

The Mass of Saint Secaire
From the French of
Barbey de Rochechouart
Translated by Mark Wells

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I.

Outside the village inn at Arques-le-Roi in Gascony sat Captain Pierre Larue, leaning on his crutch and chatting to the local doctor over a bottle of Burgundy. "Another week, and you may burn that for firewood," said the doctor, pointing to the crutch; "but, as I told you, no more active service."

"I have something better than that," replied the soldier. "As you know, I care for adventure, and for adventure only. When I heard your opinion, there was only one thing for me to do; I wrote to cousin Henri in Paris, and he has got me a position I would rather hold than take out of my knapsack that field marshal's baton that they told me hid there!"

"And what is that?" asked the doctor.

"I am to go with du Chaillu to the Gold Coast — with du Chaillu, the greatest of all our explorers! Think of that! New country, never seen by man, great forests, each one as large as Gascony, rivers to which the Rhone is but a mountain stream, strange flowers and fruits, wild men, wild beasts — ah! my friend, the greatest of all the wonders of the world is there — the ape-man, twice a man's height, so strong that he can twist a rifle-barrel as I twist this piece of cord — and we are going after him: we shall catch him, and cage him, and bring him back to France!"

"And what of little Félise while you are catching the apeman? Hadn't you better catch her first?"

"Ah no! I trust her. And she is better with her people for a year or two. She is very young yet to marry. And they will never let her marry any one else; there are family reasons, too, you know. Besides, she loves me. Ah! *bonjour, Monsieur le Curé,*" he broke off, rising on his crutch and bowing. The doctor rose, too, but his bow was painfully formal. The priest gave them his greeting, and passed on.

He was an extraordinary type, strong and long, but so lean that he enjoyed the reputation of the most stern asceticism. His face was in contradiction, for it was haughty, passionate, ambitious, and overwhelmingly sensual, with an expression of avid and insatiable desire. His eyes were dead, lack-lustre wells of quenchless passion. He was either a very good or a very bad man.

"You do not like Father de Choisy," said Larue.

The doctor was silent a moment. "Why should a man of his noble family and his amazing ability be lost in this desert?" he said at last. "He ought to be a bishop, by now, and here he is in Arques-le-Roi. Oh well! we know what we know. We have seen what we have seen." The soldier's frankness took some offence. "I cannot hear you speak evil of my priest," said he.

"I was wrong," replied the doctor, crossing himself, "and may God pardon me! I had better stick to my bistoury. Here's your hated rival, by the way. A surly fellow swaggered towards them and, sitting down at a table on the other side of the doorway, called for brandy. He was already partly drunk, and his nod to the others barely civil; his greeting an unintelligible grunt. When the patron of the inn came out with the brandy, he invited him to take a "petit verre." The good man complied.

"Should I fear a drunken lout of that type for a rival?" said the soldier aside to his medical friend.

The young man, whose name was Dufour, cast a hostile glance at the Captain, and, touching his glass to the innkeeper's, proposed "The fairest eyes, and the truest heart in Arques!" The good man drank willingly; he did not guess that all this would lead up to a brawl. Dufour's next toast was more provocative. "Drink to my love, the fair Félice!" he cried. Captain Larue made no movement; 'Felise' was non-committal, though he knew that insult was intended.

"I am a lucky man, patron," the boor went on; "she loves me so, Félice! Every night we have a stolen meeting in the wood behind the château. The old man suspects nothing, or the dragon on guard either. Ah, but she is sweet, the little piece of mutton!"

This time the doctor spoke to his friend. "It is useless to have a row. Let us go down to your house together!" Larue nodded, and rose stiffly. "Bon soir, patron!" he said, and the old man rose politely and returned the salutation. But the youth was out for trouble, and filled his glass again.

"And here's luck to my Félice; and when I've done with her, may she marry some rotten old cripple!" Larue turned and faced him.

"Your conversation is interesting, sir; pardon me if I ask whether you are referring to me!" The sot replied with the one French monosyllable that cannot be construed as a compliment.

