

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE.

THE first greetings had been exchanged by the queens, the first questions of politeness and etiquette asked and answered. Sophia Dorothea had given her hand to Queen Elizabeth Christine, and led her into the little salon adjoining the garden salon, in which she was wont to receive the intimate circle of her court. The doors of the garden salon were open, and the two ladies-in-waiting of the reigning queen were seen standing with Laura von Pannewitz, to whom they occasionally addressed a question or observation, receiving brief, fleeting, whispered replies. The wrathful, annihilating glance of the queen had made Laura's heart palpitate, and filled her with a dull, dreadful fear. She felt that the crisis of her fate was approaching, and prayed God to give her strength to resist all evil; yet she was not trembling for herself but for her beloved, and for his sake alone she was determined to bear the worst and meet her fate undaunted. She did not wish to die, to succumb, for she knew that he would die with her. Silently she renewed the oath of love and invincible fidelity which she had vowed for him. Suddenly she heard the hard, imperious voice of the queen mother pronounce her name, and, looking up, saw her standing in the door of the adjoining room.

"I request the queen's ladies to go into the garden," said Sophia Dorothea, "to my ladies in waiting. Fräulein von Pannewitz, stay here."

The ladies bowed low and left the room. Laura von Pannewitz remained. She stood erect with folded hands in the middle of the salon. Her face was deathly pale, her lips trembled, but her eyes, raised to heaven, glowed with heroic courage. As Sophia Dorothea pronounced her name, Laura pressed both hands to her heart as though she would still its anxious beating; and, her head sunk upon her breast, she meekly and submissively obeyed the call of her mistress. At the door of the second salon she paused, awaiting in silence the queen's further commands. Sophia Dorothea not speaking at once, Laura slowly raised her head, looking at both queens, who had seated themselves upon a divan opposite the door. The eyes of both were fastened upon her.

The expression of the queen mother was proud and stern and a contemptuous smile played about her lips, while Elizabeth Christine gazed with a look of boundless pity at the poor girl, leaning against the door like a lily broken by the storm.

"Fräulein von Pannewitz," said Sophia Dorothea, after a long pause, "I have called you because I desire to speak with you upon a subject of importance; and as it bears no postponement, her majesty has given me permission to speak of it in her presence. Listen, therefore, with attention, and weigh each one of my words! I have hitherto treated you with affectionate kindness; I have always let you see in me a considerate mistress, a motherly friend. Now I require of you the unconditional, silent obedience which I, as your queen and mistress, have a right to demand. You are of a noble and distinguished family, which is, however, poor and unable to maintain its children upon a suitably splendid scale. Hence I took you to myself, and hence will I now care for your future, which shall, God grant it, be both brilliant and happy. A rich and noble cavalier has asked me for your hand in marriage; and as he is a wholly fitting and suitable *parti* I have accepted his proposal, and assured him, in advance, of your acceptance."

The queen was silent and looked questioningly at the young girl, still leaning speechless and with bowed head against the door. This silent submission, this un murmuring resignation, enraged the queen instead of calming her anger. She took this silence for defiance, this humility for obstinacy.

"Are you not curious to know the name of your future husband?" she asked, sharply; "or is it joy, perhaps, that seals your tongue and prevents you from speaking the thanks due me for my maternal care?"

"Pardon, your Majesty," said Laura, raising her soft eyes with a beseeching expression to the queen's stern countenance; "it is not joy which seals my tongue, but reverence for your Majesty. I feel no joy."

"You feel no joy!" exclaimed the queen, with the savage pleasure of the lioness that sees her foe approaching near enough to be torn to pieces. "Then you will have to submit without pleasure to your marriage. That is all! And since you are so superior to all feminine foibles as not even to be curious, I shall have to tell you whose betrothed you are, in order that you may be under no misapprehension and may not perchance, in the tenderness of your heart, render another than your future husband happy in your embraces."

Laura uttered a slight cry and her cheeks, which had been colorless, were flaming purple.

