

A SHORT STORY

BLACK ASS

AT THE CROSS

ROADS

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

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“Black Ass at the Cross Roads,” a completed short story, was written between the end of World War II and 1961.

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WE HAD REACHED THE CROSS ROADS before noon and had shot a French civilian by mistake. He had run across the field on our right beyond the farmhouse when he saw the first jeep come up. Claude had ordered him to halt and when he had kept on running across the field Red shot him. It was the first man he had killed that day and he was very pleased.

We had all thought he was a German who had stolen civilian clothes, but he turned out to be French. Anyway his papers were French and they said he was from Soissons.

“Sans doute c’était un Collabo,” Claude said.

“He ran, didn’t he?” Red asked. “Claude told him to halt in good French.”

“Put him in the game book as a Collabo,” I said. “Put his papers back on him.”

“What was he doing up here if he comes from Soissons?” Red asked. “Soissons’s way the hell back.”

“He fled ahead of our troops because he was a collaborator,” Claude explained.

“He’s got a mean face.” Red looked down at him.

“You spoiled it a little,” I said. “Listen, Claude. Put the papers back and leave the money.”

“Someone else will take it.”

“You won’t take it,” I said. “There will be plenty of money coming through on Krauts.”

Then I told them where to put the two vehicles and where to set up shop and sent Onèsime across the field to cross the two roads and get into the shuttered estaminet and find out what had gone through on the escape-route road.

Quite a little had gone through, always on the road to the right. I knew plenty more had to come through and I paced the distances back from the road to the two traps we had set up. We were using Kraut weapons so the noise would not alarm them if anyone heard the noise coming up on the cross roads. We set the traps well beyond the cross roads so that we would not louse up the cross roads and make it look like a shambles. We wanted them to hit the cross roads fast and keep coming.

“It is a beautiful guet-apens,” Claude said and Red asked me what was that. I told him it was only a trap as always. Red said he must remember the word. He now spoke his idea of French about half the time and if given an order perhaps half the time he would answer in what he thought was French. It was comic and I liked it.

It was a beautiful late summer day and there were very few more to come that summer. We lay where we had set up and the two vehicles covered us from behind the manure pile. It was a big rich manure pile and very solid and we lay in the grass behind the ditch and the grass smelled as all summers smell and the two trees made a shade over each trap.

Perhaps I had set up too close but you cannot ever be too close if you have fire power and the stuff is going to come through fast. One hundred yards is all right. Fifty yards is ideal. We were closer than that. Of course in that kind of thing it always seems closer.

Some people would disagree with this setup. But we had to figure to get out and back and keep the road as clean looking as possible. There was nothing much you could do about vehicles, but other vehicles coming would normally assume they had been destroyed by aircraft. On this day, though, there was no aircraft. But nobody coming would know there had not been aircraft through here. Anybody making their run on an escape route sees things differently too.

“Mon Capitaine,” Red said to me. “If the point comes up they will not shoot the shit out of us when they hear these Kraut weapons?”

“We have observation on the road where the point will come from the two vehicles. They’ll flag them off. Don’t sweat.”

“I am not sweating,” Red said. “I have shot a proved collaborator. The only thing we have killed today and we will kill many Krauts in this setup. Pas vrai, Onie?”

Onèsime said, “Merde” and just then we heard a car coming very fast. I saw it come down the beech-tree bordered road. It was an overloaded

grey-green camouflaged Volkswagen and it was filled with steel-helmeted people looking as though they were racing to catch a train.

There were two aiming stones by the side of the road that I had taken from a wall by the farm, and as the Volkswagen crossed the notch of the cross roads and came toward us on the good straight escape road that crossed in front of us and led up a hill, I said to Red, "Kill the driver at the first stone." To Onèsime I said, "Traverse at body height."

