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# THE DEVIL IN THE SAINT

BY HARRY SODERMAN

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**O**F ALL THE cases I came in touch with when I was in the French police, I think that few were as peculiar as that of Angèle Laval, queen of anonymous letter writers, saint and devil.

The story goes back to 1917 when France was struggling in the World War. But reverberation from the battle front hardly disturbed the calm life of Tulle, a small town in southern France and seat of a county government. There in this quiet little village something happened which was destined to develop into one of the most interesting cases in the history of criminology. One day at the end of 1917 some of the foremost citizens of the town, most of them government officials, received anonymous letters through the mail. The letters told of old and carefully buried stories of a scandalous nature. One individual learned that his grandfather had been a notorious swindler and forger; another received the information that his grandmother had had a child before she married; a third that one of his cousins had died in the penitentiary fifty years before. The contents showed that the writer was well informed about the affairs of the town. But the recipients of this first crop of letters showed no great willingness to aid an investigation, and most of them simply denied that they had received them.

These first "revelations" were soon followed by others. The letters now began to deal with happenings of a more recent date. They had, however, still the same peculiarity. They were addressed chiefly to government officials or their wives. The wives of the town were informed that their husbands while serving their country did not take their vows of alliance too seriously. The sons of the town, who were facing death in the dirt of the trenches, were informed that their wives used their absence to indulge in revolting orgies and that their

children had only the name in common with their fathers.

There were hundreds of theories and speculations about the author of the letters; the whole county was buzzing with rumors. One thing seemed sure: the writer must have been affiliated in some way with the county government, as most of the victims belonged to this service. This latter theory became a certainty when a certain M. Martin, who was soon to become governor of the province in which Tulle was located, received, while he still was lieutenant governor in Nancy, a number of the most terrible letters of all. His appointment was at this time still a secret, except to high officials.

In the beginning the letters came through the mail. The sender, however, probably felt that the mailboxes would be carefully watched and began to distribute them in other ways. They would be found on the sidewalks of little-frequented streets, and the innocent finders — in the kindness of their hearts — would carry them to the addresses indicated on the envelopes.

One day a young hoodlum found on a bench in the city park a long list of prominent citizens, with the names of their alleged mistresses — and of their wives, with their alleged lovers. The youthful scoundrel, feeling that he should make public these facts, pasted the list on the notice board at the city hall. All afternoon the population of the town swarmed before the board, before the police discovered the list and destroyed it.

A clergyman of the town, taking his afternoon walk, found on the sidewalk at a drugstore a letter addressed to the druggist. The first impulse of the worthy priest was to put down the letter again, because the druggist was well known as a leader of the anticlerical movement in the town. A long life consecrated to the

service of mankind had, however, taught him to be obliging, and with a jovial smile he entered the drugstore and handed over the letter. He would show this enemy of the clergy that a servant of God was not mean and could do anyone a service.

The druggist was moved by this unexpected service and invited the clergyman to sit down over a glass. The latter, however, was polite and insisted that the druggist should first read the letter, which might be important. The druggist opened it, eyed the few lines, and turned purple. With a wild roar he plunged at the bewildered clergyman, who was too astonished to defend himself. He received a thorough beating before the neighbors, alarmed by his cries of agony and by the crashing of bottles smashed in the struggle, hastened to part the antagonists. The letter had informed the druggist that the clergyman was guilty of illicit relations with the druggist's wife!

#### BEGINNING THE HUNT

**T**HIS WAS ALL, in a sense, comical. But there were many tragic results. Divorces and scandalous incidents of all kinds were daily occurrences in the horror-ridden town of Tulle. The very air was thick with suspicion and malevolence. The wretched people whom the public suspected of authorship of the letters were driven to despair.

The clerk of the county government was told that his wife was rumored to be at the source of the letters. He became insane, was confined in a lunatic asylum and died shortly afterwards. Some months later, the teller of a small bank in the town likewise lost his mind because of the same sort of suspicion.

The letters continued to flood the town. In 1921 one of the executives of the county government, by name Jean Laval, and several of his colleagues made a formal appeal to the district attorney to investigate the whole thing. The latter appointed an assistant, M. Richard, to investigate. With the appointment of Richard, who was a very able man, the story took a new turn. It was high time, for the Tulle mystery was already famed throughout Europe.

