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# IF THE RED SLAYER

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

*Death is not the ultimate horror  
in this war. On the contrary.*

**I** WONT' even try to describe the pain. I'll just say that it was unbearable even with anesthetics, and that I bore it because I didn't have any choice.

Then it faded away and I opened my eyes and looked into the faces of the brahmins standing over me. There were three of them, dressed in the usual white

operating gowns and white gauze masks. They say they wear those masks to keep germs out of us. But every soldier knows they wear them so we can't recognize them.

I was still doped up to the ears on anesthetics, and only chunks and bits of my memory were functioning. I asked, "How long was I dead?"

"About ten hours," one of the brahmins told me.

"How did I die?"

"Don't you remember?" the tallest brahmin asked.

"Not yet."

"Well," the tallest brahmin said, "you were with your platoon in Trench 2645B-4. At dawn your entire company made a frontal attack, trying to capture the next trench. Number 2645B-5."

"And what happened?" I asked.

"You stopped a couple of machine gun bullets. The new kind with the shock heads. Remember now? You took one in the chest and three more in the legs. When the medics found you, you were dead."

"Did we capture the trench?" I asked.

"No. Not this time."

"I see." My memory was returning rapidly as the anesthetic wore off. I remembered the boys in my platoon. I remembered our trench. Old 2645B-4 had been my home for over a year, and it was pretty nice as trenches go. The enemy had

been trying to capture it, and our dawn assault had been a counter-attack, really. I remembered the machine gun bullets tearing me into shreds, and the wonderful relief I had felt when they did. And I remembered something else too . . .

I sat upright. "Hey, just a minute!" I said.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought eight hours was the upper limit for bringing a man back to life."

"We've improved our techniques since then," one of the brahmins told me. "We're improving them all the time. Twelve hours is the upper limit now, just as long as there isn't serious brain damage."

"Good for you," I said. Now my memory had returned completely, and I realized what had happened. "However, you made a serious mistake in bringing *me* back."

"What's the beef, soldier?" one of them asked in that voice only officers get.

"Read my dogtags," I said.

He read them. His forehead, which was all I could see of his face, became wrinkled. He said, "This is unusual!"

"Unusual!" I said.

"You see," he told me, "you were in a whole trench full of dead men. We were told they were all first-timers. Our orders were to bring the whole batch back to life."

"And you didn't read any dogtags first?"

"We were overworked. There

wasn't time. I really am sorry, Private. If I'd known—"

"To hell with that," I said. "I want to see the Inspector General."

"Do you really think—"

"Yes I do," I said. "I'm no trench lawyer, but I've got a real beef. It's my right to see the I.G."

They went into a whispered conference, and I looked myself over. The brahmins had done a pretty good job on me. Not as good as they did in the first years of the war; of course. The skin grafts were sloppier now, and I felt a little scrambled inside. Also my right arm was about two inches longer than the left; bad joiner-work. Still, it was a pretty good job.

The brahmins came out of their conference and gave me my clothes. I dressed. "Now, about the Inspector General," one of them said. "That's a little difficult right now. You see—"

Needless to say, I didn't see the I.G. They took me to see a big, beefy, kindly old Master Sergeant. One of those understanding types who talks to you and makes everything all right. Except that I wasn't having any.

"Now, now, Private," the kindly old sarge said. "What's this I hear about you kicking up a fuss about being brought back to life?"

"You heard correct," I said. "Even a private soldier has his rights under the Articles of War. Or so I've been told."

"He certainly does," said the kindly old sarge.

"I've done my duty," I said. "Seventeen years in the army, eight years in combat. Three times killed, three times brought back. The orders read that you can requisition death after the third time. That's what I did, and it's stamped on my dogtags. But I wasn't *left* dead. Those damned medics brought me back to life again, and it isn't fair. I want to stay dead."

"It's much better staying alive," the sarge said. "Alive, you always have a chance of being rotated back to non-combat duties. Rotation isn't working very fast on account of the manpower shortage. But there's still a chance."

"I know," I said. "But I think I'd just as soon stay dead."

"I think I could promise you that in six months or so—"

"I want to stay dead," I said firmly. "After the third time, it's my privilege under the Articles of War."

"Of course it is," the kindly old sarge said, smiling at me, one soldier to another. "But mistakes happen in wartime. Especially in a war like this." He leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. "I remember when the thing started. It sure looked like a pushbutton affair when it started. But both us and the Reds had a full arsenal of anti-missile-missiles, and that pretty well deadlocked the atomic stuff. The invention of the atomic damper clinched it."

That made it a real infantry affair."

"I know, I know."

"But our enemies outnumbered us," the kindly old sarge said. "They still do. All those millions and millions of Russians and Chinese! We had to have more fighting men. We had to at least hold our own. That's why the medics started reviving the dead."

"I know all this. Look, Sarge, I want us to win. I want it bad. I've been a good soldier. But I've been killed three times, and—"

"The trouble is," the sarge said, "the Reds are reviving their dead, too. The struggle for manpower in the front lines is crucial *right now*. The next few months will tell the tale, one way or the other. So why not forget about all this? The next time you're killed, I can promise you'll be left alone. So let's overlook it this time."

"I want to see the Inspector General," I said.

"All right, Private," the kindly old sarge said, in a not very friendly tone. "Go to Room 303."

