

CHAPTER XI

THE CURÉ D'ARS AND THE DEVIL

THAT hell exists and that there are fallen angels condemned to hell, is a dogma of the Catholic faith. The devil is a personal, living being, not a figment of the imagination. True, his activity in the world remains for the most part hidden; none the less, by divine permission, at times the evil one comes out into the open. The reason is, no doubt, that he has felt that on some spot or other of the earth his influence is in jeopardy, and since he cannot come to grips immediately with God, he endeavours, evildoer that he is, to render fruitless the labours of his servants. For the space of some thirty-five years—from 1824 to 1858—the Curé d'Ars was subjected, even outwardly, to the molestations of the evil one. What if, by preventing him from taking both food and sleep, Satan had succeeded in inspiring him with a distaste for prayer, penance, and the exertions of the apostolic life, and in obliging him to give up the cure of souls! But the enemy of our salvation was disappointed and defeated. "The struggles of M. Vianney with the devil," says Catherine Lassagne, "helped to render his charity more ardent and more disinterested." The evil one had not bargained for such a result.

The vexations of hell "began at the time when the holy curé was planning his *Providence*, for which he had just bought a house"—that is, during the winter of 1824 to 1825.¹ As a matter of fact, they were but the sequel of previous internal temptations of great violence. In the course of a grave illness, due, perhaps, to what he called his "youthful follies," he was attacked by despairing thoughts at the very moment when he felt death near. It seemed to him that he heard a voice within himself saying: "Now is the time when you shall go down to hell." However, he recovered his interior peace by protesting his trust in God.

¹ Catherine Lassagne, *Procès apostolique ne pereant*, p. 424.

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¹ Catherine Lassagne, *Procès apostolique ne pereant*, p. 424.

Once resolved upon upsetting M. Vianney's outward tranquillity, the devil began with some rather trivial vexations. Every night the poor Curé heard the curtains of his bedstead being rent. In the beginning he imagined that he had to do only with common rodents. He placed a pitchfork near the head of his bed. Useless precaution: the more he shook the curtains in order to frighten off the rats, the louder became the sounds of rending, and in the morning, when he expected to find them in shreds, the curtains were undamaged. This game lasted for quite a while.¹

It is evident that at first the Curé d'Ars did not realize that he had to deal with the spirit of darkness. He was not credulous, and it was with difficulty that he gave credence to extraordinary occurrences,² so much so that when divers cases of diabolical possession were submitted to him, he always proceeded with the utmost caution. M. Dufour, a missionary of Belley, relates how he once asked him for his opinion about a person who was seized with fury at sight of a priest or a crucifix. He replied: "It is a case of a little

¹ Catherine Lassagne, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 481. In order that the reader may be able to appraise these strange phenomena, we subjoin the following theological principles: we must range under the heading of *extraordinary preternatural* facts the prolonged vexations of which, by God's permission, the Curé d'Ars was for so long a victim. M. Saudreau, who is an authority on this matter, writes as follows: "There are two kinds of diabolical operations: those that are *ordinary* and others of an *extraordinary* nature."

"The devil acts on all men by tempting them; no one can escape those attacks; these are his *ordinary* operations."

"In other very much rarer cases, the devils reveal their presence by troublesome vexations, which are more terrifying than painful; they cause a great noise, they move, transport, knock over and at times smash certain objects; this is what is called *infestation*."

Infestation is the first among extraordinary diabolical operations. It is the one from which the holy Curé d'Ars suffered almost exclusively. Only on a few very rare occasions was he the victim of *external obsession*, during which the devil attacks, beats, and hurts the person obsessed. He never complained of having experienced *internal obsession*, in which the fallen spirit, by influencing the imagination in particular, seems to force upon a poor soul something of his own sentiments; nor of *possession*, properly so-called, in which Satan "seizes upon the human organism and makes use of its members, its tongue, in fact, of the whole body, which he moves according as he pleases." (Cf. A. Saudreau, *The Mystical State*.)

The Curé d'Ars, in the course of his ministry, encountered many such cases, and in many instances he set free the soul, and even the body, of those who were undergoing the persecution of the evil spirits.

² Abbé Toccanier, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 181.

nerves, a little madness, and a little of the *grappin*.¹ *Grappin* was the nickname by which he generally designated the devil. As for himself, a man who in the midst of incredible labours remained ever absolutely self-possessed, could not, assuredly, be described as the victim of hallucination.² Opposed to every form of falsehood and far too serious to invent idle tales, he would never have spoken of those diabolical obsessions had they not been real. Such, in fact, was the conviction of all who knew him.³

Soon, in the silence of the night, blows were struck against doors, shouts were heard in the yard in front of the presbytery. Perhaps they were the act of thieves, who were after the rich offerings of the Vicomte d'Ars, which were kept in the large cupboard in the attic! M. Vianney boldly came downstairs, but saw nothing. None the less, on subsequent nights he was afraid to remain alone.

¹ *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 360.

² Doctor J. B. Saunier, who for seventeen years was physician to the Curé d'Ars, has left the following statement concerning the perfect physical and moral balance of his illustrious patient: "*We have only one thing to say of the alleged physiological explanations of phenomena of this kind.*" The doctor had been questioned about the nocturnal disturbances at the presbytery, and by way of accounting for them the word hallucination had been whispered in his hearing: "*If explanations such as these be admissible when we have to account for facts accompanied by pathological circumstances that reveal their nature, and which are rarely wanting—such as hebetude, convulsions, signs of folly—it is quite impossible to attribute to them the same cause when they are accompanied, as in the case of M. Vianney, by perfect regularity of all the functions of the organism, by a serenity of ideas, a delicacy of perception, a sureness of view and judgement, a mastery of all his powers, and the maintenance of that miraculous health which hardly ever failed him, notwithstanding the incessant labour that absorbed his life*" (*Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1112).

