

# SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

## 23. The Fallen Walls



**MEIRING FOUCHE**

# THE FALLEN WALLS

*by*

**MEIRING FOUCHE**

and

translated, proof-read and edited by  
**PIETER HAASBROEK**

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by Meiring Fouche

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## SUMMARY

Captain D'Arlan of the French Foreign Legion intensely studies the plans for the reconstruction of Fort Laval, a strategically vital outpost in the Sahara. The fort was recently treacherously destroyed by Arabs, aided by Algerian rebels. The small garrison, including the South African Teuns Stegmann, miraculously escaped. D'Arlan is charged with the urgent task of rebuilding the fort, despite the growing unrest among the Arab population. His concern is exacerbated by the mysterious deaths of several Arab workers, apparently by poisoning, which stokes tension between the Legion and the local populace.

Teuns Stegmann plays a pivotal role in unravelling the mystery behind the deaths. He discovers that a member of the penal platoon, Rossi, poisoned the Arabs in an attempt to escape the Legion. This discovery leads to Rossi's execution, a decision D'Arlan takes with sombre reluctance. Tensions escalate as an enormous Arab army converges on the fort, spurred by rumours of the fort's destruction and fueled by a desire to finally expel the Legion. The betrayal of the penal platoon, led by the villainous Draga, and the sabotage of the radio, leave D'Arlan and his small garrison isolated and outnumbered.

Teuns's ingenuity comes to the fore when he devises a plan to send a messenger, Fonck, on a perilous mission to Dini Salam for urgent aid. Amidst the chaos and bloodshed of the Arab attacks, Teuns remains a beacon of calm and determination. He and the remaining loyal soldiers fight with unwavering courage, but their situation quickly becomes desperate. The stench of decomposing bodies and the exhaustion of battle take their toll. Will help arrive in time, or is the heroic struggle of Teuns and his comrades in vain? A shocking secret, hidden within the desert itself, may determine the fate of Fort Laval and its defenders.

## EXTRACT

As the sun neared sunset, the warlords of the Arab army watched in vain to see if an emissary was approaching from the ruins. When the sun withdrew its head, the eldest of the sheikhs said, “Very well, if they prefer it this way, we shall crush them tomorrow morning.” The order went out to the rest of the battle lines that they must be ready for an attack on the ruins tomorrow morning when day breaks.

As dusk descended, twenty of the garrison’s most reliable men appeared before D’Arlan. They were almost alone here in the ruins, for the rest of the garrison was behind the ramparts, the penal platoon men were in their tents, as were the Arab workers. With Catroux and Teuns Stegmann beside him, D’Arlan gave the twenty men detailed orders.

They waited until around ten o’clock, until complete darkness covered the desert. Then the twenty men launched a surprising diversionary attack on a specific point of the Arab circle. It was a fierce and swift assault. A barrage of hand grenades sent the desert sand leaping into the air, and deadly fire from automatic rifles tore through the Arab tents, mowing down those who sprang up in the confusion and tried to escape.

And precisely at that same moment, a rider at another spot nearby raced among the Arabs, shouting in their language that the garrison of Fort Laval was attacking. That the order had come for them to hasten to the point of the attack.

Through the confusion, a white horse raced through the night among the Arabs, for the man who had given that order was not an Arab. It was Private Fonck, attempting to break through to the open desert and to Dini Salam...

## **23. THE FALLEN WALLS**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **DEATH IN THE SUN**

Captain D'Arlan of the French Foreign Legion sat under the canvas cover at the trestle table, studying the intricate sketch plans. It was still early. The full force of the Sahara sun had not yet made itself felt, and the captain still felt eager and full of purpose. With deep concentration, he stared at the building plans spread out before him on the trestle table. They were plans for a new Fort Laval. He, D'Arlan, had been specially dispatched from Dini Salam to oversee the rebuilding of the fort.

It was an important task D'Arlan was engaged in, for Fort Laval is the southernmost outpost of the French Foreign Legion in the entire Sahara. Although small, unpleasant, and often extremely dangerous, Fort Laval must be maintained at all costs because it is situated in the middle of the access routes from Dini Salam, the garrison town of the Foreign Legion, to the Atlas Mountains where the large concentrations of Arabs are to be found.

Throughout the years, the small Fort Laval had always been the lightning rod that, in an Arab attack, always had to bear the first brunt before an assault was made on Dini Salam. The reason for this is obvious, for with its small, well-armed garrison, Fort Laval is always a thorn in the flesh for the Arabs. When they decide to launch an attack, they always realise acutely that they dare not bypass Fort Laval and simply attack Dini Salam. They know they are playing with fire if they leave Laval behind them and attack Dini Salam. The high command of the Foreign Legion knows the strategic value of Laval only too well. That is why they keep it manned year in and year out, and why they ensure that the garrison there remains armed to the teeth. The fort is built upon a small subterranean oasis. Inside the Fort, a well has been dug down to the oasis. Within the Fort, there is an underground armoury, abundantly supplied with ammunition.