Larue turned and faced him. He clubbed his crutch, and struck the boor a swinging blow on the head. He dropped like a tree under the axe of the backwoodsman. The captain took no further notice; he walked home nonchalantly with the doctor. "If I were not a good Catholic," was the latter's only comment, "I could cry Vive la Revolution Sociale! To think that that swine should be the richest man in Arques!" Just then the door of a very smart little house opened, and a lady appeared. She was dressed in widow's weeds, very heavily and very quietly, and she had composed her face to melancholy. Sacred books were in her hand; she was evidently on her way to

vespers. Her face belied the rest of her attire; for all its composure, it radiated some element of matured rottenness which would have better suited a woman of the Buttes Montmatre or the Halles. Evil, conscious, joyous evil, laughed behind her mask. The soldier could hardly refrain from a gesture of aversion as she passed. "I am not a good Catholic, my dear doctor," he replied, "for charity is above all the Catholic virtue; and when I see that woman I say 'There goes the devil to mass.'" "Shame!" cried the doctor, "the good Marquise! she is the model of all the virtues. I wonder what my hospital would do without her. Why, she offered to nurse your leg!" "I know, I'm a brute," answered the soldier, "and I've a silly way of trusting instinct instead of reason; if I must find you a reason, it's this; I notice that the children avoid her. Come in, and have a glass of wine before we part. Next week I'll be packing my kit, and off on the long trail again!" "Well," laughed the doctor, "with our funny likes and dislikes, you had better bring your ape-man back to Arques to teach us manners. I wish I had seen the world," he added wistfully; "here I am, a poor three-franc doctor in a lost little village in Gascony. I cannot even keep up with the progress of medicine. But God knows what is best for all of us." "He certainly has blessed us with good wine," laughed Larue, and brought out his most ancient bottle.

II.

It was two and a half years later. It was midnight. The great clock of the ancient church of Arques tolled twelve. Arques, by the way, was a place of some ecclesiastical importance. As its name, Arques-le-Roi, implied, it had at one time been a favorite resort of the Kings of France, who had a château there. This chateau had passed into the hands of the Dufours, enormously wealthy manufacturers of silk, with factories at Lyon employing 20,000 people.

So the church was disproportionate to the village. It contained some extraordinary fine stained glass, and the architecture was superb. It occupied a charming situation against the slope of a green hill, crowned with fantastic rocks about which popular fancy wove many a legend of fays, and druids, and magicians.

It was winter, and the skies were cold — glittering with stars. But when the half hour sounded after midnight, and the vestry door opened suddenly, young Dufour, who came out, was pale and sweating heavily like one in a great fever. He staggered rather than walked; he seemed to grope both for sight and for support. Presently, reaching the white road, he seemed to recover himself a little; but he still shook and trembled as he walked along it.

Presently de Choisy himself came out. He was in perfect possession of all his faculties; but instead of turning into his house, as might have been expected, his long determined stride took him to the old bridge across the river. On this bridge were certain shelters, Gothic in type, which had been shrines before the Revolution. At the sound of his step, the lady who so aroused the antipathy of Captain Larue stepped out of the central niche. "You are late, François!" she cried. "It is a wonder I am here at all, Jeanne; something happened."

"Good!"

"It nearly killed Dufour."

"Oh how splendid! How I wish I had been there. What was it?"

"Probably imagination. But I'm not given that way. Dufour howled, and then fainted. Bringing him round has kept me all this time."

"But what was it?"

"Well, it seemed to both of us that there was something above the altar — something with an ass' head and bat's wings; but enormous — enormous!"

"Oh how I wish I had been there!"

"You shall come next time. But he must never know, of course."

"Of course. These three months have been hell upon earth. How happy I am!" She put a hand upon his arm, and a look of tigerish ecstasy came into her eyes.

"To be the altar!" she cried, "to hold the chalice of the Living One! To outrage God and Christ! I live for nothing else! Here was what hindered me!" She drew a square black case from the folds of her heavy fur.

"The imp of Satan?" laughed the priest.

"You told me; I obeyed."

"No baptism, no burial. But not here. Let us go to the old well behind Père Fauchard's orchard!"