One of Richard's very few clues was the fact that a certain Monsieur Moury, also an executive of the county government, was the only

man who had been spared by the anonymous writer. Moury had never received a letter. He had recently married a stenographer in his office, a girl by the name of Fioux, daughter of the owner of a hardware store in Tulle. If on some rare occasion the anonymous writer had had a word of praise for someone, it was inevitably Moury or his wife. This was somewhat suspicious, and the police kept a discreet eye on the couple. In time the public got wind of the suspicion, and the life of the Mourys became unendurable. Furthermore, the citizens grew so unruly that, when the clerk who had died in the asylum was buried, a large police detachment was needed to guard Fioux's store against the rage of the people.

Richard, however, was soon convinced that the Mourys were absolutely innocent. He himself had received several letters which showed that the writer was familiar with matters in his office, things of which neither Moury nor his wife could possibly have knowledge. The couple also had been traveling for some time, and meanwhile the letters continued to arrive as usual.

#### THE END OF THE TRAIL

**I**NVESTIGATIONS were now at a standstill; the letters spread like a poisonous tide over the wretched town, bringing chaos and misery with them; the police were powerless. It was already 1924. For seven years the scourge had lasted. Then, quite by accident, came the solution of the mystery.

I have already mentioned that the first person to ask for the aid of the district attorney was Jean Laval. He had a sister, Angèle, who had been a stenographer in Moury's office when the latter was a bachelor. Now Jean Laval, vitally interested in the progress of the investigation, often conferred with Richard about it. One day he told the latter that a certain Mademoiselle Leygnac had received a highly obscene letter. When Richard inquired further about it, Laval told him that he had heard it from his sister Angèle, who was a good friend of the girl Leygnac. This happened on a Wednesday.

Saturday, about noon, Richard by chance saw Mlle. Leygnac in the street and inquired about the letter. He told her that he had learned of it Wednesday from Laval, who had it from his sister.

But, Mlle. Leygnac exclaimed, she had not seen or spoken to Angèle Laval before Friday!

Everything depended on whether Angèle Laval could explain the fact that she knew of the existence of this letter on Wednesday. She was immediately questioned. She denied everything.

Richard sent some of the anonymous letters to Dr. Edmond Locard, then my chief, head of the laboratory of the police department in Lyons and world-famous criminologist. I think we got about three hundred letters to examine, although the entire number of anonymous letters received in Tulle would have been reckoned in thousands. With the letters came standards of comparison from Angèle Laval and her mother, with whom she lived. We scrutinized the letters closely, but they were all written to imitate printed letters, and it was found that new standards, in the same styles of writing but obtained by dictation, were necessary. Locard himself went down to Tulle, and Angèle Laval was summoned one morning to the detective division to take this dictation.

Angèle Laval was at this time about thirty years old, tall and rather thin, of a dark complexion, and with large, dark, intelligent eyes. She was very nervous and had two hysterical fits during the dictation. She consented to write printed letters, but the first line took her about ten minutes, and she altered and re-touched every letter in such a manner that the page was full of inkstains. Locard then calmly told her that she was to write several large pages. After this she ceased altering the letters, and in the next line wrote a "y" which looked like a "v" with a long tail at the base, a characteristic of the anonymous letters. She also wrote "g" in a very peculiar manner, also characteristic of the letters. The identification was then already certain, but, to the astonishment of Locard, Mlle. Laval had already begun to develop a new style on the second line. She speedily perfected this new style and continued to fill page after page with it. In the afternoon, however, she grew tired and at the end of the sixth large page she could not control herself any more. She fell back into a style absolutely identical with that of the anonymous letters. The examination was ended.

Among the letters were a few in ordinary handwriting. Locard was able to show that they

were written by Angèle Laval's mother.

Now there was enough evidence to open a trial, and both daughter and mother were summoned before the court of Tulle to answer for their deeds. But the unholy affair was first to have another victim. Angèle and her mother decided to end their lives and went to a neighboring lake. Mme. Laval jumped first and immediately drowned. Angèle hesitated for a moment, then followed her mother, but some workmen managed to save her.

She was examined by psychiatrists, who found her fully responsible for her actions, although of a very nervous disposition. In due time she was convicted, sentenced to two months of imprisonment, and fined five hundred francs. She appealed, but the decision was upheld by the highest court of France.

