

The Reformer

A novel based on the life of Martin Luther

by
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Luther and the Jews

Martin Luther approaches a Jewish woman.

He is clothed in a white robe and a green scarf, the same outfit he had on when delivering the Sunday mass. A black cross necklace, hanging from his neck, shines on the clean dress. He tries to find his way through the many devout Germans who are leaving the church.

Carrying a basket, the Jewish woman was passing by the church when the Christian commoners swarmed out. Bad timing. Sixteen-century Christian Europe is already openly intolerant of the Jewish faith. Among a bunch of laypeople who probably have just received a fresh dose of hate speech is the least safe place to be for a Jewish woman.

Holding her basket tight, she walks faster to avoid the crowd. The batch of churchgoers leaving from the church's side door, however, covers the street before she can leave the area. She turns to go back. Too late already. The rushing Christians are now everywhere. The Jewish woman swallows hard against the lump in her throat. Tucking her basket under her coat, she looks in doorways, in alleys, and at each of the faces around her, keeping watch of her surroundings.

A sturdy peasant prepares to thank Luther for the inspiring sermon. Pushing people aside, Luther makes his way through the crowd. His serious face is free of any emotions. Gulping in fear, the man moves aside to give him the way. Someone is going to get hurt today, the man thinks.

Only if I could survive today, the Jewish woman thinks while warily finds her way out of the crowd. Surrounded by people, her gaze wanders, never quite settling on any face. Suddenly, her eyes fall on Luther, his clerical outfit, and his unyielding look. Her heart sinks into her stomach.

As her gaze is on Luther, someone shoves her to the ground and disappears into the crowd. Her face partly covered in mud, she sits up. Helplessly sitting on the cobblestone street, she stares at her basket's contents that are spread all over the mud. She doesn't say a word, but her eyes are screaming 'why?'.

The indifferent crowd simply walks by. Not expecting much compassion from the followers of Jesus Christ, she does not bother to look up at them.

She is staring at her hands covered in mud when a tall shadow casts over her. She looks up. The angry priest is standing right above her, almost blocking the sun. Having nowhere to escape, she is frozen, staring at Luther. Luther's black cross necklace hangs in the air when he leans forwards. Frightened by that, she shrinks back on the mud.

"All's well," Luther says, his kind voice contradicting his inexpressive face. "All's well. You'll be safe."

She is however suspicious of Luther's intentions; why would she not? To her surprise, Luther kneels on the muddy ground, now the same height as her. Looking into her eyes, Luther offers a forced smile.

"What the hell do you want from me?" she cries.

Luther lets the smile wear off, breaks the gaze, and takes the basket. He then picks up the muddy fruits one by one. Rubbing them against his garment, he cleans the dirt off and then puts the fruits back into the basket. His clergy robe is getting quite dirty, but Luther does not seem to mind.

Surprised, the Jewish woman tries to memorize the face of the strange priest who is redefining what it means to be a good Christian.

His gaze down, Luther hands over the basket to her. Still filled with doubt, the Jewish woman does not dare to make a move. She looks down when Luther offers a smile.

As her gaze is on the ground, she considers Luther's last look. The basket is hanging in the air. The image of Luther's smile begins to seem genuine. Her gaze still down, she gingerly extends her hand to take the basket. Before pulling the basket, she looks up at Luther; it was meant to be a quick glance, but her eyes freeze on his face when she realizes that tears are flowing down it.

"I'm sorry," Luther says as his head hangs down. He looks up. There is sincerity in his crying eyes. "I swear to my Lord that someday you'll see nothing from a Christian but Christian love; someday soon, I swear."

Without saying a word, the woman pulls the basket. She then swiftly gets off the muddy ground to leave, cautiously optimistic.

Luther is still kneeling on the ground when she leaves. As she is getting farther away, she remembers Luther's face; the bitter smile, the tears, and the eyes. There was something in his sincere eyes that makes us want to believe in a bright future for the Jews in Germany. But we already know the holocaust's history, don't we? What happens in between, nevertheless, is quite complicated and a fascinating part of history to learn about.

Once upon a time in Germany

What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews?

First to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians...

Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed... they might be lodged under a roof or in a barn, like the gypsies. This will bring home to them that they are not masters in our country...

Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them.

