

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries  
**Detlev von Liliencron (1844-1909)**

(from *Kriegsnovellen*, [War Novellas] 1904 [1885])

1. Surrounded
2. The Orientation Point

**Surrounded**

[These tales are from the Franco-Prussian War. “Surrounded” takes place during the Siege of Metz, capital of Lorraine, which began on August 19<sup>th</sup>, 1870. The fighting described occurred on August 31<sup>st</sup> and September 1<sup>st</sup>. Marshal Bazaine, with 180,000 men, attempted to break through the German line (200,000 men commanded by Prince Friedrich Karl of Prussia) to join Marshal Mac-Mahon’s army of 140,000 men.]

What a restless night it had been! We had lain, rifle in arm, in incessant, pouring rain, our eyes, perhaps four times a hundred thousand eyes, looking directly towards the giant fortress.<sup>1</sup>

The telegraph clicked continuously in the large ring of besiegers. We could hear quite clearly, if we put our ears to the hard road like Red Indians, the rolling of the guns and the ammunition wagons and ambulances. Music also sounded over to us through the night, intermittently, weakly; evidently playing at one location for hours to make the troops marching past hold their heads up.

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<sup>1</sup> Metz.

That these were the marches through the city gates towards the outer forts, to sally forth in the morning, perhaps with the entire besieged army, seemed obvious to all of us. But where and whither, towards which quarter of the Heavens, was the push, the attempt to break through, to take place? And that was the reason why everyone stayed up.

The telegraph clicked again. His Royal Highness<sup>2</sup> had given the order at midnight: Fires out. And only a few minutes later, darkness encompassed us. The moon was in its last quarter. Thick black clouds had completely covered it and the stars. And it rained ever on and on: rain, rain, rain.

Then, as if to mock us, immediately after the deepest darkness had come to us, when not even a match was struck for a cigar from excess of caution, the enemy gave us a firework display. Rockets soared up everywhere, as symbols of an engagement not having been forgotten, in the liveliest colours. And when they had fizzled, crackled for five minutes, and gone out, the guns flashed forth, as on a given signal, on every one of the forts in the circle. The thunder of cannon rolled for two full hours without a pause. We kept as silent, while the horn of plenty discharged all its shells, as schoolboys on the end of a severe dressing-down.

With us, eternal night; over there, eternal, roaring Hell and the first home of thunderbolts. With us, rest; over there, feverish restlessness.

The shells, often long and fat as a fully-grown poodle, as a musketeer lying next to me described them, and with fiery tails behind

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<sup>2</sup> Prince Friedrich Karl of Prussia (1828-85).

them, did us little or no harm; seldom did they burst in the soddened ground.

Suddenly, without a transition to quieter, slower shooting, the cannonade stopped. And deathly silence over here and over there; and darkness over here and over there.

We lay with bated breath for several minutes, relieved that the hideous quarrelling which had deafened us with its din had fallen silent, and – in tense anticipation! What will come now?

And not a quarter of an hour might have passed when lights appeared everywhere in the loopholes of the casemates: the thousand eyes of a monster. Now these eyes seemed to close, now they opened, according as the light was shaded for us for a few seconds by men hurriedly passing by in the rooms. Had we been able to take a closer and more precise look, we would have discovered a swarming movement of soldiers in every room of the fort: strapping knapsacks to backs, buckling on side-arms, filling cartridge-pouches, and whatever else indicates the hasty confusion of a troop which is to fall in for the march-off in the barrack yards.

Again the telegraph clicked: the order came: Fires allowed. At the crack of dawn we received accurate information from the enemy himself about where he would thrust his horns. And it was precisely the troop to which I belonged that was to sustain the first onset. We quickly moved in to the positions we had taken earlier to practise for this eventuality, to receive the enemy here. He displayed his forces with great liveliness.

In the first furious onset, some of our far advanced, stronger

outposts were overrun; but by midday, these had been recaptured with fixed bayonets. Back and forth, barely winning land here and there, the battle had lasted the whole day. Only this had we achieved: the enemy had not succeeded, despite constantly renewed onslaughts, in breaking through our lines.

Only the one thought held sway among us, from the commander to the bugler: not to let those pushing forward get through under any circumstances. What men could be spared from the furthest reaches of the circles were also sent over to support us.

Seven o'clock. My battalion<sup>3</sup> lay, to have a breather, behind a village. An adjutant brought the order to withdraw to a grange that was enclosed with a wall, lying one, perhaps two hundred paces behind us, to install ourselves there, and to hold this point through the night to the last man.

Behind us our men encamped on the heights again. This movement had separated us from the others and brought us to the front.

The firing stopped all along the line, and everywhere, among both enemies and friends, the camp-kettle boiled without disturbance, as in peacetime.

What was to be achieved had been achieved. Our bracket had held fast around the swelling wood.

New support and replenishment kept coming to us, and so it seemed that we would also be secure the following day.

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<sup>3</sup> A battalion, of 1,000 men, consisted of four companies, which in turn comprised three platoons or squads.

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When the order reached us, the village church had just struck seven. During the day, the hot August sun had frequently presented itself among the rainclouds: at those times, our coats, red-hot, would steam. Now it shone from misty masses, reflecting in the puddles and pools of blood. Then it crept back into its cloak, came out again one more time, and sank. A wide strip, tinted blue and yellow, remained on the horizon for perhaps a quarter of an hour. We set out with this illumination. As it was not a retreat, as we were no longer troubled by enemy fire, everything went in good order. When we arrived at the farm, the battalion commander faced about and halted. He sat in a calm posture, his head bent forward, holding his sword, which he had drawn, across the pommel. Around him, the command was given for the greatest haste in the best order; the battalion streamed to his right and to his left like ebb-tides around a rock. The troops had to pass so close to him that they often touched the flanks of his horse, thereby shoving it to the right or to the left. To the east lay the single broad gate of the property. This sucked the companies in, one after another, like sheep into the fold. Directly beside this opening, a cannon with its six horses and several gunners had become entangled in an impenetrable knot. All seemed to be already in the next world, man and beast; only a dark-bay tried, time and again, to get back on its feet, repeatedly raising its head and mane. Is this the Chariot of the Sun, struck from the sky and jolted into a shambles? – the thought passed through my mind when I saw the tangle. A single, well-directed shell had caused the calamity.

“Everybody in the ark?” cried the Noah-Lieutenant-Colonel when he, as the last man, rode in. “Yes, Lieutenant-Colonel,” we four captains cried, almost as one man. “Close the gate, barricade it, bedding behind it!” Then short directions: First Company here, Second, Third, Fourth there, accompanied with pointing fingers and outstretched sword. And we were standing at our assigned places just as promptly. These places were easy to choose. All around, behind the entire enclosure wall. But this wall rose up high. First of all, therefore, we had to see to it that we could look out over the coping, that we could lay our rifles on it. So bring something to stand on! And everything that was portable was dragged over at once: furniture, barrels, casks, an Erard,<sup>4</sup> garden moulds, trees topped in a twinkling, a Chinese pavilion pulled down in next to no time. Over all of these, planks and boards, which were fortunately at hand. Now up onto the planks and boards! Success: the rifles lie well, we can look out into the outlying land.

