

Cideville Poltergeist

This mid-nineteenth century French case was documented in a court action brought by a shepherd against a parish priest who, he claimed, had falsely accused him of causing certain disturbances in the priest's house. The priest's pupils were the more obvious culprits, but some witnesses insisted that the phenomena could not have been caused by them.

The case is interesting for the high degree of responsiveness demonstrated by the source of the raps, which accurately counted out answers to questions put to it.

The text given here is an article on the case by Andrew Lang (Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research 18, 1903-4, pp. 454-463).

The Poltergeist at Cideville, by Andrew Lang

In the history of the Poltergeist, the case of the Presbytère of Cideville (1850-1851) is best known through Mr. Dale Owen's *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World* (London, 1861, pp. 195-203). The author cited M. de Mirville's *Fragment d'un Ouvrage Inédit*, a pamphlet which I have failed to procure. By the kindness of the Marquis d'Eguilles—a descendant of the French envoy who accompanied Prince Charles from Edinburgh to Derby and Culloden—the Society has received an authenticated copy of the original documents of what was practically a trial for witchcraft before the Juge de Paix of Yerville in 1851. To the present Juge de Paix we owe the privilege of having the records viewed and transcribed.

It will be remarked that Mr. Dale Owen omitted the negative evidence, and certain rulings of the court, unfavourable to the innocence of the alleged sorcerer, who appeared as plaintiff in a case of libel against M. Tinel, Curé of Cideville. Public judicial proceedings began on January 7th, 1851, before M. Folloppe, Juge de Paix. Thorel, a shepherd swain, summoned M. Tinel for defamation of character. M. Tinel had described various phenomena of the usual sort, invading his house, and persecuting two boys, his pupils.

Thus, according to [M. Tinel], sharp and distinct raps would be heard behind the wainscot of his apartments ; a voice, responding to the summons of two young children, his pupils, would converse with them, make promises or threats, and sing various airs, notably that of Maître Corbeau. Now shovels and tongs, having got tired of the hearth, would give themselves up to wild dances, afterwards returning quietly to resume their accustomed places; now tables and chairs would stamp and spin round, running all over his house as if they were playing at prisoner's base or hide-and-seek, never ceasing from their gambols until covered with perspiration and worn out with fatigue. Sometimes knives lying on a table would be hurled by some occult and irresistible force, and bury themselves deep in the walls. Sometimes penknives or inkstands would be suddenly seized with a desire to frolic, and, dashing against the windows of the presbytery, would break the panes, afterwards returning ashamed to ask the forgiveness of their young owners. Sometimes, finally, a distinctly visible hand belonging to some invisible body would inflict the most prodigious blows on the cheeks of the two young acolytes." (From the charge brought by Thorel against Tinel.)

[The phenomena] included a black hand which slapped one of the boys. He accused Thorel of producing these phenomena, declared that Thorel knelt and begged his pardon, and he induced Pain, a sheep farmer, to discharge Thorel. He also beat Thorel with a stick "to the effusion of blood." Tinel replied that he only charged Thorel with "arrogating to himself the quality of sorcerer," and that he struck Thorel in self-defence.

The judge adjourned the case to January 28th, 1851, for evidence to be collected.

The first witness for the plaintiff, Bézuel, spoke to much hearsay matter. He had visited M. Tinel's house, in his absence, M. Tinel inviting him to stay for a fortnight. He did not, but visiting the place with M. Eobert de Saint Victor (brother of Paul de Saint Victor ?), he witnessed nothing unusual.

Andrieu, the next witness, had heard of the affair from Tinel, and other hearsay matter. He had, however, heard raps produced at the order of the younger pupil, whom he placed "in a position in which he could not produce any noise by himself." He heard a M. Fontaine call from the window (he himself being in the garden) that he had caught the boy cheating. The boy bellowed that he had not cheated, and offered to stand on the window sill, where he could not touch a table which, according to Fontaine, he had moved in a normal way.

Masson, a gendarme, was told that objects flew about and broke the windows. He himself saw nothing occur during an hour and a half of observation.

