

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Balduin Groller (1848-1916)

The Affectionate Friends

Count Kornel was a courageous young cavalier. He had been one of the first to put his signature to the Anti-Duel League, where they appreciated this acquisition and immediately elected him to the committee. In the casino, his friends made good and bad jokes about this, but he had enough philosophy and enough of a sense of humour to bear it with composure.

But now he had become involved in a very bad business, for the slightest conceivable reason, all of a sudden, without his having had time for lengthy reflection or wise consideration. It happened at a picnic for aristocrats. Kornel and Adam, a lieutenant in the hussars, had paid court to a Countess, quite harmlessly and yet with colossal dash. The Countess expressed a wish: she wanted to have her feather-boa, as she felt a slight draught. There followed a little race to the cloak-room between the two young men. For there was the prospect of a handsome prize: the victor would personally place the feather-boa around the Countess's shoulders. An accident occurred at the finishing line. The two competitors collided. Kornel fell onto his knee and tore his trousers. The Lieutenant, who was flung to the side by the collision, did not see that Kornel had fallen but he did see a case of unsporting, thoroughly inadmissible, disloyal obstruction of the opponent in the shove he had received, which he imagined to have been given intentionally, and he reacted in the heat of the moment with a crude invective.

Kornel, who likewise believed himself to have been deliberately pushed and now heard himself sworn at to boot, sprang up in blind rage and dealt his opponent a hefty slap to the chops. The lieutenant did not hesitate to give the only answer permitted him. But however quickly he set about giving his assailant a severe drubbing on the spot, he did not manage to execute his intention. A dozen arms were wrapped around him, a group of bodies pushed in between the two. *Duobus litigantibus!*¹ - - A third man, who had no part in this business, placed the feather-boa around the Countess's shoulders.

When Kornel woke up at the crack of dawn next morning, it was precisely twelve noon, and there were already waiting for him, as his valet at once reported, two cavalymen who wished to settle an issue with him. He speedily dressed and made his way to the men waiting in his so-called study. They were bringing the challenge. It was, of course, the challenge, although strictly speaking, they only submitted to him the request to name two of his friends with whom they could come to an understanding about the unresolved matter. Now the opportunity was there for Kornel to put his principles to the test. He passed it very well by declaring, not without dignity, that he had no cause whatsoever to name his representatives, as he was not inclined to, and, in any case, unable to duel. The two cavalymen made him a serious remonstrance. The case was such that something had to be done.

“One must have the courage of his convictions,” replied Kornel. “I

¹ “*Duobus litigantibus, tertius gaudet*” – “While two men argue, the third rejoices.”

have it. I am sorry, gentlemen, to have let you leave empty-handed, but it cannot be otherwise.”

The two cavalymen, not only officers but also aristocrats, naturally did not give up so easily. When one had one’s “Principles,” then one ought not to give offence. But if one does give offence, then one has to, as a man of honour, answer for one’s actions. Hopefully it would not be necessary now to enter into lengthy negotiations about the most elementary concepts. The misfortune had occurred, and who had said A also had to say B. This was as simple and clear as two times two is four. There was really nothing more to be said on the matter. Now there was actually no other choice than a duel, and one under rigorous conditions at that. For it was a case of a Third-Degree Insult.

Kornel stood firm. “I regret, gentlemen,” he resumed, “not being able to comply with your wishes. I am, as you know, a committee-member and board-member of the Anti-Duel League. It would be too great a scandal. I know that my position imposes obligations on me, and you are entirely right when you say that if one takes the view that one should not duel, one also should not give offence. I would like to add that, should the occasion arise, one would be obliged to tender an apology.”

“For the present case, we could not be satisfied with an apology,” the spokesman for the two cavalymen retorted.

“In that, our views diverge,” Kornel continued. “Even for the most serious case of an affront to honour, there must be a more reliable and more sensible remedy than the blind game of chance with weapons. I would therefore certainly not hesitate to offer amende honorable in any

form desired, if – you did not let me finish speaking just now, when I was about to say this – if I had actually given offence. I have not done that. I was the one offended, and then I took my satisfaction. That is all, and that is the end of the affair as far as I am concerned. For a man who does not in principle duel cannot of course be outlawed.”

