

FLAMES OF THE TIGER

John Wilson

Kids Can Press

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Kids Can Press is a  Entertainment Company

*For all the victims of the Nazis:
those who were damaged in spirit
as well as in body*

*Two broken Tigers on fire in the night
Flicker their souls to the wind
I wait in the line for the final approach to begin ...
The flames of the Tigers are lighting the road to Berlin.*

Al Stewart
“Roads to Moscow”



Dieter peered over the lip of the ditch. The acrid smell of burning diesel fuel irritated his nose. Across the field, a burning Tiger tank lay stark and black against the sunset's fragile colors, its long cannon pointing uselessly at the heavens. Deep red flames licked upward from pools of spilled fuel, and a column of heavy, roiling smoke rose in the still evening air. A dead man lay on the scorched grass nearby, and another, his charred body arched in a final agony, was trapped half out of the tank's open hatch. Slowly Dieter scanned the field for signs of life — there were none.

He let out a long breath and relaxed.

“Is it all right?” an urgent whisper came from behind him.

The boy slithered back down the slope until he was lying beside his sister. “I think so. There’s a tank in the field, but everyone’s dead.”

Dieter looked up at the sky. The pink of the setting sun on the thunderheads competed with the reflected glow of the burning village the pair had passed through that afternoon.

“This is as good a place as any to spend the night,” Dieter said. “If the clouds bring rain, we’ll cross to those trees or shelter under the tank if it’s stopped burning by then.”

Dieter extracted his water bottle and took a sip. His mouth was dry, and the desire to gulp the bottle empty was powerful, but he forced himself to stop and pass it to Greta.

“Just a sip,” he warned.

“I know, I know,” Greta replied. “Stop nagging.” She took a sip and passed the bottle back. Dieter screwed on the top and replaced it in his pack. He pulled out a loaf of stale black bread, the last of the food Uncle Walter had given them two days before. It was coarse and unpleasant, but better than the sawdust-filled stuff they’d had in Berlin. In the long run, the bread would make Dieter’s thirst worse, but he promised himself another sip of water when it was finished. He broke the loaf in half and handed a piece to Greta.

She groaned. “I’d give anything for a cream pastry, loaded with jam,” she said wistfully.

“Don’t torture yourself,” Dieter advised as he sullenly chewed. “This is all we’ve got. Besides, you never liked cream pastries.”

“I did so,” Greta responded indignantly.

One of his sister’s most irritating habits was an ability to rewrite the past to suit her mood. Dieter had long ago learned that he couldn’t win an argument when Greta had convinced herself of something, so he let it go and ate in silence.

Despite his own advice, Dieter couldn’t stop his mind drifting back to better days. It was something he often did. His father had called it daydreaming and said it was a waste of time, but many times recently, Dieter’s memories had helped him get through the present. A good daydream was a treasure. Dieter’s surroundings faded, time slowed, and the past opened up in his mind like a movie. Sometimes when it was happening, he felt as if he were two people — the one who could sit at his school desk or walk or even carry on a simple conversation, and the one who was reliving some wonderful event.

Right now, while the surface Dieter chewed a mouthful of stale bread by the glow of a burning tank, the real Dieter was thirteen years old and sitting at the formal dining room table in the

family apartment on the Charlottenburger. It was three years ago, Christmas Eve dinner 1941. The German armies were sweeping victoriously over the Russian Steppes and everyone thought the war was as good as won. Elsa still cooked and cleaned for the family, and the curtains over the long windows didn't need to be closed against the bombers. Dieter could stand at the windows and look out over the Tiergarten to the distant buildings of the zoo. He loved the zoo, the view out the window and the ornate high-ceilinged rooms of the apartment, but his favorite thing in the whole world was the dining room table.



The shine on the table was deep and magical, a pond with cool liquid depths that Dieter's imagination could reach into to pull out all manner of strange life. But it *was* solid — solid enough to support the gleaming silverware and carved crystal glasses. And the tureens and servers and plates, piled high with steaming potatoes, vegetables and meat.

Glorious smells filled the room — the warm, rich odor of ham and turkey, the sharp, slightly

sour smell of cabbage. And wonderful tastes were there for the sampling — the sweetness of his mother's famous strudels, the saltiness of the soup, the fresh crispness of a Waldorf salad.

Dieter's father, Ernst, sat at the head of the table, looking every inch the family patriarch with his old-fashioned bushy mustache. At the foot sat Dieter's mother, Eva, resplendent in lace. To one side were Dieter and his little sister, Greta. On the table beside her, glinting in the candlelight, lay her most precious possession, her flute. She had got it the previous March for her eighth birthday, and it went everywhere with her. All year, she had practiced with a devotion that bordered on fanaticism, and even Dieter had to admit that she was getting quite good. Ernst allowed the flute to be brought to the table on condition that Greta play them a tune after the meal.