Bourrienne, also a gendarme, had the same negative experience. Stanislas Huet had only hearsay matter.

Gustave Lemonnier, the younger of M. Tinel's pupils, aged twelve, told his story. Raps began, when he was alone, on November 26th, and continued. All sorts of objects flew about. A black hand struck the witness. He was haunted by a spectre in a blouse. A child's voice was heard by him. He did not ask to be allowed to go home. Meeting Thorel, when with Tinel, he recognised in Thorel the spectre in the blouse. The boy spoke about the incident of Fontaine's accusation of cheating.

Bunel, aged fourteen, the other pupil, corroborated Lemonnier, who "lost consciousness" and "had a nervous attack" after meeting Thorel. The witness showed a black eye, caused by a stamping iron which flew at his face. He attested many eccentric movements of objects.

Thorel then asked that nine questions, partly as to Fontaine, might be put to witness.

The Judge disallowed them as "contrary to the dignity of justice," and adjourned the court.

The next witness, M. de Bagneux, spoke to M. Tinel's anxiety to have the affair investigated. He himself, alone with the boy, heard "the noise" beat several tunes : he could not "discover the cause."

Auguste Huet, the next witness, by his request had raps struck under his fingers on a table. He was "convinced that it was not the boy who did it, nor any of the people of the house." The boy's arms were folded at the time. A tune was rapped out by his request.

Maxime Henry, as to the phenomena, spoke only from hearsay.

Cheval spoke to the scene in which Thorel knelt to Tinel, and was beaten by him. He mentioned, on hearsay, that Thorel had boasted of his sorceries, and, by way of an evidence, had caused a person to fall down whenever he struck a blow against his hut. He then said that he had not seen but heard of the kneeling and beating incident. But he did see the tongs and shovel at the house of M. Tinel "leave the hearth and go into the middle of the room." They were put back, and rushed out again. "My eyes were fixed on them to see what moved them, but I saw nothing at all." (This witness was a farmer, aged forty.) He saw "a stocking dart like a thunderbolt from beside the bed on which the children were sleeping, to the opposite end of the room." Lying in bed with the boys, his hands on their hands, and his feet on their feet, he "saw the coverlet dart away from the bed."

Leroux, Curé of Saussay, aged thirty, said:

I have to add that when at the Presbytery of Cideville, I saw things which I have been unable to explain to myself. I saw a hammer, moved by some invisible force, leave the spot where it lay and fall in the middle of the room without making more noise than if a hand had gently laid it down; a piece of bread lying on the table darted under the table; and we being placed as we were, it was impossible that any of us could have thrown it in that way.

I also saw, after the Curé of Cideville and I had shaved, all the things we had used for the purpose placed as if by hand on the floor; the young pensionnaire of M. Tinel having called our attention to this, M. Tinel and I went upstairs to assure ourselves of the fact. Perhaps the child had had time to do this; but on coming away again, we had scarcely descended six steps of the stairs when the child told us that everything had been put back in its place. I went back alone, and found everything was, in fact, in its place, with the exception of the mirror, and I am certain that the child could not have put everything back in its place in that way in so short a time. It seems to me inexplicable.

Since that I have heard noises at the Presbytery at Cideville. I took every precaution in listening to them, even placing myself under the table to make sure that the children could do nothing, and yet I heard noises, which seemed to me, however, to come more especially from the wainscot. I said in connection with this that the noises seemed to me so extraordinary that I would vouch for them with my blood. I noticed that M. Tinel seemed to be somewhat exasperated at these noises and at their persistence, especially on several nights during which I slept with him, when he woke up frightened about it all.

The Judge disallowed a question to this witness, with the usual formula. Much frivolous hearsay evidence followed, and need not be repeated. Somebody had heard somebody say that M. Tinel said that the two boys made the noises.

