

CHAPTER ONE

Otto Is Not Allowed to Join

At last it was twelve o'clock and school was over.

The morning had lasted too long for Otto Maehler; the minutes had dragged on, but now it was lunchtime. As soon as the school doors opened Otto, swift as an arrow, raced through the narrow streets of Zerbst, and a minute later he stormed into his parents' living room.

"Dear me! You gave me a fright!" Mother Hedwig exclaimed. She was busy setting the table. "Can't you come in a little quieter? And where is Lisa?"

"I don't know, Mother. Lisa always walks so slow, and I just had to fly home. Oh, Mother, it will be so exciting tomorrow!"

Hedwig Maehler raised her eyebrows. She couldn't imagine what was to happen the next day to cause Otto to be so excited.

"Don't you know yet, Mother?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Otto."

"Oh, I'll tell you. There will be a procession when the papal grace arrives in town, and the master promised us that we are allowed to join in and sing songs. This morning we have already practised and . . ."

Mother Maehler frowned. Otto noticed it and stopped talking.

"Why that look, Mother? What's wrong?"

"There is nothing wrong, Otto, but I'm afraid that Father will not allow you to walk in the procession."

“Why not?” The thought that he would not be allowed to welcome Johan Tetzl, the pedlar of indulgences, had never entered Otto’s mind. Master Hahne had said that he could walk in the procession with the older students. They were to greet the Dominican at the Jueterbocker gate and then accompany him to the church. The prospect of such a tremendous festivity had absorbed Otto so completely that he had not even considered the possibility of a refusal from his father’s side.

“And what is really wrong with it, Mother? All the boys and girls are allowed to go!”

“Father will have nothing to do with the indulgence business, Otto. He strongly rejects that trade and I’m sure he won’t let you take part in it; but you’d better go and ask Father yourself. He and Hans are still in the workshop. You can tell them at the same time that lunch is ready.”

Otto left the room and a moment later he rushed into the carpenter’s workshop where Erich Maehler and his apprentice Hans were still very busy.

“Mother asked if you and Hans are coming for lunch, Father.”

“It won’t be long, Otto. Just two more nails to be hammered in. Hans, you may go already, I’ll be there in a minute.”

Hans threw his hammer onto the workbench and, whistling a tune, went to the house.

Now Otto had to seize the opportunity, but his mother’s prediction weighed heavily on him, and hesitantly he came out with his question.

“You’re asking my permission to join in to welcome Tetzl?” Maehler slowly repeated Otto’s words. “So, is it the turn now for the people of Zerbst’s to be robbed by that fellow? A fine thing you are telling me!”

“He’s coming with the grace of God and of the Holy Father. That’s what the master told us.”

“I wish Master Hahne knew better, Otto. God won’t give His grace to a fellow like Tetzal. And certainly not when he plans to sell that grace again for a lot of money.”

Otto was startled. What Father said seemed to him almost blasphemy, especially after the master that morning had so fully explained Tetzal’s mission in Zerbst. He understood very well that his chances were not great.

In the meantime the nails had been hammered in and Maehler went with Otto for lunch. Still the boy did not know whether or not he was allowed to join in, but he lacked the courage to press for an answer.

During the meal the carpenter asked, “Tell me, Hans, did you know that Tetzal was coming to Zerbst?”

“Yes, Sir. Ewald Zeigler told me yesterday.”

“That makes sense; gatekeepers are usually the first to hear such news. Is it perhaps the idea to let Tetzal enter the town by the Jueterbocker gate?”

“Yes, Father,” Otto was quick to answer. “We are going to meet him there. It will be a marvellous procession. Priests and nuns, the magistrate, the guilds with their banners, the teachers with the older students, and many more people; they will all walk together. We have to sing songs and the church-bells will toll.”

“Is that so? Well, a fine thing to do for such a deceiver!”

Otto was becoming agitated. “Father,” he said, “Master said it is the grace of God and of the Holy Father we’re welcoming at the gate.”

“Does Master Hahne still believe that nonsense?” the carpenter asked tartly.

Otto kept quiet. He understood that his chances of participating were very slim indeed.

“What does Ewald say about it, Hans?”

Hans was busy nibbling at a lamb-chop. Between two bites he answered, “The gatekeeper had a good laugh about it. He said, ‘That thief won’t get even half a cent from me.’ ”

“Good for him! And Zeigler’s opinion is exactly mine; it is a deceitful business. I wish the people were wiser. The church will never prosper when it allows such things to happen.”

Mother Hedwig did not say a word. She quietly continued eating. Being a sincere Roman Catholic woman, she did not have the courage to fully agree with her husband. Those indulgences came straight from the Holy Father in Rome, didn’t they? Why should there be anything wrong with them? The pious woman did not give the matter a further thought. However, she knew her husband too well to contradict him at this moment, for she could read from his face that he was very serious.

Otto looked anxiously at his mother, hoping that she would put in a word for him. Mother noticed his glance and made a careful attempt to help her son.

“Is Tetzl really such a bad man, Father?” she asked. “The Master promised that all the children could join in, and I reckon it’s rather disappointing to refuse Otto to walk in the procession.”

“I reckon it’s much more disappointing that the scoundrel is coming to Zerbst to work for the salvation of souls. Can’t the pope send someone else?”

“He was appointed by Cardinal Albrecht of Mainz, wasn’t he?” Hans inquired.

“That’s right, but the cardinal has rented the business from Pope Leo, paying him a large sum of money for it. And you can be sure that Cardinal Albrecht also wants to make a handsome profit.” Hans nodded.

“Is Tetzal unfit for his task, Father?” his wife asked.

“At this moment I can’t tell you everything because we have to go back to work. But there’s one thing I can say. Already years ago he was sentenced to death by Emperor Maximilian, at Innsbruck.”

“And today he is still alive,” Hedwig replied.

“Yes, and he can thank elector Frederick of Saxony for that. The emperor had sentenced him to death because of his scandalous behaviour. He was to be put into a sewn-up sack and drowned. He had more than deserved that punishment. However, the elector put in a good word for him and so he could just escape his punishment. What a pity, for now we still have to put up with him, and he will surely try to empty the purses of the citizens of Zerbst. Hans, watch your pocket! Don’t let that rogue get hold of your hard-earned money.”

“So Otto is not allowed to join in, Father?” the carpenter’s wife tried once more.

“No. Otto has to stay home from school tomorrow. He can lend me a hand in the workshop. He should have nothing to do with Tetzal’s ungodly practices.”

Otto, looking sad, kept silent. He was very disappointed but did not doubt that his father was right. If it was really a harmless business Father would have given his permission; he was sure of that.