

Murder Sands

by John Starr



Mike Donlin broke the Legion law. And a desert devil swore he'd pay in full—out where the shifting sands bury the murder sign.

THE Legion never forgot the blistering afternoon they broke Sergeant Mike Donlin. The entire regiment stood at *rapport*, a hollow square two ranks deep. Hardly a sign of breathing from the still, sweating ranks. No sound but the monotonous sing-song of the sergeant-major reading out the transfers and invalided men. The routine business ended.

“It’s comin’,” muttered Healy, a Dublin Irishman with a past of his own.

“E’s shakin’.” Cockney Orpen wet his upper lip with the tip of his tongue.

A burly negro from Alabama shivered. It was the heat, he’d have told you—but it was not.

“Sergeant Mike Donlin,” barked the sergeant-major crisply.

An ordinary looking man, somewhat more freckled than Legion-tanned, stepped four paces from the ranks. No more about him to catch the eye than the last truck driver you saw. Lantern-jawed, short. Sturdy arms made for rolling hogsheads on a wharf. And, in their time, Donlin's arms had done just that.

He stood quiet as a wooden man. The sergeant-major ran through the preamble. Offender's past record of gallantry would mitigate his punishment. The Legion knew that meant the time he saved Colonel Gaspard's life in a Touareg ambush. Also, went on the sergeant-major, other circumstances made the offense less severe. The Legion grimaced at that. The offended one aroused very little sympathy, even from his fellow officers.

"But," wound up the sergeant-major, "punishment must be meted out to a soldier who strikes his superior officer." And no man, having seen it happen, ever would forget the action of Sergeant Mike Donlin's fist crashing home against Lieutenant Hans Hinderman's jaw.

The sergeant-major prepared to wind up. Both Colonel Gaspard and the culprit stood silently.

Colonel Gaspard was thinking of the court-martial that had heard out the case. Over and over, he heard the guilty man's sole defense:

"He called me a bad name. And I socked him."

In the end it was Colonel Gaspard's final word that saved Donlin from a worse fate than that decided upon. "Hinderman," the colonel argued over a cigaret, "is a desert devil. If he'd got one in the eye long ago he'd never have run that Italian through with a bayonet. Also you cannot overlook what this American did—oh, all those times."

"But, *mon pere*," protested the young

adjutant. He was a thin Frenchman who, for his own reasons, had been compelled to forsake an honored name and retire into the Legion with a beard. "But the example—"

"Of course. The example," Colonel Gaspard agreed wryly. And it had come to this blistering afternoon and the breaking of Sergeant Mike Donlin.

The sergeant-major read the sentence of a month's confinement in the guard-house. Colonel Gaspard did the rest. He extended his right hand sharply. The sergeant's stripes were torn from Donlin's sleeve. They didn't come off immediately. At the commandant's second jerking pull Donlin winced a bit—like a man having his skin peeled off.

A snappy military command. The rifles of the Legion went up. The rear ranks wheeled off. Ex-sergeant Donlin, escorted by four Lebel bearing Legionnaires, and Lieutenant Hinderman—bearing a split lip—went off.

In the barracks' quarters at Sidi-bel-abbes, the Legion discussed the fate of their comrade.

"Won't Hinderman be a sorehead now. Donlin coulda got ten years."

It's the old story that most men come to the Legion to escape their sins. The cases of Mike Donlin and Lieutenant Hans Hinderman, the Dutchman, were more interesting.

CURIOSITY brought Donlin, the American, to Sidi-bel-abbes, where the pink and yellow roofs look up at the glaring sky. The same curiosity that makes some follow Klondike trails and dim Congo routes, and others the sky from continent to continent.

Hinderman came to the Legion not so much to escape old sins as to find new ones. When old Colonel Gaspard said Lieutenant Hinderman was a desert devil, he said everything. At his work, Hinderman

belonged out on the hot Sahara sands with the dry-rustling palms and weird tumpafa plants where a man hit by a bullet makes no sound when he falls. At his play, his place was in the steaming cafes where *bocha* is cheap.

In the desert an officer likes to think his sergeant looks up to him. But Donlin, who disliked Lieutenant Hinderman's fat face and spraying yellow mustache as much as his bullying manner, did no looking up. He even made it sometimes obvious that he looked down on him.

Hinderman's sort broods on such matters. That particular night in the cafe he had stowed away too much cognac. With no introductory remarks, Hinderman leaned over to the next table where Donlin read a newspaper.

"You, for instance," Hinderman snarled, like a man who had been thinking it over, "are a bad soldier. You are an American, which is bad because that makes you a mongrel. You are too damned superior. Further, you are a—"

It ended as quickly as it had started. Donlin stood up automatically, turning. Likewise Lieutenant Hinderman, cursing madly. Donlin's arm shot out straight, swiftly. Next minute, mouth streaming blood, Hinderman fell over two tables and landed in a mess of broken glass. He was still trying to extricate himself from all of that when the military police led Donlin away.

