

The Reformation of Wolfshausen

Teil Neununddreizig, The Temptation of Vater Karl, 1524

Vater Karl watched Heinrich head downhill toward town and home. He smiled as he saw Dietrich turn off the easy path and veer through the forest toward either no place in particular or, perhaps, Gretchen's cottage. Otto, a truncated centurion protecting the local clergy, sat on the stump he had tripped over. As he sat, he spun his wooden vise back and forth, vigilantly. The old priest turned back and addressed himself to the tall monk.

"I can't imagine why anyone would cross rivers and mountains looking for me. You have explained how you heard of me from a travelling caravan that stayed a night and heard a sermon which my own neighbors forget as soon as their coin lands in the milk bucket. I must confess, friend, your answers only deepen the mystery of your presence here."

As the loose claw of Otto's vise spun back and forth along the slot dowel, it reported a dry screech, as constant as a hymn and fricative as a thief's confession.

"Good priest," Ludwig uttered. His low tone expressed a whisper, though the rocks around the fire seemed to shake in resonance and the flame itself retreated as if it wished to die. "I mean you no harm to you nor to anyone in the good town of Wolfshausen or its environs, but your friend's fidgeting might still drive me to murder."

"I understand," the smiling priest replied and turned to face his protector. "Dear Otto, you are a constant friend for which heaven will reward you in the world to come and I will reward you at the alehouse tonight. But the fraternal love between new acquaintances is a song that needs no rhythm. Would you mind?"

Otto frowned at the priest whose well-being the wheelwright would fight a giant and a dragon to secure. He felt unmanned and undermined at the very moment he was most reliant on sinew and stones. He grudgingly placed the vise beside him on the log and began tapping his thigh with the hammer. Pop, pop, pop.

“Will that do?” the priest asked.

“Perhaps,” answered Ludwig, “you wouldn’t mind binding my arms again. To answer your previous question, I will ask you a question. Where is the best place to learn the commercial affairs of a city?”

“The confessional,” replied Vater Karl, quickly and with certainty.

“Exactly so,” explained Brudder Ludwig. “And, likewise, nobody understands the full enterprise of ecclesiastical affairs like travelling salesman. The caravan that stopped in Wolfshausen buys and sells trinkets and albs throughout the Christian world and France. The grandfathers of the present merchants were there when Jan Huß was burned at the stake, selling cowls and coal oil. The cousins of those you entertained sold ink to the University of Wittenberg that Martin Luther used to write his theses. They sell treasure chests and tin soldiers to the Archbishop of Mainz and diapers to the priests in Zurich.

“When Thomas Münzer, whose leadership I have pledged to declared the baptism of infants a false promise, the merchants sold him an oriental tub large and cleverly crafted enough to contain a squirming fat man and a barrel of blessed water without spilling. It was I, who completed this transaction on Münzer’s behalf.

“The merchants, holding a sack full of gold I had given them, invited me to join them at their campground. A caravan is an efficient thing, Vater, and I was drunk before long and listening eagerly to the chieftan’s encouragement. Until that night, I thought of Zwingli, Luther, Münzer and Melancthon as heaven’s rebels, fighting with an earthly church in the hope of martyrdom. As Huss burnt, so would we all. But as Jesus taught us, better fixed to a tree alive than walking around dead.

“But the merchant chieftan, my new friend, had a different perspective. Luther had escaped with the help of powerful friends. Münzer is alive and well and teaching post-natal baptism despite the heresy. ‘But listen,’ he added, ‘a few years ago, on the road to Marburg, we stopped and heard a sermon by a priest. His humor was subtle, but I understood him to homilize the agents of the archbishop as rapacious husbands there, in the open air, near the roads and trails that knights

often follow. That was when I realized that for the first time, the heretics are now less pious than the devout. Listen to me, friend,' he told me, 'you are on the right side of history. The German-speaking lands are changing and the first shall be last as prophesied. Well, probably not Austria.'"

Vater Karl had listened intently but laughed at the importance he'd been given. "So a foolish old priest loses his discretion and now the rough places are to be made plain? You came from Leipzig to congratulate my self-destruction."

On his log, Otto sensed an insult to his friend and his syncopated self-abuse with the hammer grew more forceful. Pop! Pop! Pop!

Vater Karl turned back to his friend. "Please don't consider me ungrateful, Otto, but a renegade monk is the safest companion for a fugitive priest. Why don't you go to the alehouse and tell them I am treating you?"

Otto considered the request and agreed, "If you're secure, Vater Karl, I could be warmer. But," he added in a suggestive tone, "if you don't show up to pay, I'll come back and find you and my hammer's coming too." With that, Otto excused himself and wandered down toward town. Once Otto had left, Ludwig continued his explanation.

"I come from among the Czechs, and I have never worn down my shoes looking for the hand of a martyr to shake. Brudder Münzer heard through friends that, while the Landgravs and Bishops throughout the empire are reluctant to risk a revolution, here in Hessen Philip the magnanimous has considered adopting the evangelical cause. He has, according to rumor, set his own theologians to the problem of whether Luther might be right in his theses and their conclusion.

"It would be dangerous to any priest or nun or novice in Marburg, where Archbishop Albrecht has spies and servants, to convert before Philip's soldiers are on our side. You may be the closest clergyman, decamped as you are and for so long, who can help prepare our place at Philip's ear if you will convert."

Vater Karl merely sat and stirred soup a moment before speaking. "If Philip's court scholars are studying your cause, what use is an escaped small-town priest? I joined the Holy Mother Church and have never considered another way. But even if I did, I don't see how I could be useful to you."

“As I said, the court scholars are investigating Luther’s claims. But Münzer has found proof in scripture of heresies committed by the church that Luther never noticed. The baptism of babies and the preservation of power in a human heirarchy are intolerable apostasies that the devil invented, the church presented and Luther would leave intact. We need an agent of our own, not for gathering money from the poor but for spreading enlightenment to the noble. Are you our man?”

The question had been obvious for some time, but still startled the old priest.

“I don’t know,” he answered frankly, “but I think I’d like to think about it over a glass of beer. Why don’t you come in to the alehouse with me and stop scaring the townsfolk.”

“I have no gold,” the giant answered.

“Our informal parish will buy you a drink,” Vater Karl promised. The two finished the soup and then walked, an unmatched pair, into town.