The two cartel²-bearers strove to prove that Kornel was actually the insulter, and they went systematically to work to do so. The unintentional push had constituted the starting point. An unintentional push did not necessarily have to count as an insult, but the person affected had the right to take it as such, particularly when it was not immediately followed by a satisfactory apology. Anyhow, it was a First-Degree Insult, which was actually eliminated when Lieutenant Adam used an invective, thus proceeding with a Second-Degree Insult. At this stage, Kornel really had been the insulted party. But now there followed the last and most serious act – the blow! That erased all which had gone before, and now this one, terrible affront stood alone. It must not remain unexpiated and satisfaction must be offered for it.

Kornel persisted in his point of view, and the cartel-bearers, who could not comprehend how one could philosophise so much over such a simple matter, came very close to losing their patience. However, they remembered in good time that it was bad form to betray particular exasperation for such a reason, and even worse form to insult, on their part, an opposing party who moreover does not want to take up a

² A written challenge to a duel.

challenge, in negotiations of this kind. They consequently stood up without a word, gave a dry salute, and left, to place their mandate back in the hands of the man who had appointed them this task.

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It was two hours after midnight when Kornel drove up in front of his palace. The coachman leapt down from the box-seat and rang the bell for the porter to open. In the meantime, Kornel sat still in the coach. He did not want to get out a second earlier than was absolutely necessary. For it was terribly cold, and a raging, icy wind swept through the streets with elemental pitilessness.

When the large door opened, a broad, shining stream of light pushed out over the pavement into the street. The porter gave a deep bow. His mighty silver-mounted stick and his stately uniform, dripping with gold, sparkled away in the flood of light. Kornel hurried into the entrance, and just behind him a pale, visibly frozen-stiff young man slipped in, wearing a winter coat that was reasonably elegant but decidedly inadequate for the prevailing cold; its collar was, admittedly, turned up, but this was probably more to hide the man's face than provide protection from the cold, for which it would have been of very little use.

Kornel looked around in amazement, and the porter took up a position ready to discharge his duty in the case that his services were required.

"What can I do for you?" Kornel asked curtly.

"Kornel, it's I, Lieutenant Adam!"

Kornel took him by the arm and conducted him up to his lighted

chambers on the first floor. Adam walked up the stairs with a visibly very great effort. In the brightly lit drawing room beside Kornel's bedroom, a cheerful fire was burning in the marble Renaissance fireplace and spreading a cosy warmth. There the master of the house directed his late guest to a seat. Adam sank heavily into the comfortable easy-chair and was at first incapable of uttering a single word.

"Just look at you, Adam! What's wrong with you?" asked Kornel, still under the effect of the shock which the sight of his former friend had given him.

"Three hours I stood before your front entrance," Adam laboriously uttered, "I was waiting for you, Kornel."

"Terrible! Why did you not come during the daytime and why are you not in uniform?"

"You would perhaps have turned me away, and I did not want to be recognised. I am not supposed to come to you, you know, and I'm a lost man if anyone finds out. And yet I had to talk to you, I had to. My life depends on it."

"What do you want from me?"

"You know what, Kornel."

"I gave my answer to be passed on to you."

"And yet I have come to you, to ask, to beg."

"That I shoot at you!"

"Yes. So have pity on me!"

"That would be a strange pity! I cannot, I may not."

"I ask you one more time, Kornel. One more time, I ask you."

“We really must drop this now, Adam. You are ill, a child could see that. There’s no way I could send you back out in your condition. You will first have a long and proper sleep here; then we shall talk further. It was an infernal idea of yours to plant yourself outside in this cold!”

“What does that matter? I felt nothing. I have felt nothing at all since that dreadful moment other than my burning face. Say once more that you don’t want to.”

“I’m not saying another word now, Adam. First you must be brought halfway back to normal and to a condition befitting human dignity. I shall have hot tea brewed first and foremost; we’ll put a good ration of rum in it, and then you’ll see –”

“Stop that, Kornel. You have not fully grasped what is at stake for me here. Do you suppose that I shall carry on taking my slapped face for walks in the world as untroubled as the day is long, or that I’ll live only an hour longer once I know for certain that I cannot obtain satisfaction?”

“Adam!”

“You do not need to be alarmed, Kornel. I shall not inconvenience you in any way in your house. I can settle this perfectly well in the street or, if my feet carry me so far, at my lodgings. Farewell, Kornel!”

He tried to stand up, but he fell feebly back. A severe fit of the shivers had gripped him. His lips turned blue, his eyes stared glassily, and his teeth audibly chattered.

