

Urbain Grandier

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Chapter 1

On Sunday, the 26th of November, 1631, there was great excitement in the little town of Loudun, especially in the narrow streets which led to the church of Saint-Pierre in the marketplace, from the gate of which the town was entered by anyone coming from the direction of the abbey of Saint-Jouin-les-Marmes. This excitement was caused by the expected arrival of a personage who had been much in people's mouths latterly in Loudun, and about whom there was such difference of opinion that discussion on the subject between those who were on his side and those who were against him was carried on with true provincial acrimony. It was easy to see, by the varied expressions on the faces of those who turned the doorsteps into improvised debating clubs, how varied were the feelings with which the man would be welcomed who had himself formally announced to friends and enemies alike the exact date of his return.

About nine o'clock a kind of sympathetic vibration ran through the crowd, and with the rapidity of a flash of lightning the words, "There he is! there he is!" passed from group to group. At this cry some withdrew into their houses and shut their doors and darkened their windows, as if it were a day of public mourning, while others opened them wide, as if to let joy enter. In a few moments the uproar and confusion evoked by the news was succeeded by the deep silence of breathless curiosity.

Then, through the silence, a figure advanced, carrying a branch of laurel in one hand as a token of triumph. It was that of a young man of from thirty-two to thirty-four years of age, with a graceful and well-knit frame, an aristocratic air and faultlessly beautiful features of a somewhat haughty expression. Although he had walked three leagues to reach the town, the ecclesiastical garb which he wore was not only elegant but of dainty freshness. His eyes turned to heaven, and singing in a sweet voice praise to the Lord, he passed through the streets leading to the church in the market-place with a slow and solemn gait, without vouchsafing a look, a word, or a gesture to anyone. The entire crowd, falling into step, marched behind him as he advanced, singing like him, the singers being the prettiest girls in Loudun, for we have forgotten to say that the crowd consisted almost entirely of women.

Meanwhile the object of all this commotion arrived at length at the porch of the church of Saint-Pierre. Ascending the steps, he knelt at the top and prayed in a low voice, then rising he touched the church doors with his laurel branch, and they opened wide as if by magic, revealing the choir decorated and illuminated as if for one of the four great feasts of the year, and with all its scholars, choir boys, singers, beadles, and vergers in their places. Glancing around, he for whom they were waiting came up the nave, passed through the choir, knelt for a second time at the foot of the altar, upon which he laid the branch of laurel, then putting on a robe as white as snow and passing the stole around his neck, he began the celebration of the mass before a congregation composed of all those who had followed him. At the end of the mass a Te Deum was sung.

He who had just rendered thanks to God for his own victory with all the solemn ceremonial usually reserved for the triumphs of kings was the priest Urbain Grandier. Two days before, he had been acquitted, in virtue of a decision pronounced by M. d'Escoubleau de Sourdis, Archbishop of Bordeaux, of an accusation brought against him of which he had been declared guilty by a magistrate, and in punishment of which he had been condemned to fast on bread and water every Friday for three months, and forbidden to exercise his priestly functions in the diocese of Poitiers for five years and in the town of Loudun for ever.

These are the circumstances under which the sentence had been passed and the judgment reversed.

Urbain Grandier was born at Rovere, a village near Sable, a little town of Bas-Maine. Having studied the sciences with his father Pierre and his uncle Claude Grandier, who were learned astrologers and alchemists, he entered, at the age of twelve, the Jesuit college at Bordeaux, having already received the ordinary education of a young man. The professors soon found that besides his considerable attainments he had great natural gifts for languages and oratory; they therefore made of him a thorough classical scholar, and in order to develop his oratorical talent encouraged him to practise preaching. They soon grew very fond of a pupil who was likely to bring them so much credit, and as soon as he was old enough to take holy orders they gave him the cure of souls in the parish of Saint-Pierre in Loudun, which was in the gift of the college. When he had been some months installed there as a priest-in-charge, he received a prebendal stall, thanks to the same patrons, in the collegiate church of Sainte-Croix.

