

The Reformation of Wolfshausen

The Temptation of Vater Karl, 1524

“St. Lawrence said that the treasures of the Church were the Church's poor, but he spoke according to the usage of the word in his own time”-59th Thesis

Two weeks passed and the flowers flattened by early April storms were soon memorialized by robust replacements so that the departed blooms were forgotten. Wolfshausen basked in a glorious afternoon when Ludwig woke up to discover his companions, Wilhelm and Vater Karl had absented themselves in the morning.

He stretched his giant frame and roared a yawn and the rafters groaned. He unfolded himself out the door like a moth escaping the chrysalis, and took the stairs down to the alley beside the alehouse. After a season in the village, townspeople no longer scattered to safety when Ludwig entered the square. They had all learned to listen for the groaning of the stairs and those who would hide were already hidden.

But those who lived outside the village proper hadn't developed the same skilled senses. Ludwig's looming caught Julia Ausländer entirely by surprise. She had brought her four white-headed boys to town, and the giant laughed as she herded the children into a headlong dash for home.

In the opposite direction, he saw the tiny form of his friend coming in from the farmland to the south. Even at a distance, the little Swiss reformer looked urbane and rakish despite a panorama of newly broken fields conspiring to cloak him in rustic simplicity. The outline was angular with particular assistance from clothing designed at high cost where French and Italian culture meet. Before Wilhelm had entered the square, the live curls of his perfectly tended moustache promised the distinguished disreputability the little evangelist had cultivated.

“Where is Karl?” Wilhelm asked as the two mismatched men embraced.

“I don’t know,” answered Ludwig. “I just woke up and you were both gone.”

“Not at home?”

“No.”

“Nearby?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s look in the alehouse.”

“Sure!”

The pair went arm in arm into the alehouse over which they had settled. Inside, they found only the brewmaster pushing a broom and two tradesmen conspiring in the corner. The two protestants took a table in the middle of the floor and magnanimous Wilhelm Monteverdi ordered beer for both.

“Well,” Ludwig began. “I don’t suppose you were out in those fields planting barley.”

“*Mais non,*” his comrade answered, “I found a particularly stupid farmwife to entertain and I was trying to entertain her. A voluminous beauty named Greta.”

“You look pleased with yourself. I believe you must have made a convert. Remember why we are here and please try to avoid scandal.”

“Pah!,” Wilhelm ran the index finger of each hand along his moustache, from just under his nose out past the curls on his cheeks. “You worry about a scandal? There is already scandal in Wolfshausen. The honest honor of the farmers’ wives is scandalous.

“*Au contraire,* this Greta woman might just have made a convert. She did all the enlightening. The entertainer was much entertained.”

“Friend, I think you should be careful what you say next, we are not alone.” Ludwig bobbed his big head like Scylla the seamonster surfacing slowly. His nod brought Wilhelm’s attention to the two men sitting in the corner, behind the zealous aristocrat. Then to the brew master who was sweeping nearby.

“Let them hear, if they’ll listen. Try gossiping the farmwives in this town and you’ll find the course pressing backwards against you. It would be like trying to spit upriver.

“This Greta, she recognized me, of course. I find I am very often recognized in strange lands, *d’accords!* I walk over to her, she is on a stool beside a lamb and I have a parable from scripture already on my tongue. ‘You stay with Vater Karl, don’t you?’ she chirps like a hungry chick. ‘I do, yes,’ I tell her. You see, she had the advantage of me. Perhaps I would have told her of the levite and his concubine to thrill and frighten her, but now she described me as concubine. I could not speak at first, but then it was too late. For she was speaking, ‘Does Vater Karl like his woolens?’”

“Again, dear Ludwig, I could imagine only the most unwholesome thing she could mean but could not ask for an explanation before I had it. Merrily she continued, ‘peep peep peep peep.’ And she tells me that another of these wholesome wives around town had gone to fetch the priest and to tell him that a widow lay dying. You remember?”

“Yes,” Ludwig answered. “During the storm. We were playing cards and discussing theology.”

“*Exactement!*” Wilhelm answered. “But it was a trick! There was no dying widow, just a widow. A widow and eleven sisters, who were to give him gifts and lecture him as part of a conspiracy!”

“A conspiracy?” asked Ludwig, suddenly concerned. “Against whom?”

The Swiss reformer burst out laughing, “Oh, my beautiful Greta! So sad you are not free to marry! She could not remember. She tells me of the conspiracy and cannot remember against whom. She knows who I am but cannot see a cause for caution. Ah, I love women of the rustic variety.”

“The conspiracy was against us?”

“I am quite sure. This little baby chicken keeps telling me how worried are the women of Wolfshausen, the proper ones at least, about Vater Karl’s consorting with dangerous warlocks. ‘I am glad you are there, Herr Wilhelm,’ she tells me, ‘to look out for him when we can’t. His soul, I think, is what they are after. And the children, maybe.’”

Now Ludwig rumbled again his large laughter. “Why do you think our brother Karl hasn’t told us about this.”

“You see,” answered Wilhelm, “He is a discrete man and a good priest. I have to give him credit, although he serves Leo and the rest of Roman whoredom, he serves well and with conviction. Perhaps he knows change is coming and our good opinion might one day matter to the people of town as their good opinion matters not the least to us. Or perhaps he considers a sin committed against a priest to be a form of confession.

“But I think it is this- he is a thoughtful man and we have convinced him a little. Nobody is more secretive than a thoughtful man who is half-persuaded. I think the seeds we scattered have not fallen on stone n or on sand, but on very, very, very dense soil. If he had told us, we would have said, ‘You see! this is what your church brings people to. Jesus brought the dead from their tombs, would he have buried the living? These are not followers of the Lord but they are followers of your church. Choose, friend! *Choisissez!* How will you lead these people?’”

Ludwig, grinning, clapped Wilhelm on the arm. “He is a stubborn old bull, that priest. I was starting to think it better to eat him than to argue with him.”

“I was starting to think so as well. But maybe he gives us no leverage to move him because he is coming on his own.”

The two both took long drafts from their tankards and Wilhelm called for more. When the drinks arrived, Ludwig spoke again, “But now that we do know, do we have leverage?”

Wilhelm smiled brightly, “Ah, but ask yourself, which of those women would have thought of such a plan? Who would have enough intelligence? Who would lack enough morals.”

“Wilhelm, you know perfectly well I don’t know those women. Gretchen hates me and is warmer than all the others combined.”

“Ah, but it is not a woman at all. This was an order given by the high priest in Marburg.”

“Did you hear all that?” whispered one of the tradesmen to his companion and the brewmaster. Both men nodded solemnly.