

SAHARA

ADVENTURE SERIES

40. The Secret of Fort Laval



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THE SECRET OF FORT LAVAL

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SUMMARY

The narrative commences with a fatigued contingent of French Foreign Legion soldiers, commanded by Teuns Stegmann, reaching Fort Laval following a ruinous Sahara storm. They are parched, famished, and their attire is in tatters. The fort symbolizes hope and respite after their narrow escape in the desert. Teuns, a South African who enlisted in the Legion seeking his missing brother, is depicted as a pre-eminent and seasoned leader. However, Fort Laval, an isolated and implacable stronghold, offers a bittersweet homecoming. As they approach the fort, they observe something foreboding. The French flag is absent from the fort's flagpole, and vultures perch ubiquitously upon the parapets. A sense of impending doom pervades the weary soldiers.

The premonition of a sixth sense is substantiated when they discover a ghastly scene of slaughter just outside the fort. Within, the fort appears silent and deserted, a horrific stillness even more terrifying than the storm they have just survived. To their astonishment, Fatma Harrar, an exquisitely beautiful Arab woman, awaits them in the commander's quarters. Her appearance unveils an unexpected and personal conflict, her words revealing a deep-seated animosity towards Teuns Stegmann. It emerges that she has journeyed far to exact vengeance for the death of a loved one. The men find themselves captive, facing an exceedingly dangerous and unpredictable adversary.

Teuns Stegmann's loyalty is tested, as he holds the key to the life and death of himself and his men. The soldiers soon realize they must confront not only a murderous individual but much more, including betrayal within the Legion's own ranks. In a brutal struggle for survival, the Legion soldiers find themselves overwhelmed in numbers and firepower as a massive Arab force storms Fort Laval. A desperate battle erupts, with hand-to-hand combat and explosions detonating within the fort's walls. Amidst the chaos, the Legion soldiers must rely on their training, courage, and ingenuity to withstand the assault and devise a means of escape from the besieged fortress. Can Teuns succeed in

rescuing his comrades from certain death? Their sole salvation may perhaps lie in a secret that Fort Laval has closely guarded for many years, known only to a handful of Legion soldiers!

EXTRACT

Elkrim leads his men to just beyond striking distance. Then, as one, they halt. And it strikes Teuns immediately. Within this Arab army, there is discipline. There is tactic. Here is someone who knows how to fight. Not a frenzied, disordered charge. Not making cannon fodder of the fine horsemen. Here is a plan.

And then, piercing the silence, the sound of a trumpet rings out.

As one, the entire Arab mass advances upon Fort Laval.

They charge. Then they break off. Then they charge again and break off. But they also do something more. At a given signal, the front lines dismount from their horses and drop flat onto the sand. The horses turn and storm back. It is as if even the animals have been taught what to do.

There on the parapets, there is effectively no one giving the command to fire. Someone simply shoots, and then everyone follows suit. It becomes a powerful volley, but its effect is minimal, for the Arabs who dismounted are already lying flat on the sand.

“Let them come closer,” yells Teuns. “Do not shoot yet.”

But he might as well be speaking against the hurricane. Here, he knows, he is now dealing with fear. The men continue to fire. Wave after wave of Arabs storm forward, leap from their saddles, fall flat, and commence firing. The bullets sing and whistle against the parapets. Here and there, a man falls backward with a bullet through the head.

And so, they inexorably draw nearer until the foremost are beneath the walls of Fort Laval. Hundreds have already been shot dead, but those behind simply leap over their fallen comrades, over their wounded mates, and charge without asking if it is safe, without considering whether they will survive.

40. THE SECRET OF FORT LAVAL

Chapter 1

Footsore, utterly exhausted, and near death from thirst, the ten soldiers of the French Foreign Legion emerge onto the crest of the final dune.

To them, it feels like the millionth dune they have surmounted since last encountering civilization. They imagine having wandered thousands of miles through the godforsaken southern Sahara up to this very day.

