

Weird Tales



JANUARY, 1952

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THE IRON HANDS OF KATZAVEERE



J. R. Eberle "51"

by David Lewis Eynon

"*Après moi, le deluge,*" said Hauptmann von Frolich pleasantly, puffing to start his Havana, "if you will permit me to quote a Frenchman—Louis XVI, *nicht wahr?*"

"Pardon, Mynheer Commandant?" said Burgomeister ten Brink, pulling his attention from the sound of the firing up the coast—guns that promised liberation to his village of fisherfolk. "You were saying?"

"In the morning," explained the German wearily, tired after three years of dealing with gross Dutch metality, "when we leave your gemütlich little village—where, need I say, we have enjoyed our . . . 'Holiday'—the dike would be blown. I shall command the demolition squad personally."

Ten Brink stared at the German captain. The afternoon sun had faded now, the fire-light licked at the German's crooked smile, brightened the decorations on his tunic.

"You would do *that*?" ten Brink asked hollowly. "Destroy the work of centuries, leave my people destitute and—"

"Oh, please," said von Frolich hastily, "it's nothing personal, you understand, my dear Herr Burgomeister." He settled his weight more comfortably in the large chair. "Purely a question of military expediency. I've grown quite fond of Katzaveere, actually. Perhaps, after the war, when my vacation permits . . ." The captain blew a ring of smoke towards the fireplace and mused.

"However," he drew himself back to the business at hand; "when the English arrive," he cocked his head and listened to the mumble of artillery for a second, "about noon tomorrow, I should imagine—you can express my regrets that I could not be here to receive them." He winked at ten Brink. "And also extend my apologies for the town's being under water," he added, showing a denture made by the best orthodontist in Hamburg.

"But my villagers," said ten Brink helplessly. "It means the end of everything for them!" he protested.

"Nothing actually ever begins or ends—does it really?" asked von Frolich. He had studied philosophy at Marburg. "And you can repair things, one day. Your town should be as good as new—in ten or twenty years!" he laughed, shaking until his chair groaned.

Ten Brink's mind flooded with desperation. He fought the urge to throttle the German as von Frolich sat laughing. That guaranteed immediate reprisal—a hundred fishermen shot, perhaps the whole village executed. His own death ten Brink could discount, but his people must survive somehow.

If they lived, only, there always remained the hope of rebuilding.

Von Frolich's laughter ebbed into an amiable smile. He propped his boots on the grate, warming his toes against the evening dampness that seeped slowly into the stones of the Raadhuis floor.

"Oh, yes, Herr Burgomeister," said the Hauptmann familiarly, "before I take my leave, there is a point about which I have often meant to ask." He juttied his cigar towards the mantel. "Those hands," he said, indicating three black casts hanging by their wrists from hooks set in the stone, "iron, are they not? What brings them there?"

"Hands?" asked Ten Brink, wondering how the German, on the brink of disaster, could interest himself with trifles. "They are from the middle ages. It was then the custom to cut off a hand—as a punishment for great crimes. The hand was set in iron and hung in a public place as a warning to malefactors."

"Ach, so!" exclaimed von Frolich, bending forward with interest. He reached up and clasped the nearest hand, letting it clank back against the stone when he felt the coldness of the iron.

"And these hands," he asked, rubbing his fingers together, "to whom did they belong?"

"The two right hands belonged to a pair of traitors," said the Burgomeister pointedly. "They attempted to deliver our town to the Spanish, it was believed."

"Believed?" asked von Frolich. "There was no proof, then?"

"Perhaps in those days, barbarity was not so distinctly cut," said ten Brink acidly. "The third hand was a common murderer's."

"Wonderful!" said von Frolich, blandly ignoring ten Brink's barb. "Such a charming tale! Really, the things one encounters in out of the way spots!" He drew out a fresh cigar, struck a match on the nearest hand and lighted his smoke with deep drags.

As the Hauptmann savored his cigar the Burgomeister desperately made plans for the evacuation of his people. The two men sat in

silence for several minutes, then the German spoke.

"You know, my dear ten Brink," he said jovially, "I have it! Those hands will make fine souvenirs—*wen wir nehmen Abschied*. Just the memento I need of my pleasant sojourn in Katzaveere. May I?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow towards the mantel.

"Take them," said ten Brink softly.

"A thousand thanks," said von Frolich, tossing the burned match into the fireplace. "I'll wager, Herr Burgomeister," he said, winking slyly, "that you'd like to put my hands up there—as replacements—Nein?"

"If the Hauptmann will excuse me," said ten Brink bitterly, "I must see to the evacuation of my village."

"But of course, friend Burgomeister," said von Frolich politely, bowing from his chair. "Till morning, then?"

Ten Brink nodded sharply and started toward the door.

"Oh, and also, Herr Burgomeister," called the Hauptmann as ten Brink reached the door, "thanks for the hands!"