On his part, Dr. Aimé Michel of Coligny (Ain), when asked for his opinion during the same process, made the following statement, May 31, 1864: "*All that I have seen or heard of M. le Curé d'Ars strengthens my conviction that he was absolutely self-possessed and endowed with great soundness of judgement. Nothing could persuade me that he was the victim of delusions or hallucinations. As regards demoniacal attacks, I have heard of them, and if M. Vianney affirmed that he experienced them, I believe them to have taken place.*"

³ "At Ars nobody doubted the fact that those noises were caused by the devil. I never entertained a doubt myself; neither time nor reflection has altered my conviction in this respect. The idea of a fraud cannot be entertained for a moment. If these occurrences had been merely a bad joke, or the act of persons who deemed it to their interest, they would have been promptly unmasked" (Abbé Chaland, *Procès apostolique continuatif*, p. 650).

The following is the deposition of André Verchère, the wheelwright of the village, a hefty fellow, then twenty-eight years old :¹ "For several days M. Vianney had heard strange noises in his presbytery. One evening he came to look for me, and said : 'I wonder whether or no it is a case of thieves . . . will you come and sleep at the presbytery?' 'Most willingly, M. le Curé, and I will load my gun, too.' At nightfall I went to the presbytery. Until ten o'clock I sat by the fire warming myself and talking to M. le Curé : 'Let us go to bed,' he said at last. He gave up his room to me and went into the one adjoining it. I was unable to sleep. At about one o'clock I heard a violent shaking of the handle and lock of the front door. At the same time heavy blows were struck, as if with a club, against the same door, whilst within the presbytery there was a terrific din, like the rumbling of several carts.

"I seized my gun and rushed to the window, which I threw open. I looked out but saw nothing. For nearly a quarter of an hour the house shook—so did my legs. I felt the effects of that night for a fortnight. As soon as the noise had started, M. le Curé lit a lamp. He accompanied me.

" 'Have you heard?' he asked.

" 'You can see that I have heard, since I am up and have my gun.' And all the time the presbytery was shaking as in an earthquake.

" 'So you are afraid?' he asked.

" 'No,' I replied, 'I am not afraid, but I feel my legs giving way under me. The presbytery is going to crash to the ground.'

" 'What do you think it is?'

" 'I think it is the devil.'

"When the uproar ceased we returned to bed. The following evening M. le Curé came again to ask me to keep him company. I replied : 'M. le Curé, I have had quite enough.'"

Subsequently, at the *Providence*, M. Vianney, mimicking the perplexity of his first protector, "laughed heartily at his terror." "My poor Verchère," he told the directresses, "was

¹ He died at Ars in 1879, at the age of eighty-one.

shaking with fear, though he was holding his gun in his hand. He no longer knew he had a gun."¹

The wheelwright having refused, M. Vianney appealed to the Mayor, who sent to the presbytery his son Antoine, a big lad of twenty-six, and an additional companion-in-arms in the person of Jean Cotton, gardener at the château of Ars, and two years younger than Antoine. These two defenders went to the presbytery after night prayers and remained on duty for about twelve nights. "We heard nothing whatever," was Jean Cotton's report. "Not so M. le Curé, who slept in an adjoining room. More than once his rest was disturbed, and he called out to us: 'Children, do you not hear anything?' We answered that not a sound had reached us. At one moment, however, I heard a sound resembling that which would be made if a water jug were rapidly struck with the blade of a knife . . . We had hung up our watches near the looking-glass in his room. 'I am greatly surprised,' M. le Curé told us, 'that your watches are not smashed.'"²

Several other young men, among whom was Edme Scipiot, steward at the château, posted themselves as sentries in the church tower. They, too, heard nothing, except that one night, according to Magdeleine Scipiot, Edme's daughter, they saw a tongue of fire, which precipitated itself upon the presbytery.

Whence exactly proceeded these noises? M. Vianney, anxious but cautious, did not as yet dare to form a definite opinion. One night, when the ground was covered with snow, shouts were heard in the yard. "It was like an army of Austrians or Cossacks who were talking all together in a language he was unable to understand."³ He opened his door. On the white surface where objects can be distinguished even during moonless nights, he could detect no footprints. His mind was now made up. These were not human voices; nor could there be question of anything angelic or divine, but rather of something horrible, with the horror of hell itself. Moreover, those shudders of terror which he experi-

¹ Jeanne-Marie Chanay, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 685.

² *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1382.

³ Catherine Lassagne, *Petit mémoire*, troisième rédaction, p. 93.

enced gave him an adequate cue as to the identity of the mysterious personage. "I came to the conclusion that it was the devil because I was afraid," he admitted later on to Mgr. Devie; "the good God does not frighten us." Knowing that neither gun nor pitchfork availed in such a contest, "he dismissed his bodyguard and remained alone on the field of battle."

