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The Blue Croquet-Ball;

Or, Illona's Two Escapes.

"And to be brought up just in this wretched hole of a place! And all your wet toilettes for Baden-Baden lying in the boxes. And I had counted so much upon the Giroudiste hats!"

"Baden-Baden is always dreadfully monotonous," remarked Illona, stifling a yawn.

"And the Plage costumes for Ostende," went on the Princess, despondently. "The French bathing-dresses."

"Ostend! That means travelling over half Europe in order to see the same people that are to be met on the Vienna Ringstrasse."

"And the lawn tennis suits—"

"I never cared for lawn tennis."

"And the English yachting costumes—"

"Yachting always makes me sea-sick."

"But you are not sick the whole time; and think of the opportunities! The highest titles and the largest fortunes are to be found on board of yachts. Oh, Illona, Illona, another summer will have passed and you are still—"

"An old maid," finished Illona, composedly.

The Princess sank back in her chair with a groan.

"With your millions of caprices it will come to that. I cannot yet understand why you refused the Marquis Fleurette."

"Because he dyes his hair, mamma, and I don't want a painted husband. It might come off when he's kissing me, you know."

"Oh, Illona, I wish you were not so frivolous! And there was Count Stumfenspor—his hair wasn't dyed."

"If Count Stumfenspor had had as many brains as he had horses, I might possibly have taken him into consideration."

"And Prince Schnappingen?"

Illona laughed a little wearily.

"Count Schnappingen was in love with my gold-bags, not with me, and I don't want a bought husband any more than a painted one."

"Another of your caprices! But you can't say the same of his rich cousin. That man's bouquets during the Carnival must have cost a fortune."

"Possibly," said Illona quietly. "I know that I greatly preferred his bouquets to himself."

"But what objection had you to him?"

"None, except that I didn't care for him."

"But, a non du ciel! There is nothing in the world that you care for, child. Here have I been asking about for—how many years is it? I shudder at the thought."

"In the winter it will be ten years since my first ball, mamma."

"Don't speak so loud. There might be people listening. Verily, ten years! And on the 30th of this month you will be—"

"Twenty-seven," said Illona.

"Twenty-seven! C'est terrible. Ten Carnivals, ten summer-seasons, half of the Vienna aristocracy at your feet, and nothing moves you! Are you made of stone, Illona, or of ice?"

Illona made no reply, but stared out in silence through the streaming pane. She was not unlike a fair statue of ice as she leaned there, immobile, in her white draperies. Illona was tall and slender, with soft, brown hair, a well-poised head and delicate, clear-cut features. Her complexion was of that colorless sort which late hours and town-lights are apt to produce, but in this case the dead-white tint did not lack a charm of its own. The finely moulded lips gained a more vivid hue by contrast, and the dark eyes looked all the darker. They were strange, those eyes; they betrayed nothing of youthful vivacity, rather there was to be read in their depth a spirit of world-weariness which accorded but ill with her years.

And verily, it was no great wonder if Illona, now in her twenty-seventh year, had grown weary of the world. The pleasures which to most girls are laded out in spoonfuls she had drunk of in full draughts. Since her seventeenth year the queen in every ball-room, surrounded with suitors, led, or—as she herself called it—dragged in triumph from one fashionable watering-place to another, paraded in every Vienna saloon, for ever dressed according to the newest fashion, admired, adored and envied on all sides—what could the world still contain for her that was new? There were moments in which Illona put the question to herself, and there were moments, too, in which she would have been almost ready to change places with her younger sister, who, being far less pretty, was also far less persecuted.

Her early triumphs she had naturally enjoyed, but very soon this universal admiration which was, so to say, hurled at her head, had begun to stir disgust within her.

It was several years now since the moment of quitting a ball-room had become to her much pleasanter than that of setting foot within it. The mere sight of a camellia bouquet was an irritant, and as for hot-house violets she found their scent unbearable. Nothing seemed capable of attracting her attention. With her beautiful, tired eyes she looked at all her suitors and looked past them. It was a gaze which appeared to be always searching and never finding, and which grew ever more tired with the fruitless search.

The poor Princess could not understand her daughter. Was Illona determined to quit for good the old maid? Was it for this end that this self-sacrificing mother had for ten whole years borne such huge fatigues? For this end that she had kept so strict a look-out upon her daughter's stay-laces, and had actually achieved the triumph of having Illona's waist spoken of as the smallest in Vienna?

These pathetic reflections were interrupted by the entrance of a maid with a perfumed note. All three ladies gazed at it in astonishment.

"Who on earth can be writing to us here? An Eulenburger billet! as far as I can see," said the Princess, who had turned the note round, "there is Hirschthal on the seal. That would mean that it is from the Duke."