Kornel phoned his house doctor without delay, the famous clinician Professor Becker. When he was on the spot barely a quarter of an hour later, he found the sick man in a feverish, sweltering heat. Adam, who no

longer had any clear idea what was happening, was brought to bed. Kornel had ordered his own bed to be made ready for him. He himself did not think of his night's rest; he wished to keep watch by the patient's bedside.

The Professor, declaring his inability to express any definite opinion just yet, prescribed a medicine to fight the fever and promised to come again the next morning. And he appeared on time, carried out another thorough examination, and when Kornel was conducting him out, he expressed himself as follows: "Well, dear Count, we have here a serious case of pneumonia. Whether and how he will overcome it will depend more on the patient's nature than on my humble art and science."

"But, Court Counsellor, there is no danger of his life, is there?" asked Kornel, stricken with fear.

"I told you, Count Kornel, that the case is a serious one, and I had to say it. Actually, we are in a bad time for pneumonias now. The weather is too abominable. However, this is a young man with a strong constitution. We must be prepared for anything, but we do not need to abandon hope."

The ladies of the house, Kornel's mother and sister, appeared in the sick room as well and wanted to share the care with Kornel, but he would not allow this. It was his patient, his friend, for whose life he felt responsible, and he nursed him with a tenderness and devotion which only a mother could have shown when nursing her child. For a full fourteen days and nights he did not go to bed. In vain did the ladies raise objections to this, in vain did they represent to him that no person could endure this, that he would make himself sick, for he remained deaf to every remonstrance. Something like the Passion of Charity had come over him.

With trembling anxiety he listened by day and by night to the patient's breathing and it was as if his own life depended on that of his friend. Nothing could move him to leave the sick room even for only an hour or to think of his own health and relaxation.

It took about three weeks until it could be said that the real and deep danger was over. When Adam's eyes first became clear again – admittedly, he was still very pale and lay there very feeble -, Kornel whispered in his ear: “Cheer up, Adam; strive to pull yourself out of this! I handed in my resignation to the League long ago.”

Adam cast a grateful look at Kornel and made an effort to hold out his white, emaciated hand to him. Then he went back to sleep with a blissful smile around his lips and slumbered as peacefully, with regular breathing, as a happy child.

Now things progressed with gigantic steps. In the first fourteen days, Adam had not been given a single bite to eat. Professor Becker insisted that, as long as fever remained in a body, no kind of food could be of any use. But as soon as the fever was overcome, Kornel began to feed his friend, whom it had badly reduced, up again, nice and slowly, as cautiously and carefully as possible. Adam, once he had entered convalescence, was not mocked. The little soups and the delicious chickens and the marvellously preserved Bolzano fruits, and the accompanying superior Malaga, tasted wonderful to him. Only, it was all too little for him. Kornel, however, for all his tenderness, ruled with a firm hand and would not allow an imprudent act to happen at any price. So Adam regained his strength quite capitally, but then there came to pass

what, in the given circumstances, had to come to pass. One fine day, Kornel himself broke down. He had stayed on his feet until Adam was out of the woods, but then he flaked out. Now he lay in a fever and hallucinated and was weak and helpless as Adam had formerly been. Now the tables were turned. Now Adam undertook the nursing, and he did so with an attentiveness and self-sacrifice as if he wished to show that, compared to him, Kornel had been a mere babe-in-arms. This time, the ladies of the house were of course not to be got rid of so easily. As unwelcome as it was to him, he had to put up with their also taking care of the patient, but he controlled them very strictly so that nothing was overlooked. The ladies were anxious themselves, but they could not help smiling at Adam's trembling overzealousness. He acted just as if the worst had been to fear from their thoughtlessness or their brutality. And after all, it was their son and their brother, they really had to say to Adam in their defence; but they were, of course, disarmed every time he assured them that nothing in the world was dearer to him than Kornel's life, and that he would never tremble as much for his own well-being or for his own life as he would for Kornel's.

This illness was also overcome, and Kornel also made, once he had pulled through the critical stage, rapid progress in his recovery. On a resplendent spring morning, Professor Becker announced to them that, if the weather stayed as fine the next day, they would be allowed to go for their first drive. And when the professor had gone, the two friends fell into each other's arms and kissed with tears of joy in their eyes. Tomorrow, they would finally be able to shoot at one another.