It was indeed a battle, and in order to fight it the holy man had no other resource than patience and prayer. "I sometimes asked him," his confessor relates, "how he repelled those attacks. He replied: 'I turn to God; I make the sign of the cross; I address a few contemptuous words to the devil. I have noticed, moreover, that the tumult is greater and the assaults more numerous if, on the following day, some big sinner is due to come.'"¹

This knowledge was his comfort during sleepless nights. "At the beginning I felt afraid," he confessed to Mgr. Mermoud, one of his friends and faithful penitents; "I did not then know what it was, but now I am quite happy. It is a good sign: there is always a good haul of fish the next day." "The devil gave me a good shaking last night," he would say at times; "we shall have a great number of people to-morrow. The *grappin* is very stupid: he himself tells me of the arrival of big sinners. . . . He is angry. So much the better!"

It was now the time of superhuman toil when M. Vianney spent the greater part of his day in the confessional. Although utterly exhausted when evening came, he would not go to bed without first reading a few pages from the *Lives of the Saints*. It was likewise the hour when at close intervals he inflicted on himself bloody disciplines. When that was over he stretched himself on his thin straw mattress and sought repose. Just as he was about to fall asleep he would start up, awakened by shouts, mournful cries, and formidable blows. It seemed as if the front door were being battered in with a sledge-hammer. Suddenly, without a latch having been moved, the Curé d'Ars perceived with horror that the devil was close to him. "I do not ask him

¹ Abbé Beau, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1191.

to enter," he used to say, half laughing, half annoyed, "but he comes in all the same."

The uproar now began. The evil spirit remained invisible, but his presence could be plainly felt. He threw over the chairs and shook the heavy furniture of the room.¹ With a fearful voice he shouted: "*Vianney, Vianney! potato eater!*"² *Ah! thou art not yet dead! I shall get thee all right.*" Or roaring like a beast, growling like a bear or snarling like a dog, he rushed at the curtains of the bed, which he shook violently.³

Borrowing from the accounts of Catherine Lassagne and from his own recollections, Frère Athanase relates that the devil "reproduced the sound of a hammer driving nails into the wooden floor, or that of hooping a cask; he drummed on the table, on the chimney-piece, on the water jug; or he sang with a shrill voice, so that M. le Curé used afterwards to tell us derisively: 'The *grappin* has a very ugly voice indeed.'

"On more than one occasion M. Vianney experienced a sensation as of a hand passing over his face or of rats scampering over his body.

"One night he heard the buzz of a swarm of bees; he got up, lit his candle, and was about to open the window to let them out—but he saw no bees.

"Another time the *grappin* endeavoured to throw him out of bed by pulling away his straw mattress. More frightened than usual, M. Vianney crossed himself, and the devil left him in peace.

"One evening he had been in bed for a few moments when all of a sudden it seemed to him that his couch, which was hard enough, to be sure, was becoming exceedingly soft, and that he was sinking into it as into a feather bed. At the same time a mocking voice kept repeating: '*Ha, ha!*

¹ He one day told the Abbé Tailhades, who repeated it to me: "Look at this piece of furniture; I do not know how it is that it was not smashed" (Comtesse des Garets, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 783).

² "*Mangeur de truffes!*" In the country districts round Lyons potatoes are called *truffes*. The Curé d'Ars himself used the word.

³ These details and those that follow are taken chiefly from the depositions of Frère Athanase at the *Procès de l'Ordinaire* (pp. 807-809). These facts were for the most part recorded day by day, from 1841 to 1842, in the first rédaction of Catherine Lassagne's *Petit mémoire*, pp. 16-20.

... *Allons, Allons,*' and other ironical exhortations, by which it sought to lead him to sensual indulgence. In his terror M. Vianney crossed himself and it ceased."¹

The spirit of darkness displayed much resourcefulness in inventing ever new tricks; he seemed to multiply his presence and to wander over the whole presbytery. In the sleeping-room a hideous brood of bats flapped their wings under the roof beams or clustered on the curtains of the bed. In the attic, for hours on end, was heard the uninterrupted, exasperating tramp of a flock of sheep. Below the bedroom, in the so-called dining-room, a noise went on as of a prancing steed, which, leaping to the ceiling, apparently dropped to the floor on its four iron shoes.

This hellish farce wearied the poor Curé d'Ars; it never discouraged him. His dreadful sleeplessness notwithstanding, so soon as the clock in the church tower struck the midnight hour, his thoughts went to his penitents who awaited him, and of whom there were always fresh relays. So he rose promptly and went to the church. But at what a cost! "In order to encourage us he came to our singing practices," a woman of the parish related. "At times he looked ghastly pale. We asked him if he were ill. 'No,' he would say, 'but the *grappin* bothered me to such a degree that I have not slept a wink all night.'"²

At times the presence of this sinister visitor led to some alarming encounters. "One day," relates a missionary of Pont-d'Ain, "whilst making me go up the stairs in front of him, M. le Curé remarked: 'O my friend, this is not like yesterday; then the *grappin* went up before me; he looked as if he had boots on.'"³

One morning in December, 1826, long before dawn, the Curé d'Ars set out on foot for Saint-Trivier-sur-Moignans, where he was to preach the exercises of the jubilee. He said his rosary as he walked along. All around him the air seemed full of sinister lights. The atmosphere appeared to be on fire, and the bushes on either side of the road looked as if they were burning. This was Satan's work: he, foreseeing

¹ Abbé Beau, the saint's confessor, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1191.

² Marthe Miard, *Procès apostolique continuatif*, p. 843.

