

Papini and the Devil, red binding

GHOSTS IN THE PEEL

Rumors circulated last week that the Limburg Peel region, particularly around 5 Helenaveen, is haunted. There were reports of eerie noises and stones, rotten apples, and even tomatoes flying around for no apparent reason. I rushed to the threatened location and found that the locals had adopted the usual attitude of somewhat fearful disbelief regarding these phenomena. However, there is one man who persists in an unwavering belief: the Peel region isn't just haunted; the devil is raging "to the 10 point that it's no longer beautiful." That man is Mr. Leo Kluijtmans. He lives on "Hoeve het Volkmeer" (Farm of the Volkmeer), on Grashoek, an inhospitable place that must indeed be a paradise in the eyes of ghosts with a sense of natural beauty.

15 Mr. Kluijtmans is an antiquarian and 56 years old. He has six children, aged four to eighteen, and his fruit-growing business, which he primarily manages with his staff, is estimated to be worth around €200,000. He's not wealthy, but he manages to get by enough to have enough time for his hobby of archaeology. When I enter his living room, I see a book lying on a trestle table: "Papini. The Devil." Upon closer inspection, this turns out to be not entirely without meaning. Mr. Kluijtmans had been a farmer since he was twelve. He could do so because he "didn't have to fight 20 the battle of life." After all, his father, a peat digger by trade, had worked his way up to become manager of the best farm in the region. And his research began when, as a boy, he discovered some shards in the sand during some leveling work for the construction of a temporary church. He went to ask the teacher about it. And he said: "Those are the remains of urns." Later, Mr. Kluijtmans also found whole urns.

25 A little bit of ancient history. In 1910, the remains of a Roman officer were found near Helenaveen. A golden helmet—which can still be seen in a museum somewhere—a silver spur, a wine barrel holding two to three liters, a horseshoe, and some baskets of leather. Mr. Kluijtmans had long been thinking about solving that case. However, he had to wait years. In 1959, a fire broke out at the aforementioned location—which 30 he knew from his father—that lasted for weeks. This opened up the area, which had previously been virtually inaccessible to humans. But it wasn't until 1960 that Mr. Kluijtmans dared to enter. One Sunday after Mass, however, he took the plunge and made a surprising discovery: he found a curious moonstone. At the very spot where the Roman's helmet had also been found.

35 From that moment on, Mr. Kluijtmans was certain: this moonstone had murdered the Roman. And that Roman hadn't been a warrior, but a preacher of the faith, a martyr. "How do you know that?"

"That," Mr. Kluijtmans replied. "lies in the magical plane."

40 The magical plane. Mr. Kluijtmans shows me a kind of survey form from the "Central Committee for Research into Dutch Folklore of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, Department of Folklore." Do you know stories about (I'll just give a small sample from the extensive anthology): "A Voice from the Water," "Changing Children," "Changing Witches," "Spinning Gnome Woman," "White Ladies," "Huns," "False Surveyors," "Derk with the Bear," "Heemaneke Ossaert," "Illness as a Cloud," "Ghost Funeral," "Sacred Bullets," "People Who Can Make Peat March," "Shepherds Who Can Turn Their Sheep into Haystacks or Something Like That," "Music in the Air," "People Who Were Pulled Off the Road?"

45 Mr. Kluijtmans knows all about that last phenomenon. He's experienced it himself. How?

50 The Mr. Kluijtmans must have been in his early twenties when he cycled home from lessons one Sunday afternoon. Lessons, because at the time he played the accordion in an amateur jazz band. At a crossroads, he was stopped by an intelligible force. He felt as if he had to fight against a force that ordered him to turn back.

55 Back to the Roman, however. Mr. Kluijtmans not only knows that he must have been a martyr and preacher of the faith. He even knows his name. How?

"One night," says Mr. Kluijtmans, "I woke up at 12:30, feeling short of breath. I thought: there's someone in the room. When I opened my eyes, I saw nothing. When I closed them, I did see him. I asked: 'What's your name?' And then a beautiful, clear, distinct voice sounded, saying: 'Basilius.' I nudged my wife and said: 'Woman, I know 60 his name!'" My wife then replied, still sleepily, "Tell me tomorrow morning."

Mr. Kluijtmans has seen the devil. How? "One Sunday in September, I was doing research in the Peel. There had just been a murder there. I was passing a stretch of water, and there, standing a short distance apart, were three fishermen, fishing rods in hand. I cycled past, and one turned his head and looked at me, sending a shiver 65 down my spine. About ten meters away stood the second; he turned completely, and his eyes looked like fireballs. The third had a reddish complexion. That was around 11:30 in the afternoon. At 5:30, I passed that spot again, and the fishermen were still there. Then the middle one pulled his rod out of the water and, his head carved from

70 granite, came at me without blinking. I'm not easily frightened, so I looked at him coldly. He said nothing, and I said nothing. His eyes bulged from their sockets. When he came within a meter of me, I hesitated. He wanted to destroy me. At the same moment, it was as if he were seized by a higher power, and he fell back into a helpless smallness, into nothingness. At that moment, too, I saw a glimpse of divine beauty on his face: there was something delicate there, something very subtle.

75 When Mr. Kluijtmans heard about those ghostly rumors in the Peel region, he knew immediately that they were true. There are stories about dogs chasing cyclists. That's true. "The devil likes to manifest himself in a dog!"

80 Mr. Kluijtmans' grandmother was a clairvoyant. "This traditional story—which must have taken place around 1860—is known from her. She was a farmer's maid. And one day, at eleven o'clock in the evening, she went to fetch water from the well. She had just taken the bucket off the hook and put it down when she thought: what do I see there? It was a funeral procession in the moonlight. Her hair rose up under her cap. She saw a woman, tying her apron at the back, running after the procession.

85 Days later, there really was a funeral procession in the village. And the grandmother remembered that she had been that running woman-in-apron. The "Folklore Department" calls it: "Ghost funerals, funeral procession."

90 I drive with Mr. Kluijtmans to the place where he found that famous moonstone. "I have one condition," he says beforehand, "if you find anything, it's mine." It costs me no effort to make that promise. Even less to keep it. Because, upon closer inspection, I find, in the designated spot in the Absolutely nothing. It's a patch of freshly plowed earth.

95 When we return to his house, Mr. Kluijtmans shows me a few more archaeological finds, which, to my taste, are quite remarkable, and which he has stored in a small suitcase. A remarkable arrowhead and a strange stone knife. He talks about them with infectious enthusiasm. Meanwhile, Papini and the Devil are still bound in red on the cupboard. Ghosts in the Peel.

100 Whatever the case, Mr. Kluitmans simply continues, as he has been accustomed to doing since he was twelve. Incidentally, he tells me, not without justified pride, that he has a permit from the bishop to dig in the area on Sundays. The only restriction imposed on him is that he must make "reasonable use" of it.

HERMAN HOFHUIZEN