Thirty days later when Donlin emerged from the guard-house, he considered the incident closed. But Lieutenant Hinderman, who did not relish compromises, thought differently.

"Thirty days for that insult!" he raged. "But I will get my revenge. I fear nothing but the desert itself. This fool will pay."

For his part, when his comrades

warned him, Donlin remained unmoved. "I give him his, an' he give me mine. So far as I'm concerned, the party's over."

"He'll lay for you, feller."

"Leave him lay."

Three days later the Legion marched off to the south. The Touareg waited behind the palms with his long rifle, incited by the Nazis, who were fighting on every front. In the ranks, Mike Donlin's soul was at peace. On his horse, narrow eyes peering through the heat waves, Lieutenant Hinderman made his plans.

TWO days after the Legion reached Fort Haignon, which lies between sand hills upon the Sahara's bosom, orders came to march again. Men who had carried terrible packs and sweated blood to get there, cursed when once more they dropped the little sun protectors over their necks. Word, from a scouting *goun*, was that Touareg raiders had been sighted twenty miles away.

Colonel Gaspard told his adjutant: "If it's that rascal Barbouchi we'll cut his ears off just to prove the error of stealing honest Arabs' camels and burning their tents." One hour and forty-five minutes later the Legion, in two columns waited at the sally port for the march to begin.

Colonel Gaspard issued a supplementary order. One officer and four men were to remain behind, guarding the fort. "Not many," he admitted, "but enough if those five men will pass down the gallery, firing first from one embrasure then another. No Touareg'll possibly guess whether there are five men or—fifty. And he couldn't scale these walls if he did guess."

Nothing queer about this as a desert military maneuver. But as an example of fate it was striking. The officer left in charge was Lieutenant, Hans Hinderman. One of the four men was Mike Donlin.

Behind at the fort Donlin did his

simple duty, which was to watch the vast, empty reaches of sand through a firing aperture. But Lieutenant Hinderman was doing something else. He was sampling some of Colonel Gaspard's private stock. As the contents of his bottle ebbed, devilry rose in his reddened eyes. He toyed with what he could do to Donlin now. When he got to unsteady legs a dozen vengeful schemes were in his mind.

Outside a rifle suddenly cracked on the still, molten air. One of the four men at the firing posts pitched backward on the floor.

"Les Arbis!"

Hinderman cursed irritably and flung himself out into the gallery. The sands below were swarming with Touaregs on their piebald camels. Pulling the beasts to their knees, they were firing waves of flame up at the fort. It was an attack of ominous intensity.

Down the gallery Hinderman staggered.

"Sight, fire—bleu. Sacre Dieu, fire."

The three remaining Legionnaires needed no urging. Firing coolly, his freckled face impassive, Donlin brought down two Arabs who were sharpshooting from palms. But a second Legionnaire suddenly fell backward with a gurgling sound and died.

Hinderman emptied his revolver, passing down the gallery. He was a good marksman, as were both Donlin and the third Legionnaire. By shooting from alternate apertures they had convinced the Arabs the fort was capable of stiff resistance. While the enemy fire became that of steady, unchanging siege attack there were no more rushes.

The sun sank, bringing no relief from the heat.

Back in the colonel's quarters, Hinderman considered. The Touaregs were not likely to scale the walls. If he was to

revenge himself upon Donlin his chance was now. He lurched to his feet again, steadied himself and peered down the gallery. Three lifeless bodies lay on the floor. Whatever Hinderman did there would be no witnesses. In his heart he thanked his private gods for sparing Donlin for his own judgment.

Catlike, he crept along the gallery. At his step Donlin turned. Hinderman saw the sudden tightness about the American's lips. *He* knew they were alone.

"Eyes front," he snapped. Slowly Donlin obeyed. The man's powerful shoulder blades stiffened. How easy it would be to shoot him in the back. But Hinderman wiped away the impulse. He wanted to play with his prey, make Donlin suffer before he finished him.

The heat made Hinderman's head swim, increasing the hold of the cognac upon his vengeance-crazed mind. A vicious jest occurred to him. Peering from round a corner in the gallery, he could just see Donlin's broad back. Slowly Hinderman raised the revolver, squeezed the trigger.

Less than a foot over Donlin's head the bullet buried itself.

Donlin changed position hurriedly, under the impression the Touareg aim was improving. It almost made Hinderman roar. Once more he raised his revolver. This time he experienced an almost uncontrollable desire to make his target that broad back. But he stifled his eagerness. Again the revolver sped its bullet.

This time it crashed home less than six inches from the base of Donlin's brain.

He saw the other man spit in sharp exasperation. His uneasiness set all Hinderman's desire afire. He raised the revolver this time with but one thought in mind—to kill. Carefully he aimed at the back of Donlin's head. His finger closed convulsively on the trigger.

Click!

Hinderman inspected the empty revolver disgustedly. His cartridge belt was likewise empty. Only one thing to do. He walked uncertainly back to Colonel Gaspard's office, where the ammunition was kept. He reassured himself that it was there, full belts by the dozens. Then the bottle on the table caught his eye, and he sat down for one drink more.

