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KILLER OF HUNDREDS OF CHILDREN.

FRENCH BLUEBEARD.

Once Safeguarded Joan of Arc.

Many people thought of Bluebeard as merely an unamiable character in a fairy tale were surprised to read that Mr. Aleister Crowley had been forbidden to lecture on the original Bluebeard before the Poetry Society of London.

There is nothing special, though much that is fantastic, in the true story of Gilles de Rais, the monster who confessed before his execution that he had killed hundreds of children, the numbers of which he had lost count.

Breton peasants cross themselves to this day when they approach the ruins of the castle where Gilles de Rais committed his crimes. Tradition relates how the devil changed to a brilliant blue the magnificent red beard that was his pride. But legend can add nothing of horror to the true story of Gilles de Rais, which is preserved in the judicial records of France.

In 15th century Brittany, there was no career more promising than that of the youthful Gilles de Rais. Born of noble stock, and allied with all that was illustrious in the west of France, his barony of Rais made him head of the Baronage of Brittany. When he was still a youth he married a great heiress, and became one of the wealthiest nobles in France.

GUARDED JOAN OF ARC.

On the field of honour the young baron had won glory from the age of 16, and he distinguished himself in his early manhood in the desperate eservice of Charles VII. against the English. When Joan of Arc appeared, this young knight was charged to watch over her safety, and, with exemplary devotion, remained at her side through all her glorious and tragic adventures.

The youth was also celebrated for his becoming piety. In an age when few knights could read, he studied diligently the works of St. Augustine. He was a collector of books, rejoicing in rich binding and illuminations, and a patron of music and the drama.

Such was the magnificent seigneur who from the time he was 28 lived a double life of which the excesses and cruelties were unequalled by Caligula or Nero.

When tried for his life Gilles de Rais himself told the whole shameful story. When he was a child of 11 he was left in the care of a weak and indulgent grandfather, whose authority he shook off easily to allow his own nature to run riot.

When his grandfather died, and his worst aberrations began, he was still known to the world as a magnificent seigneur. He affected a state almost royal, his banquets were open to all, and rich viands and rare wines were squandered constantly. Four hundred horsemen accompanied him wherever he went abroad, and on all his journeys his private chapel, with a service and choir fit for a Cathedral, were carried with him.

SECRETS OF THE CHAPEL

The private chapel, with its richly wrought candelabra and its magnificent altar trappings, witnessed unrecordable evils. His choristers never returned to the outside world; his pages met mysterious deaths.

The child victims selected by de Rais were secured to everlasting silence by death. At first their bodies were thrown into oubliettes at the bottoms of towers in the baron's castles/ When Champtoce was about to surrender, the bones of 40 children were hastily gathered together and carried off by the baron's men; when Rene de la Suze, advanced on Machecoul, the remains of hundreds of children were gathered together and burned. After this Gilles had the bodies burned in his chamber fireplace, and the ashes scattered in the moat.

Gilles was regular in the observance of religion, and founded a chapter of the canons, which he dedicated to the Holy Sepulchre; there is little doubt that he seriously desired, and thought he could obtain, the pardon of Heaven for his transgressions.

De Rais was also—and this led to his undoing—an alchemist in search of the Universal Elixir, which should place unlimited wealth in his hands. Possibly he was moved by genuine scientific enthusiasm, for in his career of profligacy he poured away money like water and regarded his wealth with apparent indif-

ference. Gilles afterwards gained the reputation of sacrificing innumerable children in his necromantic operations; but only one case was definitely brought up at his trial.

Meanwhile de Rais clamoured for more and more victims. At first he contented himself by making away with the waifs who crowded his doors to beg—children about whose death there was no enquiry. It came to be noticed that when he was in Nantes the children who frequented the gates of his Hotel de la Suze were apt to disappear unaccountably. But he soon grew bolder in his crimes.

In his own lands there was little concealment. His villeins were utterly at his mercy; attached to his glebe, they could not take refuge in flight, and could only wait for the next blow to fall.

CAPTURE OF THE INNOCENTS.

Abroad in the land Gilles had his agents to entice from parents the children they would never see again. Two women, Etiennete Blanchu and Perrine Matin, were the most successful of these purveyors.

Nothing was done about it until it became convenient for Duke Jean and the Bishop of Nantes, purchaser of his squandered estates, to bring him to the stake.

One Easter, after he had been to confession and taken communion, and was peacefully engaged in ornamenting with enamels the cover of a book of ceremonies for his chapel, the bishop issued a citation summoning Gilles to appear for trial of invoking the demon with horrid rites, entering into compact with him and murdering many children. His servitors and procurers were seized and carried to Nantes.

Gilles began in a defiant mood; but suffered a change of heart and made full confession. He, the proud and haughty baron, asked that his confession should be read in public, so that his humiliation should aid in winning pardon from God.

THE ODOUR OF SANCTITY.

The trial by Inquisition was followed by secular proceedings. Gilles de Rais and his two confidential servants were sentenced to be hanged and burned. De Rais received the sentence with touching submission, and begged, as his last prayer, that the bishop and clergy might be requested to walk in procession before his execution to pray that he might be kept in firm belief of

his pardon and glorious destiny. It is a glimpse of the extraordinary temper of the Middle Ages to know that the morning saw the extraordinary spectacle of the clergy, followed by the whole population of Nantes, who had been clamouring for his death, marching through the streets singing and praying for his salvation.

Gilles, on the way to execution, assured his companies in crime that they would meet in Paradise.

Henriet and Poitou were allowed to burn to ashes, but when Gilles's halter was burned through and his body fell, the ladies of his family rushed forward, and drew his body from the flames. It was given a magnificent funeral, and it is said that some of the bones were kept by his family as relics.