THE door slammed and von Frolich leaned over to poke up the coals in the grate. When they glowed to his satisfaction he loosened his belt, opened his collar and reached for a glass of brandy at his elbow. From the North the rising winds brought the sound of artillery stronger than before. Von Frolich listened to the barrage—mixed, he judged, listening to the muted whine of the lighter guns against the dull rumble of the 250's.

An orderly slipped into the room and closed the shutters against the night, leaving an oil lamp beside the captain, who sat staring at pictures in the fire. Von Frolich rolled the brandy slowly around his tongue and stared up curiously at the hands, etched against the old stone by the firelight. As he studied them in the flickering of the flames they seemed to pulse and clench with the slow, strong rhythm of the rising fire.

The North Sea wind moaned over the chimney, sucking the flames higher, and the hands seemed to dance from their hooks like tiny puppets, anxious for the show to begin. Von Frolich started as the iron fingers drummed on the stone—but no, it was only

a flash of hail against the window panes outside.

The German broke his gaze from the mantel, gulped the rest of his brandy and stared determinedly into the fire.

"ODD," said Colonel Willoughby, lowering his binoculars. "They've *been* destroying the dikes all down the coast—you don't suppose they're planning to make a stand here, do you?" he asked a junior officer at his left.

"It's not very likely, is it, Sir?" said Lieutenant Downs. "Our patrols haven't drawn any fire—unless, of course, Jerry's planning some sort of trap."

The Colonel pulled a battered package of Players from his tunic pocket, offered one to Downs and tamped his own against a thumbnail. He continued tapping the cigarette absently, staring out across the dunes capped with tufts of grass swaying gently against a leaden sky. The cry of a gull drifted across the murmur of the waves and the Colonel turned unconsciously to accept a light from the lieutenant.

"Jerry isn't given to subtleties, as a rule," mused the Colonel, who was trying to reconcile his military logic with the fact that the situation didn't "feel" right. "Still, I expect you'd better go in for a look around."

"Of course, Sir," said the youngster.

"Take along anyone you like, Downs," the Colonel said as the boy started up over the embankment. "I'd suggest Sergeant Phillips."

"Quite, Sir," agreed Downs, motioning to an aging non-com in a scarred tin hat.

"Oh, and Downs," the Colonel added, glancing at his watch, "we'll follow you in at twelve-thirty—regardless."

"Just as you say, Sir," said the lieutenant, reaching the Sergeant a hand to the top of the dune.

The Colonel watched silently as the two figures moved off among the waving grass—Downs in the lead, Phillips moving warily on his flank with a submachine gun gripped at the ready. They disappeared down a slope, popped up briefly as first Downs, then the Sergeant, writhed over the top of the next dune, then were beyond the Colonel's view. He lowered his glasses,

glanced again at his watch, then picked up the field telephone and asked for the artillery section.

The two Englishmen picked their way cautiously down a back street of Katzaveere, slipping quickly from doorway to doorway in the sinister silence of noon. Their hobnailed boots made brisk, urgent scrapes as they flicked across the cobbles beneath the gaunt windows of the narrow, leaning houses.

Downs twisted testily around a corner, into the street of the Ropemakers, and when he reached the next intersection motioned for Phillips to follow. The two men huddled together behind a coil of hawser, scanning the closed shutters along the street front. Directly ahead, looking down the street of the Never Ending Prayer, they could see the sparkle of the fountain in the main square. The sound of trickling water wandered merrily down the alley, chuckling to itself like an idiot in a graveyard.

As Downs turned to the Sergeant the clock in the Raadhuis tower started sonorously striking noon on a bell with the tone of a soul in chains.

"What do you make of it, Phillips?" whispered the boy.

"It's bloody quiet," said Phillips bitterly. "Probably a ruddy sniper behind every stinkin' window, Sir."

"I wonder," said Downs, doing his best to achieve the Colonel's tone. "Suppose we marched right up to their city hall and banged on the door—demanded that they surrender? They're caught, you know. They might be prepared to act reasonably."

"Well, Sir," said Phillips resignedly, "if they're still here, we're not goin' to get out anyway."

"Exactly," said Downs. "We could, of course, stay under cover until the Regiment moves in. However . . ."

"Look Lieutenant," said the Sergeant earnestly, "with all due allowances for our talents for sneakin' down back alleys, why we ain't hardly under cover, as I sees it. We didn't hardly come through the whole bloody town without anyone's noticin', Sir, and when the trouble starts . . ."

"Quite," said Downs. "Well, then," he sighed, straightening up from behind the

coiled rope, "there's nothing else for it. Do try your best to look casual, Phillips. It makes all the difference, you know."

"Yes, Sir," said the Sergeant, who had a boy about Downs' age. "Casual, Sir."

THEIR boots rang loudly on the stones as they marched stiffly across the square, echoing back from the neat houses in the vacuum of silence. Together they passed the flashing fountain, tromped up the wide steps of the Raadhuis and pushed open the protesting iron studded door. For several seconds they waited in the entrance hall, tensed for a challenge, until their eyes adjusted to the shadows.

