

# **The Sisterhood – Cathy's Kin**

**Annette Siketa**

## Other Books

The Sisterhood – Curse of Abbot Hewitt

The Ghosts of Camals College

Those Ghostly Victorians

Chameleon – The Death of Sherlock Holmes

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## Author's Note.

The historical information in the second part of this novel was taken from 'La Bas', written by J. K. Huysmans, published in France in 1891. The French and indeed European attitude to sexual relations was extremely liberal at the time, and it was not until 1928 when the conservative, almost painfully shy British opinion of permissiveness, relaxed sufficiently for an English translation to appear. Even then, I suspect that some of the more salubrious dialogue and narrative was either toned down or removed.

That Gilles de Rais, or Ratz as it's sometimes spelt, was a real person, and that he lived during the time of Joan of Arc, is beyond doubt. However, that he became a satanic monster – ripping open children and wallowing in their blood, is open to conjecture.

This assertion is not due to the passage of time, but rather, that *Le Bas* is a thinly veiled attack against socialism – especially American influence, the plight of the poor, and the French government. But the biggest rant is aimed squarely at the Catholic Church, and Huysmans used the story of De Rais to highlight the church's supposed hypocrisy, arrogance, greed, and exaggerated idolatry.

In its original form, *La Bas* is extremely difficult to read, and whilst the book is an interesting insight into 19<sup>th</sup> century French society, by about the third chapter, the constant salvo's at the Church become predictable and annoying.

Another source was *Devil Worship in France* by Arthur Edward Waite. Published in Britain in 1898, rather than insightful, it is a self-righteous, extraordinarily ill-informed attempt to connect Freemasonry to sorcery.

I have disregarded all the radical rants and retained only the 'good' bits. However, readers of a sensitive or pious nature are warned that some passages and descriptions – both real and imagined, are either violent, horrific, or blasphemous.

For Sarah

## Foreword.

When Nancy Redfern escaped being burnt at the stake for witchcraft – a crime for which she was unquestionably guilty, she fled to London where she became enmeshed in the seedy and licentious underworld. Unfortunately, her short but profitable career in larceny and potion making attracted the attention of the authorities, and in danger of arrest, she took ship for France.

However, she had not, as Nicholas Faulkner had supposed, relinquished her powers. Though not as experienced in the ‘black arts’ as her grandmother, Nancy’s unusual compact with the ghost of Abbot Hewitt to destroy the Ashmore family, had been made on the proviso that she ‘put away’ her skills until the task had been completed.

Just why the devout priest chose a witch to assist him is unknown. Perhaps he recognised that Nancy had a streak of compassion, and that she was not as evil as might be supposed. But Nancy’s motive for the unusual alliance was all too clear. The chance to wreak revenge for the murder of her grandmother at the hands of Margaret Dymock – matriarch of the Ashmore clan, was an opportunity too good to miss. Though the Ashmores’ were eventually brought to the stake, there was one who, for a short time at least, avoided the flames.

Catherine Ashmore, the fourteen-year-old granddaughter of Margaret Dymock, had been born with a deformed or ‘dropped’ shoulder, and in an age where beauty was a tradeable commodity, her chances of making a prosperous marriage were virtually nil. Indeed, when her mother and brother, Elizabeth and James, were arrested for witchcraft and treason, Catherine might have garnered pity and support had it not been for her sharp tongue and lack of grace.

Opportunistic, spiteful, and at war with the world, Catherine had needed little encouragement to participate in the murder of Richard Faulkner – Nicholas’s good friend and cousin. Her mentor

and co-conspirator, the evil entity Einyon Dymock - father of Margaret and the man responsible for the unjust death of Abbot Hewitt, had given Catherine a ruby ring imbued with power to instigate Richard's supposed heart attack. But, rather than returning the ring after the foul deed was done, she had still been wearing it at the time of her arrest.

Conveyed to Leeds Castle on charges laid by the sycophantic solicitor and would-be witch-finder, Horace Twissleton, Catherine had 'pleaded her belly' in order to escape immediate punishment, though whether the father was the despised Twissleton, the sexually depraved Einyon Dymock, or another man, was something she never revealed. Indeed, being a cock-teasing slut, she probably did not know the true progenitor of her daughter, whom, as was custom, was given the family names of Catherine Elizabeth Ashmore.

After her mother was burnt at the stake, the younger Catherine was given over to a Puritan family, who tried to raise her with all the manners and piety her mother had lacked. Katie, as she came to be called, was not kept in ignorance of her origin, and she did her best to conform to a simple and humble life. But as she grew older, the rebelliousness she had inherited from her mother gradually exerted itself, and her misdeeds and cruelty, especially in regards to rivals and women she did not like, became fodder for gossip.

With their reputation virtually in tatters, the family moved from the then rural Leeds to the rapidly expanding metropolis of Manchester. This was done in the hope that exposure to the seemingly limitless opportunities for advancement in business and social etiquette, would be beneficial. But the well-intended experiment proved an abject failure, and at the age of twenty, after being harangued by her stepfather for smiling enticingly at a young man, Katie snapped.

It is debatable whether her crime is attributable to pure evil or years of constant and forced piety. In either event, she was conveyed to an asylum after murdering and dismembering her stepparents. She was released some ten years later and died giving birth to a son. The father is unknown, and Katie's only legacies for her pretty, red-haired son, Oscar, were a sinister heritage and a small ruby ring. Oscar spent his first thirteen years in a workhouse. He went out one day and never returned.

Nancy Redfern had no such problem in identifying the father of her children. Upon arriving in Paris, she soon fell-in with others of her 'kind', and within a year, had established herself as trustworthy and discreet. Her skill as a seer was well known in aristocratic circles, and though constantly showered with invitations to parties and the opera, she was rarely seen in public. Moreover, she never saw anyone privately without an appointment.

