

The Reformation of Wolfshausen A Mighty Fortress, 1527*

“Since the pope, by his pardons, seeks the salvation of souls rather than money, why does he suspend the indulgences and pardons granted heretofore, since these have equal efficacy?”-89th Thesis

Before very long, the capacious figure of Vater Johann in a black cloak fell into view at the bottom of the alley. He stood like a shock of barley. He even walked like a shock of barley. Only his head seemed animated. In the turbulent air with unsettling clouds above, the shepherd of men cast his head about like he was seeing inclemency for the first time. Down by his inert beltline, he held a closed ceramic crock from which steam emerged each time the body moved forward.

Johann looked up the stairs and saw Adalbert, the spy, standing above. The man was not tall but looked tall and also wore a black cloak. Adalbert lifted his right hand and pointed a bony finger towards Johann's center of gravity. The gesture was accompanied by a reedy, rough noise which was the interrogator's voice. "Your Latin vapors will not intoxicate my spirit, Herr Johann."

The priest's searching eyes concentrated and followed the gesture down towards his middle. He laughed and answered "Brother of Hessen, this is not incense. This is stew! You were promised a meal and the church of our lady is always hospitable even away from her hearth." The larger, lower man opened the lid and the aroma filled the alleyway. Two stories above, shutters opened and an old man poked his nose out and looked down on the pair. The two below heard the sound and both looked up nervously.

The old man upstairs shook his head derisively and retreated back to his room for porridge.

Adalbert's gaunt cheeks softened and his lips pouted but his jaw clenched and his back stiffened. The interrogator suggested "It is probably made of boiled children. Why does Rome's spy in Marburg ask for my audience?"

"Well, we who have friends have friends we would be better off without. Some of mine are looking for a pagan boy named Jeremiah. Do you know him?"

Adalbert's hand went to the pocket with the order for release of one enchained person.

"That is Landgraff Philip's business and none of yours."

The man holding the stew smiled at this. "I think maybe if you were to share everything you know, the palace would stand and my Lord would receive his supper and your advancement in his society would not be compromised."

Adalbert's face reddened and only his lips still showed appetite. "I serve the Prince, not the foreign church. What I know is his."

"And do his possessions include the whereabouts of young Jeremiah?"

"I think this conversation is ended. You have nothing to offer that I would willingly have." A trickle of drool escaped the corner of Adalbert's mouth.

"Maybe, and this reformation has made Mary, the mother of God, too poor to bribe as righteous a man as you anyway. But, before you go, may I ask why you watch our church so often?"

"I am a free Hessian. I can watch what I like and I like to watch the enemies of our magnanimous ruler. I will discover your conspiracies, for I know you have them, and with the help of Jesus and for the sake of Philip, be an agent of their undoing. God and Hessen have been liberated and will not be imprisoned by Rome or Mainz again."

Vater Johann laughed a third time. "For a spy, you talk a lot."

Adalbert could not clench his jaw any tighter than it already gripped. His spine was already as erect as the human frame can carry. So much blood already filled the skin on his face that his own heart starved. So he turned away, leaving behind him the noise of crackling like a burning log in a fireplace.

Halfway to the castle road above, he turned back around for a last look at the pot of stew. Heaven used its new freedom to send a gust of wind from the bottom of the alley, carrying the scent of beef and oats. Vater Johann's hearty and superior laughter rode the same divine gale. A moment later, Adalbert vanished around the corner.

At the bottom of the stairs, Adalbert's antagonist lifted the pot to his nose, and himself turned away towards St. Elizabeth's church with a glad spirit. In his head, he considered Sunday's sermon. He might speak about the nine gifts of the holy ghost from Corinthians. He wondered what the Latin might be for "beef and barley."

Above the alleyway on the cobblestone castle road, a vigil of sorts had been organized among Jeremiah's friends.

Gretchen had refused to leave the jailhouse door while Jeremiah remained locked inside. So the priest had proposed a series of watches and finally the swineherd was persuaded. She went home and tended to her swine and Trudi to her customers. Vater Karl and Dietrich waited. As one of the number returned, another would leave and rest and eat. Baby Frau Braun was kept in the care of whoever would be warmest. Dietrich never accepted his relief and remained unfed and unsheltered until Gretchen noticed and brought him back bread, roast pork and a hat.

The mission of the vigil was difficult to discern for strangers passing by and was generally taken for loitering. The troop was, in fact, up to nothing but watching the door in case Jeremiah and Dietmärchen got out. The activity of the Wolfshausen delegation to the Marburg Colloquoy revolved around standing there and staring at a wall. At this moment, that duty lay with Vater Karl and Dietrich.

Dietrich was a natural scholar and a natural carpenter, accustomed to long hours applied to simple matters. But Vater Karl finally set his creaky knees and climbed onto one of the flat stones along the cliffside that had been put there to keep the royal swill-carts from careening onto the roof of the brewery below. Dietrich rose quickly to stop him.

That brought a laugh from the old Catholic at the young one. "Relax, dear friend. I am not bored to the point of suicide. I am bored to the point of sermonizing. Priests take communion on behalf of the entire community and suffer pointless existence the same way. Now..."

He raised his voice and let it deepen.

“Gather round. Gather round, friends...

Dietrich huddled his shoulders and made a quick side step, imitating a second listener.

“Gather around, friends, if you’d hear about Jesus!”

It was at this moment that a briskly strutting Adalbert appeared before the bend in the road.