A door on their right stood open and they stepped simultaneously inside. Across the room, silhouetted against the dying embers of the fire, a German Captain in dress uniform sat facing them with a cracked smile on his bulging face.

A thin strip of light slanting through the shutters fell on the German's tunic, gilding his Iron Cross against his gray uniform. His booted feet lolled from the edge of the grate and relaxed in the ashes beneath. The Captain sat motionless, undisturbed by the sharp click as Phillips snapped off the safety catch of his weapon. The Sergeant leveled his automatic, but Downs stopped him.

"It's all right, Phillips," he said, stepping through the shadows to the German's elbow. "The Captain is quite dead."

The Sergeant moved rapidly to the door, swung it to and shot home the heavy bolt. He loosened his chin strap, tilted back his helmet and sidled to the window to peer through the slit in the shutters.

"Any activity, Phillips?" called the lieutenant from before the fireplace, where he stood staring curiously at Hauptmann von Frolich in the dim light. The Sergeant shook his head and tiptoted over beside Downs. Both men followed the Hauptmann's stare to the mantel, where a single hand hung beside two empty hooks.

Hauptmann von Frolich's body rolled slowly forward, expelling a thin stream of dead air from his cold lungs. He made a soft whistling noise as he bowed.

"Crikey!" gasped the Sergeant, swinging his gun butt around against von Frolich's

head. It landed with a thud and knocked the Hauptmann's body to the flagstones. Phillips shot the safety on his gun and stood tensely over the German's sprawling legs.

"Just a last gasp, Phillips," explained Lieutenant Downs, reholstering his service revolver. "I expect we've had the final word from him—poor devil."

"How long has he been dead, Sir?" asked the Sergeant warily.

"Sometime last night, I should judge," said Downs, peering down at von Frolich's rigid smile. "About midnight, say."

"An extremely good guess, Lieutenant," said a voice with a thick accent. The two soldiers looked up sharply, faced a smiling, hoary headed figure in the doorway. Lieutenant Downs glanced at the silver chain of office across the old man's shoulders, then extended his hand cordially.

"Are you in authority here, Sir?" he inquired.

"It is you who are in authority, I think," smiled the old man. "However, I am the Burgomeister, yes. Are you here—" he groped for the proper English expression—"in force, Lieutenant?"

"The Regiment will be moving in soon," said Downs. "Unless they meet resistance?"

"Neen," said ten Brink. He beckoned to a priest who had appeared in the hallway.

"Fortunate," said the boy. "Oh, I'm Lieutenant Downs, Sir. And this is Sergeant Phillips. Leeds Rifles."

"I am Jonkheer ten Brink—and this is Father Vermue," said the old man. "Hauptmann von Frolich—whose acquaintance you seem to have made already—asked me to extend his apologies that he could not be here to receive you properly."

"He did his receivin' proper enough to suit me," said Phillips, running his sleeve across his forehead.

"Yes, your town has been rather full of surprises," said Downs. "We had quite expected the dike to be blown. It's been happening all down the coast, you know, Sir."

"So we imagined," nodded ten Brink.

"We have just come from the sea wall," said Father Vermue. "It is intact, *Gott sei dank!*"

"Did you manage to deactivate their

explosive, or something?" asked Downs.

"Oh, no," smiled the Burgomeister. "We had quite another job at the sea wall. We were burying a pair of hands."

"From the fireplace," said Phillips.

"Yes, from the fireplace," nodded ten Brink, walking over to the empty hooks set in the stone mantel. "Father Vermue gave them his blessing and I—as the secular arm—hurled them into the sea."

"God willing," said the Priest, missing ten Brink's sally in his zeal, "perhaps they will find peace there, finally."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Sir," said Downs. "About the dike's not being blown, I mean. Surely the Germans didn't plan to leave the town intact?"

"Not at all," said ten Brink grimly. "The Hauptmann, here was to give the order himself. At the last minute, when his troops had withdrawn, he was fortunately interrupted."

"Your underground, I imagine," said Downs, offering cigarettes.

"In a sense," smiled ten Brink. "Actually, two traitors who wished to redeem themselves." The old man walked to the window and slowly pushed out the shutters. A coffin shaped rectangle of light fell across von Frolich's body, making the Iron Cross sparkle as it hung askew on his chest. The Hauptmann was smiling, still, up into the darkened beams of the high ceilinged Raadhuis, as if he saw a familiar face among the shadows.

The click of hobnailed boots came through the window as advance parties of the Leeds Rifles moved cautiously into the streets of Katzeveere. The Burgomeister listened to the first shouts of recognition as his returning fisherfolk met the advancing British. He smiled wistfully, then turned back to the hearth where the Priest and the two soldiers stood silently over Hauptmann von Frolich.

"You will notice, Lieutenant," said ten Brink casually, "that the Herr Hauptmann has been strangled."

"Strangled indeed!" marveled Lieutenant Downs. "Why, the fingers must have snapped his spine!"

"Ya," said the Burgomeister. "The fingers of *two right hands*."