"Have mercy, your Majesty!" whispered Elizabeth Christine, laying her hand upon the shoulder of the queen mother. "See how this poor girl is suffering."

Sophia Dorothea shrugged her shoulders. "Ah, bah! have we not suffered in our lives?" she said, carelessly. "Is there a woman alive who has not wept away the half of her heart?"

"It is true," murmured the queen; "it is the sad privilege of women to weep and suffer."

"Well," asked Sophia Dorothea, turning again to Laura, "it still does not please you to inquire the name of your betrothed? I must tell you. Mark it well—it is Count Voss who has chosen you for his wife, and from now on you will have to turn your love toward him!"

Now, at last, Laura turned her eyes upon the cruel queen, but the young girl's gaze was no longer mild and pleading; it was firm and determined. The queen's imperious manner, instead of subduing this tender, girlish soul, had steeled her courage and restored to Laura the consciousness of her own dignity.

"Your Majesty," she said, with mild decision, "love cannot be bestowed at command."

"You mean that you do not love Count Voss?" cried the queen mother, restraining her wrath with difficulty.

Laura von Pannewitz bowed her head humbly. "Your Majesty has guessed aright," she said; "I do not love Count Voss."

"Well," said the queen, with a cruel laugh, "then you will marry without love, that is all!"

Laura raised her head with a passionate movement. Her eyes met those of the queen with a firm, almost wrathful glance. From this moment Sophia Dorothea was for her no longer queen and mistress, but a mere woman who wished to rob another of the most sacred rights and make a slave of her.

"Your Majesty, pardon me," she said; "as I said that I do not love Count Voss, it follows that I shall never marry him."

The queen mother sprang to her feet as though stung by an adder. "Not marry!" she repeated, with hoarse, trembling voice. "But I tell you that you shall marry him, if I have to let them drag you to the altar by force."

"Then would I say 'No' before the altar!" cried the young girl, turning toward heaven a face glowing with heroism.

The queen uttered a hoarse cry and stood like the lioness

about to rend her prey. But Elizabeth Christine laid her hand upon the raised arm and held it back with gentle force. "Your Majesty," she whispered, softly, "what do you wish to do? You cannot mean to force this poor child to marry against her will, and since she does not love the count she is but right to refuse him her hand."

"Ah! you defend her still!" cried Sophia Dorothea, beside herself. "You do not dream why she refuses to marry the count? You do not comprehend that, when a poor, dependent maid of honor declines the hand of a rich and blameless cavalier, it is only because she thinks she has assured her future elsewhere; because in the arrogance of her vain heart she believes in the possibility of winning a higher lot by her coquetry and well-calculated play? Yet, in spite of its tempting outer side, such a lot could mean for her only shame and disgrace. Surely she cannot be mad enough to believe that her treasonable and unchaste love can be sanctified by the blessing of the church! She cannot hope to place her foot where the rightful wife of the king alone may stand, where the sister of the king of England has stood, where she still stands, and is determined to repulse the miserable coquette who hoped to win a throne by her shameless charms!"

Laura von Pannewitz uttered a shrill cry, and, raising her arms to heaven, exclaimed, "My God! my God! this must I hear and live!"

The queen mother broke into a loud, contemptuous laugh. But Elizabeth Christine looked with questioning wonder at the scene which she failed to comprehend, though its tragic force touched her heart.

"It is a very heavy and cruel accusation which your Majesty hurls at the head of this young girl. Let us hope that she may succeed in justifying herself."

"Justify herself!" repeated the queen mother. "Look at her! See how my words have crushed her, and humiliated her proud being! Believe me, Elizabeth, this Fräulein whom you so generously pity understands my words better than your Majesty. And I know well of what I accuse her. But you, too, my daughter, must know it. You have a right to this, you——"

"Oh! your Majesty, have mercy!" cried Laura, falling upon her knees and stretching out her arms to the queen in supplication. "Speak no further! Do not humiliate me yet more deeply by betraying my secret, which on your lips becomes an accusation against me. Let us pause at this abyss of shame to which your Majesty has hurled me in calling me a miserable

coquette. A being so degraded, so trodden under foot cannot further share the honor of approaching your Majesty. This I see, and therefore humbly beg for my dismissal; not, as your Majesty may assume, to lead an independent though shameful life, but to flee to some quiet corner of the world where, alone and unnoticed, but at least undisgraced, I can weep over the beautiful and innocent dream of my life, from which your Majesty has awakened me with such hard words."

