

Die Rache

by Steven Utley

There is no pain at first, nothing that can be fixed in mind as being distinctly unpleasant, only a vague sense of tissues having been squeezed and stretched and pulled in all the wrong directions. There is something familiar about these sensations, something that frightens him. He tries to remember what is supposed to happen next.

Something *is* supposed to happen next, of this much he is certain. The harder he tries to remember, however, the more confused he becomes. Vivid but fragmentary impressions overwhelm him: the image of himself as a young child, eating black bread and cabbage soup in his mother's kitchen; the smell of wet shoes drying near the stove; the image of himself as an even younger child, nervously reciting his first lessons in numbers to his father, *eins, zwei, drei, vier, fünf*; faces like masks of stone, and his own voice, pleading. He tries to stop the rush of images, tries and fails and is borne by them to the old places, the old times.

There is a girl named Hilda who parts her great pale thighs and draws him into herself. There is a vast and unexpected sadness afterward.

There is the taste of ashes in the air, and he is clawing through the rubble, pulling out the pulped bodies, cursing the deadly efficiency of the enemy bombardiers, the ineffectual Luftwaffe, the shattered bricks and stones as they shred his gloves and tear his hands. *How many more times must I endure this?* he demands. *Haven't I suffered enough?* "Not nearly enough," someone murmurs.

A stone seems to sit in the pit of his stomach: now he is pushing bodies into the trench; the stench of putrefying flesh cuts through his cloth mask, forcing him to breathe as shallowly and as infrequently as possible. *God in Heaven*, he cries, *how many more times? When is this going to stop?* "When the scales are balanced," comes the reply.

The pain and horror suddenly swirl away. A great happiness settles upon him. All is right with the world now. He stands at attention, proud in the black uniform of the Schutzstaffel, his gaze fastened upon the dully gleaming coal-bucket helmet of the man in front of him. The very air shakes with a sound like the laughter of God as, on cue, he and all the others give joyous utterance to a shared sense of mission, of destiny, *sieg Heil! sieg Heil! sieg HEIL!* And then the laughter of God becomes mocking, becomes the yowling of sirens, the muffled reports of distant anti-aircraft batteries, and the maddening drone of the bombers as they pass above the city and methodically punch it into the earth. He huddles with the others in darkness deep under the city, softly moaning to himself, wincing as the shrill whine of falling bombs is first punctuated and then drowned out by explosions. The bombs are landing close now, too close, all around, seemingly right on top of him. Dust and flecks of stone drift down from the ceiling. Then the bombers move on, the explosions keeping pace.

"Do you know where you are?" someone says.

"Yes." He is in the bunker, waiting for the all-clear signal to be given. The taste and feel of dust is in his mouth, up his nose, on his face and hands. The man sitting beside him coughs. Someone else sighs and

makes a lame joke, and there is nervous laughter. It is good to be alive, he thinks, it is so very good to be alive. The hours pass slowly, however, and relief becomes restlessness. Somebody asks for and is angrily denied permission to smoke a cigarette. At last the Oberleutnant gives the order to go up. They ascend through pitch darkness and emerge into Hell. His own incredulous horror is reflected in the faces of his comrades as they survey the destruction. Awe and fear are in the Oberleutnant's muttered curse. There is the taste of ashes in the air. The ashes of the razed city. The ashes from the crematorium.

. . . the crematorium. He frowns. The images begin to warp. Perspective becomes distorted. *But the crematorium was later*, he thinks in panic. Much later and nowhere near the city, and again someone asks, "Do you know where you are?"

And then, so suddenly that he gives a wordless cry of alarm, his scrambled sensory perceptions sort themselves out. He is cold, and there are dull, throbbing aches in his marrow bones, the feel of needles under his skin. He can focus his eyes, and, hovering between him and the ceiling, there are faces like masks of stone. He can hear, and one of the faces speaks his name like a curse, spits it at him as though it tastes foul and brown on the tongue. He knows where he is and what this is: *die Rache*; the revenge. He begins to plead with the faces in a hoarse voice, "No more, please, no more . . ."

"You know the charges," one of them says in flawless German. "You have been judged guilty. The sentence must be carried out."

He groans and lies panting in the cold room, enduring the touch of their hands as they attend to his physical needs. There are no hesitations upon their part, nor is there urgency. Their precision and their imperturbability are machine-like. He says, "Monsters," and the word comes out a sob.

"But of course. We --" the speaker indicates herself and her three or four associates with a casual flick of her hand "-- are indeed monstrous human beings. Not just anybody would be able to accommodate you in the manner you so richly deserve. Not just anybody would have the stomach for this. We are fiends in flesh, even as you."

"Even as *I*? This . . .this is *inhuman*."

"This is necessary." The speaker's voice is cool and neutral. "By now you surely understand how it is. We are performing a long-overdue exorcism, driving out an old and terrible demon. We are laying ghosts to rest here. And you are absolutely necessary. You're the last one, the only one left in the entire world as far as we've been able to determine. The others, great and small, have been dead for many years now. This makes you extremely precious to us. Fortunately, with the technology at our disposal, you're also endlessly recyclable."

"I won't let you do this to me any more!"

"The sentence must be carried out. We have our mission. You have your destiny."

"Mission. Destiny." He remembers how the very air shook with a sound like the laughter of God. "How long is this nightmare going to last?"

"Until it's over and done with."

"It's been over and done with for more than three quarters of a century!"

"Nevertheless--"

"What can it *mean* to you? What difference can it make? You weren't even born then. You're hardly more than children now, how can you possibly *care*? And I, I wasn't important then, I was only a

common soldier. I gave none of the orders. I committed no murders. I drove a tractor!"

"You dug graves and put bodies into them. You were there. You were part of it. Others may have issued the orders, others may have been responsible for policy, but they're dead and out of our reach. Someone has to pay. Someone has to put the scales in balance, and you're the only person left who can do that."

"I have *paid*, damn you! Paid, paid, *paid*!" He looks from face to face to impassive face. Masks of stone. "What do you *want*? How many more times can you *do* this to me before you're *satisfied*?"

The speaker shrugs and says, "Something fewer than ten million times now," and then they put him back to death for another day.

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About the Author:

Steven Utley, a founding member of Texas' Turkey City writers group in the 1970s, is the co-editor (with Geo. W. Proctor) of an anthology of fiction by Texans, *Lone Star Universe* (Heidelberg Publishers, 1976), and the author of *Ghost Seas* (Ticonderoga Publications, 1997), *The Beasts of Love* (Wheatland Press, 2004), *Where or When* (PS Publishing, 2005 [UK]) the perennially soon-to-be-finished *Silurian Tales*, and two volumes of verse, *This Impatient Ape* (1998) and *Career Moves of the Gods* (2000), both published by Anamnesis Press.

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