

The Goat Riders of Bree

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European Ghost Literary Project

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Told with brutal honesty, the story below recounts the start of the Belgium Goat Riders myth. Told here from the viewpoint of their leader, it certainly emphasizes the fear they struck in the hearts of the people in the 18th century and gives a good idea of how a band of brigands could turn into the well-known legend it is today.

The Goat Riders of Bree

Slowly Jacob Beynsberger opens his eyes. His tongue hangs in his dry mouth like a dry sponge. Somewhere next to him, he hears moaning. There lies Jan Ackermans on the marble floor in a puddle of his own vomit. Jacob rises to see the scene around him. A few feet away from him lies Lucia Truyens, still sleeping. Her lush bosom calls to him. For a short moment he wanders if he should take advantage of the situation. Just a quick glimpse, but he decides against it. If Nolleke would ever find out, it won't make his day any easier.

Arnold van de Wal, or Nolleke van Geleen, is their leader, their captain. Nolleke might be married to Barbara, but he never bothered too much with marital loyalty. Still, he was very lucky. Her father had given him a small piece of land where he raised a small farm.

Lying on the cold, marble floor, the events of last night come to him in short jabs of memory. Nolleke had asked Jan Ackermans, Fridus Schaecker, Michiel Valle and Jacob himself to meet him in 'the Cat', the inn of Hendrik Gillaer, to discuss something of the utmost importance. Nobody knew what he had been up to and it took a long time for Nolleke to actually show up himself. While waiting they started already on the *jenever* and soon they were discussing these hard times they were living in. Unemployment was on the rise and the future of many farms was at stake.

“Still, there's plenty of cash to go around,” Fridus Schaeckers mumbled, “but it just needs to be divided better.”

Suddenly the door flew open and a cold draft whipped the warm faces of the men back to reality. The wind blew out the candles and torches along the wall. All gazes snapped towards the door where a small cat-like shadow moved across the wall and dove under the tables. Fridus Schaeckers felt something brush against his leg and the creature growled like a dog. Then it fell silent again. Next to his ear, Jacob Beynsberger thought he heard the sound of rattling chains.

They felt chills going up their spines, and not just from the cold. They felt the sweat break out on their foreheads. The shadow moved silently across the room and more than one wondered if this could be the devil himself. As it rested at the head of the table, it produced a small statue and put it with a bang on the table in front of him. With a shock they found it was a crucifix.

With a steady hand, it produced a small silver box. Everybody in the room held their breath, wondering what would happen next and fearing it wouldn't be

anything good. From the silver box, it took several catholic wafers, probably stolen from the small country church close by.

“I denounce God and hail the devil,” it spoke loud and clearly.

Everyone present watched in shock. Jacob Beynsberger recognized Nolleke's voice.

“I denounce God and hail the devil!” it spoke again, now more forceful.

Fridus Schaekers was the first to repeat the sentence. The dark shape handed him the jar of *jenever*. Fridus took a big sip from the jar and urged the others to follow his example. All of them did, although some with a hesitant, small voice. The jar went from hand to hand until it reached Nolleke again.

“I would rather be pulled apart in pieces, then to betray my comrades!” he yelled.

Again the sentence was repeated and the jar made it's way around the group. When the jar reached Nolleke, he grinned and smashed the small statue of Our Lord in several pieces, kicking each of the pieces to the others, commanding them to stamp on it.

Michiel Valle hesitated. Whoever swore this, would certainly go straight to hell!

Nolleke looked him deep in the eyes. “Whoever refuses to swear the oath, I will personally hunt down and destroy!” the dark figure raved.

Michiel gave the cross a gentle tap with his foot and Nolleke held the jar of *jenever* directly to his lips, forcing him to drink.

“The devil will take away the pain when they torture you,” he roared loudly and the small group roared with equal enthusiasm. Nolleke looked around the room with satisfied glee.

“Put up two fingers of your right hand!” he yelled, showing them how, “and repeat after me.”

“If I were to give up my comrades in the midst of my torture, I will revoke this before my execution!”