But on this morning, Fort Laval lay in ruins. Through all the years, it had withstood virtually all assaults. Garrisons have been wiped out here. Many men have died on the ramparts of Laval. Many an Arab attack has been crushed here. But Fort Laval had always remained standing. Its thick stone walls and high ramparts had always remained a challenge to the Arab enemy.

Today, however, it is different. Today, Fort Laval is no longer a proud fortress. It is chaotic rubble of stone, cement, and splintered wood. To someone who does not know what happened, it would seem as if a great whirlwind came out of the desert and violently brought down this stone fortress. The ruins of this once proud little fortress are an indescribable chaos. Where the courtyard used to be, there are now only heaps of stones. Where the ramparts were, there are also only heaps, heaps of stone and broken beams and wood. The proud gateway with its heavy iron gate is no more. The iron gate is just a piece of twisted metal, and the two heavy stone pillars on either side of the gateway have been levelled with the ground.

However, it was not a hurricane that so spectacularly levelled Fort Laval with the ground. It was treachery that conquered Fort Laval and its small garrison. It was three Algerian rebels who joined the Arabs, then infiltrated the fort under false pretences and treacherously flung open the gate for the Arabs. Sergeant Catroux, who was then in command, and his small garrison of some thirty men were massacred almost to the last man by an overwhelming force of Arabs who stormed through the open gate in the night. Catroux and his small garrison fled into the underground armoury. One of the Algerian rebels, with the help of the Arabs, then blasted Fort Laval piece by piece and systematically with dynamite. They left scarcely one stone standing upon another. They buried the door of the underground armoury under tons of stone. They imagined that it was finally over for Catroux and his handful of men. But the rebel was mistaken. Especially with the help of men like Legionnaires Teuns Stegmann, the South African, Fritz Mundt, the German, and others, Catroux and his men nevertheless escaped from

the armoury.

The news that Fort Laval had been wiped out shocked the leaders of the French Foreign Legion to their core. It was decided to rebuild the fort immediately. For this purpose, supplies and workers were brought in by cargo plane. D'Arlan was appointed to command the rebuilding operations of Fort Laval.

It is for this reason that the small, sallow captain—the terror of the Sahara's Arabs, the Houdini of the desert—sits at this moment beneath the rough canvas shelter amidst the ruins of Fort Laval, examining the sketch plans for the new fort.

Construction had not yet begun. Since his arrival, D'Arlan had concentrated solely on removing the stone, uncovering the well, clearing the entire site of the fort of rubble so that it could be rebuilt. And he is not yet finished even with that. It will probably take him another week or more before the stone and rubble are cleared so that they can begin building.

D'Arlan narrows his sharp eyes against the bright glare of the rising sun. The sunlight is sharp, brilliant, and tormenting. It is as if even its glow overwhelms you. He looks discontentedly and a little anxiously at the activity there in the ruins. Matters are progressing nowhere near fast enough for his liking. He knows that little time is granted him. The Arab peoples are rebellious. They regard this as the opportune time to strike a blow for their freedom. The destruction of Fort Laval is a great encouragement to every Arab. The news of the fort's destruction has spread like wildfire from one corner of the Sahara to the other. From the Doelaks to the Berbers. From the organised Arab peoples to the nomadic creatures who roam the desert. In every Arab heart, the annihilation of this fort has created new hope, a new ideal to wipe out their arch-enemy, the French Foreign Legion. They are inspired with new vigour, with new courage, fearlessness, and blind bravery.

The command of the French Foreign Legion acted quickly after

receiving the news that Fort Laval had been levelled with the ground. But perhaps they did not act quickly enough, because Captain D'Arlan, who knows the Sahara and the Arab peoples as he knows himself, is aware of their restlessness. He can feel it in his blood. Sometimes he wakes up at night, drenched in sweat, and then it is as if he becomes aware of a new, compelling fear, a tumult of the heart, a realisation that an invisible movement is underway in the wide, godforsaken expanses of the Sahara desert. A movement of forces, a gathering. A build-up, a confluence like streams of water flowing separately and then merging, finally becoming a flood. It is as if D'Arlan sees in his mind's eye how the riders stream from the ravines of the Atlas Mountains. How other riders stream from the furthest corners of the Sahara, where hardly any white man has set foot, towards the place where they will unite their forces. He can sense how large camel troops carry their riders from the far, far south. He can feel how the destruction of Fort Laval has become a powerful bond of unity between Arabs so hostile that they would even be willing to fly at each other's throats.

These are all just feelings, impressions, vague speculations. But sitting here now, D'Arlan knows as sure as he lives that they are all true. From his broad and deep experience of conditions in the Sahara, he knows that a flood is building up, a flood that could engulf them if they do not act quickly. Every day that passes will make that flood stronger. Every hour that passes brings the moment of bloody reckoning closer.

And D'Arlan knows that he and the handful of men toiling here will be the first to stand against the colossal black horde that will be born from the Sahara desert. They will have to withstand the first furious onslaught. They will be the first to stem a black ocean that will roll across the desert towards Dini Salam. Yes, even towards Algiers itself.

