do not do it, and quickly too.’

‘By St John,’ said the other, ‘I will try what I can do.’

With that he went home and found his wife, who was groaning and lamenting loudly.

‘How are you, my dear?’ said he.

‘I am dying, my dear,’ she replied.

‘You shall not die, please God,’ said he. ‘I have seen the doctor, who has told me what medicine will cure you,’ and as he spoke, he undressed himself, and lay down by his wife, and began to execute the orders he had received from the doctor.

‘What are you doing?’ said she. ‘Do you want to kill me?’

‘No! I am going to cure you,’ he replied. ‘The doctor said so;’ and Nature instructing him, and the patient helping, he performed on her two or three times.

When he was resting from his labours, much astonished at what had happened, he asked his wife how she was.

‘I am a little better than I was before,’ she replied.

‘God be praised,’ said he. ‘I hope you will get well and that the doctor told me truly.’ And with that he began again.

To cut matters short, he performed so well that his wife was cured in a few days, at which he was very joyful, and so was her mother when she knew it.

The young man after this became a better fellow than he was before, and his wife being now restored to health, he one day invited all his relations and friends to dinner, and also the father and mother of his wife, and he served grand cheer after his own fashion. They drank to him, and he drank to them, and he was marvellous good company.

But hear what happened to him: in the midst of the dinner he began to weep, which much astonished all his friends who were at table with him, and they demanded what was the matter, but he could not reply for weeping scalding tears. At last he spoke, and said:

‘I have good cause to weep.’

‘By my oath you have not,’ replied his mother-in-law. ‘What ails you? You are rich and powerful, and well housed, and have good friends; and you must not forget that you have a fair and good wife whom God brought back to health when she was on the edge of the grave. In my opinion you ought to be light-hearted and joyful.’

‘Alas!’ said he, ‘woe is me! My father and mother, who both loved me, and who amassed and left me so much wealth, are both dead, and by my fault, for they died of a fever, and if I had well towzled them both when they were ill, as I did to my wife, they would still be on their feet.’

The Penguin Book of French Short Stories

There was no one at table who, on hearing this, would not have liked to laugh, nevertheless they restrained themselves as best they could. The tables were removed, and each went his way, and the young man continued to live with his wife, and – in order that she might continue in good health – he failed not to tail her pretty often.

Translated by Robert B. Douglas

MARGUERITE DE NAVARRE

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In the Duchy of Milan, at the time when the Grand Master of Chaumont was governor, there lived a nobleman called Bonnivet, who later, for his merits, was made an Admiral of France. Greatly loved by the aforementioned Grand Master and everyone else in Milan for the virtues he possessed, he was often to be seen at those assemblies where all the ladies gathered together, and was more popular with them than any Frenchman had ever been, as much for his beauty, grace and eloquence as for the reputation everyone accorded him of being one of the best and bravest swordsmen of his time. One day, at a masked ball during the Carnival, he danced with one of the most beautiful ladies in the city; and, whenever there was a pause in the music, he did not fail to address those amorous compliments to her which he knew how to devise better than any other. But she, who was not supposed to answer him, suddenly decided to discourage him and halt him by saying that she did not love and would never love anyone but her husband, and that he should not entertain any hopes whatever. Despite this reply, the nobleman did not consider himself beaten, and he pursued her vigorously until the middle of Lent. The only result was that he found her firm in her determination to love neither him nor anyone else, which he found hard to believe, in that her husband was ill-favoured and she was extremely beautiful. He decided, since she was practising deception, to use trickery himself; and promptly abandoning his pursuit of her, he made such thorough inquiries about her way of life that he found she was in love with an Italian nobleman who was both worthy and honourable.

The aforementioned Bonnivet gradually won the friendship of this nobleman, so gently and craftily that the Italian did not perceive his

intentions, but liked him so well that he came second only to his lady in his affections. Bonnivet, in order to wrest his secret from him, pretended to tell him his own – namely that he was in love with a certain lady to whom he had really never given a thought – and begged him not to reveal it, so that they might have only one heart and mind between them. The poor nobleman, in order to show him equal friendship, told him at great length about the love he bore the lady on whom Bonnivet wished to be avenged; and once a day the two of them met at a certain place to tell each other what luck each had had during the day, one telling lies and the other the truth. The nobleman confessed to having been in love with his lady for three years, without having received anything from her but fair words and assurances of her love for him. The aforementioned Bonnivet explained to him all the means by which he might attain his end, and he found these so effective that within a few days she agreed to grant him all he asked; all that remained was to find an opportunity, and with Bonnivet's help this was soon found.

