

## BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE

The baby born in 1404 at Champtoce Castle seemed extremely fortunate. Four of the mightiest feudal dynasties in Western France were represented in this boy's cradle. By his father, Guy II, he was a Laval, one of the richest, most respected families in France. Their extensive tracts of land encompassed a great part of the Northwest. By his mother, Marie, he was a descendant of the foremost Houses of Machecoul and de Craon. The union of Guy II and Marie had not been a love match. Strictly political and financial in nature, their marriage of convenience took place so that Guy would inherit the de Rais name from an elderly Baroness who was last of that line of respected nobility. More important, after he received her vast fortune, he quadrupled his wealth, Champtoce being but one of the ancient lady's illustrious holdings.

The newly wed Guy and Marie, now addressed as the Baron and Baroness de Rais, took up residence at Champtoce when the old aristocrat passed away. They called their first child Gilles, affirming their promise to name him after Saint Gilles if He gave them a boy. Gilles de Rais's baptism in the charming Champtoce village church, with its bells pealing, turned into a grand event. All the neighboring great landholders attended. Riding their handsome horses that danced and eyed the onlookers, they came alluringly attired in cloaks lined with luxuriant fur, in richly woven, nap raised Bruges woolens, in voluptuous green, blue, red, and gold silks from Venice. After the ceremony, they visited with the family at the Castle. Standing next to the blazing logs in the great fireplace located in the grand hall, they happily offered toasts of

congratulations as they drank their favorite libation, Hypocras, a heavy red wine mulled with various spices including cinnamon, mace and white ginger.

Nevertheless, Gilles de Rais, brought forth in a chamber of one of the Champtoce towers called the dark tower, believed he was born under the curse of a black planet. When he was eleven a wild boar charged then gored his father while he hunted in the woods near the Chateau. This fierce attack led to Guy's slow, excruciating death. Gilles admired his father, and this accident in 1415 snuffed out a very positive influence on Gilles. Gilles imagined that the black planet hovered over Champtoce and inflicted more vengeance from above that same year when his mother also died. Gilles never fully expressed his grief or suffering about these early parental losses which he regarded as ominous omens. Similar to most Europeans in the middle ages, he assumed the cosmic dance of the stars and planets influenced his life. With his parents gone, he had no one to confide in, no one to dispel his fears. Like many young children who lose their parents, he became preoccupied with the death of his loved ones. He suffered from his loss in morbid silence, and Champtoce became a solitary place for this young Baron. He turned into a lonely, brooding child inhabiting a spacious Castle. After he became a grownup, de Rais's manservant, Henri, at his confession before a secular court looking into Gilles's crimes admitted "... he heard the said Lord (Gilles de Rais) say that there was no man alive who could ever understand what he had done, and it was because of his planet that he did such things."<sup>1</sup>

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Fate made Gilles de Rais a sad orphan. But it gave him an inconceivable gift, the opportunity to possess the immense properties of his deceased father and mother, large fortresses, beautiful land in many areas covered with vineyards, rolling hills, villages, tracts of forest and salt marshes. However, he learned nothing about the moral obligations or accountability associated with such an inheritance.

In his last will and testament, which he authorized on his deathbed, Gilles's parent, Guy II, designated a cousin as the guardian of his children. Guy knew all too intimately what type of man his father in law, Jean de Craon, was and did not want to entrust his children to him. Nevertheless, Jean de Craon successfully broke Guy's will after his demise. He took over the tutelage of eleven-year old Gilles and his one-year old brother, Rene, named after Lord Rene of Anjou. De Craon kept his grandchildren under his wing since he wanted to assume control of Gilles's huge fortune. By the feudal laws of primogenitor, the first born son, in this instance, Gilles, inherited the bulk of his parents' estates to the exclusion of his younger sibling. According to Norman tradition, practiced throughout fifteenth century France, the first born son received the entirety of ancestral properties. Because lawlessness remained rampant during the Middle Ages, nobles believed if they divided their lands among sons, strong neighbors would attempt to take over the smaller estates.