Opposite Greta was Dieter's twenty-year-old brother, Reinhard, looking splendid in his immaculate new SS uniform. Reinhard took after their mother. With his blond hair, high cheekbones, sharp nose and firm chin, he was the ideal Aryan man. Dieter wished he was tall and fair like Reinhard, but he had inherited his father's softer features, round face, brown hair and short stature.

Reinhard and Ernst were discussing the government.

“But you must admit, Father,” Reinhard said, “Hitler has done such a lot for Germany. The punishing provisions that the British, French and Americans forced on us in the Versailles Treaty after the Great War were crushing our country. Hitler stood up to them and they backed down. Our economy is secure, there is work for everyone, and we see no more of the street violence that the Communists caused a decade ago. The displaced German communities in Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland have been brought back into a nation that is being steadily purified of the undesirable elements that have been holding us back for so long. The war is almost won. It is a new age. How can you not see that it is better than the old world you grew up in?”

“I agree that the Nazis have achieved a lot. Versailles was iniquitous, our economy was a dreadful mess, and I have no more love than you for Jews and Communists, but do not dismiss the values of my world so glibly. I know that my family was privileged. We had estates in East Prussia, servants and aristocratic friends in very high places.”

“And dogs and ponies,” Greta interrupted excitedly. “That’s what I would have loved. Can we get a dog?”

Ernst laughed. “We live in an apartment, and you probably want a wolfhound.”

“Oh yes. One of those big hairy ones with the long noses.”

“It wouldn’t be fair on the dog, Greta. Those animals need a lot of exercise. More than the occasional walk in the Tiergarten.

“And I accept a lot of what you say, Reinhard. Much of my world is gone, lost in the inflation of the twenties and the stock market crash of nineteen twenty-nine, but it was doomed long before that. The trenches of the Kaiser’s war destroyed my world, but there were some worthwhile things left. We had standards: we believed it was important to behave in a certain way, to show respect to others and to comport ourselves in a civilized, sophisticated manner. This is what separated us from the rabble. And you forget that ten years ago, it was not just the Communists who rioted in the streets. The people who now sit in our government, and whom you admire so much, began by smashing people’s heads in street battles. They are vulgar, crude and lower-class. To have them in charge is a reversal of the structure of any civilized society.

“When Hitler won the election in 1932, I was convinced that the Nazi government wouldn’t last six months. I was wrong there, and I have to admit

that they have done our country some good, but I cannot believe that such a bunch of boorish rabble-rousers can be good in the long term.”

“Oh, Father,” Reinhard said, “you are so old-fashioned. You have to change with the times. Germany is great again, and it wasn’t class and elegant manners that got us here, it was action.

“If you want to see the real lower classes, look at the Russians. The Panzers and the Luftwaffe are unbeatable in the east — every battle produces hordes of Russian prisoners. These Slavs are hopeless. One good German soldier is worth a whole platoon of them. If it wasn’t for the Jewish Communist political officers warping their simple minds and pointing machine guns at their backs to force them to attack, the war would be over by now. Moscow would have fallen and we would be marching through Red Square taking the *lebensraum*, the living space our destiny demands. Soon, solid Aryan stock would populate Russia.”

Ernst sat silent for a long moment. Dieter sensed a change in the room. He fiddled nervously with his fork. At length, Ernst went on, but his voice was slower and his tone more serious. “And what would you do with the people already there?”

“Well,” Reinhard sat back and launched into his favorite topic. “They will be resettled —

after we get rid of all the Jews and Communists, of course.”

“What do you mean by ‘get rid of’?” Dieter’s father’s voice was quiet, but his words cut through Reinhard’s enthusiastic tirade. Dieter felt the tension mount. Where was this conversation going? Ernst and Reinhard stared at each other. Then Reinhard smiled. “There’s no need to worry about them,” he said. “They can work — for the greater good.”

“As slave labor?”

Reinhard shrugged.

“Slave labor and then what?” Ernst persisted.

“Then nothing. They won’t be allowed to reproduce, so they will simply die out.”

“Simply die out!” Ernst’s voice rose in anger. “Good God, man, even Slavs and Jews are human. What you are suggesting is barbaric.”

Everyone else at the table sat in silence. Even Greta had nothing to say as her gaze moved nervously between her father and her brother. Only Reinhard seemed composed and comfortable. His smile didn’t falter.

“You are wrong there, Father,” he said. “*They* are the barbarians. History proves that it is we, the true Aryan stock, who are destined to rule. We would do so already if our genes had not been contaminated by inferior blood and if the

Jewish Conspiracy was not so powerful. My generation's task is to purify the German nation. To get rid of the contaminants, to return the Aryan stock to the purity that made it great in the past. Imagine it — a single race from the Asian steppes to the Atlantic coast! What a great day that will be. It is a difficult task requiring fortitude and persistence, but it must be done. The future demands it.”

“Please,” Eva pleaded. “It’s Christmas.”