The Volkswagen driver had no control of his vehicle after Red shot. I could not see the expression on his face because of the helmet. His hands relaxed. They did not crisp tight nor hold on the wheel. The machine gun started firing before the driver's hands relaxed and the car went into the ditch spilling the occupants in slow motion. Some were on the road and the second outfit gave them a small carefully hoarded burst. One man rolled over and another started to crawl and while I watched Claude shot them both.

"I think I got that driver in the head," Red said.

"Don't be too fancy."

"She throws a little high at this range," Red said. "I shot for the lowest part of him I could see."

"Bertrand," I called over to the second outfit. "You and your people get them off the road, please. Bring me all the Feldbuchen and you hold the money for splitting. Get them off fast. Go on and help, Red. Get them into the ditch."

I watched the road to the west beyond the estaminet while the cleaning up was going on. I never watched the cleaning up unless I had

to take part in it myself. Watching the cleaning up is bad for you. It is no worse for me than for anyone else. But I was in command.

“How many did you get, Onie?”

“All eight, I think. Hit, I mean.”

“At this range—”

“It’s not very sporting. But after all it’s their machine gun.”

“We have to get set now fast again.”

“I don’t think the vehicle is shot up badly.”

“We’ll check her afterwards.”

“Listen,” Red said. I listened, then blew the whistle twice and everybody faded back, Red hauling the last Kraut by one leg with his head shuddering and the trap was set again. But nothing came and I was worried.

We were set up for a simple job of assassination astride an escape route. We were not astride, technically, because we did not have enough people to set up on both sides of the road and we were not technically prepared to cope with armored vehicles. But each trap had two German Panzerfausten. They were much more powerful and simpler than the general-issue American bazooka, having a bigger warhead and you could throw away the launching tube; but lately, many that we had found in the German retreat had been booby-trapped and others had been sabotaged. We used only those as fresh as anything in that market could be fresh and we always asked a German prisoner to fire off samples taken at random from the lot.

German prisoners who had been taken by irregulars were often as cooperative as head waiters or minor diplomats. In general we regarded the Germans as perverted Boy Scouts. This is another way of saying they were splendid soldiers. We were not splendid soldiers. We were specialists in a dirty trade. In French we said, “un métier très sale.”

We knew, from repeated questionings, that all Germans coming through on this escape route were making for Aachen and I knew that all we killed now we would not have to fight in Aachen nor behind the West Wall. This was simple. I was pleased when anything was that simple.

The Germans we saw coming now were on bicycles. There were four of them and they were in a hurry too but they were very tired. They were not cyclist troops. They were just Germans on stolen bicycles. The leading rider saw the fresh blood on the road and then he turned his head and saw the vehicle and he put his weight hard down on his right pedal with his right boot and we opened on him and on the others.

A man shot off a bicycle is always a sad thing to see, although not as sad as a horse shot with a man riding him nor a milk cow gut-shot when she walks into a fire fight. But there is something about a man shot off a bicycle at close range that is too intimate. These were four men and four bicycles. It was very intimate and you could hear the thin tragic noise the bicycles made when they went over onto the road and the heavy sound of men falling and the clatter of equipment.

“Get them off the road quick,” I said. “And hide the four vélos.”

As I turned to watch the road one of the doors of the estaminet opened and two civilians wearing caps and working clothes came out each

carrying two bottles. They sauntered across the cross roads and turned to come up in the field behind the ambush. They wore sweaters and old coats, corduroy trousers and country boots.

“Keep them covered, Red,” I said. They advanced steadily and then raised the bottles high above their heads, one bottle in each hand as they came in.

“For Christ sake, get down,” I called, and they got down and came crawling through the grass with the bottles tucked under their arms.

“Nous sommes des copains,” one called in a deep voice, rich with alcohol.

“Advance, rum-dumb copains, and be recognized,” Claude answered.

“We are advancing.”

“What do you want out here in the rain?” Onèsime called.

“We bring the little presents.”

“Why didn’t you give the little presents when I was over there?” Claude asked.