As they walked the conversation turned on other themes. It appeared that Dufour, an atheist, not by conviction, but by perversity, and very superstitious, was squandering his father's millions on an attempt to learn black magic. He was absolutely crazy about Félise, the betrothed of Larue, and not only used the priest to teach him the Black Art, which he supposed a short cut to all his longings, but to supply him with information, and to use his influence with the girl's parents. The mother, a bigot, was rather in favor of the rich young man; but the father was an old soldier, and counselled Félise to be true to his brother-in-arms. No news had come from Larue in the two years, except one letter, dirty and brief, written in pencil with a hand quaking with high fever, in which he announced that he was well, but was about to plunge into a swamp even deadlier than that he had been through, and heaven only knew when he could write again.

De Choisy then began to speak of his own affairs. He seemed to build great hopes of his bishopric on Dufour's wealth and influence; strings were being pulled in all directions at Rome and elsewhere.

"How good you are!" cried the Marquise, "you never reproach me. I can never forgive myself that it was I who broke your career."

"It was worth it," he replied, with a smile.

"I have sold my soul to the devil," she purred, "to you — and the price is your bishopric. You shall have it! And will you give Dufour his heart's wish, too? I should like him to have that thin little beast of a Félice!"

"I think she would yield but for her father!"

"Well — can we not do as we did for my — for the Marquise?"

"I think we may have to. It is a pity; the doctor here is a great fool, but he is incorruptible, and he suspects me, for all my holy orders."

They came to the well. The priest took the black bag. "In the name of the devil," he cried aloud, "sin to sin, shame to shame, fire to fire, child of Satan, I give thee to thy father!" With that he flung the bag into the well. Then the apostate priest and the wretched victim of his abominable desires embraced with all the ecstasy of long-pent passion.

An hour later they suddenly became aware of the gray world without their self-kindled hell of unlawful lust.

On the hard road a mile away they heard the hoofs of a great horse that thundered through the night. They started up in alarm; who, in the devil's name, rode such a gallop in the small hours before dawn? With quick understanding of the exigencies they parted silently. They had no need of assignations; they would meet again at the first mass of the morning.

III.

Indeed, the morning brought some confirmation of their alarm. One of de Choisy's plans — a plan which would net him half a million francs could he carry it through — had gone exceedingly agley. For the horseman of the night was none other than our old friend Larue, back safe and sound from Africa. He had taken horse and ridden like the wind. He could not waste a moment on his way to the girl whose love had

helped him to endure the thousand hardships of his journey, and steeled him to be sword and shield to du Chaillu, to bring his expedition to a successful end. The fabled ape-man was no fable after all, but a reality.

The news was all over the village by early mass. The good old patron of the inn, awakened by Larue with a colossal shout, had served him breakfast, and as the early laborers passed, they spread the tidings. Larue had gone straight over to the château of his betrothed to put an end to her anxieties — a man from Africa does not stand on calling-hours — and every one was in raptures. Except Dufour.

This forlorn wretch sought out de Choisy, and found him at breakfast, in his garden; for the morning had broken warm and sunny. The youth was in a state bordering on madness; having blasphemed God, he now blasphemed the devil; and he brutally reminded the priest that he had invested a quarter of a million francs or thereabouts in black magic, and all he had had for it was the scare of his life. The priest put him off smoothly; all would yet go well; they would find a way to get rid of the obnoxious soldier. But Dufour had spent the night with the brandy bottle, to try to recover the nerve which he had lost when the apparition above the altar had knocked him senseless; he had tried the same medicine for the shock of the news of Larue's return; and he was in no condition to listen to the priest's sophistries. In vain de Choisy explained that the appearance in the church was a sort of warning of the ill luck that had followed, that it was only needful to evoke the devil again, ask his advice, and follow his instructions.

Luckily Madame la Marquise de Branlecu happened to pass by. On her arm was a basket of fine cakes and meats; she was visiting her poor. She paused, and looked over the wall, curtsying to the priest and asking his blessing. But Dufour, now savagely drunk, roared out his story at her. Her woman's wit rose deft to the

occasion. "How nice for you!" she exclaimed, pretending to misunderstand, "and so your friend has come back after you thought him lost. You must ask the good father to say for him the Mass of St. Sécaire!" She curtsied again; the priest rose and blessed her solemnly; Dufour stood aghast. Her misunderstanding, her nonchalance, stupefied him. The priest improved the occasion. "You are a young fool," he said; "go home and drink no more. Come to me when you are sober! I promise you by the faith of him we saw last night that you shall have your wish." With a heavy hand on the wretch's shoulder, he pushed him through the gate.