They all repeated the oath, dizzy with drink. They all looked at Nolleke with awe and respect in their misty eyes. It was a good thing, 'the Cat' lay so far away from the civilized world.

“Together,” Nolleke went on, “we will lay waste to these barren lands, raid their riches and set fire to their fancy houses! We will plague these regions and take what is rightfully ours!”

He opened a book and made everyone sign. Those who couldn't write, signed with an X.

The jar of *jenever* kept going round and round. Nolleke gave each of them a crumpled up piece of paper, but it was too dark to see what it said.

“Tomorrow, we will meet,” he said, “at eight o'clock at the Gerdingenpoort. We will first hit Laurens Bogaers, the rich prick, he can do with a penny or two less.”

“Hear, hear!” exclaimed Fridus Schaekers suddenly. He had been a butcher's help at Bogaers' big farm and knew better than the others how rich the family actually was. It wouldn't be a shame if some of that money would disappear in their own pockets. Nolleke nodded satisfied.

Then the door opened again and Lucia Truyens entered. A loud roar came up from the men as she passed by and wanting hands grabbed at her full body. They all drank and sang and danced as the night went on, but it was Nolleke who finally

took the price. The others found solace in their drink until they fell asleep where to stood, sat or fell.

*

It feels like dozens of small hammers bang the temples of poor Jacob Beynsberger. In his pocket he discovers the small piece of paper and by the pale morning light, he saw the rough sketch of a devil's face, gaping and grinning at him. He tossed it aside, but quickly picked it up again, for it might be bad luck to discard it. But what if his wife found it? With a grunt he remembers his wife. She must be wondering where he's been all night long, although this wouldn't be the first time he had been out until the morning.

He quickly scrambles up and wipes the dirt from his clothes. At that moment the door of 'the Cat' swings open and Nolleke stands tall in the opening.

"Tonight," he said, "eight o'clock, the Gerdingenpoort."

It's all Nolleke says as Jacob quickly makes his way out the door.

*

In he evening he tells his wife he's going to the Jewish trader to buy some fabrics. As a weaver, Jacob cannot miss an opportunity when the Jewish trader is in town and the excuse is a valid one.

At the Gerdingenpoort, he finds his comrades already hiding in the bushes. Nolleke shows up with other men, Wallonian mercenaries and Jews from the market, people nobody around the region knows.

Jan Ackermans keeps an eye on the house. Slightly before eleven he says that all is clear and the lights are off. The tension mounts as they hide in the bushes, passing a bottle of *jenever* around for courage. Whoever is known in the region puts on a hood or paints his face dark with charcoal from the fires. When the hour strikes midnight, they're convinced the inhabitants are asleep.

The men break in through a window in the stables. Nolleke enters first, wearing a small black mask.

It doesn't take long before the first scream cuts through the night. Mrs. Bogaers woke up, along with her husband and daughters. There is no need for the men to be silent and gentle any more. They rip the golden earrings off Mrs. Bogaers, cutting the ears severely. They try to take her wedding ring, but it won't come off easily.

“Cut her finger!” Nolleke yells, “quickly!”

Hearing that, the woman slides off the ring effortlessly.

Jan Ackermans knows that Mr. Bogaers keeps his money in the earthen pots, but they are nowhere to be found. In the drawers and cupboard they only find loose change.

At the command of Nolleke, they tie the unfortunate man and his wife by their ankles and wrists.

“Come on, you rich bastard! Where is the money?!” one of them asks in a different dialect to give the impression they're not from the region. Suddenly

Nolleke grabs a candle from the wall and walks over to the groaning farmer. His wife pleads and begs, but before she can tell where the money is hidden, loud knocks sound at the door.

“Open up in the name of the sheriff!” a booming voice sound. Quickly they grab whatever they can find and run off through the stables.

They meet again in Nolleke's house to divide the loot. They have clothes and linen, two watches, a diamond cross, a golden cross and a silver one, silver buckles and some money. They curse the fact they had to flee, or the loot would have been much bigger.