As horrible as it sounds, this is what happened once upon a time in Germany. And no, this is not about the holocaust. Same location, same minority, but different time periods. What you just read was an excerpt from 'On the Jews and Their Lies' written in 1543, and the author is no one but the most influential reformer of the millennium, Martin Luther.

That is it then, you might say; the hard proof that Martin Luther was on the wrong side of the history; He said what Nazi Germany later did! That alone is sufficient to discredit Martin Luther and his entire reformation.

Well, before jumping into any conclusion so fast, you might want to read the following excerpt as well.

We should remember that we are but Gentiles, while the Jews are of the lineage of Christ. We are aliens and in-laws; they are blood relatives, cousins, and brothers of our Lord.

Therefore, if one is to boast of flesh and blood the Jews are actually nearer to Christ than we are...

If we really want to help them, we must be guided in our dealings with them not by papal law but by the law of Christian love. We must receive them cordially, and permit them to trade and work with us, that they may have occasion and opportunity to associate with us, hear our Christian teaching, and witness our Christian life. If some of them should prove stiff-necked, what of it? After all, we ourselves are not all good Christians either.

Who the author is, you ask? Martin Luther, the very same. This was an excerpt from the 'That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew' speech from the early years of his reformation. What makes this speech exceptionally heartwarming is that it was delivered in 1523, where the Jewish minority were subject to systemic hatred conducted by Christian-majority Europe. The context is best described using Luther's own words written in 1519:

Absurd theologians defend hatred for the Jews. ... What Jew would consent to enter our ranks when he sees the cruelty and enmity we wreak on them—that in our behavior toward them we less resemble Christians than beasts.

It was during this horrible period where Martin Luther rose to be a savior for the Jews, their promised Messiah if you will. So, what happened? How did the savior turn to become the prosecutor? How could such sharp contradictory characters live within the same person?

The following story is an attempt to shed some light on the complex and at some points self-contradictory character of Martin Luther. The story is short, focusing on highlights as

well as lowlights of his reformation. The monologues are verbatim copies from Luther's books, articles, and sermons. Preserving historical accuracy has been the chief goal in formulating conversations missing from recorded history.

The appendix will present the historical facts that were the basis of this story along with their references. We encourage you to do your own research and verify them by yourself.

It is worth noting that there was no country named Germany in the 16th century. The region in which the story happens was Saxony, which is a state in today's Germany.

Run Luther, Run

Martin Luther is fearlessly prepared to face destiny. The shrieks of running horses echoes through the peaceful Beech trees, signaling the most important event of 1521.

Carrying the most wanted man in the Holy Roman Empire, a horse-drawn carriage runs through the woods. Operating at top speed, the driver has only one impossible mission: get Martin Luther to Wittenberg, alive. Luther, however, is surprisingly calm. His usual emotionless face does not reflect the horror that is awaiting him. At some level, he always knew that the day would come when he rebelled against the most powerful man in the Holy Roman Empire, Pope Leo X. He has sacrificed everything for his faith—and his faith only—and now is the day to confront the consequences. In sharp contrast with Luther, the color is drained from the face of his companion. Paralyzed with fear, the skinny old man stares into space with widened eyes, mouth half-open.

The coach's wheels wobble on their axles; they are surely not made for such speed. The driver whips the horses to run faster. The light brown horses scream in pain.

The driver looks back. Although no one is there, he is still distressed. They must not be far behind. He whips the horses again; this time harder. The whip inflicts fresh wounds on their back, mixing the light brown hair with fresh, red blood. The poor horses run as fast as they can, but civilian horses are not made for a day like this.

A stone is shattered to pieces by the touch of a golden horseshoe worn by a black horse. This is not one of the civilian horses that are using every last ounce of their strength to save Luther's life. This is a warhorse leading a group of six. The warriors have their swords drawn from their scabbards; the swords that are ready to shed more blood. They seem unstoppable, whisking through the forest like a strong wind.

Far ahead, a thick tree branch blocks their way. They should slow down to maneuver around it. That, however, would give Luther a slightly higher chance to escape. The lead warrior, without slowing, holds his sword up. He charges closer and closer to the branch. *This is impossible; they should stop now before it is too late.* Right before hitting the thick branch, the warrior slashes it away with one swing of his sword, like he is executing a guillotine. The cut branch punches his shield before it gets thrown away to the side of the road. The warrior swiftly guides the small army past the obstruction and on to their next target.

