

SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

26. Dini Salam under Siege



MEIRING FOUCHE

DINI SALAM UNDER SIEGE

by

MEIRING FOUCHE

and

translated, proof-read and edited by
PIETER HAASBROEK

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by Meiring Fouche

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SUMMARY

In the southern Sahara, at Dini Salam, the main garrison of the French Foreign Legion, chaos reigns. An oppressive multitude of Arabs and desert warriors throngs around the fortress. Legionnaires, including the South African Teuns Stegmann and the German Fritz Mundt, stand ready on the ramparts. The Doelaks and even the Berbers, traditionally hostile towards each other, join the crowd. Captain D’Arlan, an astute officer, reports the menacing situation to Colonel Le Clerq, who is uncertain and fear-stricken, especially as High Command in Algiers has ordered that the captured Emir Hussein Moellah must still be executed.

Teuns Stegmann plays a pivotal role in the drama surrounding Dini Salam. He observes how the Arab forces, led by an Algerian rebel and aided by Madame Brigitte Bonnet, the white queen of the Doelaks, are becoming increasingly organised. Teuns’s efforts to delay an execution lead to desperate negotiations with the Arabs, during which D’Arlan proposes an audacious plan. Colonel Le Clerq must offer himself as a hostage in exchange for the Emir. The situation escalates rapidly when the Emir, despite the agreement, is murdered, driving the Arabs into a frenzy.

In the face of the imminent attack and the unavoidable bloodshed, Teuns acts heroically. He attempts to buy time, but the unexpected intervention of the mysterious “Riders Without Destiny” turns the tide. These strangers, driven by an intense hatred for the Arabs, save Teuns and Le Clerq from certain death and play a decisive role in the defence of Dini Salam. But who are these enigmatic riders, where do they come from, and what deeper secrets lie concealed behind their sudden appearance in the desert?

EXTRACT

“Take cover!” screams D’Arlan. “Take cover!”

But even before the men could slide behind the parapets, several more die on their feet.

And then the Arabs do something D’Arlan has never seen them do before. The lead group leaps up, runs a short distance, and then hits the ground again. They are followed by a second phalanx, charging forward, leaping from their saddles, firing a volley, and then also running a short distance before dropping flat.

Here, from the ramparts, the rifle shots crack as the men fire. White blossoms of gunpowder smoke drift away on the gentle wind. But it is difficult. The Arabs expose themselves as little as possible. When they jump up, they run hard and drop down. Before the men can properly get them in their sights, they are already down again.

And each time they fire a volley, a few men from the garrison die here on the ramparts.

“Someone taught them to shoot,” says D’Arlan, and he knows who it is. It is that Algerian rebel who still moves before them like a flame, issuing commands, encouraging them, directing the entire battle. Wave upon wave, they advance. Around the fortress, it teems with warriors leaping up, running, and dropping flat. Leaping up, running, and dropping flat. Leaping up, running, and dropping flat. They maintain an almost uninterrupted fire. They are so well-drilled that when one wave leaps up and runs, the wave behind them sustains a murderous fire on the ramparts.

26. DINI SALAM UNDER SIEGE

Chapter 1

THREATENING THRONG

In the town of Dini Salam in the southern Sahara, home to the main garrison of the French Foreign Legion in these parts, chaos and tension reign. The place is inundated by an oppressive, shifting, clamouring multitude, as if the entire population of the Sahara had been swept together here by a strong wind.

On the ramparts of the fortress, the main stronghold in this part of the desert, the legionnaires stand shoulder to shoulder. The neck-flaps of their kepis flutter gently in the wind, their rifles ready in their hands, their bayonets gleaming.

These men stand staring down at the most remarkable scene they have ever witnessed. Right up to the walls of the fortress surges the Arab multitude, shouting and pressing, fists waving in the air, and amongst them move the desert warriors with their horses, their curved sabres flashing in the bright sun.

And far behind the frenzied throng around the fortress, across the open desert, they still keep coming, in streaks, in clusters, or in long phalanxes, small as ants crawling purposefully and lethally across the sand. The crowd swells ever larger, growing wider and denser around the fortress, and each time, hatred erupts from a thousand throats.

Behind the Legionnaires on the ramparts, officers move back and forth to ensure no mistake is made. In the courtyard, directly before the great gate which is securely shut with its heavy barred gates, two machine guns are positioned, their short muzzles gleaming ominously in the sun. Behind the men on the ramparts stand chests of hand grenades here and there.

