

SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

39. The Goras Bloodbath



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THE GORAS BLOODBATH

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SUMMARY

Teuns Stegmann, a tall, blond Afrikaner, and his comrades in the Foreign Legion find their routine desert patrol interrupted by a strange discovery. Vultures circle above a lone, fleeing figure. This figure turns out to be an Arab shepherd, dying from a gunshot wound. His final murmured word is “Goras.” This single word sends Teuns and his men on a perilous journey to a remote oasis. The path leads them to a scene of horrific slaughter and inexplicable secrets. The oasis, Goras, lies in total ruin. Only vultures and the ravaged remains of an obliterated community are visible. A young survivor, Kemal, claims that Arabs are responsible for the massacre, but the evidence speaks of a more sinister plot.

The mystery deepens when they stumble upon a fresh grave, where they discover the body of a white man clad in Arab attire. Teuns Stegmann, now aware of the escalating danger, decides to return immediately to Fort Tetain, but their retreat is intercepted by a skirmish with a group of horsemen. Their commander, Igor Berthold, leads a secret military commando and reveals that he is responsible for the massacre at Goras. However, Teuns and his men are not easy prey. With skill and courage, they succeed in capturing Berthold and entrenching themselves in a sand depression, surrounded by a superior enemy force.

As they attempt to escape their predicament, Teuns realizes that Berthold has a plan that will expose Fort Tetain to grave danger. With their backs against the wall, Teuns must execute several dangerous plans and strategies to thwart Berthold’s ruthless schemes. Will Teuns Stegmann succeed in saving his comrades and protecting Fort Tetain, or does an even darker truth lie hidden, a secret stretching beyond the sands of the Sahara itself?

EXTRACT

Teuns lunges at the man. He grabs him by the chest and tears at his robe. The man staggers back, bewildered, treading on Fritz's feet.

The other men cannot help but turn and watch the scene unfolding here in the sand depression. What they witness fills them with astonishment and wonder.

It is Teuns who voices the thoughts of them all.

“You are remarkably fair for an Arab?” he says to the stranger. “And this is the first time I've seen a sailing ship tattooed on the chest of an Arab sheikh. The charade is over. Who are you? Speak.” Teuns has drawn a bayonet and presses it firmly against the man's chest. “You will deceive us no longer. You are our prisoner.”

The tall, dark man's eyes narrow. His jaw is clenched. He realizes that further theatrics are futile. He has been exposed, and there is nothing more to be done. But he feels no fear. He may be their prisoner at the moment, but they are merely five. Therefore, he has nothing to fear. He can speak, and he can speak plainly. He possesses a weapon they do not. A weapon against which they will be defenceless.

Teuns presses the bayonet harder against the man's chest, but with a large hand, the stranger slaps it away.

“Put that bayonet in your pocket, friend,” he says. And this time, he speaks fluent French. “You are very eager to know who I am. Now, I shall tell you.”

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Chapter 1

The rather short, speckled snake is so enraged that it stands half-erect in the sand, striking blindly left and right. It is a Sahara adder, and it is lethally venomous. It doesn't know itself what is happening to it, for it is encircled. Now a heavy boot is thrust towards it, now a hand is held tauntingly a short distance before it. It strikes furiously at them. Occasionally, its sharp fangs strike with a snap against the thick sole of a boot, but these hands it can never reach. Just as it strikes, they are swiftly snatched away.

The Sahara adder does not realize that a patrol of the French Foreign Legion, having marched through the desert for eight days, has finally grown bored and seeks amusement in this manner during a trek that has truly yielded nothing thus far. A trek on which the men have barely seen a vulture. Furthermore, they have encountered no other living creature.

They now find themselves high on the crest of a dune from where they survey the world. It is here they discovered the Sahara adder half-buried beneath the sand. It had struck at one of the men at the very last moment, and therefore they decided to have a little sport with this inhabitant of the desolate wasteland.

The most daring one in this game with the adder is Private Petacci, the Italian in the French Foreign Legion. He is as nimble as the day is long, and occasionally he ventures to bring his hand dangerously close to the enraged snake. When the adder strikes, it strikes empty air.

“You might as well let it bite you, Petacci,” says the big German, Fritz Mundt. “Nothing will happen to you, but I'm sure the adder will peg out.”

Petacci pays him no heed. And Jack Ritchie, the Englishman, once again thrusts his boot towards the snake. And so it continues. A few men around a furious Sahara adder.