As if he just sensed something, Luther's companion unconsciously touches his neck and then his head to ensure that they are still there. He sinks back to his seat, panting.

Luther, on the other hand, is bravely tranquil. He puts his hand on the companion's hand. A sense of peace is transferred to the companion's heart when he looks Luther in the eye. The companion is breathing slower now.

The face of an innocent baby deer reflects in the calm water of a small puddle. The water is crystal clear. Leaning forward, the baby deer drinks from it.

As she is drinking, her ears perk up and tilt toward the end of the road. The sound of horses approaching from far away is now audible. The galloping sound becomes louder and louder. The deer looks up and sees a big cloud of dust approaching. Following her instincts, she darts away.

In no time, the warriors appear through the dust. While passing, the horses' hoofs step over the puddle, turning its clear water into dirty mud.

The coach driver looks back to see if he can see the warriors yet. A cloud of dust approaching from far away. This is the end, the terrified driver thinks and whips the horses to run faster; but how much faster can they go?! The horses shriek from exhaustion.

The wheel collides with a stone. The coach shakes, bouncing left and right. "JESUS," the companion screams. His arms wrapped around Luther, he hugs him tightly from the side.

Luther, still calm, puts one arm on the companion's shoulder, trying to soothe him. As the companion is in his arm, Luther looks back and notices the cloud of dust getting closer and closer. That frightens him a bit. He manages to keep it together though. He has to be brave for both of them.

"It shall be well," he says to the companion. "Have faith, my friend. Have faith."

"Martin Luther," a hostile voice calls.

Recognizing the voice, Luther turns his head toward it.

Flashback to a few days ago.

Diet of Worms

"Martin Luther," Johann Eck calls. Luther turns his head toward him.

Luther stands tall in an imperial assembly known as the Diet of Worms. Held in the city of Worms, the assembly of the Holy Roman Empire is called by King Charles V, who himself is present. Although Pope Leo X, who has requested the assembly, is absent, Luther knows well that the Pope is the man behind the curtain.

Johann Eck, Luther's accuser, interrogates him with quite an aggressive tone. Eck has made a reputation for himself as an extremist prosecutor who takes joy in silencing indignant voices; today is Luther's turn.

The opposition between the two has been going on for quite a few years, but today is the first and last time that Eck confronts Luther face to face. The most troublesome rebel in the Holy Roman Empire is finally cornered and has no choice but to respond to Eck's questions. Theologian vs. theologian.

"Martin Luther," Johann Eck says loudly, "come then, answer the question of his majesty." Eck points to King Charles V. "Is this collection of books yours, and are you ready to revoke their heresies?"

With a pile of books on the stand before him, Eck turns to the crowd, which consists of bishops as well as government officials. Luther watches him throwing the books on the floor as he names each, like they are pieces of trash. "The 95 Theses, Resolutions Concerning the 95 Theses, On the Papacy at Rome, Address to the Christian Nobility, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and On the *Freedom* of a Christian." Each time a book is hurled to the floor, Luther's heart twinges as if someone is stabbing him in the chest.

Luther takes a few seconds to regain his temper. Closing his eyes, he reviews the plan. He then calmly opens his eyes and watches his companion nod when their eyes meet. Luther agrees with his eyes, takes a deep breath, and delivers his long, rehearsed response.

Luther starts slowly, "To answer your first question, yes they are all mine..." and goes on and on.

"Will you retract the doctrines therein?" Eck interrupts Luther, showing his impatience with Luther dancing around the subject.

Luther makes eye contact with his companion again. He decides to stick to the plan when the companion reassures him with a nod. He takes a deep breath and delivers another well-rehearsed reply, with an edge to his voice that wasn't there before—Luther is about to crack.

"My books are of three kinds..."

"Would you recant or not?" frustrated Eck shouts, cutting him off. "Deal plainly, not with a horned or ambiguous reply."

Although agitated by Eck's reaction, Luther must do his best to contain his emotions. If there is any diplomacy left under his rebellious exterior, this is the time and place to employ it. He scans the crowd, reading their frustrated faces. Their eyes demand a straight response. Feeling cornered by the many menacing glares in his direction, he realizes that he cannot get away with more diplomatic speeches.

Making his war face, Luther looks at his companion, who shakes his head. With his eyes, the companion begs Luther not to do what he is about to do.

