

The Reformation of Wolfshausen

The Temptation of Vater Karl, 1524

“Christians are to be taught that the pope does not intend the buying of pardons to be compared in any way to works of mercy.”- 42nd Thesis

On a cold, sparkling morning, two weeks after Ludwig’s debut in Wolfshausen society, Julia Ausländer set off to visit Hilda Greulich. A lifetime of stealthy parsimony had rewarded the widow with a wealthy, skinny old age and in all the area around Wolfshausen, no chimney released as thick and dark a string of smoke as hers did. The widow would never winter without the warmth of her friends as long as she kept her hearth chock full of burning logs. Julia looked forward to the grasping heat that filled her prim friend’s sitting room.

“Are you there, Hilda? It’s Julia!” the younger woman announced at the older woman’s door, then let herself in. “Well, hello, Hilda! I brought you a forest berry pie.”

Hilda sat on her chair near the fire. Her skin was white, like well-burned ash. Her hair was nearly as white as her skin and almost as stiff. Her blouse was black, her lips thin and pale. Her corded neck bent slowly to see her visitor through wide eyes.

“Well, good day, Julia. How are things by you?” Hilda spoke as though she were testing bathwater.

“All seems well for now, I suppose. Where can I leave your pie?”

“Oh, on my table will be fine. Would you like some tea?”

“That would be nice, dear Hilda. I have some things I want to discuss with you. My sips will be your opportunities shrugs and nods.”

Hilda's lips curled a little in the corners, suggesting a smile. She rose slowly and walked carefully to her well-fed stove. She set the kettle on the hot stovetop.

Julia asked from across the room "Do you and our friends still meet to defend the church in Wolfshausen?"

"Oh, yes," Hilda answered. "We're knitting a blanket."

"Are you as fervent as you were about defending her?"

"Oh, yes. It's a very nice blanket. Frau Schwartz donated some very fine wool."

"And you are aware, of course, that a giant evangelist has come to town."

"Giant? I had no idea? Taller than Dietrich?"

"Much. And he seems hostile to the Bishops."

"Is he handsome like Dietrich?"

"No. He's as furry as a bull."

"Well. What would you have us do?" The Witwe Greulich dithered a bit making tea. It had been awhile since Julia had come to visit but the widow was fairly sure she remembered Frau Ausländer taking it sweet.

"If this stranger has his way, all the wool from all our sheep won't blanket the loss to the Church. He will teach heresy to the children and tradesmen. Your average blacksmith is already just an ember or two short of a demon.

"Listen, Hilda. All these nice things we do for Vater Johann, all the indulgences we buy. If the big foreigner triumphs, will come to nothing. Can't you imagine it?"

"Julia," Hilda interrupted. "My dear friend, Frau Braun can sound this way. It isn't like you to be so, well, excitable."

"You're right, Hilda. But it's one thing to make trouble among your neighbors and another to protect them collectively. This isn't about who belongs or to who they belong with. This is about who doesn't belong.

“When your husband passed, I remember he went peacefully.”

“Oh, yes. He took care of his affairs very well,” Hilda explained, a proud grin dimpling her inverted cheeks and her eyes fixed on a spot beyond the wall. “He left this world certain of his place in the next, and I look forward to joining him there.”

“You bought indulgences from the Archbishop?”

“Oh, yes! The agent came right to my door, I sat him down while my husband was in the next room on his death bed. Brought him tea, Oh!” The kettle began to whistle and Hilda rose to make the pot. From the stove she brought two cups, having sweetened Julia’s. “Anyway, I remember he liked his sweet.

“I tell you, I have always been careful about Herr Greulich’s money, but I have never in my life bargained as well. Once he counted all the sins I knew about and gave me a price, I explained that a wife isn’t privy to all of her husband’s sins, surely. I spoke in my most disappointed, most nervous voice. Why, I was nervous!

“I had never asked him about his sins and I didn’t want to learn anything new in front of one the Holy Church’s own agents! I explained...”

“Very well, Hilda, but...,” Julia interrupted and was interrupted in return.

“I understand, dear. The point is, he agreed to include all the sins I didn’t know about with the ones I was confessing. My husband had expected his indulgences to cost much more than they did, and I managed to cover the cost all in, you see! All the sins of a whole life, washed away as with water.”

“And you say you look forward to seeing him in the next world.”

“Of course. He wasn’t the most entertaining man, but he was a very good provider. I’ll want that in paradise.”

“And you realize, I hope, that the evangelists don’t believe in buying indulgences.”

“I didn’t know that,” the Witwe Greulich addressed her cup, pointed brows indicating the steaming tea.

“That is why I’m so concerned, dear friend. If the monster succeeds in driving away the church, there will be no promise to you of spending your hereafter with your husband.”

Both women sipped silently together. After the span of silence, Hilda proposed “Well, I have been a loyal wife. I have touched no other man and I always kept my coveting discrete and tasteful. I go to Marburg once a month for confession, and I tithe. Surely, St. Peter won’t bar the gates against a poor old widow who knits blankets for his servants.”

“But what of your husband?” asked Julia.

“As I said, his debts were paid before he passed on.”

“Dear old friend,” explained Julia. “I don’t mean to alarm you. I’m sure your husband is watching from heaven and I have no doubt that you, of all people, will join him there. But isn’t the whole point to be certain? Isn’t that what the church brings us? Certainty in the moments of mystery?”

“This is just what the foreigner threatens. The evangelicals may be right, I haven’t studied like the priests and nuns. But it seems to me, you and your man lived fairly well, and if you both repent by way of the agents whether the Church is right, as I’m sure she is, or the evangelicals are right, you will be together in the next world. But if the evangelicals are right, and no indulgences are available to you as you pass, you could be alone in the next world. Your certainty depends on dying as your husband died.

“This grand stranger comes and now I have to worry about the rats in my field and you have to worry for your husband in heaven. I won’t lie to you. It isn’t only your eternity I worry about but also my tomorrow. I found the man sleeping in a haystack on my farm, uninvited. Can you imagine? The church is just one sacrament they want to do away with.”

“Oh,” the widow exclaimed, though not loudly. “What do you think we should do?”

“When is the next knitting bee?”