



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 1. From the Reformation to the Thirty Years War, 1500-1648

The Face of War – H. J. C. Grimmelshausen's *The Adventurous Simplicissimus* (1669)

The modern image of the Thirty Years War (1618-48) as three decades of unremitting plunder and murder by marauding troops is largely attributable to a single novel, *The Adventurous Simplicissimus* (1669) by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen (1622-76). Easily the most widely read German novel of the seventeenth century, it was the only German work between Luther and Lessing to enter the canon of international literature. It begins with the rural childhood of Simplicissimus (literally: simpleton) and follows his development into a professional vagrant during the war. The earlier part of the book contains much realism, the latter part much allegory and fantasy.

The following chapters from Book I describe the suffering of largely defenseless peasants at the hands of soldiers, especially cavalry. Grimmelshausen's descriptions of practices such as the "Swedish draught" [*schwedischer Trunk*] and other forms of torture lend an aura of verisimilitude to the stories and remind the reader that he had himself lived through the war.

Chap. iii: TREATS OF THE SUFFERINGS OF A FAITHFUL BAGPIPE

SO I began to make such ado with my bagpipe and such noise that 'twas enough to poison all the toads in the garden, and so methought I was safe enough from the wolf that was ever in my mind: and remembering me of my mammy (for so they do use to call their mothers in the Spessart and the Vogelsberg) how she had often said the fowls would some time or other die of my singing, I fell upon the thought to sing the more, and so make my defence against the wolf stronger; and so I sang this which I had learned from my mammy:

1. O peasant race so much despised,
How greatly art thou to be priz'd?
Yea, none thy praises can excel,
If men would only mark thee well.

2. How would it with the world now stand
Had Adam never till'd the land?
With spade and hoe he dug the earth
From whom our princes have their birth.

3. Whatever earth doth bear this day
Is under thine high rule and sway,
And all that fruitful makes the land
Is guided by thy master hand.

4. The emperor whom God doth give
Us to protect, thereby doth live:
So doth the soldier: though his trade
To thy great loss and harm be made.

5. Meat for our feasts thou dost provide:
Our wine by thee too is supplied:
Thy plough can force the earth to give
That bread whereby all men must live.

6. All waste the earth and desert were
Didst thou not ply thy calling there:
Sad day shall that for all be found
When peasants cease to till the ground.

7. So hast thou right to laud and praise,
For thou dost feed us all our days.
Nature herself thee well doth love,
And God thy handiwork approve.

8. Whoever yet on earth did hear
Of peasant that the gout did fear;
That fell disease which rich men dread,
Whereby is many a noble dead.

9. From all vainglory art thou free
(As in these days thou well mayst be),
And lest thou shouldst through pride have loss,
God bids thee daily bear thy cross.

10. Yea, even the soldier's wicked will
May work thee great advantage still:
For lest thou shouldst to pride incline,
"Thy goods and house," saith he, "are mine."

So far and no further could I get with my song: for in a moment was I surrounded, sheep and all, by a troop of cuirassiers that had lost their way in the thick wood and were brought back to their right path by my music and my calls to my flock. "Aha," quoth I to myself, "these be the right

rouges! these be the four-legged knaves and thieves whereof thy dad did tell thee!" For at first I took horse and man (as did the Americans the Spanish cavalry) to be but one beast, and could not but conceive these were the wolves; and so would sound the retreat for these horrible centaurs and send them a-flying: but scarce had I blown up my bellows to that end when one of them catches me by the shoulder and swings me up so roughly upon a spare farm horse they had stolen with other booty that I must needs fall on the other side, and that too upon my dear bagpipe, which began so miserably to scream as it would move all the world to pity: which availed nought, though it spared not its last breath in the bewailing of my sad fate. To horse again I must go, it mattered not what my bagpipe did sing or say: yet what vexed me most was that the troopers said I had hurt my dear bagpipe, and therefore it had made so heathenish an outcry. So away my horse went with me at a good trot, like the "primum mobile," for my dad's farm.