The estate consisted of a manor-house and a large adjoining building which seemed to serve the purposes of stable and storehouse. Both were surrounded by a large park with a young growth of trees; this in turn was environed by the wall we now manned. The castellet was built in a style that defies comprehension. Baroque (scrolls and shell-work) at the top, it terminated at the bottom in a single portico which occupied the entire length of the façade. These pillars were connected, in a manner offensive to the eye in the highest degree, by a glass wall. Yet at this moment, no

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<sup>4</sup> A pianoforte made by Sébastien Erard/ Sebastian Ehrhardt of Strasbourg (1752-1831).

large pane, no small pane, was shining in its entirety. And *smash! smash!* kept ringing out.

While I am busily occupied quartering and deploying my company, a gentleman in civilian clothes suddenly stands before me. His right hand is pressed to his heart, his left hand thrust into his black hair: just like in the famous painting, where Cambronne, bleeding from the brow, kneels beseechingly before Napoleon.<sup>5</sup> His words come out like a waterfall, accompanied by eyes opened as wide as can be. I do not understand a word; I ask him to speak more slowly and more intelligibly.

Now the state of affairs gradually becomes clear. He tells me in French that he, the owner, Court Méricourt, is on the point of going mad; whereupon I, between my teeth, in German: Milksop. His wife was about to go into labour any moment. Her condition made it impossible to carry her away. The Countess and he had been caught unawares by the battle today. The servants had fled and only an old aunt remained. Hang it! Why, then measures would just have to be taken. Under the accompaniment of our young surgeon-major, who had nothing to do for the present and who was doing nothing at present other than shaking down plums for himself, we carried the Countess into the cellar. We made a cover for this that was “bombproof”. The Lieutenant-Colonel, to whom I had reported the affair in hot haste, placed a double sentinel before the door to protect the lady from any intrusion by our soldiers which, of course, should it happen, would be through no fault of their own. The German soldier will always be German.

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<sup>5</sup> A painting by Charles August Steuben (1788-1856) which depicts Marshal Cambronne preventing Napoleon from rushing into the fray... (?)

The sun had set. The blue and yellow strips on the horizon faded more and more. The stars twinkled ever more clearly. The beautiful, clear summer night did not care about the wild tumult of war.

Only one solitary fire burned behind the barn; from there it could not be discerned. Two wethers that had been caught were roasting.

“Captain, the Division-Chaplain requests to be admitted”, a sentry reported to me from the planks. I had to shade my eyes when I looked up at him; he rose like a silhouette against the pale sky.

As the door was firmly barricaded, there could be no thought of opening it. On a ladder which we let down on the other side, we took the army-chaplain in. The small gentleman with the double spectacles, in high boots, with the purple and linen band on his arm,<sup>6</sup> was standing in our midst.

“You see, I could not leave the battalion on its own. Our comrades up on the heights will have quiet hours; here, there may be hot work”. I could not help it – I took the little fellow in my arms like a doll and pressed him to me like a sweet girl in a secret arbour. All the officers warmly gave him their hands in gratitude. Everywhere the bivouac fires were blazing and smoking, before us those of our foe, behind us those of our friends. A marvellous, peaceful, almost awe-inspiring sight.

Will they come? Will they make the attempt to drive us out?

Everything stayed calm. In the soft arms of night, soldiers slept in immediate proximity to the wall; most of them with their heads on their

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<sup>6</sup> On the left sleeve, signalling that he was a non-combatant.

knapsacks. It looked like an enchanted garden: here, one leaned against a pale-fence, his forehead hanging down; there, two snored back to back; here again, one lay in the lap of his fellow countryman; there, one rested his head in his hand, so tired, so tired.

Only the numerous sentries go back and forth, with left-shouldered arms. Keen is their look into the night; their ears are pricked up for the slightest sound.

Beside me, speaking in a soft whisper, stood the Captain of the Second Company. We had been friends ever since we were ensigns. We had “risen” in the same regiment. More than once had his calm, sure foot trod out the sparks on which I, frivolous companion that I was, had wandered; more than once had his faithful heart, his wisdom helped in the storms of effervescent youth that had threatened to sweep me away. There was nobody I loved so much as him...

We wrote the exact addresses of our relatives in each other’s notebook in case of death. Rather superfluous, certainly, for each of us knew the other’s circumstances.

And how it happened: we were just talking about our happy lieutenant days – I took his hands in mine and an overpowering emotion gave me the right words of ardent gratitude. But he, moved as I had never seen him before, deflected my words, his brow resting on my shoulders; I had complemented his rationality and all too serious conception of life with my cheerful nature so many a time.

Now the doctor appeared beside us and reported with pride that he had just performed his first delivery; mother and baby were well. The father

was growing calmer and ... “What was that? What was that?” cried my friend, stretching up and peering into the outlying land. Now there was a rattling. A violent noise like the blows of knouts on horses’ backs; shouts of command.

“Up! Up!” we yelled, the sentries yelled, at the same time firing shots to quickly rouse from sleep, the Lieutenant-Colonel yelled, and already a thousand musket-barrels stood out all around, like the weapons of the porcupine...

Two batteries hastened up to three hundred paces from our west side and began: “With shells – straight ahead”. But the evil birds mostly flew on high over our heads, there was not even a small crest of flame on the manor-house roof. They evidently wanted to make a breach, but they were not going to succeed. We shot into the brightly visible batteries. Suddenly they limber their guns, separate to the left and right, and infantry battalions come forth from the gap in thick, black swarms. We hear the cries of the officers, we also hear: “Avant les épaulettes!”<sup>7</sup> They are coming, they are coming. Some tigers, the forlorn hope, come leaping at the front; we see how they brandish their muskets, their yataghans, over their heads. Behind them the masses at the double.

“Lads, stand fast!” cries a Schleswig-Holsteiner among my troops. A murderous fire receives the assailants. They stop short and go back, back, and have disappeared into the darkness. The attack has been repulsed. A sea sweeping back; the sounds die away. But others are now clearly

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<sup>7</sup> “Officers, advance!”

heard: calm, slow trumpet blasts from where the batteries had just been. Three torches are seen, flourished to and fro high in the air. Between the torches there walks a man incessantly waving a white flag; beside him, an officer. Everyone drifts towards us like ghosts. Our battalion commander sends his aide-de-camp to meet them. The foreign officer's eyes are blindfolded, then he is lifted over the wall.

The negotiator brings the following: In return for orderly retreat with the honours of war, we should surrender the grange to his compatriots. In case of refusal, he gives us notice of utter annihilation.

I can hear my Lieutenant-Colonel yet today: "Nous y restons, mon camarade".<sup>8</sup> The foreigner is on the wall-coping, about to be let down, when the Lieutenant-Colonel tells him the story of the unfortunate Countess: that it was impossible to take the lady away. The officer shrugs his shoulders, looks sad, and casts his eyes down to the ground for a few seconds. Then he answered, "A la guerre comme à la guerre",<sup>9</sup> and departs with his people, sounding the bugles and waving the flag in the flitting light of the torches, into the darkness.

The Lieutenant-Colonel cries, "Officers!" Soon we are standing in a circle around him, and the old gentleman, who in his slow, hard road to the top has climbed the stepladder up to the ramps, who demands nothing from life, to whom his king, his fatherland, his family is everything, who has never known any other interests, who has grown grey in iron thrift, in the constant monotony of a never-changing garrison-town – how does he

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<sup>8</sup> "We're staying here, my friend."