For the defence M. de Mirville, aged forty-eight, was called, and said:

Last Wednesday I went to the Presbytery of Cideville and said to the 'cause', "When you wish to reply affirmatively

rap once; when you wish to reply negatively rap twice.” Immediately a rap was heard. “Then you will be able to tell me how many letters there are in my name ?” Eight raps were heard, the last more distinct than the others, apparently to make one understand that it was the last. “My baptismal name now,” Reply, five raps. “And now my fore-name which figures on the register of the Civil List, and which no one has hitherto called me by.” Immediately, seven raps; “and the names of my children, first the eldest?” Five raps, -quite correct, she is called Aline. “That of the youngest?” Nine raps, a mistake, immediately rectified, for seven raps were struck. She is called Blanche.

“Now let us pass to my age; strike as many raps as I have years.” Instantly the raps succeeded each other with such rapidity that I was obliged to stop them in order to count them, and I demanded more slowness; forty-eight raps were then heard very distinctly, the forty-eighth being more accentuated than the others. “That is not all. How many months do you reckon between the first of January of this year, and the moment I shall be forty-nine ?” Three very loud raps and one faint one followed. “What does the faint one mean? probably half a month?” One rap.

“Good! but it is not finished. How many days now between that half month and my birthday ?” Nine raps, the last being more accentuated. Perfectly correct, I shall be forty-nine on the 24th of April of this year... “Let us pass on to the place of my abode. How many letters are there in its name?” Eight raps; “and in the name of my Commune? Be careful not to make the usual mistake.” Ten raps were heard. Now I live in the Commune of Gomerville, the name of which is often written with two m's, a mistake not made by the ‘cause’. It was demonstrated to me by this, that I had to do with an old acquaintance – I hope not a friend.

“Let us pass to music; you are said to be a musician, the other day you sang the first part of Rossini's Stabat, they say; since you know the first part you ought to know the second part, the bass part Pro peccatis suae gentis; let me hear it.” Instantly the mysterious agent rapped the rhythm of the first two bars correctly enough, but in the third committed an irregularity which slightly spoiled the rhythm. On my remarking this, it began again, corrected the mistake, and the passage was recognisable. Two or three popular airs, such as, J'ai du bon Tabac, Maître Corbeau, etc... were articulated rapidly and without any mistake. The other pieces from the Italian répertoire which I demanded, were perfectly unknown to it.

“Come,” I said to it, “you are a poor dilettante. Now follow me if you can.” I then hummed a waltz from Guillaume Tell. It listened at first without doing anything; then followed me exactly while I sang it; and several times during the morning, when we were no longer thinking of it, it came back to the same piece and tried to execute it alone. The pupils, while this was going on, had not discontinued their work; I don't think the Curé came into the room during the whole time, but I must admit I did not attach much importance to this point. I have said that I was not a witness to material facts, but I must add that one of the children said to me, “Look, Sir, look at this desk knocking against the other”; but as the child was in front of the desk I did not attach much importance to this fact, not that I believed him to be the cause of it. My not mentioning this at first was because I wished to observe the most scrupulous exactitude.

[To the interpellation of the defendant with a view to knowing whether the witness believed the Curé of Cideville might be the author of these facts, he replied]: I should be much surprised if any one within these walls could seriously believe that. I do not believe it possible to produce these phenomena by natural means, and the cause must be supernatural. By supernatural causes I mean an intelligent force surpassing that of man and of nature.

[The witness being interpellated by the plaintiff with a view to knowing if he thought these phenomena could be produced by a poor shepherd unable to read or write, replied], I do not think he could produce them by himself, but he might with the assistance of an occult and supernatural cause. I am the author of one work only, entitled, Les peuples et les Savants en matière de religion. [The witness was interpellated as to whether he had received a visit from the Curé of Cideville on the 8th day of January last, when the latter was seen in company with another priest at the landing stage of Nointot, 12 kilometres (7 miles) from Gromerville. He replied], I never saw the Curé of Cideville before Wednesday last, and I was completely ignorant of the existence of a Commune of the name of Cideville.

