

THE
JUDAS
APOCALYPSE

A Novel

DAN MCNEIL



DENNINGER SIGHED AND PUT HIS GLASSES BACK ON. “All right, Rahn, what is it that you couldn’t tell me in my office?”

Rahn leaned back, savoring the moment as the Cheshire Cat grin crept across his face again. He extracted a package of cigarettes from his inside pocket and pulled one out with his mouth. He offered one to Denninger who declined. Rahn then flicked his lighter open with a flourish and lit the smoke. Denninger straight away began to cough.

“That smells horrible!” he exclaimed with disgust.

Rahn just kept grinning. “It’s a special blend that I have made just for me. It’s made up of Turkish and Persian —”

“Look, Rahn ...” Denninger interrupted.

Rahn sighed and began, “All right, all right. Just what exactly do you know about the Cathar treasure?”

“You tell me. You’re the one who supposedly found it.”

“Come on, Gerhard. Humor me for a moment.”

Denninger paused to gather his thoughts. “Well, I know that —” began Denninger, but stopped himself short when the waitress returned with their drinks.

Rahn watched her carefully as she placed the heavy steins of beer in front of them. When she left, he turned back to Denninger. “Please continue,” he said.

Denninger noticed that Rahn’s demeanor had changed slightly. He seemed slightly less jovial and was acting in a more guarded manner. “You’re awfully nervous, Otto.”

Rahn raked his hand quickly through his hair a number of times. “Please keep going,” he reiterated.

Denninger shrugged and continued. “I believe that it’s never been found ... until now, of course,” Denninger waved a hand in mock reverence at Rahn. “That much I know. There’s the story that during the siege of Montségur, some Cathars

escaped with it before the rest were wiped out by the Catholics — ”

Rahn interrupted Denninger. “Yes,” he said, slowly nodding, “that is an interesting story, isn’t it?”

Denninger took a long pull on his beer. “Even if it were true, no one knows what became of those mysterious Cathars. They have been lost to time I’m afraid.”

Rahn sipped his beer and leaned in. “Do you think so?”

Denninger raised his eyebrows. “What are you saying, Otto?”

Rahn grabbed the seat of his chair and inched it closer. “What do you know about Rennes-le-Château?” he asked in a low voice.

“I thought we were talking about the Cathars?”

Rahn shook his head gently. “Please, Gerhard.”

“Rennes-le-Château? You mean the story about the priest and the money and all that? What’s that got to do with Montségur?”

“Do you know the story, Gerhard?”

Denninger scoffed. “Oh, it’s all bunk. The priest... I forget his name ...”

“Saunière,” interjected Rahn.

“Yes, that’s it... he was renovating the church as I recall. He went to Paris where, not long after, he began to run with the upper class. When he returned to Rennes-le-Château, he was extremely wealthy — wealthy enough, as I recall, to finish the extensive work on the church and even to erect some new buildings.” Rahn nodded as Denninger continued. “But in the end he was accused of selling masses, I think. That, apparently, was the source of his wealth.”

Rahn again ran his hand through his hair. “Are you sure about that?”

Denninger crossed his arms. “Oh, how would I know? I mean, who cares, Otto. Is this why you brought me to this fascinating place? To rehash that old canard? Really, Otto, I have other things I could be doing, you know.”

Rahn looked around, and put his hand inside his coat. Slowly, he pulled out a weather-beaten leather book that had obviously seen better days. Gently he placed it on the table and slid it towards Denninger.

“What’s this?” he asked, looking up from the book to Rahn.

Otto smiled. “It’s a diary. Open it to the second page,” he instructed.

Denninger did as he was told. Written neatly across the middle of the page was the inscription *Propriété de Abbé Rivière*. The name was unfamiliar to Denninger. “Who is Abbé Rivière?”

Rahn held his breath for a second before he finally sat back. “Abbé Rivière was the priest that went to Saunière’s deathbed to give him last rites in 1917. The thing is, once Saunière confessed, Abbé Rivière refused to do so.”

Denninger’s knowledge of Catholicism and Christianity was shaky but functional. He was certainly surprised to hear that one Catholic priest refused another Catholic priest the sacrament of absolution. Without it, Saunière would not be able to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Rahn sipped his beer and continued. “Apparently Saunière confessed something to Rivière that was so... horrible, that Rivière felt he couldn’t administer the rite. Something so terrible that it affected the poor abbé so much that the rumor was ...

well, the rumor was that he never smiled again. Now, I'm not sure if that was entirely true — his not smiling again, I mean — but the fact is, something was revealed to him that had a profound effect on him. Something ... provocative."

The whole story had taken a left turn and Denninger was spellbound. "Is what Saunière confessed to in this book?"

Rahn only gave a sly smile. Denninger looked back at the diary. "Where did you get this anyway?" Denninger inquired. When Rahn didn't answer right away, Denninger looked up and was met with the Cheshire Cat grin again.

"I...uh, borrowed it." Rahn cleared his throat and continued. "When I was in France, I happened to visit a small shop in the Rennes-le-Château area ... antiques and curios ... really quite nice ..."

Rahn paused to take another sip of beer.

"Anyway, the timing was, shall we say, fortuitous? The owner had just received a box of effects from the church where Abbé Rivière had been the parish priest. The owner was a very amiable fellow. It seems he knew the whole Saunière saga and was quite happy to go on at length about it. It was then that another customer came in, so... I drifted over to one of the boxes. Since the owner was busy, I began to rummage through the box myself and I found it underneath some old clothes."

He held up the diary. "When I read what was inside, Gerhard..."

