The Disinterment of Venus

Clark Ashton Smith

Prior to certain highly deplorable and scandalous events in the year 1550, the vegetable garden of Perigon was situated on the southeast side of the abbey. After these events, it was removed to the northwest side, where it has remained ever since; and the former garden-site was given to weeds and briars which, by strict order of the successive abbots, no one has ever tried to eradicate or curb.

The happenings which compelled this removal of the Benedictine's turnip and carrot patches became a popular tale in Averoigne. It is hard to say how much or how little of the legend is apocryphal.

One April morning, three monks were spading lustily in the garden. Their names were Paul, Pierre and Hughes. The first was a man of ripe years, hale and robust; the second was in his early prime; the third was little more than a boy, and had but recently taken his final vows.

Being moved with an especial ardour, in which the vernal stirring of youthful sap may have played its part, Hughes proceeded to dig the loamy soil even more diligently than his comrades. The ground was almost free of stones, owing to the careful tillage of many generations of monks; but anon, through the muscular zeal with which it was wielded, the spade of Hughes encountered a hard and well-buried object of indeterminate size.

Hughes felt that this obstruction, which in all likelihood was a small boulder, should be removed for the honour of the monastery and the glory of God. Bending busily, he shovelled away the moist, blackish loam in an effort to uncover it. The task was more arduous than he had expected; and the supposed boulder began to reveal an amazing length and a quite singular formation as he bared it by degrees. Leaving their own toil, Pierre and Paul came to his assistance. Soon, through the zealous endeavours of the three, the nature of the buried object became all too manifest.

In the large pit they had now dug, the monks beheld the grimy head and torso of what was plainly a marble woman or goddess from antique years. The pale stone of shoulders and arms, tinged faintly as if with a living rose, had been scraped clean in places by their shovels; but the face and breasts were still black with heavily caked loam.

The figure stood erect, as if on a hidden pedestal. One arm was raised, caressing with a shapely hand the ripe contour of shoulder and bosom; the other, hanging idly, was still plunged in the earth. Digging deeper, the monks uncovered the full hips and rounded thighs; and finally, taking turns in the pit, whose rim was now higher than their heads, they came to the sunken pedestal,

which stood on a pavement of granite.

During the course of their excavations, the Brothers had felt a strange, powerful excitement whose cause they could hardly have explained, but which seemed to arise, like some obscure contagion, from the long-buried arms and bosom of the image. Mingled with a pious horror due to the infamous paganry and nudity of the statue, there was an unacknowledged pleasure which the three would have rebuked in themselves as vile and shameful if they had recognized it.

Fearful of chipping or scratching the marble, they wielded their spades with much chariness; and when the digging was completed and the comely feet were uncovered on their pedestal, Paul, the oldest, standing beside the image in the pit, began to wipe away with a handful of weeds and grass the maculations of dark loam that still clung to its lovely body. This task he performed with great thoroughness; and he ended by polishing the marble with the hem and sleeves of his black robe.

He and his fellows, who were not without classic learning, now saw that the figure was evidently a statue of Venus, dating no doubt from the Roman occupation of Averoigne, when certain altars to this divinity had been established by the invaders.

The vicissitudes of half-legendary time, the long dark years of inhumation, had harmed the Venus little if at all. The slight mutilation of an ear-tip half hidden by rippling curls, and the partial fracture of a shapely middle toe, merely served to add, if possible, a keener seduction to her languorous beauty.

She was exquisite as the succubi of youthful dreams, but her perfection was touched with inenarrable evil. The lines of the mature figure were fraught with a maddening luxuriousness; the lips of the full, Circean face were half pouting, half smiling with ambiguous allure. It was the masterpiece of an unknown, decadent sculptor; not the noble, maternal Venus of heroic times, but the sly and cruelly voluptuous Cytherean of dark orgies, ready for her descent into the Hollow Hill.

A forbidden enchantment, an unhallowed thralldom, seemed to flow from the flesh-pale marble and to weave itself like invisible hair about the hearts of the Brothers. With a sudden, mutual feeling of shame, they recalled their monkhood, and began to debate what should be done with the Venus, which, in a monastery garden, was somewhat misplaced. After brief discussion, Hughes went to report their find to the abbot and await his decision regarding its disposal. In the meanwhile, Paul and Pierre resumed their garden labours, stealing perhaps, occasional covert glances at the pagan goddess.

Augustin the abbot came presently into the garden, accompanied by those monks who were not, at that hour, engaged in some special task. With a severe mien, in silence, he proceeded to inspect the statue; and those with him waited reverently, not venturing to speak before their abbot had spoken.