"Heaven guard us from an invitation!" said Illona to herself.

But it was an invitation. The Duke, who had often met the Szentmers in Vienna, had requested their presence at a ball to-morrow afternoon, at his summer residence, Hirschthal.

"Of course we must go," said the Princess, a little excitedly.

"Of course!" repeated Illona, with a touch of bitterness.

"But it will give me a whole lot of things to think of. Ma pauvre! Let dresses to be unpacked, carriages to be ordered, and then to leave Gisela alone all evening. Illona, why don't you help me? What shall we do?"

"Perhaps stay at home."

"No, that is impossible. But I shall have no time again for my letters, and then there is the long drive—Don't you think we had better telegraph to Vienna for your fur cloak?"

"As you like, mamma, only it will probably reach us after the garden party is over."

"Ma pauvre tote! That is true. But go we must. There are no chances for you, for of course there are no marriageable Eulenburgers, and the Duke's adjutant is in love with you already and you won't have him; but at least you can show a toilette. What will you wear, mon enfant?"

"I don't know, mamma."

"Perhaps the new torchon dress with the Russian embroidery?"

"As you like, mamma."

"Or else the blue with the Mousquetaire hat, although it is almost too good for Eulenburg."

"As you like, mamma."

"No—I have it! The pale pink—that is the dress for the occasion. Illona, you will wear the feuilles de roses creases to-morrow, and of course the new corset de Paris."

Illona smiled a little inattentively, but her answer was the same as before. "As you like, mamma."

CHAPTER III.

The amiable, elderly gentleman, who bore the title of Duke of Hirschthron, was, if possible, more amiable than ever, while receiving his guests next day in the gardens of his chateau.

Among the ladies there were some who looked anxiously from their fresh toilettes to the thunder clouds over in the west, and from the thunder clouds back again to their toilettes, but, on the whole, it was a quite passable sort of summer's day for a mountainous climate like Eulenburg. The group of bright dresses under the trees was diversified by dragon uniforms and by a plentiful sprinkling of black, for it is needless to say that at this ducal garden-party all the non-military gentlemen were in full evening dress.

Just now Countess Ballaban comes sailing over the vast expanse of gravel which lies stretched before the doors of Hirschthron. For an inexperienced or diffident person the solemnities attending an arrival at Hirschthron were unquestionably trying. To step easily, and, if possible, gracefully over a stage conscious of while that the eyes of earlier arrivals are following your movements with an anything but charitable closeness, to hit off the right moment for your curtsy, and last, but not least, to find your way into your own legitimate group, where alone you will be in your proper place, all this constitutes an ordeal of which nervous or inexperienced Eulenburgers have been known to dream, more than one night in advance.

But Countess Ballaban was neither inexperienced nor nervous. The fine Hirschthron gravel had crunched several hundred times at the very least, under her stately shoe soles. She always was very sure of her business, and appeared to-day to be even more so than usual. Scarcely had she reached the haven than she turned to her next neighbor, and said, still somewhat breathlessly, for the day was hot:

"We are going to have an addition to our circle to-day."

"Really? Who?" was eagerly inquired.

"The Szentmers. They have been obliged to interrupt their journey."

It took but a few minutes to spread the news throughout all the groups, and now all eyes turned, more or less furtively, towards the entrance gate.

The carriages had almost ceased arriving; every eligible Eulenburger was already within the sacred precincts, and still these agonies?—or was it delights—of expectation trailed on. The iced Macedoine had been disposed of, and the younger portion of the guests, giving up all hope, had left their chairs at the suggestion of a stroll in the park, when once again carriage wheels were heard.

An old gentleman was seen to jump out, an elderly lady followed him, and finally a tall, slender figure in pale pink. There could be no doubt that she was magnificently built, but the features were not at once recognizable. Every step that brought her nearer more distinctly revealed the delicacy of tint, the softness of outline, and by the time she made her curtsy to the Duke there could be no more doubt remaining that the celebrated beauty was equal to her reputation.

CHAPTER III.—(Cont'd)

There followed a volley of apologies on the part of the Princess, waved aside by the amiable Duke to whom that lady's notorious unpunctuality was nothing new, then a series of introductions, and finally, at the end of a quarter of an hour of bowing and smiling, Illona found herself moving along one of the gravel walks in company of some dozen or so of her new acquaintances. On one side of her walked Mimi Engelsbrecht, on the other side the Duke's adjutant, Count Rambert, with whom she had danced frequently not only during the past Carnival, but during many past Carnivals. Count Rambert had the goldenest and silkiest moustache, the bluest eyes and the whitest teeth that it would have been possible to imagine, and yet Illona paid a very divided attention to the remarks uttered by his flute-like voice. To the inexperienced Mimi it seemed utterly incomprehensible that such open adoration should be so coolly received.

