Vision With the Black Shawl

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Abstract

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A little after daybreak of a gray uninviting dawn, I shoved my tin hat off with a clang and sat up. A couple of fellows in holes near me were in the first throes of awakening, too. I stood up, slowly, uncertain if I had succeeded in waking my sleepy feet.

Now the mornings in that European hot potato known as Alsace-Lorraine can be pretty cool in late September. Of course winter hadn't set in yet, but there are warmer ways to sleep than with a tin hat pillow and a fresh dirt mattress and without a blanket.

The situation at the front was what the tacticians describe as "rather fluid"—which means to the guys themselves that (a) they might as well forget trying to figure where the Krauts are, and (b) they are probably in for more forced marches. The evening before we had slogged about eight miles, up and down baby mountains, across roads, through woods—all of it at a galloping pace through territory we had supposed was enemy.

Now we were in the hills above a town which had been visible from one point on the march.

"If some starry-eyed colonel expects us to take that place tomorrow," remarked a fellow near me, "I hope there's more of us than I've seen on this hike."

I grunted my agreement. F Company and our platoon of K Company seemed to comprise the whole of our little task force. In a town that size, our two hundred and fifty men couldn't offer a strong invitation to the squareheads to leave if they had their hearts set on staying. But the major was leading our side of this "hide and seek" affair himself, and he had generally proved to be a pretty straight thinker.
My feet had admitted life once more, and while I brushed the loose dirt from my hair with one hand, I probed for a K ration with the other. The smokeless flame from the waxed ration box warmed the water in my canteen cup quickly. The heat felt good on my hands, and I stuck to the spot stubbornly until the box was entirely consumed.

"Good morning!" piped some humorist from the far side of a tree. "I trust you are refreshed after that delightful sleep and excellent breakfast."

A clod of dirt missed its target and splattered against the tree.

By nine o'clock, the morning grayness had given way to blue sky. We assembled with unmilitary precision in the ditches along a hard surfaced road, which ran forward out of the woods and down the hill toward the town.

"Could it be," I mused, "that we are going to march down this road into town singing the "Marseillaise?" Being an intro­vert by nature, I decided that I would rather leave the spectacular entrances to the others, and go in by some insignificant path my­self. Then I heard a rumbling noise down the road behind us.

"They might at least keep trains off the highways," remarked the humorist, propping himself up on his elbows to look back.

When the train came clumping into view, "it" proved to be five Sherman tanks. The forward tank rolled up abreast of us and stopped, motor idling. A man behind me sat up.

"Looks as though we are going to have some cast-iron carriages running interference for us, huh?"

"Mmmm—" I said, trying to decide whether I liked the idea or not. It is comforting to know that all those cannons and machine guns are on your side, but the Germans had the habit of throwing everything but their breach blocks at anything resembling a tank.

I got up and followed the three men ahead of me as they moved forward. Blankly I watched them climb onto the first tank.

"Well, at any rate it won't be so tiring," I tried to persuade myself, as I climbed up beside the others and sat down. There were seven of us crowded behind the turret, and when I looked down, there was the major shoving one of those forty-pound portable radios at me, and saying, "Here, take this while I get up!"
Most of my platoon had clambered on the tanks behind us. When the major was satisfied that everything was set, he leaned forward to the tank commander (whose head was sticking up out of the turret like an apple on a tray) and said, “Okay, let’s go! And fast!” Before I had time to worry, I made a wild grab for something to hang on to as the tank lurched forward.

Now, anyone who isn’t scared during an attack isn’t a human being; but somehow this seemed different. (The difference, no doubt, being the dearth of foreign metal in the air.) “Too bad that lieutenant I had in basic isn’t here,” I thought. “This would have suited him fine.”

With a jarring thud we left the road and headed across a wide flat plain toward the outskirts of town. The other tanks pulled into a sort of echelon to the left formation. Our driver shifted up about a half-dozen gears from low and stepped on the gas. I sized up the situation. “Now’s their chance if they have any 88’s.” Apparently they didn’t have. About half way across the plain from the houses we had to cross a three foot creek. (A river, no doubt, if you had asked a Frenchman.) Hanging on for the expected bump, I felt us settle down in the soft muddy banks and stop, amid engine roar and muddy spray.

“All right, tankman, let’s go!” someone yelled. Considering that a praiseworthy suggestion, the driver shifted into a lower gear and proceeded to dig us another foot into the mud. The major leaped down with the radio and ran over to the nearest of the three tanks that had got across. The fifth tank was flapping its treads against the muddy bottom like our own. I wondered if the tankers realized that this was a hell of a place to get stuck; but perhaps they had thought of that. I said nothing.

The other tanks were nearly into the town now, and we spread out along the creek bank to await developments.

Someone pointed, and I looked back to our right rear to see F Company coming down out of the woods and on the plain. Spread out and keeping their distance beautifully, they looked like a drove of ants moving forward in an open column of platoons. That lieutenant in basic came to my mind again. He would have liked this.

Most of them were out of the woods, and suddenly they dropped flat in the big potato patch, just as I heard the “burrrp—burrrp” of an MG-42. The gun was firing from one of the town’s outlying buildings, spitting lead in spasmodic bursts across the
eight hundred yards of table-top land. Tracers whipping low over the ground marked the cone of fire.