One day, before supper, the nobleman said to him:

‘Sir, I am more deeply indebted to you than to anyone else in the world, for thanks to your advice I hope to have tonight what I have desired for so many years.’

‘I beg you,’ said Bonnivet, ‘to tell me all about it, so that I may see whether there is any trickery or danger involved, and help you as a true friend.’

The nobleman told him that the lady had found a means of leaving the main door of the house open, on the pretext of some illness of a brother of hers, which made it necessary to send for medicines from the town at all hours; so that he could certainly enter the courtyard, but was to take care not to go up the main staircase, making his way instead up some steps on the right and entering the first gallery he came to, where he would find the doors leading into the rooms of her father-in-law and brothers-in-law. He was to pick out carefully the third door from the top of the stairs, and if, pushing it gently, he found it closed, he must go away, for that would mean that her husband had returned, although he was not due to come home for two days. But if he found it open, he was to enter softly and shut the door behind him, bolting it fast, knowing that she was alone in the room. Above all, he was not to forget to wear felt slippers, for fear of

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making a noise, and to be careful not to come until two o'clock in the morning, because her brothers-in-law, who were very fond of playing cards, never went to bed before one. Bonnivet replied:

‘Go ahead, my dear fellow! May God be with you and keep you from any mishap, and if my presence can be of any help to you, I shall not spare anything in my power.’

The nobleman thanked him warmly, but said that in this matter he could not be too much alone, and went off to attend to it.

For his part, Bonnivet did not sleep; and, seeing that the time had come for him to take his revenge on his cruel lady, he retired early to his lodgings and had his beard cut to the same length and breadth as the nobleman's; he had his hair cut in the same way, so that it was impossible to tell the difference between them by touching him. Nor did he forget to put on felt slippers and to make sure that the rest of his clothing was similar to the nobleman's. Because he was on friendly terms with the lady's father-in-law, he was not afraid of going to the house early, thinking that if he were seen he would go straight to the room of the good man, with whom he had some business.

At midnight he entered the lady's house, where he found quite a few people coming and going; but he passed among them without being recognized and reached the gallery. Touching the first two doors, he found them closed, but not the third, which he gently pushed open. Once he was inside the lady's room, he bolted the door behind him. He saw the whole room hung with white, and the floor and ceiling white too; and in the room there was a bed of fine linen, with a curtain admirably worked in white. The lady was alone in the bed, with her nightcap and shift covered with pearls and precious stones; this he saw through one corner of the curtain without her seeing him, for there was a large candle of white wax in the room which made it as light as day. For fear of being recognized, he blew out the candle first of all, then took off his clothes and got into bed beside her. She, thinking it was the man who had loved her for so long, gave him as warm a welcome as she could; but he, knowing it was meant for another, took care not to say a single word to her and thought of nothing but carrying out his revenge, in other words of taking away her honour and chastity without owing her gratitude or favour. But willy-nilly, the lady was so pleased with this revenge that she thought he had been

repaid in full for all his services by the time the clock struck one and the moment came to say farewell. Then, as quietly as he could, he asked her if she was as pleased with him as he with her. She, thinking he was her sweetheart, told him she was not only pleased but astonished at the fervour of his love, which had prevented him from speaking to her for a whole hour. He promptly burst into loud laughter, and said to her:

‘Tell me, my lady, will you reject me again, as you have been accustomed to doing till now?’

Recognizing him by his voice and his laughter, she was so overwhelmed with grief and shame that she called him a villain, traitor and deceiver a thousand times, and tried to jump out of bed to look for a knife with which to kill herself, since she had been unfortunate enough to lose her honour for a man whom she did not love and who, to revenge himself upon her, might spread the story abroad. But he held her back with his arms, and speaking to her kindly and gently, assured her that he loved her more than the Italian nobleman and would conceal her dishonour so well that it would never be held against her. This the poor foolish woman believed; and hearing from him the scheme he had devised and the pains he had taken to win her, she swore to him that she loved him more than the other man who had been unable to keep her secret, and that she was now convinced that what was commonly said about the French was untrue, for they were more clever, persevering and discreet than the Italians. Accordingly, from then on she would abandon the opinion of her fellow countrymen and of the French, and cleave to him. But she begged him not to come for some time to any gathering where she was, unless he was masked, for she knew she would feel so ashamed that her face would betray her to everyone. He gave his word, and then asked her, when her sweetheart came at two o’clock, to receive him well, after which she could then gradually part company with him. To this she objected so strongly that if it had not been for the love she bore him she would never have agreed to it. However, in taking leave of her, he gave her such satisfaction that she would have dearly wished him to stay longer.