It is easy to understand that the bestowal of these two positions on so young a man, who did not even belong to the province, made him seem in some sort a usurper of rights and privileges belonging to the people of the country, and drew upon him the envy of his brother- ecclesiastics. There were, in fact, many other reasons why Urbain should be an object of jealousy to these: first, as we have already said, he was very handsome, then the instruction which he had received from his father had opened the world of science to him and given him the key to a thousand things which were mysteries to the ignorant, but which he fathomed with the greatest ease. Furthermore, the comprehensive course of study which he had followed at the Jesuit college had raised him above a crowd of prejudices, which are sacred to the vulgar, but for which he made no secret of his contempt; and lastly, the eloquence of his sermons had drawn to his church the greater part of the regular congregations of the other religious communities, especially of the mendicant orders, who had till then, in what concerned preaching, borne away the palm at Loudun. As we have said, all this was more than enough to excite, first jealousy, and then hatred. And both were excited in no ordinary degree.

We all know how easily the ill-natured gossip of a small town can rouse the angry contempt of the masses for everything which is beyond or above them. In a wider sphere Urbain would have shone by his many gifts, but, cooped up as he was within the walls of a little town and deprived of air and space, all that might have conduced to his success in Paris led to his destruction at Loudun.

It was also unfortunate for Urbain that his character, far from winning pardon for his genius, augmented the hatred which the latter inspired. Urbain, who in his intercourse with his friends was cordial and agreeable, was sarcastic, cold, and haughty to his enemies. When he had once resolved on a course, he pursued it unflinchingly; he jealously exacted all the honour due to the rank at which he had arrived, defending it as though it were a conquest; he also insisted on enforcing all his legal rights, and he resented the opposition and angry words of casual opponents with a harshness which made them his lifelong enemies.

The first example which Urbain gave of this inflexibility was in 1620, when he gained a lawsuit against a priest named Meunier. He caused the sentence to be carried out with such rigour that he awoke an inextinguishable hatred in Meunier's mind, which ever after burst forth on the slightest provocation.

A second lawsuit, which he likewise gained; was one which he undertook against the chapter of Sainte-Croix with regard to a house, his claim to which the chapter, disputed. Here again he displayed the same determination to exact his strict legal rights to the last iota, and unfortunately Mignon, the attorney of the unsuccessful chapter, was a revengeful, vindictive, and ambitious man; too commonplace ever to arrive at a high position, and yet too much above his surroundings to be content with the secondary position which he occupied. This man, who was a canon of the collegiate church of Sainte-Croix and director of the Ursuline convent, will have an important part to play in the following narrative. Being as hypocritical as Urbain was straightforward, his ambition was to gain wherever his name was known a reputation for exalted piety; he therefore affected in his life the asceticism of an anchorite and the self-denial of a saint. As he had much experience in ecclesiastical lawsuits, he looked on the chapter's loss of this one, of which he had in some sort guaranteed the success, as a personal humiliation, so that when Urbain gave himself airs of triumph and exacted the last letter of his bond, as in the case of Meunier, he turned Mignon into an enemy who was not only more relentless but more dangerous than the former.

In the meantime, and in consequence of this lawsuit, a certain Barot, an uncle of Mignon and his partner as well, got up a dispute with Urbain, but as he was a man below mediocrity, Urbain required in order to crush him only to let fall from the height of his superiority a few of those disdainful words which brand as deeply as a red-hot iron. This man, though totally wanting in parts, was very rich, and having no children was always surrounded by a horde of relatives, every one of whom was absorbed in the attempt to make himself so agreeable that his name would appear in Barot's will. This being so, the mocking words which were rained down on Barot spattered not only himself but also all those who had sided with him in the quarrel, and thus added considerably to the tale of Urbain's enemies.

About this epoch a still graver event took place. Amongst the most assiduous frequenters of the confessional in his church was a young and pretty girl, Julie by name, the daughter of the king's attorney, Trinquant--Trinquant being, as well as Barot, an uncle of Mignon. Now it happened that this young girl fell into such a state of debility that she was obliged

to keep her room. One of her friends, named Marthe Pelletier, giving up society, of which she was very fond, undertook to nurse the patient, and carried her devotion so far as to shut herself up in the same room with her. When Julie Trinquant had recovered and was able again to take her place in the world, it came out that Marthe Pelletier, during her weeks of retirement, had given birth to a child, which had been baptized and then put out to nurse. Now, by one of those odd whims which so often take possession of the public mind, everyone in Loudun persisted in asserting that the real mother of the infant was not she who had acknowledged herself as such--that, in short, Marthe Pelletier had sold her good name to her friend Julie for a sum of money; and of course it followed as a matter about which there could be no possible doubt, that Urbain was the father.