#### ANONYMOGRAPHIA

ANGÈLE LAVAL has since been the object of much speculation. She was a very pure specimen of the type of human being for which Locard has created the name "anonymograph." All writers of anonymous letters are not anonymographs. The difference between an ordinary writer of an anonymous letter and an anonymograph is that the former writes to attain some definite end, while the latter writes for no rational reason, only for the sadistic kick it affords him. In the life of the first type, it happens perhaps once that he writes such a letter, for reasons of jealousy or revenge or for some similar motive. In the life of the latter anonymous letters constitute an important element, and he writes them in hundreds and thousands.

An anonymograph is certainly never a normal being. Experience shows he is generally a hysterical and degenerate individual. Sometimes his peculiarity is associated with an incipient mental illness, sometimes it is the result of addiction to alcohol or cocaine. In most cases, however, anonymographs are women, and the cause is a distorted sex life. Their letters are often of a highly immoral nature, but the writers are likely to be well educated and outwardly pure as snow. Women anonymographs are reminiscent of the old French proverb: "There is nothing as dirty as the dreams of a saint."

The anonymous letters Angèle sent num-



bered several thousands, and each usually occupied at least two large pages. She was probably busy most of the time writing them. Her whole family collaborated. The mother, in any case, wrote the first letter, and other members of the family collected the necessary information. The motive was peculiar. Angèle had worked in Moury's office before he married. She and Mlle. Fioux had each determined to become Madame Moury. When Angèle lost the battle she did not, strangely enough, direct her scorn against the couple Moury but against the rest of the town.

#### THE POSTERS ON THE DOOR

ANOTHER CASE of anonymous letter writing, which occurred about the same time but in the city of Lyons itself, was very similar to the case of Angèle Laval and also attracted nationwide attention. There were present the same vague motives and the same mass manufacturing of letters, although these were chiefly directed at a single person. Finally there was also a family collaboration. In its striking contrast between the high degree of education and social position of the writer and the filthy nature of the letters, this case is fairly unique.

A high government official, M. Berthin, returned one day in February, 1925, to Lyons, after a long voyage. When he arrived at his house he discovered that a large paper, covered with insults to himself, his wife, and his daughter, was pasted on the door. He had the servant scrape it off, but after a few days a new one appeared, even more gross and insulting. The same day an anonymous letter, filthy and scandalous beyond all description, was delivered to him. It was the beginning of a long series. M. Berthin went to the district attorney, who turned the case over to Locard.

The problem was not easy to solve. We had to identify a handwriting consisting of only imitation printed letters. There was not a single similar letter to compare with. There was not a single suspect.

On the last poster there was, however, an especially vile word which consisted of single letters cut from some printed matter and pasted together. The letters were carefully loosened from the poster, and we found that they were printed also on the rear. It was not difficult to determine that they came from a

printed form used only in M. Berthin's department.

The investigation was now somewhat limited, but the field was still fairly large. By a mere chance, we got a break. The letters were by this time being sent also to M. Berthin's friends, who were informed about his character and morals in a manner which did him no credit. Among these letters was a typewritten one.

Locard immediately procured specimens from all typewriters in Berthin's department. It was not difficult to determine that the letter had been written on a machine which was in a room to which only two people had entrance. These employees were father and son, and their name was Gallard. Locard had measured the height of the second poster on the door. It is well known that a person, when he writes standing, almost always writes at the height of his eyes. In the same manner, one who pastes a poster where its place is not predetermined will put it on a level with his eyes. Discreetly we measured the height of this pair. The father was short, and the son tall. The height of the father corresponded exactly with the height of the poster.

#### THE PRINT IN THE GLUE

PECULIAR TYPES, this father and his son. The former was small, thin, and foxy. He had struggled along on a small salary and economized desperately to give the idolized son a good education. The latter was tall, very elegant, and extremely well educated. In addition to being a lawyer he was a Master of Arts and had written a book on aesthetics. He was M. Berthin's right hand, and the father was his clerk.

The anonymous letters continued, but they had now changed their tone. They were serious and dignified, and were directed to the district attorney, to the judges of the courts in Lyons, and even to the Secretary of the Interior. They defended the Gallards and tried to prove the guilt of another employee.

