

ST. SILVERSTEIN'S EYE.

The Countess von Aldenstein sat alone in her boudoir, an anxious wrinkle on her forehead and an uneasy look in her eyes, as she turned now and again to the window, gazing out into the rapidly deepening twilight. The last day of the old year was drawing to a close, and all the church bells in Munich were ringing the requiem. But the Countess never heeded their clangor, never heeded the hubbub of noise which rose from the brilliantly-lit Christmas fair in the Maximilian Platz. She was listening intently to the tinkle of every passing sleigh, in the hope of hearing it turn into the court yard.

At last her expectations were fulfilled, and she summoned the page who waited in the ante-chamber.

"Has Count Albert arrived?"

"This moment, your Excellency."

"Tell him I wish to speak to him at once."

In a few minutes a quick, light step was heard outside the door, and a tall, fair young man in Bavarian uniform entered. (Going to his mother's side, he kissed her hand respectfully.)

"Your Excellency sent for me," he said; and there was something inexpressibly winning in the frank, joyous tones of his voice.

"Yes, Albert—sit down here, beside me, for I have to speak to you seriously."

The young man gave an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulders, but obeyed quietly.

"Albert, you have not now to learn that your father is very much discontented with your conduct of late; you are never at home, and from every quarter we hear fresh accounts of your escapades. He is determined, once for all, that there shall be an end of this."

Albert knew very well that on occasions such as the present, his father's name was used but as a cloak for the Countess's own sentiments. Count Aldenstein was a timid, feeble old man, from whose hands the reins of government had long ago been taken by his despotic wife. She ruled him with a rod of iron, and would fain have exercised the same sway over her sons; but the elder, Count Louis, had escaped from domestic tyranny by entering the Austrian army, and Albert was not always as manageable as his mother would have liked.

Louis had just returned on leave of absence from Vienna to find many things changed at home. Albert, whom he had left a wild, headless, merry-headed boy—always in amazing scraps, but never getting into serious mischief—Albert was most changed of all. Wild, reckless as ever he still was, but all his light-hearted gaiety was gone, and Louis was aware that his son had seen the alternate bursts of mad spite and fits of gloomy despondency which characterized his manner. For nearly a year, Albert had been troubled to a very extent by the belief of the Countess's Court—Christa von Lindenburg, the beautiful heiress of one of the wealthiest and noblest families in Munich. The time fixed for the marriage was now drawing nigh, and Albert's wild extravagance had been of late so much the topic of conversation that people began to shake their heads and wonder what was Christa von Lindenburg did not interfere. Louis had but a week ago been introduced to his brother's intended bride. His first emotion was that of strong admiration of her great beauty, and wonder that Albert could be so gloriously being; but to be so evidently was.

Albert now listened quietly to his mother's tirade, his face aglow with provoking indifference.

"I was not aware that I had been doing anything worse than usual to excite your displeasure, my gracious mother."

"Where then are you getting acquainted with this course of dissipation; but the consequences are now becoming more serious on account of your approaching marriage."

Albert's brows contracted, and he gave a slight shudder as his mother spoke. She continued without noticing him.

"Graf von Lindenburg, with your father this morning. He declares that in spite of the scandal of breaking off a public betrothal, he will insist on Christa's giving it up, if you do not alter your conduct."

Albert looked up suddenly, an irrefragable gleam of joy illuminating his face.

"I believe, mother, Christa would be glad herself if I were broken off, my mother. She has never really cared for me."

"This is folly, Albert! How does it do you until you did your best to disgust her by your systematic neglect. You have twice put off your marriage on one pretext or another; and now that it is finally fixed for next month, and she expects to see you being constantly seen in public with your dancing, you never go near her, and spend your time Heaven knows where. We only hear of you through the eyes of folly, by which you have made yourself the town talk. What is this wagger of which Count Lindenburg speaks?"

"Oh, that! So he has heard of it!" said Albert, laughing carelessly. "Your Excellency need not worry about the wagger. It is a very harmless one."

"But for an enormously heavy sum; and one that will half ruin you if you if you lose it!"

"I shall not lose it. The wagger was originally with Col. Dettenhausen; but the whole regiment has taken it up, determined to gamble to the hilt. The terms were that I should go to the court masquerade to-night and there attract more attention than any other costume in the room; say, even that their ladies should take seats across the top. Now, most of our officers will be there, and I know that they and many others have formed a league against me. They intend to make me lose by not taking the smallest bit of care to preserve, so matter how striking my costume, or how charming my handsome self may be. No matter! I shall win all the same."

"How so?"

To be continued.

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