Trinquant hearing of the reports about his daughter, took upon himself as king's attorney to have Marthe Pelletier arrested and imprisoned. Being questioned about the child, she insisted that she was its mother, and would take its maintenance upon herself. To have brought a child into the world under such circumstances was a sin, but not a crime; Trinquant was therefore obliged to set Marthe at liberty, and the abuse of justice of which he was guilty served only to spread the scandal farther and to strengthen the public in the belief it had taken up.

Hitherto, whether through the intervention of the heavenly powers, or by means of his own cleverness, Urbain Grandier had come out victor in every struggle in which he had engaged, but each victor had added to the number of his enemies, and these were now so numerous that any other than he would have been alarmed, and have tried either to conciliate them or to take precautions against their malice; but Urbain, wrapped in his pride, and perhaps conscious of his innocence, paid no attention to the counsels of his most faithful followers, but went on his way unheeding.

All the opponents whom till now Urbain had encountered had been entirely unconnected with each other, and had each struggled for his own individual ends. Urbain's enemies, believing that the cause of his success was to be found in the want of cooperation among themselves, now determined to unite in order to crush him. In consequence, a conference was held at Barot's, at which, besides Barot himself, Meunier, Trinquant, and Mignon took part, and the latter had also brought with him one Menuau, a king's counsel and his own most intimate friend, who was, however, influenced by other motives than friendship in joining the conspiracy. The fact was, that Menuau was in love with a woman who had steadfastly refused to show him any favour, and he had got firmly fixed in his head that the reason for her else inexplicable indifference and disdain was that Urbain had been beforehand with him in finding an entrance to her heart. The object of the meeting was to agree as to the best means of driving the common enemy out of Loudun and its neighbourhood.

Urbain's life was so well ordered that it presented little which his enemies could use as a handle for their purpose. His only foible seemed to be a predilection for female society; while in return all the wives and daughters of the place, with the unerring instinct of their sex, seeing, that the new priest was young, handsome, and eloquent, chose him, whenever it was possible, as their spiritual director. As this preference had already offended many

husbands and fathers, the decision the conspirators arrived at was that on this side alone was Grandier vulnerable, and that their only chance of success was to attack him where he was weakest. Almost at once, therefore, the vague reports which had been floating about began to attain a certain definiteness: there were allusions made, though no name was mentioned, to a young girl in Loudun; who in spite of Grandier's frequent unfaithfulness yet remained his mistress-in-chief; then it began to be whispered that the young girl, having had conscientious scruples about her love for Urbain, he had allayed them by an act of sacrilege--that is to say, he had, as priest, in the middle of the night, performed the service of marriage between himself and his mistress. The more absurd the reports, the more credence did they gain, and it was not long till everyone in Loudun believed them true, although no one was able to name the mysterious heroine of the tale who had had the courage to contract a marriage with a priest; and considering how small Loudun was, this was most extraordinary.

Resolute and full of courage as was Grandier, at length he could not conceal from himself that his path lay over quicksands: he felt that slander was secretly closing him round, and that as soon as he was well entangled in her shiny folds, she would reveal herself by raising her abhorred head, and that then a mortal combat between them would begin. But it was one of his convictions that to draw back was to acknowledge one's guilt; besides, as far as he was concerned, it was probably too late for him to retrace his steps. He therefore went on his way, as unyielding, as scornful, and as haughty as ever.

Among those who were supposed to be most active in spreading the slanders relative to Urbain was a man called Duthibaut, a person of importance in the province, who was supposed by the townspeople to hold very advanced views, and who was a "Sir Oracle" to whom the commonplace and vulgar turned for enlightenment. Some of this man's strictures on Grandier were reported to the latter, especially some calumnies to which Duthibaut had given vent at the Marquis de Bellay's; and one day, Grandier, arrayed in priestly garments, was about to enter the church of Sainte-Croix to assist in the service, he encountered Duthibaut at the entrance, and with his usual haughty disdain accused him of slander. Duthibaut, who had got into the habit of saying and doing whatever came into his head without fear of being called to account, partly because of his wealth and partly because of the influence he had gained over the narrow-minded, who are so numerous in a small provincial town, and who regarded him as being much above them, was so furious at this public reprimand, that he raised his cane and struck Urbain.

