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to have been delivered before

the Oxford University

Poetry Society

by Aleister Crowley

on the night of Monday, February

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First Friend.

Dost surmise
What struck me at first blush? Our Beghards, Waldenses,
Jeronimites, Hussites -- does one show his head,
Spout Heresy now? Not a priest in his senses
Deigns answer mere speech, but piles faggots instead,
Refines as by fire, and, him silenced, all's said.

Whereas if in future I pen an opuscule
Defying retort, as of old when rash tongues
Were easy to tame, -- straight some knave of the Huss-
School
Prints answer forsooth! Stop invisible lungs?
The barrel of blasphemy broached once, who bungs?

Second Friend.

Does my sermon, next Easter, meet fitting acceptance?
Each captious disputative boy has his quirk
"An cuique credendum sit? " Well the Church kept "ans"
In order till Fust set his engine at work!

What trash will come flying from Jew, Moor and Turk

When, goosequill, thy reign o'er the world is abolished!
Goose -- ominous name! With a goose woe began:
Quoth Huss -- which means "goose" in his idiom unpolished --
"Ye burn now a Goose: there succeeds me a Swan
Ye shall find quench your fire!"

Fust.

I foresee such a man.

(Browning.)

GILLES DE RAIS.

Long ago, when King Brahmadatta reigned in Benares, a gentleman whose Christian names were Thomas Henry -- you may possibly have heard of him -- he was no less a personage than the grand father of the great Aldous Huxley -- once found himself threatened by a predicament similar to that in which I stand tonight. He had been asked to lecture to a distinguished group of people.

What bothered him was this: what assumption was he to make about the existing knowledge of his audience? He adopted the

sensible course of asking the advice of an old hand at the game; and was told "You must do one of two things. You may assume that they know everything, or that they know nothing." Thomas Henry thought it over, and decided that he would assume that they knew nothing.

I think that merely shows how badly brought up he must have been; and explains how it was that he became a dirty little atheist, and repented on his death bed, and died blaspheming.

No! No! that would be quite impossibly bad manners. I shall assume that you know everything about Gilles de Rais; and that being the case, it would evidently be impertinent for me to tell you anything about him. So that we can consider the lecture at an end, and (after the usual vote of thanks) pass on immediately to the discussion, which I think ought to be more amusing, if scarcely as informative.

It is rather an hard saying -- however worthy of all acceptation in a university like Oxford, where, I understand, the

besetting sin of the inmates is lecturing and being lectured, but discussions are always apt to turn out to be amusing, especially if conducted with blackthorns or shotguns, whereas lecturing is merely an attempt, foredoomed to failure, to communicate knowledge which usually the lecturer does not possess.

I am sure that we all recognize that an attempt of this kind is impossible in nature. No! I am not proposing to inflict upon you my celebrated discourse on Scepticism of the Instrument of Mind. I am not even going to refer to the first and last lecture which I suffered at a dud univer-

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somewhere near ~~Hitchin~~ Newmarket, in which the specimen of old red sandstone in the rostrum began by remarking that political economy was a very difficult subject to theorize upon because there were no reliable data. Never would I tell so sad a story on a Monday evening, with the idea of Tuesday already looming darkly in every melancholic mind. I should like to be just friendly and sensible, though it is perhaps too much to expect me to be cheerful.

The fact is that I am in a very depressed state. My atten-

tion was attracted by that little word "knowledge," of which we hear so much and see so little. I don't propose to inflict upon you the M. C. H., and demonstrate that the life and opinions of Gilles de Rais were inevitably determined by the price of onions in Hyderabad. But I do think that in approaching a historic question, we should be very careful to define what we mean - in our particular universe of discourse - by the word "knowledge."

May I ask a question?

Does anyone here know the date of the battle of Waterloo?

Pause. (Someone - I bet - tells me '1815.')

Thank you very much. To be frank with you, I knew it myself. I did not require information on that particular point. What I asked was, whether anyone knew the date. I felt that, if so, it would have created a sympathetic atmosphere.

But since we are talking about Waterloo, we may ask ourselves what, roughly speaking, is the extent of our knowledge?