After he had got up and put on his clothes he went out of the room, leaving the door ajar as he had found it. As it was nearly two o’clock, and he was afraid of meeting the Italian nobleman on the way, he withdrew to the top of the stairs, where soon afterwards he saw him pass by and go

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into his lady's room. He for his part went home to his lodgings to rest from his labours, so that at nine o'clock in the morning he was still in bed. While he was getting up, the Italian nobleman arrived and did not fail to tell him of his good fortune, though it had not been as good as he had hoped. He said that when he entered his lady's room, he found her out of bed, wearing her dressing gown and in a high fever; her pulse was beating fast, her face was flushed, and she was beginning to perspire heavily. She accordingly begged him to leave her at once, for she had not dared to call her women, for fear of causing a scandal; and she felt so ill that she had more cause to think of death than love, and to hear about God than Cupid. She told him she was sorry about the risks he had run for her, since she was unable to give him in this world the happiness she hoped to enjoy soon in the next. At this he was so astonished and distressed that his ardour and joy turned to ice and sadness, and he left her at once. At day-break he had sent for news of her, and she was really very sick.

While he was recounting his misfortunes, he wept so copiously that it seemed as if his soul were going to leave his body with his tears. Bonnivet, who felt as much like laughing as the other felt tearful, comforted him as best he could, telling him that long-lasting love affairs always had a difficult beginning, and that Love was imposing this delay on him so that his enjoyment should be greater later on. With these words they parted. The lady kept to her bed for a few days, and when she recovered her health she dismissed her first sweetheart, explaining her conduct by her remorse and the fear she had had of dying. But she continued to favour Bonnivet, whose love, as is usual, lasted as long as the flowers of the field.

Translated by Paul Chilton

FRANÇOIS DE ROSSET

The True Story of a Woman Who Killed Her Husband and Subsequently Performed Unheard-of Acts of Violence on His Body

While previous centuries have given us several examples of the barbarism and cruelty of some women, we should not be surprised if our present times, being more wicked than earlier eras, produce monsters of nature who are indeed more brutal than the fiercest beasts. Witness the cruel acts of a violent Spanish woman – violent both in name and deed – in the unprecedented vengeance she wreaked on the man who boasted of having slept with her. There are countless stories, both ancient and modern, telling of the wrath of a woman driven to revenge, because, disregarding the attributes of her sex, traditionally gentle and amiable by nature, there is no cruel or evil act she will not commit when fury unleashes her passions. Seething with emotions, she becomes a Procne and a Medea, forgiving neither husbands nor children.

In Soirans, a village one league's distance from Auxerre, a woman called Marguerite, knowing that her husband was carousing at the tavern with some friends – and he had even sent someone to fetch two chickens from his home –, this wife waiting impatiently for her husband, on seeing him coming with one of his companions, started spewing a torrent of abuse against him, calling him a drunkard, a glutton, a lecher, an idler, a stinker, a seducer and other insults sparked by her anger. Once inside the house, she continued her tirade and, seeing that she could not be appeased, her husband fetched a double-edged sword, which he kept in his bedroom, intending to charge at her, but he missed his footing and fell to the floor. In a flash, the woman stopped him from getting up. She grabbed a three-legged stool and gave him such a hard blow to the head that he was

The True Story of a Woman Who Killed Her Husband

knocked senseless and, redoubling her blows, she killed him stone dead. When she realized that he was not moving, she dragged him over to the fireside and gave him wine, but it was in vain, because he was well and truly dead. Grasping the seriousness of the situation, she tried to think of solutions to hide this murder and, unable to hide it from God, she resolved to conceal it from men. She removed the body and placed it under the straw mattress on her bed, and, after it had lain there some time, the devil tempted her into carrying out unheard-of acts of violence.

She dragged the body out from beneath the straw mattress, laid it out in the centre of the room and, without feeling the slightest compassion, began to vent her rage on her dead husband's private parts, which she cut off. Then, she picked up an axe and delivered a heavy blow, thinking to disguise his sex. She chopped off his head and cut it into four quarters, then severed his arms above the elbow and his legs above the knee.

O executioner, do you not regret butchering your poor husband? Can your barbaric hands be thus reddened with his blood without your being repulsed? The blood of the man who slept beside you for so many years and with whom you have had two beautiful children? Do you believe your crime will escape punishment, and that the all-seeing eye of Heaven will allow your viciousness to go unchastised? Do you not feel the Furies tormenting your soul, and a parasitic worm gnawing your conscience? What! Your fanatical rage driven by the devil is not yet assuaged? You want to perform the penultimate act of this bloody tragedy, whose horrendous outcome will be no less gruesome?

