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Last Will
by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*Hear the loud alarum bells—
Brazen bells!
What tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!
In the startled ear of night
How they scream out their affright!
Edgar Allan Poe, *The Bells**

In the name of Jesus the Lord, Amen.

I, Georg Theodor Ernsting, a landowner in Oberkochen, near the Imperial City of Aalen, being of sound mind and memory, and considering the poor state of my health, make this my Last Will and Testament.

First, I recommend my soul to God that gave it and my body to the earth in such a manner as shall please God to order.

I am the holder of a large estate that lies halfway between the cities of Oberkochen and Aalen. Said estate was granted by Duke Ulrich von Urach to my paternal grandfather in 1499.

After my just debts are fully satisfied and paid, then that estate and all other lands, sums of money, goods and chattels whatsoever as shall belong to me at the time of my decease, I bequeath the same unto my sole surviving son Hermann Ernsting, currently residing in Winterthur, and his heirs forever, and I hereby appoint the said Hermann Ernsting Executor of

this my Last Will and Testament, revoking all former and other Wills by me at any time heretofore made.

1

Georg Ernsting awoke with a start in the middle of the night. He lay in bed for a moment until the clamor he was hearing penetrated his consciousness. Church bells! Why? He struggled out of bed and made his way to the hall, where he nearly bumped into his butler.

"Franz! Go see what that noise is."

Franz climbed out on the roof. After only a moment look, he was back.

"Master! There are flames coming from Aalen! All the church bells in town seem to be ringing."

"Quickly! Go rouse everyone. That can only mean trouble."

Within minutes, the family and the servants began to collect downstairs. Hans, the groom, was one of the first servants to arrive.

Ernsting cleared his throat. "Hans, go saddle a horse. Ride to town and see what's happening. Come back as soon as you can."

The young man was already moving toward the door.

"And be careful!" Ernsting called after him.

Hours later the lad returned, shaking with distress. "Aalen is in flames" he reported breathlessly. "Protestant and Catholic troops are engaged in hand to hand combat. There is looting in the areas that haven't been reached by the flames." He stopped for a moment to catch his breath and then added: "I barely escaped being captured by some foreign mercenaries fighting for the Catholics."

Ernsting was scared but saw no reason for panic. There had been many close scrapes during the interminable war between the Protestant and Catholic German princes. He assembled his servants again and addressed them:

“All of you, go away at once. Pack a few clothes and get as far from this area as you think is safe. Warn the tenant farmers along the way. Take our horses and mules and as much of the other livestock as you can. Send someone to Oberkochen in a couple of days and wait for word from me that it is safe to return.”

“Franz and Mathilda, I need you to stay with us to take care of the house.” Mathilda, Franz’s wife, was the cook and could take on other household duties.

“Hermann, if there are soldiers approaching, run to the mill by the river’s edge and hide there until Franz or I come to fetch you. If the situation gets dangerous, we’ll set a fire in the main hall. If you see smoke coming out of the chimney, that will be the sign of imminent danger. If that happens, you must sneak out from the postern on the back of the mill, plunge into the river, and swim or drift away to safety. On no account should you come back to the house until you get the all clear signal. Ursula...”

Ernsting’s wife Ursula cut him off: “I will stay here with you, where I belong.”

Ernsting saw determination in his wife’s eyes and said no more.

2

Ernsting’s nervous wait ended when one of his tenants barged into the manor house. “Sir, the foreign mercenaries are approaching. They are coming on foot, marching towards Oberkochen to the south.”

“Have you seen them?”

“Yes. And heard them. They are making a big ruckus. They must have raided all the taverns in Aalen. Their cries alerted us.”

“You must flee at once.” Turning to the servants, Ernsting ordered: “You go south with the farmers, right now! Hermann, run to the mill!” The youth made it to his hideaway as the first mercenaries emerged from a bend on the road.

The Croats started banging on the main door of the manor house. Ernsting had ordered Franz to lock and bolt the door but, as the pounding increased, he realized that there were windows on the lower floor through which the mob could force an entrance if they chose. Reluctantly, he directed: “Franz, please open the door.”

Twenty or so Croats barged into the hallway. They looked around, startled at the house’s nice appointments, which they pointed out to each other. Their enchantment was broken when their leader – a grizzled, menacing elder wearing a fur hat, long red tunic, pantaloons encased in high boots, and a wool scarf around his massive neck – waved a carbine at Ernsting and demanded in barbaric German:

“Money – give the money!”

This was the usual course of events during wartime army intrusions. Ernsting had already fetched a bag full of florins, and handed it to the Croat leader. He looked at the bag contemptuously, opened it, and emptied it on the dinner table. He scowled:

“Where is rest?”