She was wondrously beautiful in this kneeling attitude, with raised arms and pale, noble face bedewed with tears. Sophia Dorothea saw this, and was only the more embittered, more cruel in consequence.

"Ah! she dares to reproach me. She has retained so much consciousness of her shame that she trembles to hear what she did not tremble to do. Listen, my daughter, you who have so soft and pitiful a heart for this Fräulein, you who, when I have spoken, will detest and curse her as I do, and as you are justified in doing! Believe me, Elizabeth, I know all your sorrow, I know the secret history of your noble, proud, and reserved heart! Ask this maiden the source of your sorrow and your suffering, ask her the cause of your tears and your lonely nights of weeping. Demand of her the restitution of your ruined happiness, your blighted hopes. Fräulein Laura von Pannewitz must restore you all this, for it is she who has taken it, she is the beloved of the king!"

"Of the king!" cried Elizabeth, filled with pain, while Laura let her hands fall from her face, which had been buried in them, and looked at the queen with confused, astonished eyes.

"Yes, of the king," replied Sophia Dorothea, whose excited blood flowed to her head until it swam and she was scarcely able to maintain the appearance of outward calmness. "She is the beloved of the king, and for that reason declines to marry Count Voss. But patience, patience! Let her not yet triumph, and if she dares to love my son, the son of Sophia Dorothea, King Frederick, let her remember that Doris Ritter, too, loved him and was loved by him, and was lashed through the streets for doing so!"

Laura von Pannewitz uttered so terrible a cry that even the queen mother paused for a moment and felt a sort of pity for the poor, broken-hearted girl who lay at her feet like a gazelle felled by a fatal shot, writhing in agony. But she dared not yield to this pity, betray her weakness, of which she was ashamed. She took the young queen's hand and said, darting a last contemptuous glance at Laura: "Come, my daughter,

let us torture ourselves no longer with the sight of this Fräulein, whose tears, let us hope, are called forth by remorse and repentance. May she allay our just wrath by determining to-day to accept the hand of the count voluntarily, without forcing us to harsher measures. Then we may, perhaps, cease to despise her. Come, my daughter!" She took the young queen's hand and accompanied her through the salon to the door which led to the boudoir. Sophia Dorothea threw back the heavy portière with a violent movement and went away. But Elizabeth Christine did not follow her at once. She looked backward to the trembling figure lying there on the floor, and the sight of the pale, noble face touched her.

"Pardon me, your Majesty, if I do not follow you at once," said the young queen; and going to the Fräulein she continued, with a wan smile, "I should like to speak a few words with Fräulein von Pannewitz, and I think I have a right to do so."

The queen mother felt a cruel satisfaction at these words.

"Ah! my daughter," she said, "even your kindness and patience are exhausted, and you feel that here no pardon is possible, but only contempt and wrath. Yes, speak with her! Let her feel the whole force of your indignation. Your words will have annihilating weight with this criminal. But hasten, for the king will appear very soon with his court."

The queen mother let fall the portière, and closed the inner door of her boudoir. She would hear nothing of Elizabeth's conversation with the maid of honor. She needed quiet to regain her self-possession and prepare for receiving the king.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MISUNDERSTANDING.

THE young queen, whom the people called, with an irony which she alone could feel, the reigning queen, was alone with Laura von Pannewitz. For a moment she was faint and powerless to speak. New, unwonted, stormy feelings made tumult in her resigned soul. One moment she experienced all the torture of jealousy, anger, the humiliation of rejected love. Leaning against the wall, she gazed across at her who lay wringing her hands and weeping upon the floor, who, nevertheless, called a happiness her own which to possess Eliza-

beth would gladly have given years of her life. At last she had found her for whose sake she was herself rejected. At last she stood face to face with the envied, happy being whom the king loved. This was the despoiler of her happiness! A wild pleasure reigned for a moment in her breast, at seeing that being bathed in tears, writhing humiliated at Elizabeth's feet.