This shrew took the head, rolled it, spat out evil words in a croaking voice, then came to the eyes, which she stabbed with the point of a spindle. She took a pair of pincers with which she ripped off his nose and ears. And she was not done, there was still more violence to come: she plucked out his beard, leaving not a single hair.

What did she do next? She gathered up all the scattered pieces – in other words, the head, the eyes, the nose, the ears, the lower part of the arm with the hands, the legs and the innards – and buried all those butchered parts in a corner of the house. Then she picked up a bag and put one of the quarters in it and went to throw it into the River Arvesan. She then did the same with the remaining three quarters.

Finally, there she was, her hands still red with blood, trying to erase the

bloodstains from her bedroom. The more water she threw on them, the redder the blood became; the colour was so deep that the water could not wash it away.

A few days went by, and people were surprised not to see her husband. Even the local lord asked her where he was. She replied that he had left the house late one night in his nightshirt and that she had not seen him since. The wheelwright's wife asked her the same thing and she told her that he had gone to war.

Finally, the lord of Soirans sent one of his servants to enquire further, and the servant asked where her husband was. She answered that he had gone to Chalon and that, if she had money, she would go looking for him.

These three different replies provided seemingly incontrovertible evidence pointing to this evil woman's crime. Nevertheless, God requires much clearer and stronger proof of her offence, and for suspicions and evidence to be confirmed by that same veracity.

So now it was Epiphany. While the procession was making its way around Soirans church, the local lord, on seeing the woman beside the river, went to her and asked her what she was doing there. She said that she was watching some crows and magpies on the bank of the river, whose water level had dropped drastically since she had thrown her husband's quarters into it, and she had already spotted one, after which she subsequently confessed.

It seems that God wished to make use of those macabre birds, as He did in the past with the cranes that acted as witnesses against the thieves that had killed Ibucus! On seeing her alone and pensive by the river, the lord of Soirans began to have suspicions, and the cawing crows appeared to be saying in their language that the carrion was close at hand, which prompted him to ask whether she might have killed her husband. She denied it loudly and emphatically, saying that the truth would out.

Then the lord of Soirans mulled over the different replies she had given when asked about her husband's absence. His misgivings grew and he resolved that after mass he would try to uncover the truth of which she had spoken.

Once mass was over, he took a good number of parishioners, his subjects, who began searching the riverbanks, where they found three of the deceased's quarters, and a dog found the fourth, which it dragged out of

The True Story of a Woman Who Killed Her Husband

the water. Although he could not be identified from his quartered body, having been mutilated and decapitated, even so, the lord of Soirans had the woman arrested and imprisoned and, as he made her touch the body parts, the blood spurted out.

They then went to her house where they encountered the scene where she had committed this butchery, even though she had tried, as we have already described, to wash away the blood. And now there was new evidence calling for vengeance against this cruel woman. Even though she would not accuse herself from her own lips, it was sufficient to have her brought to trial and to subject her to the sentence warranted by her crime.

Finally, the judge having extracted the truth through her own confession, she was sentenced to make honourable amends, in her nightdress and brandishing a torch, to beg mercy from God, the king and from Justice.

After she had made honourable amends in front of Sourans church, she was transported by cart to the Bouteran woods, on the main road to Dijon, where the gallows had been erected.

Her confessor exhorted her to call on the Divine Majesty and beg for His mercy to receive forgiveness for her wrongs and recognize that Our Lord always has open arms to receive the sinner who bows down in shame and repents. Even the lord of Soirans said to her: 'Be brave, Marguerite, ask the Lord for mercy with a contrite and humble heart! Beg His forgiveness, meet death willingly and repent for having thus slaughtered your husband!' That wretched woman, as I am so bold as to call her, refused all these holy remonstrances, remained obdurate and obstinate in her sin and did not allow her heart of stone to soften or demonstrate the least contrition by shedding a few tears. But alas! It seemed she was possessed by the Devil, telling her to say that her deed was a good thing, and were it to be done again, she would do so.

Oh, wicked woman, what are you thinking of? Where will despair lead you? Can you not see the gates of Hell opening if you do not change your mind and the Devil holding you in his clutches ready to throw you in? Call on the mercy of your Saviour, who does not wish for the death of the sinner, but for him to convert! Give the heavenly angels cause to rejoice by your conversion! But alas, I cannot see you ready to relinquish your

stubborn stance, because you persist in your obduracy. You are close to the port where you can find your salvation, but you prefer to sink.