There is hardly a Legionnaire who does not feel copious sweat in his

eyes, or the cold sensation down his spine. There is not a finger that does not lie trembling on the trigger. Like a living wall, they stand there, waiting for the one spark that might ignite the powder keg, that one small event that might drive this crowd of Arabs to ultimate hysteria, when they will swarm up the stone walls of the fortress like animals. It is not the first time these Legionnaires have witnessed such a multitude, although it has never been this large.

Time and again they have stood thus on the ramparts before the attack came. They know the death-defying nature of these people. They know that when the command comes, these Arabs will scramble up the walls. They will shoot the creatures down from above in their hundreds, perhaps in their thousands, but there will always be others coming until the fortress is overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

And if Dini Salam falls, then the road lies open to Algiers, to the coast. Then the road lies open to the defeat of the entire French Legion.

Here, near one corner of the rampart, on the south-eastern side, stands a tall legionnaire, just as ready as all the others. He is a tall, blond man with clear blue eyes, broad shoulders, and the physique of an athlete. His name is Teuns Stegmann, and he is the only South African in the French Foreign Legion. Beside him stands a giant of a man with a bull neck, a fierce blockhead, and a rather reddish complexion. His name is Fritz Mundt, a German and a man with the reputation of being the strongest man in the entire Legion.

“Have you ever seen them like this, mon ami?” Fritz Mundt asks Teuns.

“Never before,” admits the South African. “Just like this, I have never seen them. Look how they are coming. It looks as if they are being blown here by a wind.”

Together they look out over the bare desert, which seems to have suddenly come alive as the Arabs continue to approach. From east and west. From south and north they come. The two fall silent for a moment, staring at the overwhelming scene before them. And when Teuns

Stegmann speaks again, his voice is hoarse and low. “You see, of course, what happened last night, Fritz,” he says.

“What do you mean?” asks the big German, for he is someone who does not grasp things quickly.

“The Doelak army also arrived last night,” says the South African. “There lies their camp to the south-west.”

“Yes, indeed,” answers Fritz. “I tell you, if the Doelaks decide to fight alongside other Arabs, then things look ugly.

How many do you estimate are here now?” he asks.

Teuns surveys the crowd with his eyes, and for a moment the cheering fades from his ears, the shouting, the taunting.

“I tell you,” he finally addresses the German, “there are no fewer than thirty thousand here.”

“Yes, I estimate the same,” agrees Fritz. “Thirty thousand. We don’t stand a chance, mon ami.”

“No, we don’t stand a chance,” confirms Teuns. “If they want to overwhelm us this time, they will overwhelm us. That’s as plain as day. I just hope Colonel Le Clerq doesn’t make a mistake this time.”

“I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes,” says Fritz.

“Even less so I. If he does the wrong thing this time, then we’re done for, this fortress and all, and then the fat’s in the fire in the Sahara.”

Suddenly, the South African’s eye catches something towards the south-west. His left hand flies out and grips Fritz’s arm. “Look there!” he says.

Fritz gasps for breath as he looks in the direction the South African indicated. There, it looks as if someone has kicked open an anthill. Over the farthest ripple of dunes, a solid mass of Arabs is now approaching. They are not advancing one by one or two by two, not in clumps. They

move in a solid mass that seems to make the horizon bend. Their curved sabres glint like white pinpoints of fire, and from the way they advance, Teuns instantly knows who they are.

“The Berbers!” he exclaims, almost breathless with astonishment.

“The Berbers!” the word echoes from Fritz’s mouth. “Even the Berbers. But they have always been reasonably well-disposed towards us.”

“I know,” answers Teuns, “but on this day, even the Berbers come to fight.”

Fritz wipes the sweat from his eyes. “This is ugly,” he says, as if it still needed saying. With a sense of dismay, not only these two Legionnaires, but also the others witnessing this new phenomenon, realise that surely in many, many years there has never been so much deadly unanimity among the Arabs as on this day, when even the Berbers, the traditional enemies of the Doelaks, are prepared to fight shoulder to shoulder with them.

Teuns Stegmann and Fritz Mundt turn halfway, looking over their shoulders as they hear the voice behind them. “There come the Berbers, mes amis.”

It is the voice of one of the most famous and reckless fighters of the Sahara desert. It is the small, almost childlike voice of Captain D’Arlan, a slender, sallow little man who has the reputation of being one of the most ruthless and one of the most cunning commanders in the entire Sahara.

“Yes, there come the Berbers, mon Capitaine,” says Teuns Stegmann.

“Good heavens,” D’Arlan lets out, “but the entire Sahara is in revolt. Berbers, Doelaks, Touaregs, everything that lives and breathes, is converging on Dini Salam. I must quickly go and give the colonel the news.”

D’Arlan’s boots clatter quickly on the planks of the rampart as he

hurries to the stairs leading down to the courtyard. He jogs across the courtyard to the office of Colonel Le Clerq, the greyish, nervous commander of the Dini Salam garrison.

