



THE DEVILS OF LOUDUN

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The Devils of Loudun

**The Alleged Possession of the Ursuline Nuns &
the Trial of Urbain Grandier**

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The following extraordinary account of the "*Cause Célèbre*" of Urbain Grandier, the *Curé* of Loudun, accused of Magic and of having caused the Nuns of the Convent of Saint Ursula to be possessed of devils, is written by an eye-witness, and not only an eye-witness but an actor in the scenes he describes. It is printed at "*Poitiers, chez J. Thoreau et la veuve Ménier, Imprimeurs du Roi et de l'Université, 1634.*" I believe two copies only are known: my own, and the one in the National Library, Paris. The writer is Monsieur des Niau, Counsellor at la Flèche, evidently a firm believer in the absurd charges brought against Grandier.

Magic appears to have had its origin on the plains of Assyria, and the worship of the stars was the creed of those pastoral tribes who, pouring down from the mountains of Kurdistan into the wide level where Babylon afterwards raised its thousand towers, founded the sacerdotal race of the *Chasdim* or *Chaldeans*. To these men were soon allotted peculiar privileges and ascribed peculiar attributes, until, under the name of Magi, they acquired a vast and permanent influence. Their temples were astronomical observatories as well as holy places; and the legendary tower of Babel, in the Book of Genesis, is probably but the mythical equivalent of a vast edifice consecrated to the study of the seven planets, or perhaps, as the *Bab* (court or palace) of *Bel*, to the brilliant star of good fortune alone. Availing themselves of the general adoration of the stars, they appear to have invented a system of astrology—the apotelesmatic science—by which they professed to decide

upon the nature of coming events and the complexion of individual fortunes, with especial reference to the planetary aspects.

In Persia magic assumed a yet more definite development. The Chaldeans had attributed the origin of all things to a great central everlasting fire. The foundation of the Persian system, usually ascribed to Zerdusht or Zoroaster, was the existence of two antagonistic principles—Ormuzd, the principle of good, and Ahriman, the principle of evil. In Persia everything associated with science or religion was included under the denomination "magic." The Persian priests were named the Magi or Magi, but they did not arrogate to themselves the entire credit of intercourse with the gods. Zoroaster, who was King of Bactria, made some reservations for the sake of exalting the regal power, and taught that the kings were illuminated by a celestial fire which emanated from Ormuzd. Hence the sacred fire always preceded the monarch as a symbol of his illustrious rank; and Plato says the Persian kings studied magic, which is a worship of their gods.

It was, however, in Egypt, that magic received its development as an art. The most famous temples in Egypt were those of Isis, at Memphis and Busiris; of Serapis, at Canopus, Alexandria, and Thebes; of Osiris, of Apis, and Phtha. Isis, the wife of Osiris, derives her name from the Coptic word *isi*, or plenty, and would seem to typify the earth; but she is usually represented as the goddess of the moon (Gr. *kerasphôros*, the horn-bearing). Isis was also employed as a personification of wisdom, and to a certain extent she may be regarded as a symbol of the eternal will, her shrines bearing the enigmatic inscription—"I am the all that was, that is, that will be; no mortal can raise my veil." Horus was the son of Isis, and was instructed by his mother

in the art of healing. Horus, synonymous with light, is the king or spirit of the sun. Astrological science and magic were earnestly and eagerly studied by the Egyptian priests. It was their belief that the different stars exercised a powerful influence on the human body. Their funeral ceremonies may be quoted as an illustration, for they agree in sharing among the divinities the entire body of the dead. To Ra, or the Sun, they assigned the head; to Anubis, the nose and lips; to Hathor, the eyes; to Selk, the teeth; and so on. To ascertain the nativity the astrologer had only to combine the theory of the influences thus exercised by these star-related gods with the aspect of the heavens at the moment of an individual's birth. It was an element of the Egyptian as well as of the Persian astrological doctrine that a particular star controlled the natal hour of everyone.¹

Through the instrumentality of Orpheus, Musæus, Pythagoras, and others, who had travelled in Egypt, and been initiated by the priests into their mysteries, magic found its way into Greece, and there assumed various novel developments. The Greek sorcery was chiefly manifested in the peculiar rites of the Orpheotelesta, the invocation of the dead, the cave of Trophônios, the oracles of the gods, and the worship of Hekatê. The latter mysterious deity, the moon-goddess, was the patron divinity of the sorcerers. From her, as from one of the powers of the nether world, proceeded phantoms that taught witchcraft, hovered among the tombs, and haunted crossways and places accursed by the blood of the murdered or the suicide. "The Mormô, the Cereops, the Empusa, were among the goblin crew that did her bidding."

Rome borrowed her magic, no less than her art and literature, from poetic Hellas. The occult science does not appear to have been known to the Romans until about 200

years before the Christian era. But they had previously cultivated a modification of the Etruscan sorcery, comprising the divination of the future, the worship of the dead, the evocation of their *lemures* or phantoms, and the mystic ceremonies of the Mana-Genita, a nocturnal goddess of awful character. Numa was the great teacher of the ancient Roman magic, which probably partook both of a religious and medical character.

The Christian church, at the outset of its history, forbade the practice of pagan magic, but taught what may be described as a magic of its own. Both Origen and Tertullian held that mania and epilepsy were produced by the action of demons or evil spirits confined within the bodies of the sufferers, and that these were to be exorcised by certain forms of words. The church formally recognized the efficacy of exorcism in 367, when the Council of Laodicea ordained that only those should practise it who were duly authorized by the bishops. Connected with magic and magical rites were the supposed curative properties of the relics of saints, and the divine origin popularly ascribed to visions and ecstatic trances.

In the middle ages magic asserted its supremacy over the whole of Christian Europe; but it had entirely lost the religious character communicated to it by the Chaldeans. It had degenerated into the "black art." It dealt only with the night-side of nature, with the Evil One and his imps, with the loathsome practises of witchcraft and the enchantments of the necromancer. The scholar rose superior to this low kind of theurgy, but he, too, no longer sought communion with the heavenly powers; he devoted all his energies to the discovery of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of eternal youth, to the sources of illimitable wealth and endless life. [*Encyc. Nat.* ix. p. 52].

Born at Rouvère, near Sablé, at the very end of the sixteenth century, Urbain Grandier was curate and Canon of Loudun. On obtaining this living, he became so popular a preacher that the envy of the monks was excited against him. He was first accused of incontinency; but, being acquitted, his enemies instigated some nuns to play the part of persons possessed, and in their convulsions to charge Grandier with being the cause of their visitation. This horrible, though absurd, charge was countenanced by Cardinal Richelieu, who had been persuaded that Grandier had satirized him. It is this celebrated case which our credulous author here endeavours to prove.

The reader will, no doubt, be interested in the wonderful effects said to have been produced by exorcism. This word is a term applied to the act of driving an evil spirit out of one possessed, by a command in the name of some divine power. The ability to effect this by such means has been accepted as a belief by pagans, Jews, and Christians, and ceremonials with this object are still in use among the Roman Catholics and the closer followers of the teachings of Luther, who continued to keep his opinions in this respect after the Reformation. One of the minor orders of the Roman Catholic clergy exercise the function, and it is only used in cases of supposed demoniacal possession, in the administration of baptism, and in the blessing of the holy oil or *chrism*, and of holy water. [*Nat. Encyc.* v., p. 389].

"Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jer. xxiii. 29).

"Healing by words, that is by the direct expression of the mental power," says Van Helmont, "was common in the early ages, particularly in the church, and not only used against the devil and magic arts, but also against all diseases. As it commenced in Christ, so will it continue for