

La Belle Hélène

By Prosper Mérimée

1

Now, those of you who would hear the sorrowful tale of La Belle Hélène and her husband, Theodore Khonopka, gather round Jean Bietko, the finest guzla player you have ever heard. The finest that ever you will hear.

2

Theodore Khonopka was a courageous hunter who lived in the times of my grandfather, from whom I heard this tale. He married La Belle Hélène, who chose him instead of Piero Stamati, because Theodore was handsome and Piero was ugly and mean.

3

Piero Stamati came one day to Theodore Khonopka's house. "Hélène," he said, "is it true that your husband has gone to Venice, and that he needs to be gone for a whole year?" "Sadly true. And oh how painful it is to be left alone in this huge house..."

4

"No need to grieve alone and lonely, Hélène, when company is so near at hand. Let me sleep with you, and I will give you a handful of golden coins to put in your jet black hair."

5

"Get thee behind me . . . villain "Ah," said the cruel Stamati, "let me sleep with you and I will give you a velvet robe and as many gold coins as my bonnet can hold."

6

"Get thee behind me, villain. Or I will tell my brothers of your perfidy, and they will kill you."

.....

Now you must know that Stamati was small and old, ugly and stunted, and Hélène was tall and strong.

7

Well for her that she was tall and strong..... Stamati was thrown on his back. Weeping, he tottered back to his own house on trembling knees.....

8

He went to a certain impious Jew and asked how he might avenge himself on H el ene. The Jew said, "Seek till you find a black toad that lives under a tombstone. Then bring me the toad in an earthen pot."

9

Stamati brought him a black toad found under a tombstone, and the Jew poured water over the beast's head, and called it "John." —What a dreadful blasphemy—to baptise a toad with the name of so great an apostle!

10

Well then, they scored the toad's skin with their daggers' points until a subtle venom oozed from the cuts. This they gathered into a vial, from which they forced the toad to drink. That done, they caused the toad to lick the skin of a lovely fruit.

11

And Stamati said to his servant lad, "Take this fruit to La Belle H el ene, and tell her that my wife sent it to her." The boy did as he was told, and took the fruit to H el ene, who ate it at once with the greatest pleasure.

12

Having eaten the lovely fruit, Helene felt terribly sick, and it seemed to her that a snake was stirring in her belly.....

Now those of you who would know the end of this story [must] give a little something to Jean Bietko, the teller of the tale.

PART TWO

1

When La Belle H el ene had eaten the fruit, she made the sign of the cross, but still she felt that something was stirring in her belly. She called her sister, who told her to drink some milk. [She did,] but the snake-like stirring continued.

2

And now her belly began to swell, little by little; each day a little morc.....The women said, "H el ene is pregnant; yet how can that be, since her husband has been in Venice for more than ten

months?”

3

And La Belle H el ene was deeply ashamed, and could not hold her head high, nor think of going out into the street. She stayed indoors, and wept her days and nights away. She said to her sister, “What will become of me when my husband returns?”

4

When he had been gone for a year, Theodore Khonopka thought of returning home. Taking a place on a gilded ship, he made a safe journey to his homeland. His friends and neighbors came to greet him, dressed in their finest clothing.

5

But no matter how closely he searched among the crowd, Khonopka could not see La Belle H el ene and he inquired: “What has happened to my wife? Why isn’t she here?” His neighbors hid their smiles; his friends blushed; but no one replied.

6

When he came to his house, he found his wife seated on a cushion. “Get up, H el ene.” She stood and he saw her belly—how it was swollen. “What is this? H el ene, it has been more than a year since I slept with you?”

7

“My lord. I swear to you by the blessed Virgin Mary, I have been faithful to you; but I have been bewitched in some manner that has caused my belly to swell.” But he did not believe her and, drawing his sabre, he cut off her head with a single blow.

8

When he had cut off her head, he said, “I will take the child from her perfidious belly and will expose it in the fields as if I meant it to die. Then its father will come looking for it, and by this means I will recognize the man who betrayed me, and I will kill him.”

9

He opened her white, white belly, and lo! instead of a child, he found a black toad. “Alas, alas! What have I done?” he said. “I have killed La Belle H el ene who never betrayed me. She was indeed bewitched by means of a toad.”

10

He took up his dear wife’s head and kissed it. Suddenly, the cold head opened its eyes. Its lips trembled and it said, “I am innocent, but for vengeance’s sake the sorcerers cast the spell of a

black toad upon me.

11

“Because I was faithful to you, Piero Stamati, with the help of a wicked Jew who lives in the valley where the tombs are, cast the spell on me.” Then the head closed its eyes; the tongue grew chill and never spoke again.

12

Theodore Khonopka sought out Piero Stamati and cut off his head. He also killed the wicked Jew; and he caused thirty masses to be said for the repose of his wife’s soul.

May God have pity on them and on all this company.