Stricken by doubts, Luther turns his head down. This is the moment, he thinks; The moment to prove my faith, my integrity, no matter the consequences. When he decides to proceed, he draws in a deep breath, looks up, and gives a response that is no longer tactful.

"Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed."

The audience sits forward in their seats, staring. The emperor stops drinking red wine and slowly brings down the silver cup. The color drained from his face, the disappointed companion covers his frightened eyes with his palms; only if he could do the same with the ears.

"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason—for I do not trust either in the Pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves—I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God."

Luther takes a moment and then shouts in one breath the quote that will become the most known in the history of Protestantism: "*I cannot and will not recant anything.*" As he is panting, he continues, willing his voice calm. "... since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience." Luther surveys the crowd while taking a moment to regain his breath. "May God help me," he says finally, "Amen."

The court is filled with the murmur of the audience, stunned by Luther's outrageous response.

Wine has spilled on the ground after the emperor unconsciously crushed the silver cup that he was holding.

Eck turns his gaze back from the emperor's squinted eyes to Luther. Eck looks more disappointed than angry. Having nothing more to ask Luther, he goes to return to his seat. Before completely leaving the stand, he stops. After a hesitation, Eck turns to Luther and continues but with a softer, advisory tone.

"Martin, there is no one of the heresies which have torn the bosom of the church, which has not derived its origin from the various interpretations of the Scripture. The Bible itself is the arsenal whence each innovator has drawn his deceptive arguments."

Luther shows no indication of a change in his uncompromising look. Eck, looking disappointed, turns away and leaves the stand.

An awkward silence reigns the court and the stand, which is now empty of any challenger. The silly cough of an audience member is the only sound that dares to break the seemingly never-ending silence.

The archbishop, a diplomatic character, asks the emperor's permission and comes up to fill the Eck's place. Turning to Luther, he continues the interrogation.

"Suppose that we made from your books faithful extracts of articles we object to. Would you submit them to a council?"

Fearlessly rigid in his position, Luther's anger reignites when he looks at his books thrown on the floor. "I would not consent to submit them to a council," he responds, "for I am certain that the decrees of that council condemned the truth." Luther turns to the emperor, shouting at the top of his voice: "I would rather *lose my head* than abandon the divine word."

His face turned red from fury, multiple veins pop on the emperor's forehead. The man who sits at his lower right-hand side takes his eyes off the emperor's furious face and springs up from his seat, shrieking: "Traitor!!! Traitor!!!"

Luther boldly surveys the murmuring crowd's reaction to his stubbornness. Some cannot remain seated anymore. Each uses his own incomprehensible hand gesture to express his rage. Luther is relieved that those hands cannot reach his throat, for now at least. While pulling his hair, the companion watches them with frightened eyes.

"Gentlemen! Order! Order!" the archbishop yells.

Except for a few, the crowd becomes quiet. "Settle down, gentlemen," the archbishop yells at those few. "Settle down." He continues after a moment that the crowd is all quiet. "We, the elites of the Holy Roman Empire, gathered here to hear out Professor Luther's arguments in a civilized manner. So, let us act as such. Let the man explain himself," the archbishop says and turns to Luther.

"In what concerns the word of God and the faith," Luther continues to explain himself, "*every Christian* is as good a judge for *himself* as the *Pope* can be for *him*; for each man must live and die according to that faith. The word of God is the common heritage of the whole Christian world, each member of which is competent to explain it. The master must follow the disciple if the latter understands the word of God better than he himself does."

Having the hours-long interrogation failed at breaking Luther, the arch-chancellor, an old man who looks like a ruthless executioner but in chancellor cloth, finishes the assembly. "Since you have not chosen to listen to the counsels of his majesty and of the states of the empire, and to confess your errors, it is now for the emperor to act," he says while pointing to the emperor.

The emperor's face split into an evil grin.

The arch-chancellor turns back to Luther after he receives the signal from the emperor. "By his order," he declares to Luther, "I give you... twenty days, wherein to return to Wittenberg, *secure* under the imperial safe-conduct."

The emperor sneers when the arch-chancellor says the word 'secure'.

"If it's secure, then I'm an ass," the companion whispers into Luther's ear, his voice trembling. People have left the court, and only Luther and his companion remain. "We are dead already," the companion continues while shivering. "The Pope wants you dead; The emperor's soldiers will never let us reach home alive."

Imperial Safe Conduct!