The straggle procession moved onwards, until at the entrance to a fairy-like pavilion, built entirely of birch-stems and smothered in climbing roses, a halt was made.

"I have heard of this rose pavilion," said Illona. "The Duke told me about it last winter."

"And so did I," responded Count Rambert. "During the cotillon on Carnival Tuesday I gave you a complete picture of the Hirschthal park. Surely you must remember, Princess Illona?"

"I am afraid I have forgotten," said Illona.

"Perhaps the cotillon music was too loud," suggested Baron Strobel, showing his teeth in an amiable grin.

"You must know that we Eulenburgers are very proud of Hirschthal," put in Captain Kimmel.

"Hugely proud," emphasized the juvenile lieutenant.

"And the Duke gives splendid dinners," said the fat lieutenant. "You will enjoy them, no doubt, in autumn."

"No, I shall certainly not enjoy them," replied Illona. "In autumn we shall probably be at the other end of Europe. You forget that we are only on the way through."

Illona stood now surrounded by men, and on every face admiration was more or less plainly written.

She was certainly worth looking at as she stood there in the deep tree shade. Her wide straw hat set off her face to advantage. At the first glance her dress appeared to savor of an almost childlike simplicity; but the artlessness was in reality nothing but higher development of art. Princess Szentmer knew very well that the untrimmed skirt of pink jacquet would serve to show off Illona's perfect build far better than more intricate draperies could have done. The belt and broad silk sash might have been pronounced suitable for a child of six years, and yet each fold and each turn of the ribbon had been closely studied and carefully adjusted by the Princess herself.

"What do you think of her?" whispered Lili Engelsbrecht of Fanny Rosen.

"Lovely!" answered the good-natured Fanny, but she said it somewhat sorrowfully, for her cousin Fritz Strobel formed one of the circle around Illona.

"I wonder she can stand being laced so tight," remarked Mimi.

"Her hat is delicious!" sighed Baroness Lebra, who was feeling too pensive even to giggle. "I wonder if I could manage to copy it?"

"And I wonder whether it would suit you as well as it does her," retorted Lili, a trifle sharply. "Strangely enough a slight feeling of irritation seemed to have sprung up among the ladies."

"It is strange what newness does," philosophized Fanny.

"Oh, those men!" murmured Baroness Lebra. "Have they all proved unfaithful?"

Yes, all except one, but this one belonged to nobody in particular. It was the same young man who had played so passive a part the other day in the Curgarten. He alone had not approached Illona. The celebrated beauty seemed to have made no impression whatever upon him. The exception was conspicuous enough to attract Illona's attention. A faint curiosity stirred within her; she wanted to know why this one man disregarded her so completely. However indifferent she might be to the universal admiration Illona was not used to being passed over in this way, and she found that she did not like it.

When presently the straggle procession moved on again, the temper of the Eulenburger ladies still had no chance of improving. It is true that all the gentlemen could not simultaneously walk beside the new beauty, but what consolation could be derived from this circumstance, seeing that their eyes and their attention alike remained fixed upon that pink figure in advance?

It was not until the Thiergarten (preserved shooting-ground) was reached that the company broke up into smaller groups, and Illona thus ceased to be the central object of attention.

"Oh, look, that was a deer!" cried Mimi Engelsbrecht, excitedly. "Did you not see it? There, between the trees!"

"I have just remembered that we left the gate open," said Count Rambert, and he hurried back to close it.

"Ah, now it has disappeared! But from that mound up there we shall be sure to see it. Aren't you coming?" And Mimi, in her anxiety not to miss the deer, took to running.

Illona followed much more slowly. She felt no curiosity about the deer, but Mimi's childish interest did, after all, interest her a little. How long was it since she had felt so harmless, and spontaneous an emotion? Oh, surely very long, and Illona walked on meditatively under the trees. It was not till several minutes had passed that she discovered how completely she had lost sight of Mimi. Neither were any other members of the company visible. But after all, what matter was that? Either she would overtake Mimi within the next few minutes or else Count Rambert would overtake her.

It was so beautiful here in this distant portion of the park that even the world-weary Illona could not resist the magic

of the forest. Brilliantly green scraps of meadow-land contrasted vividly with the dark tree-shade. The midsummer flowers were in full bloom; thick moss spread a carpet under Illona's feet, while here and there an opening in the trees afforded a glimpse of the yet wider depths of the woods. With every step the forest seemed to be growing more entrancing, but also darker.

"Can the dusk have fallen so soon?" thought Illona standing still at last under a giant pine-tree.

(To be continued.)

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