But this passionate feeling soon died away. Elizabeth was too tender and noble a woman to yield long to such stormy emotions. She experienced a certain melancholy joy at seeing that it was not coldness of heart, but love, which estranged the king from his wife, and her sense of justice recognized that this woman whom the king loved was more attractive than herself, with her silent, prosaic beauty. Her love for her husband was so free from egotism, so full of resignation and generosity, that she experienced a feeling of thankfulness for this woman who created for her husband the happiness which she had not been able to grant him.

With a noble, truly royal expression in her beautiful face, she approached the maid of honor, who still lay weeping with covered face upon the floor, and had not noticed the presence of the queen.

"Stand up," said Elizabeth, mildly. "It is not fitting for you to weep. A woman whom the king loves must not, like any other, fall upon her knees and mourn!"

Laura withdrew her hands from her face, and looked up at the queen almost joyfully.

"God has heard my prayer," she said. "He wills it not that your Majesty despise and condemn me. He grants my prayer for the opportunity of justifying myself in your eyes."

"Justify!" repeated Elizabeth. "Ah! believe me, in my eyes you are already justified. You are young, beautiful, talented, merry. You have a rare gift of conversation, with a spirited, witty answer for every piquant word. All this has attracted the king's attention to you, won his love. And with that all is said, for it is impossible for any woman to resist when the king loves her. So I pardon you, and I beg you to fill your whole soul with the one thought that it is your duty to make the king happy. This is what I had to say to you, nothing more. Farewell!"

She was about to go, but Laura held the hem of her dress.

"Oh! your Majesty," she cried, beseechingly, "hear me; do not leave me under this cruelly false impression, with this shameful suspicion. Do not think that I am so demoralized, so bare of every feminine feeling that the laws of the church

and of morals no longer exist for me. Oh, believe me, that the husband of my queen is sacred in my eyes! If I really had the misfortune, as your Majesty believes, to love his majesty otherwise than with the devotion of a loyal subject, I would rather die than do anything, or even think anything, which might offend against your Majesty's rights. Unhappy and blameworthy as I am, your Majesty must not hold me a criminal. Nay! I am not the beloved of the king! Never has his majesty distinguished me by one word, one look. Never have I felt for him anything else than the most obedient, respectful loyalty."

"Ah!" said the queen, sadly, "you repudiate him, you have not even the courage to be proud that the king loves you. You must feel that you are greatly to blame!"

"O my God!" moaned Laura, utterly despairing. "She does not believe me."

"No, I do not believe you, Laura, for I saw how you started and turned pale when the queen accused you of this love for her son; but I have not heard you try to clear yourself."

"I did not know that the queen mother spoke of her son Frederick," murmured Laura, blushing deeply, and speaking so low that the queen did not hear her.

"Do not make further denials," continued Elizabeth; "confess a passion for which every woman on earth must envy you, and I forgive you! Do not believe what the queen told you. I have nothing to ask of you, for I lack nothing; I do not weep, do not complain, do not, as she said, pass my nights in tears, I do not mourn a life's lost happiness. No, I am content and reconciled to my fate, provided that I know the king is happy. But should this be one day otherwise, should you prove faithless to the high duty of making him happy, then, Laura, I withdraw this my pardon; then shall I curse you remorselessly, shall be in my own person your accusing conscience as I now seek to bless you!"

"No, no, you must not go!" cried Laura, deeply moved by Elizabeth's nobility and greatness of soul. "Believe me, have mercy upon me. I suffer enough without this. This dreadful accusation was not needed to punish me for a love which, however much to be condemned, is at least not criminal or sinful! As true as God is over us and hears me, it is not the king whom I love. But you turn from me again! O your Majesty——"

Suddenly Laura was silent and a shudder passed over her whole frame. She had heard the voice of her lover; it seemed

to her that God had sent him to rescue her, to clear her from the shameful suspicion that rested upon her.