The opportunity which this affront afforded Grandier of being revenged on all his enemies was too precious to be neglected, but, convinced, with too much reason, that he would never obtain justice from the local authorities, although the respect due to the Church had been infringed, in his person he decided to appeal to King Louis XIII, who deigned to receive him, and deciding that the insult offered to a priest robed in the sacred vestments should be expiated, sent the cause to the high court of Parliament, with instructions that the case against Duthibaut should be tried and decided there.

Hereupon Urbain's enemies saw they had no time to lose, and took advantage of his absence to make counter accusations against him. Two worthies beings, named

Cherbonneau and Bugrau, agreed to become informers, and were brought before the ecclesiastical magistrate at Poitiers. They accused Grandier of having corrupted women and girls, of indulging in blasphemy and profanity, of neglecting to read his breviary daily, and of turning God's sanctuary into a place of debauchery and prostitution. The information was taken down, and Louis Chauvet, the civil lieutenant, and the archpriest of Saint- Marcel and the Loudenois, were appointed to investigate the matter, so that, while Urbain was instituting proceedings against Duthibaut in Paris, information was laid against himself in Loudun. This matter thus set going was pushed forward with all the acrimony so common in religious prosecutions; Trinquant appeared as a witness, and drew many others after him, and whatever omissions were found in the depositions were interpolated according to the needs of the prosecution. The result was that the case when fully got up appeared to be so serious that it was sent to the Bishop of Poitiers for trial. Now the bishop was not only surrounded by the friends of those who were bringing the accusations against Grandier, but had himself a grudge against him. It had happened some time before that Urbain, the case being urgent, had dispensed with the usual notice of a marriage, and the bishop, knowing this, found in the papers laid before him, superficial as they were, sufficient evidence against Urbain to justify him in issuing a warrant for his apprehension, which was drawn up in the following words:

"Henri-Louis, Chataignier de la Rochepezai, by divine mercy Bishop of Poitiers, in view of the charges and informations conveyed to us by the archpriest of Loudun against Urbain Grandier, priest-in-charge of the Church of Saint-Pierre in the Market-Place at Loudun, in virtue of a commission appointed by us directed to the said archpriest, or in his absence to the Prior of Chassignes, in view also of the opinion given by our attorney upon the said charges, have ordered and do hereby order that Urbain Grandier, the accused, be quietly taken to the prison in our palace in Poitiers, if it so be that he be taken and apprehended, and if not, that he be summoned to appear at his domicile within three days, by the first apparitor-priest, or tonsured clerk, and also by the first royal sergent, upon this warrant, and we request the aid of the secular authorities, and to them, or to any one of them, we hereby give power and authority to carry out this decree notwithstanding any opposition or appeal, and the said Grandier having been heard, such a decision will be given by our attorney as the facts may seem to warrant.

"Given at Dissay the 22nd day of October 1629, and signed in the original as follows:

"HENRI-LOUIS, Bishop of Poitiers."

Grandier was, as we have said, at Paris when these proceedings were taken against him, conducting before the Parliament his case against Duthibaut. The latter received a copy of the decision arrived at by the bishop, before Grandier knew of the charges that had been formulated against him, and having in the course of his defence drawn a terrible picture of the immorality of Grandier's life, he produced as a proof of the truth of his assertions the damning document which had been put into his hands. The court, not knowing what to think of the turn affairs had taken, decided that before considering the accusations brought by Grandier, he must appear before his bishop to clear himself of the charges, brought against himself. Consequently he left Paris at once, and arrived at Loudun, where

he only stayed long enough to learn what had happened in his absence, and then went on to Poitiers in order to draw up his defence. He had, however, no sooner set foot in the place than he was arrested by a sheriff's officer named Chatry, and confined in the prison of the episcopal palace.

It was the middle of November, and the prison was at all times cold and damp, yet no attention was paid to Grandier's request that he should be transferred to some other place of confinement. Convinced by this that his enemies had more influence than he had supposed, he resolved to possess his soul in patience, and remained a prisoner for two months, during which even his warmest friends believed him lost, while Duthibaut openly laughed at the proceedings instituted against himself, which he now believed would never go any farther, and Barot had already selected one of his heirs, a certain Ismael Boulieau, as successor to Urbain as priest and prebendary.

