

The Reformation of Wolfshausen

The Temptation of Vater Karl, 1524

“Apostolic pardons are to be preached with caution, lest the people may falsely think them preferable to other good works of love.” -Martin Luther, 41st Thesis

As crowded as the service had been, the after-mass assignation in the alehouse was as surprisingly sparse. Warmth reached out from the hearth and glowing wisps danced in kerosene lamps. Only the brewmaster, the priest and the giant, Ludwig were present at first to enjoy the light and heat. This disturbed Vater Karl, but relieved him as well. The bucket in which he took collection was empty but for Jeremiah’s penny and the priest liked to buy the first round. The three men took off their jackets once the heat reached their shirts.

“Well,” boomed Ludwig, addressing the brewmaster. “Either your people are the most pious in all the German lands or I think I might be bad for business.”

“Don’t worry,” came the reply, “the tradesmen will grow thirstier, the farmers colder and the farmwives more curious. Your notoriety will only keep this place empty so long.”

“Clearly,” continued Vater Karl, addressing his new friend. “This den of sin can use the peace your charisma provides.” The three men chuckled but soon, the alehouse door did open.

Gretchen’s face appeared inside the room, strained and was withdrawn. A second time her hair entered the room, tousled and fell back. Her hip was the third member of Gretchen’s mortal assembly to seek shelter from the cold wind, only to fail at the threshold.

“Jeremiah Freulich Oberweißer!” Gretchen’s voice succeeded where her flesh had failed and filled the warm drinking room. “He’s just an evangelist. *You* stoned *him*, remember? Come on! Vater Karl is waiting on us. He would never let you come to harm!”

Again, Gretchen’s parts appeared in the doorway. Her face, hair and hip entered as one and were soon stalled but not, this time, stopped. Her shoulder followed, the left and inmost shoulder tugging an arm strapped tight across her chest. Soon came her left knee and finally she was inside, pulling by the feet a growing Jeremiah whose arms were wrapped around an adult boar whose hooves skittered against the project.

Finally, when Gretchen was at last inside with her wards she let go of them, slammed the door shut and shivered. Jeremiah used the freedom to leap onto a table and into the rafters, leaving Diemärchen, Jeremiah’s boar and brother, to find his own peace which he sought under Vater Karl’s chair.

“Hello, pig,” said the old priest in a soothing voice. “Rest easy. The protestant has reformed. I’ve even taught him to eat stew.”

Gretchen smiled from the door at the old priest and his gentle hand scatching Diemärchen’s bristly ears. She approached the table and the alemaster abandoned his chair for a broom that leaned against the hearth. Her smile was warm and kind and relaxed as she approached the still warm chair the alemaster had left her, but she took the long way to it, around and behind Vater Karl rather than the straight path which would have taken her near the mysterious stranger.

Priest and evangelist both rose to greet the maiden, but Ludwig’s long legs clumsily pushed the shared table onto Vater Karl’s knees. The priest was crushed into his chair, startling the boar who leapt to his feet and backed away, upending the chair so that Karl was left doubled around the chair, his back and head stretched across the chair’s back and his feet squeezed by the seat which carried his own weight.

“Oh!” Gretchen and the priest shouted in harmony.

Ludwig apologized briskly with profanity and pulled back the table, which Vater Karl clutched and rode back upright. He dusted himself off. “One day,” the priest explained, “I will behold the face of God and when I do, the closest I will have seen to it’s like will have been when I was caught between a pig and a giant. Come on down, boy.”

“I’m Gretchen,” the mistress of swine introduced herself, looking only obliquely at the newcomer. “You gave my son and that hog a pretty bad scare.”

Ludwig, who had never before been without dignity since he arrived in town, even when he slept leaning in the doorway of that same alehouse, sputtered and stared at his own rough knuckles. “I am truly sorry. I was hungry and thought the boar was wild.”

“Sprouch,” objected Dietmärchen settling again with his head under the priest’s chair, though not so far in as before. A “Shwoosh, thump,” like the sound a haybale makes falling from a loft, interrupted the awkwardness as Jeremiah landed beside Gretchen, close to her and on the same side Ludwig faced.

“And I believe you’ve met Jeremiah,” Gretchen continued. Ludwig ran one hand through the hair that covered the wound he’d suffered.

“Only his rock so far, but it pleases me to meet the softer parts. I’m glad to get to know you under better circumstances when I am no longer murdering your friend.” For his response, Jeremiah pushed backwards against his guardian. “For what it’s worth, that was a manly thing you did hitting me with that stone.” The compliment didn’t bring Jeremiah any closer to the titan’s reach, but it did bring a smile.

“So!,” Ludwig continued. “I have a few pennies left in my purse, some I came by honestly and all in holy service. Can I buy the round?”

“Oof!” said Gretchen, as Jeremiah sat himself on her lap.

“Thank you,” Vater Karl answered for the group.

“Ah, no!” said the evangelist. “You have done me a good turn, today and I owe you my thanks. Today was the first time anyone wrote a sermon for my benefit, that it was delivered by a priest of Albrecht’s was gloriously forgiving. That you even went so far as to ask your townsfolk not to martyr me, well, you may be a Catholic for now but I feel you are my brother. Prost!”

“Prost!” replied Vater Karl and Gretchen together and the three adults each took a sip of warm apple wine. Dietmärchen caught a scent and wondered to the corner of the alehouse to investigate.

“That is an extraordinary swine,” mused Ludwig. “I’m glad the boy brained me before I killed him. He never makes messes indoors?”

“My darling Gretchen, here,” answered Vater Karl, patting the young woman’s hand, “gives her swine more than a sty to live in. She gives them a home and family. They are as well-mannered as the children of nobility and known throughout Hessen for their tenderness.”

“Forgive me,” intervened Ludwig, “but Gretchen’s pigs are the perfect parable with which to describe the relationship between the church and her people. Comforting, confusing, instructing, housebreaking, rating, judging, fattening, selling and slaughtering them then filling intestines with the ground remains.”

“Sprouch!” protested Dietmärchen as Gretchen’s eyes narrowed.

“You left out loving,” corrected Vater Karl. “Gretchen loves those hogs.”