Only one of the small group does not participate in this dangerous sport. He sits a few paces from the others, binoculars pressed to his eyes. He is a large, strong man with blond hair and piercing blue eyes. He has broad shoulders, strong legs, and his entire appearance is that of a reckless leader. He pays no attention whatsoever to the antics with the snake. He simply surveys the Sahara through his binoculars. The Sahara here is savage. It is just a chaotic tumble of immense sand dunes with ravines, heights, and depths almost like mountains. A dangerous part of the Sahara, this. Perhaps that is precisely why they were sent here. The five of them. Teuns Stegmann, the South African in the Foreign Legion and the man currently sitting and observing through the binoculars. Then the rest, Fritz Mundt, Petacci. Ritchie, and the Pole, Podolski. The five of them do everything together. The command at Fort Tetain knows this too. That is why they were sent out as a team on this patrol. That is why they were sent to this dangerous region. They know the Sahara and its dangers like the back of their hands. They have much experience, and they have often seen death stalking through the Sahara.

This is again the season for patrols, for the high command of the Foreign Legion expects eruptions to occur somewhere. The whole of Algeria is in turmoil due to the actions of the Secret Army Organisation, which is fighting tooth and nail against the independence to be granted to Algeria. These few men have heard of the bloodshed underway in Algiers, where the Secret Army Organisation wages a reckless guerilla war against the Mohammedans. There is fear that the large Arab tribes in the interior might rise in revolt and possibly launch a full-scale campaign against the remote forts of the French Foreign Legion. And heaven knows, Fort Tetain is one of the most remote. It lies far in the southwestern part of Algeria, in the perilous heart of the Sahara. It is cut off from everything and everyone. No one knows precisely why they built a fort there where Tetain stands. Perhaps it is because some clever individual discovered there was water. Perhaps it is because the place is so well situated in a round depression in the Sahara.

Teuns Stegmann, the South African, no longer moves his binoculars.

He has already surveyed the entire horizon in the distance before them, but now he gazes at just one spot. He looks at a spot almost directly to the south...

Fritz Mundt, the bull-necked German, the man regarded as the strongest fellow in the entire Foreign Legion, has tired of the game with the Sahara adder. Therefore, he ambles over to Teuns. He sits down flat in the sand beside the South African. There is a special bond between Fritz and Teuns. They are close comrades. The two of them, probably more than any other two men in the Foreign Legion, have endured the deadliest dangers together.

Fritz lets out a long yawn. Then he stretches himself out on the sand. He closes his eyes against the harsh sunlight.

“What are you still looking at?” he asks Teuns. “There’s nothing to see, surely.” This must be the most uninteresting patrol I’ve ever participated in. It seems to me the entire Sahara is dead. One doesn’t even see a sand rat move. It seems even the vultures have died out here.”

“Take a look here,” says Teuns. Fritz slowly sits up, rubs his eyes, and takes the binoculars from Teuns.

“What should I look at?” asks the German.

Teuns Stegmann extends his long arm and indicates a spot southwards with his index finger. “Look there,” he says, “and tell me what you make of it.”

The German raises the binoculars to his eyes. He searches briefly, and then he sees it. Then he knows that the vultures of the Sahara have not died out. What he sees are vultures in motion. They move apparently low over the sand. They wheel and climb and descend, and some even land on the sand. Then fly up again and circle once more.

“Do you see it?” asks Teuns.

“I see it, mon ami.”

“What do you make of it?” asks Teuns.

“Well, I don’t know,” answers Fritz. “It looks as though those vultures are after something. But, if I had to guess, their prey is still alive. They’re following it until it drops.”

“That’s exactly it,” answers Teuns. “Vultures acting like that are waiting for their prey to lie still.”

“And the prey?” asks Fritz. “What do you think the prey is?”

“I wish I knew,” answers the South African. “Yes, I wish I knew.” He takes the binoculars from Fritz, brings them to his eyes, and looks again. But the circling vultures have now disappeared down the slope of a dune, and apparently they have now reached one of the deep hollows one so often finds hereabouts in the Sahara. A deep, round hollow between the dunes.

“Shall we go take a look?” asks Fritz.

“We most certainly shall,” answers Teuns, immediately standing up. As acting sergeant, he is the leader of this patrol.

He walks over to the other pair still amusing themselves with the sand adder.

“Alright then,” says Teuns. “The fair’s over. Kill the snake, Petacci. We need to move out.”

“Move out?” asks Podolski. “Move out where? Still further south?”

“There’s something on the dunes ahead of us,” answers Teuns.

“Aha,” says Ritchie. “Finally, a bit of excitement. Arabs?”

“No, not Arabs,” answers Teuns. “I don’t know what it is. The vultures are driving something, or someone.”

“How interesting,” says Petacci as he gives the sand adder a hefty kick with his boot. “Perhaps it’s a lost Arabian beauty with blue-black hair

and jet-black eyes and a veil over her lips. A beauty with tanned hips and the most exquisite legs in a translucent, gossamer silk skirt. How does that appeal to you, Ritchie?”