A few days after the Diet of Worms, Luther and his companion leave the city of Worms in a horse-drawn carriage. The coach goes through the woods, escaping the warriors who ride tireless, black warhorses; they are not far away.

Shadows pass by the coach. "OH JESUS! They are here!" the companion screams.

Luther hears the driver stopping the horses. Shortly after, the coach comes to a full stop. The shivering companion shrinks away. His face blanched, he covers his mouth to stop the sound of his teeth chattering. Luther does not blame his craven reaction. Even Luther himself is no longer tranquil; who would be in the last moments before facing death?

There are a few moments of silence; the calm before the storm. Luther can hear nothing but his own heavy breathing. Hearing the sound of crunching leaves, Luther knows that one of the warriors is approaching. He manages to pull himself together and cautiously peeks outside the window, where he sees the reflection of light from a warrior's metal footwear. Luther flinches after he looks up and sees the warrior's sword. The companion cannot control himself anymore and hugs Luther from the back. Eyes dilated, Luther no longer can breathe.

The door breaks open with a sudden pull. "AAAAAH," the companion screams in a girly voice.

Luther senses the weight of the warrior's gaze on him. Taking a deep breath, Luther gathers the courage to look up at the warrior, who seems to be a high-ranking officer. To Luther's surprise, he kneels and says: "The soldiers of Prince Frederick III, Elector of Saxony are at your service. We are here to safely escort you to Wartburg castle before Emperor Charles's soldiers catch you."

Luther takes a relaxed breath, and his companion bursts into tears—tears of happiness.

Wartburg Castle

Luther, his companion, and the warrior are standing next to each other in the great hall of Wartburg castle. The hall is so big and relatively empty, that Luther feels it is a waste of space.

A hand armed with expensive rings rises before the three men, waving the warrior away. The warrior heads to the door after showing respect. He stops and looks back at the companion, who is still standing next to Luther. Pulling the companion's shirt, he shows the door with his head. Luther nods when the confused companion consults him with his eyes. The companion mocks the warrior's way of showing respect and follows him.

Luther takes his eyes off the owner of the ring-heavy hand and onto the two men leaving the hall. The hall being big, it takes a while for the two to reach the door. The door is shut behind them when they finally exit the hall. Still facing the door, Luther has no rush to look back at the hand laden with rings. There is a moment of silence.

"You are a lucky man, Luther," Luther hears, finally. "You have gained his majesty's favor."

Luther reluctantly turns his gaze back to the voice. "Say my sincere thanks to Prince Frederick," Luther says sarcastically, "for promising safe conduct if I would appear in the Diet of Worms, and also thank him for knowing that the promise is void and catches me before the Holy Roman Empire's soldiers do."

Pfaffinger, Frederick's treasurer, is sitting on, not a throne, but quite a fancy chair. He is a 55-ish-year-old man, with the sly eyes of a politician. Jewelry is hanging from every corner of his luxurious outfit. Although he chuckles, his eyes give away that he is upset by Luther's remark. "With a bitter tongue like that," Pfaffinger responds, "I'm not surprised that the Pope wants your *rebellious* head."

Pfaffinger, making a mirthless smile, stares at Luther. Luther is still analyzing the response to determine what kind of man he is dealing with. Atrocious dictators is what they are, Luther thinks; Emperor or Elector, they are all the same. Pfaffinger breaks the silence when gets no reaction. "But... you're still alive, aren't you?" he continues with a friendlier tone. "Come on, do sit please, join me for a drink. We should celebrate that you're safe and sound with us."

Pfaffinger pours red wine into two ornate silver cups that were waiting on the small table at his side. Sitting on the chair left of Pfaffinger, Luther picks up the silver cup. The contrast between the modesty of his chair and the extravagance of Pfaffinger's is striking.

Both men are waiting for the other to start. Holding the cup in his hands, Luther stares at his reflection in the wine instead of looking at Pfaffinger. Pfaffinger finally leans forward, to the point that his head is very near Luther's. "Charles once said," he whispers, "I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse." He takes a moment for that to sink in. "*German to my horse!*" he repeats slowly. "It is time for good German people to gain their dignity back—"

"And give it to Frederick III, Elector of Saxony."

