A Pair of Shoes

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There had been rain and a heavy shelling in the night and much of the path had disappeared. What years, maybe centuries of elemental beating had failed to do had been done by high explosive shells. Rocks and mud slidings covered the path in a number of places, some yards long, making detours necessary, and walking without slipping was impossible. The rain gathered in small natural basins and in depressions made by boots. Where it had fallen or drained into slit trenches or shellholes it gave the impression of stagnant lakes. The already scrubby bushes and stumpy trees were torn and shredded, bark and limbs scattered everywhere on the sloping hillside.

The ridge had been very important. Its possession gave the enemy a deep salient into the Marine line and protection for the bridgehead they had established. Without the ridge the enemy had nothing and their threat would be ended. The Marines had made their assault, seized the ridge after two days of vicious fighting and held it against desperate counter-attacks for two nights and a day. Now things were secure and they were carrying the dead and wounded to collecting points.

The four men were still a long way from the collecting point and they wanted to get down before it began raining again. A stretcher was hard to carry on firm, level ground and on a muddy hillside it was much more difficult. They hurried over this cheek of hell as rapidly as their burden and the ground would permit.

Everywhere they looked there were signs of the struggle. Piles of empty cartridge casings showed where machine-guns had been used in the assault. There were bolt action
rifles scattered among the rocks and mud, enemy equipment. Bandoliers dropped by riflemen after they had used the last clip. Metal halves of first-aid packets. C-ration cans. Helmets. There were still many enemy dead in the positions they had held and in a way the men now on the ridge were glad that it had been cold and rainy.

The corporal and the short one led the way, slipping and stumbling, almost wrenching the stretcher from the hands of the tall man and the fourth following behind. All but the fourth had the casually alert appearance of seasoned fighters. The fourth had the apprehension of the new replacement. If he lived long enough he would become dulled by repeated shock and molded by necessity into the appearance of his companions.

"That's the eighth machine gun I seen since we started."
"Jesus."
"Yeah, it's a goddam wonder we ever made it."
"All of us didn't," said the fourth.
"Yeah."
"What a position — Jesus, there's anothern up there."
The corporal pointed up hill.
"Billings tolle me this was as bad as Saipan, mebbe worse."
"No lie?"
"Yeah, an he oughter know, he got shot all to hell there."
"Knock it off and let's get down to that road," snapped the fourth.

The stretcher dipped and pitched in their grip, mounded up over its length and covered with a mottled green and brown poncho. The face was hidden and between the two leading men muddied field shoes and canvas leggings poked forward.

"I didn't realize he was so damn heavy, he sure didn't look it."
"Nah, he didn't at that."
"Let's put him down for a minute and take a break," the tall man suggested.
"What for, I thought you guys were in such a hurry to get down to the road before it rained?" asked the fourth.
"Hell, a little break won't hurt none."
"I say let's keep moving," said the fourth.
"What's wrong with you — fraid a hustling a stiff?"
"Knock it off," warned the fourth.
"Both a you knock it off," the corporal ordered.
"Yeah, aint ya got no respect fer the dead?"

The other men on the ridge watched them as they worked their way down. There were many groups such as theirs making their way down to the road and the collecting station, and as they passed a position someone would ask them, "What outfit?" Then maybe, "Do ya know....?" and mention a name. Sometimes they would turn away, "Sorry to hear that, real sorry," they'd say and begin to re-clean a weapon already spotless.
"They want his boondockers."
"What?" asked the fourth.
"They want his field shoes."
"What for?" asked the fourth.
"For the gook porters."
"The hell with 'em," the fourth exploded.
"Yeah," said the short one, "Let's keep moving."
"We better sit him down," ordered the corporal, "Some-one's coming."

They put the stretcher down and waited for the sergeant and the gook porter to approach. The porter carried an A-frame with ammunition lashed to it. His feet were wrapped in rags bound with cord.
"This man needs some shoes corporal."
"Yeah, I reckon he would."
"I'm going to let him have these."

The sergeant pointed to the shoes poking out from under the poncho.
"You'll die too, sarg," said the fourth.
"What was that?"
"Nobody's taking those shoes, not for any gook."
"This man ain't gonna need 'em." The sergeant pointed to the stretcher.
"But he's going to keep 'em. We can leave him that much." The fourth man spoke quietly, almost in reverence.
"You feeling awright?"
"Yeah."
"Well then, let's have those shoes."
"You try and take those shoes, sarg, and I'll spread your
brains all over the hill.” The fourth man took a short step toward the sergeant. The sergeant looked at him for a minute.

“Git him outta here,” he said.

They picked up the stretcher and began to move toward the road again. The sergeant and the gook porter watched them pick their way down. The stretcher tugged and pulled at the men and the muddy shoes poked forward.

“Hell, they’ll git ’em down at the road after we leave him,” the corporal said.

“That’s different,” said the fourth, “I won’t know it for sure then, and maybe they won’t. Maybe they’ll leave him that much.”

They were not quick enough and the rain began again before they reached the road. They lowered the stretcher on a level place of the road and fitted their mottled ponchos, still wet from the last rain, over their heads and onto their shoulders. The ponchos were not very good but it was another layer between them and the rain.