³ Abbé Dufour, *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 359.

the success M. Vianney was about to achieve, pursued him step by step, enveloped in the element that devours him, hoping thus to terrify and discourage the servant of God. But M. Vianney quietly pursued his way.¹

The *Curé d'Ars* invariably covered with a veil of silence those things that might have procured him honour, but he readily recounted, even in his catechisms in church, the pranks which the evil one played on him. Everyone knew M. Vianney to be incapable of telling a falsehood, and that, notwithstanding his unheard-of labour, he was yet perfectly sound in mind and body. Nevertheless, more than one, even among his intimates, might have wished for other proofs besides his word, and the testimony of Verchère, the wheelwright. The Abbé Raymond, who was his assistant during eight years, the Abbé Toccanier, who held the same post during six, never heard anything unusual. "Listen to the *grappin*," the *Curé* would sometimes say to the Abbé Raymond; but the latter strained his ears in vain. Why was the *Curé d'Ars* the only person at that time to hear those hellish noises? Surely because the vexations of Satan were aimed at him alone.

However, others in every way worthy of credence have, under exceptional circumstances, obtained personal proofs of these infernal *infestations*.

About the year 1820, M. Vianney removed, from the church to the presbytery, an old canvas representing the Annunciation. The picture was hung on the wall at a place where there is a bend in the staircase. Upon this holy image the devil now vented his rage by covering it with filth. It became necessary to remove the picture. "Many witnessed these odious profanations," M. Monnin writes, "or at least saw the material traces of them. M. Renard testifies to having seen the picture most foully besmirched so that the figure of our Lady was unrecognizable."²

Marguerite Vianney, the Gothon of his childish days, was in the habit of paying an occasional visit to her saintly

¹ The distance between Ars and Saint-Trivier is twelve kilometres.

² This picture was taken away from Ars by a painter who made a copy of it, which is now in the chapel of the *Providence*. The artist, however, did not have the honesty to return the original.

brother. During one of the nights that she thus spent at the presbytery, she heard her brother leave the house to go to the church before one o'clock in the morning. "A few moments later," she relates, "a tremendous noise was produced apparently close to my bed, as if five or six men had been striking heavy blows upon the table or the cupboard. I was terrified and got up. I had strength enough to light a lamp, when I discovered that everything was in perfect order. I said to myself: 'I must have been dreaming.' So I returned to bed, but no sooner had I lain down than the noise began again. This time I was even more alarmed, so I dressed quickly and ran over to the church. When my brother returned to the presbytery I told him what had happened. 'O my child!' he replied, 'you should not have been frightened: it is the *grappin*. He cannot hurt you: as for me, he torments me in sundry ways. At times he seizes me by the feet and drags me about the room. It is because I convert souls to the good God.'"¹

Mlle. Marie Ricotier of Gleizé, in the province of Lyons, who had settled at Ars in 1832, used to hear from her house certain noises that apparently originated in the presbytery. Once in particular, when the hubbub seemed to be greater than usual, she went early in the morning to speak to M. Vianney about it: "I, too, have heard it," he replied; "no doubt at this very moment there are some sinners on the road to Ars."²

M. Amiel, a plasterer of Montmerle, one day told François Pertinand, the famous hotel-keeper: "I cannot understand how anyone can go to bed in a presbytery where such terrifying noises are heard. I stayed there for several nights, at the time when M. Vianney commissioned me to make some statues for him."

One day in 1838 Denis Chaland, of Bouligneux, then a young student of philosophy, went to confession to the Curé d'Ars. By a special favour he was admitted to the saint's own room. He himself related what happened: "I knelt on his prie-Dieu. Suddenly, when I was about half through my confession, a general convulsion shook the room; my prie-Dieu trembled like everything else. Full of

¹ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1026.

² *ibid.*, p. 1335.

terror I tried to stand up. M. le Curé kept me down by seizing my arm. 'It is nothing,' he said, 'it is only the devil!' At the end of this confession M. Vianney decided my future career: 'You must become a priest.' My excitement was still very great, and I must admit that I never again went to confession to the Curé d'Ars."¹

This same Denis Chaland had boarded, ten years earlier, at the house of the schoolmaster of Ars. On certain evenings, curiosity proving stronger than fear, he used to go with some of his fellow-students and glue his ear to the presbytery door in order to listen to the noises which people said were caused by the devil. On more than twenty different occasions, mostly at nightfall, these children heard a guttural voice repeating: *Vianney, Vianney!*²

In 1842 a gendarme of Messimy, Provost-marshal Napoly, who was undergoing some severe trials, wished to consult the Curé d'Ars. He arrived in the village late at night. Now, at about midnight, as he was waiting at the door of the presbytery, he, too, heard the repeated and terrifying shout. A feeble light appeared in the saint's room! shortly afterwards he came out of the house, guiding his steps with the help of his lantern. "Monsieur le Curé, it seems that you are being attacked," exclaimed the good Napoly. . . . "But I am here to defend you!"

"Eh! my friend, it is nothing; it is the *grappin*." So saying, M. Vianney took the hand of the gendarme—it was a trembling hand. "Come with me, my friend," he added, whilst he led the would-be defender into the sacristy, where, to quote Frère Athanase, "without doubt everything was settled satisfactorily. I have since learned that the man became an excellent Christian. M. le Curé used to tell me concerning him that, for a gendarme, he was not very bold."³

In March, 1852, a young nun of the congregation of the Child Jesus—Sister Clotilde—in the world Jeanne Coiffet, of Leigneux (Loire), wished to go to confession to the saint. A day went by. When evening came she, like many

¹ Abbé Denis Chaland, curé of Marlieux, *Procès apostolique continuatif*, p. 656.