This slaps Pfaffinger in the face. He seems upset but with no snappy response to deliver. Breathing heavily, he slowly leans back. For a few moments, he does nothing but taps his

fingers on the table. He suddenly springs up from his royal chair and steps forward a bit, backs onto Luther. "If the Pope had truly supported the candidacy of our prince," he yells, "*Frederick* would be sitting on the Holy Roman Emperor's throne." Pfaffinger turns to Luther, pointing at him. "Then you, my friend, would be speaking *freely* on German soil to common German people, and not being prosecuted by an *Italian* church, and escaping from the blade of a *Spanish* Emperor."

Panting through his nose, Pfaffinger tries to hide his shaking hand behind him when noticing Luther's staring eyes on it. Luther looks back at his reflection in the red wine.

A while after Pfaffinger regains his temper, he approaches Luther, leans down, holds his hands, and says: "The Pope has no power without the Emperor's support, nor would you without that of Frederick. Your reformation would die in its inception if the Elector of Saxony doesn't protect your church."

Luther is still staring at the cup instead of looking at Pfaffinger. "Have faith, Luther," Pfaffinger says, and with that Luther's attention is immediately grabbed. He looks up at Pfaffinger, right into his eyes. "We all must," Pfaffinger continues with a furtive smile. "The future of poor, common Germans is in your hand."

Pfaffinger and Luther's hands are joined together around the deluxe silver cup.

A Peasant's Life

Otto, a middle-aged peasant, works hard on his farm. He has been a farmer all his life, and through these years his main companion has been his only digging fork. They are both born to work on a farm and produce wheat; a destiny that is about to be rewritten.

Otto takes a moment to clean the sweat off his forehead. The light hurts his eyes when he looks up at the sun. The scorching heat beats down harder on Otto today, but he does not mind. He is pleased about the harvest this season, and the entertaining thought of how much he will make tomorrow when selling them in the market makes the cruelty of the sun more tolerable. Without missing a beat, he gets back to his hard work.

The fork hits something hard that is buried in the ground. Otto pushes harder and harder, but the fork's sharp points cannot penetrate through. He has a bad feeling about this. Otto looks around for help but does not find his son; he has to face it himself. After stabbing his fork into the ground at his side, he kneels and uses his bare hands to remove the soil around the object.

Judging from its top, it seems to be a giant, shy log that is hiding deep in the ground. Otto's farm is no place for hide and seek. The log has to be removed, and Otto's bare hands seem to be the only solution. He holds a grip on the log's top and gives it a good pull, but the log is stubborn. He repositions his hands, holds a tighter grip, and tries again, this time with all his power. Before the log finally obliges, Otto's hand slips and he tumbles on his butt.

Otto proudly watches the surrounded log when he notices that it is smeared in blood! As the joy of victory fades away, he feels tremendous pain in his palm. Before facing its defeat, the malicious log has left a deep wound in Otto's palm. He takes a good look at the wound, where fresh blood is in a hurry to leave his body. Taking off his head kerchief, he wraps it tight against the wound. He winces from the pain when the kerchief touches the wound.

Otto gets up, takes his digging fork, and gets back to the hard work as if nothing has happened.

"First thing I'll do after selling the crops," Otto thinks, "I buy a new sickle. No, first I'll fix the leak on the roof, then I'll buy a new sickle."

Drowned in his thoughts, Otto suddenly hears crows screeching. He looks up, nervous. Many pigeons and sparrows fly off a tree that has been their home for many years. In their place, a crow as dark as night is sitting on a branch. A bloody white feather that is stuck to its bill tells of the injustice that has occurred. The yet-free sparrows are loudly singing a depressing symphony, partly mourning for their brother who was today's victim and partly for tomorrow when their turn will come. The black crow is still tasting the red blood that it has just shed.

A black cross necklace hangs on a red outfit. The pastor who is wearing it, Helmut, is riding in a cart. A creepy smile appears on his face when he touches the barley crops he is

sitting on. His worker, who is, in contrast, wearing worn-out clothes, shamefully fights doubts while riding the cart.

The cart stops.

Otto hears his son calling him from far away. Taking his confused eyes off the crow, he turns to his son but still cannot hear him well. He worryingly watches his son running toward him. "Dad!" he hears after a few moments. "They are here! They are here!"

Otto drops his fork to the ground and takes off running, past his son, toward where his son came from. He does not need to hear more as he can already guess the tragedy that awaits him. The son also turns back and chases after him. Soon, he can see the cart, and then Helmut, who oversees Otto's crops being taken away. The worker loads the cart with Otto's wheat harvest that was packaged and ready to be sent to the market.

