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Hostage to Death

GALAXY
PRESS

The Challenge of the Hand

THE severed hand lay upon the scarred desk, its fingers lifted and curled, as though raising its palm in mute supplication. Drained of blood, the severed tendons and arteries stood out at the wrist—hollow white tubes. The man who had cut off that hand had done it neatly, as though he had been carving a fowl, instead of human flesh. The wrist joint protruded, white and glistening.

For dragging seconds no one in the hut moved. And then Lieutenant Reilly found breath enough to gasp, “Good God!” He stared around him at the tense faces of the Legionnaires. Their eyes were drawn to the thing like steel to a magnet.

“Call divisional PC,” said Lieutenant Reilly.

Sergeant Morenz, his weathered face stiff, said, “The wires are down, sir, I was just coming in to tell you when the runner brought—brought that.”

Lieutenant Reilly looked back at the grisly object. It had been wrapped in cheap paper, and upon the paper, like worms crawling over cloth, was a set of Arabic words.

Picking up a rifle cleaning rag, Reilly removed the object and looked at the writing. Arabic was no great mystery to him, but this was blurred. The message read:



*Sergeant Morenz, his weathered face stiff, said,
"The wires are down, sir, I was just coming in to tell you when
the runner brought—brought that."*

To Railguard Three:

I beg to inform you that I am holding a certain Englishwoman named Kay MacArthur. I send this to you today. Tomorrow I shall send you one of her hands. I do this because I seriously doubt your courage and the fighting quality of your men, who do nothing but cringe beside a railroad, watching the trains. Come and get Kay MacArthur.

Blessings from Abd el-Ulad

Lieutenant Reilly went to the door and looked southwest, to the uneven blue-white humps which were the High Atlas. In the midsummer heat, the brown plains shimmered and writhed on their way to the foothills.

Stepping outside, Reilly stared to the north. The iron and cinders that made up the roadbed were scorching hot under the metallic, brittle sky. The great cauldron of molten copper that was the sun beat the parched earth with searing rays.

Sergeant Morenz had finished reading the message when Reilly came back. Sergeant Morenz, his tunic soggy and dark with sweat, shrugged.

"It is to be pitied, *mon Lieutenant*. Unable as we are to reach battalion, we can do nothing. Yes, it is to be pitied."

Reilly's black eyes went suddenly hot. "Are you trying to tell me what to do? Get the hell out of here and down to your barracks!"

They went, those Legionnaires. Hurriedly. One of them grinned a bit when he was outside and whispered to another, "*Sacrebleu*, little pig, it will not be long."

“No, not long. When he swears, *zut!* We have action! I am weary of this railhead, me.”

Sergeant Morenz lingered near the door, hesitantly. He felt very responsible, did Morenz. It showed in his sunken, colorless eyes.

Lieutenant Reilly fidgeted and stared down at his dusty boots, frowning. He pulled out his revolver and whirled its cylinder, then replaced it. He went to his desk, glared at the offending hand and reread Abd el-Ulad’s message.

“Morenz!” cried Reilly. “Get in here!”

Morenz re-entered and saluted.

Reilly did a turn around the walls of the iron-roofed furnace which passed for his quarters and came back to Morenz. “Sergeant, what were our orders when we came to this place?”

“Sir,” said Morenz, “our orders were these: Guard the railhead at post three. Under no pretext are you to leave this post. The railhead is all important.”

“Go on,” said Reilly.

Morenz relaxed a little. “I’m thinking, begging the lieutenant’s pardon, about Captain Francois deGrille. You remember the captain, don’t you, Lieutenant? He left Fort Germaine, down in the Sahara. Went after a woman, he did, sir. Captain deGrille, begging the lieutenant’s pardon again, will be sentenced next week, sir. I need not remind you, *mon Lieutenant*, that *la belle Légion* is a very jealous lady.”

“Rats!” said Lieutenant Reilly. “DeGrille was a fool. He had his entire post wiped out by Tuaregs in his absence. We aren’t at war with anyone. The Riffs are after the Spaniards, not the French.”

“As the general said on parade last month, *mon Lieutenant*, ‘All Morocco is blazing with revolt.’”

“That’s trite,” cried Reilly. “Damned trite! It’s been blazing with revolt ever since they landed us here. And how many engagements have we fought? None!”

“Morenz, this Abd el-Ulad—he’s a Berber. Just a guerrilla warrior. That other fellow—what’s his name? Abd el-Krim—won’t have anything to do with him. This Ulad wants to wipe out a Legion company and thereby gain favor in the eyes of Krim. He thinks he’s got a setup, this Ulad.