I have heard plenty of theories about why Napoleon lost the battle. I have been told that he was already suffering from the disease which killed him. I have been told that he was outgener-

aled by Wellington. I have been told that his army of conscripts was underfed and not properly drilled. I have also been told that the battle was won by the Belgians.

Now, all these things are merely matters of opinion. There may be a little truth in some of them. But we have practically no means of finding out exactly how much, even if our documentary support is valid to establish any of these thories. It is, also, almost impossible to estimate the causes of any given event, if only because those causes are infinite, and each one of them is

to a certain extent an efficient determing cause.

Take a quite simple matter like the time of year. If it had been winter instead of summer, the hens would not have been laying and Hougomont and La Haye Sainte would not have been able to nourish the contending forces. But though it is profitable for the soul to contemplate the extent of what we don't know, it is in some ways more satisfying to our baser natures to consider what we do know in a reasonable sense of the word.

It is not disputable that the battle of Waterloo was faught

and won. It is not disputable that it was the climax, or rather the dénouement, of campaigns lasting over a number of years. And there is no reason for doubting that Napoleon was born in Corsica, that he entered the French army, and rose rapidly to power by a combination of military genius and political intrigue.

There is a vast body of indirect evidence which confirms these statements at every point. Taken as a whole, they would be totally inexplicable on any other hypothesis. But when we consider the character of Napoleon, we are at once involved in a mass of contradictions. Probably no one in history has been more discuss-

ed, and every writer gives a totally different account. Each seeks to buttress his opinion by incidents which we have no reason to suppose other than authentic, but seem incongruous. So far as we can get any truth out of the matter at all, it is that the character of Napoleon, like that of everybody who ever lived, was extremely complex. And the writers are more or less in the position of the Six Wise Men of Hindustan who were born blind and had to describe an elephant.

Spiritually fortified by these simple meditations, we may apply their fruits to the problem of Gilles de Rais, and ask ourselves

what we really know about him as opposed to what we have heard about him.

We know that he was a gentleman of good family, because otherwise he could not have held the offices which he did hold. We know that he was a brave soldier, and a comrade of Joan of Arc. We know that he had a passion for science, for the basis of his reputation was that he frequented the society of learned men. We know finally that he was accused of the same crimes as Joan of Arc by the same people who accused her, and that he was condemned

by them to the same penalty.

I do not think that I have left out any verifiable fact. I think that all the rest amounts to speculation. The real problem of Gilles de Rais amounts, accordingly, to this. Here we have a person who, in almost every respect, was the male equivalent of Joan of Arc. Both of them have gone down in history. But history is somewhat curious. I am still inclined to think that 'there 'aint no sich animile.' In the time of Shakespeare, Joan of Arc was accepted in England as a symbol for everything vile. He makes her out not only as a sorceress, but a charlatan and hypocrite;

and on top of that a coward, a liar, and a common slut. I suspect that they began to whitewash her when they decided that she was a virgin, that is a sexually deranged, or at least incomplete, animal, but the idea has always got people going, as any student of religion knows. Anyway, her stock went up to the point of canonization. Gilles de Rais, on the other hand, is equally a household word for monstrous vices and crimes. So much so, that he is even confused with the fabulous figure of Bluebeard, of whom, even were he real, we know nothing much beyond that he reacted in the most

manly way to the problem of domestic ~~affliction.~~ infelicity.

A moment's digression; in fact, the main point. What is the most precise and most atrocious charge that is made against him? That he sacrificed, in the course of alchemical and magical experiments, a matter of 800 children! I submit that, a priori, this sounds a little improbable. Gilles de Rais was the lord of a district whose population could not have been very extensive, and even in that age of slavery, dirt, disease, debauchery, poverty and ignorance, which seems to Mr. G. K. Chesterton the one ideal

state of society, it must have been a little difficult to carry out abductions and murders on such wholesale principles.

