

SWASTIKA!

by **Brian W. Aldiss**

Black humor is the mark of our times. Perhaps because if we do not laugh at the state of things we shall have to cry. And crying is simply a waste of time, no matter how good it feels while indulging in it. Catch 22 was the book on this theme, and Dr. Strangelove the movie. Now we have Brian Aldiss's short story that, once and for all, should lay to rest all those vicious rumors about Adolf Hitler being alive and well in Argentina. He is not. He is... well, let Mr. Aldiss tell you...

On April 30, 1945, in his Bunker in the Berlin Chancellery, Adolf Hitler crunched an ampule of potassium cyanide. Then he was shot through the head by Heinz Linge, his valet, and his body taken out into the garden of the Chancellery and burned—or partially burned.

Some of these facts were known almost immediately. Luckily, the Soviet forces got to the scene of the crime first and, only twenty-three years later, rushed out the rest of the facts. The one thing that makes me doubt the truth of the whole account is that I happen to know Hitler is alive and well and living in Ostend under the assumed name—at least, I assume it is assumed—of Geoffrey Bunglevester.

I was over to see him last week, before the winter became too advanced. Of course, he is getting on in years now, but is amazingly spry for his age and still takes an interest in politics, supporting, the Flemings against the Walloons.

We had been talking business but gradually turned to more personal matters.

"Looking back," I said, "do you ever have any regrets?"

"I wish I'd done more with my painting." A faroff look came into his eyes. "Landscape painting—that would have suited me. I flatter myself I always had an eye for pretty landscapes." He started reeling off their names: the Rhineland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland. . . . To keep him to the subject, I said, "I'd certainly agree that some of your early watercolors showed astonishing promise, but haven't you ever regretted—well, any of your . . . military judgments?"

He looked me straight in the eye, brushing his forelock back to do so.

"You're not getting at me, Brian, are you? You're not trying to be sarcastic at my expense?"

"No, honestly, Geoff, why should I?"

He leaned over the table toward me and glanced over one shoulder.

"You are Aryan, aren't you?"

I went to an English public school, if that's what you mean."

"That's good enough for me. Very fine unrivaled disciplinary system! Well, I apologize, I thought you

were trying to get at me for attempting to apply a final solution to the Jewish problem."

"It never entered my head, Geoff."

"Very well, only I'm a little touchy on that score, yon see. I've been very unfairly criticized there ever since the Third Reich collapsed in 1945. You see, there was a much deeper intention behind the extermination of the Jews; *that* was little but a warming-up exercise to get the machinery going. The ultimate target—the course on which I was intending to embark by 1950 at the latest before I was so rudely interrupted—was the extermination of the Negro races."

I gasped as the enormity of his plan came home to me.

"Surely-surely, an error in tactics—" I began falteringly. In his almost boyish eagerness, he misunderstood what I was going to say. Leaning forward over the table, his eyes shining, he said, "Yes, perhaps it was an error in tactics—you see, I admit I commit errors occasionally—not to have announced my grand plan to the world. Then the Americans would have been sympathetic and stayed out of the war. Well, too late now to cry over spilt milk. If only I could have pulled off the extermination of the Negroes; admittedly it would have seemed rather controversial to begin with, but afterward I would have been accepted, I think it's fair to say, as a benefactor."

"Except by the Negroes themselves?"

He took my naiveté in good part.

"My dear boy, even the Negroes themselves admit that nobody likes them. I would merely have followed that through to its logical conclusion. Heaven knows, I've never courted popularity for its own sake, but you yourself would admit that I've had to put up with more than my share of backbiting. Even the German people have to pretend to have turned against me."

He shook his head, looking very downcast. To console him, I said, "Well, Geoff, that's the unfair way the world treats the defeated—there's no respect for ambition nowadays—"

"Defeated! Who was defeated? Have you fallen victim to all the lying Jewish bourgeois bolshevik anti-Nazi propaganda too? I've not been defeated—"

"But surely in 1945—"

"What happened in 1945 is neither here nor there! It just happens to be the year when I chose to step back and let others take over the arduous role of waging war and waking whole populations from their slave-mentality inertia."

"You don't mean—you're claiming a sort of psychological victory? A—"

He poured us both another measure of red wine and watered it down with mineral water. "It was my old racist enemies who spread the lie that peace broke out in 1945. It is not true—what old Winston would call a terminological inexactitude, in his comic way. That was the year the Americans dropped the first A-bomb and started the nuclear arms race which shows no sign of slackening yet, particularly now that the U.S.A. and U.S.S.R. have managed to goad China into joining the competition. *We* hadn't the resources to manufacture war materiel on that scale, alas!"

