

# SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

## 35. Aber-el-Mir's Secret



**MEIRING FOUCHE**

# HABER-EL-MIR'S SECRET

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## **ABER-EL-MIR'S SECRET**

by Meiring Fouche

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## SUMMARY

The French Air Force discovers an inexplicable phenomenon in the Sahara. At Aber-el-Mir, a remote location near the Atlas Mountains, 280 soldiers of the Foreign Legion have vanished without a trace. Colonel Duval immediately summons Captain D'Arlan to Algiers to investigate the enigma. D'Arlan, renowned as the "Houdini of the Sahara" for his exceptional resourcefulness and ingenuity, is asked to undertake this perilous mission voluntarily. The stakes are high, and the prestige of the Foreign Legion hangs in the balance. The fate of the missing soldiers is uncertain, as there is no sign of a struggle or any other clear indication of what befell them.

Teuns Stegmann, a courageous South African and an outstanding soldier in the Legion, plays a significant role in the events. He supports D'Arlan alongside five other loyal men. Fritz Mundt, Podolski, Ritchie, Petacci, and Van Leeuwen. As D'Arlan attempts to unravel the truth from the silent Sahara, he uncovers certain clues that lead him and his team down a treacherous path. But the peace is deceptive, and there looms a constant threat of danger and betrayal.

Through ingenuity and bravery, Teuns and D'Arlan navigate a web of enigmas. They investigate the deserted camp and discover that the men did not simply desert. Soon, changing circumstances compel them to consider their own safety. Teuns finds crucial clues, from horse dung in the desert to a mysterious message on a French flag. Ultimately, he is forced to execute a dangerous plan to save D'Arlan from certain death, a plan that could unveil the deepest secrets of the Sahara. What truth will D'Arlan and Teuns uncover when they finally confront the inexplicable forces lurking behind the disappearance of the men of Aber-el-Mir?

## EXTRACT

When Akbar Moellah turned around, the first thing he saw was a tall Arab with dark glasses over his eyes.

Then he saw the round muzzle of a revolver. And then he heard the voice again. "Make a sound, Moellah, and you die. I am not an Arab. I am the missing legionnaire. Come with me." Moellah saw the long finger beckoning him. He was over his initial shock. It became a joke to him. He lifted his portly body from the cushions and walked towards Teuns with a smile on his face.

"Are you taking me on an interesting journey, Legionnaire?" asked Moellah.

Teuns gestured for him to hurry. He lifted the tent flap and slid underneath with Moellah. And when they stood behind the tent, Moellah said, "Are you out of your mind, Legionnaire? There are numerous guards at this tent. Do you want..."

But Moellah did not finish his question, for like lightning, Teuns struck him across the throat with the edge of his hand, and even before Moellah could fall, the tall South African grabbed him, slung him over his shoulder, and as two guards walked back around the tent from the front where they had turned, all was silent.

Teuns had slipped behind a tree with his heavy burden. Then he chose the darkness and vanished.

## **35. ABER-EL-MIR'S SECRET**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **THEY HAD VANISHED**

Through the dry, hot air of the Sahara, not far from the Atlas Mountains, the reconnaissance aircraft of the French Air Force banked low for the fourth time over the same spot and came storming across the sand. The pilot leaned sideways as he looked out. There was a deep frown between his eyes. What he saw there, he could not believe. It was the most remarkable scene he had encountered in his entire career.

As he soared back into the air, doubt assailed him. Should he dive one more time and see what was happening? But he decided against it. He realized now that it was needless. What there was to see, he had seen, and he did not like it. It was such an extraordinary scene that he wondered if they would believe him in Algiers.

Like a gleaming bird, the jet climbed into the empty blue space and then sped straight towards Algiers.

The young pilot landed there, hastened to the headquarters of the French Foreign Legion, and was immediately admitted to the office of Colonel Jean Duval, head of the secret service of the Foreign Legion.

The airman entered the impressive office, saluted stiffly, and clicked his heels just before Colonel Duval's desk.

“What did you see?” asked the greying colonel. “Tell me in full detail.”

The pilot recounted everything he had seen, down to the finest particulars. He related that he had circled four, five times over the place where Duval had sent him.

As the story unfolded, tension mounted in Colonel Jean Duval. His hands rested still on the desk, and just a hint of perspiration appeared on his forehead. Perspiration not merely from the heat, but born of

shock and astonishment. His tanned face had paled slightly, his eyes fixed in bewilderment.

“I thank you, mon ami,” said the colonel after the pilot had reported fully on what he had witnessed in that remote corner of the Sahara desert.

“That will be all,” said Colonel Jean Duval. And scarcely had the pilot saluted again, turned on his heel, and walked out, when Duval summoned his ordnance.