D'Arlan is so concentrated on his own thoughts that he does not even notice the movement there before him. It is a man approaching him quickly and stumbling over the rubble. A rather small man like himself, a sallow man, just like himself. The figure moves with the uncertain

haste of an excited child who has suddenly discovered a great secret he has come to share. He comes stumbling and falling over the rubble, but there is so much zeal and strength in his movement that it seems to be the only thing keeping him upright.

D'Arlan only looks up from his reverie when Sergeant Catroux comes to a halt before the trestle table and salutes briskly. Sweat glistens on Catroux's face. The muscles in his jaws twitch nervously. In his eyes, there is an urgency, an excitement. And his entire posture seems strained to breaking point.

"Yes, my friend?" D'Arlan asked when he became aware of the sergeant before him.

Inwardly, D'Arlan felt slightly annoyed that Catroux was bothering him now. When he was occupied with his train of thought, the energetic French captain did not like being interrupted with all sorts of trivialities. And he was sure that what Catroux had come to tell him could not be of particular importance. Therefore, there was just a hint of unfriendliness in his voice when he posed his question to Catroux.

"Captain," said Catroux. "There is a problem."

"A problem?" D'Arlan asked quickly, for when something unusual arose, this French captain was quick as lightning.

"There is a problem among the Arabs, Captain. Two have just died, and four look as if they are not going to make it either."

D'Arlan immediately rose to his feet. "Two Arabs dead? And four sick? From what?"

"That is what I do not know, Captain," said Catroux. "And that is precisely what makes me so uneasy."

"But my dear Catroux. Arabs do not just die without cause. Are they sick then?"

"That is precisely what makes everything so mysterious, Captain,"

Catroux replied. “This morning when they reported for duty, not one was sick. Of that I am sure. But half an hour ago, the first one became ill. Then another. And now they have passed away.”

“But that is impossible, Catroux,” D’Arlan said indignantly. He swung out from behind the table and hurried over the rubble towards the workers who were busy removing stone and debris on the north side of the fortress. Catroux hopped and skipped beside D’Arlan to keep up. “This is a big problem, Catroux,” said D’Arlan. “I am precisely in such a hurry for us to start building, and if these creatures get sick now, things will go very wrong for us.”

“I am afraid so, Captain. I am just as afraid it might be an epidemic.”

“What are the symptoms?” D’Arlan asked.

“Apparently, it has something to do with the stomach, Captain. Those who are sick suddenly started groaning and moaning, clutched their stomachs, and not long after, they collapsed. Then they tremble like reeds, and not long after, they are unconscious. They are foaming at the mouth.”

D’Arlan stopped short. There was a strange glint in his eyes as he looked up at Catroux. “They foam at the mouth?” he asked.

“That is correct, Captain. They foam at the mouth.”

D’Arlan now moved faster. He swept almost like a whirlwind over the rubble and stones towards the temporary shelter the men had made from stones and old pieces of plank. Catroux had to really exert himself to keep up.

When he swung into the shelter, D’Arlan first stopped by the two Arabs who were already dead. It was just as Catroux had said. White bubbles of foam stood before their mouths. Their eyes were wide, glassy, and even in death, there was a terrified expression in them. As if these two mute creatures, just before entering eternity, had witnessed some horrific phenomenon that had frozen the terror in them so that even

death could not erase it. D'Arlan quickly turned away to the few others lying there. He looked at them only once, then he knew that their moments were also numbered. Each of them lay jerking there with convulsive spasms, and in each of their mouths, the foam was already beginning to form. They groaned and moaned from a pain that apparently tore their insides apart. A pain that made their tortured bodies jerk back and forth, made the muscles tremble, made the hands clench convulsively into fists.

D'Arlan and Catroux stood powerlessly staring at the few dying Arabs. Then D'Arlan bent down and felt one of the victims' foreheads. It was damp and cool despite the heat. Not hot and feverish. But cool, almost cold as in the case of a man who has lost nearly all his blood.

D'Arlan's heart was heavy when he finally turned away and walked out of the shelter. "Are any more of the workers affected like this?" he asked.

"Not as far as I know, Captain," said Catroux. "It is just these few. I do not know of any more cases."

"How do you explain it, Catroux?" D'Arlan asked.

"I haven't the faintest idea what it could be, Captain." D'Arlan looked away to where the men were working, and then he said, his eyes narrowed, "This does not look good, Catroux. Perhaps it is something they ate. But then surely it would not be so fatal." He sighed and slapped his hands against his sides. "Why must this happen precisely now? Now that we have to race against time and every pair of hands is worth gold to us. And why must it happen precisely among these creatures? I do not like it, Catroux. We brought three hundred Arabs here from Algiers to help with the work, and if the devil of suspicion and superstition once takes root among them, we will accomplish nothing on earth with them. You know how these people are. They did not come to help us because they love us, Catroux. They came merely for the sake of the money they can earn. And although they work so diligently here, they would still