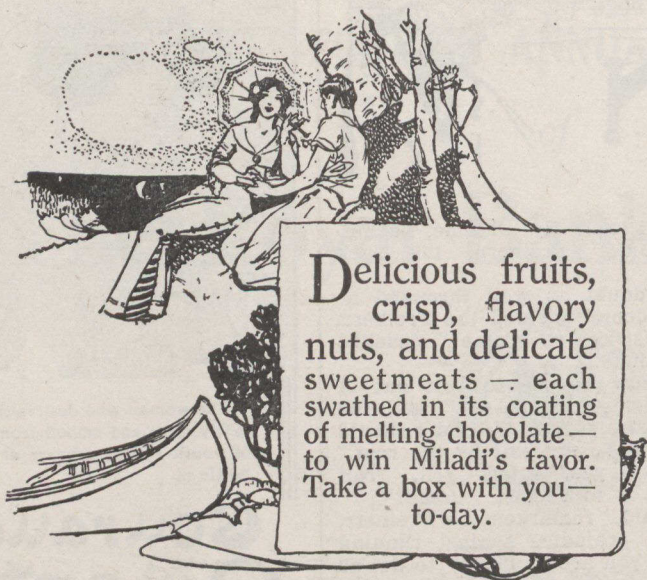




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"That was what I said. But they persisted in their obduracy."

"They are gentlemen—not turncoats. I commend their fortitude."

"Then your lordship will have the opportunity of offering your commendations in person."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Simply that we shall conduct you to the airy apartments in the Strafeburg reserved for political prisoners of the first class."

The Freiherr rose slowly to his feet. "You will take me to the Strafeburg?" he demanded.

Meyer shrugged his shoulders.

"You know the alternative—entire concurrence with the new regime. I fancy I know your lordship's disposition too well to suppose that you will change your intentions."

The Freiherr bowed stiffly. "Understand," he said, "I do not recognize your authority."

Meyer tapped his sword. "My argument is an old one," he said, "but it is universally unanswerable."

"A Jew's sword!" sneered the lord of Kraag.

"My sword was made at the Government factory at Gleiss," was the calm retort. "It is of similar pattern and fibre to that worn by your lordship when you commanded the third regiment of Guards."

"It is the man who honours the sword, not the sword the man."

Meyer winced. He admitted the stubborn old aristocrat, envied him his indomitable pride, his stiff-necked courage, and his racial arrogance.

"At least," he said, "I have never dishonoured mine."

"Then do so now," cried the Freiherr vindictively; "pass it through the body of an old, unarmed man. It would remove an irreconcilable opponent—and you could always say I resisted."

"Freiherr," said Meyer, "we waste time when time is valuable. Will you kindly follow me?"

"No, sir, I will not."

"You compel us to use force?"

"Whether you use force or not is your affair. I am the President of the Rathsherren, as much your superior in the eye of the law as I am in every other respect. If you choose to play the bully, that is your business. I will not meet you half-way by acquiescing in your violence."

"Freiherr, may I remind you that we have an overwhelming display of force, and that resistance can merely compromise your dignity without effecting its object?"

The Freiherr of Kraag stepped to the mantelpiece and pressed the bell. Meyer glanced apprehensively at his satellites. He was partially reassured when the summons was answered by a very old butler followed by a very old dog.

"K APPUS," said the Freiherr to his servant, "these soldiers wish to arrest me and imprison me in the Strafeburg."

The butler's pale blue eyes lit up with watery gleam.

"Shall I turn them out, my lord?" he asked, and Apollo growled sympathetically at the suggestion.

The Freiherr smiled his appreciation, resting his hand lovingly on the wolf-hound's head.

"That is the proper spirit, Kappus, but I will not avail myself of your services. No, I am going to make General Meyer a proposal. He remarked with some truth that resistance would merely compromise my dignity without effecting the result. He also said he possessed a sword of similar pattern and fibre to my own. I propose to put that statement to the test."

Meyer's pallor increased visibly at these words, and a sick, empty feeling possessed his inward parts. The man had a constitutional horror of risking his life, and it was perfectly evident that this acerbated old nobleman wanted to engage him in single combat.

"I came to effect an arrest, Freiherr, not to fight a duel," he said at length.

"So!" mocked the Freiherr; "the sword is better metal than the man, eh? I suspected as much."

Meyer bit his lip. He tried to see out of the corner of his eyes whether

his subordinates were laughing at him. His mind worked rapidly, as it always did when he was really afraid. He remembered that the Freiherr was an old man, and that he himself had been an expert fencer in his younger days when the practice of duelling made it a matter of prudence to be skilled with the epee.

"I honoured you too much with my proposal," the Freiherr went on scornfully. "You are not worthy to cross swords with the Lord of Kraag."

Meyer hesitated no longer. Perhaps the thin stream of honour that mingled dubiously in his cold blood helped him to his decision. After all it was an honour to cross swords with this proud old aristocrat. He felt that pride begets pride, and he feared more to appear a coward in his antagonist's eyes than he feared the point of an old man's sword.

"You misunderstood me," he said hoarsely. "I was thinking of the exigencies of the situation. I will fight, but on one condition: if you kill or disable me, you surrender to the officer next in seniority to myself."

"Agreed," said the Freiherr. "Kappus, fetch my infantry sword. It is in an iron box under my dressing-room table."

THE Freiherr took off his evening coat and rolled up his shirt-sleeves. Meyer divested himself of his overcoat, and displayed the green and black tunic of the Grenadiers. The dining-table was pushed back by the others, giving ample space in the great stately room for the coming encounter. Kappus returned shortly with the required weapon, Apollo, who had accompanied him on his quest, following closely at his heels.

The proceedings were initiated with all formality and circumspection. The blades were disinfected by being passed through the flame of a spirit-lamp. Swords were measured, and the two antagonists stood on guard awaiting the word to begin. The officer next in rank to Meyer gave the word, and the blades crossed with a faint clash.

The Freiherr attacked at once. His passes were neat and his style elegance itself. The one thing lacking was power. The old brain had not forgotten its coming, but the wrist that obeyed the brain had lost its flexibility and the forearm its suppleness. Meyer's defence was scarcely taxed. His relief as he realized that his life was not in serious danger was immense. The aching void in the pit of his stomach no longer rebuked the uniform that covered it. His heart beat normally, and the physical exercise began to warm his extremities, which had been cold and bloodless a moment before. He parried a slow "coupe" and a forceless "beat reverse" with such ease that he began positively to enjoy himself. Then occurred something which rudely shattered his waxing confidence. Apollo, who had been watching the contest unnoticed, but with bristling pelt and slaving jaws, suddenly hurled himself in a savage leap at Meyer's throat. His forefeet struck the General on the chest, and his teeth met in the black frogging that adorned his breast. Meyer staggered back, shaken and helpless before this unexpected onslaught. In a trice the Freiherr rushed forward and passed his sword through the animal's body. Apollo fell transfixed, and as the Freiherr withdrew his reeking weapon the poor beast, even in his death agony, tried to lick the hand that had laid him low.

"A thousand apologies, General," said the Freiherr. "I had not foreseen the possibility of such an untoward occurrence."

"Naturally, Freiherr," said Meyer, readjusting his eyeglass.

"Kappus," continued the Freiherr, "remove Apollo's body from the room. I trust, General, you are not injured, or in any way unfitted to resume our contest."

"Not in the least. But I fear you have lost your favourite hound."

The Freiherr turned his head away. Wifeless, childless, as he was, he had bestowed an almost unnatural affection on the faithful old dog. Nevertheless his honour had been at stake,