

The Reformation of Wolfshausen

Teil Drei-und-Dreizig,
The Temptation of Vater Karl, 1524

Administrative scholars on the fourth and highest floor of the castle on the hilltop in Marburg were reviewing Luther's theses against the holy scripture while a few miles down the Lahn, Heinrich Braun pronounced, "good cow!" In the frigid black of a January morning, the farmer was milking a favorite cow and pressing his cheek against her warm belly.

In testimony to the quality of Dietrich's carpentry, not a board had fallen from a single stanchion in the dairy. More than two years since the carpenter left Wolfshausen for Marburg, the boards beside Heinrich's cows' heads were well-gnawed but still sturdy against their pressing, pleased necks.

The milk wooshed and foamed into Heinrich's pails. His three lactating cows filled two buckets, enough for his needs and a little to take to town for Otto the wheelwright. He gave the calves their share, let the cows back into the pasture and cleaned the barn well and himself roughly. Since the turbulent year of 1521, Heinrich's wife had taken to sleeping late and Heinrich to enjoying the quiet morn.

Heinrich's home and central Hessen had been tranquil since witchcraft had last been cited in Wolfshausen. The rest of the German-speaking world, however, seemed to be splitting apart in a new way. The typical heresies of German society were gaining church office and the comparatively democratic German politics spun toward populism.

To the south, in the Swiss Confederation, a priest named Ulrich Zwingli had forsaken lenten fasting and promoted marriage among the clergy. The seasonal interruption of clerical voracity and the conceit of sexual abstinence had been the glamors behind which every other ecclesiastical corruption and priestly appetite

had been disguised for centuries. The local Bishop had barely managed to send an observer against Zwingli.

To the East, in Prague, a fugitive monk named Thomas Müntzer published manifestos calling for the apocalypse and arguing against the clergy. Müntzer's monastic madness threatened to separate the unknown from the familiar setting of the mass, leaving peasants nervous and priests speechless.

To the south and East of Hessen, from the black forest to the plains of northern Bavaria, the Holy Roman dukes and barons found their own ill tempers competing with those of the peasants and plebeians for pestilence.

Up in Wolfshausen, Otto Schwartz had a sore tooth. "God in heaven! The devil take my whole mouth!" It had been two years since there had been any discussion of witchcraft but he felt ready to follow the rumor to Gretchen Oberweißer's cottage.

Vater Karl, who was awake for morning prayer had heard the tormented soul crying below and gone to assist. "With what would you beg for death" he asked Otto. "Some apple wine might help." The priest decanted a tall draught and offered it to the wheelwright.

"You see me with the eyes of an angel. The rest call you father, but to me you are my 'angel eyes.'"

"I am not yet in heaven, young man. I'm old, but much can still happen."

"Your pity on a poor tradesman will preserve your soul. And if you ever have a cart, I will make wheels for it."

"Well," answered the old priest, "that will take me somewhere, if not heaven. Do you feel better?"

"Your wine paid for my sins. I can live with the tooth."

"Glad to hear. Next time you are in Marburg, though, I would see the doctor. That tooth should come out and he might trade you for a grinding stone."

A dim figure entered the town square, tall and thin with a jar by his side.

“Heinrich?” asked Otto.

“My friend, it is almost dawn. You should be going to bed by now. I just brought you some milk for when your head hurts in the morning.”

“A friend gives you milk to restore your head. But a priest saves your soul with wine. And then preaches to you about where to lose your teeth.”

“Oh,” Heinrich said, addressing the priest who stood with a bottle beside his friend. “Hello, Vater. Out late with the sinners?”

“Up early to tend a suffering servant,” Vater Karl replied.

“Him?” Heinrich asked, pointing at a man asleep in the brewhouse doorway. The priest and tradesman both stared. In the time they had been in the square, neither had noticed the man, but dawn was coming and the sky was turning pink and they could see the hulking man with the thick, black beard. His wild, curly, dirty hair nearly covered the shaved cap that marked him as a monk. The sleeping figure was dressed in peasant clothes beneath a leather vest and leggings. The rusting, pitted sword on the ground between his feet was unusual in the village.

“Whose poor husband is he?” asked Vater Karl. “I don’t recognize him.”

“I don’t think he’s from here,” said Otto.

“You must be right,” agreed Heinrich with his friend. “If he drank locally, you would recognize the back of his head and he sure doesn’t look sober. Vater?”

The man slumped forward, his forehead pressed against the doorjamb and his hands between his knees. His jaw fell open.

“I have seen the position before, but not this man in it,” the priest observed. “Maybe if I take an offering his wallet will open and we can at least know where his money was minted.”

“That would only scare off Otto, and we’ll need him to help this man to shelter.” As the sky brightened, the man broadened. The three could see now that he was even taller and broader than Dietrich.

“I knew one day your wife would make a Christian of you,” Vater Karl answered. “He can sleep up in my room. Maybe when he wakes up he’ll confess a name or something.”

The three men walked over to gently lift the sleeping stranger but before they could reach him a dagger flashed into the man’s hand from the top of his long boot. With a single punch that shook the brewhouse, the goliath’s fist punched the dagger into the wood of the door, sinking it to the hilt.

“What kind of Christians are we three?” inquired the old priest, “to interrupt a sleeping man’s prayer.”