"But you can't compare the Cold War with World War II, Adolf!"

"Geoff to you, Brian."

"Geoff, I mean. Sorry."

"I'm not comparing. The one *developed from the other*, 1945 saw the change from one phase to the next. The continuity is clear. Look at the Russians! I don't think much of the Slav races, but you have to hand it to them—their policy of aggression has been consistent for half a century now. I don't know if you recall the name of Joseph Stalin? A bit of a rogue, but a man after my own heart. He told me back in—oh, 1938, I think it would be, that he would like to get into Europe—"

"The Common Market—"

"And of course he did so and, only last year, his followers were still obeying his orders and marching into Czechoslovakia just as I did, way back!" He clapped his thigh with genuine pleasure. "That was the time! A ball, as today's youngsters would say! Beautiful city, Prague! The sun shining, the Wehrmacht in their best uniforms, the tanks rolling, everyone shouting 'Heil—'. . . well, 'Heil Me,' let's say, and the pretty Czech girls hanging flowers round our necks. . ." The mood of genial reminiscence softened his rather harsh profile. "You were only a boy then, Brian. . ."

"I can remember the occasion, all the same. But the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 is a different thing—"

"It's still part of World War II, just like the Korean War and Vietnam and the Middle East hot-pot. They are all conflagrations lit from the torch I started burning in Europe." It was a concept almost beyond my grasping, and I told him as much.

"I'll have to beg to differ there. After all, the 1945 peace treaties—"

"I've no wish to be unpleasant, but I was slightly more in the center of things than you were, after all. I'm sure that General Curtis LeMay doesn't think of the war as being over, not by a long chalk. Men like that, strong men, men born with iron in their bones, they all have something of Bismarck in them—they hold the great vision of peace as merely a time for rearming. How's the drink? More mineral water?"

I covered my glass with my hand. "No, thanks, just right. Well, we mustn't argue—"

"Excuse me, we must argue if you do not accept my point. My war, as I pardonably regard it, is still being waged, is breaking out afresh, and may soon even return to its fatherland. What does it all mean if not victory for me and my ideals?"

Moved if not convinced, I felt I was in touch with greatness.

"Always the old warrior, Geoff! You've never despaired, have you?"

"Despair! Who can afford to despair? Besides, the world has given me little real cause for despair. Men of warrior caste are still alive everywhere."

"I suppose so. But I was a bit surprised by what you were saying just now about General LeMay. I understood that you basically had little respect for the American spirit?"

Sipping his drink, he looked at me with reproach in his eyes.

"Let's be fair to the Americans. I know as well as you do that their whole continent is overrun by a rabble of Slavs and Jews and Mexicans and Spaniards and the sweepings of Africa and Scandinavia; but fortunately there is a backbone of Teutonic and Anglo-Saxon military morale there too. They aren't all semi-Asiatic ghetto-infesting-decadents like Roosevelt I know a backstreet racially inferior lackey-mentality has often prevailed in the past, but just recently a more upright no-nonsense element is coming to the fore and triumphing over the flabby democratic processes. I'm extremely encouraged to see the vigorous uncompromising attitudes of American leaders like Reagan and Governor Wallace. President Nixon also has his better side. Of course, the American practice-war in Vietnam was hopelessly ill-run and..."

"Namby-pamby?"

"Yes, good, namby-pamby... namby-pamby. Except for de Gaulle, the French are namby-pamby, eh? What was I saying? Yes, a more realistic spirit growing in America. They failed in logic by hesitating to use thermonuclear weapons in Vietnam, but that obscurantist attitude is altering and soon I expect to see them employing such solutions to restore discipline within their own frontiers."

"Incurably the grand strategist!" I smiled. "Do you find yourself reliving your old campaigns over and over?"

"I don't think so, not more than most people. I'd say I was a pretty average sort of person. I like to keep up with current events. A friend in New York sends me the *Times* every day. And, as I believe I told you, I'm now writing some poetry." He smiled modestly, with a twitch of his moustache.

"Don't know how you'll take this, Geoff, but do you think I could possibly see some of your poetry some time? Just take a peek?"

He sat back and looked at me, half-laughing—yet I thought there was a mist in his eyes, as if my interest had touched him.

"What possible interest could an old man's poetry have for you?"

Perhaps the watered-down wine had had its due effect. Hunching my shoulders over the table, I said, "You can hardly imagine what a deep impression you made on me when I was a kid. In England, we never had a strong leader like you in the thirties and, by God, we desperately need one again now—Harold Wilson's much too mild and permissive! I—okay, it sounds sentimental—but you were a father-figure to me, Geoff, and to thousands like me who had the luck to fight in the war. All those marvelous torchlight processions you used to hold, and the shouting, and the beautiful deep-bosomed frauleins, and the way your troops kept so faultlessly in step! And then the dramatic way you just swept across Europe in the late thirties and early forties... It was wonderful to watch! I mean, it didn't *matter* that we were on opposite sides; we knew you were really a friend of the British Empire."