Some hours later, the Marquise sought her lover in the confessional. "Abandoned woman!" he cried out upon her, "are you so lost that you dare to mention that accursed rite? I have sinned, no doubt, but — the Mass of Saint Sécaire!"

"My dear Father," she answered laughingly, "I dare not argue with a priest upon theology. But it seems to me that we have no hope of salvation — unless we repent, which the devil forbid! — and that being so, the best thing we can do is to stand as high as we can in the hierarchy of the damned! Come, let us do it! If it succeeds, the money means success for us; if it fails, we are no worse off. Besides, I want to do it; I want to do it! I want to do it! I want to be your clerk!" "By all the flames of hell!" replied the apostate, "certainly men are lost through women. I will do it, though the devil drag us to damnation in the very church itself!"

That evening de Choisy explained to Dufour the peculiar merits of the Mass of Saint Sécaire. "Let it work quickly!" grumbled the fool, "I bet he wastes no time in putting her in the pen."

In point of fact, the preparations for the mass took longer than those for the marriage; the Church joined Captain Larue and Félise D'Aubigny in holy matrimony only four days later.

It was a hard task to persuade Dufour to patience; but one cannot perform the Mass of Saint Sécaire except at the halfmoon when she is waning. The priest and his mistress thought it best to admit him to a portion of their secrets; and he was comforted.

The Marquise exercised all her fascination and her tact; he had only a few weeks to wait; if he got no satisfaction by then, why, we were all in the same boat. We would all give up this silly magic, which led nowhere; Dufour should have his money back; we would try to get Félice for him in some other way, and all remain good friends. And, alone with de Choisy: "If the fool kicks, put him on to cocaine; he'll be mad in ten days, and no one will believe a word he may say. But that's a last resource."

One night — they were rehearsing the mass for the grand occasion — she asked him point blank if he believed in magic.

"Well," he answered, "I do and I don't. Nothing has ever happened — nothing to be sure of. And yet — I hardly know how to put it — well — it comes off. I do an evocation to produce a certain effect: nothing comes of it. But I hear a fortnight later, perhaps, that something happened at that very time which brings about that effect in a perfectly natural way."

She showed that she did not care if it happened or no. "I love it; I love it!" she cried; "there is nothing else in the world for me. But I want to see the devil myself; I want to give him all I have given you." The priest made a wry face; then he turned and crushed her with a kiss. "I love you for everything," he cried.

IV.

The great clock of Arques-le-Roi boomed out eleven strokes. Instantly, at a distance of some three miles, a man's voice answered it.

The man was Father de Choisy. He was dressed in his most noble vestments, but the crosses on them had been elaborated by dividing each arm into two parts, so that each cross made four Ys at the base. He was standing at the ruined altar of a deserted chapel, a place long since given over to the owl and bat. There was enough roof left to give shelter to occasional tramps or gypsies, but all trace of door or window was departed. By his side stood the atrocious woman who inspired him, robed also as a priest, but with her garments looped in such a manner as to make the dress indecent. There were two lights upon the altar, candles of black wax, both on the north side of what served for crucifix.

This was a live toad nailed to a scarlet cross. Around it was wrapped a strip of linen, torn from one of Captain Larue's shirts by a bribed laundress. For incense a stick of yellow sulphur smouldered on charcoal.

Through the open roof the stars looked calmly down upon the profanation. The voice of de Choisy was the sole vibration in that still air. He began to say the Mass, but reversing the order of the words of every sentence. His voice was a peculiar nasal drone, rising and falling by sharp and inharmonious changes. When he should have made the sign of the cross, instead he spat upon the ground, and crossed it with his left foot. The divine names he replaced by a peculiar hissing whistle.

The host was triangular, made of unleavened oatmeal mixed with blood. For chalice he used a vessel consecrated to all baseness and impurity, and the cloth with which he covered it was a napkin drenched in blood. It held no wine, but water from that well where he had hidden the evidence of his guilt.