After being hanged and strangled, her body was burned, and the ashes scattered to the winds. Ultimately, that evil woman, that terrible monster, died in her obstinacy, refusing through true contrition to patiently resign herself to temporal torment, insignificant compared to her crime, in order to avoid eternal damnation.

Translated by Ros Schwartz

JEAN-PIERRE CAMUS

The Phantom

These tidings are so fresh that it has only been a few days since their principal character yielded to the grave the tribute all flesh must pay. The object which strikes our senses without the distance it requires to serve its purpose deprives them of understanding; things which happen on our own doorstep are much less remarked upon than those which reach us from afar. Some occurrences are like flowers: the foreign ones are more valued, not for their price but for their rarity, than those which grow on our own soil.

In that capital of our Gauls, the grandeur of which is reflected in its very name, at the home of a wearer of those robes said to be long, meaning belonging to the Judicature, a dreadful phantom appeared several times in the night, on occasion to his clerks, and on others to his maidservants.

Now not all the phantoms which appear to such folk during the hours of darkness are pure spirits without flesh or bone, which renders these apparitions somewhat dubious in the eyes of masters and mistresses, and makes them keep their eyes on the behaviour of these young people to ensure that nothing dishonourable is happening in their households. Now it was mainly in the clerks' bedroom that this spectre would show itself quite frequently, and so terrify these poor boys that they would be quite dumbstruck and beside themselves. This led the master to judge that their fear was not feigned. He was a resolute and God-fearing man, and so he decided to find out what could be the cause.

He wanted to spend a night in this bedroom, where his wife did not care to keep him company, having done all she could to dissuade him. He

has his bed made, readies candles and books there, and decides to spend the time occupied thus to prevent sleep from overcoming him. He also gave orders for watch to be kept in the bedroom beneath, which was his own, and, should he make the slightest noise moving a chair, they were to climb the stairs and come to him.

Notwithstanding all these watches and sentries, an hour after he had gone to bed, while he was reading a book, the phantom did not fail to appear. It was a large man, a wearer of the same robes, tall beyond measure, with a hideous face, a long, bristly and ragged beard, and horrible eyes that blazed like two torches. This sight alone so terrified him that he remained motionless and pulseless, as if he had been stunned or enchanted. The spectre walked two or three times around the room at a furious pace and then, taking the candlestick from a bedside stool, places it on the table, takes a large book which was lying on it and opens it, and, having sat down, starts to read it, or rather to say things as if he were reading them – appalling things which this man, lying in his bed, more dead than alive, distinctly heard, so overwhelmed with horror that he could no more move than a statue. This continued a while, for what seemed an age to this stupefied man, who then summoned the strength to reach out from under the sheets with his hand and shake the stool to ask for help. At that moment, this tall man rises, and, casting a look his way capable of turning a man into stone, so horrible it was, knocks over the table, book, chair and candlestick, putting out the candle, and leaves the room full of darkness and horror, disappearing with a sound that led the man in bed and even those below to believe the house was going to ruin.

They rushed up the stairs with light and found the master unconscious in bed, as stiff and as cold as if he were dead. Someone dashes off for water and restoratives; he does not stir for at least half an hour, his wife weeping and despairing. At last he comes round, but so dejected and agitated that it was as if he had risen from the grave like a second Lazarus. A high fever took hold which led him almost to death's door. Nonetheless, care and succour saved him from this mortal illness, though for the two years he lived thereafter he was left with such palpitations, along with such agitation and melancholy, that his health was far from perfect. A very virtuous man of the Church, his relative, who aided and consoled him from the time of this accident to his death, told of these matters which spread far

The Phantom

and wide in every tongue, with each teller adding to it, either by his invention or by his lies.

To speak now of the apparition of spirits, about which many have written great volumes, would you not judge it pointless, and would it not be an unbearable abuse of Scripture, to offer in evidence that passage against the return of spirits, that they leave and do not return (the Prophet saying at that point that human will is by itself led into sin, but cannot by itself escape it without the assistance of celestial grace)? Scripture is so full of apparitions of angels and demons, and even the souls of the dead, and yet there are people of little faith who remain incredulous after such clear examples.

And when Our Lord appeared to His Apostles after His Resurrection, is it not written that they thought they had seen a spirit? And He said to them: 'Touch and see.' But if they thought they had seen a spirit, they must have believed in the return of spirits. The story I have just told, which took place in our time and on our doorstep, and one might say before our eyes, seems to me as remarkable as it is urgent.