“There is no more!”

The man jerked Ernsting violently and hurled him to the floor. “They all say same!” he snarled, and bellowed to his men something that apparently meant: “Search the house!”

The Croats began going through every room, snatching anything that appeared to be of value. They started in the bedrooms, where they removed the bedsheets to become improvised bags for their loot and knifed the beds looking for hidden items. They began filling the bags with food, dishes, silverware, tapestries, rugs and wall hangings, clothes, anything that was portable. Each soldier became loaded with purloined items, but their leader was not satisfied.

“No gold or silver or jewels. Where?” He lifted Ernsting off the floor and shook him energetically. “We don’t have any!” shrieked Ernsting.

When the soldier continued to shake her husband, Ursula started pummeling the Croat on his back, bellowing: “Let him go!” He turned angrily but was interrupted by a commotion from the kitchen, from which came screams in a foreign language. The Croat dropped Ernsting and went back to investigate.

Ernsting turned deathly pale, guessing what had happened. One of the soldiers must have found the concealed door in one of the cupboards, had forced it open, and had retrieved the satchels that contained the family’s most valuable possessions: coins, precious stones set in bracelets, necklaces and rings, golden cups and platters, and other treasures the Ernstings had accumulated in over a century. “We’re ruined” he told himself in despair.

Ernsting came back to his senses and spoke hurriedly to Ursula: “They are fighting over the satchels! Get out now, quickly! Run to the mill and hide with Hermann!” She shook her head. “They would go looking for me and might find us both.”

“Please, dear, you must try to save your life!”

She answered resolutely: “I will not endanger our son’s life to save mine. And my place is here, with you!”

A few moments later, the Croatian leader stormed back. He had a gash across one cheek and his tunic was smeared with someone's blood. "It's all your fault, swine! You'll pay!"

He lunged at Ernsting, rage in his eyes, and gave him a savage punch that left his victim dazed and bleeding through the nose. Ernsting was shaking with fear and did not attempt to defend himself.

The officer then threw Ursula on the floor, covering her with his body as he lifted her skirt and his tunic.

Franz had stood in the middle of the hall, his arm protectively around Mathilda, shielding her from the soldiers. When he saw the Croatian officer attacking his mistress, he pushed Mathilda aside and lunged at the officer. There was a shot and one of the soldiers stood at the threshold of the kitchen, holding a smoking carbine. Franz fell to the floor, life escaping through a large hole on the back of his topcoat.

The officer and his soldiers then took turns raping both women. Ernsting tried to get up and was immobilized by two soldiers. Mathilda let out a series of agonized screeches as she was attacked. Ursula, however, lay stoically beneath the brutish men.

The rapes continued. Each time, Ursula inched her body and that of her assailant towards a standing candelabrum that illuminated the entry way. The candelabrum held four candles that cast a ghastly play of lights and shadows on the scene.

As one of the last soldiers prepared to take his pleasure with Ursula, she kicked the candelabrum, which tumbled to the ground. The candles were dislodged by the impact and scattered away. The flame on one of them went off, but the other two remained lighted. With a last effort, Ursula further kicked one of the burning candles towards the fireplace. It rolled against the dry kindling at the base of the wood pile, causing it to ignite.

The other lit candle ended up flushed against the baseboard, which began burning. The leader of the Croats chortled to his troops: “Burn the place down.” After a moment, he added: “And kill everybody.”

His soldiers then slit the throats of the women. Ursula received the knife silently, as if at peace with herself. One of the soldiers turned Franz’s dead body with one foot. Another soldier hit Ernsting brutally on the head twice with the butt of his carbine. He started bleeding through the nose, the side of the head, and the mouth, and lay on the floor, not moving.

3

Hermann had seen the Croats enter the manor and remain inside for a long time. Then, as smoke began drifting from the chimney, he realized he was in mortal danger. He vacillated for a moment; should he go back to the house and try to help his parents? Then he remembered his father’s admonition and, swallowing a sob, ran down from the loft, opened the postern and made to flee at the same time Croats came out of the vandalized house.

They saw him and started in pursuit, shooting their carbines. Hermann plunged into the river and made progress underwater until his lungs were about to burst, whereupon he emerged. The soldiers were gone. He resumed swimming away as rapidly as he could.

The Kocher runs to the north and, as he made his escape, Hermann was swimming towards the ruins of Aalen. He arrived in town, exhausted, and began looking for help. To no avail: the town was deserted and reduced to smoldering ruins. Hermann walked aimlessly west of Aalen along the river Rems until he came upon a farm where he was given shelter and taken in later as a goatherd. Eventually, Hermann managed to flee from Germany and ended up living in Winterthur, in the land of the Schweizer. He would always remember his homeland with rancor and sorrow.

