

*A Remarkable Article, Translated from the French
"Histoire De La Magie" of Alphonse Louis
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WEIRD TALES by C. P. OLIVER*

BLACK MAGIC

*Being the True Story of Gilles de Laval, Baron de
Raiz, Marshal of France, Sorcerer and Murderer*

IN THE entire history of inankind, there is no stranger or more weird story than that of Gilles de Laval, Baron of Raiz and Marshal of France.

A brave and gallant soldier under Charles VII, the services of Gilles de Laval to France could not counterbalance the extent and enormity of his crimes.

All tales of devils and sorcerers were realized and surpassed by the terrible deeds of this fantastic scoundrel, whose history has been engraven upon the memory of children under the name of Bluebeard, for the fable by that title was written around the crimes of the Lord of Raiz.

Gilles de Laval had indeed so black a beard that it seemed to be almost blue, as is shown by his portrait in the Salle de Marchaux, at the Museum of Versailles.

A Marshal of France, de Laval was a brave man; being rich, he was also ostentatious; and he became a sorcerer because he was insane.

The insanity of the Lord of Raiz became manifested, in the first instance, by his sumptuous devotion to religion and by his extravagant magnificence.

When he went abroad, he was preceded by cross and banner; his chaplains were covered with gold and velvet; and he had a choir of little pages, who were always richly clothed.

But, day by day, one of these children was called before the marshal and was seen no more by his comrades; a newcomer succeeded him who disappeared, and the children were sternly forbidden to ask what had become of the missing ones, or even to refer to them among themselves.

These children were obtained by the marshal from poor parents, whom he dazzled by his promises, and whom he pledged to trouble no further concerning their offspring, who, according to his story, were assured a brilliant future.

The explanation is that, in his case,

seeming devotion was the mask and safeguard of infamous crimes.

Ruined by imbecile prodigality, the marshal desired at any cost to create wealth.

A believer in alchemy, he had exhausted his last resources in the pursuit of his hobby, and loans on usurious terms were about to fail him; he therefore determined to attempt the last and most execrable experiments of Black Magic, in the hope of obtaining gold by the aid of hell.

An unfrocked priest, a Florentine named Perlati, and Sille, who was the marshal's steward, became his confidantes and accomplices.

Gilles de Laval had married a young and beautiful woman of high rank only a few months before, whom he kept practically a prisoner in his castle at Machecon, which had a tower with the entrance walled up.

A report was spread by the marshal that this tower was in a ruinous state and that no one sought to penetrate therein.

Notwithstanding this, Madame de Laval, who was frequently alone during the night hours, saw red lights moving to and fro in this tower; but she did not venture to question her husband, whose bizarre and somber character filled her with extreme terror.

ON Easter Day in the year 1440,

Marshal de Laval, having taken solemn communion in his chapel, bade farewell to his wife, telling her that he was departing for the Holy Land to join the Crusades; the poor creature was even then afraid to question him, so much did she tremble in his presence.

Before leaving, the marshal informed her that he was permitting her sister to visit her during his absence, and as he spoke the sister, Annie by name, arrived.

After her husband's departure, Madame de Laval communicated to her sister her fears and anxieties.

What went on in the castle every night?

Why was her lord so gloomy and what signified his repeated absences?

What became of the children who disappeared day by day?

What were those nocturnal lights in the walled-up tower?

These and other questions excited the curiosity of both women to the utmost.

What could they find out during the marshal's absence?

He had forbidden them expressly even to approach the tower, and before leaving had repeated this injunction, but woman's curiosity could not thus be conquered, and the two women set out to seek the entrance to the forbidden tower.

It must assuredly have a secret entrance, argued Madame de Laval, and after an hour's search throughout the lower rooms of the castle, the two women found a copper button located in the chapel and behind the altar, which yielded to pressure and caused a stone to slide back, revealing the lowermost steps of a staircase, which led them to the condemned tower.

At the top of the first flight there was a kind of chapel, with a cross upside down and black candles; on the altar stood a hideous figure, representing the devil.

On the second floor they came upon furnaces, retorts, alembics, charcoal—in a word, all the apparatus of alchemy. The third flight led to a dark chamber, where a heavy and fetid atmosphere compelled the two young women to retreat.

Madame de Laval came into collision with a vase, which fell over, and she was conscious that her robe and feet were soaked by some thick and unknown liquid. On returning to the

light at the head of the stair, she found that she was bathed in blood.

Her sister Annie would have fled from the place, but Madame de Laval's curiosity was stronger than fear, and she returned to the room again, taking with her a lamp from the infernal chapel.

She now perceived a frightful spectacle, for, ranged the whole length of the room were copper basins filled with blood and each bearing a label containing a date, and in the middle of the room there was a black marble table, on which lay the body of a child, quite recently murdered.

It was one of these basins which had fallen, and the black blood had spread far and wide on the grimy and worm-eaten wooden floor.

The two women were now half dead with terror, but Madame de Laval endeavored at all costs to remove the evidence of her indiscretion.

She went in search of a sponge and water, to wash the boards; but she only extended the stain, and that which at first seemed black became scarlet in hue.

Suddenly a loud commotion echoed throughout the castle, mixed with the cries of people calling for Madame de Laval. She distinguished the startling words: "The Marshal has returned!"

