The Devils of Loudun

One of the Historic Cases of the Black Art as Practised in the Seventeenth Century and Its Modern Explanation

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LOUDUN is a small town in France about midway between the ancient and romantic cities of Tours and Poitiers. To-day it is an exceedingly unpretentious and an exceedingly sleepy place; but in the seventeenth century, the time of this story, it was in vastly better estate. Then its markets, its shops, its inns, lacked not business. Its churches were thronged with worshipers. Through its narrow streets proud noble and prouder ecclesiastic, thrifty merchant and active artisan, passed and repassed in an unceasing stream. It was rich in points of interest, preeminent among which were its castle and its convent. In the castle the stout hearted Loudunians found a refuge and a stronghold against the ambitions of the feudal lords and the tyranny of the crown. To its convent, pleasantly situated in a grove of time honored trees, they sent their children to be educated.

It is to the convent that we must turn our steps; for it was from the convent that the devils were let loose to plague the good people of Loudun. And in order to understand the course of events, we must first make ourselves acquainted with its history. Very briefly, then, it, like many other institutions of its kind, was a product of the Catholic counter reformation designed to stem the rising tide of Protestantism. It came into being in 1616, and was of the Ursuline order, which had been introduced into France not many years earlier. From the first it proved a magnet for the daughters of the nobility, and soon boasted a goodly complement of nuns.

The Mother Superior

AT their head, as mother superior, was a certain Jeanne de Belfiel, of noble birth and many attractive qualities, but with characteristics which, as the sequel will show, wrought much woe to others as well as to the poor gentlewoman herself. Whatever her defects, however, she labored tirelessly in the interests of the convent, and in this respect was ably seconded by its father confessor, worthy Father Moussaut, a man of rare good sense and possessing a firm hold on the consciences and affections of the nuns.

Conceive their grief, therefore, when he suddenly sickened and died. Now ensued an anxious time pending the appointment of his successor. Two names were foremost for consideration—that of Jean Mignon, chief canon of the Church of the Holy Cross, and that of Urbain Grandier, curé of Saint Peter's of Loudun. Mignon was a zealous and learned ecclesiastic, but belied his name by being cold, suspicious, and, some would have it, unscrupulous. Grandier, on the contrary, was frank and ardent and generous, and was idolized by the people of Loudun. But he had serious failings. He was most unclerically gallant, was tactless, was overready to take offense, and, his wrath once fully roused, was unrelenting. Accordingly, little surprise was felt when Mignon was chosen.

With Mignon the devils entered the Ursuline convent. Hardly had he been installed when rumors began to go about of strange doings within its quiet walls, and that there was something in these rumors became evident on the night of October 12, 1632, when two magistrates of Loudun, the bailie and the civil lieutenant, were hurriedly summoned to the convent to listen to an astonishing story. For upward of a fortnight, it appeared, several of the nuns, including Mother Superior Belfiel, had been tormented by specters and frightful visions. Latterly they had given every evidence of being possessed by evil spirits. With the assistance of another priest, Father Barré, Mignon had succeeded in exorcising the demons out of all the afflicted save the mother superior and Sister Claire.

In their case every formula known to the ritual had failed. The only conclusion was that they were not merely possessed but bewitched, and, much as he disliked to bring notoriety on the convent, the father confessor had decided it was high time to learn who was responsible for the dire visitation. He had called the magistrates, he explained, in order that legal steps might be taken to apprehend the wizard, it being well established that "devils when duly exorcised must speak the truth," and that consequently there could be no doubt as to the identity of the offender, should the evil spirits be induced to name the source of their authority.

Without giving the officials time to recover from their amazement, Mignon led them to an upper room, where they found the mother superior and Sister Claire, wan faced and fragile looking creatures on whose countenances were expressions of fear that would have inspired pity in the most stony hearted. About them hovered monks and nuns. At sight of the strangers, Sister Claire lapsed into a semicomatose condition; but the mother superior uttered piercing shrieks, and was attacked by violent convulsions that lasted until the father confessor spoke to her in a commanding tone. Then followed a startling dialogue, carried on in Latin between Mignon and the soi-disant demon possessing her.

"Why have you entered this maiden's body?"

"Because of hatred."

"What sign do you bring?"

"Flowers."

"What flowers?"

"Roses."

"Who has sent them?"

A short pause, then the single word, "Urbain."

"Tell us his surname."

"Grandier."