Two honorable clergy, Gilles's tutors, agreed with Guy's assessment of de Craon. When Gilles's father was alive they made sure the young Baron de Rais was well schooled in morals, ethics, religion, arithmetic and the humanities. They abruptly left Champtoce Castle after de

Craon placed Gilles and Rene in his own care. These men disrespected Jean de Craon, considering him to be no better than a thug who did not care about the education or the responsibilities of fledgling noblemen.

This sixty year old de Craon relied on banditry to get what he wanted. Although he possessed substantial noble credentials as a powerful vassal of the Dukes of Anjou and Brittany and was extremely wealthy, Jean de Craon only worshipped profits. Avaricious, savage, a miser without scruples, de Craon showed little respect. "If one puts aside a totally exterior respectability, Jean de Craon has the outlook and the facility, if one likes, of a purse snatcher,"<sup>2</sup> insisted George Bataille, a noted French historian. De Craon even authorized an armed attack on the Queen of Sicily, Yolande d'Aragon, as she enjoyed a ride on her placid horse through the elm and cedar covered hillocks in her own Angevine domain. The Queen, also known as the Duchess of Anjou, was relieved of her jewelry beneath a peaceful blue sky tinged with puffy pink and pearl white clouds. Her escorts had their horses as well as their baggage stolen. They were obliged to walk many miles back to Yolande's castle before her servants found them and provided them with additional horses.

Displaying little empathy for Gilles's losses, never paying attention to his soleful expressions, Grandfather de Craon set an atrocious personal example. The greatest lesson de Craon imparted to Gilles as heir to a vast empire was that he remained above the laws of France. Other than that, since de Craon only cared about acquisitions, he essentially left his grandson to run free with little oversight. The one exception was that he insisted Gilles receive extensive military training as a knight.

Like many bereaved children, de Rais showed abnormal anger and defiance because of the death of his parents. Perhaps he felt he needed to control his environment since he lived with an amoral grandfather, who never supervised him. The mature Gilles, playing upon the sympathy of the judges during his public confession to an ecclesiastical court in Nantes, admitted he amused himself in any way he saw fit as a child and blamed his offenses on his grandfather's lack of discipline. He told the court he sought his grandfather's attention, and the most dramatic way to be noticed, he thought, was to inflict pain on other juveniles, servants, retainers. He acted at the pleasure of his will, doing all the evil of which he was capable. "I placed all my hope, intent and effort in these illicit and shameful things and...increased these improper acts for the purpose of bringing about"<sup>3</sup> suffering. He laughed as these individuals twisted in pain. De Craon never heeded Gilles's improprieties, never reprimanded him, never showed him any love. (Of all the abuses a child might suffer, a profound sense of abandonment and rejection causes the most harm later on.)

Once in a while de Craon indulged Gilles, who hated to be bored. To entertain de Rais, Grandfather Jean gave him a mock court of his own composed of twelve and thirteen year old boys. The mission of these youngsters was to obey his commands and to serve him. Little was sacred to Gilles. He pushed the children beyond their limits of tolerance for him, as he so liked to dominate, so liked to punish his courtiers. The French historian from the Vendee, Joseph Rouille, alluded to his acts as being "homosexual in nature".<sup>4</sup> In hindsight de Rais displayed an antisocial personality disorder early on. While no single childhood problem signifies future

criminality, the impulsive, improper choices he took with his peers when some boys did not submit to him indicated that the rage, the fear, the bewilderment he experienced after his parents' deaths was ever present.

<sup>1</sup> Bataille, Georges. (1991) The Trial of Gilles de Rais. (Richard Robinson, Trans.) Los Angeles, California: Amok Books, (Original work published 1965), p. 272.

<sup>2</sup> Bataille, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Hyatte, Reginald. (1984) Laughter for the Devil. The Trials of Gilles de Rais. Companion-in-arms of Joan of Arc (1440). (Hyatte, Reginald, introduction & translation from Latin and French). Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Press, Inc. p.113.

<sup>4</sup> Rouille, Joseph. (n.d.) Gilles de Rays, L'homme de la demesure. Cholet, France: Editions Pays & Terroirs, p. 31.