The two women rushed for the staircase, but at the same moment they were aware of the trampling of steps and the sound of voices in the devil's chapel.

The sister, Annie, fled upward to the battlement of the tower; while Madame de Laval went down, trembling, and found herself face to face with her husband, in the act of ascending, accompanied by the sorcerer Prelati and Sille, the steward.

Gilles de Laval seized his wife by the arm, and, without speaking, dragged her into the infernal chapel.

It was then that Prelati, the sorcerer, spoke, saying:

"It must be, as you see, and the victim has come of her own accord."

"Be it so," replied his master. "Begin the Black Mass."

The unfrocked priest went to the altar, while Gilles de Laval opened a little cupboard fixed therein and drew out a large knife, after which he sat down beside his wife, who was now almost in a swoon and lying in a heap upon a bench near the wall.

The sacrilegious ceremony now began, with Prelati, the sorcerer, repeating the Mass backward, which was the invocation to the Devil to appear.

HERE it should be explained that the marshal, so far from starting for the Crusades, had proceeded only to Nantes, where Prelati lived; he attacked this miserable wretch with the utmost fury and threatened to slay him if he did not furnish the means of extracting gold from the Devil by the aid of Black Magic.

With the object of obtaining delay, Prelati declared that terrible conditions were required by his infernal master, first among which would be the sacrifice of the marshal's wife with her unborn child (for Madame de Laval was soon to become a mother) on the Devil's altar.

To this horrible suggestion, Gilles de Laval made no reply, but returned at once to Macheoul, Prelati and Sille, the steward, accompanying him.

In the meanwhile, Annie, sister of Madame de Laval, left to her own devices on the roof of the tower and not daring to come down, had removed her veil, to make signals of distress on the chance of attracting help.

They were answered by two cavaliers, accompanied by a troop of horsemen, who were riding toward the castle; they proved to be her two brothers who, on learning of the spurious departure of the marshal for Palestine, had come to visit and console Madame de Laval.

They soon rode into the court of the castle with a clatter of hoofs, whereupon Gilles de Laval suspended the hideous ceremony and said to his wife: "Madame, I forgive your meddling, and the matter is at an end between us, if you now do as I tell you.

"Return to your apartment, change your garments and join me and your brothers in the guest-room, whither I am going to meet them.

"But if you say one word, or cause them the slightest suspicion, I will bring you hither on their departure; we shall proceed with the Black Mass at the point where it is now broken off, and at the consecration you will die. "Mark where I place this knife."

He then rose, led his wife to the door of her chamber and subsequently received her relatives and their suite, saying that his wife was preparing herself to come and salute her brothers.

Madame de Laval almost immediately appeared, pale as a specter. Her husband never took his eyes off her, seeking to control her by his glance.

When her brothers asked if she was ill, she answered that she was only fatigued, but added in an undertone: "Save me; he seeks to kill me."

At the same moment her sister, Annie, rushed into the room, crying:

"Take us away; save us, my brothers: this man is an assassin!"—and she pointed to Gilles de Laval.

While the marshal cried out for his retainers, the escort of the two visitors surrounded the two women with drawn swords; and when the marshal's men arrived, they were ordered to stand back or fight.

While de Laval's retainers hesitated, Madame de Laval, with her sister and brothers, gained the drawbridge, mounted and galloped off.

They hurried to the neighboring city of Nantes, where information regarding the marshal's crimes was laid before the authorities, who at once ordered de Laval's arrest.

A troop of horse surrounded the castle of the marshal and he was, without resistance, placed under arrest and placed in the prison at Nantes.

The civil authorities desired to try him for murder, but the Inquisition intervened and demanded that he be turned over to the Ecclesiastical Court to answer charges of Sorcery and Heresy.

Now throughout the surrounding country, rose the voices of parents, long silenced by terror, demanding their missing children: there was dole and outcry throughout the province.

The castles of Macheoul and Chantoe were ransacked, resulting in the discovery of over three hundred skeletons of children; the rest had been consumed by fire.

Two months later Gilles de Laval appeared before the judges of the Inquisition. He was as arrogant and proud as ever and refused to answer their questions or to admit their authority over him.

But this haughty insolence was demolished by the threat of torture, and he ended by confessing that, aided by Prelati, ex-priest and sorcerer, and Sille, the steward, he had murdered, during a period of three years, over eight hundred children.

Pressed for his motive, he replied that he enjoyed an execrable delight during the death agony of the poor little beings.

The president of the Inquisition found it difficult to credit his statements and questioned him anew, but received no other answer.

That which Gilles de Laval shrank from confessing was that he sought the Elixir of Everlasting Life, which, so he had been told by Prelati, was to be found in mixing the blood of fresh slain children with salt, sulphur and mercury, and this horrible concoction was to be drunk while warm.

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BLACK MAGIC

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Horrible as was the drama of Gilles de Laval, the same horrors recur throughout the history of the Middle Ages, wherever Black Magic is found.

Gilles de Laval, with Prelati and Sille, was found guilty by the court and burned alive in the pre de la Magdeline, near Nantes; he obtained permission to go to the execution with all the pageantry that had accompanied him during life, as if he wished to involve in the ignominy of his downfall the ostentation and cupidity by which he had been so utterly degraded and lost.

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