The Croats headed south towards Oberkochen, intending to continue their pillage there. On their way, they set afire the fields that lay on the side of the road. Then they doubled back and set upon the livestock pens, butchering pigs and sheep and carrying bloody chunks of meat with them for later consumption.

They were met at the Oberkotchen town gates by Swedish troops supporting the Protestants. Battle was joined, and at its conclusion all the Croatian soldiers had been killed or captured. The Swedes continued their march north, now carrying several Croatian prisoners of war.

Halfway on their route to Aalen, the Swedes arrived at what was left of Ernsting's estate. Before that fateful day, corn had been grown and ground in the mill; the estate also grew wheat, tobacco, plums, cherries and asparagus. There was a small vineyard that produced fine grapes, which were sold to wine merchants in Strasburg. Now many of the crops had been burned or trampled by the Croats and what remained was in disarray after the hasty departure of Ernsting's tenants.

Arriving at the manor house, the Swedish captain dispatched three of his soldiers to survey the property. "Be careful" he directed. "There may be Croats hiding in the ruins."

One of the soldiers came back and reported: "My Captain, it's awful in there. It reeks of smoke and blood. The interior of the house is almost totally destroyed. The walls of every room are charred as if deliberately torched. Large pieces of furniture like the main dining room table have been hacked to pieces. Holes have been gouged in places where things like paintings used to hang. It looks as if these criminals took pleasure in destroying what appears to have been a beautiful home..."

“Did you find anyone alive?”

The soldier’s face contorted in disgust. “There is a dead man lying on a pool of blood, shot in the back. There are two middle-aged women with their throats cut, clearly the victims of multiple rapes. And there is a man that appears to be on the verge of death, still bleeding from wounds to the head...”

The captain interrupted him: “Go get the medic and see if the one that’s still alive can be helped. After that, look around the property for a suitable place to bury the deceased. We’ll send to Oberkochen for a minister to perform services for the dead.”

As the soldier walked away, the Swedish captain murmured: “This is the worst part of war. The innocent people that are caught in the middle.”

5

The Swedish army made camp on a meadow north of the ruins of Aalen. One of its tents was turned into a field infirmary where a couple of Swedish soldiers were treated for wounds received in the skirmish with the Croats. Ernsting was brought to the tent and placed on a cot, where he was ministered by a healer who warned the captain: “I’ll do what I can for him, but he may not live the night.”

“Do what you can. We are Christians and can’t let the poor man die unattended.”

Miraculously, Ernsting did not die. For several days he lay, drifting in and out of consciousness. His mind was unfocused every time he woke, but then the memory of his ordeal came before his eyes and he cried desperately, remembering the agony of his brave wife and all the things that had been taken from him in only a few minutes. He ached greatly from his wounds, but suffered even more from his unimaginable loss.

He had become weak as a newborn baby but, on the second week of his convalescence, was able to get up and walk slowly around the camp. He discovered that the infirmary was only a few paces from a shepherd's hut where several Croatian soldiers were being held. Talking to the sentinels guarding the hut he learned, with much difficulty for their German was poor, that there were seven of them, including their leader. The sentinels did not know what the Swedes planned to do with the captives.

Ernsting went on wobbly legs to the large tent that served as headquarter to the Swedish army. There, sitting on stools beneath a large blue and yellow flag, he found the captain of the Swedes conferring with his aides. Startled, they asked the wounded man for his business.

“Sire, as you remember, your troops rescued me from the ruins of my home days ago. I’ve just learned that you are holding as prisoners the mercenaries who killed my wife and destroyed all that I own.”

“That’s true. They are being kept pending exchange for Protestant soldiers held by the Imperial forces.”

“But Sire, these are monsters, heartless bandits. They must be put to death at once.”

“I see your pain, my good man. But that’s the nature of war. Those men are currently a valuable commodity. Maybe someday you will get the justice you seek, but for now they must remain alive. I’m sorry for all your losses.”

Ernsting left the tent with hate flaring up in his heart like a midsummer bonfire. He began talking to himself, brooding over all that had been lost through the villainy of the barbarians. “They must pay for their crimes” he would say over and over, choking with rage. “I must be avenged” he repeated.

Afterwards, he would make the rounds around the camp every day, filching supplies that could be set afire with the intent of perhaps roasting the Croats' prison as they had done to his home. He went around unnoticed and those who looked at him only saw a feeble old man, walking haltingly, clutching a cane.