"A better friend than the decadent Americans proved." He looked down at his glass. "Yes, Brian, those were great days, no denying that. You needn't reproach yourself for feeling as you do. Nobody's in quite the same league today—the Russians, the South Africans, the Portuguese..."

He shook his head. For a moment, we were both too full of emotion to speak. Then I asked softly, "Do you ever wish things had worked out differently, Geoff? I mean—for you personally?"

I shall never forget his answer. He didn't look up, just went on clutching his glass with hands that shook

slightly (his old disease still occasionally troubled him) and staring down at the wine.

In a voice from which he strove to hold back tears, he said, "I'm getting old and sentimental, as you know. But sometimes I despair of the world ever getting put to rights. The permanent East-West confrontation is well enough, and the two mutually interdependent persecution manias of America and Russia have served to maintain the world's battle-alertness over some otherwise lackluster years. But..."

He sighed. No man should look as isolated as he did at that minute. He resembled a mystic staring down a telescope the wrong way at a golden dream.

"But..." I prompted. "You had a master plan?"

"I've had emissaries come to me over the years, Brian. They come humbly to me, exiled here. Soviet and American—and British too, to begin with. They've come swarming to me in secret. Yes, and the little tin-pot rulers too. Nasser, Hussein, that Rhodesian fellow, that ingrate Chou En Lai, Castro—filthy little Communist! All on their knees here! Even—yes, even General Dayan of Israel. Not a bad fellow, considering... They've all begged me to take charge of their war aims, clarify them, implement them. "You can have the whole Pacific if you'll help me take Peking." That's what—h'm, memory's going—that's what Sukarno said. Always it was *me* they wanted. It's the old charisma..."

"Either you've got it or you haven't," I agreed. "Why didn't you accept their offers—America's and Russia's, I mean?"

"Because the imbeciles asked me to rule them and yet wouldn't give me full power! He struck the table with his fist. "They wanted me and yet they were afraid of me! LBJ and I met in this very café, person-to-person—remember LBJ? This is confidential, mind you, and I don't want it to go any further."

"You can trust me," I assured him fervently. My eyes were starting out of my head. "You actually met LBJ here?"

"He paid for the drinks. Insisted on it. Rather big-mouthed. He was in trouble with the Communists abroad and the Negroes and white-trash subversive crypto-mulatto elements at home. Would I help him? I said I would. With me in charge, the United States could have conquered the world. Not a doubt of it! Russia first—use up all those rusty old H-bombs!—pffff!—then Europe invaded and rationalized. Then the rest of the world would just be erased, wiped clean, starting probably with South America. Wiped clean. Nothing namby-pamby."

"Why didn't LBJ take you up on it? It sounds like his big chance!"

"If you can believe it, he had some harebrained scheme for preserving India from destruction. He was a yellow liberal at heart and the deal fell through."

I was aghast. "Why should anyone wish to preserve India from destruction, of all places?!"

"My dear man, American colonialist ambitions are as much of a mystery to me as to you! A pity—together, or preferably me alone, we could have built a tidier world, an altogether tidier world where people would have to do EXACTLY WHAT THEY ARE TOLD TO DO!"

It was time for him to go. We trudged back to his flat together through the streets of Ostend. He was wearing his old gray trench coat which still bore the swastikas he had never bothered to remove. What symbols of nostalgia they were! In a flash I had found a tide for the musical of his life which I had come

to discuss with him: "Swastika!" I shall always think of that moment as one of the most dramatic in my whole life, the war notwithstanding.

We halted on his doorstep.

"I won't ask you in," he said. "The concierge is down with flu." He always referred to Martin Bormann as "the concierge," in his humorous way.

"It's been wonderful talking to you," I said.

"I've enjoyed it, too," he said. "And I promise to come over for the premiere—provided that Jewish chap doesn't write the music."

"Count on me," I said simply. "And don't forget—two-and-a-half percent of the gross."

We eyed one another in complete understanding. For sentiment's sake, I knew how I wanted to bid him good-bye; but there were people passing, and I was a little embarrassed. Instead, I grasped his worn frail hand in both of mine.

"Good-bye, Geoffrey!"

"*Auf wiedersehen*, Brian, dear boy!"

Blinking moisture from my eyes, I hurried for the airport, the contract in my pocket.

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