² *ibid.*, p. 655.

³ *Procès apostolique in genere*, pp. 207-210.

other penitents, was compelled to take shelter in the vestibule of the tower. At about half-past one in the morning M. Vianney opened the door. They all rushed after him, when he, suddenly turning round, pointed his finger at the unknown religious whose shyness had kept her in the darkest corner of the room: "Let that child come," he commanded. Sister Clotilde followed him. Now the saint had no sooner entered the nave than strange noises were heard in it, as of angry men quarrelling among themselves. "It is nothing," the Curé d'Ars whispered into the ear of the trembling sister; "it is the devil who is doing this."

One event which might possibly be explained through natural causes, but in which M. Vianney and the crowds saw a particularly virulent aggression of the evil one, caused immense excitement among the pilgrims and strengthened them in their conviction that the devil attacked the Curé d'Ars even outwardly.¹ It was either on the Monday or Tuesday during the Forty Hours' Prayer—February 23 or 24, 1857. That morning the saint had started hearing confessions at an unusually early hour, by reason of the great crowds assembled in the church, where the Blessed Sacrament was exposed. A little before seven o'clock some persons were passing by the presbytery when they noticed a fire in M. Vianney's room. He was promptly informed, just as he was about to leave his confessional to say Mass. "It would seem, father, that your room is on fire!" He just handed the key to those who had brought the information, so that they might put out the flames, and without any excitement he simply said: "The villainous *grappin*! he could not catch the bird, so he burns the cage." He left the church, however, and passed into his courtyard, where he met with the men who, at that very moment, were carrying out of the house the smoking remains of his poor bed. He asked no questions, went back to the church, and once more entered

¹ In a book entitled *Ars et son pasteur*, published at Ars—without the sanction, it should be stated, of M. Vianney—the very year in which the event took place, Michel Givre suggests that a match struck by M. le Curé, for the purpose of lighting his lamp, may have caused the fire which we are about to describe. In that case the fire would have smouldered unnoticed for more than five hours. . . . However this may have been, the hypothesis of crime must be eliminated, since the room was locked and the key was in M. Vianney's pocket.

into the sacristy. As may be imagined, some commotion had been caused among the women penitents who crowded the nave of the church. Frère Jérôme, the watchful sacristan, thought that perhaps the saint was as yet unaware of the cause of the excitement. "M. le Curé, it is your bed that has been burnt." "Ah!" was all he said, in a tone of utter indifference, then, calm as he always was, he went to say his Mass.

M. Alfred Monnin, a young missionary of Pont d'Ain, was at that time supplying for the Abbé Toccanier, who was engaged in giving a mission at Massigneux, near Belley. This priest rushed into the room at the first signal of alarm and at once noticed the mysterious character of the fire. "The bed, the tester, the curtains of the bed, and everything near—everything had been consumed. The fire had only halted in front of the reliquary of St Philomena, which had been placed on a chest of drawers. From that point it had drawn a line from top to bottom with geometrical accuracy, destroying everything on this side of the holy relic and sparing all on the other. As the fire had started without cause, so it died out in like manner, and it is very remarkable, and in some ways truly miraculous, that the flames had not spread from the heavy serge hangings to the floor of the upper storey, which was very low, old, and very dry, and which would have blazed like straw.

"At noon, when M. le Curé came to see me at the *Providence*, we spoke of the event. I told him that it was universally looked upon as a bad joke of the devil, and I asked him whether he really thought that the evil one had had something to do with it. He replied very positively and with the greatest composure: 'Oh! my friend, that is plain enough. He is angry; that is a good sign; we shall see many sinners.' As a matter of fact, there followed an extraordinary influx of people into Ars, which lasted for several days."¹

Thirty years earlier another occurrence, the accuracy of which it seems impossible to question, had made a deep impression on the clergy of the neighbourhood in particular. In 1826 it was rumoured in the various presbyteries that during

¹ *Life of the Curé of Ars*, p. 195, English trans.

a mission at Montmerle the devil had dragged across the room the bed in which the Curé d'Ars slept. The priests laughed, and the story met with unbelief. But the following winter their minds underwent a great change.

A jubilee was being preached at Saint-Trivier-sur-Moignans, and M. Vianney was invited to lend a hand. This he gladly consented to do. The very first night strange noises disturbed the habitual peace of the presbytery. The priests who slept in the house accused M. Vianney of being the cause of the disturbance, for no sooner had he retired than the noise began and it proceeded from his room. "It is the *grappin*," M. Vianney said; "he is wroth because of the good that is being done here." But his colleagues refused to believe him. "You do not eat," they said, "you do not sleep; it is your head that plays you tricks! . . ." One night these reproaches were particularly sharp, and this time the servant of God remained silent.

The following night a noise was heard like the rumbling of a heavy cart, and the presbytery shook. It seemed as if the house were about to crumble. Everybody got up terrified, M. Grangier, curé of Saint-Trivier, M. Benoît, the vicaire, M. Chevalon, an old soldier of the Republic and now a diocesan missionary, not to forget Denise Lanvis, the housekeeper. At that moment such an uproar arose in M. Vianney's room that M. Benoît exclaimed: "The Curé d'Ars is being murdered!" Everybody rushed in the direction of the Curé's room, but when the door was opened all that they saw was the holy man lying peacefully in his bed, which invisible hands had dragged into the middle of the room. "It is the *grappin* who has dragged me thus far," he said with a smile, "it is he who has caused all this tumult. It is nothing. . . . I am sorry I forgot to warn you beforehand. However, it is a good sign: there will be a big fish to-morrow."