“Ah, things have changed, camarade.”

“For the better?”

“Rudement,” the first rummy camarade said. The other, lying flat and handing us one of the bottles, asked in a hurt tone, “On dit pas bonjour aux nouveaux camarades?”

“Bonjour,” I said. “Tu veux battre?”

“If it’s necessary. But we came to ask if we might have the vélos.”

"After the fight," I said. "You've made your military service?"

"Naturally."

"Okay. You take a German rifle each and two packs of ammo and go up the road two hundred yards on our right and kill any Germans that get by us."

"Can't we stay with you?"

"We're specialists," Claude said. "Do what the captain says."

"Get up there and pick out a good place and don't shoot back this way."

"Put on these arm bands," Claude said. He had a pocket full of arm bands. "You're Franc-tireurs." He did not add the rest of it.

"Afterwards we can have the vélos?"

"One apiece if you don't have to fight. Two apiece if you fight."

"What about the money?" Claude asked. "They're using our guns."

"Let them keep the money."

"They don't deserve it."

"Bring any money back and you'll get your share. Allez vite. Débine-toi."

"Ceux, sont des poivrots pourris," Claude said.

"They had rummies in Napoleon's time too."

"It's probable."

"It's certain," I said. "You can take it easy on that."

We lay in the grass and it smelled of true summer and the flies, the ordinary flies and the big blue flies started to come to the dead that

were in the ditch and there were butterflies around the edges of the blood on the black-surfaced road. There were yellow butterflies and white butterflies around the blood and the streaks where the bodies had been hauled.

“I didn’t know butterflies ate blood,” Red said.

“I didn’t either.”

“Of course when we hunt it’s too cold for butterflies.”

“When we hunt in Wyoming the picket pin gophers and the prairie dogs are holed up already. That’s the fifteenth of September.”

“I’m going to watch and see if they really eat it,” Red said.

“Want to take my glasses?”

He watched and after a while he said, “I’ll be damned if I can tell. But it sure interests them.” Then he turned to Onèsime and said, “Piss pauvre Krauts, Onie. Pas de pistol, pas de binoculaire. Fuck-all rien.”

“Assez de sous,” Onèsime said. “We’re doing all right on the money.”

“No fucking place to spend it.”

“Some day.”

“Je veux spend maintenant,” Red said.

Claude opened one of the two bottles with the cork screw on his Boy Scout German knife. He smelled it and handed it to me.

“C’est du gnôle.”

The other outfit had been working on their share. They were our best friends but as soon as we were split they seemed like the others and the vehicles seemed like the rear echelon. You split too easy, I thought. You want to watch that. That's one more thing you can watch.

I took a drink from the bottle. It was very strong raw spirits and all it had was fire. I handed it back to Claude who gave it to Red. Tears came into his eyes when he swallowed it.

"What do they make it out of up here, Onie?"

"Potatoes, I think, and parings from horses' hooves they get at the blacksmith shop."

I translated to Red. "I taste everything but the potatoes," he said.

"They age it in rusty nail kegs with a few old nails to give it zest."

"I better take another to take the taste out of my mouth," Red said.

"Mon Capitaine, should we die together?"

"Bonjour, toute le monde," I said. This was an old joke we had about an Algerian who was about to be guillotined on the pavement outside the Santé who replied with that phrase when asked if he had any last words to say.

"To the butterflies," Onèsime drank.

"To the nail kegs," Claude raised the bottle.

"Listen," Red said and handed the bottle to me. We all heard the noise of a tracked vehicle.

“The fucking jackpot,” Red said. “Along ongong de la patree, le fucking jackpot ou le more.” He sang softly, the nail keg juice no good to him now. I took another good drink of the juice as we lay and checked everything and looked up the road to our left. Then it came in sight. It was a Kraut half-track and it was crowded to standing room only.