Translated by Will McMorrin

CHARLES PERRAULT

Bluebeard

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 storerooms,' 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

Bluebeard

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.

Translated by Christopher Betts

MADAME DE LAFAYETTE

La Comtesse de Tende

In the first year of the regency of Queen Catherine de Médicis, Mademoiselle de Strozzi, the daughter of the Maréchal and a close relation of the Queen, married the Comte de Tende of the house of Savoy. He was rich and handsome; he lived with greater magnificence than any other nobleman at court, though more in a manner to attract esteem than to give pleasure. His wife nonetheless loved him passionately at first. She was very young; he regarded her as a mere child, and he soon fell in love with another woman. The Comtesse de Tende, who was spirited and of Italian descent, became jealous. She allowed herself no rest; she gave none to her husband; he avoided her presence and ceased to live with her as a man lives with his wife.

The beauty of the Comtesse de Tende increased; she showed that she was well endowed with wit; she was regarded in society with admiration; she busied herself with her own affairs and gradually recovered from her jealousy and passion.

She became the intimate friend of the Princesse de Neufchâtel, the young and beautiful widow of the prince of that house. On his death, he had bequeathed her a sovereign position that made her the most high-ranking and brilliant match at court.

The Chevalier de Navarre, a descendant of the former monarchs of that kingdom, was also at that time young, handsome, full of wit and nobility; but fortune had endowed him with no other goods than his illustrious birth. His glance fell on the Princesse de Neufchâtel – with whose character he was acquainted – as a woman capable of a passionate attachment and well suited to making the fortune of a man like himself. With this in mind, he paid court to her and attracted her interest: she did not

discourage him, but he found that he was still very far from the success he desired. His intentions were known to nobody except one of his friends, to whom he had confided them; this friend was also an intimate of the Comte de Tende. He made the Chevalier de Navarre consent to entrust the Comte de Tende with his secret, in the hope that he might be persuaded to further his cause with the Princesse de Neufchâtel. The Comte de Tende already liked the Chevalier de Navarre; he spoke of the matter to his wife, for whom he was beginning to have greater consideration, and persuaded her, in fact, to do what was wanted.

The Princesse de Neufchâtel had already told her in confidence about her inclination for the Chevalier de Navarre, and she gave her friend her support and encouragement. The Chevalier came to see her; they established connections and made arrangements together; but, on seeing her, he also conceived a violent passion for her. At first, he refused to give himself up to it; he saw the obstacles that would be put in the way of his plans if he were subject to conflicting feelings of love and ambition; he tried to resist; but, in order to succeed, he would have had to avoid seeing the Comtesse de Tende frequently, whereas in fact he saw her every day when he visited the Princesse de Neufchâtel. In this way, he fell hopelessly in love with her. He was unable to hide his passion from her entirely; this flattered her self-regard and she began to feel a violent love for him.

As she was speaking to him one day of his good fortune in marrying the Princesse de Neufchâtel, he gave her a look in which his passion was fully declared and said:

‘Do you then believe, Madame, that there is no good fortune I would prefer to that of marrying the princess?’

The Comtesse de Tende was struck by his expression and his words; she returned his look, and there was a moment of troubled silence between them more eloquent than words. From that time on, she was in a state of constant agitation and could find no rest; she felt remorse at depriving her friend of the heart of a man she intended to marry solely for the sake of his love, amid universal disapproval, and at the expense of her high rank.

The treachery horrified her. The shame and misery of a love affair presented themselves to her imagination; she saw the abyss into which she was about to cast herself, and resolved to avoid it.

Her resolutions were ill kept. The Princesse de Neufchâtel was almost

persuaded that she should marry the Chevalier de Navarre; however, she was not satisfied that he loved her sufficiently and, despite her own passion and the care he took to deceive her, she discerned that his feelings were no more than lukewarm. She complained of it to the Comtesse de Tende, who reassured her; but Madame de Neufchâtel's complaints added the final touch to her disquiet, making apparent to her the extent of her treachery, which might perhaps cost her lover his fortune. She warned him of the Princesse de Neufchâtel's suspicions. He declared that he was indifferent to everything except her love for him; nonetheless, he mastered his feelings at her command and succeeded in reassuring the princess, who indicated to her friend that she was now entirely satisfied with the Chevalier de Navarre.