“Tell the Marconi operators to come here immediately. I have an urgent message,” Duval commanded.

Moments later, he dictated the following radio message to the Marconi operator of the headquarters.

To Le Clerq, Commander, Dini Salam, urgent meeting requested with D’Arlan. Send aircraft to Dini Salam today. Urgent. Duval, Colonel.

“Make it a priority message,” Duval told the Marconi operator, who hurried off with it to the radio room.

Then Duval leaned back for a moment in his swivel chair, turning thoughtfully, wiped the sweat from the corners of his eyes, and then stood up and walked slowly to the large wall map of the southwestern Sahara and the Atlas Mountains region.

He looked at a small spot on the map, looked at it long and pensively. Then he shook his head slowly like a man who sees something but cannot understand it.

“It is absolutely impossible,” Colonel Duval said to himself. Then he walked back to his desk, picked up his cap and his officer’s staff, and hurried to the office of the commander of the French Foreign Legion to report on one of the strangest events he had dealt with in his long military career.

And there in Dini Salam, the southernmost outpost of the Foreign

Legion, Colonel Le Clerq summoned Captain D’Arlan and handed him the urgent message from Duval.

“What could be going on now?” asked D’Arlan.

“Heaven knows,” answered Le Clerq. “It must be something significant, mon ami, otherwise they wouldn’t have summoned you so urgently.”

“But why me, specifically?” D’Arlan asked modestly.

Le Clerq looked at him askance. “You ought to know why they’re calling for you, mon Capitaine. You are, after all, the most capable captain in the Sahara. You are the cleverest, you have the most experience, you are the most resourceful, and you are the bravest. Is it for nothing, then, that you are known as the Houdini of the Sahara?”

Le Clerq said this slightly mockingly, yet also with seriousness, because it was entirely true.

“Thank you for all the compliments, mon Colonel,” said D’Arlan, and if he hadn’t been such a hardened warrior, a blush would surely have appeared on his tanned face. “Have you no idea what it could be?” asked D’Arlan.

“Not the faintest notion,” replied Le Clerq. “But as I said, it must be something major and important, otherwise Duval wouldn’t send a plane to fetch you.”

“I wonder,” said D’Arlan thoughtfully, “if there’s trouble brewing among the Arabs again.”

“I can scarcely believe that,” said Le Clerq. “According to the latest reports from our patrols, the Arabs seem as peaceful as can be. But there must be a snake in the grass again, otherwise we wouldn’t have received this emergency call from Duval. In any case, mon ami, go polish your boots, shine your buckles, and get your hair cut, because they will surely send a fast aircraft and there isn’t much time for you. Go get ready,



Capitaine, and let me know as soon as you've heard what's going on. I am positively burning with curiosity. I wonder... I wonder what secret the Sahara is about to reveal to us this time, D'Arlan. And I just hope Duval isn't sending you on an impossible mission."

"We shall see, mon Colonel," said D'Arlan, inwardly trembling with excitement. He too realized that something very extraordinary must be afoot, for the high command in Algiers does not lightly send an aircraft to fetch a captain from down here in the Sahara.

D'Arlan saluted and walked to the door. There, Le Clerq's jesting voice brought him to a halt. "Perhaps," said Le Clerq, "they are summoning you to give you a higher rank. Who knows, mon ami, maybe they want to make you a colonel!"

D'Arlan smiled, his demure, handsome dark face crinkling with it. His deep blue eyes twinkled for a moment. "There's no danger of that, mon Colonel," said D'Arlan. "We already have far too many colonels in the Sahara."

Le Clerq burst into hearty laughter, knowing that this barb from the excellent and agreeable D'Arlan was actually aimed at him.

That very evening, shortly before sunset, D'Arlan landed in the jet aircraft in Algiers. A special fast plane had come to fetch him from Dini Salam. The pilot had not even disembarked. D'Arlan had simply climbed in. They took off immediately, and D'Arlan had a peculiar feeling as they shot away over the old desert fortress, looking down at the familiar square, at the flag of France swaying slowly on the flagpole, at the guards on the ramparts, and at the curious legionnaires gathered in the square.

When the aircraft touched down, and as D'Arlan stepped out, a lieutenant was there to collect him. They departed immediately by car for the headquarters, and when they arrived at the office in the headquarters building, the lights were already burning. D'Arlan was immediately taken inside, and as he appeared on the threshold, he

gasped for breath. Rarely had he seen so many officers of the French Foreign Legion together. So many top brass.

He entered the room and just inside the door, he snapped stiffly to attention and saluted the small, dark, intense man sitting behind the large desk.