When you set a trap on an escape route you have four or, if you can afford them, five Teller mines, armed, on the far side of the road. They lie like round checker counters wider than the biggest soup plates and toad squatted in their thick deadliness.

They are in a semi-circle, covered with cut grass and connected by a heavy tarred line which may be procured at any ship chandler's. One end of this line is made fast to a kilometer marking, called a borne, or to a tenth of a kilometer stone, or any other completely solid object, and the line runs loosely across the road and is coiled in the first or second section of the trap.

The approaching overloaded vehicle was of the type where the driver looks out through slits and its heavy machine guns now showed high in anti-aircraft position. We were all watching it closely as it came nearer, so very overcrowded. It was full of combat S.S. and we could see the collars now and faces were clear then clearer.

“Pull the cord,” I called to the second outfit and as the cord took up its slack and commenced to tighten the mines moved out of their semi-circle and across the road looking, I thought, like nothing but green grass-covered Teller mines.

Now the driver would see them and stop or he would go on and hit them. You should not attack an armored vehicle while it was moving, but if he braked I could hit him with the big-headed German bazooka.

The half-track came on very fast and now we could see the faces quite clearly. They were all looking down the road where the point would come from. Claude and Onie were white and Red had a twitch in the muscle of his cheek. I felt hollow as always. Then someone in the half-track saw the blood and the Volkswagen in the ditch and the bodies.

They were shouting in German and the driver and the officer with him must have seen the mines across the road and they came to a tearing swerving halt and had started to back when the bazooka hit.

It hit while both outfits were firing from the two traps. The people in the half-track had mines themselves and were hurrying to set up their own road block to cover what had gone through because when the Kraut bazooka hit and the vehicle went up we all dropped our heads and everything rained down as from a fountain.

It rained metal and other things. I checked on Claude and Onie and Red and they were all firing. I was firing too with a Smeizer on the slits and my back was wet and I had stuff all over my neck, but I had seen what fountained up. I could not understand why the vehicle had not been blown wide open or overturned.

But it just blew straight up. The fifties from the vehicle were firing and there was so much noise you could not hear. No one showed from the half-track and I thought it was over and was going to wave the fifties

off, when someone inside threw a stick grenade that exploded just beyond the edge of the road.

“They’re killing their dead,” Claude said. “Can I go up and put a couple into her?”

“I can hit her again.”

“No. Once was enough. My whole back’s tattooed.”

“Okay. Go on.”

He crawled forward, snaking in the grass under the fire of the fifties and pulled the pin from a grenade and let the lever snap loose and held the grenade smoking grey and then lobbed it underhand up over the side of the half-track. It exploded with a jumping roar and you could hear the fragments whang against the armor.

“Come on out,” Claude said in German. A German machine-gun pistol started shooting from the right-hand slit. Red hit the slit twice. The pistol fired again. It was obvious it was not being aimed.

“Come on out,” Claude called. The pistol shot again, making a noise like children rattling a stick along a picket fence. I shot back making the same silly noise.

“Come on back, Claude,” I said. “You fire on one slit. Red. Onie, you fire on the other.”

When Claude came back fast I said, “Fuck that Kraut. We’ll use up another one. We can get more. The point will be up anyway.”

“This is their rear guard,” Onie said. “This vehicle.”

“Go ahead and shoot it,” I said to Claude. He shot it and there was no front compartment and then they went in after what would be left of the money and the paybooks. I had a drink and waved to the vehicles. The men on the fifties were shaking their hands over their heads like fighters. Then I sat with my back against the tree to think and to look down the road.

They brought what paybooks there were and I put them in a canvas bag with the others. Not one of them was dry. There was a great deal of money, also wet, and Onie and Claude and the other outfit cut off a lot of S.S. patches and they had what pistols were serviceable and some that weren't and put it all in the canvas sack with the red stripes around it.