Even the saintly Augustin, however, in spite of his age and rigorous temper, was somewhat discomfited by the peculiar witchery which seemed to emanate from the marble. Of this he gave no sign, and the natural austerity of his demeanour deepened. Curtly he ordered the bringing of ropes, and directed the raising of the Venus from her loamy bed to a standing position on the garden ground beside the hole. In this task, Paul, Pierre and Hughes were assisted by two others.

Many of the monks now pressed forward to examine the figure closely; and several were even prompted to touch it, till rebuked for this unseemly action by their superior. Certain of the elder and more austere Benedictines urged its immediate destruction, arguing that the image was a heathen abomination that defiled the abbey garden by its presence. Others, the most practical, pointed out that the Venus, being a rare and beautiful example of Roman sculpture, might well be sold at a goodly price to some rich and impious art-lover.

Augustin, though he felt that the Venus should be destroyed as an impure pagan idol, was filled with a queer and peculiar hesitation which led him to defer the necessary orders for her demolishment. It was as if the subtly wanton loveliness of the marble were pleading for clemency like a living form, with a voice half human, half divine. Averting his eyes from the white bosom, he spoke harshly, bidding the Brothers to return to their labours and devotions, and saying that the Venus could remain in the garden till arrangements were made for her ultimate disposition and removal. Pending this, he instructed one of the Brothers to bring sackcloth and drape therewith the unseemly nudity of the goddess.

The disinterment of this antique image became a source of much discussion and some perturbation and dissension amid the quiet Brotherhood at Perigon. Because of the curiosity shown by many monks, the abbot issued an injunction that no one should approach the statue, other than those whose labours might compel an involuntary proximity. He himself, at that time, was criticized by some of the deans for his laxness in not destroying the Venus immediately. During the few years that remained to him, he was to regret bitterly the remissness he had shown in this matter.

No one, however, dreamt of the grave scandals that were to ensue shortly. But, on the day following the discovery of the statue, it became manifest that some evil and disturbing influence was abroad. Heretofore, breaches of discipline had been rare among the Brothers; and cardinal offences were quite unknown; but now it seemed that a spirit of unruliness, impiety, ribaldry and wrongdoing had entered Perigon.

Paul, Pierre and Hughes were the first to undergo penance for their peccancies. A shocked dean had overheard them discussing with impure levity, certain matters that were more suitable for the conversation of worldly gallants than of monks. By way of extenuation, the three Brothers pleaded that they had been obsessed with carnal thoughts, and images ever since their exhumation of the Venus; and for this they blamed the statue, saying that a pagan witchcraft had come upon them from its flesh-white marble.

On that same day, others of the monks were charged with similar offences; and still others made confession of lubric desires and visions such as had tormented Anthony during his desert vigil. Those, too, were prone to blame the Venus. Before evensong, many infractions of monastic rule were reported; and some of them were of such nature as to call for the severest rebuke and penance. Brothers whose conduct had heretofore been exemplary in all ways were found guilty of transgressions such as could be accounted for only by the direct influence of Satan or some powerful demon.

Worst of all, on that very night, it was found that Hughes and Paul were absent from their beds in the dormitory; and no one could say whither they had gone. They did not return on the day following, Inquiries were made by the abbot's order in the neighboring village of Sainte Zenobie, and it was learned that Paul and Hughes had spent the night at a tavern of unsavoury repute, drinking and wenching; and they had taken the road to Vyones, chief city of the province, at early dawn. Later, they were apprehended and brought back to the monastery, protesting that their downfall was wholly due to some evil contagion which they had incurred by touching the statue.

In view of the unexampled demoralization which prevailed at Perigon, no one doubted that a diabolic pagan charm was at work The source of the charm was all too obvious, Moreover, queer tales were told by monks who had laboured in the garden or had passed within sight of the image. They swore that the Venus was no mere sculptured idol but a living woman or she-devil who had changed her position repeatedly and had re-arranged the folds of the sackcloth in such manner as to lay bare one shapely shoulder and a part of her bosom. Others avowed that the Venus walked in the garden by night; and some even affirmed that she had entered the monastery and appeared before them like a succubus.

Much fright and horror was created by these tales, and no one dared to approach the image closely. Though the situation was supremely scandalous, the abbot still forbore to issue orders for the statue's demolition, fearing that any monk who touched it, even with a motive so pious, would court the baleful sorcery that had brought Hughes and Paul to disaster and disgrace, and had led others into impurity of speech or actual impiety.

It was suggested, however, that some layman should be hired to shatter the idol and remove and bury its fragments. This, no doubt would have been accomplished in good time, if it had not been for the hasty and fanatic zeal of Brother Louis.