Then jealousy took possession of the Comtesse de Tende. She feared that her lover really did love the princess; she perceived all the reasons he had for loving her; their marriage, which she had earlier desired, horrified her; yet she did not wish him to break it off, and she found herself in a state of cruel uncertainty. She allowed the Chevalier de Navarre to see the remorse she felt towards the princess; but she resolved to hide her jealousy from him and believed she had in fact done so.

The Princesse de Neufchâtel's passion finally triumphed over her hesitations; she determined upon marriage, but resolved that it should be consecrated in secret and only made public afterwards.

The Comtesse de Tende felt she would die of grief. On the day the wedding was to take place, there was also a public ceremony; her husband attended. She sent all her women there; she let it be known that she was receiving no one and shut herself in her private room, where she lay on a couch and gave herself up to the most cruel torments of remorse, love and jealousy.

The room had a secret door. While she was in this state, she heard the door open and saw the Chevalier de Navarre, finely dressed and more elegant and charming than she had ever seen him.

'Chevalier! What are you doing here?' she cried. 'What do you want? Have you lost your reason? What has become of your marriage? Do you care nothing for my reputation?'

'Have no fear for your reputation, Madame,' he replied; 'no one can know I am here; there is no question of my marriage; I care no longer for

my fortune, I care only for your heart, Madame; all the rest I willingly renounce. You have allowed me to see that you did not hate me; yet you have tried to conceal from me that I am fortunate enough to have caused you pain by marrying the Princesse de Neufchâtel. I have come to tell you, Madame, that I will not proceed with the marriage, that it would be a torment to me, and that I want to live only for you. They are waiting for me as I speak to you now, everything is ready, but I shall break it all off, if, in doing so, I do something that is pleasing to you and that convinces you of my passion.'

The Comtesse de Tende fell back on her couch, from which she had half risen, and looked at the Chevalier with eyes full of love and tears.

'Do you then wish me to die?' she said. 'What heart could contain everything you make me feel? That you should abandon for my sake the fortune that awaits you! I cannot even bear to think of such a thing. Go to the Princesse de Neufchâtel, go to the high position destined for you; you will have my heart as well. I shall deal with my remorse, my hesitations and my jealousy – since I am forced to admit it – in whatever way my feeble reason dictates; but I shall never see you again if you do not go immediately and consecrate your marriage. Go, don't hesitate an instant; but, for my sake and yours, give up this unreasoning passion you have revealed to me; it could lead us into terrible misfortunes.'

The Chevalier was at first enraptured to see how genuinely the Comtesse de Tende loved him; but the horror of giving himself to another woman presented itself anew to his gaze. He wept, he lamented, he promised her everything she wanted, provided that she would agree to see him again in this same place. She asked him, before he left, how he had found his way in. He told her that he had entrusted himself to an equerry in her service who had once been in his own; this man had brought him through the stable yard and up a little staircase that led to the private room as well as to the equerry's own room.

Meanwhile, the time for the wedding was drawing near and the Chevalier, urged on by the Comtesse de Tende, was at last obliged to go. He went to the greatest and most desirable gift of fortune to which a penniless younger son has ever been raised up; but he went as if to the scaffold. The Comtesse de Tende passed the night, as may well be imagined, in a state of agitation and disquiet. When morning came, she called her women;

not long after her room was open, she saw her equerry approach her bed and put a letter on it without anyone noticing. The sight of this letter disturbed her, both because she recognized it as coming from the Chevalier de Navarre and because it was so improbable that, during a night which was supposed to have been his wedding night, he had had the opportunity to write to her – so improbable was it, indeed, that she feared he or others might have put obstacles in the way of his marriage. She opened the letter with deep emotion and read these words, or something like them:

‘I think only of you, Madame, I care for nothing else: in the first moments of legitimate possession of the highest-born match in France, when the day has hardly begun to break, I have left the chamber where I spent the night in order to tell you that I have already repented a thousand times of having obeyed your will and of failing to renounce everything to live for you alone.’

The Comtesse de Tende was much moved by this letter and by the circumstances in which it was written. She went to dine at the house of the Princesse de Neufchâtel, who had invited her. The princess’s marriage had now been made public. The Comtesse de Tende found the room full of people; but as soon as the Princesse de Neufchâtel caught sight of her, she left the gathering and asked her to come with her to her private room. Hardly had they sat down before the princess’s face was covered in tears. Her friend believed the cause to be the public declaration of her marriage: she must be finding this more difficult to bear than she had imagined. She soon saw, however, that she was wrong.