An Ignorant Demon

IN an instant the room was in an uproar. But the magistrates did not lose their heads. To the bailie in special the affair had a suspicious look. He had heard the devil "speak worse Latin than a boy of the fourth class," he had noted the mother superior's hesitancy in pronouncing Grandier's name, and he was well aware that deadly enmity had long existed between Grandier and Mignon. So he placed little faith in the latter's protestation that the naming of his rival had taken him completely by surprise. Consulting with his colleague, he coldly informed Mignon that before any arrest could be made there must be further investigation, and, promising to return next day, bade them good night.

Next day found the convent besieged by townspeople, indignant at the accusation against the popular priest, and determined to laugh the devils out of existence. Grandier himself, burning with rage, hastened to the bailie and demanded that the nuns be separately interrogated, and by other inquisitors than Mignon and Barré. In these demands the bailie properly acquiesced; but, attempting in person to enforce his orders to that effect, he was denied admittance to the convent. Excitement ran high; so high that, fearful for his personal safety, Mignon consented to accept as exorcists two priests appointed, not by the bailie, but by the Bishop of Poitiers—who, it might incidentally be mentioned, had his own reasons for disliking Grandier.

Exorcising now went on daily, to the disgust of the serious minded, the mystification of the credulous, the delight of sensation mongers, and the baffled fury of Grandier. So far the play, it melodramatic, had not approached the tragic. Sometimes it degenerated to the broadest farce comedy. Thus, on one occasion when the devil was being read out of the mother superior, a crashing sound was heard, and a huge black cat tumbled down the chimney and scampered about the room. At once the cry was raised that the devil had taken the form of a cat, a mad chase ensued, and it would have gone hard with pussy had not a nun chanced to recognize in it the pet of the convent.

Still, there were circumstances which tended to inspire conviction in the mind of many. The convulsions of the possessed were undoubtedly genuine, and undoubtedly they manifested phenomena seemingly inexplicable by any naturalistic basis. A contemporary writer, describing events of a few months later, when several recruits had been added to their ranks, states that some "when comatose became supple like a thin piece of lead, so that their body could be bent in every direction, forward, backward, or sideways, till their head touched the ground," and that others showed no sign of pain when struck, pinched, or pricked. Then too they whirled and danced and grimaced and howled in a manner impossible to anyone in a perfectly normal state.

Only a Brief Respite

FOR a few brief weeks Grandier enjoyed a respite, thanks to the intervention of his friend, the Archbishop of Bordeaux, who threatened to send a physician and priests of his own choice to examine the possessed, a threat of itself sufficient, apparently, to put the devils to flight. But they returned with undiminished vigor upon the arrival in Loudun of a powerful state official who, unfortunately for Grandier, was a relative of Mother Superior Belfiel's. This official, whose name was Laubardemont, had come to Loudun on a singular mission. Richelieu, the celebrated cardinal statesman, in the pursuit of his policy of strengthening the crown and weakening the nobility, had resolved to level to the ground the fortresses and castles of interior France, and among those marked for destruction was the castle of Loudun. Thither, therefore, he despatched Laubardemont to see that his orders were faithfully executed.

Naturally, the cardinal's commissioner became interested in the trouble that had befallen his kinswoman, and the more interested when Mignon hinted to him that there was reason to believe that the suspected wizard was also the author of a recent satire which had set the entire court laughing at Richelieu's expense. What lent plausibility to this charge was the fact that the satire had been universally accredited to a court beauty formerly one of Grandier's parishioners. Also there was the fact that in days gone by, when Richelieu was merely a deacon, he had had a violent quarrel with Grandier over a question of precedence. Putting two and two together, and knowing that it would result to his own advantage to unearth the real author of the satire, Laubardemont turned a willing ear to the suggestion that the woman in question had allowed her old pastor to shield himself behind her name.

Back to Paris the commissioner galloped, to carry the story to Richelieu. The cardinal's anger knew no bounds. From the King he secured a warrant for Grandier's arrest, and to this he added a decree investing Laubardemont with full inquisitorial powers. Events now moved rapidly. Though forewarned by Parisian friends, Grandier refused to seek safety by flight, and was arrested in spectacular fashion while on his way to say mass. His home was searched, his papers were seized, and he himself was thrown into an improvised dungeon in a house belonging to Mignon. Witnesses in his favor were intimidated, while those willing to testify against him were liberally rewarded. To such lengths did the prosecution go that, discovering a strong undercurrent of popular indignation, Laubardemont actually procured from the King and council a decree prohibiting any appeal from his decisions, and gave out that, since King and car-