<sup>9</sup> "War is war."

speak to us now? His words are sharpened to a point; they come short and precise. From his eyes there shines the lofty sun of the purest dutifulness, the duty of the hour. He, who has at times brought us to despair on the drill-ground through his pedantry, whose tongue has stuck fast in the middle of every speech in the small gatherings where he had to speak – now his words sound sharp and rousing.

“Gentlemen! You have all heard what the negotiator offered us, what he had to say to us in case of refusal. The answer which I gave him was the answer of all of you, without my needing to ask you. In a quarter of an hour we shall be surrounded. True unto death! Long live the King”.

Then he gave all of us his hand in thanks. To me, the head of the Third Company, he said, “The company will send a platoon into the castellet for a sudden advance, if it be necessary. You will accompany the platoon, Captain. I shall take a position by the barn with the two other platoons, to throw them wherever the greatest danger appears”. Everyone hurried to his men. With a piercing sound, a corridor-clock in the manor-house struck the first hour after midnight.

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I had posted my platoon in the portico – the idea of the glass partition had disappeared – which a broad, bright marble staircase of few steps led up to. From this position we could reach the road in one bound. Bleak devastation reigned supreme throughout the house; the raging here had been not to pillage, but to drag furniture out to support the boards and to search for eatables and wine. Things are not, of course, handled gently in such cases.

Before my foot lay a book. I lifted it up: 'A circle of the arts and sciences. By William Johnson. London 1817.' I opened it and read, letting my cigarette glow.

"Mythology:<sup>10</sup>

Question: Who was Jason?

Answer: He was the son of Eason and Almede, and, at the persuasion of Pellas, undertook the Argonautic expedition to Colchis for the Golden Fleece, which he carried away, though it was guarded by bulls that breathed fire from their nostrils, and by a great and watchful..."

I read that very attentively, as if I were in my room at home.

Now! Nothing could be heard, and yet every one of us knew it! they are coming! And the total encirclement was soundlessly effectuated, the circle being made ever narrower as it moved towards us.

Now. No, not yet. The silence of the grave. And yet, we feel it in every nerve: they are creeping up.

Horns and drums and shouting and yelling. In between, the machine-gun rattles: it sounds strikingly like an anchor clanking into the depths from the deck. Rrrrrt – Rrrrrt – The Marseillaise in the background from a thousand instruments, from many thousands of voices, and in the way the French sing it: "Allons, enfants de la patri-i-e!"<sup>11</sup> The "i" sung shrill, sostenuto.

And then they were on us. We had kept masterly order in firing our volleys. No shot had been fired before the proper time. Rapid fire. Rattling.

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<sup>10</sup> This section appears in English in the original story.

<sup>11</sup> "Arise, Children of our Fatherland!"

Fighting around the wall. Are they in the garden? “Lads, keep a firm grip on your rifles!” And when I was just about to jump down, I saw Turcos.<sup>12</sup> The black faces stand out against the white marble staircase in the faint light of the stars. Short, serpentine knives, yataghans gleam around me; bestial teeth are bared. Africa against Germany. And everything is a whirling circle in which raging men, leaves, stones, earth are in dreadful tumult. Now I am alone, now I help my soldiers, now they rescue me.

The castellet is on fire now. And in the middle of the kicking and the being kicked, the throttling and the being throttled, I suddenly think of the Countess. How I came down into the cellar, I never can say. The puerpera is lying unconscious on furs, the screaming baby beside her; her husband, that cissy, is praying on his knees in a corner. I shall never ever forget the deathly fear on his face. Then Turcos crowded in, spattered with blood, dirty, in a frenzy, animals. Already one of them is bending over the bed with his short flame-bladed sword – but a heavy bronze candlestick flies whirring at his forehead; he reels back. An old lady threw it, and as if she were a Judith standing on Holofernes, she places her foot on the monster. Auntie, that was well done.

Soldiers from my platoon are around me; we beat the Blacks back out. But it's burning, it's burning. “Forward, march, lift up the woman and the baby”. And torn, crumpled, tattered uniforms take the two of them in their arms as gently and carefully as if they were sugar-dolls. Out, out. We go to the barn like a procession for a much-loved, mortally wounded king,

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<sup>12</sup> Algerian infantry.

under crackling and crashing beams, carefully, protecting with might and main, slowly, slowly, and with hearts beating furiously. “Meier, Jahn, Bergmann, Schönborn stay here, guard woman and baby!” I cried that in jerky, guttural words. And back among the surges.

“Potato soup, potato soup, all day long potato soup, soup, soup, soup”.<sup>13</sup> There it is again, the signal for the infantry. “Advance”. If they sound it by my coffin, I’ll overcome any angels who want to bar my passage into Heaven.

And for a second time, the frantic attack was repulsed. I lean like one who is weary to death, like one who is listless, against a small pear-tree; the fruit is yellowing through the dear, beloved leaves. Is the tree bowing down to me? Does its top rustle around, enwrap me? Will it become a veil? And I sink slowly down. Heaven and Earth are now one to me.

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#### (The Garden of Death)

Have I been sleeping? No, really, have I been sleeping? I am lying stretched out straight. My eyes are still shut. Everything is so quiet around me. Now I open them and look into the leafy canopy of my little pear-tree again. My eyes wander, without my turning my head, past the branches to the sky. Countless small red clouds are drifting in the East. It is the last chaste minute before sunrise. Still the world is silent.

Learning upon the knuckles of my hands, I raise myself to a sitting

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<sup>13</sup> Soldiers would set words to the rhythm of signals and trumpet-calls.

position and slowly turn my brow to the right. I am not wounded in the slightest. I see only a medley of the most vivid colours on the green grass. Then I wake up: for close, close by me a black head is staring at me, its skull gaping wide open and deeply cleft. The Turco's body is propped on his knees and hands. He is dead. He has been lying in this position. Now I jump up and have fully returned to my senses. And I step through the Garden of Death... Here, one man has put his hand to his heart; there, one stretches out an arm; this one's fingers are bent, the latter lies flat on his face. The faces are contorted, seldom of those in a painless sleep. The wounds caused by splinters from shells are the most terrible: often legs and arms have been torn off, breast and intestines are open to view... Small white butterflies, such as often fly in their hundreds from the crack of dawn on beautiful summer days, flit around over the slain. At times they alight on the red blood; but it is not roses, and they flutter on, contrasting with the red wounds, with the green branches, with the blue sky – all colours of nature. In a flower-bed that is filled with Crown Imperials, I find my friend, the Captain of the Second. He snapped some of these proud flowers in falling, some bend over him like the canopy of a cradle, some were torn out of the ground, rootlets and all, by the captain's left hand as he crashed down – for Death is withered, and only life that is taking root is fresh, life with its foot on the ground. – His ash-coloured face – a shell-splinter has torn his breast open – has, if I may say, peacefully died away. He felt no pain. Farewell, my true friend.

Several paces further on, Death has overtaken the valiant army-chaplain; the bullet went into the centre of his heart. He had wanted to

bring the last comfort to a dying man. He fell down across the man, who had passed away in the meantime. Still the man of God is tightly grasping a small ivory crucifix. Barely five paces from him, the Battalion doctor is kneeling. But he is not shot dead; he has only been seized by a deep swoon from over-exertion. In his hands he holds a linen bandage. His head is sunk on the breast of one who has no more need of dressings.