Again, the *jenever* starts flowing, but Jacob returns home where his wife is already asleep. He feels strangely alive, although ashamed. From his pockets, he takes the note with the devil's head and places it in the box where he keeps his few precious items. It looks like the devil smiles at him.

*

The gang can't keep taking risks like they did that first night. Nolleke quickly comes up with another plan to make money. They will write and place 'fire letters'. Nolleke, as a child, studied with the Augustine monks and can write neatly and correct.

The note read:

Place forty guilders in the thicket

that lays when thou comes from Bree.

In the thicket you will find a hole with a cross.

Put the money in the hole and cover it with earth.

The money will remain there for two days,

until it is collected.

Fail to do so and your house will be lit at the four corners.

Thou will know no rest, for we will be vengeful!

He signs it with the Goat Rider's and the sketch of the devil's head.

Suddenly, the region is rive with the fire letters. De sheriff's men forbid people to place the money and to hand over the notes to them. Estimations are made of the value of the houses. If one of them burns down, the owner can expect two-thirds of it's value being repaid by the local government. Whoever gives a tip which will lead to the capture of the Goat Riders, will receive a price of a 1000 guilders.

For that money, one could by a good, fancy house. And still, none of them comes forward, afraid of Nolleke whom they call a monster, a wolf or a ghost. Nobody dares to say this to his face, of course, but everybody fears his flammable temper.

Laurens Bogaers seems to be the favourite victim of the Goat Riders. He receives multiple fire letters and every time neatly hands over part of his hard-earned money. He knows, like no other, how bad the bandits can be.

Soon enough, Nolleke introduces the fire call, which involves standing under a window and shout that the house will burn down if the inhabitants do not hand over the requested amount. Because the fear of loosing their house, the people give the brigands all they have.

Nolleke and his men quickly spends their money in the bars, raising the eyebrows of the other guests. One night, Nolleke is already drunk as he enters the bar, wanting to play cards for cash, but the innkeeper rather tells Nolleke to go sleep it off.

“So this is the thanks I get” Nolleke exclaims, “for keeping you free from fire letters for four years?”

The innkeeper laughs in his face.

“So come back home,” Nolleke says, even more angry than before, “I will show you the damn letters. If you can read, that is.”

“You know what I think of these letter writers?” the barkeeper hisses at Nolleke.

“They're cowards who dare not to show their faces.”

Nolleke's face turns red and he starts yelling and kicking. “You will have no more peace! I'll kill you!”

From the confines of his jacket, Nolleke produces a musket and aims it at the innkeeper, who doesn't blink. Nolleke is far too drunk to aim and some of the other guests quickly work him out of the bar. As he is pushed down into the mud, he yells: “I will burn down your house, or my soul and body may burn in Hell!”

*

The argument reaches the ears of Lieutenant Pendris. He questions the people present at that time, but nobody heard or saw anything. As long as Nolleke is still free, nobody dares to speak ill of him. Because of this lack of witnesses, the investigation is soon stranded.

The fire letters do continue. The money being placed is heavily guarded by Pendris' men. Although there must be hefty sum waiting for him, Nolleke doesn't dare to claim it.

But Lucia Truyens, being naturally inquisitive, can't control her curiosity and goes to have a look. She figures that, if the money is not guarded, she can just take it and give to Nolleke. He would very proud of her. She would do most anything to please him, even though he hardly glances at her, unless he needs her the most.

In the night she approaches the thicket. Glancing left and right, she doesn't see any guards. She enters the thicket and hesitates for a minute.

Suddenly she hears her name being called! Two of the guards come towards her with big steps. She runs from the thicket and over the open road. The guards don't follow. They have recognized her and the best they can do is to inform the sheriff.

In the next hours, Lucia panics and flees to her sister in Thorn. Her absence from the village only increases the suspicion.

Bailiff Van de Cruys finally tracks down Lucia Truyens. She's being held in the catacombs of the city hall in Peer. Soon enough she confesses to having collected the money of the fire letters, claiming she needed it to buy bread.