As the hideous rite proceeded, the priest became aware of great need of firmness. His knees shook under him; again and again he looked round as though to see some presence that he felt. No: there was nobody there but his clerk, whose flaming red hair shone like

fire itself in the night, curling out like serpents from under the biretta, and whose tigerish green eyes were blazing with intense excitement. Neither noticed that the stars no longer shone above the chapel; neither realized that the atmosphere had become suddenly hot and suffocating.

It is impossible to tell the details of the final consecration of the accursed elements, with what defilements and curses the consummation of the mass took place, or with what hideous gestures the apostates abandoned themselves to the adoration. But this must be told, that with the consecrated water the priest baptized the toad in the name of Pierre Larue, saying: "As this creature of toads shall wither and die upon the cross, so let it be with Pierre Larue!"

The great clock of Arques-le-Roi boomed midnight. The ceremony ended. The hysteria of the abominable celebrants died down; suddenly the woman took the priest's arm. "Look!" she cried. The priest came to himself. The whole chapel was ablaze with globes of fire, and the storm shook the walls of the chapel with whirling rage. A rotten beam came crashing from the roof. "Come away!" said the priest, unshaken, "there is danger here." But at that instant the storm died down; the electricity of the air discharged itself finally to earth; the stars shone out again. But the horror of real loneliness enveloped the celebrants as they stood without the chapel. From their sanctuary they had come back into the world; and they were no longer of the world. They had cut themselves off irrevocably from their fellow-creatures. The realization came to them simultaneously; for a moment they stood aghast. Then the woman's passion turned loneliness to exaltation; she clung wildly to her accomplice, and their mouths met in solemn resignation to, and acceptance of, their ineffable and appalling doom.

V.

It was six months later. Pierre Larue and his bride had returned from a long honeymoon, beginning at St. Oritz, and continuing through Pallanza and Florence, Rome and Naples, whence they had gone to Seville for Easter, and returned through Spain.

The village heard that they were well, and Dufour was in despair. But the priest had bethought him to pretend that the devil had given him a certain "Wine of the Sabbath," and plied him with a decoction of strange-sounding but quite innocent herbs which they gathered in mysterious ways at moon wane; in this brew the cunning priest had infused solutions of morphine and cocaine. The sot soon took the habit, and thought less of Félice every day; he spent most of his time running to the priest's house for a draught of the Devil's Wine. De Choisy naturally refused to supply it for home consumption; unless it were kept under a priest's roof (it appeared) it would lose its virtue.

It was early in June when Madame Larue came to the priest's house. She was a slight pretty girl with dark brown hair, a quiet and pleasing manner of real delicacy and elegance. Marriage had apparently not changed her; she was still looking out upon the world with the child-eyes of innocence. One could see that she feared no evil; she had never known it. Her manner towards the priest was as simple and reverent as if she had been at first communion. She told him her trouble very childishly, as if he had indeed been her father in the flesh. "Pierre is changed," she said; "he is not the same man that I married. I think he is ill, but he will not admit it. He does not seem to care about any thing. He is always drowsy, and I think he has lost flesh." De Choisy gave her the obvious counsel, to tell her trouble to the doctor, ask him to dinner, and get him to make a quiet examination of her husband. She promised to do so, and went away smiling. Only a few minutes later Dufour

arrived for a dose of the Devil's Wine. "Courage, my son!" cried the excited priest, "the Mass of Saint Sécaire is working at last. Pierre Larue is sick of a mysterious malady. Courage, and a little more patience; the goal is in sight."