“Entrez, D’Arlan,” said the small dark man, who was clearly a senior general. D’Arlan was introduced to only two individuals. The man behind the desk, General Raval, commander-in-chief of the French Foreign Legion, and the large, broad-shouldered, fair man, Colonel Duval, head of the secret service of the French Foreign Legion. It struck D’Arlan how similar the two men’s names were, Raval and Duval, and yet they were as different as two people could be. Raval’s dark eyes glittered intensely, but Duval looked calm and self-assured.

“Sit down, D’Arlan,” invited Raval with a slight wave of the hand. D’Arlan sat, and Colonel Duval took a seat beside him. The other few officers remained in the background.

“Captain D’Arlan,” said Raval, looking piercingly at the captain, “I have summoned you here because something exceptionally remarkable has occurred, something we cannot decipher or comprehend at all. Come look here, Capitaine.”

Raval, Duval, and D’Arlan moved to the wall map. With his slender index finger, General Raval indicated a spot on the map. A place named Aber-el-Mir.

“Have you heard of this place, mon Capitaine?” asked Raval.

“I cannot say that I have heard of it, General,” answered D’Arlan.

Raval smiled dryly. “I don’t blame you, mon ami,” he said more cordially. “I myself had never heard of it in my life.” He snatched a pencil and almost fiercely drew a large black circle around the spot named Aber-el-Mir.

“This place has suddenly gained significance for us, mon Capitaine,” said Raval. “A very ominous and inexplicable significance. You see, mon Capitaine, two hundred and eighty men of the French Foreign Legion have just vanished without a trace at Aber-el-Mir!”

“Vanished?” echoed the word from D’Arlan, and he felt his heart lurch within him.

“Precisely, mon Capitaine. Vanished. Two hundred and eighty men, clean gone, without a trace, without a whisper ever heard from them again. Evaporated, disappeared into thin air like mist before the sun.”

Raval made the announcement with peculiar emphasis on his words. “It is a fantasy, mon Capitaine,” he said. “Quite possibly a bloody fantasy. Of these two hundred and eighty men, we receive no word nor tidings. It is as if they have been wiped from the face of the earth.”

Raval looked once more at Aber-el-Mir. Then he turned almost irritably, hurried back to his chair. D’Arlan and Duval followed him, and after they had sat down, Raval said to Duval, “You tell the story of Aber-el-Mir, mon Colonel.”

Colonel Duval got straight to the point. “Mon Capitaine,” he said to D’Arlan, “in the vicinity of Aber-el-Mir, there have recently been two hundred and eighty men of the French Foreign Legion under a Captain Schwemmer. These are men from the penal battalion. They were busy constructing a road southwards, before the Atlas Mountains. It is a strategic road connected to our oil resources in the Sahara.

“We did not maintain very regular contact with Schwemmer, but when we tried to reach the column by radio the day before yesterday, we received no answer. It struck us as somewhat unusual that they had not contacted us. We tried repeatedly to establish radio contact, but in vain. Early this morning, I asked a reconnaissance pilot from the French Air Force to investigate. He returned with a strange story. There is not a trace or a sign of a single man from that column.”

D'Arlan felt as if his head was swelling. Two hundred and eighty men! Two hundred and eighty men do not simply vanish without a trace in the expanses of the Sahara.

“Could it be that they deserted, mon Colonel?” asked D'Arlan.

“That is scarcely possible,” answered Duval. “We cannot assume that. These men are indeed criminals held in the penal battalion, but they are under strict discipline, and there are quite a number of officers. If they had deserted, we would have found out somehow by now. That area is almost completely waterless. The distance from Aber-el-Mir to the nearest oasis is so great that men on foot are very unlikely to make it through. They naturally have water supplies in their camp, but these are strictly guarded day and night.”

General Raval's voice cut sharply through the silence. “No, D'Arlan,” he said. “I think you can put the idea of them deserting out of your mind. Something else happened, of that I am convinced.”

“Is there perhaps something else you can suggest, Captain D'Arlan?” asked Duval.

“If they did not desert, mon Colonel,” said D'Arlan, “then there can be only one other explanation, Arabs.”

“But there is no sign of a struggle,” said Duval. “The pilot informs me that he did not see a single body. There is no sign of a fight. The men simply vanished. Disappeared without a trace. If there had been a battle, if they had clashed with the Arabs, surely there would have been bodies. I am certain that at least a horse or two would be lying dead. But there is nothing. The camp stands just as it stood. Nothing appears to have been disturbed.”

“Then I cannot explain it, mon Colonel,” said D'Arlan.

General Raval, who had been leaning back all along, his penetrating eyes fixed on D'Arlan, suddenly sat upright and then leaned forward on the desk.