Though not previously promiscuous, she was advised early in her career to learn how to flirt like a high-class whore, or as the profession was more tactfully called, a courtesan. Her flaming red hair eventually attracted the attention of a wealthy English peer, who indoctrinated her into the pleasures of the flesh.

Despite taking precautions – both natural and unnatural, she fell pregnant with twin boys. It was with a sense of irony and a love for the mythical that she named them Romulus and Remus.

Their father the knight was already married, and he made the usual avowals of love to Nancy whilst at the same time, promising to divorce his wife.

Blinded by love, Nancy believed him, but as time passed, she came to realise that his promise was as empty as his purse, for as it transpired, it was his wife to whom the wealth belonged.

Incensed, Nancy then employed one of her old 'tricks' to reek revenge, namely, an image of him fashioned from wax.

The peer died slowly and painfully. He went blind in one eye, lost the use of his right arm, and contracted gangrene in his left foot. Then, one evening, Nancy buried the wax doll near an apiary. The knight was soon driven mad by a constant 'buzzing' noise in his ears, and one evening, unable to stand the torment, he went to his study and blew his brains out. A figure in a long black cloak was seen fleeing the scene. This person was never identified.



## Prologue. The Getting of Wisdom.

### I. September 1682. Sybil aged Seven.

“It’s time.”

Fronwyn looked up. “Oh? How do you know?”

Sybil smiled as she turned away from the window. “Because the wind told me so, just like you said it would. You’re always right.”

Fronwyn put down her needlework and held out her arms. “Come here, child, I want to tell you a story.”

Sybil climbed onto the nursemaid’s knee. Fronwyn looked into the child’s extraordinary bright green eyes. It never ceased to amaze her how much they resembled those of a cat. According to the horoscope cast at her birth, Sybil was destined for greatness, and being superstitious as her master, Fronwyn had often wondered when the child would feel the ‘stirring of her blood’.

“This is a special story,” she began, “one with a hidden meaning.”

“Will I find it?”

“Ah, my darling, that is up to you. I can only say the words.”

Sybil snuggled closer and prepared to listen. Her nursemaid was the only mother figure she had ever known, and she trusted the craggy-faced spinster implicitly.

“Once upon a time in a faraway kingdom, there was a very deep pit in the middle of a field. Now, this pit was supposed to be a bad place and everyone was afraid to go near it. But one day, a very poor girl who was gathering wood for the fire, tripped on a tree root and fell into the pit. When she climbed out again she started to laugh,

for she had seen nothing strange except lush green grass, red and white stones, and pretty yellow flowers.

“Soon afterwards, everyone saw that she was wearing a beautiful pair of emerald earrings. When they asked how she had obtained them, for she and her mother were very poor, the girl laughed and said that the earrings were only made from grass.

“The next day, she wore a brooch of the reddest ruby anyone had ever seen. It was as big as a hen’s egg and glowed like a hot coal. When they asked how she obtained it, she laughed and said it was not a ruby but only a dull red stone.

“And then she appeared wearing the most stupendous glittering necklace. It was made from hundreds of diamonds, and was more lovely than anything the Queen possessed. Once again the people asked how she had obtained it, but she laughed and said it was not diamonds but little white stones.

“Now, news of these fabulous jewels reached the Queen, who was very jealous of anyone prettier than she, and so the girl was invited to Court. This time, in addition to her jewels, she wore a crown of pure gold. It shone like the sun at midday, and was more splendid than the Queen’s own crown.

“A courtier asked the girl if she was a Princess, but she laughed and said it wasn’t a gold crown, but only some yellow flowers she had put in her hair.

“She was so lovely that everyone fell in love with her, including the Queen’s only son, who said that her eyes were greener than the emeralds, that her lips were redder than the ruby, that her skin was whiter than the diamonds, and that her hair was brighter than the crown.

“And so they were married. There was a great feast, and afterwards, the Prince went to his wife’s bedchamber. But, no sooner had he placed his hand on the door when a dreadful voice said, ‘Venture not inside, for this is mine own wife’.

“The Prince fell down in a swoon, and when the guards came, they heard howls of laughter behind the door. They broke it down. The room was filled with a yellowish smoke, and on the bed was a

clump of dried grass, a pile of worthless red and white stones, and a bunch of faded yellow flowers.

“Now, what do you think it all meant?” but Sybil was sound asleep, her rosebud mouth curved in a smile.

## **II. March 1684. Sybil aged nine.**

Oscar Ashmore had never made any secret of his hatred of religion. It was his opinion that Christ was an ordinary man, and that the church capitalized on the ignorance and superstition of the populus to wield its power.

Listening to this blasphemy over dinner was the pious Claude Zachary. The sumptuous fare and excellent wine having loosened his tongue, he attempted to argue the point. “Sir, what of all the Christians and Martyrs who have sold their possessions and given the money to the poor?”

Oscar grunted. “If they were not preachers for gain, then they were fools.”

“But sir,” Claude went on, ignoring a warning look from his brother, James, “the apostles were philosophers. Man differs from the brute not through understanding but by faith. That animals have intelligence is beyond doubt, but as yet, no trace of faith has ever been discovered in them. You tell us to allow only reason to dictate the truth, but in my opinion, a man who only believes what his senses tell him, might as well graze with the cows in the fields.”

Interpreting the latter as a personal insult, Oscar jumped to his feet. “You insolent knave! Do you compare me to a beast?” and before anyone could intervene, he drew his dagger and stabbed the pious man in the heart.

Claude fell on the floor, his face and legs quivering in agony. Everyone except Oscar was struck dumb. “Ha! You base-born son of