“Stop talking about women and stomp the adder dead,” Ritchie warns Petacci.

“Come on, Petacci,” warns Teuns. “I don’t want to be saddled with a man bitten by a sand adder. Kill the snake.”

Petacci turns away, fetches a bayonet, comes back, rakes at the snake, and when the reptile lifts its head again, Petacci slices the head clean off with the bayonet.

And a few moments later, they slide down the slope of a dune, pass through a deep hollow, climb out on the other side, and move slowly in the direction where the vultures were last seen.

The silence in the Sahara is peculiar. It is so intense. Everything is so motionless. Not even a shadow moves, except their own. The men have also fallen silent. They have learned that when the Sahara is at its quietest, it can sometimes be at its most dangerous. Each is occupied with his own thoughts. There could be many reasons why the vultures are moving like that. Perhaps it’s a colony of desert rats. Perhaps a stray goat, which one sometimes finds here. Or perhaps some injured bird fighting for its life against the birds of prey.

Thus they try to dismiss it. But they know that this is likely not the case. If it is an injured bird of prey, the vultures will attack it. If it is a colony of desert rats, they will attack them. If it is an injured or starving goat, they will descend upon it.

No, it is probably, very probably, a human being.

While walking, Teuns Stegmann consults the map he carries. In this part of the Sahara, a man must be very careful what he does. Even a man with intimate experience of this impossible terrain can sometimes get lost here, ending up nowhere. That is why a map is so essential.

Teuns knows they must be in the vicinity of an oasis named Goras. While walking, he determines their position and calculates that they cannot be more than about a day's march from the oasis. Perhaps a little more. A day and a half, or two days.

Goras is inhabited by a relatively peace-loving and tranquil little Arab tribe under Sheikh Abker. Teuns knows all this, for all this was communicated to him by the commander of Fort Tetain.

Teuns must also consult the map as they are relatively unfamiliar with this part of the Sahara. It is the first time in many years that the five comrades have been transferred to Fort Tetain. Usually, they are stationed at Fort Laval or at the southern main base of the Foreign Legion, Dini Salam. But this time, for some reason or other, they have been sent to Fort Tetain.

For them, it is an interesting experience, if wanderings in the Sahara can be considered interesting. They enjoy moving through unfamiliar areas to gain new experience and knowledge.

Up dune and down dune they go. And after they have been trekking for almost an hour, they see the vultures again. They see them wheeling up out of one of the deep depressions of the Sahara. They are just behind the next dune.

An urge comes over Teuns Stegmann to hurry. They slide and scramble down the high dune, clamber quickly up the next one, and arrive breathless on the crest of the high dune.

They look down into one of the typical deep dips between two dunes.

Their eyes narrow. They stand stock-still, and then Teuns starts running down the dune. With his long legs, he bounds down over ridges here and there. The others follow him too. They see that their presence is urgently needed.

Down there in the dune lies a person. That person is being taunted by the vultures circling low around him, then shooting upwards, then

diving down again. It is as vultures do. When they see their victim is near death, they become ever bolder with their attacks and feints, thus forcing such a victim to use his last strength to try and fend them off. That is what is happening here. The poor figure down there swings his arms each time to keep the rapacious birds away.

While still running down the dune, Teuns tries to determine who and what it is fighting so helplessly against the hideous monsters of the sky. It looks to him like an Arab, but he cannot be very sure.

Teuns and his men come storming in amongst the circling vultures, shouting at them, swinging their rifles, and thus driving them away. The birds are so bold that they only give way a short distance and settle on the sand. It seems they are firmly convinced that this victim will ultimately belong to them.

Teuns drops to his knees beside the still figure, and then sees that it is indeed an Arab. An Arab man.

He sees something else. The man looks like a shepherd. And he is on the verge of death. His dark-brown face is grey with pain and exhaustion. He lies half on his back, and his eyes are just two narrow slits. His arms still move slowly as if trying to drive the vultures away. Teuns takes his hands, folds them down, and lays them on his chest. He sees that the man's lips are moving. Moving slowly and spasmodically, but no sound issues from them. It seems as if he wants to communicate something.

Teuns pushes the dark-striped robe aside from the thin chest, and then sees the ghastly gunshot wound high in the chest near the collarbone. He can see that the creature has bled profusely, for his entire body and his robe are caked with dried blood.

“A gunshot wound,” says Jack Ritchie, who is also crouching beside the fallen man. He says it as if it needs to be said. Anyone can see it is a gunshot wound, and anyone with knowledge knows that the bullet struck the poor creature from behind. The wound at the front of the chest