The cognac had no sooner passed his thick lips than Hinderman experienced overwhelming drowsiness. He nodded, eyes closing. When he opened them again it was with the disquieting conviction that he had been asleep.

Then he made an unnerving discovery. The spare cartridge belts had vanished from the room.

Cursing with rage, he stumbled out into the gallery. Then Hinderman saw Donlin still at his post, the cartridge belts stacked neatly round him. The American's grunt of greeting told Hinderman the truth. Guessing what was in his mind, Donlin was taking no chances.

Hinderman resolved to bluff it out. He took a step forward.

Then a level voice snapped warningly:

"Keep off or I'll let you have it."

Hinderman halted, shivering in his fury. "What's the meaning of this?"

His answer was a Lebel barrel swung exactly in his path.

NO sound issued from the sands outside. If the Touaregs were there they kept quiet, waiting. It may have been the terrific heat or sheer madness that made Hinderman do what he next did. Without arms, his vengeance was impossible. Once Colonel Gaspard said he was a desert devil, a wild thing. He proved that now.

Directly under the parapet he glimpsed a still, sprawling figure. A Touareg

who had paid the penalty for trying to scale these walls. It was the long gun at the dead man's side that held Hinderman's gaze. If he could get that gun. . . .

He considered the chances. If the enemy was still there they'd hardly expect a defender from the fort to come outside. No, that part ought to be easy. But how about Donlin shooting him while he was out there?

Suddenly he stiffened with an idea. Stumbling, he made his way back to Colonel Gaspard's desk, found pencil and paper. Awkwardly, he wrote seven lines.

Getting to his feet, he stumbled out into the gallery. He stood at the head of the steps leading down to the sally port. It was in that instant that Donlin turned, saw the swaying, disheveled figure at the other end of the gallery. Then Hinderman's crazy babble reached his ears:

"I go out on inspection. But mark you well—shoot me from behind and you'll go to the firing squad for it. On my body I carry evidence that ruins you if I die."

Donlin gaped at the square of white paper fluttering in Hinderman's hand. He raised his rifle, then lowered it. He couldn't murder—even a mad dog. As he sprang forward Hinderman saw him coming. Like a flash Hinderman leaped down the steps, flung open the great gate. He was outside.

Behind the gate Donlin, listening, tensed. All was still out there on the desert sands. He prayed for that madman's safety.

Crack!

A single shot, then a choking cry.

"Hinderman. They got him—"

Abruptly Donlin ran down the steps, pushed open the barricade gate, raced across the sands. He bent over Hinderman's body, waiting for a Touareg bullet.

A single trumpet call rang on his ears. The advance guard of the returning Legion. Next instant, over the nearest sand dune, they swung into sight. He was seen

now, bending over Hinderman's damning body.

Sweat dripped from him. Shakily, he extracted from the man's hand the single sheet of folded paper. He spread it open:

If I die. I want it fully understood and known that the American Donlin is my killer. Donlin had nothing to do but shoot and get by with it. In spite of all my attempts to avoid disputes we have never got anywhere. Donlin hated deeply. The Arabs have gone. Donlin is pressing me hard.

HINDERMAN.

His death warrant! But even as he started to tear it up, he felt the field glasses of the returning Legion on him.

They all knew of this feud. He was in a damning position anyway. What he needed now was something to clear him of all suspicion. Instead, he had. . . The paper blew sidewise in his hand, bending in two. Fascinatedly, Donlin's eyes returned to it. He stared wide-eyed with unbelief at what that visible half of the note told him.

Suddenly, as the advancing Legion drew nearer, he turned his back on it. Then Mike Donlin abruptly did a queer thing. He slipped his bayonet in the fold of the paper. From top to bottom, he slit Hinderman's letter in half.

Then, as he got to his feet, one half of that letter went into his mouth, was chokingly swallowed. The other half, in shaking hand, Donlin held onto like a drowning man clinging to a straw.

SEATED at the table, Colonel Gaspard listened to Donlin's story—the story he had stuck to unhesitatingly. Lieutenant Hinderman had simply walked out shortly before dawn into the desert and been killed.

Colonel Gaspard nodded his head thoughtfully.

"A queer man, Lieutenant Hinderman. And queerer still—his going out into the desert like that." He stared straight at Donlin.

"I don't mind telling you that but for this letter things would look pretty black for you, Donlin. As it happens, the letter clears you. Without it you might have been—well, suspected. After all, you two were known enemies. And it was queer, his going out that way." He stood up, waving toward Donlin the only half of Hinderman's letter that remained.

Donlin's face was expressionless as a mask, as he read what it now said:

If I die I want it known that the American Donlin had nothing to do with it. In spite of all disputes we have never hated deeply. The Arabs pressing me hard.

HINDERMAN.

"That letter," Colonel Gaspard was saying, "wipes out a lot of the lieutenant's bad deeds."

And Donlin smiled.