‘Ah! Madame,’ the Princesse de Neufchâtel said to her, ‘what have I done? I have married a man for love; I have entered into an unequal match which is universally disapproved of and which drags me down; and the man I have placed above everything else loves another woman!’

The Comtesse de Tende thought she would faint when she heard these words; she did not believe that the princess could have fathomed her husband’s passion without having also unravelled its cause. She was unable to reply. The Princesse de Navarre, as she was now called, noticed nothing and continued thus:

‘The Prince de Navarre, Madame, far from showing the impatience one would have expected once the wedding was over, kept me waiting yesterday night. When he came, he was joyless, distracted and preoccupied. At dawn,

he left my room on some pretext or other. But he had been writing: I saw it on his hands. To whom could he have been writing if not to a mistress? Why did he keep me waiting, and what was it that preoccupied him?

At that moment the conversation was interrupted because the Princesse de Condé was arriving; the Princesse de Navarre went to receive her and the Comtesse de Tende remained, beside herself. That very evening, she wrote to the Prince de Navarre to warn him of the suspicions of his wife and to urge him to restrain his behaviour.

Their passion was in no way diminished by the perils and obstacles they faced. The Comtesse de Tende could not rest, and sleep no longer came to alleviate her distress. One morning, after she had called her women, her equerry approached and told her quietly that the Prince de Navarre was in her private room and that he begged her to let him tell her something it was absolutely necessary for her to know. It is easy to yield to what gives pleasure: the Comtesse de Tende knew that her husband had gone out; she said that she wished to sleep, and told her women to close her doors again and not to return unless she called them.

The Prince de Navarre came in from the private room and fell on his knees by her bed.

‘What have you to tell me?’ she said.

‘That I love you, Madame, that I adore you, that I cannot live with Madame de Navarre. This morning, I was overcome by such a violent desire to see you that I was unable to resist it. I have come here at the risk of all the consequences that might follow and without even hoping to be able to speak to you.’

The Comtesse de Tende rebuked him at first for compromising her so heedlessly; then their passion drew them into such a long conversation that the Comte de Tende returned from town. He went to his wife’s apartment; he was told that she was not yet awake. It was late; he insisted on entering her room and found the Prince de Navarre on his knees by her bed, as he had been from the start. Never was a man so astonished as the Comte de Tende; never was a woman so dismayed as his wife. The Prince de Navarre alone retained some presence of mind; without losing his poise or getting up, he said to the Comte de Tende:

‘Come, I beg you, and help me to obtain a favour: I have gone down on my knees to ask for it, yet it has not been granted.’

The tone and manner of the Prince de Navarre allayed the astonishment of the Comte de Tende. 'I am not sure,' he replied in the same tone as the prince, 'that a favour that you ask of my wife on bended knees, when she is said to be asleep and I find you alone with her, and with no carriage at my door, is likely to be of the kind that I would wish to grant.'

The Prince de Navarre, who had overcome the embarrassment of the first moments and regained his assurance, rose from his knees and sat down with the greatest self-possession. The Comtesse de Tende, trembling and distraught, was able to hide her confusion because her bed was in shadow. The Prince de Navarre addressed her husband thus:

'I shall surprise you: you will no doubt blame my conduct, but you will nonetheless be obliged to help me. I love and am loved by the person at court most worthy of love. Yesterday evening, I slipped away from the company of the Princesse de Navarre and all my servants in order to go to an assignation with this lady. My wife, who has already fathomed that I have something other than herself on my mind and who is keeping my conduct under observation, found out from my servants that I was no longer with them; her jealousy and despair are beyond bounds. I told her that I had spent the time that gave her anxiety as a guest of the Maréchale de Saint-André, who is unwell and who is seeing hardly anyone; I told her that only Madame la Comtesse de Tende was there and that she could ask her if it were not true that she had seen me there the whole evening. I decided to come and place myself in your wife's hands. I went to the house of La Châtre, which is only a few steps away from here; I left the house without my servants seeing me and was told that Madame la Comtesse was awake. I found no one in her antechamber and made so bold as to enter. She is refusing to tell lies on my behalf; she protests that she is unwilling to betray her friend and is very properly rebuking me, as I have vainly rebuked myself. It is imperative to relieve Madame la Princesse de Navarre of her anxiety and jealousy so that I may be spared the mortal embarrassment of her reproaches.'

The Comtesse de Tende was hardly less surprised by the Prince de Navarre's presence of mind than by the arrival of her husband; she recovered her composure, and the Comte de Tende's doubts were entirely set at rest. He joined his wife in pointing out to the Prince de Navarre the depths of misfortune and misery into which he was about to cast himself,