Yet life awakens: I see the deadly tired musketeers sleeping against the wall; sleeping curved up and sprawled out like the dead. The sentinels are walking back and forth on the boards again. I go to them.

In a whisper I ask, in a whisper they answer. Who is it we do not wish to disturb? The dead? The sleeping?

The lid of the Erard has been torn open; a sheet of music flies about on the snapped strings in the morning breeze: La Calesera. Canción Andaluza. Yradier.<sup>14</sup>

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I am at the barn. I find the wounded in it, by it. The Lieutenant-Colonel has taken a severe shot to the abdomen. He smiles at me heroically in appalling pain. The Countess is still here. The newborn babe has a little bag of sugar in its mouth. Some one of the musketeers has brought this miracle about. The old aunt, whose grey hair falls over her shoulders, is busy everywhere. Now with her sister-in-law, now with the baby, now with the wounded and dying, to whom she gives to drink, to whom she gives comfort. She is indefatigable...

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<sup>14</sup> Lady Driving a Caleche. Andalusian Song. By Sebastián Yradier (1809-1865).

My company has assembled round me. I have now come completely to my senses. "Fall in, tell off, Sergeant-Major". Everything runs as on the drill-ground. The other companies also set themselves in order. We occupy our old places on the wall once more. There is reason to expect a third attack. Certainly, one more, one last advance against us, and our small band will have lost its last man.

And new enemy columns are indeed drawing near. But our comrades do not leave us in the lurch. They come down from the heights in dazzling sunshine, regiment beside regiment. Every band is playing a march. Our throats let out a "Hooray!" that penetrates to the marrow. They approach ever closer, ever closer, the enemy, the friend. And now our soldiers crowd round the grange. We fall in with them. Marching forward united, we send the French back through the gates.

Later, a trusty ally helped us, one whom besieged fortresses are rather loath to see: that shabby old ruffian, Hunger.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Marshal Bazaine surrendered Metz on October 27, 1870.

## **The Orientation Point**

[The action in this story takes place during the Battle of Vionville, also known as the Battle of Mars-la-Tour, on 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1870. It was the bloodiest battle of the war, with over 35,000 men dead or wounded.]

I had already had the pleasure of leading my company in two battles and a few bloody skirmishes. The third combat was expected for the morrow. We lay in masses on both sides, the enemy and our force, closely opposite each other.

It was four in the afternoon. I had just inspected the rifles and now sat with my officers under hazel trees. Our conversation revolved around the last encounter. My company, which had suffered the loss of two lieutenants and a hundred and seven men, had been provisionally patched up again. Before the reinforcements from home joined us, I had to make do with what remained to me, as well as I could. Every captain knows his men, their characteristics, disposition, talents, inclinations, their domestic circumstances. He and they have coalesced: it is no wonder if the gaps are keenly felt, if he misses many a man he has trained in the hard work of making peace. In war, close camaraderie between superiors and subordinates comes further to the fore than in peaceful times. That lies in the nature of things.

And we sat, tanned as gypsies, under the hazel trees. Around us fluttered the bustling life of the bivouac. From the camp-kettles rose the steam of boiling, very fresh beef. Often protecting their eyes from the rising

vapour with their left hand, the soldiers busily skimmed the bubbling scum off with their wooden-handled spoons. While doing this, they turned their heads away every now and then and pulled really odd faces when too much of the mephitic vapour got up their noses. We expected to indulge in the pleasure of this anything but tender and tasty dish in an hour. Lager, in the true sense of the word,<sup>16</sup> from the barrels of the sutlers (these tenacious souls had followed us, most commendably, up to the present) was to help to wash it down.

During our lively conversation, my Colonel appeared unexpectedly, on foot, and informed me that I had been appointed as adjutant to the Commander-in-Chief, two of the officers in his staff having been shot and wounded in the last few days. How I would have liked to stay with my company.

After only a few minutes, I had assembled my men around me to inform them that I was leaving and to give them to the charge of their new leader, a lieutenant-colonel. This lieutenant-colonel and I did not have the most congenial feelings for each other. It was like a stab through the heart when his refined, overloud voice caught my ear: "The company will listen to my command." On the next day, in a different situation, I heard the same words up to the syllable "mand" which Death bit off another comrade's lips.

After only half an hour, I found the Chief-in-Command, to report myself to him, in an isolated farmhouse. He was leaning over maps and they seemed to be stuck with pins which had heads of different colours.

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<sup>16</sup> "Lagerbier" literally means "camp beer."

His entire entourage stood, at a respectful distance, behind him. Nearest him, the Chief of Staff, to whom he put questions every now and then who answered them quickly and assuredly in a steady voice when he never rose nor lowered. I had, as the saying goes, a pique against the Chief of Staff, whom I had known from my garrison days. His terrible mathematical heart, which knew no pleasure, no joy, in God's wide world save the pleasure and the joy of counting and calculation, had always filled me with horror. His fallow-pale face, which even the strongest, most incessant sunlight could not colour a shade darker, with the eternally frowning forehead, with the bloodless, narrow lips, which never laughed or smiled, with the cold grey eyes, was dreadful to me. He also, as I knew very well, gave the General the creeps. Only the unbelievable, never-tiring faculty for work, the complete immersion in the duty of the hour, the taciturnity of this general staff-officer, compelled even me, as all of us, to feel admiration for him and hold him in high regard.

The other staff officers were likewise known to me from my garrison days. I had taken a particular liking to the fat, merry, laughing Major of the Hussars, who preserved his cheerfulness, his good-naturedness, in all of life's situations.

When the General noticed me, I walked up to him and reported myself. He said a few courteous words to me and concluded with one of his dry, never hurtful, witty remarks, which were always at his disposal. Everyone laughed – I had been the butt – only the Chief of Staff surveyed me with a stern look, to then write some memorandum or other in his notebook in his copperplate-resembling letters.

The General, yes, I loved him. As serious and taciturn as the Chief of his Staff, imbued with a sacred sense of dutifulness, his entire existence gave people a sun of loving-kindness. He helped wherever he could. Many a thoughtless young officer, whose ebullient, warmly steaming blood had once leapt off the right path, was led back to the old road by him, were this at all possible to achieve. From my knowledge of him, I am firmly convinced that at heart he had a low opinion of people, that he knew exactly the circles in which everything connected with human affairs had to run. Nevertheless, he did not abate his gentle love. He was a little overfond of scoffing. But his gibes flowed harmlessly from his lips. He was too clever not to keep this little door open which allowed what was weighing on his soul to slip away from time to time. If a folly became too conspicuous in his presence, then his bow certainly had arrows to send which could open a serious wound; but even in these cases, the man who was struck had to forgive him because of the amiable smile which made amends for everything.

The General, when he had risen from his maps and acknowledged my report, turned to us and said that he wished to personally inform himself about a point in the outlying land which he could not get clear in his mind from the maps. He asked us to mount our horses with him half an hour later. To me he gave the order to command a troop of the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Ulan Guards to ride along. The Lances soon arrived, led by Lieutenant Count Kjerkewanden. The General retained this troop at his personal disposal for the next day also.

