

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

Surrounded

(from *Kriegsnovellen*, 1904 [1885])

[These tales are from the Franco-Prussian War. "Surrounded" takes place during the Siege of Metz, capital of Lorraine, which began on August 19th, 1870. The fighting described occurred on August 31st and September 1st. 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.¹

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.

That these were the marches through the city gates towards the outer forts, to sally forth in the morning, perhaps with the entire besieged

¹ Metz.

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 Highness² 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 them, did us little or no harm; seldom did they burst in the soddened ground.

² Prince Friedrich Karl of Prussia (1828-85).

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 battalion³ 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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When the order reached us, the village church had just struck

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

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,⁴ 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 castlet 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 large pane, no small pane, was shining in its entirety. And *smash! smash!* kept ringing out.

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

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.⁵ 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.

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

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

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,⁶ 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 knapsacks. It looked like an enchanted garden: here, one leaned against a pale-fence, his forehead hanging down; there, two snored back to back;

⁶ On the left sleeve, signalling that he was a non-combatant.

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!”⁷ 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 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

⁷ “Officers, advance!”

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 adjutant 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".⁸ 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",⁹ 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 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,

⁸ "We're staying here, my friend."

⁹ "War is war."

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 castlet 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:¹⁰

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!”¹¹ 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. Fighting around the wall. Are they in the garden? “Lads, keep a firm grip on

¹⁰ This section appears in English in the original story.

¹¹ “Arise, Children of our Fatherland!”

your rifles!” And when I was just about to jump down, I saw Turcos.¹² 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 castlet 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, under crackling and crashing beams, carefully, protecting with might and

¹² Algerian infantry.

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”.¹³ 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 position and slowly turn my brow to the right. I am not wounded in the

¹³ Soldiers would set words to the rhythm of signals and trumpet-calls.

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.¹⁴

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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...

My company has assembled round me. I have now come

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

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.¹⁵

¹⁵ Marshal Bazaine surrendered Metz on October 27, 1870.