"A big fish." By this familiar expression, which he frequently used, the Cure d'Ars meant to hint at the conversion of some big sinner. The priests still doubted, believing him to be the victim of an hallucination. The next day they caused the approach to a certain confessional to be carefully watched. Nothing out of the way happened all

day. It was plain that good M. Vianney had had a nightmare. But what a joyful surprise for the parish priest and the missionaries when, after the sermon, they beheld M. des Murs going across the church to ask the Curé d'Ars to hear his confession. That nobleman had long neglected all religious practices, so that the example he thus set made a deep impression upon the people of Saint-Trivier. M. Chevalon, who had perhaps been the first among those who had laughed at M. Vianney, ever after looked on him as a great saint.¹

It would seem that on more than one occasion the devil likewise attacked the *Providence*. On certain nights both mistresses and pupils were roused by strange noises. At other times the evil spirit endeavoured to disturb their souls.

"One day," Marie Filliat relates, "after thoroughly cleansing the saucepan, I filled it with water for the soup. I noticed little bits of meat in the water. Now the day was one of abstinence. I emptied the saucepan, rinsed it, and filled it once more with water. When the soup was ready to put on the table I saw that there were bits of meat in it. M. le Curé, on being informed, told me, 'the devil has done this thing; serve the soup just as it is.'"²

Thus did Satan's fury spend itself in futile efforts. Eventually M. Vianney became quite used to his visits. "You must be very much afraid?" the Abbé Toccanier asked him, alluding to those revolting interviews.

"One gets used to everything, my friend," was the gentle reply. "The *grappin* and I are almost comrades."³

He treated him accordingly. On December 4, 1841, he related the following incident to the mistresses of the orphanage: "Listen to this: last night the devil came into my room whilst I was reciting my breviary. He was blowing hard, and seemed to vomit on my floor, I know not what, but it looked like either corn or some other grain. I told him: 'I am going over there (to the *Providence*) to tell

¹ Catherine Lassagne, *Petit mémoire*, troisième rédaction, p. 66.

² *Procès apostolique ne péchant*, p. 1094.

³ "Le *grappin* et moi, nous sommes quasi camarades" (*Procès apostolique ne péchant*, p. 202).

them of thy behaviour, so that they may despise thee!" and he stopped at once."¹

One night, as the Curé was trying to get some sleep, the hellish disturber of the peace signified his presence by shouts such as: "*Vianney, Vianney*, I shall get thee, yes, I shall get thee! . . ." But from the dark corner where his bed stood the meek saint merely answered: "I do not fear thee much."²

It is now easy to understand that the mastery which the servant of God had acquired over the devil should have been taken advantage of by people who asked him to deliver possessed persons. Mgr. Devic had authorized him to use his powers as exorcist whenever circumstances required. Here also we have the testimony of many witnesses.

Jean Picard, the village farrier, witnessed some extraordinary scenes. A wretched woman had been brought by her husband from a considerable distance. The woman was raving, and uttered inarticulate shrieks. M. le Curé was summoned, but after examining her he declared that she must be taken back to the Bishop of the diocese. "Good, good," exclaimed the woman, suddenly recovering her speech, though the sound of her voice froze the listeners with horror, "the *creature* shall go home! Ah, if I had the power of Jesus Christ I should plunge you all into hell."

"*Tiens*, thou knowest Jesus Christ," M. Vianney replied, "very well, let her be taken to the foot of the high altar."

Four men carried her there, notwithstanding her resistance. M. Vianney then placed his reliquary³ on the head of the possessed woman, who became rigid like a corpse. After a while, however, she stood up of her own accord and walked rapidly towards the door of the church. She returned in an hour's time, perfectly calm now, took holy water, and fell on her knees. She was quite cured. During the three days that she spent at Ars, she was the edification of all the pilgrims.⁴

¹ Catherine Lassagne, *Petit mémoire*, première rédaction, p. 20.

² *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 729.

³ "The Curé d'Ars always carried in his pocket a large silver reliquary containing several relics of the Passion, and, I believe, of a few saints" (Abbé Tailhades, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1508).

⁴ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1312.

One poor old woman from the neighbourhood of Clermont-Ferrand particularly excited the compassion of Pierre Oriol, one of the men who constituted "the bodyguard" of our saint. The wretched woman, he tells us, sang and danced the whole day in front of the church. They made her drink a few drops of holy water, whereupon she flew into such a rage that she began to bite into the walls of the church. Her son accompanied her, but he was helpless. A priest then led her to a spot between the presbytery and the church which M. Vianney would have to pass. The saint, indeed, soon appeared. He contented himself with giving his blessing to the poor woman, from whose mouth blood was flowing. She instantly became quite calm. Her son then related that his mother had been in her previous pitiful state for forty years, but that she had never before shown herself either so furious or so calm. She was presumed to be possessed. Her dreadful fits never returned.¹

On the evening of December 27, 1857, a vicaire of Saint-Pierre of Avignon and the Superior of the Franciscan nuns of Orange, brought to Ars a young schoolmistress who showed every symptom of diabolical possession. The Archbishop of Avignon had personally studied the case and his advice was that she should be taken to M. Vianney. The very next morning after her arrival she was taken into the sacristy just as the saint was about to vest for Mass. The possessed woman, however, made at once for the door. "There are too many people here," she exclaimed. "Too many people?" the saint asked; "very well, they are going to leave." At a sign from him the assistants withdrew so that he found himself alone with the unfortunate victim of Satan.

