

The Reformation of Wolfshausen

The Temptation of Vater Karl, 1524

“On the other hand, the treasure of indulgences is naturally most acceptable, for it makes the last to be first.”-64th Thesis

Vater Karl lay the boy softly on the bank and knelt beside him. The priest folded his hands across the lad’s chest and pronounced, “Patri et Filio et Spiritu Sancto” and pressed down on Jeremiah’s chest bringing a sea of viscous water out from the boys mouth and into his nose and hair and on to the ground. The volume of the water seemed greater than the size of the child. Vater Karl pressed again and more water ran down both Jeremiah’s cheeks. A third press and the boy gasped.

A cataract drenched the pair as Heinrich pulled himself up beside them. The boy coughed again and Heinrich knelt beside them.

Vater Karl explained, “He is still alive, but someone should go get Gretchen.” Dietmärchen, who had tunneled under the broken fence on the town side of the farm appeared at the near fence next to Frau Braun who oinked. Heinrich went to check on his wife, who stayed on the ground and hugged his ankle. He petted her head and lumbered off, streams of water coursing off of his sweater and trousers, writing sanskrit proverbs in the dirt as he went.

Jeremiah was breathing harshly but steadily. Karl picked the boy up and noticed how heavy the lad had grown. “Please,” the leading reformer of Wolfshausen urged the great Catholic loyalist, “help me get the boys somewhere warm.” Frau Braun shook her head.

Over another fence, Julia Ausländer shouted, “What is wrong?”

Frau Braun reached for a board from the fence and pulled herself upright to her feet. She climbed back to her own side of the fence as Julia and three of her sons

arrived. The four neighbors and the priest hoisted the boy over to Frau Braun who braced him in a standing position. Then she and Vater Karl walked the boy under their own power to the Braun house, followed by the Ausländer.

Jeremiah was stripped, placed on the table the Brauns ate at and covered with a blanket. Julia promised to send her husband horseback to Marburg for a doctor. Frau Braun realized she was holding the young boy's hand and clasped it tighter. The priest listened to the boy's chest and prayed over him.

"I have some acorn soup I can warm," the woman announced.

"I'm fine," the priest answered and his companion rolled her eyes and went to start a fire.

After a while, a silent boar and a sobbing woman burst into the Braun's home. "Jeremiah!" Gretchen growled, rattling cups on a nearby shelf.

"He is breathing," the priest pronounced and his former ward fell into his arms. Dietmärchen put his front hooves up on the table and inspected the patient. Vater Karl stood up and realized his feet had fallen asleep during his vigil.

He left the family and found Frau Braun fiddling in the next room by the stove and the fire barely lit. He joined her and the two worked in silence, but the project advanced. The farmwife prepared the broth and the cleric handed her utensils. Both could hear pleas, sobs, sniffles and snorting coming from next door.

After some time, the dining room with the agonized child on the table went quiet. Vater Karl crept back in and, with his arm around Gretchen offered to give the boy last rites, just in case.

"He's something of a pagan," Gretchen explained.

"That explains the deer-riding. The soup is almost ready, why don't you get it from Frau Braun and bring it back. He must be hungry." She left him to conduct the ritual and Vater Karl noticed that she was calmer leaving the room than she'd entered it.

When she reached the kitchen, Frau Braun was stirring vigorously and Gretchen collapsed onto a stool. The grey-haired, childless matron took the pot from the fire and hung it to cool. There was one of Heinrich's one-legged milking stools on a

shelf, and Frau Braun balanced on the ground between Gretchen and the wall, plumping herself down upon it.

After a moment of silence, Frau Braun noticed that Gretchen was not resting but was listening to Karl's chants and the frictioned breathing of the boy.

"The Apostle Paul asked 'has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?' I have been a fool, piggy witch. Many times in my wisdom." Gretchen didn't answer but turned her pretty, freckled face toward her old persecutor, who continued. "The church- following the church- protecting the church, always made me certain. The blasphemers who strut in our town but cower in castles never brought me any doubt. But somehow I lost my way between the great stone edifice of St. Elizabeth's Church and the paltry men around this tiny town." Gretchen's mouth relaxed slightly and Frau Braun noticed her husband standing in changed clothes in the doorway. "These men around here are like toys," the older woman continued, "but too simple for a baby to play with and too fragile for a lad." Heinrich smiled and withdrew.

Gretchen saw the motion of the farmer and laughed just a little, then fell out of her chair and across Frau Braun's generous lap, knocking the old woman off of the stool. The pair lay there a moment, spraddled across the floor of the kitchen, neither ready at that moment to pursue any dignity that required moving.

Gretchen spoke into Frau Braun's stomach, "You were right, though. I'm obviously not fit for motherhood."

"There's no cure for foolishness in a boy," the farmwife answered. "I haven't gotten it all out of my dreary old husband. Any youth who will ride a wild animal was doomed for many a disaster despite his raising. I bet he's got a few catastrophes left in him. Your sorrows are just beginning.

"Now," said Frau Braun firmly, slapping Gretchen on the wrist, "let's get some food in that boy. I failed at your ruination but that rat-brained heathen out there on my dinner table has restored my hope."

Untangling themselves from each other turned out to be complicated and neither Gretchen's grace nor Frau Braun's rigidity simplified the task. Both women dusted themselves off and went to the stove together. Just as Frau Braun reached for her ladle, Gretchen caught the older woman's wrist with a gentle hand. The two faced each other a moment and Gretchen wiped her eyes before saying, "Thank you."

Frau Braun answered, "I don't like you."

"I know."

The two reentered the dining room and saw that Ludwig and Wilhelm had entered and were standing beside the table. The Czech was bent so far over it looked as though the Swiss aristocrat were sheltering himself under a scaffold of bear. Gretchen set the bowl of soup next to Jeremiah's head and filled a spoon. She put it to his lips and poured the broth into his mouth. The boy gagged and lashed out violently, upsetting the bowl and breaking his mother's lip.

Frau Braun took the empty bowl away to refill it and Ludwig crept along the ceiling until he could hold the boy's arm with the gentleness only superior strength would allow. The next time Gretchen had soup to the boy's lips, Wilhelm was standing underneath and in front of Ludwig, raising the child's neck as his comrade restrained the boy's arms. A spoonful of soup went down, then another until the bowl was drained and the boy relaxed, stated "Sprouch!" and fell into a kinder unconsciousness.

The priest gave a signal to the protestants and the three men withdrew, leaving the farmer, his wife, her nemesis, the wild boy and the tame pig to recover together. Heinrich sneezed and the theologians turned the corner.

"Dear Ludwig, good Wilhelm," Vater Karl addressed his friends. "I thank God that you were born, made clever and sent to be my companions these last months. I love you both and would go anywhere with you if I weren't needed here. But this town needs a priest and I was made a Catholic one.

"I wish God's protection for you both, and his help for your cause. I'm wiser that I met you and happier that I can call you my friends. Go with my blessings, but go. I am a better man for your counsel, but no less a Roman priest."

Each reformer hugged the rebellious relic and all swore to remember the other party in their prayers and thoughts all their lives until death takes them. The two absented themselves to pack their few belongings.

Then they went and hid in the forest, neither near to nor out of sight from the trail that leads to Gretchen's cottage. In the late afternoon, they quit the area altogether and went to rejoin Thomas Münzer; departing once they'd seen the mistress of

swine trudge home leading her best boar, who carried on his back a weakened but wakened young man.

Sier endet Kapitel Zwei, The Temptation of Vater Karl.