

The Pea Princess: A Vignette of the “Era of Enlightenment”

by Barbara Dreher

Katrin heard it in the night—cloud rumbles and rain! But in the hour before dawn she was wakened again to a gushing downpour. It submerged all other sounds...no cock’s crow, no restless stamping in the stables, no querulous lowing from the cattle.

It was lucky for the barnyard servants who snuggled back into bed for a few more minutes of rest. No overseer would fault them. But the household servants had to keep their schedule. They dashed across the deeply puddled courtyard to tend the master’s kitchen, larder, nursery, bath, sleeprooms, and great hall. The senior servants had learned intuitively that the higher men rose in social circles, the more they distanced themselves from the natural life. Only the animals adapted themselves to the rhythm of seasons without question or complaint.

Katrin herself wished to avoid the oncoming day. She closed her eyes and took slow breaths to calm the queasiness in her gullet. How could she contrive to avoid the prince for another day?

Constantine’s touch had become repellent and not just because of her current condition. With each child his arrogance had grown. Each boy was destined to be the fighter who would regain his lands for him. Perhaps his gentle way during their short courtship was merely mourning over his wartime losses. No matter with whom he conspired to stop Napoleon’s advance, each ally betrayed him. Time and again his property was sacrificed to win an uneasy peace and keep the line of battle away from stronger Palitinate territories.

Hearing his whiny voice made Katrin more tired and irritated than usual. How could she face the day? There was no pea planted under the mattress of her bed. There was no wicked mother-in-law contriving to undo her dreams. The pea was in her belly – her womb to be exact. It was her doom, her destiny, and her hope. She would nurture it any way she could.

As she bathed Katrin formulated her plan for the day. Submitting to gloom was not her nature. What was the point of past suffering if she couldn’t twist it into a brighter tomorrow?

When the prince came into her room she gave him an adoring smile, “You look fine today. Did you have a good rest?”

“Cursed rain! It kept me awake.”

“Me, too,” she murmured knowing he was too self-involved to concern himself with the feelings of others.

“I planned to go riding, but now the trails are soaked.”

“What if you go toward the mountain? The uplands drain quickly.”

“That’s not what I planned. Besides the tree branches are sodden and sprinkle cold water down my back.”

“What a shame!”

Katrin continued to be amazed at his childishness. It must be the mark of a “privileged” upbringing. Inspiration came to her and she snatched up a crocheted shawl. “How do you like this? I thought I’d wear it when the painter comes.” She twirled around.

“Who?”

“The portrait painter.”

“Oh. That does not concern you . . . only men in the royal line. Surely your mother was a Jewess by the way you like to adorn yourself in silk and jewels.”

“More likely she was a gypsy. She didn’t live long enough for me to know, “she snapped. She remembered only amber hair and a singing voice that flowed like amber. She retreated to her major goal. “You belong in the Great Hall with the others.”

“Definitely! But the sitting is not today. I’ve set the schedule for the end of the week.”

“Oh . . . Well, that was wise because it gives you time to decide what to wear.”

“Don’t be foolish! You know I have to wear the same old thing. I can’t afford a new waistcoat.” His lips leveled in a pout and he slipped his left hand under the front opening of his hunting tunic in the well-known Napoleonic pose. She marveled again at his admiration for the military genius who had victimized him.

“Why is it my curse to be saddled with the weakness of my forebears?”

Katrin had heard it all before. Constantin never admitted that his lands were not won in battle, but acquired by marriages. Naïve as she had been, she never thought to investigate the settlements in his earlier marriages . . . the first, a princess, then a countess. Or was it the reverse . . . the countess having brought enough property that he could vie for a princess the second time around.

“What a pity . . . not your fault,” she murmured as her mind searched for an alternative way to keep him occupied.

“Yes, but I have to suffer now.”

“Crown Prince Nicholas Otto was the only one to make the family proud. By the way, where is his waistcoat? The decorated one?”

“I don’t know . . . somewhere.”

“In the clothes press perhaps. The new maid could be sent to search for it.”

“Don’t bother.”

“Or send Old Ilse . . . she knows which coat shows the badges of office.”

“No. I can’t wear Otto’s coat.”

“Perhaps not . . . you are not heavy like he was. But the buttons could be moved.”

“Wouldn’t that show?”

“No, not when making the coat trimmer. If it were widened there would be a fade line.” It seemed logical and she sensed victory.

“Well, but I can’t”

“Just try it on for size,” she tried not to seem too eager. Persuasion was such a demanding art.

“No, I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m too tall.”

“Oh, what a shame. I always liked that color. Deep blue brings out your eyes.”

“Can’t be helped.”

“A competent tailor could add length by taking out the shoulder seam and inserting a gold stripe.” He made no facile response, so she continued, “If you demand it and Ilse supervises, the coat could be ready for the first sitting.”

He squirmed around; a furrow of concentration formed on his brow. She dared not interrupt because advice from her so often set off opposition.

“I’ve got things to do,” he declared and stomped off. As he descended the staircase she heard him call “Ilse!”

Katrin smiled with satisfaction. She’d won peace at last.

The prince was occupied in preparations for a few days and then for hours, while the artist worked. Katrin attended only once, because she had so much difficulty stifling her irritation at the prince’s petty bullying of the painter. He had to have his way in every detail and the final portrait revealed his imperious nature.

Once framed the portrait was hung in the Great Hall. It showed the upper torso of a stern-faced man. His black hair was combed to frame his rugged features. His left arm rested in his tunic. Constantine’s personal vanity had tricked him into a veritable replica of Napoleon . . . his nemesis and his hero.

Katrin was embarrassed, but remained serene. She had won more time for her little sweet pea to settle into a safe position in her incubator. This child (boy or girl) she would raise to her own standards of nobility.

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