



*Historic Ghosts
and
Ghost Hunters*

H. Addington Bruce

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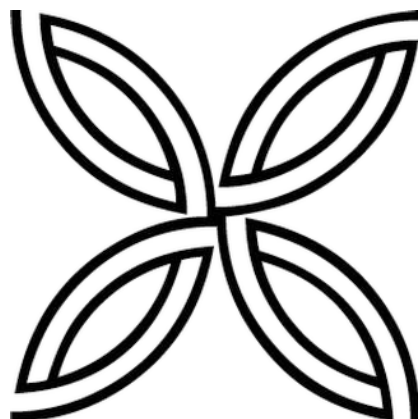
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Preface

The following pages represent in the main a discussion of certain celebrated mysteries, as viewed in the light of the discoveries set forth in the writer's earlier work "The Riddle of Personality."

That dealt, it may briefly be recalled, with the achievements of those scientists whose special endeavor it is to illumine the nature of human personality. On the one hand, it reviewed the work of the psychopathologists, or investigators of abnormal mental life; and, on the other hand, the labors of the psychical researchers, those enthusiastic and patient explorers of the seemingly supernormal in human experience. Emphasis was laid on the fact that the two lines of inquiry are more closely interrelated than is commonly supposed, and that the discoveries made in each aid in the solution of problems apparently belonging exclusively in the other.

To this phase of the subject the writer now returns. The problems under examination are, all of them, problems in psychical research: yet, as will be found, the majority in no small measure depend for elucidation on facts brought to light by the psychopathologists. Of course, it is not claimed that the last word has here been said with respect to any one of these human enigmas. But it is believed that, thanks to the knowledge gained by the investigations of the past quarter of a century, approximately correct solutions have been reached; and that, in any event, it is by no means imperative to regard the phenomena in question as inexplicable, or as explicable only on a spiritistic basis. Before attempting to solve the problems, it manifestly was necessary to state them. In doing this the writer has sought to present them in a readable and attractive form, but

without any distortion or omission of material facts.
H. Addington Bruce.

The Devils of Loudun

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 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, preëminent 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.

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 the choice ultimately fell, not on him but on Mignon.

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 upwards 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 a 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 semi-comatose 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 moment's hesitation, then the single word—"Urbain."

"Tell us his surname?"

"Grandier."

In an instant the room was in an uproar. But the magistrates did not lose their heads. To the bailie in especial 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, on 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 incredulous, the delight of sensation-mongers, and the baffled fury of Grandier. So far the play, if 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 on 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 any one in a perfectly normal state. ¹

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 dispatched 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 to 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 cardinal believed in the enchantment, any one denying it would be held guilty of lese majesty divine and human.

Under these circumstances Grandier was doomed from the outset. But he made a desperate struggle, and his opponents were driven to sore straits to bolster up their case. The devils persisted in speaking bad Latin, and continually failed to meet tests which they themselves had suggested. Sometimes their failures were only too plainly

the result of human intervention.

For instance, the mother superior's devil promised that, on a given night and in the church of the Holy Cross, he would lift Laubardemont's cap from his head and keep it suspended in mid-air while the commissioner intoned a *miserere*. When the time came for the fulfilment of this promise two of the spectators noticed that Laubardemont had taken care to seat himself at a goodly distance from the other participants. Quietly leaving the church, these amateur detectives made their way to the roof, where they found a man in the act of dropping a long horsehair line, to which was attached a small hook, through a hole directly over the spot where Laubardemont was sitting. The culprit fled, and that night another failure was recorded against the devil.