Madame de Saint Victor, aged fifty-six, said:

Being at the Presbytery I heard some ‘cause’ which was unknown to me make raps intelligently. The Angélus was ringing and I said to the ‘cause’, “Rap the tune of the Angélus,” and the tune was rapped. I also heard the tune of Maître Corbeau rapped out and that of Drinn Drinn, quite perfectly. I think it was on the 8th December before mass at Cideville that I saw the child, who said he had received a slap from an invisible hand. The same day after Vespers, when I was at the Presbytery of Cideville standing quite apart from the other people there, I felt an invisible force seize me by the mantle and give me a vigorous shake.

The same day also I saw three persons sitting on a small table in the Presbytery and it moved along the floor in spite of the efforts of two people to hold it back. Several people were there, amongst others my femme de chambre, but I cannot precisely say who the others were. Another day I saw the child sitting on a chair with his feet off the ground and his back not leaning on the chairback, yet the chair rocked with a movement which the child could not have given it, ending with the chair falling in one direction and the boy in another. The child was much frightened at this.

A week ago when I was alone with the children I saw the two desks at which they were working fall over and the table on the top of them. The same day I took the children some St. Benoist medals in which I had faith, and every time the medals were placed on the desks not the least sound was produced there, the noise then being heard behind me in the wall cupboard; but as soon as the medals were withdrawn from the desks the noise was heard again in the desks.

The same day the noise rapped out the tune of Maître Corbeau, and on my remarking, "Do you know nothing but that, then?" it sang the air of Au clair de la lune, and that of J'ai du bon Tabac. Yesterday, again, I saw a candlestick leave the chimneypiece in the kitchen and go and hit the back of my femme de chambre, and a key lying on the table struck the child's ear. I must say that I cannot tell precisely where the key was, as I did not see it start on its flight, but only saw it arrive. I was not frightened, only surprised. My son was with me when I heard the Angélus as well as the two children and the Curé, but during the other airs I was alone with the children. It was not possible for the children to do these things; I watched their feet and their hands, and could see all their movements. I think the shepherd Thorel could not have done them unless he had made a compact with the devil; for it seemed to me there was something diabolical in it all.

M. Eobert de St. Victor, aged twenty-three, said :

I was a witness at the Presbytery of Cideville of things I cannot explain to myself. I heard a 'cause' unknown to me make raps, particularly rapping the tune Maître Corbeau, and the rhythm of the Angélus. I asked this 'cause' to rap Rossini's Stabat Mater – the tune was exactly rendered. A week ago I went again to the Presbytery, and was alone with the children and the old servant maid I placed one of the children in each of the windows of the room upstairs, I being outside, but in a position to observe all their movements in the position they were placed in; besides, they could not have moved much without risk of falling, and I then heard raps struck in the room, similar to those of a mallet. I went up to the room and I saw one of the children's desks coming towards me, with no visible force to push it; however, I did not see it at the moment of its starting. I am convinced that the children had nothing to do with this, since they were still standing in the windows.

Being one day at the Presbytery with the Mayor, I heard several loud blows such as the children could not have produced. I put my hand and ear against the wainscot, and very distinctly felt the vibrations and the place where the blows were struck. I was present several times at the scenes at the Presbytery. It seems to me impossible that the Curé could have produced them. Often he was not in the Presbytery, and when he was there he was seated beside me. [The witness being interpellated as to whether he thought it possible that the shepherd was the author of these phenomena, replied], No, I do not even know this shepherd.

The fourth witness, Bouffay, said :

Being at the Presbytery of Cideville, I saw M. Tinel put his hand lightly on Thorel's shoulder, saying, "You have spoken very imprudently; I should not be surprised if you know something about what is happening at the Presbytery," and the child then said, "I know this man to be the one who has been following me about for a fortnight." M. Tinel told Thorel to go on his knees and ask the child's pardon. Thorel fell on his knees and begged pardon, saying, "I don't know what for." While on his knees, Thorel put out his hand as if with the intention of taking hold of the child's blouse in diabolical mischief.