"But what does it say, Otto?"

Rahn patted the book with his finger. "I want you to read it for yourself," he said.

Denninger scratched his head lightly and pulled the diary closer. "I cannot believe that the owner of the store would have parted with it," he said as began to thumb through the pages.

Rahn finished his beer and waved to the waitress, holding up two fingers. “Actually, I don’t think he knew that it was in the box.”

Denninger’s mouth fell open slightly. “What do you mean, he didn’t know?”

Rahn put his hands together and drummed his fingers against each other. “He’d only just received the boxes that day. I don’t even think he knows about it.”

Denninger couldn’t believe his ears. “You mean you stole it! My God, Rahn, what were you thinking?” Rahn put up his hand and shook his head.

“When you read what’s in it, Gerhard, you’ll be thankful that I did ... borrow it. Trust me.”

As the waitress brought the beers over, a commotion by the front entrance captured Rahn’s attention. He noticed three men in trench coats, checking identification papers. “Fucking Gestapo,” he muttered. “That’s a really good way to blend in.”

He quickly turned to Denninger. “I think it’s time we left, my friend,” he urged. He snatched up the diary with one hand and tried to button up his jacket with the other.

Denninger was puzzled and began to look around, not quite understanding what was happening. What is it? What is going on? Denninger wondered silently.

The Gestapo agents slowly waded into the crowd onto the dance floor. The dancers, suddenly aware of the unwanted guests in their midst, began to move a little more demonstratively, deliberately slowing down their progress.

One of the Gestapo officers, scanning the back of the bar, spotted Rahn and started to make his way towards him. Rahn grabbed Denninger by the scruff of his coat and hissed. “Let’s go!”

Denninger was completely bewildered. He was in the process of trying to get his hat from the shamelessly flirting transvestite at the cloakroom when he heard Rahn call out. Denninger turned just in time to see something flying straight at him. He had no time to react. The object, which turned out to be Rivière's diary, hit him squarely in the chest. The book flopped to the floor at his feet. Surprised more than angry, he instinctively bent over to pick up the projectile when suddenly he felt two legs crash into his backside at a high rate of speed.

The Gestapo agent who had just collided into Denninger sailed over Denninger's back until he completed the parabola and landed on his ass with a loud crack, signifying a broken tailbone. Over on the dance floor, the other two agents, noticing the commotion by the cloakroom in the back, immediately reversed and tried to break through the crowd.

One of the officers managed to squeeze past two men, both dressed like Marlene Dietrich, but didn't notice the handle of an umbrella as it completed its vicious arc and smashed into his face. Blood and teeth sprayed onto the dress of the taller, uglier Marlene as the hapless agent crumpled to his knees. Ugly Marlene turned her head and saw a red splotch and a broken tooth on the white lace across her chest. "Now, is that any way to treat a lady, swine?" she said hoarsely as she grabbed hold of the agent's hair with a large, hairy knuckled mitt. A strangled yelp slipped between the lips of the Gestapo agent as he was raised a few inches off of the floor.

"Goddamned Gestapo," muttered the other Marlene as she connected a roundhouse smash to the rest of his teeth. Rahn winced. He's going to have to see a dentist, he thought. As the Gestapo agent slithered to the floor, Rahn saw the owner of the umbrella.

“Thank you, Bobby,” Rahn called. Turning to the Marlenes, he gave a small bow. “Thank you too, girls.”

Bobby tipped his hat to Rahn just before he took a huge cricket-bat swing at the other Gestapo officer who, at the moment, was being rendered immobile by a rather energetic swing doll, who had wrapped her legs around his neck like a boa constrictor.

Turning to Denninger, Rahn said, “You see Gerhard, they’re really not such bad kids.”

Picking up the pace, the two of them squeezed through what was rapidly becoming a riot of impressive proportions. The cloakroom “girl” had disappeared, no doubt engaged in the melee. Denninger saw his coat and grabbed it while Rahn yanked on his arm. As the first few ejections from the bar hit the street, news of the growing brawl had been brought to the attention of some members of the Hitler Youth. They quickly assembled in front of the bar and were spoiling for a fight. The rest of the swing kids, upon hearing about the visitors waiting for them outside, were anxious to oblige them. There was no love lost between the two groups. The überdiscipline of the Youth contrasted deeply with the laissez-faire lifestyle of the swing kids, and Rahn could feel the electricity in the air. Excitedly, he grabbed Denninger by the arm and pulled him to the side of the building, out of the way of what was surely about to be a bloody clash.

“This is going to be ugly,” whispered Rahn. “Don’t move.”

Denninger had pressed his back and face up against the wall, leaving an imprint of brick in his cheek. “Don’t worry.”

The Hitler Youth, decked out in their traditional brown shirts, short pants and leather belts were armed with rocks, lead pipes and two by fours. They stood in a phalanx across

the road, effectively blocking any exits, while the kids, attired in their zoot suits and fedoras, were of a looser formation, with umbrellas and clasp knives at the ready.

No one made a move for at least a minute, as they sized each other up. One of the swing kids, a tall specimen in a chalk-white dust coat stepped forward. "Hello boys," he began, "Isn't it past your bedtime? Everyone I know in short pants is asleep by now." There were assorted chuckles from the kids behind him. "You know," he continued, "We don't fight with children... why don't you come back in a couple of years when you are ... Hitler Men?"

More guffaws.

There was suddenly a loud crack and the kid in the dust coat fell to the ground. A bloodied rock with flesh and hair stuck to it clattered across the pavement.

Rahn held his breath.

"Here we go ...," he breathed.

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