The door of the salon opened and Prince Augustus William appeared upon the threshold. His face was carefree and bright, for he had come to greet his mother, of whom he had been told that she was in this room and had commanded that no one be announced. But she had always given her sons the privilege of entering unannounced. Prince William wished to-day, as usual, to use his privilege, wished it the more as he had been told that Fräulein von Pannewitz was with the queen; so a jesting greeting was upon his lips as he entered the salon and met the extraordinary scene transpiring there. Laura upon her knees, her face pale and distorted, and before her the queen, proudly erect, making no effort to lift the young girl from her kneeling, humble attitude. Such a picture the proud and tender lover could not endure. The passionate blood of the Hohenzollerns awoke in him, and the hot waves of anger mastering his brain, he forgot all considerations of reserve. With a bound he was at her side, lifting her from the floor with passionate force, and demanding, with eyes flashing rage:

"What is the meaning of this scene? why are you weeping, Laura? why upon your knees, you who are so holy, pure, and innocent that all the world might kneel in reverence before you? And you, madame, permit this angel to humble herself in the dust before you! How have you dared to wound her? What have you done to her, that this noble face is bathed in tears? Oh, madame, I require an adequate account of this; I demand it in the name of honor, love, and justice, for Laura is my betrothed and I have a right to defend her!"

"Now she will no longer accuse me of an adulterous passion," whispered Laura, clinging, faint and weak, to her betrothed.

"Your betrothed?" said the queen, with a sorrowful smile. "Ah! how young you are and how confiding, my brother, to believe in the possibility of such a union."

"She will be my wife," he cried, ardently. "I have sworn it, and I shall keep my word. I have courage to defy all storms and to brave every danger; I fear no condemnation of the world nor of my brother. Our love is pure and honorable, free before God, the king, and all the world. Go, betray to the king, madame, a love which some accident has doubtless revealed, and for the sake of which you must have been wounding and insulting this dear and noble being, since I found her on her knees before you, weeping!"

"It is true, I have insulted her," said the queen, softly; "I doubted her word, her assurances. But the Fräulein herself knows that this insult was unintentional, and that I was under a false impression for which not I, but the queen mother, was responsible."

"How so? Does my mother, too, know of our love?" asked the prince, in astonishment.

"She believes, or rather she is convinced, that Fräulein von Pannewitz loves the king and is loved by him. She therefore overwhelmed her with reproaches and commanded her to marry Count Voss, who has sued for her hand."

The prince pressed his half-fainting, still weeping loved one to his heart with passionate force. "Ah! They wish to tear thee away from me. But my arms shall hold thee and my breast be thy shield to protect thee! Nay, do not tremble, my Laura, and do not weep. As we are here united arm in arm, so shall we now approach the king, so will I show thee to the whole court and say, 'This is my betrothed; I have given my oath of eternal fidelity, and never shall it be broken!'"

"Hush, be silent!" cried the queen; "let not your mother hear these words, and most of all, do not betray your sad secret to the king! When you have spoken it you are lost, and his remorseless severity will strike you both."

"Then you will not tell him what you have seen and heard here?" asked the prince, in astonishment. "You have the courage to keep a secret from your husband?"

"Oh!" said the queen, with a sorrowful smile, "my whole life, thought, experience is a secret from him. No, my brother, I shall not betray you, either to my husband or your mother. But have a care that no one else learns of this unhappy union, that must, alas! cause you much suffering. Be prudent and wise. Leave the queen mother under the erroneous impression that it is the king whom Laura loves, she will the less suspect yourself and her eyes will be less sharp than they otherwise would be! Thus can you obtain, perhaps, an occasional conversation unattended, a moment of undisturbed companionship, and that in your position is always happiness. But now hear my request. Never speak to me of this love which an accident has revealed to me, and I shall strive from this moment to forget. Never remind me that I am cognizant of a relation which, in the eyes of the king and your mother, is punishable and unpardonable, and of which it were my duty to give notice at once. So long as you are happy, so long as you can place your love under the protec-

tion of secrecy, I shall see and know nothing of your union! But one day, when storm and ruin surge over you, come to me. Then, my brother, you shall find in me a faithful friend, who will open her arms to you and weep with you over your lost happiness."