I went to 303, which was an outer office, and I waited. I was feeling sort of guilty about all the fuss I was kicking up. After all, there was a war on. But I was angry, too. A soldier has his rights, even in a war. Those damned brahmins . . .

It's funny how they got that name. They're just medics, not

Hindus or Brahmins or anything like that. They got the name because of a newspaper article a couple years ago, when all this was new. The guy who wrote the article told about how the medics could revive dead men now, and make them combat-worthy. It was pretty hot stuff then. The writer quoted a poem by Emerson. The poem starts out—

If the red slayer thinks he slays,  
Or if the slain thinks he is  
slain,  
They know not well the subtle  
ways  
I keep, and pass, and turn  
again.

That's how things were. You could never know, when you killed a man, whether he'd stay dead, or be back in the trenches shooting at you the next day. And you didn't know whether you'd stay dead or not if you got killed. Emerson's poem was called "Brahma," so our medics got to be called brahmins.

Being brought back to life wasn't bad at first. Even with the pain, it was good to be alive. But you finally reach a time when you get tired of being killed and brought back and killed and brought back. You start wondering how many deaths you owe your country, and if it might not be nice and restful staying dead a while. You look forward to the long sleep.

The authorities understood this. Being brought back too often was bad for morale. So they

set three revivals as the limit. After the third time you could choose rotation or permanent death. The authorities preferred you to choose death; a man who's been dead three times has a very bad effect on the morale of civilians. And most combat soldiers preferred to stay dead after the third time.

But I'd been cheated. I had been brought back to life for the fourth time. I'm as patriotic as the next man, but this I wasn't going to stand for.

At last I was allowed to see the Inspector-General's adjutant. He was a colonel, a thin, gray no-nonsense type. He'd already been briefed on my case, and he wasted no time on me. It was a short interview.

"Private," he said, "I'm sorry about this, but new orders have been issued. The Reds have increased their rebirth rate, and we have to match them. The standing order now is six revivals before retirement."

"But that order hadn't been issued at the time I was killed."

"It's retroactive," He said. "You have two deaths to go. Good-bye and good luck, Private."

And that was it. I should have known you can't get anywhere with top brass. They don't know how things are. They rarely get killed more than once, and they just don't understand how a man feels after four times. So I went back to my trench.

I walked back slowly, past the

poisoned barbed wire, thinking hard. I walked past something covered with a khaki tarpaulin stenciled *Secret Weapon*. Our sector is filled with secret weapons. They come out about once a week, and maybe one of them will win the war.

But right now I didn't care. I was thinking about the next stanza of that Emerson poem. It goes:

Far or forgot to me is near;  
Shadow and sunlight are the same;  
The vanished gods to me appear;  
And one to me are shame and fame.

Old Emerson got it pretty right, because that's how it is after your fourth death. Nothing makes any difference, and everything seems pretty much the same. Don't get me wrong, I'm no cynic. I'm just saying that a man's viewpoint is bound to change after he's died four times.

At last I reached good old Trench 2645B-4, and greeted all the boys. I found out we were attacking again at dawn. I was still thinking.

I'm no quitter, but I figured four times dead was enough. In this attack, I decided I'd make sure I stayed dead. There would be no mistakes this time.

We moved out at first light past the barbed wire and the rolling mines, into the no-man's-land between our trench and

2645B-5. This attack was being carried out in battalion strength, and we were all armed with the new homing bullets. We moved along pretty briskly for a while. Then the enemy really opened up.

We kept on gaining ground. Stuff was blowing up all around me, but I hadn't a scratch yet. I started to think we would make it this time. Maybe I wouldn't get killed.

Then I got it. An explosive bullet through the chest. Definitely a mortal wound. Usually after something like that hits you, you stay down. But not me. I wanted to make sure of staying dead this time. So I picked myself up and staggered forward, using my rifle as a crutch. I made another fifteen yards in the face of the damndest cross-fire you've ever seen. Then I got it, and got it right. There was no mistaking it on this round.

I felt the explosive bullet slam into my forehead. There was the tiniest fraction of a second in which I could feel my brains boiling out, and I knew I was safe this time. The brahmins couldn't do anything about serious head injuries, and mine was really serious.

Then I died.

I recovered consciousness and looked up at the brahmins in their white gowns and gauze masks.

"How long was I dead?" I asked.

"Two hours."

Then I remembered. "But I got it in the head!"

The gauze masks wrinkled, and I knew they were grinning. "Secret weapon," one of them told me. "It's been in the works for close to three years. At last we and the engineers perfected a de-scrambler. Tremendous invention!"

"Yeah?" I said.

"At last medical science can treat serious head injuries," the brahmin told me. "Or any other kind of injury. We can bring any man back now, just as long as we can collect seventy percent of his pieces and feed them to the de-scrambler. This is really going to cut down our losses. It may turn the tide of the whole war!"

"That's fine," I said.

"By the way," the brahmin told me, "you've been awarded a medal for your heroic advance under fire after receiving a mortal wound."

"That's nice," I said. "Did we take 2645B-5?"

"We took it this time. We're massing for an assault against Trench 2645B-6."

I nodded, and in a little while I was given my clothes and sent back to the front. Things have quieted down now, and I must admit it's kind of pleasant to be alive. Still, I think I've had all I want of it.

Now I've got just one more death to go before I'll have my six.

If they don't change the orders again.

**THE END**