But such fiascos availed nothing to save Grandier. Neither did it avail him that, before sentence was finally passed, Sister Claire, broken in body and mind, sobbingly affirmed his innocence, protesting that she did not know what she was saying when she accused him; nor that the mother superior, after two hours of agonizing torture self-imposed, fell on her knees before Laubardemont, made a similar admission, and, passing into the convent orchard, tried to hang herself. The commissioner and his colleagues remained obdurate, averring that these confessions were in themselves evidence of witchcraft, since they could be prompted only by the desire of the devils to save their master from his just fate. In August, 1634, Grandier's doom was pronounced. He was to be put to the torture, strangled, and burned. This judgment was carried out to the letter, save that when the executioner approached to strangle him, the ropes binding him to the stake loosened, and he fell forward among the flames, perishing miserably. It only remains to analyze this medieval tragedy in the light of modern knowledge. To the people of his own generation Grandier was either a wizard most foul, or the victim of a

dastardly plot in which all concerned in harrying him to his death knowingly participated. These opinions posterity long shared. But now it is quite possible to reach another conclusion. That there was a conspiracy is evident even from the facts set down by those hostile to Grandier. On the other hand, it is as unnecessary as it is incredible to believe that the plotters included every one instrumental in fixing on the unhappy curé the crime of witchcraft.

Bearing in mind the discoveries of recent years in the twin fields of physiology and psychology, it seems evident that the conspirators were actually limited in number to Mignon, Barré, Laubardemont, and a few of their intimates. In Laubardemont's case, indeed, there is some reason for supposing that he was more dupe than knave, and is therefore to be placed in the same category as the superstitious monks and townspeople on whom Mignon and Barré so successfully imposed. As to the possessed—the mother superior and her nuns—they may one and all be included in a third group as the unwitting tools of Mignon's vengeance. In fine, it is not only possible but entirely reasonable to regard Mignon as a seventeenth-century forerunner of Mesmer, Elliotson, Esdaile, Braid, Charcot, and the present day exponents of hypnotism; and the nuns as his helpless "subjects," obeying his every command with the fidelity observable to-day in the patients of the Salpêtrière and other centers of hypnotic practice.

The justness of this view is borne out by the facts recorded by contemporary annalists, of which only an outline has been given here. The nuns of Loudun were, as has been said, mostly daughters of the nobility, and were thus, in all likelihood, temperamentally unstable, sensitive, high-strung, nervous. The seclusion of their lives, the monotonous routine of their every-day occupations, and the possibilities afforded for dangerous, morbid introspection, could not but have a baneful effect on such natures, leading inevitably to actual insanity or to hysteria. That the

possessed were hysterical is abundantly shown by the descriptions their historians give of the character of their convulsions, contortions, etc., and by the references to the anesthetic, or non-sensitive, spots on their bodies. Now, as we know, the convent at Loudun had been in existence for only a few years before Mignon became its father confessor, and so, we may believe, it fell out that he appeared on the scene precisely when sufficient time had elapsed for environment and heredity to do their deadly work and provoke an epidemic of hysteria.

In those benighted times such attacks were popularly ascribed to possession by evil spirits. The hysterical nuns, as the chronicles tell us, explained their condition to Mignon by informing him that, shortly before the onset of their trouble, they had been haunted by the ghost of their former confessor, Father Moussaut. Here Mignon found his opportunity. Picture him gently rebuking the unhappy women, admonishing them that such a good man as Father Moussaut would never return to torment those who had been in his charge, and insisting that the source of their woes must be sought elsewhere; in, say, some evil disposed person, hostile to Father Moussaut's successor, and hoping, through thus afflicting them, to bring the convent into disrepute and in this way strike a deadly blow at its new father confessor. Who might be this evil disposed person? Who, in truth, save Urbain Grandier?

Picture Mignon, again, observing that his suggestion had taken root in the minds of two of the most emotional and impressionable, the mother superior and Sister Claire. Then would follow a course of lessons designed to aid the suggestion to blossom into open accusation. And presently Mignon would make the discovery that the mother superior and Sister Claire would, when in a hysterical state, blindly obey any command he might make, cease from their convulsions, respond intelligently and at his will to questions put to them, renew their convulsions, lapse even