I know nothing of the facts referred for proof, that is, nothing personally, only from hearsay. I went several times to the Presbytery at Cideville; the first time the noise was continual in those rooms only where the children were, both in the church and at the Presbytery. The 'noise' was intelligent and obedient only on this first visit. The noise was sometimes so loud that once when I was lying in the same room with the children I thought the ceiling would come down. When day came the idea occurred to us of knocking nails in the spot where there was rapping; and a very plaintive voice was heard, the sounds of which were unintelligible.

I also saw, both upstairs and downstairs, the perfectly isolated table move without any force that I could see to cause the movement. On the second visit I scarcely saw anything. On the third visit I saw pretty much the same things as on the first. I noticed that the children were perfectly motionless when the sound was produced, so could not have made

it themselves. I heard it when the Curé was absent from the Presbytery as well as in his presence. It was impossible that either he or the children should have had anything to do with the noise, because it was too loud. I forgot to say that when the child heard a voice begging his pardon, we all fell on our knees and prayed God to forgive those who were persecuting us.

[Being interpellated by the plaintiff as to whether the witness thought the shepherd could have produced these phenomena, he replied that he did not know the shepherd's capabilities. Being interpellated by the defendant, the witness said that when he returned with M. Tinel and the children from the house of one of the inhabitants of the Commune, where they had slept on account of the noises at the Presbytery, just as the children were going up to their room to ascertain if all was at an end, he saw a phantom-like vapour go with great rapidity through the kitchen door towards the room where the children were. When the shepherd Thorel came to the Presbytery and threw himself on his knees to M. Tinel he said he had come to fetch an organ.]

The sixth witness, Bréard, said :

During December last I passed two nights at the Presbytery of Cideville. On the first I heard an irritating noise during part of the night which prevented my sleeping. The next morning at breakfast, being at table in company with M. Tinel and the Abbé Bouffay, I heard an alarming knock struck on the floor beneath the table. I am certain that it was neither the children nor M. Tinel who did this, any more than the shepherd, whom I do not know. When I had returned to Rouen, I received a letter from M. Tinel asking me to get M. Pressier, professor of physics, to come and look into the phenomena which were being produced at the Presbytery of Cideville. I saw M. Pressier, but he could not come.

I cite this witness to show that M. Tinel appealed to science, and that he appealed in vain!

Evidence to threats by Thorel against Tinel, in the menacing style of the Drummer of Tedworth, was given by a hearer of the same, Varin, aged thirty-seven, grocer; by Le Tellier, twenty-seven, farrier; Grenet, aged fourteen; Foulogne, aged forty-eight; du Forestel, a weaver, aged thirty-seven, and others.

Judgment was pronounced on February 15th, 1851, after hearing counsel. The learned judge said, "The most clear result of all the evidence is that the cause [i.e. of the extraordinary events at the Presbytery of Cideville] remains unknown."

As the plaintiff had himself spread the report that he caused the occurrences, and had shown contrition on two occasions, the defendant had done him no technical wrong. In thumping the plaintiff, who tried to handle him, the defendant acted in legitimate self-defence. Thorel was nonsuited, and had to pay about £6 in costs.

Dale Owen quotes de Mirville to the effect that the boys were removed to another Presbytère, behaved well, and were not attended by the Poltergeist, "as far as appears."

The experienced reader will see that, in the seventeenth century, Thorel would have been burned, on the "spectral evidence" of the appearances to the younger boy. The sceptic will be sure that the boys caused all the trouble because they were tired of staying with M. Tinel. The claim of Fontaine to have caught the younger boy in the act of cheating will be accepted, and all the affirmative evidence will be dismissed in the usual way. The present writer cannot form a conjecture as to how the things were done, or made to appear to be done, but they are the ancient traditional things, *quae semper, quae ubique, quae ab omnibus*. They are attested on oath by persons of various ranks, ages, and education, and the evidence is not remote from the time of the events.

My one wish is that somebody would find a boy or girl who will, at least, attempt to produce the phenomena in the presence of a committee of the Society. If the things can be done so easily, will no young person do them?

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