

CHAPTER 1

“October 14th...”

Helena’s voice faded away, her figure partly hidden by the heavy drapes of green velvet. She was looking out on the garden, where evening was turning rapidly into night. I did not need to see her face to know that she was deeply offended. Like every other Prussian, she was wounded by the reduced state of our nation, the changes that had been forced upon us by the French, as defeat followed defeat, and rout followed rout. It had all begun in October of the previous year.

“Jena?” she insisted. “Is that what they mean to celebrate?”

The invitation from Count Aldebrand Dittersdorf had arrived by post ten days before. Before the war, the annual dinner and ball had been as fixed a point on our calendar as the falling of the autumn leaves. Should we go, or might it be wiser to stay at home? I had spent hours debating the question. Helena had not been out of the house in more than two months. Her third pregnancy had been difficult, the weeks leading up to the delivery had tried her strength greatly. She had lain in for a month afterwards, though the daily sight of little Anders - a plump look of satisfaction on his tiny mottled face as Helena tucked her swollen breast away inside her wet-smock - had more or less restored my wife to her former bloom. When the embossed card from the Dittersdorfs arrived, I instinctively pushed temptation away behind the large Dutch clock on the oak mantle-shelf in the kitchen.

But the fateful day was almost upon us, and the question had to be faced.

Memories were still strong of 13th October, the year before, when we had all risen heavily from the Dittersdorf dinner-table and made our way home cheerfully beneath a brilliant star-lit sky, unaware of the fact that our troops were manoeuvring into position to face the French at dawn.

“I suppose *they* will be there in force,” Helena murmured, pressing her nose up against the glass, frowning out at the darkness, as if that were the true cause of her indisposition.

“Probably,” I answered.

“There is nothing probable about it, Hanno,” she corrected me pettishly. “They will certainly be there.”

“It is certainly most probable that they *will* be there,” I replied with a sigh. “They are everywhere else in Prussia. And Count Dittersdorf is the District Governor. He can hardly hold a secret dinner party for Prussian nationals alone. Our safety depends on peaceful co-existence with the invaders.”

Helena turned to stare at me. The cut-crystal bulb of the Bohemian oil-lamp on the side-table cast delicate diamond patterns on her cheeks and forehead.

“Can you offer me no more comfort than that, husband?” she whispered. The proud tension had gone from her voice. “One hears such terrible stories of those who are foolish enough to socialise with the French. The rebels care not for peaceful co-existence. They show no pity.”

“We are in no danger,” I reassured her, stepping close and taking her hand which was cold and unresponsive to my touch. “There are armed patrols everywhere, and we will have a permit to stay out after the curfew. If we decide to go, that is.”

I kissed her gently on the forehead. She was thinner than before, though whether from the strain of childbirth, or the state of constant nervousness which had possessed her since the occupation, I could not tell. Dark shadows had etched themselves into hollow cavities in her cheeks. The broad brow, high cheek-bones, and slender lips which constituted the essence of her beauty had shifted in their delicate relations, and a dark furrow appeared on either side of her mouth on the rare occasions when she chose to smile. Her eyes alone remained unaltered. They were large, intelligent, enquiring, defiant,

the warm chocolate brown of chestnuts. My new son had inherited those eyes, and I was glad of that. I could only pray that one day Helena would recover the fullness of her beauty, and that those two worry-lines would fade away with the slow passage of time.

“Are you suggesting that the French will save us from our fellow-countrymen?”

I shook my head, and looked away. “I only meant to say that we have to begin again, my love. Dinner at the Dittersdorfs is as good a place to start as any. Of course there are dangers, but nothing untoward has ever happened here in Lotingen. I do not see why the situation should change this Saturday evening.”

I caressed her chin with my thumb and forefinger, and gazed into her eyes, determined to change the subject. “I was hoping that you would be more worried about what to wear.”

“What?” she echoed, knitting her dark eye-brows, glancing up.

“Your gown was always of great concern as the autumn season approached. There is fierce competition between the ladies, I believe.”

She smiled, timidly at first, her eyes glistening ever more brightly, like coals in the blacksmith’s forge when the boy works the bellows. That smile had conquered my heart at our very first meeting. Thank heavens! I thought. Count Dittersdorf was right to revive the old customs. The autumn feast was just the thing to mark a vital change for the better. My taste-buds surged at the welcome vision of the honeyed side of pork which would dominate the table. As Helena smiled back, contemplating the prospect of the dinner, I imagined, with feelings similar to my own running through her head, the dark clefts on either side of her mouth seemed to fade away to nothing.

“I shall wear the one I wore last year,” she said quietly. It was a declaration of a sort, though I had no intuition of what was coming. “That pretty ball-gown will serve as an emblem, Hanno. As if these past twelve months had never been. In my heart of hearts,

the field of Jena will always be a gentle rolling plain, where birds sing and marigolds bloom in the Spring. But that will be *our* little secret.”