Count Kjerkewanden, hitherto unknown to me, an extremely calm-

looking, unassuming officer, had two almost asiatically slanting dark-brown eyes in his wax-coloured face. "He will be the first to fall tomorrow; Death is already in his look," I whispered to the fat Major of the Hussars. "Come now, don't talk such nonsense!" he replied, laughing. But through this laughter there sounded a gentle reproof of my words.

At the stroke of six, we set out with the General. From the very outset we trotted quickly in that smooth and regular progression in which a good horse can cover miles without any trouble. The troop of Uhlans followed us. While we trotted through the bivouac, the villages, the farm premises, the officers in command there came to the General from all directions to report. Those who were sitting in the saddle at that time applied their spurs to dash up. The Supreme Commander thanked all of these gentlemen, briefly greeting with his hand, in a gesture of inimitable gracefulness, to left and right, and giving a slight, courteous nod with his head, thereby relieving them of any more detailed report. Otherwise, we would have been constantly ordered to stop.

Through the red-hot summer's day, whose heat was tempered by a brisk northeasterly, we trotted on and on. Our uniforms glittered in the dust. We trotted without talking, the General a horse's length ahead, through the dense mantle of troops. It became ever thinner, ever sparser. Now we scampered into the outposts. We had gradually, so to speak, come out of the cheerful bivouac life, from a more careless attitude, into the full gravity of war, to a certain extent into a more buckled, a more closed life. Finally, we stopped at a double-outpost of outlying picket Number Thirteen. Both soldiers stood, in accordance with regulations, left shoulder arms, face to

the enemy, beside the General. The commander of the outpost came and reported himself. His answers to the Commander-in-Chief's questions were certain and clear. It was a pleasure to hear him.

The Supreme Commander, who had looked at his map, asked for elucidation on where L'arbre – as a single point on the outlying plain was called – was to be found. The lieutenant took us to the next double outpost, which stood to the south. From here we saw, on a hillock in the middle of the sandy plain, a solitary large tree. It leapt out at us so clearly that we were not forced to use a field-glass. It may have been half a league away from us. Only now did the General explain to us that he had wanted to see this tree for himself. We all eagerly looked at the map and soon found the point called: L'arbre. Hitherto, the General continued, no information about it had reached him in any report. He concluded, turning to me: "Will you, accompanied by the troop, betake yourself thither at once, make a small sketch, and give me an oral report, particularly on how the surrounding country appears from that point, what can actually be seen from there, and how it is seen. If the hillock is strongly defended, you will not engage in a fray."

"Yes, Sir!"

The General and the officers of his staff took their leave. I asked the commander of the outpost if listening detachments, larger patrols and silent patrols were in the outlying land at present, impressed the password and the watchword on my own and the Uhlans' memories one more time, and then advanced with Kjerkewanden. The great extent of country appeared as empty as a sandy desert. Yet to the north we found a

depression in which we could move forward, unseen from the tree. It cost us a quarter of an hour more time; but we had thereby the advantage of being able to press forward until we were close to our destination without being observed from it.

I had the same feeling that I have always had after leaving the last line of outposts behind me, carrying out larger patrols and deploying listening attachments. I would say: On every occasion, it seemed to me that I was on a totally unknown star, on which it was so lonely that not even any animals lived there. Yes, I imagined that even birds and insects were lacking. And indeed, there is something mysterious about the bleakness of these man-forsaken stretches which lie between the outposts of both sides. As when on a hunt, as every time when an ingenuous soul walks through Nature, so, especially so, on these explorations in outlying land after leaving the double-sentinel at the outposts, it is a case of: Eyes peeled! Every shrub, every stone, every tiniest elevation or depression is as unknown to us as if it were on Uranus: who, what may be hiding behind it? A shot, even from a great distance, can have us turning cartwheels from the saddle to the sand at any minute. All orders are given in whispers: signs with the sabre, with the head, with the hands instead of loud words. Sticking behind a mound of earth, like panthers lying in wait, for minutes, indeed, for hours. I know of barely anything in life that keeps the soul more on edge.

Count Kjerkewanden and I trotted ahead of the troop, which often had to break up into single file owing to the narrowness of the depression. I had asked the young czapka-bearer if he might, should we succeed in

reaching the hill unnoticed, quickly draw his men up in line there and make a galloping charge at the hill and the tree. One could never know...

And we really did come up so close unmolested that, after the troop had deployed like lightning, the Count could command: "Lances down to charge! At the double! Hooray!" And Kjerkewanden and I galloped with brandished sabres in front of the long, couched tickle-sticks up to the tree. No human being showed himself, no bullet whizzed around our ears. Only a fox jumped up. The first living creature we had seen. It appeared in the hill before us like the started roe which the good "Count Palatine of the Rhine," Lord Siegfried (From 'Genoveva,' the tragedy of calumination.<sup>17</sup> If only Shakespeare had known the story!) had drawn and pursued, and Genoveva with her Woebegone stood before us. It is true that it was not her, and the hunted fox did not lay his limbs beside her; but a young girl did reach her arms out to us in supplication: a mortally afraid infant was snuggling up to her; she wished to protect it from us. Behind these two an old man who must have been a hundred years old hobbled with a stick. He tittered to himself in an amiably idiotic way, constantly wagged his head, and seemed, like a masticating cow, to be grinding bread between his toothless jaws.

The Uhlans laid their lances on their thighs.

The three people had walked out of a cottage which we only now discovered. It lay like a cave in the hillock. And on the hill there stood, colossal of size: L'arbre, an ash-tree with magnificent branches. The three

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<sup>17</sup> Ludwig Tieck's *Leben und Tod der heiligen Genoveva*. 1799.

lived not only in its shade but also under its roots. We soon learned, after we had convinced ourselves of the complete absence of the enemy here, that Monsieur Regnier with his granddaughter and great-grandchild called this place his own.

In spite of our having the most expansive view, as from the deck of a ship on the open sea, Count Kjerkewanden did not neglect the prescribed precautionary measures. I myself immediately set to work on the drawing and turned my attention before all else to what could be seen in the country around from this point, which was insignificant in and of itself owing to its minuteness. I wrote headwords to this purpose down in my notebook, compared the surrounding area with the map, and found that everything tallied. The plain, which appeared to be studded at its edges with villages, estates, farms, hamlets, and solitary buildings, had the approximate extent of a square kilometre around the hill. This wasteland was as flat as a pancake. Before the burrowed cottage lay a colourful patch of meadowland, an oasis which took the place of a garden. Deadnettle, bright yellow syrupflowers, red common vetch, valerian, ground-ivy, yellow rattle, camomile and speedwell exuberated all over. Now was I an apothecary, looking for plants and determining plants at that time? I think not. And yet all those flowers and herbs have become fixed in my memory. It may have been like a dream, my taking in this picture of peace, had it been for only a tenth of a second.

When I had finished my drawing and entering my observations, I looked up, as if by chance, to the majestic ash. Above it, a flight of vultures passed through the cloudless azure. They might have scented

something... The eight church towers which were visible from our sandhill glistened in the evening sunlight. If I assumed myself at that moment to be a genial, fat cross-spider, who was waiting and watching in the middle of its net, my threads would have had their nearest support on a carriage factory in the south, on a castellet in the north.

