

BLUEBEARD.

I have read a great many horrible stories, who can help doing so in this age of melodrama and sensational novels? But nothing ever made the same impression on my mind as the account of the life and death of the *Maréchal de Retz*, compiled by Sabine Baring-Gould, the well-known novelist. Baring-Gould is a novelist, but he is also a student, deeply versed in the folk-lore and strange legends of many lands. The narrative in question is no fiction but is simply a digest of State records collected by the eminent historians Michelet and Lacroix. I do not propose to give the details of this terrible story: they would be entirely out of place in a paper of this description: but in these days of Whitechapel murderers it may be interesting and even instructive to revive reminiscences of one who eclipsed all moderns in his thirst for blood, and who has in the course of four centuries become a conspicuous figure in our nursery mythology under the name of *Bluebeard*.

Gilles de Laval, Sire de Retz, was one of the wealthiest nobles of France, and the strongest supporter of King Charles VII. His military exploits against the English were brilliant, and were rewarded by the title of Marshal of France, and chamberlain to the king. His sagacity in council was as remarkable as his personal bravery, and it was considered a great loss to the state when he suddenly decided to retire from public life and spend the rest of his days in the country. His favourite abode was the castle of Machecoul, where he dwelt in seclusion for many years; with the drawbridge raised, the men under arms, and the castle always in a condition to resist a siege. The chapel and the vestments of the priests were sumptuous, and the Marshal heard mass three times daily, and was passionately fond of ecclesiastical music. On certain days, too, the bridge was lowered, and the servants stood in the gate distributing alms to all comers.

Very often there were children among the beggars, and these were sometimes invited into the kitchen to get some dainty. The children who accepted the offer were never seen again. This went on for several years, and at the end of that time there was scarcely a family in the surrounding country that had not lost one of its number, and very often the missing child had been last seen in company with one of the Marshal's servants.

On the occasions of the Marshal's visits to Nantes—visits in princely style, with a retinue of 200 men-at-arms—the country was in a state of uproar, the people about Machecoul charging him with one voice, with sacrificing their children to the devil. At last their outcries reached the ears of the Duke of Brittany and the Bishop of Nantes. The Duke pool-pooled the idea, but the Bishop was obstinate, and insisted on a public trial. After great efforts he gained his point, and the Marshal was summoned to appear before the Duke, a commissioner being appointed to collect charges against him. The official record gives the evidence of dozens of parents whose children had gone to the castle for bread, been taken to be trained as choristers, or some other pretence, but who had never again been seen or heard of. Things certainly looked bad against De Retz, but the Duke was still hesitating to bring to trial so powerful a kinsman when he received an extraordinary letter from the Marshal himself, tacitly admitting his guilt, and begging to be allowed to retire into a monastery. After this it was no longer possible for the Duke to avoid making the affair public, and after some little delay the Marshal, who had spent his time saying litanyes, in the garb of the Carmelite order, was summoned before the Tribunal. He appeared in a white dress, in token of repentance, but adorned with all his military insignia, and knightly orders. At first sight, the Marshal's face appeared to denote melancholy rather than cruelty, but at times of excitement the whole expression changed, he ground his teeth, contracted his lips like a wild beast preparing

to dash on its prey; his eye became fixed, and the pupils dilated to such an extent, with a sombre fire quivering in them, that they seemed to fill the whole orbit, which became circular, and sank back into the head. At the same time the black beard appeared to bristle, and to assume a bluish hue, which latter trait gave rise to the nickname of *Bluebeard*.

The charge sheet was long, the most important count being that "the said Sire de Retz has seized and caused to be seized seven little children, not only ten or twenty, but thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, one hundred, two hundred, and more, and has murdered and slain them inhumanly, and then burned their bodies to convert them to ashes."

Many witnesses were examined, the most conclusive evidence being that of the two confidential servants, Henriot and Ponton, who confessed to having themselves murdered many children, for the pleasure of their lord and master, who loved to bathe in their blood, though he was always seized with feelings of remorse directly the deed was done, and threw himself on a lounge, sobbing and praying for forgiveness. To cut a long story short, the Marshal was at last condemned to death, and confessed his crimes in full. In his confession he said that these diabolical practices originated in the reading of Suetonius and the "charming history" of Tiberius Cæsar and the other Cæsars. He still begged to be allowed to enter the Carmelite order, and at the last insisted on wearing the garb of that order to the scaffold.

This sketch would not be complete without the following address, delivered by the marshal from the scaffold, to a vast throng of spectators:—"My very dear friends and servants, be strong and courageous against the assaults of the devil, and feel good displeasure and contrition for your ill deeds, without despairing of God's mercy. Believe with me that there is no sin, however great in the world, which God, in his grace and loving kindness, will not pardon, when one asks it of Him with contrition of heart. Remember that the Lord God is always more ready to receive the sinner than is the sinner to ask of Him pardon. Moreover, let us very humbly thank Him for his great love to us in letting us do the full possession of our faculties, and not cutting us off suddenly in the midst of our misdeeds. Let us conceive such a love of God and such repentance, that we shall not fear death, which is but a little pang, without which we could not see God in his glory. Besides, we must desire to be freed from this world, in which is only misery, that we may go to everlasting glory. Let us rejoice rather, for although we have sinned grievously here below, yet we shall be united in Paradise, our souls being parted from our bodies, and we shall be together for ever and ever, if only we endure our pious and honourable contrition to our last sigh."

There is a moral to my tale, even to such a tale as this. When we hear of Whitechapel murderers, and suchlike atrocities, and when we hear it said that they denote the degeneration of the human species and a depraved humanity, let us look back to the Marshal de Retz, and thank God that four long centuries have failed to produce such another monster.

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