Whenever questions arise with regard to black Magic or black masses, invocations of the Devil, etc. etc., it must never be forgotten that these practices are strictly functions of Christianity. Where ignorant savages perform propitiatory rites, there and there only Christianity takes hold. But under the great systems of the civilized parts of the world, there is no trace of any such perversion in religious feeling. It is only the bloodthirsty and fu-

tile Jehovah who has achieved such monstrous births. Such upas-trees can only grow in the poisonous mire of fear and shame where thought has putrefied to Christianity.

There is thus no antecedent improbability that Gilles de Rais (or any other person of that place and period) was addicted to black magical practices, for they were all Catholics. The power of the Church was, at that time, absolute, and even research was limited by the arbitrary theology imposed upon the mind of every one. The abomination was at its height. But its decline has been

rapid. True, 100 years later it was still possible for Queens to be bulldozed by Presbyterian pulpiteers, but the time was already predictable when their best was for undergraduates to be bluffed by homosexual ecclesiastics. I suppose it is all in the family.

While these profound thoughts were producing a hypochondriac obnubilation of my mental faculties, it suddenly occurred to me that after all, I had heard this story before. And I saw the connection.

In the pitch-dark ages, when Christianity held unchallenged

sway over those portions of this globe which it had sufficiently corrupted, the pursuit of knowledge -- knowledge of any kind -- was justly estimated by the people in power as the one and only dangerous pursuit. Even so, as late as 300 years ago, it was not considered very gentlemanly to be able to read and write. I am not sure that it is.

In any case, it is a great error in education to teach these things. Grammar, we must never forget, appears in the word "Gramarye", beloved of Sir Walter Scott, and "grimoire", a black magical ritual -- that is to say, any written document.

Precious little knowledge filtered through Christianity. It was against the interests of the Church, and in those times it was much easier to suppress people and ideas than it is now, though even to-day we find priests -- at least in Oxford-- who appear not to have heard of a certain recent invention by a notorious Magician inspired by the Devil -- the Printing Press.

But they feared. So those who pursued knowledge were at the best under strong suspicion of heresy. I need not quote the obvious names. But there were certain bodies of people who did carry on the old knowledge, mostly by oral tradition, and who were

perforce tolerated to a certain extent, because even the little knowledge that they did possess was so exceedingly useful. The best way to make armour, or to build Cathedrals, or to heal sickness would enable the Christian to get ahead of his friends. Therefore, although conscience evidently demanded the maximum amount of persecution compatible with the existence of the villains, the Jews and the Arabs were at least allowed to live. Besides, the Arabs saw to that themselves.

But no one was better aware than the Pope that knowledge was

power. For all he knew, and he probably knew that he did not know much, the Jews and the Arabs might get together and overturn the whole construction of society. Had he not in his own records the very best example of such a catastrophe?

There is a large number of excellent people, possessed of even less than the minimum amount of brains required to grease a gimlet, who are always boring us with the bogey of the Jew-Bolshevist peril. But as most of them are Roman Catholic laymen, unaware that Rome is laughing in its sleeve at them, they conveniently ignore what should be -- if they realized it -- their best argument. What

was the ultimate cause of the destruction of the great civilization of Rome? What corrupted the spirit of a people unconquerable in arms? What but the spread of the slave-morality of the Jewish communists of the period? If you will take your New Testaments from your pockets, you will find in the 4th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles and the 32nd verse "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them said that aught of the things that he possessed was his own, but that they had all things in common". Of course one of them, and he too was a Jew, tried to hold out on the kitty, and was struck miraculously dead

for his pains. Lenin and Trotsky never did as well!

So, as Roman Catholics are always telling us, the Church has a monopoly of logic, and the Pope argued that all Jews were communists. Anyone who had or wanted knowledge must be a Jew, and therefore a communist, and therefore -- well, the Pope too believed in preparedness, though he probably called it a programme of disarmament. When people scrap battleships in the name of peace on earth and goodwill to men, it means that they have found battleships useless and too expensive, and that they have found something cheaper and more deadly. So the Curia kept a weapon in reserve, in order to be sure of having a nice jolly pogrom whenever they gave

the word. And what was the word to be?

