

The Reformation of Wolfshausen A Mighty Fortress, 1527*

“Christians are to be exhorted that they be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hell”-94th Thesis

“I never criticized you for being an idiot,” Vater Johann assured in his gruff and momentarily muffled voice, “but it always bothered me that you are a useless one. I prayed and prayed for you, Brudder Karl, that God had a purpose for your vexatious life; and for myself that I would finally come to see it bear fruit.

“You have troubled the church and troubled my plans and I never persecuted you for leaving your post because it spared me your proximity. You were like a tuft of nettles that voluntarily uprooted itself and resettled.”

Vater Karl found the miraculous analogy flattering but was enough not a nettle not to interpret aloud.

His superior continued, “And now, after all the troubles of the last three years, the disestablishment of the one true church, the deprivation of her property and the seduction of her prettiest nuns, you bring me news, never mentioned in discretion that you are about to bring a scandal under the roof of the church you abandoned?”

“You untether your alliance with the mother church halfway! Have you ever seen a donkey yoked halfway? You absent yourself from St. Elizabeth’s service but retain just enough connection to bind us to the Prince’s other enemies?”

The red strengthened around the high priest’s beard. “Surely by now, certainly by now, I see your place in God’s plan. You are a shepherd for the devil, a gadfly to raise welts on Saint Elizabeth’s shapely posterior. You were sent by the devil and the devil take you!”

Vater Karl saw his chance in his comrade's silence. "Then deliver me to the devil. Deliver me to the demon who imprisoned an innocent boy."

"Nothing would give me more satisfaction and if I thought they would burn you at the stake and behead you and desecrate the tendons that hold your soulless skeleton together for now, hear me, I would consider it. I would at least dream of it in my most emotional moments. I would send you to Satan with happy tears softening my manly beard.

"But these evangelists don't uphold tradition. They might imprison you in the Prince's jail and bring you bread. Whatever misery you sought in whatever hamlet you've haunted would be there doubled. You might be happy. You might live out your days with darkness and good sausage for comfort and deprive the Devil's flames of the fuel from your dried up bones.

"No, Karl. Idiot! You tried to bind this holy temple to the most heretical of her enemies..."

"I just let them sleep in my room," Vater Karl corrected, growing slightly bored.

"You tried to be Priest and heretic and now you will be neither. You have no home here, but you will have none in the protestant's jail, either. Here I stand. So help me, God, I will not do otherwise. Now get out. If I see you again in this world, I'll rebaptize you under a thirsty cow. Guards!"

Vater Karl rose as the interior door opened and two cowed adolescents shuffled meekly in. He went to the door and put his handle on the lever that would unlock it. He opened the door and turned back to meet Vater Johann's glare.

"Brother," the lesser priest started.

"Get out," replied the greater.

"I have seen you as corrupt, compassionless, avaricious, ignorant, conspiratorial and brazen in your sin. But I have always thought of you as my friend and I always will."

The two frail youths who had recently entered slouched like dumplings stood up like soldiers and manufactured faces of malice towards the old man who had assured them beatings a good show of hatred might moderate somewhat.

The older man turned away as he stepped outside and collided with a newcomer. Karl looked up at a familiar cadaver. He could not immediately recognize the ghost until it spoke.

“Karl, I presume. Servant of two devils. It is you I have come for.”

Now the older man thought he recognized the emaciated features of the corpse.

“Thank you,” the deceased continued, “For coming out to me on your own and saving me a trip across the threshold.”

“Who are you?”

The bones beneath the pale skin were familiar. Karl recognized the voice like the rustle of dried leaves. It was the same voice that announced freedom for the pitiful old outlaw while maintaining his young friend in jail. The old priest thought he might be looking at a reanimated ancient ancestor of the interrogator, Adalbert.

Then the specter wheezed and coughed. Karl pulled a cloth from his pocket to offer the troubled spirit and, as the antagonist doubled over coughing, the priest patted the turned back.

In reply to the friendly gesture, the ailing skeleton jerked himself erect and abruptly interrupted his own spasms. His face reddened. “You will... you are not... to lay a hand on me. Any laying on of hands will be mine.” Centuries lapsed from the face and the creature was once again the middle-aged prosecutor who rasped “Compassion is ours, now.”

“Then have compassion on Jeremiah. Let him free.”

“I don’t care a Roman mite for Jeremiah. This church...” and Adalbert pulled the hand that had covered his mouth out for a grand gesture taking in everything from St. Elizabeth’s grand spire to Vater Johann’s front door. “Offends me. Although you may...” he gasped, gagged, coughed and continued “Your bones may...be the levers I use to pull it all down. God grant his servant victory.”

“If you let Jeremiah...and Dietmärchen, the pig, free, I will tell you anything.”

“What will you tell me?”

“What you tell me you need to hear.”

“You will tell me what I need to hear in jail.”

“Take me there. You can have my body, but you won’t have my cooperation until the boy and his hog are free.”

“I think Landgrav Philip will have your cooperation anyway. He is a magnanimous young Prince. That we all know. But for those who sheltered his greatest enemies, I think there will be no protection.”

Vater Karl’s eyes sparkled. “No, no. When the tent is worn through, you can leave it out for the wind or bring it indoors. Your mercy touches me. Lead on, I’ll follow as a good shelter should.”

Adalbert spun on his feet and stepped cautiously uphill towards the castle. Vater Karl did as he promised and kept only a few steps behind his new warden. Together, they made a solemn procession of only two.

But they hadn’t walked many feet together when an adolescent in a brown robe bolted from around the corner of the church offices and, yelling “for Vater Johann,” plunged a pewter knife into Vater Karl’s side.