When I had slipped my rough sketch into my saddlebag, I looked around for my Uhlans to give the command to ride back. A picturesque prospect took me by surprise: under a laburnum bush, which was still in full bloom in spite of the July day we were living through today, under this, the only bush near the giant tree, the lieutenant had stopped. He bent down with a smile to the girl, who was standing slightly elevated at his side, with her hands on the pommel, and he held her hands clasped in his. She also smiled up at him. It was as if we were in the deepest peace. Unfortunately, I had to interrupt the little love-scene: "If it is convenient for you, Count, we shall depart."

Once we were underway, I had to reap a small gibe from the young officer, probably from slight annoyance at my interruption: if our galloping attack with lowered lances at tree and hill had not had the tiniest little similarity with that onslaught at the windmills described in a famous Spanish novel.

Night had not yet fallen when we reached the double outpost. I quickly leapt down from my mare Gemma, which was called Emma by my orderly as a matter of course, and brought my report and rough sketch to the Commander-in-Chief. When I asked leave to withdraw, I did not refrain from saying: "If Sir will allow a respectful remark, I would say that I would

choose the tree as the best vantage point from which to direct the battle tomorrow.” “I would say that even old Sirs have already had that thought,” the General answered, gently mocking me. But his good-natured, amiable smile quickly checked the blush which was about to flood my cheeks following my slightly presumptuous words.

Soon night came, and with it the full moon passed through the luminous sky. But it was no night. Evening and morning, protected by a chaste veil of twilight only through short summer hours, kissed each other’s rosy lips.

The Commander-in-Chief had ordered us to march up and on from three o’clock in the morning. To take a short nap, the high-ranking officer had reclined in the ample rustic armchair. Meanwhile, the Chief of Staff read out the plan of battle for the following day and had it written down in pencil by approximately a hundred adjutants who had rushed over. They all wrote assiduously. Lanterns, storm lamps, and swiftly prepared torches illuminated the densely crowded circular threshing-floor of the barn. The Colonel read slowly, launching every word with razor precision, without intonation: everything fitted seamlessly together, and everything ran its course like a perfect timepiece. Admittedly, the speaker was often interrupted by reporting officers and orderlies, who filled the entrance to the barn, pressing in, pressing out, pushing past each other (I would say, closing their wings, opening their wings) as in a beehive. When one walked up, then the Colonel stopped, read the note handed to him, or listened to the oral report, to immediately, without having lost the next word of his dictation, continue his talk. At one time he ordered me to wake the

General, to obtain a decision which did not lie in his remit. The Commander-in-Chief had given the order that he be woken at all costs if an event of significance took place, an important occurrence happened. I entered very cautiously and softly. As I had to wake him, I would have done better to noisily unlatch the door. But we humans are often so. And I even crept up on tiptoes. Dimly lit by the lamp, he held his brow in his left hand; his elbow rested on the back of the chair. He was sleeping. I hardly dared to shake him. But this was no time for consideration. So I carefully tapped him on the shoulder with my index-finger. "Sir, you commanded"... He stood up before me in a trice, and said with a kind smile: "Well, what is it?" and answered immediately and decisively and without hesitation.

We got into the saddle at three o'clock. I rode my small Hanoverian mare, Gemma-Emma again. She was an excellent jumper, had brisk paces, and she could, as I knew, show great endurance.

When the Chief of Staff put his foot in the stirrup, it tore. Never will I forget the cold, scornful, well-chosen, slowly spoken threats he made to his pale-grown groom. For Heaven's sake: a few sound invectives, a pull at his ear, and the good-natured peasant-boy, who in all other cases paid such close attention to his "jobs," would have been sufficiently punished; and it would not have happened again. It was evidently painful to the General, who must have heard the scene; he urged on his bay.

And we moved into the dance. The commands of the contredanse came into my mind to the point of insufferability, and I continually repeated:

En avant deux,  
Chaîne des cavaliers,

Balancez,  
Demi-chaîne anglaise,  
Traversez,  
Chassez croisez,  
Toutes les dames traversez le cavalier au milieu,  
Retraversez,  
Balancez, en ligne à quatre,  
Demi-ronde à gauche...

Unbearable. Finally the fat Major of the Hussars liberated me. Happy and cheerful as ever, he cracked bad jokes, made witticisms, tickled his horse behind its ears, and told me he had slept “fabulously” for an hour this night on two of the Provost Marshal’s trunks. Then he offered me a dark bottle which he had taken out of his saddlebag. “I put it to my lips”<sup>18</sup> but I could not get a drop. It was empty. The Major, who loved such jokes, laughed and slapped his thigh with delight. What was the use of frowning? And immediately afterwards, as we all knew he would, the cheerful Hussar produced another little bottle, which contained the best Nordhausen whisky. Discipline is necessary – so I took a long, hearty, mighty swig, “to make the tears trickle from your fingertips,” as my old, splendid sergeant Cziczán used to storm when he had us practising manual exercises.

The Commander-in-Chief had determined at the end of his plan of battle: Reports will find me, if circumstances do not render another location necessary, at Outpost Number 13 up to 7 o’clock in the morning.

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<sup>18</sup> A quotation from the song “The Bard” (Der Sänger) in Goethe’s 1795 novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship)

We trotted off thither.

We stopped at the place from which, at the double outpost, we had seen l'arbre for the first time.

And everyone was advancing.

Even when the sentinels had been taken up by the marching troops, we remained, as the General had ordered, at the designated place. The dance began. En avant deux.

Single shots are fired day and night when two large armies stand opposite each other and wish to exchange the time of day from patrols, from lonely posts. They bang out now here, now there: often from a far distance.

The time was 5 hours 37 minutes in the morning when the first sharp rattling became audible. In a twinkling it became more intense. Artillery shells were now raining down in between the gunfire. We all sat, with field-glasses to our eyes, on the left of the saddle and looked to the southwest, where the factory was veiled in white smoke. We also saw those thick, yellowish-grey, slowly rising, slowly dispersing small clouds which were created by the striking shells when they churned up the sand. I put my spy-glass down and checked once more, with eye and hand, the stirrups, the cingle, the harness; I knew, after all, that I had to be ready to ride soon. I also whispered to my mare: "Old one, look sharp now! Show your mettle!"

A slight change occurred in the General's face, the friendly line around his mouth disappearing; his lips closed more and more. His hand slid three times, four times, contrary to habit, quickly over his horse's

mane. He pulled his bay up quite roughly when it rubbed its teeth against its right foreleg, which was stretched forward. The Colonel stayed motionless: he was counting. "Just watch, he'll take his pocket-compasses out any moment now. The tables of logarithms will follow," the Major whispered in my ear. Behind us Count Kjerkewanden waited with his Uhlans.

The fight at the nail factory seemed to remain undecided. Evidently it was defended by a strong force. Two mastiffs were fighting there ever more viciously and loudly.

The Commander-in-Chief called to me: "Ride to the factory and bring me, at full pace if you please, a report."

"Very well, Sir."

While I rode away, I suddenly heard lively gunfire in the northwest also, at the castellet.

I gave a sustained and shrill whistle. My mare knew it: and while I bent forward a little, she stepped out, her hooves touching the earth at ever shorter intervals. O cavalryman's bliss. O day for men.