Nice quiet peasant folk, or genial hard-working hunters and fighters, are not easy to arouse to indiscriminate slaughter without reason. In order to get them going, there are only two things which you can play on -- greed and fear. The motive behind the Crusades was the story of the fabulous wealth of the East. We find, in fact, that well-organized armies of buccaneers, such as the Templars, did bring back incalculable spoils, while the honest pious mugs ruined themselves in the process.

Now, in this particular sport of suppressing earnest enquirers, it was not much good trying to play on people's greed. For everyone knew that even if the Jews had wealth, they managed to hide it very successfully, and that they had a nasty way of arranging for protection with people who were too powerful to be bullied, and too good business men to be fooled into killing the goose that laid the golden eggs. So the only motive available was fear, and in those ages where ignorance was fostered with infinite devotion, it was even easier to create a scare about bogies than our propaganda in

the recent scrap found it.

I was in Venice just before the war, when Halley's comet was around, and although the Pope himself sprinkled holy water over the comet, and sent it his special benediction, and told the people it would do no harm, in his most ex cathedrâ manner, the Venetians gathered themselves in panic-stricken crowds in the Square of St. Mark and waited, howling, for the end of the world.

It was accordingly easy enough to associate the pursuit of knowledge with the most abominable crimes, real or imaginary or both. For this reason, we hear -- not as a demonstrated thesis,

but as a commonplace of inherited knowledge -- that Jews were sorcerers and wizards. IN other words, they knew something about grammar. We hear that they transformed themselves into cats or bats, and sucked people's big toes. I have never, personally, investigated the question as to whether this form of nutrition is palatable. But alas! even in those idyllic Chestertonian times there was a little shrewd common sense knocking about; the instinct -- sometimes very splendidly described as horse sense -- which comes from intimate wordless unintellectual communing with Nature (please do not take that word "communing" in any bad sense;

if it were not for Baldwin, I would be a Conservative myself) -- the instinct of some people, who at the bottom of their hearts, did not so much believe in these phantasms. It was not so easy to get them to go out and murder a lot of inoffensive people at the word jump. They had to be supplied with something a little more tangible.

You will notice how all this sort of argument is invariably of the ad captandum variety. It is produced out of nowhere for a definite purpose; and, as the French say, does not rime with any-

thing. If it did, of course, it would immediately be exposed as nonsense. It is satisfied that nobody can disprove it any more than they can prove it.

Take a concrete example. A nice young gentleman the other day wanted (very properly) to earn his living, and not being peculiarly endowed by Nature in the matter of original invention, he thought he might make a story out of the idea of a Suicide Club. In this he was evidently correct. Robert Louis Stevenson had in fact proved thepoint. So he took Stevenson's story and transferred it to Ger-

many, and drivelled on about the ace of spades, and quoted statistics of suicides, and said that I was the president of the Club and that the Berlin police were after me.

Now, I am afraid it would be a little difficult for anyone to prove that I am responsible for any suicides that may take place in Germany. But, on the other hand, it is quite impossible for me to disprove it. So now, if you want to attack anybody without the slightest fear of contradiction, you know how to set to work.

I omitted to mention that all these suicides were excessively

beautiful and even voluptuous young women of high social position, and that the wicked president had blackmailed them out of vast sums. You see, the people for whom this dear young gentleman was writing all get sexually excited by pictures of young women, and also by any statement about large sums of money. For they immediately have a wish phantasm -- if they had large sums themselves, what terrible fellows they could be.

In the Middle Ages, the art of exciting the people was not very different. The Jew had always an immense hoard of ill-gotten wealth, and of course every penny that was exacted by Reginald

Front-de-Boeuf was laid to the Jews' account. But there was another treasure that the peasant was afraid to lose, the dearest treasure of all, his children. As little boys, thank God, have a habit of straying in search of adventure and getting lost in the process, which is good for their souls, the peasant naturally has moments of serious disquietude as to whether something terrible can have happened to little Tommy. Very good. All we have to do is to play on that alarm.

We put into his mind that little Tommy (who turns up all right, if rather muddy, half an hour later) has almost certainly been

kidnapped by the Jews for purposes of ritual murder.