“Well, Morenz, this Ulad is going to be fooled. We’re going up and *wipe him out!*”

“*Mon Lieutenant!*” cried Morenz. “It means deserting your post!”

“You, a sergeant, are telling me what to do?”

Morenz backed hastily away. This Reilly was a fighter, not to be tampered with. Down in the Sahara, this Reilly had a reputation. When those black eyes grew wild, such lesser things as sergeants did well to get out of the way. Morenz got. He knew the conflict. It wasn’t human to leave a woman in Berber hands without doing something about it.

But then, since when was warfare human?

Lieutenant Edouard William deReilly, as he was listed on the Legion books, went to the window and looked out across the scaly, sun-scourged plain. Up there Abd el-Krim was going at it hammer and tongs with the Spaniards.

Not long before, Reilly remembered, the Spanish general, Silvestre, had lost his six thousand Spanish soldiers in the

siege of the Mountain of Baran. Shot down like sheep by Riffian guns, the six thousand corpses had strewn the slopes of Baran and the vale by the tomb of *Sīdī* Misaud el-Derkawi.

Silvestre had blown out his brains with his own pistol, rather than suffer either capture or explanation to the king.

Reilly remembered with a twinge that Silvestre had been acting independently, *without orders or support*.

Yes, the Riffs were at it again up there. Fighting to drive the Christians into the sea. Reilly thanked God that France wasn't in it—not yet. The closest France had come had been in connection with this railroad over which passed nightly trains of Spanish supplies and troops from other sectors. Guarded, paradoxically, by the French Foreign Legion, because France didn't want the Riffs to tear up the rails.

Reilly looked back at the severed hand and shoved shaky fingers into his tunic pocket to bring forth a sweat-dampened pack of vile Algerian cigarettes. It was a bad situation, a hard decision, because a man of Reilly's ancestry is shot through and through with a streak of romanticism as wide as a mountain river and as hard to control.

Lieutenant Edouard William deReilly was not French at all. He was, for the time being, a citizen of France. He had graduated from that mighty school St. Cyr, where army officers are made for the tricolor. He had fought his campaigns and won his medals and ribbons with both Spahis and Legion, in both mountain and desert jungle.

His grandfather had been a captain of the Irish Guard—the French stand and cheer when you mention that part of their

military history. They tell you that the gentlemen of Ireland fought superbly and gallantly for France through scores of years. The first deReilly had been, of course, O'Reilly, but the name had shifted. The women of the family had all come from Ireland, except Reilly's mother. She was an American.

Three years before his father had died at the first battle of Verdun, Reilly's mother had taken him back to America where, for the better part of his youth, he had been plain Bill Reilly, "that exceptionally hard-boiled, gentlemanly little boy."

He had come back to France to attend St. Cyr, and for the past two years he had been mopping up Africa—France's granary—to France's profit and his own delight.

As an officer of *la belle Légion*, he was respected, hailed and fêted. For, though France thinks little of the enlisted Legionnaire, she knows that the officers are the finest, the best and positively the most romantic gentlemen extant—perhaps with the exception of the *Chasseurs Alpins*.

Thus, it was hard for Bill Reilly to turn his back on that hand. An Irish gentleman to the core, with an American's straightforward impulsiveness, Reilly was finding it impossible to turn down the challenge.

Should anything happen to that railhead in his absence—well, they wouldn't be able to find dungeons deep enough or bars too thick. On the surface, France and Spain were friends.

His black eyes and black hair, his compact, pug-nosed face, his deceptive slenderness, stood Reilly in good stead here in a dark country. He could forage for news with a djellaba about his shoulders, passing himself off for an Arab or even a Berber.

For wild minutes he stood there, thinking that he would stand a better chance if he went up to this hideout by himself, disguised as a Riff. He knew he had the nerve to try it, but you had to have men to blast a fighter like Abd el-Ulad. Even sixty men would be a handful when the Sniders and Mannlichers and flintlocks began to bark. You'd need a squadron of cavalry, about seven machine guns, a plane or two—

Well, fifty Legionnaires could do it.

Reilly went out the door and glanced about him. The bugler was asleep on a bench in the questionable shade of the wall, his German face covered with globules of sweat, flies hovering perilously close to his open mouth.

“Schwartz!” cried Reilly thunderously. “You lazy—!”

Down at the barracks, the Legionnaires heard the words and grinned cheerfully. After all, it was a bore making a railroad safe for Spaniards. And this Abd el-Ulad probably needed a lesson. They knew what Reilly meant when he swore.

A good officer swears. A bad one means it.

“Schwartz!” roared Reilly again. “Let's have a few sour notes out of that tin-fish horn! We're leaving for the Atlas!”