

The Reformation of Wolfshausen

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

Leaving the quartet of his friends, Dietrich took the notion to visit Gretchen. He hadn't been to her cottage since the end of 1521, the meeting which led to his ecclesiastical devotion in Marburg and her maternal dedication to Jeremiah, the feral child. But he had encountered Gretchen on the road now and then and the chance meetings lacked any of the awkwardness of their more intentional associations. In fact, her smile remained as warm and welcoming as ever and he even felt an inexplicable sense that the two were in some way allies. He was already in the forest near her home, and she had lately had cause for fear, so he hoped a visitor might be allowed some company.

As he approached her door, he heard the wooden thud of a chair or cooking implement dropped onto the floor. "Oh! It's you! Come in, please!" Gretchen called from inside.

Dietrich let himself in and found himself quickly confronted by Gretchen's warm grin and how quickly a small space can change. Where the well-crafted wooden icons had been against the wall, there were now strangely-shaped, irregular carvings most of which resembled, so much as they resembled anything, porcine rodents or ratty pigs. Where one large bed had been there were now two cots. Where pots and pans and utensils had lain in an orderly fashion, the small counter was now strewn with its old inhabitants and pie pans and pies, dark stains, blond crumbs and grayish grains. The last time Dietrich had been there, the whole home had expressed Gretchen's graceful solitude. Now it looked like the whole herd of her hogs had had a hand in the design. Or one boy.

Before Dietrich could speak, Gretchen's lips pressed against each other and her eyelids worried her eyelashes. "I'm sorry," she explained, "you know I adopted that

boy, Jeremiah, and last night he was hurt when he was playing. There's a giant living in the woods and controversy in the cities. I worry for the future."

"I understand," Dietrich replied, and Gretchen's smile, which had been so humane as to suggest demon worship to her neighbors, returned to her face as quickly as it had fled.

"Hey, you have a nice voice!"

"Thank you. You have a nice herd of hogs." Now Gretchen laughed.

"I understand you have taken orders in Marburg. Should I call you 'brother'?"

"Almost. I hope to become a Priest as soon as I can read better."

"It would be funny to call you Brother Dietrich. Of course, the only brothers and sisters I've known have been pigs but, even so, well, I haven't kissed them."

Now Dietrich laughed. "If it helps," he answered when he had finished chuckling, "I am pretty sure looking back that the affection in your kiss was meant for Frau Braun."

"It's hard to know. Both of you fainted."

The two chuckled together easily, and blushed together, too.

"I came by to look in on you. I met the giant with Vater Karl. He's human enough."

"That's what I was afraid of," said the mistress of swine.

"Vater Karl is with him now."

"Is it safe?"

"Seems to be. Good Heinrich was there, but went to his chores once Vater Karl asked to be alone with the stranger. But Otto the wheelwright stayed. That's protection of a sort."

"Is Otto Sober?"

“Fairly. To be honest, I’m not sure if he stayed to protect the priest or if he just couldn’t remember the way downhill.”

“Hmm.”

The two sat quietly in the only chairs with the one table between them. The silence wasn’t irritating or uncomfortable. It was, in fact what they shared in common. Gretchen got up and went to her stove to make a tea of local herbs. Once the fire was lit, she asked Dietrich, without looking back at him, “Did you get what you want, joining the church?”

After a pause, he answered, “It was the best thing for me. Everything was so obvious here in Wolfshausen I hated showing my face. At Saint Elizabeth’s church, I understand nothing and can’t bare myself enough.”

“It’s funny about getting what you want. I wanted an heir for my father and now I have this fine boy with my name. I’ve never been so discontented. Tell me about the giant.”

“What do you want to know? He’s as big as a bear, that’s true. The top of his head was shaved not long ago, which is interesting. It’s hard to believe he used to be a monk. All the monks in Marburg seem so tame.”

“Is he pleasant to look at?”

Dietrich frowned. “He is. Smells like a sack full of spoiled sausage, though.”

“Hmm,” Gretchen answered. “Is he very pious?”

“He’s no Frau Braun. Probably not even as holy as Vater Johann from Elizabeth’s Church, who, himself, has a past. The giant said he’d tried marriage a couple of times while still in the monastery. He’s also Moravian.”

“I see,” she answered. This time, the silence was more like its cousins.

After a long pair of minutes, Dietrich spoke. “How is Jeremiah, after his scare.”

“He’s ok,” Gretchen responded, her voice quavering a little. “I have been three times to see him at Vater Karl’s since last night. The barber says he shouldn’t walk until the bruises on his head subside. It would be nice to have him home.

“If you like, I could go with you and carry him back.”

“That would be wonderful!” Gretchen answered. “Can you also carry his boar?”

They both laughed, and then Gretchen fed the herd some grain she’d collected from the hillside. She cleaned off the water trough and remembered when she’d caught the pack of witch-hunters in her home, looking for Dietrich’s ritualized remains.

“You know,” she told the helpful priest-in-training, “if I were a better witch, the boy would be right here with me, eating soup from your bones.”

“And if I were a proper priest, like Vater Johann, he’d have brothers to help finish the stew.”

The two made the trip to Vater Karl’s apartment and found the boy and his boar attended by the alehouse master. Jeremiah was slightly feverish and heroically bored. To save the boy’s strength, Dietrich carried him home while Jeremiah, to burn energy, kicked the entire way. More than once, Dietmärchen bit Dietrich’s heels. When the entire riot reached the cottage once more, Gretchen thanked her new old friend who turned sharply and started the long walk back to his home in the church at Marburg.