The police were keeping a close eye on the Gallards and especially on their visits to post offices and mailboxes. One day the father was stopped while putting a letter in a mailbox. The letter was examined. It contained an unwritten sheet of paper, but the address on the

envelope was printed in the same manner as in the previous anonymous letters. There was now certain proof that there existed a relation between the Gallards and the anonymous writer. The district attorney signed a search warrant for Gallard's apartment.

The search had an unexpected result. In a drawer there was found a collection of papers, mostly blank, except for letterheads from several official institutions. There were papers from the legislature, from the board of aldermen, from the county government, from the police commissioner and from the mayor. Some of these papers were already filled with anonymous insults and ready to be sent to different addresses. I suppose the purpose was to mislead the investigators.

The Gallards were arrested. They defended themselves vehemently but in vain. The final blow came when Locard, who had examined the poster on M. Berthin's door very carefully, found a fingerprint in the glue. It was badly blurred, but by ingenious photography it was developed enough to be identified with the right index of Jean Gallard, the son. Eleven characteristic points were common, i.e., there was one chance in 4,194,304 of a mistake. Gallard tried to explain the presence of his fingerprint on the poster in this not-very-plausible way: the daughter of Berthin, who hated him, had gone into his office and taken the paper, which very likely had been touched by Gallard. She then had written thereupon the grossest libels against herself, her mother, and her father and pasted it on the door of her house!

The ways of anonymographs are strange, and, unlikely as the explanation was, it could not be entirely discarded. But there was a logical gap in this story of Jean Gallard. If he had innocently put his finger on the paper before it was used, the fingerprint should have been *under* the layer of glue and not *over* it.

Jean Gallard and his father were convicted to two months' imprisonment and fined five hundred francs. Again the high court upheld the decision.

#### A MILITARY "ROMANCE"

THE READER may be rather startled at the light sentences which were given to Angèle Laval and the Gallards. It is a fact, however,

that no civilized country could punish them much more severely. Morally, Angèle Laval was a murderess, if there ever was one, but in the eyes of justice she was guilty only of libel. It is not as dangerous to poison with ink as with arsenic.

Our tale of poisoners in ink is not, however, complete without a still more amazing story of anonymous letter writing. The French army school of advanced horsemanship was, in the year 1834, stationed in the city of Saumur and commanded by General Baron de Morell. He was the father of a pretty girl sixteen years old.

Lieutenant La Roncière le Noury, known as "bon garçon" and a connoisseur of the weaker sex, in that year was ordered to the school in Saumur. The General liked him and invited him several times to his home, where he made the acquaintance of the General's wife and daughter. Some days after the first visit of the Lieutenant, anonymous letters, signed E. R., were received by the General, his wife, and his friends.

They spoke of the writer's love for the General's daughter. At first they were highly romantic in tone but in time they grew more and more passionate. Finally the writer declared that he would seduce the girl and described in detail how the assault would be carried out.

Late one night, the members of the General's household were aroused by the cries of Mlle. de Morell. Rushing to her room, they found her hysterical and declaring that she had been attacked and that the criminal had escaped. But she had recognized him, she said, as the Lieutenant.

Lieutenant La Roncière le Noury was immediately arrested and court-martialed. Although he vehemently and indignantly denied his guilt, the letters were declared to have been his, and he was convicted and sentenced to ten years of penal servitude. It was not until the poor Lieutenant had served a part of his term that it was discovered that Mlle. de Morell had written the letters to herself and simulated the assault! Her parents frantically hushed up the scandal, and it was never determined whether her actions were the result of hopeless love or of only a desire to make herself interesting. The Lieutenant was, of course, immediately released, but not before the devil in the saintly Mlle. de Morell had nearly finished him.

# A PAGE FOR POETS

CONDUCTED BY HENRY GODDARD LEACH

President, Poetry Society of America



## INTERSCHOLASTIC POETRY CONTEST

FIVE POETS generously acted as judges of THE FORUM'S 1935 Interscholastic Poetry Contest. They are:

Mary Borland  
Robert P. Tristram Coffin  
Roy Helton  
Edmund Wilson  
Audrey Wurdemann.

One hundred ninety-seven schools — public and private — were represented, a number which compares favorably with the 205 colleges and universities from which poems were received in our Intercollegiate Poetry Contest last spring.

The first prize, \$50, is awarded to Sonia Whitman, of the Foxcroft School, Middleburg, Virginia, for her "Water Stars."

The second prize, \$30, is awarded to N. Gordon Le Ber, of Brattleboro High School, Brattleboro, Vermont, for his "Forgotten Acres."