I never touched the money. That was their business and I thought it was bad luck to touch it anyway. But there was plenty of prize money. Bertrand gave me an Iron Cross, first class, and I put it in the pocket of my shirt. We kept some for a while and then we gave them all away. I never liked to keep anything. It's bad luck in the end. I had stuff for a while that I wished I could have sent back afterwards or to their families.

The outfit looked as though they had been showered by chunks and particles from an explosion in an abattoir and the other people did not look too clean when they came out from the body of the half-track. I did not know how badly I must have looked myself until I noticed how many flies there were around my back and neck and shoulders.

The half-track lay across the road and any vehicle passing would have to slow down. Everyone was rich now and we had lost no one and the place was ruined. We would have to fight on another day and I was

sure this was the rear guard and all we would get now would be strays and unfortunates.

“Disarm the mines and pick up everything and we will go back to the farmhouse and clean up. We can interdict the road from there like in the book.”

They came in heavily loaded and everyone was very cheerful. We left the vehicles where they were and washed up at the pump in the farmyard and Red put iodine on the metal cuts and scratches and sifted Sulfa on Onie and Claude and me and then Claude took care of Red.

“Haven’t they got anything to drink in that farmhouse?” I asked René.

“I don’t know. We’ve been too busy.”

“Get in and see.”

He found some bottles of red wine that was drinkable and I sat around and checked the weapons and made jokes. We had very severe discipline but no formality except when we were back at Division or when we wanted to show off.

“Encore un coup manqué,” I said. That was a very old joke and it was a phrase that a crook we had with us for a while always uttered when I would let something worthless go by to wait for something good.

“It’s terrible,” said Claude.

“It’s intolerable,” said Michel.

“Me, I can go no further,” Onèsime said.

“Moi, je suis la France,” Red said.

“You fight?” Claude asked him.

“Pas moi.” Red answered. “I command.”

“You fight?” Claude asked me.

“Jamais.”

“Why is your shirt covered with blood?”

“I was attending the birth of a calf.”

“Are you a midwife or a veterinary?”

“I give only the name, rank and serial number.”

We drank some more wine and watched the road and waited for the point to come up.

“Où est la fucking point?” Red asked.

“I am not in their confidence.”

“I’m glad it didn’t come up while we had the little accrochage,” Onie said. “Tell me, mon Capitaine, how did you feel when you let the thing go?”

“Very hollow.”

“What did you think about?”

“I hoped to Christ it would not trickle out.”

“We were certainly lucky they were loaded with stuff.”

“Or that they didn’t back up and deploy.”

“Don’t ruin my afternoon,” Marcel said.

“Two Krauts on bicycles,” Red said. “Approaching from the west.”

“Plucky chaps,” I said.

“Encore un coup manqué,” said Onie.

“Anybody want them?”

Nobody wanted them. They were pedaling steadily, slumped forward and their boots were too big for the pedals.

“I’ll try one with the M-1,” I said. Auguste handed it to me and I waited until the first German on the bicycle was past the half-track and clear of the trees and then had the sight on him, swung with him and missed.

“Pas bon,” said Red and I tried it again swinging further ahead. The German fell in the same disconcerting heartbreaking way and lay in the road with the vélo upside down and a wheel still spinning. The other cyclist sprinted on and soon the copains were firing. We heard the hard ta-bung of their shots which had no effect on the cyclist who kept on pedaling until he was out of sight.

“Copains no bloody bon,” Red said.

Then we saw the copains falling back to retire onto the main body. The French of the outfit were ashamed and sore.

“On peut les fusiller?” Claude asked.

“No. We don’t shoot rummies.”

“Encore un coup manqué,” said Onie and everybody felt better but not too good.

The first copain who had a bottle in his shirt which showed when he stopped and presented arms said, "Mon Capitaine, on a fait un véritable massacre."

"Shut up," said Onie. "And hand me your pieces."

"But we were the right flank," the copain said in his rich voice.

"You're shit," Claude said. "You venerable alcoholic. Shut up and fuck off."