The factory had just been captured by us when I arrived. I asked for the officer in command. A gaunt general was pointed out to me. He wore a monocle in his left eye. His cheek, pushed rather out of shape by this, gave somewhat of a smiling expression to his face. But, Heavens! How mistaken I was to be. He bustled around like the Evil One; but he did give me, when I had reported the Commander-in-Chief's order, a calm answer. Before he had finished his explanation, the enemy attacked again with reinforced masses. The General and I saw ourselves in the midst of the

tumult. And how it came about; yes, God knows how something like this occurs in the thick of a great battle: the General and I found ourselves with the defending battalions in the large and tall main building. I had been able to pull my horse in with me. We were completely surrounded. Never will I forget the infernal noise, the dreadful din. The enemy's shells fell, over the heads of the attackers, incessantly, continually, in the factory. Now and then they burst on the anvils weighing many hundredweight: what a racket! The heavy fire ceased suddenly. The French began their final push. From the barricaded doors, from the windows, from the quickly broken-open loopholes, from the hole-riddled roof, our infantry sent the most murderous rapid fire. Then, at the last, fatal moment, help came to us. We could get out of the factory. The enemy was thrown down again. My mare and I had not been troubled by the smallest shell splinter. Now I could return to the Commander-in-Chief with my glad tidings. But I was still stuck fast in the throng. It cost me an effort to force my horse through those who were pushing forward. I saw the General, whose horse had fallen, put his hand to his breast and fall. Even at this painful moment he did not let his eyeglass fly off. A young blond adjutant with waving whiskers came rushing up from somewhere or other; he was searching, searching... wanted to stop his horse ... then he let go of the reins, threw both arms high up in the air, swayed back and forth a couple of times like a balloon gradually working itself free, and then plunged headlong to earth. But I really had no time to make observations. I had to go over a thousand obstacles, over pipes and wheels, iron fittings and axles, helmets and hooves, knapsacks and dead horses. At one time I was entangled in a train of ammunition

wagons. I cursed and railed like a broombinder to extricate myself. “What miserable cur is that, shouting so?” I heard a coarse, deep voice. But I had now disentangled myself from the Tohu-wa-Bohu<sup>19</sup> and dashed towards the Commander-in-Chief, handling the reins in that grinding, stirring-a-cooking-pot motion for the final stretch as in a race.

I made my report and then mounted my second horse. Gemma-Emma was in a lather like in a Turkish bath...

And once again, our total attention was turned to the nail factory, which was being contested again. The enemy was incessantly throwing fresh troops there. The Commander-in-Chief sent an adjutant to the 192<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division who were standing in reserve so they would march there without delay and finally make some breathing-space.

Not a foot of land seemed to have been won at the castellet either. The enemy held it tenaciously in their fingers. The General sent me there to make a report, giving me the instruction to return to the “tree,” whither he would now betake himself. It had more and more the appearance that friend and foe, as though compelled by a supernatural power, were regarding this tree as an orientation point. In particular, dense masses of cavalry on both sides were moving towards it, albeit still some miles away.

The fighting at the castellet was frenetic. Both adversaries struggled like two raging knifers going for each other. A small general with golden glasses and snow-white hair clipped very short was in command here and trying to oust the enemy using every possible means. When I met him, his

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<sup>19</sup> A Hebrew word meaning “without form or void” which describes the Earth before the creation of light (Genesis 1:2). Here, it means a state of utmost confusion.

horse, its neck upstretched, had just cut itself on a beech-twigg. In a thick Thuringian dialect, he nervously drew back the reins with the words, "Howay, ye Luther." He spluttered all over me when I made my orders known to him. He was sending a report to His Excellency about the further course of the fray every half hour. And as if he had suddenly flown into a rage, he cried: "Howay, lads get the Lutherans." With these words, he thundered up to a standard-bearer, tore the sacred sign from him, and holding it up high, waved it to and fro. He had all the drums beat and horns blown for an attack and then launched the final assault. I stayed at his side to obtain certainty of the outcome. No lead hit us or our horses. And with the standard fluttering around, which the foolhardy little General kept waving to and fro over his head as he steadily advanced, I rode into the jaws of Hell.

It so happened that I came together with my old company. They received me with thundering cheers. A sergeant ran up to me and announced, while I bent down to him and he breathlessly raised his forehead to me, that the First Lieutenant, the leader, had just fallen. I drew my sabre. And as I had to await the outcome of our situation anyway, it was immaterial whether I went along in the general flurry or led the men I knew to victory. The Commander-in-Chief would admit that I had been in the right when I explained the state of affairs to him later.

In one of these "final" assaults, in one of these last summonings-up of all one's mental and physical strength, every tactical formation seems to have broken up. In every German soldier, whether they are superiors or not, there is only the one intention, the one thought: the enemy must be

trampled underfoot.

And all is confusion. Men from unknown bodies of troops have mixed with my company. How they came to do so, they do not know. Beside me to the right, a young officer with a boyish face is charging, whom I have never seen before; he comes from another regiment. His eyes are aglow, are wide-open. Leaning far forwards, he thrusts his sabre before him continually; his left hand, the index-finger, likewise points forward with constant thrusts. In this way he passes like an avenging angel into the maw. On my left, with a regular beat, not becoming faster, not slower, my drummer Franke has joined me. Every now and then he looks me in the face. Otherwise, he cares about nothing, he drums, drums, drums endlessly, without the beat becoming stronger, weaker, slower, faster... Forwards! Only forwards! ... A single, roaring, world-encircling yell of Huzza is the conclusion. We have reached our destination. Where? I have no idea. By a garden-wall, in a park, on rosebeds, in bushes, by a summerhouse ... Man against man ... Swords and guns and rifle-butts and revolvers, fists and teeth, flesh in flesh ....

On a pond, which we run round, wade through, swim through, a frightened swan is paddling, I remember this precisely, with billowing wings. A musketeer makes a grab at him for support while sinking. It beats its iron pinions; the white feathers are already spotted red ... Through! Forwards! ... We are on the far side of the garden ... Beside me, on rising ground, a battery is working its way up. Individual horses fall, become entangled with others as they crash down. The men help with the wheels, put their hands in the spokes, drag the gun from its limbers, turn, push,

shove ... Success! At this moment the Captain turns a somersault from his horse. Immediately the veteran Lieutenant shouts, "The battery will listen to my com..." – He had to swallow "mand," for Death swallowed him ... The bloody work is done. The French withdraw. I have to go to His Excellency. Beside the burning castle I encountered the little General with the golden glasses and the short-clipped snow-white hair. He shouts to me, "The Lutherans winnet..."

I rode up to the tree to report to the Commander-in-Chief. And there I found him.

His entire suite kept in the shade under the gigantic ash-tree. The cave-dwelling, the piece of meadowland with many kinds of herbs and flowers, the whole little patch of earth lay so fresh, so untouched, so peaceful. No hoof, no sole had trod it yet today. The General, when I arrived, was speaking kindly and affably to the girl who, like the previous day, led the little child by the hand. But while seemingly giving ear to the Commander-in-Chief's words, she cast furtive glances at the Count with his gold-laced collar. The centenarian also hobbled around between us, like yesterday, heartily content with a cheerfully idiotic smile, grinding his toothless jaws as if he were chewing bread.