Two months later the illness of Larue was the common talk. Occasionally he would sally forth as of old to drink his wine on the terrace of the inn; but he hardly spoke to any one, and would fall asleep in the sun, his Pommard barely tasted. He had grown strangely thin and haggard; his weak leg seemed to give him trouble, and he walked leaning heavily on a stout cane. The doctor had no idea what was the matter with him; his treatment had no effect whatever. One day the patron of the inn asked him point-blank if he knew, and if he hoped; the doctor shrugged his shoulders. The innkeeper bent down and whispered in his ear. "Everybody says that he is dying of the Mass of St. Sécaire." "Bah, my friend, God is stronger than the devil. I am a good Catholic, I hope, but this is superstition, not religion. Trust me; I'll get to the bottom of it. It's more like poison than anything I know; but I don't know what poison could produce the symptoms; besides, his wife's devoted to him, and the servants have been with him for twenty years." However, he wrote a letter that night to a Paris doctor, one Arouet, who had been with Larue on his travels. "Your old friend is sick," he wrote, "beyond either my diagnosis or my treatment. You know his constitution, and you are up-to-date in medical knowledge as I, alas! cannot afford to be. Will you come and see him?"

A fortnight later the great doctor was with his friend. He made a thorough examination, and took back to the local doctor samples of blood and so on for analysis. Arouet was working at the microscope that evening in the doctor's study. "You know," said the local man, "this is one of the mysterious cases which make men superstitious. The village folk all say that a bad priest has bewitched him with the Mass of St. Sécaire." "What in

the devil's name is that?" cried the man at the microscope. "Look here!" and the other took down a copy of Bladé's "Quatorze superstitions populaires de la Gascogne," and pointed out a passage in its early pages.

The great man read it in astonishment; it was as follows.

"Gascon peasants believe that to revenge themselves on their enemies bad men will sometimes induce a priest to say a Mass called the Mass of Saint Sécaire. Very few priests know this mass, and three-fourths of those who do know it would not say it for love or money. None but wicked priests dare to perform the gruesome ceremony, and you may be quite sure that they will have a very heavy account to render for it at the last day. No curate or bishop, not even the archbishop of Auch, can pardon them; that right belongs to the Pope of Rome alone. The Mass of Saint Sécaire may be said only in a ruined or deserted church, where owls mope and hoot, where bats flit in the gloaming, where gypsies lodge of nights, and where toads squat under the desecrated altar. Thither the bad priest comes by night with his light o'love, and at the first stroke of eleven he begins to mumble the mass backwards, and ends just as the clocks are knelling the midnight hour. His leman acts as clerk. The host he blesses is black and has three points; he consecrates no wine, but instead he drinks the water of a well into which the body of an unbaptized infant has been flung. He makes the sign of the cross, but it is on the ground and with his left foot. And many other things he does which no good Christian could look upon without being struck blind and deaf and dumb for the rest of his life. But the man for whom the mass is said withers away little by little, and nobody can say what is the matter with him; even the doctors can make nothing of it. They do not know that he is slowly dying of the Mass of St. Sécaire."

"You know," said the sad little man, "I am a good Catholic, and I sometimes wonder whether God does not now and then allow the Devil such power. Certainly

Larue is wasting terribly, and I believe the priest here is a bad man."

"To hell with your nonsense!" roared the other, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself, you, with your scientific training! If he's a bad man, you're a bad doctor! But I don't blame you; as it happens, I'm one of about three men in France who can tell you what is wrong. Come and look at this slide!" The local man came over. "Those things are filaria," explained the Paris doctor, "it's a kind of worm; you get it in drinking-water. Poor old Larue is dying of what the Africans call the Sleeping Sickness, and there's not a damned thing we can any of us do to save him."

"Ah!" sighed the other, "there is mercy in God; it would have been more hopeful if he were dying of the Mass of St. Sécaire!"

"Incorrigible!" shouted the man from Paris, the whole argument of the incompatibility of an all-powerful and yet benevolent deity with the existence of the plagues that torture man thundering through his ill-trained and therefore atheistic mind.

VI.

Seven years had passed. It was the high Mass of Easter in the Cathedral at Auch. In her carved oak seat, with its gilt coronet, sat the most devout and most esteemed of the ladies of the district, Jeanne, Marquise de Branlecu, her charms yet riper and lovelier than of old. Humbly she knelt to receive the blessing of François de Choisy, the Cardinal Archbishop.

And further down the nave were two others; Dufour and a woman, the long agony of her life making her look twice her age — his wife. For after the death of Pierre, Félice had bowed to the inevitable, and accepted the millions of the great silk manufacturer of Lyon. They have three charming children.