From within the church only confused sounds could at first be heard. All at once the voices became louder. The vicaire of Avignon, who had remained close to the door, was now able to follow part of the dialogue:

"You absolutely insist on going out?" the Curé d'Ars asked.

"Yes!"

"And why?"

¹ Pierre Oriol, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 751.

"Because I am with a man whom I do not like."

"So you do not like me?" M. Vianney said in a tone of irony. A strident "*No*" was the only reply of the spirit who abode in the unhappy girl.

Almost immediately the door was opened. The power of the saint had prevailed. Collected and modest, weeping tears of joy and boundless gratitude, the young school-mistress appeared on the threshold. For an instant, however, fear showed itself once more in her looks. Turning towards M. Vianney, she said: "I fear lest he should come back." "No, my child, at any rate not for a long while." In fact, he did not come back, and the girl was able to resume her teaching activities at Orange.

On July 25, 1859, the eve of the day on which the saint took to his bed never to leave it again, they brought to him, with much difficulty, towards eight o'clock at night, a woman who was thought to be possessed. Her husband accompanied her, and he alone entered with her into the courtyard of the presbytery, whither M. Vianney followed them. M. Oriol and a great number of strangers were standing at the gate. The moment the woman came out again, now free and quite happy, "a noise was heard in the yard resembling that of branches of trees being violently broken. The crash was such that the witnesses were terrified. But," adds M. Oriol, "when I went to the presbytery after night prayers, I saw that the elder-trees were unhurt."¹

Another wretched woman could not be got into the church, so great was her resistance and the aversion she showed for M. Vianney. The saint was therefore asked to come to the house where she was lodging, but at a moment when she was not at home. He awaited her return in another room. Needless to add, the possessed woman was in complete ignorance of his presence. Suddenly, as she was approaching the house, she was seized with violent convulsions: "He is not far away, the *calotin*!" she shrieked. In her favour also the saint was able to exercise his healing power.

A truly amazing incident happened one afternoon—January 23, 1840—in the very confessional of M. Vianney. A woman from the neighbourhood of Puy-en-Velay, and

¹ *Procès apostolique ne pereant*, p. 1108.

about whom nothing out of the ordinary could be noticed, had just knelt down at the feet of the saint. At that moment some ten persons, among whom were Marie Boyat and Geneviève Filliat, of Ars, were standing in a group near the chapel of St John the Baptist, awaiting their turn to go to confession: though they saw nothing, they could thus hear everything. M. Vianney repeatedly urged the woman to begin the avowal of her sins, but she persisted in a sullen silence. All of a sudden a loud, strident voice was heard:

"I have committed only one sin, and I share its beautiful fruit with all those who wish for it. Raise thy hand and absolve me. Ah! it does happen at times that thou raisest it for me; for I am often close to thee in the confessional."

"*Tu quis es?* (Who art thou?)" the saint asked.

"*Magister caput* (The Master, the Chief)," the devil replied—then proceeding in French, he exclaimed: "Ah! black toad, how thou tormentest me! Thou art always talking about going away. Why dost thou not do so? There are black toads that torture me less than thou."

"I shall write to the bishop to make thee go out of this woman."

"Yes, but I shall cause thy hand so to tremble that thou shalt be unable to write. I shall certainly get thee, *va!* I have defeated those that were stronger than thou. And thou, thou art not yet dead. Without that . . . (here he used a word of repulsive coarseness to designate our Lady) who is up above, we should have thee for certain; but she protects thee, together with that great dragon (St Michael), who is at the door of thy church. . . . Say, why dost thou get up so early? Thou disobeyest *purple robe* (the bishop). Why dost thou preach so simply? That also makes thee pass for an ignorant man. Why not preach in the big style, as they do in the towns?"¹

These diabolical invectives lasted for several minutes; they were aimed in turn against Mgr. Devie, Bishop of Belley, Mgr. de Bonald, Bishop of Le Puy, who was about to become Archbishop of Lyons; certain categories of priests and finally, once more against the Curé d'Ars himself. Now

¹ This part of the dialogue is taken from the account of Catherine Lassagne (*Petit mémoire*, troisième rédaction, p. 95).

the evil spirit, who discovered matter for blame in all the above mentioned, was yet compelled to proclaim the irreproachable virtue of the servant of God, even as he had been forced to do once upon a time in the Gospel, with regard to the person of our Lord.

The Curé d'Ars, whose eye could penetrate into hidden things, showed himself at all times most severe towards those who dabbled in occultism or spiritualism. "What causes tables to turn and to speak?" some people one day asked a possessed woman who stood in the village square insulting the passers-by. "It is I," answered the woman, whom an evil spirit tormented . . . "all that is my work." The Curé d'Ars judged that on that day the father of lies had spoken the truth.

Comte Jules de Maubou, who owned estates in the Beaujolais, near Villefranche, but who spent part of the year in Paris, loved to visit M. Vianney, for he was the Curé's penitent and his friend.

It was about 1850. Now at that period—history ever repeats itself—spirits, mediums, and table-turning were the fashion. Parisian society, even families that had remained true to their faith and religious practices, freely indulged in what was considered to be a fashionable amusement. One day M. de Maubou was invited to an evening party at the house of a relative, where he took part in divers experiments: the usual phenomena took place under his eyes: the table lifted itself and delivered its answers by striking the floor.