Now did strange and fantastic imaginations fill my brain; for I did conceive, because I sat upon such a beast as I had never before seen, that I too should be changed into an iron man. And because such a change came not, there arose in me other foolish fantasies: for I thought these strange creatures were but there to help me drive my sheep home; for none strayed from the path, but all, with one accord, made for my dad's farm. So I looked anxiously when my dad and my mammy should come out to bid us welcome: which yet came not: for they and our Ursula, which was my dad's only daughter, had found the back-door open and would not wait for their guests.

Chap. iv: HOW SIMPLICISSIMUS'S PALACE WAS STORMED, PLUNDERED, AND RUINED, AND IN WHAT SORRY FASHION THE SOLDIERS KEPT HOUSE THERE

ALTHOUGH it was not my intention to take the peaceloving reader with these troopers to my dad's house and farm, seeing that matters will go ill therein, yet the course of my history demands that I should leave to kind posterity an account of what manner of cruelties were now and again practised in this our German war: yea, and moreover testify by my own example that such evils must often have been sent to us by the goodness of Almighty God for our profit. For, gentle reader, who would ever have taught me that there was a God in Heaven if these soldiers had not destroyed my dad's house, and by such a deed driven me out among folk who gave me all fitting instruction thereupon? Only a little while before, I neither knew nor could fancy to myself that there were any people on earth save only my dad, my mother and me, and the rest of our household, nor did I know of any human habitation but that where I daily went out and in. But soon thereafter I understood the way of men's coming into this world, and how they must leave it again. I was only in shape a man and in name a Christian: for the rest I was but a beast. Yet the Almighty looked upon my innocence with a pitiful eye, and would bring me to a knowledge both of Himself and of myself. And although He had a thousand ways to lead me thereto, yet would He doubtless use that one only by which my dad and my mother should be punished: and that for an example to all others by reason of their heathenish upbringing of me.

The first thing these troopers did was, that they stabled their horses: thereafter each fell to his appointed task: which task was neither more nor less than ruin and destruction. For though some began to slaughter and to boil and to roast so that it looked as if there should be a merry banquet forward, yet others there were who did but storm through the house above and below stairs. Others stowed together great parcels of cloth and apparel and all manner of household stuff, as if they would set up a frippery market. All that they had no mind to take with them they cut in pieces. Some thrust their swords through the hay and straw as if they had not enough sheep and swine to slaughter: and some shook the feathers out of the beds and in their stead stuffed in bacon and other dried meat and provisions as if such were better and softer to sleep upon. Others broke the stove and the windows as if they had a never-ending summer to promise, Houseware of copper and tin they beat flat, and packed such vessels, all bent and spoiled, in with the rest. Bedsteads, tables, chairs, and benches they burned, though there lay many cords of dry wood in the yard. Pots and pipkins must all go to pieces, either because they would eat none but roast flesh, or because their purpose was to make there but a single meal.

Our maid was so handled in the stable that she could not come out; which is a shame to tell of. Our man they laid bound upon the ground, thrust a gag into his mouth, and poured a pailful of filthy water into his body: and by this, which they called a Swedish draught, they forced him to lead a party of them to a another place where they captured men and beasts, and brought them back to our farm, in which company were my dad, my mother, and our Ursula.

And now they began: first to take the flints out of their pistols and in place of them to jam the peasants' thumbs in and so to torture the poor rogues as if they had been about the burning of witches: for one of them they had taken they thrust into the baking oven and there lit a fire under him, although he had as yet confessed no crime: as for another, they put a cord round his head and so twisted it tight with a piece of wood that the blood gushed from his mouth and nose and ears. In a word each had his own device to torture the peasants, and each peasant his several torture. But as it seemed to me then, my dad was the luckiest, for he with a laughing face confessed what others must out with in the midst of pains and miserable lamentations: and such honour without doubt fell to him because he was the householder. For they set him before a fire and bound him fast so that he could neither stir hand nor foot, and smeared the soles of his feet with wet salt, and this they made our old goat lick off, and so tickle him that he well nigh burst his sides with laughing. And this seemed to me so merry a thing that I must needs laugh with him for the sake of fellowship, or because I knew no better. In the midst of such laughter he must needs confess all that they would have of him, and indeed revealed to them a secret treasure, which proved far richer in pearls, gold, and trinkets than any would have looked for among peasants. Of the women, girls, and maidservants whom they took, I have not much to say in particular, for the soldiers would not have me see how they dealt with them. Yet this I know, that one heard some of them scream most piteously in divers corners of the house; and well I can judge it fared no better with my mother and our Ursel than with the rest. Yet in the midst of all this miserable ruin I helped to turn the spit, and in the afternoon to give the horses drink, in which employ I encountered our maid in the stable, who seemed to me wondrously tumbled, so that I knew her not, but with a weak voice she called to me, "O lad, run away, or the

troopers will have thee away with them. Look to it well that thou get hence: thou seest in what plight ..." And more she could not say.