The third prize, \$20, is awarded to Mary Ellen Mowbray, of the Bancroft School, Worcester, Massachusetts, for her "Why?"

The following school poets receive Honorable Mention: Suzanne Patchell, Radnor High School, Wayne, Pennsylvania; Anne Phelps, Academy of the Holy Angels, Minneapolis, Minnesota; William H. Prosser, New Albany High School, New Albany, Indiana; Marion de Kay Rous, the Dalton School, New York City; Louis Stoumen, Liberty High School, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

### Water-Stars (1st Prize)

*The world is quiet, not in sleep, but  
thought,  
And all the air is stirred with silent  
dreams.  
The crowded stars are swarmed like silver  
bees,  
Beneath the bive of heaven, and the moon  
With soft, enchanted fingers pleats the sea,  
And rims with richer lace its whispering  
shores.  
I sit alone beside the living depths  
Of pensive pools among the bearded rocks,  
Whose magic stars, eternities away,  
Shatter to crystal lightning when my band*

*Disturbs the cold horizon of their realm,  
Unknown, unless in dreams or maybe  
death.*

*And now they shine in quietness again,  
And far below, the pale, deserted shells  
Appear, and glow with dim intensity,  
Like phosphorous cloud-reflections in the  
dark,  
Or wandering ghosts that watch with quiet  
eyes.*

*Perhaps, when I desert my quiet shell,  
The substance of my soul may penetrate  
The mystery that is keeping me away,  
That makes the radiant surface spoil itself  
At my material touch. Far, far below,  
The shadows of the wilful water-weeds  
Bestir themselves, expand their many  
arms,  
And sway in rhythm with the secret breeze.  
And keenly through the gloom the water-  
stars*

*From phantom skies, eternities away,  
Tremble together, with their eerie light  
Unspoiled by shadows, burning through  
the time  
That otherwise would separate our worlds;  
How weak the earth-bound stars compared  
to these.*

SONIA WHITMAN

### Forgotten Acres (2nd Prize)

*There is a road that sprawls across a field  
(What was a road but now is one with  
snow)  
And splits itself to bend about a house  
That was — the cellar-hole is all that's  
left —  
The owner went away and time moved in.*

*Black rock-ribbed mountains break the  
evenness  
Of snow-sowed acres then fuse into mist  
And disappear. No sound mars brittle  
space,  
Although, once, a brook fell in laughter on  
The bill, as if amused with its own fun,  
Like something that's forever being chased.  
(Ice caught it one cold night and stopped  
its laugh.  
But brooks know ice can't hold them quiet,  
long.)*

*There isn't anyone to plow the earth,  
This spring, and none to pick strayed  
boulders up*

*And pile the tumbled stonewalls back in  
place;  
Nor none to care where orchard wants to  
grow —  
The owner went away and time moved in.*

N. GORDON LE BER

### Why? (3rd Prize)

*Why  
Has God left the air like a quivering band  
Stretched over a brown earth;  
Flung the sun against a taut sky, and  
Driven away the winged things  
That made shadows on my book,  
When they crossed the path of lamplight?  
Why  
Has God sifted thick dust over the boney-  
suckle;  
Wrung all the mist from  
Soft, sweet evenings;  
Hidden the tiny marsky places that were  
All yellow with the pond lilies, and  
Sent doubt winding into my heart?*

MARY ELLEN MOWBRAY

## THESE YOUNGER POETS

THE WINNER of the contest, Sonia Whitman, is 16 years old. One of the judges gives her poem first place "for originality of idea, depth of thought, and 'fancy.'"

The subject matter of these juvenile verses changes with the geography. Connecticut school children are likely to write correct imitations of standard poets, with "appreciation of Wordsworth" or "apologies to Villon." In California, judging from the exhibits, they have less metrical skill but are freer from tradition. They look out of the school window and describe a flag, a eucalyptus tree, a dog, a toothache, or a parent's grief. The students of a Toledo, Ohio, high school submit a group of sonnets composed on a bridge. Chicago school children have less to say about nature and more about striking themes from their schoolbooks or moral lessons from their teachers. These youths of a congested city turn also frequently for relaxation to religious themes.

It is the schools of the South that offer not only melody but one or two whimsical examples in the vein of Gertrude Stein and the Transition Group.