Two days later the Count, having returned to the Beaujolais, set out for Ars, rejoicing at the thought of once more seeing his venerated and holy director. At the moment of the nobleman's arrival M. Vianney just happened to be standing on the threshold of his church. With a smile on his face and outstretched hand M. de Maubou ran towards his friend. But what a surprise! Without even returning his greeting, the Curé d'Ars stopped him and spoke to him in sad and severe accents.

"Jules, stop! The day before yesterday you had dealings with the devil. Come to confession!"

The young Count readily complied, and promised never again to indulge in a pastime thus judged and condemned.

Some time after this incident the Count returned to Paris, when he found himself in another salon. He was asked this time also to assist in making a table turn. But he remembered his promise, and remained inflexible in his refusal. The guests decided to proceed with the experiment, leaving the scrupulous nobleman alone in a corner. Meanwhile M. de Maubou made internal protestations of his utter abhorrence of all such games. So great and so unforeseen was the resistance of the table that the medium could not help saying: "I cannot understand this; there must be a superior power present which paralyzes our action!"¹

At about the same period M. Charles de Montluisant, then a young captain, who eventually attained to the rank of a general of division and died in his château of Marsanne (Drôme), was in a position to satisfy himself whether M. Vianney had any knowledge of the mysteries of the unseen world. Having heard people talking of the marvelous happenings at Ars he resolved, together with three brother officers, to make a searching inquiry into the accuracy of these reports. On the way to Ars the friends agreed that they should each of them ask M. Vianney a question. M. de Montluisant, however, bluntly declared that since "he had nothing to tell him he would tell him nothing."

At the hour of the interview he walked into the sacristy behind his friends, determined to remain dumb, when one of them introduced him at once to the Curé with the words: "M. le Curé, this is M. de Montluisant, a young officer with a future, who would like to ask you something." Thus taken by surprise, he decided to face the situation and ask something or other at random: "Come now, M. le Curé, those tales of diabolical trickeries which circulate in connection with your name, they are not true, are they? They are all imagination, are they not?" M. Vianney looked his interlocutor straight in the face, and his answer came, short

¹ This narrative is based in its entirety upon some notes written on May 16, 1922, at the presbytery of Ars, by M. de Fréminville, of Bourg, a grand-nephew of M. de Maubou. M. de Fréminville has authorized the present writer to make use of his own name and that of his great-uncle.

and incisive: "O my friend, you know something about it right enough. . . . Had you not done what you did, you would not have succeeded in ridding yourself of *it*." Non-plussed by this reply, M. de Montluisant was unable to utter a word, to the astonishment of his companions.

On the return journey he must needs explain. Either the Curé d'Ars had spoken at random, or . . . What had happened? The officer had to own that whilst he was pursuing his studies in Paris, he had become affiliated to a certain group which, under the guise of philanthropy, was in reality an association of spiritualists.

"One day," he related, "as I was returning to my room, I experienced a feeling that I was not alone. Perturbed by so strange a sensation, I looked and searched everywhere. There was nothing to be seen. The next day the same thing happened. Moreover, it seemed to me as if an unseen hand were seeking to strangle me. . . . I had the faith. I went to fetch some holy water at Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, my parish church. I sprinkled every nook and corner of my room. From that moment every impression of a super-sensible presence vanished. After that I never again attended a séance. I doubt not that this is the incident, now long past, to which the Curé d'Ars was alluding." No comment was offered and the officers hastily changed the subject.¹

As the Curé d'Ars advanced in years these diabolical vexations decreased both in frequency and in intensity. The evil spirit, far from succeeding in disheartening that heroic soul, was himself the first to lose heart. By degrees he gave up the contest, or more accurately, it was the will of God that an existence so beautiful, so pure, apparently so calm and yet so much tried, should end in profound peace.

From 1845 until the day of his death, M. Vianney was hardly ever disturbed by the devil at night. Nevertheless, sleep had become wellnigh impossible, for, instead of the *grappin*, an obstinate cough now kept him awake. For all that he refused to give up his interminable sittings in the confessional. He used to say: "So long as I can get an

¹ The experience of the officer is recorded in the archives of the presbytery at Ars. General de Montluisant died a pious death on May 11, 1894.

hour's, or even half an hour's, sleep during the day, I am fit to resume my work."¹ That hour, or half-hour, he spent in his room, immediately after his midday meal. He stretched himself on his straw mattress and tried to sleep. Now this was the moment which the devil occasionally chose, even now, to tease him.

Mme. Marie de Lamartine, of Grau-de-Roi, *département* of the Gard, was one day waiting, with M. Pagès, for the moment when M. Vianney would come out of the presbytery. It was about one o'clock in the afternoon. "Suddenly," she relates, "we heard the sound of shouts and groans." "That is the devil," M. Pagès informed me, "who is playing his pranks, and who is now being put in his place by the good Curé."²

At last the evil one kept away for good, and M. Vianney felt no regrets at parting with a comrade of that ilk. He did not torment him in his agony as he has tormented other saints. Even before the close of his earthly life the Curé d'Ars had inflicted on Satan a decisive defeat.

¹ Abbé Toccanier, *Procès apostolique ne pereant*, p. 315.

² Letter of September 18, 1907 (archives of the presbytery of Ars).