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Chap. xiii: HOW SIMPLICISSIMUS WAS DRIVEN ABOUT LIKE A STRAW IN A WHIRLPOOL

NOW a few days after the hermit's decease I betook myself to the paster above-mentioned and declared to him my master's death, and therewith besought counsel from him how I should act in such a case. And though he much dissuaded me from living longer in the forest, yet did I boldly tread on in my predecessor's footsteps, inasmuch as for the whole summer I did all that a holy monk should do. But as time changeth all things, so by degrees the grief which I felt for my hermit grew less and less, and the sharp cold of winter without quenched the heat of my steadfast purpose within. And the more I began to falter the lazier did I become in my prayers, for in place of dwelling ever upon godly and heavenly thoughts, I let myself be overcome by the desire to see the world: and inasmuch as for this purpose I could do no good in my forest, I determined to go again to the said pastor and ask if he again would counsel me to leave the wood. To that end I betook myself to his village, which when I came thither I found in flames: for a party of troopers had but now plundered and burned it, and of the peasants killed some, driven some away, and some had made prisoners, among whom was the pastor himself. Ah God, how full is man's life of care and disappointment! Scarce hath one misfortune ended and lo! we are in another. I wonder not that the heathen philosopher Timon set up many gallows at Athens, whereon men might string themselves up, and so with brief pain make an end to their wretched life.

These troopers were even now ready to march, and had the pastor fastened by a rope to lead him away. Some cried, "Shoot him down, the rogue!" Others would have money from him. But he, lifting up his hands to heaven, begged, for the sake of the Last Judgment, for forbearance and Christian compassion, but in vain; for one of them rode him down and dealt him such a blow on the head that he fell flat, and commended his soul to God. Nor did the remainder of the captured peasants fare any better. But even when it seemed these troopers, in their cruel tyranny, had clean lost their wits, came such a swarm of armed peasants out of the wood that it seemed a wasps'-nest had been stirred. And these began to yell so frightfully and so furiously to attack with sword and musket that all my hair stood on end; and never had I been at such a merrymaking before: for the peasants of the Spessart and the Vogelsberg are as little wont as are the Hessians and men of the Sauerland and the Black Forest to let themselves be crowded over on their own dunghill. So away went the troopers, and not only left behind the cattle they had captured, but threw away bag and baggage also, and so cast all their booty to the winds lest themselves should become booty for the peasants: yet some of them fell into their hands. This sport took from me well-nigh all desire to see the world, for I thought, if 'tis all like this, then is the wilderness far more pleasant. Yet would I fain hear what the pastor had to say of it, who was, by reason of wounds and blows received, faint, weak, and feeble. Yet he made shift to tell me he knew not how to help or advise me, since he himself was now in a plight in which he

might well have to seek his bread by begging, and if I should remain longer in the woods, I could hope no more for help from him; since, as I saw with my own eyes, both his church and his parsonage were in flames. Thereupon I betook myself sorrowfully to my dwelling in the wood, and because on this journey I had been but little comforted, yet on the other hand had become more full of pious thoughts, therefore I resolved never more to leave the wilderness: and already I pondered whether it were not possible for me to live without salt (which the pastor had until now furnished me with) and so do without mankind altogether.