“I wish I had one of them army raincoats”
“What for...still git wet.”
“It’d fit better.”
“Oh bull.”
“Nah, I really mean it. Why look like a horse?”
“Aint we the stylish ones now!”
“Why’n hell not?”
“C’mon — c’mon, let’s git movin.”
“Awright — awright.”
“Raincoats — stylish. Pretty soon yul wanna fight inna tuxedo.”
“Why not?”
“Aw bull.”
“C’mon, c’mon.”

They started again. There were fewer men watching now as they passed by. The holes and caves were covered with a variety of materials and the eyes that watched looked out from what protection they could find. They moved with their heads bent forward against the rain. It came now in thick sheets giving the impression of stopping between each drenching but the steady soaking remained.
It would beat on the helmet covers and run off where the cloth formed a spout. Then it drained onto the shoulders or between the neck and the clothing. A little felt good on bodies sweating with the stretchers.

“I hate rain — I ain’t never gonna live where it rains,” he said. “No sir. And to think I used ter play in this kinda stuff. No sir. No more.”

“Hell, you’ll probably end up in Brazil where it rains a couple hundred inches a year.”

“So what — it’s rained that much here in the last ten minutes.”

“Bull.”

“No bull — it musta, an’ anyway there ain’t no place where it rains a couple hundred a year.”

“The hell — why, in India the typhoons come every year an’ rain twice that much in a couple months.”

“You mean the monsoons,” said the fourth man.

“Wil ya listen,” the tall one snapped, “the guy’s a prof­essor. I wasn’t even sure he was still with us.”

“Can it,” the fourth man said.

“I’ll can you.”

“I’ll can both of you — now knock it off.” The corporal glanced back at the fourth man. “What did ya come on this for?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Ya better be careful how ya talk, kid. Some a these guys won’t buy that stuff ya put out back there to that ser­geant.”

“I suppose not.”

“Now mind, I know how ya feel. But ya gotta watchit kid or yull blow yer gasket.”

“Yeah—yeah.” He nodded impatiently.

“OK — OK — have it yer way. But somebody’s gonna grab ya fer sure.” The corporal glanced back again.

The fourth man walked with his head bent forward and his eyes following the toss and pitch of the shoes.

Where the trail crossed the road there was a little grove of trees. Several tall, thin ones, hardly scratched by the shelling or small arms fire stood on each side of the narrow road, now rutted and muddy. They carried the stretcher
across the road and down the gentle bank to a level space under the trees. There were two long rows of poncho wrapped bodies lying on the wet green of the ankle high grass. Two long rows of stockinged feet pointed toward each other. A man at the end of one row waved them down and pointed to a place at the foot of a tree. They put the stretcher down and carefully lifted the now stiff body onto the grass. The corporal spoke quietly with the man standing there and gave him a few things which had belonged to the man under the poncho.

"You're not taking his shoes are you?" the fourth man said.

"What's that?" the man asked.
"I said, you're not taking his shoes are you?"
"Fraid so."
"You better not try it."
"What?"
"I'll take care a him," the corporal said.
"Like hell, and don't you touch his shoes," the fourth man said.

"This guy nuts, corporal?"
"I'll take care a him. You better git though."
"I'm gonna shoot that son-of-a-bitch," the fourth man said. He had his rifle unslung when the tall man hit him. He fell and lay without moving beside the body. The three stood closely together watching him as the other man left.
"Can't they leave a guy anything?" he asked quietly.
"Can't they leave him anything? Hasn't he given these goddam gooks enough?"
"I ain't gonna argue with ya kid." The three shifted uneasily as the corporal spoke. "Yer new at this, but if yer gonna flare up like so everytime someone gits it — ya better quit now. Ya better quite fore you an a lotta good people get hurt jest cause a you."

"But can't they leave the poor bastard anything?"
"I don't know about that and I ain't sure I know what yer gettin at — but kid, if ya can't kinda slip this back in yer mind — turn in now. Ain't nobody gonna say anythin."

He sat beside the body now and stared at the leggings and the tilted shoes. He may have been crying but they
could not tell with the rain and eyes bloodshot from long
days and nights of fighting. They did not care to look
closely to see a man cry. It was not fear and they knew it.
He sat beside the body and after waiting a while, the three
turned back to the trail. They walked over the dripping
springy grass of the grove, then up to the mud of the road
and the trail. The rain did not come in sheets anymore
and there were minutes when there was no rain at all and
they would look up at the sky, watching the clouds. They
were out of sight when he finally stood. "I'll have to catch
up with them," he thought. "I'll have to hurry."
—Roger C. Kezar, Sci. Sr.

Myopia

MOLE stopped short. He retreated a little from the
new discovery and rubbed his bruised snout.
"There's always something blocking progress," he thought
as he brushed some of the dirt from his face and settled
down to relax for a moment.

Mole liked to think of himself as 'progressive'. He was
almost always spearheading some drive or other. Only re­
cently he had, on self appointment, carried out a drive to
rid the area of grub worms. He liked that kind of work.
The personal returns weren't too spectacular, but he always
had plenty to eat. And, what is more, with that kind of
work, Mole always felt that he was going somewhere in this
world.

Mole was now engaged in a drive to sample and evaluate
all root types in the area, but he had just run into familiar
opposition. The stone was the latest of the "stand pat"
conservative factors that blocked almost everything that
Mole tried to do. Last time it was the Humane Society
with some silly argument about grubs being living creatures
too, and now it was this stone.