“I’m sorry, but I cannot let this go.” Ernst’s voice was barely above a whisper. He addressed his apology to his wife, but he never took his eyes off his son.

“Reinhard,” Ernst continued. “The future *demand*s nothing. Do not use historical necessity as an excuse. The things we see around us and think so important are mere flotsam swept along by the river of time. We can no more shape the future to fit our petty desires than we can stop time. If it were possible to create the future, do you think the world would have gone through the madness and horror I saw in the Kaiser’s war?”

“In my war, I saw lines of men fall before our machine guns like long grass in the wind. It was a futile, horrible waste, but at least the men were soldiers, doing what soldiers have always had to do and paying the price soldiers have always

paid. You are talking about controlling the lives of millions of civilians. We may not like them, or want them to live beside us, but they are human beings, and no one, however much semi-mystical nonsense they invent to support their views, is entitled to turn an entire people into slaves.”

Dieter’s fork clattered onto his plate with a noise that made Greta jump. Ernst ignored the interruption.

“You asked me earlier, Reinhard, if I could not see that your world is much better than mine. I see good things in it, but there is neither class nor compassion underlying it. Therefore, there are no checks against going too far. My generation made mistakes — some horrible ones, I admit that — but when I hear you talk of such things, I truly fear where these men you admire so much will lead us.

“You are my son. I have watched you grow from a baby, and I love you. But your mind has become twisted by self-centered demagogues spouting rubbish passed off as thought. You are an adult and must make your own decisions, for better or worse, but I will not have such claptrap at my dinner table.”

Reinhard’s smile had vanished as his father spoke, replaced by a look of grim determination.

Now he rose, pushing his heavy chair back with a long grating sound. Dieter could see the muscles in his jaw clenched in anger. “You are a fool, Ernst Hammer,” Reinhard said. “The future is mine. You may rail against it, but it will swallow you as easily as it will the Slav hordes. You may not care if the family is dragged down with you, but I do. I shall do as you ask and bite my tongue in your little kingdom for their sakes. But remember that the large world outside is mine.”

Reinhard strode toward the dining room door. With his hand on the latch, he turned and looked straight at Dieter.

“Dieter,” he said, “be careful not to get stuck in this old man’s past. The future is yours, too, and you must embrace your place in it or be crushed.”

As Reinhard’s footsteps echoed down the hallway, Dieter was a turmoil of emotions — he was being asked to choose between the two people he admired most in the world: the big brother who had taught him to play football and taken him fishing in the city’s many canals and rivers, and the father who had taught him to both show and expect respect and told him stories of the different world he had grown up in.

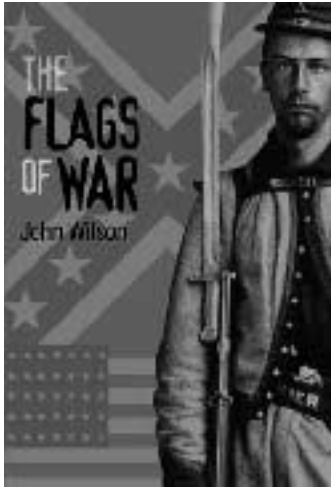
Dieter felt he was being torn apart. He yearned for the simple, colorful past his father

talked of, but he couldn’t deny the seductive attraction of the dynamic world being created around him by people like his brother.

Slowly Dieter realized that everyone was looking at him. They seemed to be demanding a decision. Why did he have to be drawn into this? Why wouldn’t everyone just leave him alone?

Tears pooled in the corners of Dieter’s eyes. To hide them, he violently pushed back his chair and fled to his room, where he lay weeping on his bed.

Also by John Wilson
Flags of War



“Enjoy the moment, boy,” the man said. “There will not be too many more of them. I fear there are battlefields calling you and your kind.”

The year is 1860. As South Carolina votes to leave the Union, the drums of war begin to sound. Nate MacGregor, a son of the South, knows he must fight.

Meanwhile, for his cousin Walt in Canada West, news of a war brewing between the states merely adds some excitement to life on the farm — until an unexpected visitor arrives on his doorstep.

Nate and Walt have never met, but as a country descends into chaos and armies march to their destruction, a runaway slave named Sunday is about to change the cousins’ lives forever.

And in the Morning



*As the wounded passed, a man from their ranks
broke the silence with “Are we downhearted?”
We responded with an ear-splitting “No!”
He snarled, “Well, you bloody well should be.”*

Jim Hay is fifteen, thinks war is a glorious adventure and cannot wait for his turn to fight. But as his father boldly marches off to battle in August 1914, Jim must be content to record his thoughts and dreams in his journal.

Gradually, however, Jim’s simple life begins to unravel. His father is killed in action, his mother suffers a breakdown, and when he does at last join up, it is as much to find a refuge as it is to seek glory.

What Jim discovers in the trenches of France is enough to dispel any romantic view of the war. And while his longing for adventure is replaced by a basic need to survive, the final tragic outcome is one he never dreamed of.