"Father!" Otto cries from far away. "Father!"

Helmut turns and waits a few seconds for Otto. Otto arrives finally, exhausted and out of breath.

"Oh, good afternoon, son," Helmut says with a cheerful tone, "God bless you! Fine harvest this year!" he says and turns away.

Otto, still panting, needs to take a few more breaths before he can talk again.

"Father! I don't... I... I can't... Father! ... I need your help."

"Oh, son! Now is not a good time for a confession," Helmut says while pointing to the worker loading the cart.

"No, not that Father."

Helmut gets curious.

"Father, is there any way you could take less tithe this year?" Otto begs while pointing to the worker loading the cart. "The prince has raised the taxes, *again*, and my family—"

Otto's son arrives as well and stands next to him.

Helmut, half surprised, half upset, interrupts. "My son! The tithe is by definition one-tenth of crops," he says in a formal voice, "and it is not up to me or any other pastor to change the amount. This comes from God."

Otto's embarrassed eyes look away. "But Father! I can't—"

Helmut interrupts him again, and this time takes a harsher, more serious tone.

"Do I need to remind you that the tithe belongs to the church of God, and avoiding it would make you *excommunicated*?"

Otto shakes from fear when he hears the word 'excommunicated'. He takes a step back. "No, no, no, Father. I don't want to... I didn't mean to... It's just that with taxes going up each year, soon I will not be able to even afford rent, I would lose my land. I'd become just a serf here, basically a slave."

Helmut seems to be a bit sorry for Otto. Perhaps there is hope.

"I am a god-fearing man, Father," Otto continues, "but I want to remain God's freeman as He created me so."

There are a few moments of silence. Helmut looks at the innocent eyes of Otto's son begging for mercy. He then lets out a long sigh of disappointment and turns back to Otto. "We *all* are servants of God, son. I am serving by doing His work at the church, and your duty is to serve Him here... and to obey your lord."

Noticing that the worker has finished loading the cart, without saying another word, Helmut turns away from Otto and approaches the cart.

"I am sorry!" the worker whispers while passing by Otto.

Instead of sitting at the front, Helmut sits at the back on Otto's the crops. After a few moments, when Helmut gets comfortable, he turns to Otto and finishes his short sermon. "Have faith, my son, have faith. And don't let the devil use greed to get into your heart."

The cart leaves; and the crops with it. The black cross necklace bounces on Helmut's neck.

Otto, with tearful eyes, watches the cart loaded with his crops getting further and further away. His son painfully observes the tears on his dad's face, but there is nothing he could do. Holding under his dad's arm, the son unsuccessfully tries to hold Otto when he falls to his knees. His father's cry having burst out, the son helplessly eyes him mourning for their misery. Otto's pitiful sorrow slowly turns into anger. He clenches his fist and angrily squeezes on the kerchief that is wrapped around his fresh wound.

Not too far away, Otto's digging fork awaits him. Its sharp points, however, make it look more like an angry claw, ready to tear.

Hanging by a thread, a piglet's head is bouncing left and right in the town's only butchery.

Partly fragile and partly on edge, Otto is completely phased out, staring at the dead piglet's head as if looking into a mirror. He feels related to the executed piglet and its pain.

The confused butcher, a man with an imperial mustache and thick arms, was gazing at Otto. He curiously follows Otto's eyes and finds the piglet's head. He leans forward to have a visual of the bouncing piglet and then joins Otto in staring at it, hoping to figure what is so mesmerizing about it. After a few moments that he gives up, he turns his gaze back at Otto. Otto comes off as a weirdo to him.

"Are you buying or what?"

Otto comes back to attention, still on edge. He looks at his palm, where two lonely coins are preparing for a farewell. His palm is still wrapped with the kerchief, which is now reddish-brown, having the blood dried up in the scorching sun. He looks up at the pieces of meat that are hung in front of the butchery. The biggest piece shines out among the others. That should feed the family for the whole week, Otto thinks. That sweet thought does not last long when he takes another look at the two lonely coins on his palm. He sighs and points to a piece that is considerably smaller than the others. "How much?" he asks in a frail voice.

"Two pfennigs."

Otto takes another long and dragging look at his money. He is not able to say goodbye to them, not at least to both of them. "Give me half," he says finally while throwing one of the coins on the table.

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