

Prologue ~

Incident at the Hellow Tavern

1662 ~ *For two years now, the river Waal had not frozen over in winter as was its custom. The natural philosophers declared it was all because the earth had shifted some degrees off its center, and the astrologer Godfried the Fearless bravely predicted the winter of 1663 would also be benign. He was wrong. That year, "The smiting hand of God's angry will" brought forth sheets of ice on this lower stretch of the Rhine, their pressure building such a mighty force against the dikes that once again they broke. The village of Tuyl on the river's north shore was inundated, and the dike-break at Nieuwaal on the south shore flooded the Bommel-waard. Life along the Waal had, unfortunately, returned to normal.*

But why this ill fortune? One Dr. Essenius of Salt-Bommel sermonized that "...cursing, swearing, gambling, card playing and carousing" had caused the catastrophe, along with the fact that "People [were] going from bar to winehouse to whorehouse, ...fighting and murdering." The blood thus spilled, he declared in a published diatribe, cried out for God's revenge.

The good Dr. Essenius may have had a particular, notorious incident of January, 1662 in mind when he published his polemic: there was, it seems, this trouble in the village of Helloww...

On January 23, 1662, six men from Gameren - a farming village west of the walled city of Salt-Bommel - crossed the river Waal by boat to Hellouw, Gameren's cross-river neighbor to the north. These men were probably all farmers who, having little to do on their land during winter, headed out for a day of farmer's business, hoping for a little fun in the bargain. During the afternoon of that cold January day, they popped their heads into the village tavern to see where they could find Mr. De Rouw, the clerk of Hellouw. What business they had with him, we do not know. The innkeeper, one Evert Corneliszen, directed them to De Rouw's house, whereupon the men left the tavern, continuing their quest on foot. Two hours later, their business with De Rouw apparently concluded, the Gameren delegation returned to the warm tavern, with its open-hearth fire, where they probably set to drinking, and possibly gambling.

These six men from Gameren were all neighbors who lived on or near the Burgersteeg - "Burgher's Street" - a lane of compact but productive family farms on some of the world's richest and most productive river-bottom land. A dike system had for several hundred years made farming here not only possible, but profitable, and the prosperity of the region clearly depended on its farms and the *boeren* who worked them. The Spanish wars that had plagued the Bommel-ward were now a thing of the past, but cold weather had brought about hard times after 1650, and many people were now migrating to the big cities.

This delegation in search of De Rouw included: Jan Petersz, Arien Sprückel, Jacob Janz (called by the nickname "Hens"), Wouter Mertens de Greeff and his virtually next-door neighbors: Geerlof Otten and Jan Otten - sons of Ott van Tuyl. Jan Otten van Tuyl was a young married man, under 30 years of age, with a wife and baby at home. When Jan and his companions returned to the tavern, they joined a couple of the locals - Peter Jansz Keppel and Willem Gerrits Crom - for an afternoon of conviviality. It was dark inside, with only the light of candles and a fireplace to illuminate the proceedings. The air was probably thick with smoke from the candles, the fire, and the clay pipes being smoked by the men in the tavern. Most were farmers, surely, but some of them were also watermen - skippers and hands who made part of their living along the river - and who, like sailors everywhere, liked to enjoy a drink in a warm, hospitable room full of people after a hard day's work in the freezing cold. These men probably sat around a crude table, drinking, talking, and spouting their various opinions. We do not know if they were playing cards for money - surely the innkeepers would not have admitted it if they had - but after awhile, for reasons unclear and long forgotten, Hens and Arien started to quarrel.

The innkeeper Evert Corneliszen tried immediately to cool things down. He knew the *schout* would hold *him* responsible for any bloodshed, should the quarrel get out of hand. As the innkeeper moved to separate the two men, their companion, Jan Otten van Tuyl, called out to him: "*Leave them alone, they don't have the guts to fight -they're windbags, the pair of them!*"

Then, as if to show who *did* have the guts, Jan Otten van Tuyl pulled out his *boer's* knife, making a scraping noise with it just in case anyone failed to see the weapon, and challenged his companion Hens to fight. Hens was taken aback. Either because he was actually unarmed, or because he just didn't want to risk his life over the incident, Hens shouted back that he had no knife.

There the matter may have rested - a bit of cheap barroom bravado - had it not been for these fateful words coming out of the dark;

"So you've got a knife, do you? Well, I've got one too!"

This was the voice of Wouter Mertens de Greeff, Jan Otten's neighbor. Perhaps Jan and Wouter had been friends as boys. Perhaps they had been rivals. Perhaps they hated each other, nursing some long-standing grudge. Or perhaps they were friends who wanted to prove who was the better man. Most likely, though, they were just the victims of hot tempers and too much drink, and events moved faster than they could comprehend.



Adriaen van Ostade: *Farmers Fighting in a Tavern*. [Unicorn Collection - Used by Permission]

Things moved quickly now. Wouter Mertens drew his knife, and the two armed men went for each other. The innkeeper's son grabbed Jan Otten while bystander Willem Gerrits Crom tried to separate the combatants with a chair. Someone seized Wouter Mertens' left arm, leaving his knife hand free to lash out at his antagonist. Wouter stabbed at Jan Otten, whose knife arm was pinioned by the innkeeper's son. Obviously in a desperate situation, and probably blind with fear

and rage, Jan Otten van Tuyl screamed at the innkeeper's son: "*Jan Evers, turn me loose or I'll stick this knife between your ribs!*" The lad did as he was told, and Jan Otten immediately lunged forward, slashing at his enemy's right arm - the arm that was free - the arm that held the knife. Jan's slashing blow drew blood from Wouter's flesh, but he didn't stop there.

Jan Otten van Tuyl struck again - as quickly as possible - this time with an upward stabbing motion that drove his knife deep into Wouter's inside right arm. This terrible thrust ripped open Wouter's flesh and his blood vessels. He was sliced open all the way up to his armpit, with blood gushing out onto the straw-covered floor. Still conscious, but knowing that he was a dead man, Wouter Mertens was heard to say:

"I'm going to die now. I'm going to die the same way my brother did!"

By the time the surgeons arrived, there was little they could do. They bandaged his wound, but it was too little, too late. Wouter Mertens de Greeff died within hours.

For Jan Otten van Tuyl, this foolish barroom brawl would prove to be one of those turning points in life - an act that once committed could never be reversed. As we will see, this young farmer from a tiny village along the River Waal would soon be forced to flee to America. And because he did, we have quite a story to tell...

References:

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