This Brother, a youth of good family, was conspicuous among the Benedictines both for his comely face and his austere piety. Handsome as Adonis, he was given to ascetic vigils and prolonged devotions, outdoing in this regard the abbot and the deans.

At the hour of the statue's disinterment, he was busily engaged in copying a Latin testament; and neither then nor at any later time had he cared to inspect a find which he considered more than dubious. He had expressed disapprobation on hearing from his fellows the details of the discovery; and feeling that the abbey garden was polluted by the presence of an obscene image, he had purposely avoided all windows through which the marble might have been visible to his chaste eyes.

When the influence of heathen evil and corruption became manifest amid the Brothers, he had shown great indignation deeming it a most insufferable thing that virtuous, God-fearing monks should be brought to shame through the operation of some hellish pagan spell. He had reprobated openly the hesitation of Augustin and his delay in destroying the maleficent idol. More mischief, he said, would ensue if it were left intact.

In view of all this, extreme surprise and alarm were felt at Perigon when, on the fourth day after the exhumation of the statue, Brother Louis was discovered missing, His bed had not been occupied on the previous night; but it seemed impossible that he could have fled the monastery, yielding to such desires and impulsions, as had caused the ruin of Paul and Hughes.

The monks were strictly interrogated by their abbot, and it was revealed that Brother Louis, when last seen, had been loitering about the abbey workshop. Since, formerly, he had shown small interest in tools or manual labour, this was deemed a peculiar thing. Forthwith a visit was made to the workshop; and the monk in charge of the smithy soon found that one of his heaviest hammers had been removed.

The conclusion was obvious to all: Louis, impelled by virtuous ardour and holy wrath, had gone forth during the night to demolish the baleful image of Venus.

Augustin and the Brothers who were with him repaired immediately to the garden. There they were met by the gardeners who, noticing from afar that the image no longer occupied its position beside the pit, were hurrying to report this matter to the abbot. They had not dared to investigate the mystery of its disappearance, believing firmly that the statue had come to life and was lurking somewhere about the garden.

Made bold by their number and by the leadership of Augustin, the assembled monks

approached the pit. Beside its rim they beheld the missing hammer, lying on the clodded loam as if Louis had cast it aside. Near by was the sacking that had clothed the image; but there were no fragments of broken marble such as they had thought to see. The footprints of Louis were clearly imprinted upon the pit's margin, and were discernible in strangely close proximity to the mark left by the pedestal of the statue.

All this was very peculiar, and the monks felt that the mystery had begun to assume a more than sinister tinge. Then, peering into the hole itself, they beheld a thing that was explicable only through the machinations of Satan—or one of Satan's most pernicious and seductive she-demons.

Somehow, the Venus had been overturned and had fallen back into the broad deep pit. The body of Brother Louis, with a shattered skull and lips bruised to a sanguine pulp, was lying crushed beneath her marble breasts. His arms were clasped about her in a desperate, loverlike embrace, to which death had now added its own rigidity. Even more horrible and inexplicable, however, was the fact that the stone arms of the Venus had changed their posture and were now folded closely about the dead monk as if she had been sculptured in the attitude of an amorous enlacement!

The horror and consternation felt by the Benedictines were inexpressible. Some would have fled from the spot in panic, after viewing this frightful and most abominable prodigy; but Augustin restrained them, his features stern with the religious ire of one who beholds the fresh handiwork of the Adversary. He commanded the bringing of a cross, an aspergillus and holy water, together with a ladder for use in descending into the pit; saying that the body of Louis must be redeemed from the baleful and dolorous plight into which it had fallen. The iron hammer, lying beside the hole, was proof of the righteous intention with which Louis had gone forth; but it was all too plain that he had succumbed to the hellish charms of the statue. Nevertheless, the Church could not abandon its erring servant to the powers of evil.

When the ladder was brought, Augustin himself led the descent, followed by three of the stoutest and most courageous Brothers, who were willing to risk their own spiritual safety for the redemption of Louis. Regarding that which ensued, the legends vary slightly. Some say that the aspersions of holy water, made by Augustin on the statue and its victim, were without palpable effect; while others relate that the drops turned to infernal steam when they struck the recumbent Venus, and blackened the flesh of Louis like that of a month-old cadaver, thus proving him wholly claimed by perdition. But the tales agree in this, that the strength of the three stout Brothers, labouring in unison at their abbot's direction, was impotent to loosen the marble clasp of the goddess from about her prey.

So, by the order of Augustin, the pit was filled hastily to its rim with earth and stones; and the very spot where it had been, being left without mound or other mark, was quickly

overgrown by grass and weeds along with the rest of the abandoned garden.