

The Reformation of Wolfshausen A Mighty Fortress, 1527

“We say, on the contrary, that the papal pardons are not able to remove the very least of venial sins, so far as its guilt is concerned.”-76h Thesis

The soiled straw bunched on the cell floor smelled like a sty. Rats and mice scurried back and forth along the dark hall that ran in front of the locked chambers, cautious near the cell. The bars impeded the boy’s swift movement as did the knot around his wrists. Jeremiah felt like an exile in heaven.

“Who are you?” came a voice.

“Who are *you*?” Jeremiah answered.

“A priest, I suppose,” was the reply from beyond the cell wall. “Hello, Father.”

“What is this place?”

“See those bars? It’s a jail. No wonder you Catholics couldn’t hold Hessen. I bet you’d recognize a jail cell from the outside, Father.” There was the sound of a wheeze, some raspy cackling and then the sound of another wheeze. A few gasps and the voice continued, “you should have seen this place before Philip became Landgraff. It was so crowded we all sat on each other’s laps. Especially the priests. Not that there were many.”

There was more wheezing and cackling before the story continued, “Yeah, seven or eight years ago, this was a real jail. I once had a killer tied to me, foot to foot, and a thief tied to me hand-to-hand.

“The thief was named Gottfried. You ever hear of Gottfried? He was Swabian but a pretty good guy. He used to be whispered about all over Hessen and Thuringia

for stealing pots and pans and then taking the horse to carry it all off with. He used to tell me, Gottfried did, that he always went home every year to bring his loot to his poor old mother. That Gottfried was a gentleman. Famous, too!

“And he and I were the best of friends right there in that cell where you sit today. Us and a drunk named Bruno. Yeah, this used to be a real jail. Before Philip came.”

Jeremiah thought of a question, “if this isn’t a real jail, what kind is this?”

“Oh, now they just keep the old-timers from the old days. It’s too high to carry a drunk to and too near the castle for a conspirator. So, its just me and a couple other unforgivables. Right, boys?”

There was no answer. The man continued, “Huh. Must have died.”

“Why are you unforgivable?”

“Oh, back in the old days, I used to be a great man. I would go to the bars and fight until someone bought me a drink and keep fighting until I was drunk. One day, I walked out of the pub across the street from St. Elizabeth’s hospital with a bunch of battered beer-buyers stacked up in a corner of the bar and a cask of beer in my bladder. I decided I needed to pee on a tree, and I’ll be darned if the tree didn’t turn out to be a nun and the nun didn’t turn out to be the mother superior. The mother superior turned out to be a niece of old Prince William.

“So here I am and here I’ll stay. The new prince turned out to be a magnanimous sort, but he’s a little careful about forgiving insults against his relatives. Plus, what with this whole reformation and so forth, now is no time to abide with nun-pissers. It undermines the social order. Here I am and here I’ll stay.

“Or he might have forgotten I’m here.”

The wheezing returned, but without the laughter.

“How could he forget?” Jeremiah inquired. “You’re loud.”

Now the laughter and the wheezing reached full volume. “Oh, good Landgraff Philip never comes down here anymore. When he was a little boy, he would sneak

in past the guards and stare at us. Sometimes he even brought food or a ball to play with.

“The guards didn’t like it but they couldn’t really stop him, could they? I mean, his old dad in the grave and him six or seven and his mom the regent. So he would throw us bread and watch us grab and fight and finally eat. Then he would throw us a ball to throw back through the bars, but sometimes those got eaten too.

“Listen, here’s some advice for you, father, be careful what toys you bring to the jailhouse.”

Jeremiah considered the wisdom of that. He wondered where Dietmärchen was.

The boy asked “Do they let animals in here?”

A wheeze and then an answer, “Ha! They force animals in here. They don’t let nobody but animals in here. Even as guards. So what did you do? Bother an altar boy?”

“I’m not sure. I was waiting for my pig and then things went badly.”

“Things always go badly when you wait for a pig, father. I’m no way surprised. What’s your name?”

“I’m Jeremiah.”

“Not a bad name, Vater Jeremiah. Most of us in here don’t have names. Well, I suppose half of us now.”

“You don’t have a name?”

“Not anymore. You can call me ‘the scourge of the nunnery,’ if you need to.”

“I just got my name a few years ago.” Jeremiah offered, “I was born without one.”

“We all were, father.”

“Do you think I’m unforgivable too?”

“Not for waiting on a pig. They probably just want to make sure you aren’t a witch and that you think highly of them.”

“People say my mom’s a witch.”

“When they come to interview you, try not to mention that. Tell me though, what does your mom look like?”

The boy started describing his mother to the accompaniment of scittering rodents and wheezing from behind the wall. He talked about her golden hair and her caring eyes, the ignition in her smile and the warmth of her calloused hands. He told how her eyes sparkled when she was stern with him and how her hands would fidget when she laughed at him. The wheezing grew raspier and Jeremiah realized how dark and musky the room was. “Can I tell you about my new friend, Trudi?” he asked.

“If you don’t mind,” came the hoarse answer, but just then the sound of metal scraping against wood interrupted the conversation.

“Not now!” wheezed Jeremiah’s fellow prisoner as the toe of one guard’s boot appeared in front of the boy’s cell.