"O my queen, how noble, how generous you are!" cried Laura, pressing her lips to the hand offered her. But Elizabeth did not tolerate this humble testimony of love, she drew the young girl to herself, and pressed a tender kiss upon her hot, trembling lips.

"Among those who weep and suffer there is no difference of rank," she said. "I am for you not the queen, but a sister who understands and will heal your sorrow! When you are weary of weeping alone, come to me at Schönhausen. There you will find no amusements or noisy pleasures, but a dusky, quiet garden, among whose mighty tree-tops one seems to hear the consolation of the voice of God. You will find quiet, shady places, where you may weep unobserved, and a friend who will never ask the source of your tears."

"I will come," said Laura, in a choking voice. "I know well that I shall soon need this comfort, for my happiness will soon come to an end."

"And may I come too, my noble, generous sister?" asked the prince.

"Yes," she said, with a smile, "you may come, but only when Laura is not there. And now I entreat you, for your own safety, let us break off this conversation. Dry your eyes, Fräulein von Pannewitz, and try to smile. Then pray go down and summon my ladies in the garden. But you, my brother, come with me to your mother, who is there in her cabinet."

"No," he said, passionately, "I cannot see her now, I should not have strength to be quiet and indifferent, and to hide the pain that tortures me."

"O brother!" sighed the queen, "we princes have no right to show our pain. It is the sorrowful privilege of our rank to conceal our suffering; come! The queen, who is filled with wrath, will receive you with a smile, none the less, and we, who are sad and filled with pain, will smile as well. Come!"

"Let me say one word more to my Laura," begged the prince; and as he accompanied the young girl through the room to the door, he laid his arm about her slender waist and pressed a kiss upon her lustrous black hair.

"Laura," he whispered, softly, "Laura, dost thou remem-

ber thy vow? Wilt thou be faithful to it? Will my mother's threats find thee strong and courageous? Thou wilt not bow thy head nor let them so far humiliate thee as to force thee to accept the hand of this Count Voss, who would tear thee from me?"

She gave him one glowing look of decision. "They may kill me, but they cannot force me to be unfaithful to myself," she said.

He laid his hand as if with a blessing upon her beautiful head, and smiled at her. The whole history of that noble, chaste, and holy love lay in that smile, and in the glance with which she answered it.

"Dost thou know," he asked her, further, "that thou hast promised me to meet me now and then in yonder greenhouse?"

"I know it," she replied, blushing deeply.

"Well, then, Laura, after a few days we must part! The king will make a pleasure journey and has requested me to accompany him. I must obey."

"Ah, my God! They wish to remove you at once. I shall never see you again!" sighed Laura, pressing her lover's hand upon her bosom, as though she would detain him.

"We shall meet again," he answered, confidently; "but to give me courage to leave you, you must grant me the one favor of seeing you to say adieu. So listen to me. The day of our departure is not yet fixed. Whenever it is determined, I shall come hither and tell my mother of it in your presence. On the evening before our departure I shall be in the greenhouse and await you there. Shall I wait in vain, Laura?"

"No," she whispered, softly, "I shall be there"—and fleeing before her own words, she hastened toward the garden salon. The prince looked after her with a delighted smile, then turned to offer his arm to escort his sister-in-law to the queen mother. But the young queen was not there. She had not wished to be witness and accomplice of this agreement, and had preferred to go alone to the queen mother. The prince, yielding to the first boisterous impulse of his heart, was about to hasten after Fräulein von Pannewitz to accompany her in the garden, when the loud cry of the watch was heard without, followed by the blast of trumpets