But Jan Mathijs Clercx, sheriff and secretary of Peer, is not satisfied. He wants to hear the names of the Goat Riders to exterminate them and so Lucia Truyens is tortured far beyond the point of what any woman can handle. She names her brother Michiel, his wife, Martin Houben en.... Nolleke van Geleen. Then she hangs her head and weeps, knowing she will be condemned to death.

To great satisfaction of the god-fearing sheriff, Lucia asks for a confession. He tells the people of the region, she has converted and has asked forgiveness for her sins. Lucia Truyens is beheaded on the 4th of July 1789.

*

Sheriff Clercx issues an arrest warrant against Arnold van de Wal and soon enough he is arrested and questioned about Nolleke van Geleen. First, he denies to have anything to do with the leader of the Goat Rider's. He is not Nolleke van Geleen, but witnesses confirm that Arnold van de Wal and Nolleke van Geleen are indeed one and the same person. But, although he admits to being the dreaded man, he denies committing the crimes. When the sheriff asks him to sign a written confession, Nolleke claims he cannot write. The sheriff doesn't believe him and forces him to sign. Nolleke signs in a fine handwriting and feigns his own surprise.

“It's been fifteen years since I last held a pen!” he says.

The sheriff realises that he cannot believe anything Nolleke has to say and relies on witnesses to incriminate him.

Some of them beg not to be in the same room with Nolleke. Other tell him, they would rather run into a wolf than to see the wicked man.

Bailiff Van de Cruys asks permission to torture Nolleke, because 'there has never been captured a more horrid beast'. He gets his permission, but that evening a small band of brigands steals the instruments of torture from the sheriff's office. Once again they are faced with the enormous influence Nolleke still holds over his men.

Nevertheless the wicked man is tortured during five excruciating hours. They tie him to the rack and use the thumb screws. When he is brought before the judges, more dead than alive, he confesses to robbing of the church in Kaulille and the fire letters. As he is carried out of the courtroom, he looks up at the judges and asks:

“You are going to burn me alive, right?”

On a later date, Nolleke confesses to robbing the farm of Bogaers and he names his accomplices. Now that they have him talking, it seems the list goes on and on. The sheriff is getting impatient and fears the Goat Riders will come and rescue their leader. He quickly asks permission of the judges to carry out the sentence. Usually, the leader of a gang is burned alive or pulled apart, but the judges sentence him to the gallows in exchange for his confessions.

Nolleke van Geleen and Martin Houben are executed together. They are tied to a cart and accompanied by two priests. Behind the cart come the judges and the people of the region. Among them are several of the Goat Riders.

As he is being brought up to gallows, wearing his cap and smoking a pipe, he turns to his accomplices and addresses them in the language of thieves, which the judges do not understand.

Bingkes en mokkels, knolkes en gezeukes,

Ze hebben mechels gesjop, mechels jalt molle.

Noppes flikeke.

De poen die moos in de dieperik onder de erferik.

Nu bik en buis maar tof, mechels jalt naer paerland.

Amen.

His accomplices know all too well what he wants to say:

Men, woman, boys and girls.

They've caught me and I must die.

There is nothing you can do.

The money is in the basement, below a stone of the first step.

Eat and drink, for I must go to the hereafter.

Amen.

The gang members disappear one by one to collect the money. For their leader there is nothing left but prayers to the devil to which they promised their souls. Maybe Satan can free Nolleke from the noose.

The priest asks Nolleke to repent.

“It's too late for that, father,” he says.

“But you will burn in Hell if you don't,” the priest hisses and shows him the crucifix.

“Then I will see you there,” Nolleke hisses back. To the hangman he yells,

“Come on, hurry up! I want to be with Lucifer by noon, so I can join him for lunch!”

The hangman pulls the noose around Nolleke's neck, but fails to pull it tightly. It takes two tries before the noose is tight enough.

“Come on, man,” Nolleke says to the hangman, “because of your clumsiness, you would quench my pipe.”

When, a few moments later, Nolleke leaves for the hereafter, the other gang members raise the glass and toast: “*to the Goat Riders*”.
