

IN THE WHALE'S BELLY

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News



laes*! Claes! Have you heard?"

Joos* dashed through the door of the cheese house and over to the large copper kettle which Claes was washing.

"Claes, have you heard the news?"

"No, I haven't," said Claes looking up from his kettle. Claes, who had grown quite a bit taller recently, was no longer so excitable as his younger friend.

"A notice was just posted on the doors of the town hall." Joos was still breathing hard from his running. "The Council of Flanders has sentenced the heretics. They'll be put to death in three days."

"Where?"

"In the Veerle*Square," Joos said.

Claes looked even more grown up when he became serious as he was now. "How will they be executed?"

**Pronounce the names starred above like this: (KLAHS), (YOHS), (VAYR luh).*

"By burning alive at the stake, even the two women! It's supposed to be a warning to all heretics," Joos replied. "You know that means Hans van Overdam will probably come to Ghent for the execution. You've wanted to see him for a long time."

"Yes, I have wanted to see him. I must go to that execution. I may be able to find him somewhere in the crowd."

"Do you think you could recognize him, Claes? I can hardly remember what he looks like. It's been six years since he worked at the cheese house. At that time you helped here only in the afternoons. You were still going to Master Adrian's to learn reading and writing."

"No, Joos, I haven't forgotten him. He was a fine man. It's hard to understand. Nothing seems right since that Inquisitor Titelman came here from Ronse. I've heard that even the city officials don't like him. They don't want a stranger interfering here in Ghent."

"Claes, do you think your uncle would let you go to the execution?"

"Yes, I think he would. He would say it is a good lesson to see what happens to heretics—to people who leave the Mother Church. Here, Joos, help me clean these kettles so we can go home."

With that, Joos energetically and haphazardly started cleaning kettles. Soon the task was finished, and everything was ready for the master cheesemakers in the morning. Claes, one of the apprentices, had to stay in the evening to clean. He and Joos locked the doors and started home over the cobblestone streets of Ghent.

"Claes, why do you want to see Hans van Overdam? Is it just because he used to work in the cheese house?" asked the younger boy. He gave a little skip to keep up with his friend.

"No. For a long time I thought I could make him see his mistake in joining this new church. I wanted to ask how his church could be right when it's not even thirty years old. Our church dates from the time of the apostles."

"You know a lot about religion," Joos replied. "My mother used to say you were going to be a priest because you went to mass early every morning. But now you're learning to be a cheesemaker. Claes, my mother says it's best to stay away from those Anabaptist heretics. They are so clever in winning people over."

Claes did not try to answer this remark. "I certainly admire Hans van Overdam for his bravery. They say he often comes to Ghent secretly to visit his fellow believers. I wonder if our priests would do the same for us if we were persecuted. I suppose if Hans were caught, he would get the same treatment that those heretics will get in three days."

The two walked in silence through the nearly empty streets. The setting sun lit the stepped gables of the tall stone buildings, while the streets were in shadow. The boys passed a number of small Catholic shrines at street corners—shrines consisting of a painting, covered with glass and tilted forward to meet the upward gaze of the passer-by.

Claes stopped and looked up at one, and his friend stood beside him. The small flame of an oil lamp, shielded from the wind, gleamed in front of a painting of the Virgin Mary. A gilded

halo surrounded the head of the Virgin, and her two fingers were upraised stiffly in a sign of blessing. In the empty street Claes silently crossed himself and began to recite a prayer. Joos followed his example.

"Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, hear me I beseech . . ."

A man came up behind the boys, but they didn't know it. He roughly laid a hand on each boy's shoulder. Frightened, the boys turned quickly, smelled his unpleasant breath, strong with drink, and saw his long robe and hooded face—the dress of a monk.

The quickness of their turn threw the monk a little off balance. Recovering himself, he drawled, "I am always glad to see young men saying their prayers." He slowly held out his hand. "Do you have some money for a poor man of God?"

A look of disgust crossed Claes' face. He seized Joos' arm and pulled him hurriedly down the street. As the boys turned the corner at the end of the street, they saw the monk. He was leaning unsteadily against the building and looking up into the face of the Virgin Mary.

Although Claes had never told anyone, this kind of happening was another reason he wanted to see Hans van Overdam.