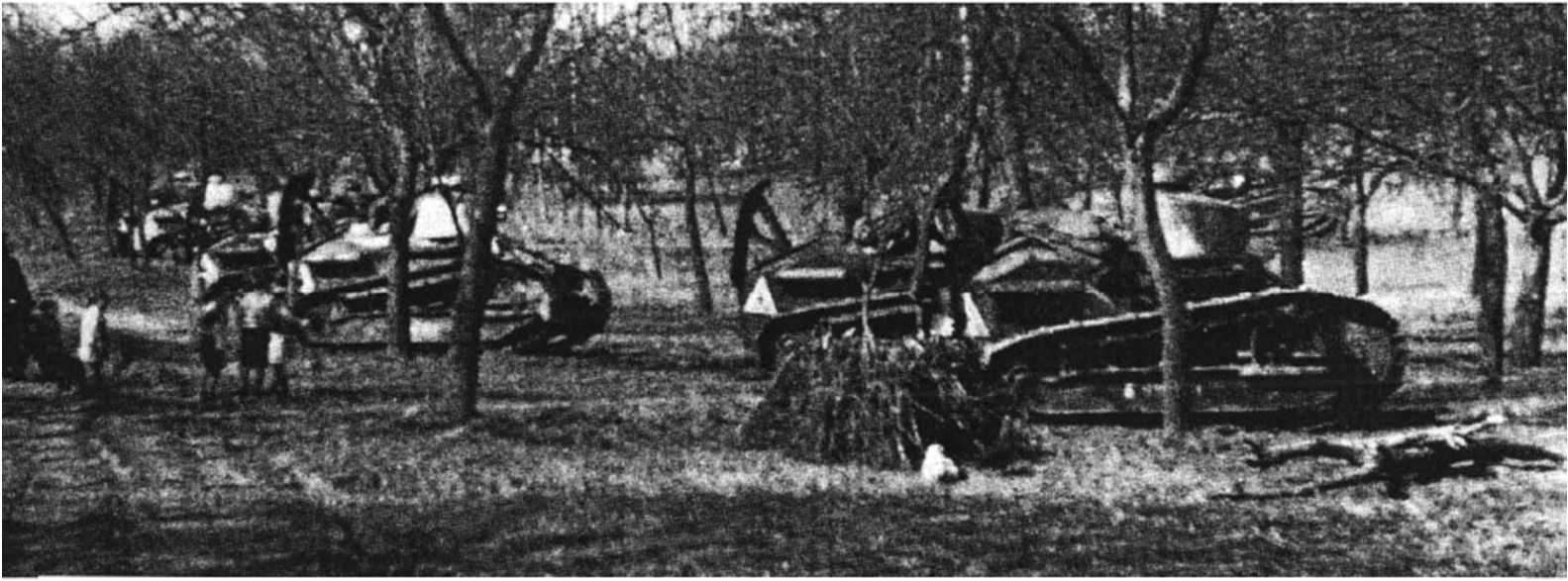


BEASTS in the Woods

Laurence Stallings



Wondrous monsters for some future Homer's book.

Pictures of the floods in the Eastern United States are remembered poignantly but little: they are more a general succession of sorrows where the gear of a community is washed away. There were, to be sure, some fine things from cameramen, the chief among them being the sequence up that Johnstown street. One recalls minor sorrows: the obstinacy of an old woman in Pennsylvania who refused to leave the veranda roof without her dog.

Abroad the Germans marched into the Rhineland, and we had their pictures to satiety. Eager faces welcomed them, and hands in the foregrounds showered flowers. Cannon forged for shell were breached in blossoms. Sword-knots were padded against saddle leather by daffodils.

I can pass these pictures idly, for they are secondary to films of years ago. Even memories are now worn thin by too many paths that cross the mind. The plea of critics—that the machine has now entered the soul—finds inevitable reflection in pictures strengthened by these. Of all weights imposed upon man by modernity, the steel helmet is the most eloquent testimony. Restless souls may covet modernism, and transform drawing rooms into a semblance of reformed boiler rooms; or cafe lounges may suddenly blossom with spanners and trusses, as though inviting a creature of flesh and blood to be a Martian out of an early Wellsian tale. Only, it seems to me, are these German helmets eloquent, not out of covetousness or invitation, but necessity. It is the soldier who reflects the spirit of man's machined destiny.

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Observe that the French democracy, dragged into tin hats, turns back to Minerva and the Greek helmet. The Englishman, who fashioned our own tin hats, seems apologetic that man must once again go abroad in a casque, and semi-apologetically places a temporary protection over his pate—balances there a pie plate, more or less, as if fearsome of having to wear a helmet. Only the German, with his machine, emerges unrecognized by other mailed men.

Perhaps others, besides myself, recall those German helmets, as first seen busy about the accelerated operation of Maxim guns. Do others now analyze that blush of fear? No man seemed the enemy under those hats: they were creatures unaccountably from another planet; and I think now it was their hats which struck the high pitch of fear in an attacker's heart upon first glimpsing them. Germans had been calabashes and pickle hats and drolleries from Weber and Fields.

Yet we have become so modernized that the filing of them over the bridges at Cologne and Mainz finds nothing odd about them: not Martians, but men out of the current age of steel, strode into the Rhineland, with nothing picturesque about them. Routine were the crustacean stares of the Italian children in gas masks last week, where they practised first aid against chlorine and mustard barges, children of ten proudly submitting their schoolmates to the rigors of first aid and artificial respiration. Twenty years ago, such rigs as salamander suits and goggled snouts would have been unthinkable. The month's pictures of them left little impression, having been nothing new. We are accustomed to such; nor are they yet part of a daily use, but a special thing.

I think the unforgettable picture of the month will come from shots stolen near a French farmhouse by Strasbourg, when the French were countering Hitler's move into the Rhineland. Some children sauntering from the doorway have come upon beasts

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feeding beneath the peach trees of their father's orchard. These beasts are war tanks; not the Renault whippets which now chaperon infantrymen. These beneath the trees are like hippo glimpsed under trees in an African river, feeding there in the profound silence which marks the absence of lesser animals. There is contrast in such a picture. (The small tank is, like its brother the automobile, a renovated buggy out of the horse age, with the same halcyon lines.) The heavy tank of war owns to no such necessity of conforming to man's conservatism, and his dislike of startling change. The turtle roofs, the caterpillar treads of these monsters, silently munching their petrol, storing up the nitro stings of their antennae, seem dominant in the jungle of armed men that is now Europe, wondrous monsters for some future Homer's book.

Southward along the Po children trudged in masks and salamander suits; across the Rhine others flung nosegays to Martians. But, for me, the moment imprisoned among a memory of photographs is of those French kids, coming from their father's dooryard to find beasts in the woods. It is that moment, when, in awe-eyed wonder, these children gripped their sabots deeper with dug-in toes and contemplated the row of monsters suddenly apparitioned from the night. In this, I think, one caught the fearful import.