"Mais on a battu."

"Fought, shit," Marcel said. "Foute moi le camp."

"On peut fusiller les copains?" Red asked. He had remembered it like a parrot.

"You shut up too," I said. "Claude, I promised them two vélos."

"It's true," Claude said.

"You and I will go down and give them the worst two and remove the Kraut and the vélo. You others keep the road cut."

"It was not like this in the old days," one of the copains said.

"Nothing's ever going to be like it was in the old days. You were probably drunk in the old days anyway."

We went first to the German in the road. He was not dead but was shot through both lungs. We took him as gently as we could and laid him down as comfortable as we could and I took off his tunic and shirt and we sifted the wounds with Sulfa and Claude put a field dressing on him. He had a nice face and he did not look more than seventeen. He tried

to talk but he couldn't. He was trying to take it the way he'd always heard you should.

Claude got a couple of tunics from the dead and made a pillow for him. Then he stroked his head and held his hand and felt his pulse. The boy was watching him all the time but he could not talk. The boy never looked away from him and Claude bent over and kissed him on the forehead.

"Carry that bicycle off the road," I said to the copains.

"Cette putain guerre," Claude said. "This dirty whore of a war."

The boy did not know that it was me who had done it to him and so he had no special fear of me and I felt his pulse too and I knew why Claude had done what he had done. I should have kissed him myself if I was any good. It was just one of those things that you omit to do and that stay with you.

"I'd like to stay with him for a little while," Claude said.

"Thank you very much," I said. I went over to where we had the four bicycles behind the trees and the copains were standing there like crows.

"Take this one and that one and foute moi le camp." I took off their brassards and put them in my pocket.

"But we fought. That's worth two."

"Fuck off," I said. "Did you hear me? Fuck off."

They went away disappointed.

A boy about fourteen came out from the estaminet and asked for the new bicycle.

“They took mine early this morning.”

“All right. Take it.”

“What about the other two?”

“Run along and keep off the road until the column gets up here.”

“But you are the column.”

“No,” I said. “Unfortunately we are not the column.”

The boy mounted the bicycle which was undamaged and rode down to the estaminet. I walked back under the hot summer sky to the farmyard to wait for the point. I didn't know how I could feel any worse. But you can all right. I can promise you that.

“Will we go into the big town tonight?” Red asked me.

“Sure. They're taking it now, coming in from the west. Can't you hear it?”

“Sure. You could hear it since noon. Is it a good town?”

“You'll see it as soon as the column gets up and we fit in and go down that road past the estaminet.” I showed him on the map. “You can see it in about a mile. See the curve before you drop down?”

“Are we going to fight any more?”

“Not today.”

“You got another shirt?”

"It's worse than this."

"It can't be worse than this one. I'll wash this one out. If you have to put it on wet it won't hurt on a hot day like this. You feeling bad?"

"Yeah. Very."

"What's holding Claude up?"

"He's staying with the kid I shot until he dies."

"Was it a kid?"

"Yeah."

"Oh shit," Red said.

After a while Claude came back wheeling the two vélos. He handed me the boy's Feldbuch.

"Let me wash your shirt good too, Claude. I got Onie's and mine washed and they're nearly dry."

"Thanks very much. Red," Claude said. "Is there any of the wine left?"

"We found some more and some sausage."

"Good," Claude said. He had the black ass bad too.

"We're going in the big town after the column overruns us. You can see it only a little more than a mile from here," Red told him.

"I've seen it before," Claude said. "It's a good town."

"We aren't going to fight any more today."

"We'll fight tomorrow."

"Maybe we won't have to."

"Maybe."

“Cheer up.”

“Shut up. I’m cheered up.”

“Good,” Red said. “Take this bottle and the sausage and I’ll wash the shirt in no time.”

“Thank you very much,” Claude said. We were splitting it even between us and neither of us liked our share.

The End