Since the beginning of the fray, all eyes had turned to the tree. Everyone seemed to have the intention of streaming towards it. The battle having broken up into individual scraps, the bodies of troops fought through their day of battle in larger or smaller units.

Only the enemy cavalry, who had been menacingly apparent for some hours, now pressed closer to us. At any rate, they wanted to get

ready to assist their foot-soldiers, who had been beaten at all points. The Supreme Commander's keen eyes had realised a long time before that an attempt to break through was to be made. He had therefore had *four* cavalry brigades assemble. This mighty mass now drew near, and in all probability the decisive stroke of the day was going to happen at the "tree," on the wide plain around it.

Adjutants and orderlies now flew to us from all directions, and even from afar the joy on their beaming faces told us that the enemy was showing us his back everywhere.

Only one more time did he try to tie the victory to his colours with his hosts of troopers.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon when the Major of the Hussars whispered to me: "Be so obliging as to look at the sky. Father Abraham, Moses and the prophets, Saint Antony, Peter and the apostles, Sem, Ham, and Japhet and the archangels have stationed themselves in the frontmost seats to watch one of the greatest cavalry clashes ever fought."

"But, Major," I replied, "Your imagination..."

He interrupted me, laughing: "Actually, its with our stopping here so free from care. In less than ten minutes we'll be in the thick of it. And I almost believe the French have come closer to us. Well, the General must know."

We saw battalions disengaging from the enemy manes to the right and to the left, like small flocks from an immensely numerous swarm of birds that was moving straight towards us. To throw themselves at our infantry who were finally unfolding forwards from the factory and from the

castellet.

The two lines, each of them constantly displacing itself slightly, moved ever nearer. A more grandiose<sup>20</sup> sight never met my eyes. Every artist's heart would have had to cry aloud with delight:

Behind both of the mighty squadrons, a large yellowish-grey cloud of dust rose up and moved along. It bent slightly, like a nodding-plume, shell-like, over the centaurs. It served as a featureless wall, a background for all the sparkling, glittering, flashing, molten, flowing gold and silver, iron and steel, the red, white, blue, yellow, all possible colours, which it moved before it in the dazzling sunlight.

While the merriest marches met our ears ever more clearly from the French squadrons, only the sound of signals came to us from our cavalry, those signals which contain a world of poetry. There was nothing more to hide behind for either side; the large, level plain did not allow such masses to draw near without being perceived. Therefore, music, signals, loud commands rang out everywhere.

And the squadrons moved ever nearer towards each other. While in the distance, turns to the right and to the left, and wheels, had leapt to our sight like flashes of light, we could now clearly discern the turns and wheels as horse and rider.

And the squadrons moved ever nearer. Confused neighing, breathing, clinking, snorting changed into separate sounds. Man and beast emerged from the whole in bolder outlines. While I sat stark with joy at the

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<sup>20</sup> I must, much to my regret, retain the foreign word here; "splendid" does not entirely cover the concept.

splendour presented to my sight, there came to my mind – how was this conceivable at that moment – Job’s wonderful verses:

“The horse paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men. He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword. The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering spear and the shield. He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage: neither believeth he that it is the sound of the trumpet. He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smelleth the battle afar of, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.”<sup>21</sup>

Now they are very close to each other. And twenty thousand fresh, vigorous men in the prime of life set themselves with root-like tenacity in the saddle ready for the furious impact.

At a trrr-o-o-t!

Gallop!

And then the fanfare!

During this short time, we had been under the ash, with the General, completely at rest. Then the Commander-in-Chief cried: “Draw your swords, gentlemen!” And swords, broadswords, sabres flew out of our sheaths like freed falcons thirsting for blood and desirous of flight.

The French approached the hill, the tree, before our men.

Without hesitation, Count Kjerkewanden and his few Uhlans rushed into the enemy force, outnumbered thousandfold...

Out of the typhoon, in the centre of the typhoon, the whirlpool

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<sup>21</sup> Job 39:21-25

mixing earth and air in which I found myself, where everybody fights for himself, I can barely recall any particular incidents. I had galloped up to the General at the last moment to be close to him, to protect him to the best of my ability...

The wild, flying, tousled, bright-yellow mane, overfull on both sides of the neck, of a dark-sorrel Barbary Stallion, who kicks the head of my General's horse with its fore-hoofs... the brandishing of swords ... Silver-gleaming battle-axes emerging from a black, restless, rippling, blood-coloured lake<sup>22</sup> ... Circles ... At one time I see the Chief of Staff. With masterly skill he can turn his horse round, wheel round, on the spot, He defends himself with his revolver, first calmly taking aim each time ... Someone pulls me backwards, my head, now helmetless, lies on the crupper on my horse, right over my forehead a black face, big white eyes, hot breath, small bells, small yellow spangle-crescents, purple tassels ... An arm raised high with the flaming sword of Saint Michael is about to rush down on me – no, it falls limp. The empty bottle of Nordhausen whisky, belonging to the Major who, dealing out blows some distance away in the tumult, had seen the fatal blow being fetched at me, hit the savage African on the bridge of his nose ... hurray, hurray ... The enemy shows us his horses' tails ...

The General and we, his staff, gather together while the pursuit continues to the very last breath. Nobody is seriously wounded. We are missing only the Count. But I could not find time to look for him. "Sheathe

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<sup>22</sup> This refers to the red Fez of the Spahis, the Algerian cavalry in French service.

your swords, gentlemen!” ordered the Commander-in-Chief, and the fierce falcons flew back into their cages.

We rode on at a short, Canterbury gallop. I cast a glance back at the tree and the hill. Everything has been trampled down...

The day is ours!

Long live the King!

When, around midnight, I received the order to go and fetch a unit that was falling far back, I rode across the large sandy plain where the cavalry battle had raged. I made my way to the Orientation Point, for that was what the spot was called from that time on, although it had served only the cavalry as such. The tree could be perceived from afar in the bright night. The plot lay silent and dead. Far into the field fell the shadow of the great ash, which slept motionless in the fine summer's night. All life had ended here. With its feet under a fallen dragoon's horse, which stretched its legs to the sky, the little four, five-year-old child lay crushed, slain, trampled. A pool of blood encircled the little blond hairs like a halo, glittering in the soft starlight. Under the blooming laburnum bush, through whose racemes the full moon was shimmering, Count Kjerkwanden lay stretched out. A stab to the heart had brought him that happy, enviable death, death for his king and for his Fatherland. His head lay in the lap of the young woman, whom a shot had killed. Before she received the fatal wound in her breast, or perhaps with death already in her heart, she must have carried or dragged the body of the Uhlan officer here. He had probably fallen in the immediate proximity of the tree when he threw himself into the tumult for us. And as he had held her hands firmly in his on

the pommel the day before, so did she, even in death, hold his hands encompassed today. The Count's brown, Asiatic eyes looked, lifeless, up to her. The back of her head leaned, slightly shifted to the right, against the trunk...

From far away a song of victory sounded over...

And all the fresh, healthy young blood which trickled slowly, slowly into the earth here. And in between the slain, there hobbled around, as the only breathing soul, the centenarian with his amiably idiotic smile, making that rubbing, grinding motion with his toothless jaws.