Chap. xiv: A QUAIN COMEDIA OF FIVE PEASANTS

SO now that I might follow up my design and become a true anchorite, I put on my hermit's hair-shirt which he had left me and girded me with his chain over it: not indeed as if I needed it to mortify my unruly flesh, but that I might be like to my fore-runner both in life and in habit, and moreover might by such clothes be the better able to protect myself against the rough cold of winter. But the second day after the above-mentioned village had been plundered and burnt, as I was sitting in my hut and praying, at the same time roasting carrots for my food over the fire, there surrounded me forty or fifty musqueteers: and these, though amazed at the strangeness of my person, yet ransacked my hut, seeking what was not there to find: for nothing had I but books, and these they threw this way and that as useless to them. But at last, when they regarded me more closely and saw by my feathers what a poor bird they had caught, they could easily reckon there was poor booty to be found where I was. And much they wondered at my hard way of life, and shewed great pity for my tender youth, specially their officer that commanded them: for he shewed me respect, and earnestly besought me that I would shew him and his men the way out of the wood wherein they had long been wandering. Nor did I refuse, but led them the nearest way to the village, even where the before-mentioned pastor had been so ill handled; for I knew no other road.

Now before we were out of the wood, we espied some ten peasants, of whom part were armed with musquets, while the rest were busied with burying something. So our musqueteers ran upon them, crying, "Stay! stay!" But they answered with a discharge of shot, and when they saw they were outnumbered by the soldiers, away they went so quick that none of the musqueteers, being weary, could overtake them. So then they would dig up again what the peasants had been burying: and that was the easier because they had left the mattocks and spades which they used lying there. But they had made few strokes with the pick when they heard a voice from below crying out, "O ye wanton rogues, O ye worst of villains, think ye that Heaven will leave your heathenish cruelty and tricks unpunished? Nay, for there live yet honest fellows by whom your barbarity shall be paid in such wise that none of your fellow men shall think you worth even a kick of his foot." So the soldiers looked on one another in amazement, and knew not what to do. For some thought they had to deal with a ghost: to me it seemed I was dreaming: but the officer bade them dig on stoutly. And presently they came to a cask, which they burst open, and therein found a fellow that had neither nose nor ears, and yet still lived. He, when he was somewhat revived, and had recognised some of the troop, told them how on the day before, as some of his regiment were a-foraging, the peasants had caught six of them. And of these

they first of all, about an hour before, had shot five dead at once, making them stand one behind another; and because the bullet, having already passed through five bodies, did not reach him, who stood sixth and last, they had cut off his nose and ears, yet before that had forced him to render to five of them the filthiest service in the world. But when he saw himself thus degraded by these rogues without shame or knowledge of God, he had heaped upon them the vilest reproaches, though they were willing now to let him go. Yet in the hope one of them would from annoyance send a ball through his head, he called them all by their right names: yet in vain. Only this, that when he had thus chafed them they had clapped him in the cask here present and buried him alive, saying, since he so desired death they would not cheat him of his amusement.

Now while the fellow thus lamented the torments he had endured, came another party of foot-soldiers by a cross road through the wood, who had met the above-mentioned boors, caught five and shot the rest dead: and among the prisoners were four to whom that maltreated trooper had been forced to do that filthy service a little before. So now, when both parties had found by their manner of hailing one another that they were of the same army, they joined forces, and again must hear from the trooper himself how it had fared with him and his comrades. And there might any man tremble and quake to see how these same peasants were handled: for some in their first fury would say, "Shoot them down," but others said, "Nay: these wanton villains must we first properly torment: yea, and make them to understand in their own bodies what they have deserved as regards the person of this same trooper." And all the time while this discussion proceeded these peasants received such mighty blows in the ribs from the butts of their musquets that I wondered they did not spit blood. But presently stood forth a soldier, and said he: "You gentlemen, seeing that it is a shame to the whole profession of arms that this rogue (and therewith he pointed to that same unhappy trooper) have so shamefully submitted himself to the will of five boors, it is surely our duty to wash out this spot of shame, and compel these rogues to do the same shameful service for this trooper which they forced him to do for them." But another said: "This fellow is not worth having such honour done to him; for were he not a poltroon surely he would not have done such shameful service, to the shame of all honest soldiers, but would a thousand times sooner have died." In a word, 'twas decided with one voice that each of the captured peasants should do the same filthy service for ten soldiers which their comrade had been forced to do, and each time should say, "So do I cleanse and wash away the shame which these soldiers think they have endured."