6

The Swedes had been ordered to stay at their camp and wait to join forces with a mercenary army of Scots that was marching east. The mercenaries, however, were more interested in looting and plundering the countryside than in making war, so their progress was slow and the Swedes became restless with boredom.

At the end of three weeks the monotony was broken by the arrival of an army. But it was not the expected Scottish mercenaries, but Empire forces marching from Munich. When the Imperial soldiers reached a spot within range of the Swedish positions, they set up their heavy artillery and began releasing volley after volley of cannon fire throughout the camp.

After an initial scramble to assume a defensive stance, the Swedes emplaced their leather guns and began returning fire. The battle raged amidst hellish noise and confusion, and while the two sides were shooting at each other Ernsting stood outside the infirmary debating whether to hide or flee. As he watched the cannon exchanges, an idea blossomed in his mind.

Trying to duck the incoming projectiles and stay out of the way of the defenders, Ernsting gingerly made his way towards the Swedish headquarter tent. It was deserted, since all officers had gone to the front. But there it still was: the very large Swedish flag, blue emblazoned with a yellow cross, that was intended to be carried at the vanguard of the troops as they marched. It hung on a light wooden flagpole. Ernsting seized both items and left the tent without being noticed.

Arriving in front of the hut where the prisoners were held, Ernsting found himself needing to improvise. His aim was to get to the rooftop, but there were no ladders.

He placed the flag by the door of the hut and began searching quickly around the camp. “This walk will surely kill me,” he lamented, but pressed on. After a lot of rummaging, he found a couple of empty beer barrels. He dragged them to the prisoners’ hut and climbed on them. He tottered dangerously, but somehow managed not to fall, and with a supreme effort was able to hoist the flagpole above his head and force it down on the straw roof of the hut.

Inside, the prisoners heard the noises on the roof and sought to attract the visitor’s attention, screaming on top of their lungs in Croatian and pig German. Ernsting gleefully ignored their cries.

Attempting to get down, he lost balance and fell off the barrels onto the ground. From there, he looked up at his handiwork. The hut now sported an oversize blue and yellow flag that fluttered in the afternoon breeze.

Ernsting was too weak to get back on his feet. He crawled to a nearby tree and was able to prop himself up and rise. He then got away, limping.

He retreated barely in time, for the cannons of the Imperial Army were already trained on the presumed Swedish headquarters and in less than fifteen minutes had landed several shots on the structure, pulverizing it.

Ernsting was too far to hear the cries of the trapped mercenaries as the cannon balls impacted on their prison but he smacked his lips, savoring the bittersweet taste of his revenge. “I wish I could have done it by my own hand” he told himself with regret.

The Imperial forces were advancing, intent on overrunning the Swedish positions. Ernsting was expecting to die at the hands of the attackers, but he did not care, for his vengeance had been accomplished.

At that moment, the long-awaited Scottish mercenaries started pouring in from the west into the battle scene and soon they and the Swedes were coming close to surrounding the Imperial army. The Imperial forces retreated hastily, leaving their cannons and a number of dead and wounded behind.

When the Swedish troops returned to the shepherd’s hut, they found the seven captives dead amidst the rubble. Some had been crushed by the collapsing building; others were horribly burned, for the remains of the hut had caught fire. Their leader had made it to the door, only to be struck by a roof beam. He probably asphyxiated as smoke engulfed the entire area.

The Swedes also found remnants of their flag, ripped to shreds and partially burned. Nobody could figure out how the flag had gotten there.

Ernsting had lost the will to live but, nonetheless, life asserted itself and he continued to make a slow recovery in the care of the Swedes. They and the Scottish mercenaries marched away to other battles and, for lack of anything better to do, Ernsting returned to the manor to salvage the little that was left of his holdings.

His only capital was some money held by Stuttgart wine merchants in payment for grape sales. It was this sum, plus the help of the returning tenants, which allowed Ernsting to reconstruct a small portion of what once had been a wealthy estate. He worked tirelessly for the next five years replanting crops, repairing damage to the property, raising livestock, and returning the manor house to a barely livable condition.

He had decided to rebuild his home in memory of his beloved wife. From time to time, he would thank the Lord that Hermann had been able to escape. Then, he would chastise himself: “Why was I the only one spared? Why did I receive that boon, which I did not deserve?”

To the end, his heart was heavy with grief over the death of Ursula. Yet, he was at peace at having brought retribution to those that hurt him and his loved ones so grievously.

* * *

In Witness whereof, to this my Will I have set my hand the Twentieth day of April, Anno Domini 1639.

Georg Theodor Ernsting signed and sealed this in the presence of us, Conrad Schübel and Friedrich Mangelsdorff.

[Signatures]

THE END