It was arranged that the costs of the lawsuit should be defrayed out of a fund raised by the prosecutors, the rich paying for the poor; for as all the witnesses lived at Loudun and the trial was to take place at Poitiers, considerable expense would be incurred by the necessity of bringing so many people such a distance; but the lust of vengeance proved stronger than the lust of gold; the subscription expected from each being estimated according to his fortune, each paid without a murmur, and at the end of two months the case was concluded.

In spite of the evident pains taken by the prosecution to strain the evidence against the defendant, the principal charge could not be sustained, which was that he had led astray many wives and daughters in Loudun. No one woman came forward to complain of her ruin by Grandier; the name of no single victim of his alleged immorality was given. The conduct of the case was the most extraordinary ever seen; it was evident that the accusations were founded on hearsay and not on fact, and yet a decision and sentence against Grandier were pronounced on January 3rd, 1630. The sentence was as follows: For three months to fast each Friday on bread and water by way of penance; to be inhibited from the performance of clerical functions in the diocese of Poitiers for five years, and in the town of Loudun for ever.

Both parties appealed from this decision: Grandier to the Archbishop of Bordeaux, and his adversaries, on the advice of the attorney to the diocese, pleading a miscarriage of justice, to the Parliament of Paris; this last appeal being made in order to overwhelm Grandier and break his spirit. But Grandier's resolution enabled him to face this attack boldly: he engaged counsel to defend his case before the Parliament, while he himself conducted his appeal to the Archbishop of Bordeaux. But as there were many necessary witnesses, and it was almost impossible to bring them all such a great distance, the archiepiscopal court sent the appeal to the presidial court of Poitiers. The public prosecutor of Poitiers began a fresh investigation, which being conducted with impartiality was not encouraging to Grandier's accusers. There had been many conflicting statements made by the witnesses, and these were now repeated: other witnesses had declared quite openly that they had been bribed; others again stated that their depositions had been tampered with; and amongst these latter was a certain priest named Mechin, and

also that Ishmael Boulieau whom Barot had been in such a hurry to select as candidate for the reversion of Grandier's preferments. Boulieau's deposition has been lost, but we can lay Mechin's before the reader, for the original has been preserved, just as it issued from his pen:

"I, Gervais Mechin, curate-in-charge of the Church of Saint-Pierre in the Market Place at Loudun, certify by these presents, signed by my hand, to relieve my conscience as to a certain report which is being spread abroad, that I had said in support of an accusation brought by Gilles Robert, archpriest, against Urbain Grandier, priest-in-charge of Saint-Pierre, that I had found the said Grandier lying with women and girls in the church of Saint Pierre, the doors being closed.

"ITEM, that on several different occasions, at unsuitable hours both day and night, I had seen women and girls disturb the said Grandier by going into his bedroom, and that some of the said women remained with him from one o'clock in the after noon till three o'clock the next morning, their maids bringing them their suppers and going away again at once.

"ITEM, that I had seen the said Grandier in the church, the doors being open, but that as soon as some women entered he closed them.

"As I earnestly desire that such reports should cease, I declare by these presents that I have never seen the said Grandier with women or girls in the church, the doors being closed; that I have never found him there alone with women or girls; that when he spoke to either someone else was always present, and the doors were open; and as to their posture, I think I made it sufficiently clear when in the witness-box that Grandier was seated and the women scattered over the church; furthermore, I have never seen either women or girls enter Grandier's bedroom either by day or night, although it is true that I have heard people in the corridor coming and going late in the evening, who they were I cannot say, but a brother of the said Grandier sleeps close by; neither have I any knowledge that either women or girls, had their suppers brought to the said room. I have also never said that he neglected the reading of his breviary, because that would be contrary to the truth, seeing that on several occasions he borrowed mine and read his hours in it. I also declare that I have never seen him close the doors of the church, and that whenever I have seen him speaking to women I have never noticed any impropriety; I have not ever seen him touch them in any way, they have only spoken together; and if anything is found in my deposition contrary to the above, it is without my knowledge, and was never read to me, for I would not have signed it, and I say and affirm all this in homage to the truth.

"Done the last day of October 1630,

"(Signed) G. MECHIN."

In the face of such proofs of innocence none of the accusations could be considered as established and so, according to the decision of the presidial court of Poitiers, dated the 25th of May 1634, the decision of the bishop's court was reversed, and Grandier was

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