Thereafter they would decide how they should deal with the peasants when they had fulfilled this cleanly task. So presently they went to work: but the peasants were so obstinate that neither by promise of their lives nor by any torture could they be compelled thereto. Then one took the fifth peasant, who had not maltreated the trooper, a little aside, and says he: "If thou wilt deny God and all His saints, I will let thee go whither thou wilt." Thereupon the peasant made reply, "he had in all his life taken little count of saints, and had had but little traffic with God," and added thereto with a solemn oath, "he knew not God and had no art nor part in His kingdom." So then the soldier sent a ball at his head: which worked as little harm as if it had been shot at a mountain of steel. Then he drew out his hanger and "Beest thou still here?" says

he. "I promised to let thee go whither thou wouldst: see now, I send thee to the kingdom of hell, since thou wilt not to heaven": and so he split his head down to the teeth. And as he fell, "So," said the soldier, "must a man avenge himself and punish these loose rogues both in this world and the next."

Meanwhile the other soldiers had the remaining four peasants to deal with. These they bound, hands and feet together, over a fallen tree in such wise that their back-sides (saving your presence) were uppermost. Then they stript off their breeches, and took some yards of their match-string and made knots in it, and fiddled them therewith so mercilessly that the blood ran. So they cried out lamentably, but 'twas sport for the soldiers, who ceased not to saw away till skin and flesh were clean sawn off the bones. Me they let go to my hut, for the last-arrived party knew the way well. And so I know not how they finished with the peasants.

Chap. xv: HOW SIMPLICISSIMUS WAS PLUNDERED, AND HOW DE DREAMED OF THE PEASANTS AND HOW THEY FARED IN TIMES OF WAR

NOW when I came home I found that my fireplace and all my poor furniture, together with my store of provisions, which I had grown during the summer in my garden and had kept for the coming winter, were all gone. "And whither now?" thought I. And then first did need teach me heartily to pray: and I must summon all my small wits together, to devise what I should do. But as my knowledge of the world was both small and evil, I could come to no proper conclusion, only that 'twas best to commend myself to God and to put my whole confidence in Him: for otherwise I must perish. And besides all this those things which I had heard and seen that day lay heavy on my mind: and I pondered not so much upon my food and my sustenance as upon the enmity which there is ever between soldiers and peasants. Yet could my foolish mind come to no other conclusion than this —that there must of a surety be two races of men in the world, and not one only, descended from Adam, but two, wild and tame, like other unreasoning beasts, and therefore pursuing one another so cruelly.

With such thoughts I fell asleep, for mere misery and cold, with a hungry stomach. Then it seemed to me, as if in a dream, that all the trees which stood round my dwelling suddenly changed and took on another appearance: for on every treetop sat a trooper, and the trunks were garnished, in place of leaves, with all manner of folk. Of these, some had long lances, others musquets, hangers, halberts, flags, and some drums and fifes. Now this was merry to see, for all was neatly distributed and each according to his rank. The roots, moreover, were made up of folk of little worth, as mechanics and labourers, mostly, however, peasants and the like; and these nevertheless gave its strength to the tree and renewed the same when it was lost: yea more, they repaired the loss of any fallen leaves from among themselves to their own great damage: and all the time they lamented over them that sat on the tree, and that with good reason, for the whole weight of the tree lay upon them and pressed them so that all the money was squeezed out of their pockets, yea, though it was behind seven locks and keys: but if the money would not out, then did the commissaries so handle them with rods (which thing they call

military execution) that sighs came from their heart, tears from their eyes, blood from their nails, and the marrow from their bones. Yet among these were some whom men call light o' heart; and these made but little ado, took all with a shrug, and in the midst of their torment had, in place of comfort, mockery for every turn.

Chap. xvi: OF THE WAYS AND WORKS OF SOLDIERS NOWADAYS, AND HOW HARDLY A COMMON SOLDIER CAN GET PROMOTION

SO must the roots of these trees suffer and endure toil and misery in the midst of trouble and complaint, and those upon the lower boughs in yet greater hardship: yet were these last mostly merrier than the first named, yea and moreover, insolent and swaggering, and for the most part godless folk, and for the roots a heavy unbearable burden at all times. And this was the rhyme upon them:

“Hunger and thirst, and cold and heat, and work and woe, and all we meet;
And deeds of blood and deeds of shame, all may ye put to the landsknecht's name.”