As D'Arlan enters, Le Clerq turns from the window. His eyes are bloodshot and his face reddish and shiny from all the cognac he has knocked back since this new crisis befell him.

“What ill tidings do you bring now, Capitaine?” Le Clerq asks cynically.

D'Arlan salutes quickly and enters the room further. “It is the Berbers, mon Colonel,” says D'Arlan. “The Berbers are also coming.”

“The Berbers?” Le Clerq asks loudly, moving quickly to his desk. “Are you telling me the Berbers are coming too?”

“It is so, mon Colonel. We just spotted them for the first time. They are approaching from the south-west.”

“How many?”

“It is very difficult to say, mon Colonel. They are still far off, but to me, it looks like a large army.”

Le Clerq sinks onto his chair as if lifeless, yanks open the top drawer, snatches out his bottle of cognac and takes several deep draughts straight from the bottle. This is what Le Clerq always does when difficulties become too much for him. He slams the drawer shut quickly and bangs his fist on the desk. “In God’s name, D'Arlan,” he bursts out, “what are we going to do? The entire Sahara is in revolt. What are we going to do, I ask you. If even the Berbers march against us, then I cannot think of a tribe that is not yet in revolt. I tell you, we will not be able to withstand them!”

D'Arlan thinks of the scene he has just witnessed outside in the sun, a terrifying scene of thousands of Arabs milling around the fortress and of the multitude still arriving across the sand.

D'Arlan sits down nervously, and it is not characteristic of D'Arlan to be nervous. His hands tremble slightly on the table as he lays down his officer's baton.

"I ask you, D'Arlan, what are we going to do?" Le Clerq's voice is sharp, almost desperate.

But D'Arlan, who is not only a brilliant fighter but also a shrewd diplomat, does not answer his chief's question. Instead of answering it, he poses a counter-question.

"Have you not yet received an answer from Algiers?" he asks.

Le Clerq shakes his head vehemently and slaps his kepi down on the desk. "No," he answers, "I have not yet received their answer. You know how it is with them. When one expects an answer most urgently, they dither and delay for days, and I am sure, D'Arlan, when we get the answer from High Command, it will be the wrong answer. If only we had never captured this old curse of an Arab."

D'Arlan looks into Colonel Le Clerq's eyes and is certain he detected a moment of fear there. Fear and uncertainty. Two of the most fatal characteristics in this critical situation they are now in.

"We must simply remain calm, mon Colonel," the captain advises.

"Remain calm?" asks Le Clerq, his voice loud and wavering. "Remain calm in this state? Remain calm when an unstoppable flood is about to engulf us?" He suddenly leans forward over his desk. His eyes gleam with earnestness. "Do you think for one moment, D'Arlan, that this garrison of Dini Salam will be able to hold back these Arab masses when they decide to attack? Do you think so? If you think so, tell me, then perhaps you will also calm my mind."

D'Arlan knows an impossible question has been posed to him. In his heart, he knows they cannot withstand the ever-growing masses converging on them from all directions. On the other hand, he does not want to give Le Clerq the impression that he too believes their defeat is

predestined.

Therefore, D'Arlan speaks softly, encouragingly, and tactfully. "Mon Colonel," he says, "surely this is not the first crisis in which we two have found ourselves together. And every time in the past, there has been a way out for us somehow."

"That is all well and good," answers Le Clerq, "but I cannot recall ever being in such a crisis as this. I know you wish to encourage me, D'Arlan, but we might as well face the facts. If High Command gives us the wrong instruction, I tell you, we will all be wiped out here in Dini Salam."

"Is it not better, mon Colonel," answers D'Arlan, "to wait until we receive the order from Algiers?"

"I cannot understand why they haven't answered yet. Just an hour ago, I asked again via radio for their decision," answers Le Clerq. "General Gerhard has been back from here for over a week now, after the court-martial sat, and still we have no answer. This morning, I tried to impress upon them that the crisis here is becoming more dangerous for us every hour and that they must send their order through as soon as possible. If only I knew what to do with this wretched old Arab, then the position would also be much easier. It is this uncertainty that is driving me mad. At the court-martial here, Gerhard got all the facts. He just had to present them to High Command, and they merely need to decide based on that. Why are they taking so long?"

"It is not an easy decision to make, mon Colonel," says D'Arlan. "You know that well."

"Yes, yes, I know that. But they don't need to brood on it for a whole week while our position becomes ever more dangerous."

Driven by anxiety and unease, Le Clerq suddenly stands up. "Are we prepared down to the finest detail, D'Arlan?" he asks, wiping the sweat from his forehead once more.