The main accusation against Gilles de Rais is therefore just this general accusation against anyone in Christendom who exhibited any desire for knowledge. Only, in his case, it was concentrated and exaggerated to fantastic lengths by some factor or other on which I feel it useless to speculate. The one thing of which I feel certain is that 800 children is a lot. I don't know over how many years these practices were supposed to have spread. As I think you must all feel sure by now, I know nothing whatever of my subject.

But scientific experiment in those days was always a very prolonged operation. They thought nothing of exposing some unknown substance to the rays of the sun and moon for periods of three months at a time, in the hope that in some mysterious way the first stage of some dimly-visaged operation might be satisfactorily accomplished. And even if they sacrificed a child every day, it would have taken a matter of two and a half years to dispose of 800 children. Besides, it must have taken more than a few minutes to kidnap a child with the secrecy obviously required. Did the disappearance

of the first four hundred, say, put no parents on their guard?

I think, at the best, it is a case of little Johnny who told his mother that there were millions of cats on the wall of the back garden, but under cross-examination, in the style made popular by the dialogue of Lot with Almighty God, admitted that it was 'Tom and another.'

Of course, it will be obvious to you by this time that I have been seduced by Jewish gold, and the only way that I can think of to disarm your suspicions is to bring forward another case of the

same kind, little more than a century old, with which Jews had nothing to do.

There was a poet laureate -- I am not quite sure what this species of animal is -- but his name was Robert Southey, and he lived, if you can call it living, about the time of William Blake. He wrote a number of words arranged in some scheme connected with rime and rhythm; apparently, like golf clubs, "a set of instruments very ill-adapted to the purpose." But, anyway, he called it a poem, and the title was something to do with the old woman of Berkeley and who

rode behind her. The person who rode behind her was Mr. Montague Summers' friend, the Devil. What she actually did to merit this favour is to me rather obscure, because I have forgotten the whole beastly thing. But I do remember two lines, because I am in the same line of business myself.

"I have candles made of infant's fat,
I have feasted on rifled graves."

Southey was an ambitious man. He was not content with the brilliant success of this masterpiece of the poetic art. He immed-

iately sat down and wrote another alleged poem all about infant's fat and rifled graves and the Devil coming for the villain at the proper moment. This poem has nothing to do with witchcraft. It is called "The Surgeon's Warning."

I think this is the best evidence in support of my thesis -- whatever that is, I am not quite sure -- that it is possible to adduce.

In the minds of the kind of people who believe in their neighbours making candles of infant's fat and digging up corpses to econ-

omize on the butcher's bill, the surgeon -- that is to say, the man in pursuit of knowledge which it is hoped may alleviate human pain -- is the same kind of animal as the witch and the ritual-murdering Jew.

It is, no doubt, because it is a part of the old taboo complex about the corpses of one's relatives, that the clerical attack on surgeons concentrated itself on one fact -- the fact that to learn to be a surgeon you must have corpses to dissect. For at that time, it will be remembered, hospitals were not as flourishing as they are to-day, and it was very difficult to find living people whom you

could cut up to see what came of it. The surgeon was, in fact, not understand at all, except in the one way which such people were capable of understanding; i.e., as the body-snatcher. The rest of his proceedings were perfectly mysterious to them.

You notice that even Charles Dickens -- who may yet go down to history for having wished to prosecute Holman Hunt, of all people in the world, for painting indecent pictures -- takes very much this popular view of medicine and pharmacy in Pickwick.

I think, then, it is not altogether unfair to assume that

Gilles de Rais was to a large extent the victim of Catholic logic. Catholic logic: and the foul wish-phantasms generated of its repressions, and of its fear and ignorance. He wanted to confer a boon on humanity; therefore he consorted with the learned; therefore he murdered little children.

I think it is about time that somebody got after J. B. S. Haldane. It is too late to do anything more to Ridley and Latimer, but I am quite sure that the candle they lit was made of infant's fat. It is no use your starting to rifle Graves, because his pub-

lishers might resent your interference.

Those in favour of the motion will now please signify the same in the usual manner. And may the Lord have mercy on your souls!