Which rhymes were the less like to be lyingly invented in that they answered to the facts. For gluttony and drunkenness, hunger and thirst, wenching and dicing and playing, riot and roaring, murdering and being murdered, slaying and being slain, torturing and being tortured, hunting and being hunted, harrying and being harried, robbing and being robbed, frightening and being frightened, causing trouble and suffering trouble, beating and being beaten: in a word, hurting and harming, and in turn being hurt and harmed—this was their whole life. And in this career they let nothing hinder them: neither winter nor summer, snow nor ice, heat nor cold, rain nor wind, hill nor dale, wet nor dry; ditches, mountainpasses, ramparts and walls, fire and water, were all the same to them. Father nor mother, sister nor brother, no, nor the danger to their own bodies, souls, and consciences, nor even loss of life and of heaven itself, or aught else that can be named, will ever stand in their way, for ever they toil and moil at their own strange work, till at last, little by little, in battles, sieges, attacks, campaigns, yea, and in their winter quarters too (which are the soldiers' earthly paradise, if they can but happen upon fat peasants) they perish, they die, they rot and consume away, save but a few, who in their old age, unless they have been right thrifty rievors and robbers, do furnish us with the best of all beggars and vagabonds.

Next above these hard-worked folk sat old henroostrobbers, who, after some years and much peril of their lives, had climbed up the lowest branches and clung to them, and so far had had the luck to escape death. Now these looked more serious, and somewhat more dignified than the lowest, in that they were a degree higher ascended: yet above them were some yet higher, who had yet loftier imaginings because they had to command the very lowest. And these people did call coat-beaters, because they were wont to dust the jackets of the poor pikemen, and to give the musqueteers oil enough to grease their barrels with.

Just above these the trunk of the tree had an interval or stop, which was a smooth place without branches, greased with all manner of ointments and curious soap of disfavour, so that no man save of noble birth could scale it, in spite of courage and skill and knowledge, God knows how clever he might be. For 'twas polished as smooth as a marble pillar or a steel mirror. Just over that smooth spot sat they with the flags: and of these some were young, some pretty well in years: the young folk their kinsmen had raised so far: the older people had either mounted on a silver ladder which is called the Bribery Backstairs or else on a step which Fortune, for want of a better client, had left for them. A little further up sat higher folk, and these had also their toil and care and annoyance: yet had they this advantage, that they could fill their pokes with the fattest slices which they could cut out of the roots, and that with a knife which they called "War-contribution." And these were at their best and happiest when there came a commissary-bird flying overhead, and shook out a whole panfull of gold over the tree to cheer them: for of that they caught as much as they could, and let but little or nothing at all fall to the lowest branches: and so of these last more died of hunger than of the enemy's attacks, from which danger those placed above seemed to be free. Therefore was there a perpetual climbing and swarming going on on those trees; for each would needs sit in those highest and happiest places: yet were there some idle, worthless rascals, not worth their commissariat-bread, who troubled themselves little about higher places, and only did their duty. So the lowest, being ambitious, hoped for the fall of the highest, that they might sit in their place, and if it happened to one among ten thousand of them that he got so far, yet would such good luck come to him only in his miserable old age when he was more fit to sit in the chimney-corner and roast apples than to meet the foe in the field. And if any man dealt honestly and carried himself well, yet was he ever envied by others, and perchance by reason of some unlucky chance of war deprived both of office and of life. And nowhere was this more grievous than at the before-mentioned smooth place on the tree: for there an officer who had had a good sergeant or corporal under him must lose him, however unwillingly, because he was now made an ensign. And for that reason they would take, in place of old soldiers, inkslingers, footmen, overgrown pages, poor noblemen, and at times poor relations, tramps and vagabonds. And these took the very bread out of the mouths of those that had deserved it, and forthwith were made Ensigns.

Source of English translation: H. J. C. von Grimmelshausen, *The Adventures of Simplicissimus*, translated by A. T. S. Goodrick. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962, pp. 5-10, 27-35.

Source of original German text: H. J. C. von Grimmelshausen, *Der abentheuerliche Simplicissimus*, edited by Adolf A. Steiner. Zürich: Stauffacher 1969, pp. 24-37, 54-62.