I took a preliminary step toward the creek. We heard the comparatively slow "put-put-put" of one of our machine guns answering now. Then from behind the nearest hill came the faint "pomp-pump" of the company's little mortars, and seconds later blasts of dirty gray smoke blossomed on the plain. Far short!

"What the hell are they doing, shooting those things out of sling shots?" The humorist was perturbed.

"Maybe," said someone, as the turret of a tank clanked around toward the German gun. One of our other tanks had discharged its load of hitch-hikers in town and was coming back to help us. Unaware of our little skirmish, the major was standing nonchalantly behind the turret, his gold oak leaves shining, reflecting his disdain for German marksmanship. Except for the oncoming tank everything was quiet. Not perceiving the supreme beauty of dying for the führer, the rear guard had evidently made a hasty exit.

A heavy rope and coordinated clanks and roars brought our mired war wagon sloshing out of the mud. While the rope was passed to the other tank, F Company disengaged itself from the potato plants and moved over behind us. We all went clattering and scurrying in together.

On a main street our tank stopped. We piled off and took positions in doorways and alley entrances to await orders.

"It's all been too damned easy! Why should they sit over there and not so much as lob an over-ripe cantaloupe at us?" The humorist's rheumatism must have been bothering him; he certainly wasn't himself.

"Delusions of grandeur," I muttered, as the unmistakable odor of fresh coffee drifted out of the sky. "Gotta do something with that imagination of mine, or what with all the steaks and ice cream it's been feeding me, I'm going to be overweight!"

I was standing in the entrance of a narrow alley. A window just above banged open and I jumped, pushing the safety off my rifle. But instead of a gun barrel, a woman with a cup of coffee in her hand appeared at the window. She pointed to the cup of coffee and then to me.

"Kaffee?"
The cold was still oozing out of me from somewhere deep inside, and here was an angel offering me a cup of coffee! She came out a door that opened into the alley, with a steaming cup in one hand and a bottle in the other. "Cognac!" she said, and poured a little into the cup. That was the best cup of coffee I ever expect to have, though it was made with ersatz material that looked more like tobacco than coffee. A little girl appeared from somewhere and watched as I gulped the last drop and handed back the cup.

"Danks."

"Bitts," replied the woman.

The little girl smiled, and said something which I didn't understand. I reached in my pocket for some candy, then jumped back against the wall at the sudden "Whoosh—Boom" of a mortar shell landing in the next block. The woman and girl were gone when I looked around.

"Somebody must have told them we're in town," I thought; but when the next one hit the roof of a building across the street I no longer felt facetious. Another and another came hissing in. Shrapnel ricocheted down the street; spent pieces rattled with metallic clinking to the pavement. Suddenly the woman was standing beside me, jabbering something I couldn't understand. Then "Kellar, kellar!" pointing to herself and then across the street.

"Oh, a cellar! Okay. If you want to cross that street, go ahead. It's your neck!" We ducked as another shell landed, and chips of masonry and bits of metal rattled to the pavement. Pulling an old black shawl about her shoulders, she ran across the littered street and disappeared among the buildings. I took a deep breath. "Safe."

A momentary lull, and again the barrage began, closer and heavier. Shells were dropping in the street, and the concussion was terrific between the buildings. I moved away from the alley entrance and crouched against the wall as fragments raked that area and ricocheted down by me. A guy's mind is a little fuzzy at times like that, and I thought that I was having hallucinations when I looked up to see the lady running back across the street toward me, shawl flying, oblivious of danger. She dashed past me to her doorway, crying, "Kommen Sie! Kommen Sie!" and, thrusting a key into the lock, opened the door and pointed inside.
"Hier!" As I leaped inside, mumbling "Bitts," she turned and ran back across the street, miraculously unscathed.

I stepped through the door into the rear of a little cafe, and a shell landed at the alley entrance. The concussion flattened me; shrapnel ripped ugly gashes in the pavement and walls where I had been crouching. Fragments tore through the iron shutters over the big front windows. The room was filled with plaster dust and tinkling glass.

Dazed, I looked up for my helmet, but saw instead a lady with a black shawl about her shoulders hurrying towards me, through the dust and broken glass.

"Thanks—thanks, but I'm all right," I mumbled, rubbing my eyes and shaking my head. When I looked again there was nothing there but the dust.


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**Rats Are Different**

JANET straightened from her intent stooping over the wire-topped lab cage. She continued to watch the rat dispassionately as she groped behind her for the high stool, hooking it with one foot and dragging it into position. Still watching, she pulled her notebook forward, flipping it open, and fumbled in her pockets for her pen. She cased herself onto the stool and took a deep breath. At last her gaze shifted from the huddled ball of spiked white fur, with its eyes like frosted shoebuttons, its twitching and its dubious suffering, and considered her page of neat notes.

She sighed. This was the part about research that frightened her—not the hours of patient observing; not the recording of minute details; not the endless wading through others' masters thesis;—but this, the slow unfolding of a positive generalization: one valid conclusion: one useful step forward. She reached for her pen, uncapped it, then hesitated. She'd test this step one more time.