They no longer resemble soldiers. They look like rabble from the slums of one of Europe's great cities. Their uniforms are in shreds. Their eyes are bloodshot, their lips cracked, causing blood to trickle down into their long, unkempt beards. They no longer possess a complexion, as the fine Sahara dust has formed a complete crust on their sweat-streaked faces. It appears as though their faces are made of clay. Their fingernails are long. Some have boot soles that have detached. Consequently, they look more like beggars than members of the proud Foreign Legion.

"Thank God," says their leader as he sits down on the dune's crest, in the scorching sand of the Sahara. "Thank God, there lies Fort Laval." His eyes, usually so clear blue, are today faint and listless, for they swallowed the last bit of water yesterday. The last food they consumed was the day before yesterday, and prior to that, they had only drunk and eaten just enough to stay alive. These ten men have traversed hell to reach the crest of this dune. For a week, one of the most unrelenting Sahara storms had trapped them amongst the dunes, rendering them capable of almost nothing but hiding their heads. Day after day, night after night, this unparalleled storm raged over them with such violence that it drove the sand particles horizontally across the earth, and with such force that no man or beast could venture upright into it. However they tried to protect themselves, the sand caught their hands and sometimes their faces. It struck them until blood flowed. From time to time, they had to shift position if they did not want to be buried beneath the sand. Day or night was virtually indistinguishable, so fiercely did

the Sahara sand blow. Those far away watched the phenomenon, dazed and shocked, for it seemed as though the dust reached the heavens. In the major cities, newspapers reported on it, stating it was one of the most furious and deadly sandstorms in living memory. So tremendous was the storm that its direction and course were regularly announced over the radio so that Arab villages and nomadic Arabs could potentially be warned to try and get out of its path.

But for this small group of men from the French Foreign Legion, no warning was given. They experienced its full violence, its full pain, and they would never have survived had they not had this leader, and had they not received instruction early on about how one must behave in a Sahara storm. They survived it by the narrowest of margins, and here they now lie on the crest of the final dune. They lie, for they possess virtually no more strength to sit upright. This past half-day, they stumbled foot by foot across the sand. They can no longer walk. They can only place one foot slowly before the other, and were it not for the endurance and inspiration of their leader, they surely would never have reached this dune.

The leader of the small patrol is a tall, lithe man, strongly built with fine lines around his eyes, lines etched there from his long tenure in the Sahara. For many years now, he has had to narrow his eyes against the white glare of the desert. His name is Teuns Stegmann, and he hails from distant South Africa. He is the only South African in the entire French Foreign Legion.

Teuns Stegmann did not join the Legion because he was trying to flee something, or because life had reached a dead end for him in his own country, or because he had committed some crime. The tall man joined the Foreign Legion with a calling. That calling is his search for his brother, who disappeared back in the Second World War. He has always believed that his brother was abducted by Arabs and is being held captive somewhere. When he is honest with himself, he must concede that there is little hope left of ever finding his brother alive. But after

joining the Legion, he made so many good friends, and it became so interesting for him that he remains in the Legion to this day.

Teuns Stegmann's eyes are narrowed again against the bright light of the Sahara. He gazes intently towards the small Fort named Laval. What a pestilential little place it is! One of the southernmost strongholds of the French Foreign Legion in the Sahara, a stinking nest of heat, flies, and iron discipline. So unpleasant is Fort Laval that the garrisons here are rotated every three months. The high command of the Foreign Legion understands very well that their men should not endure more than three months here. There have been instances where men went insane in the loneliness and isolation of Fort Laval. There isn't even an oasis or an Arab village or a caravan route nearby. It is just Fort Laval in the infinite, godforsaken solitude of this part of the Sahara.

And yet, for them, this is homecoming, even if it is homecoming to Fort Laval. Even Fort Laval is more agreeable than the perdition of the Sahara. Even Fort Laval is preferable to the torment of heat and sand they have just experienced again.

Teuns Stegmann is grateful as he sits here. For him, it is almost as if he has come home to the beautiful Hex River Valley where the green vineyards and large orchards greet one, the valley where he has his origins. He also feels proud and thankful that he can now sit and gaze at the parapets of Fort Laval. More than two weeks ago, the nine men were entrusted to him, a few recruits and two of his friends. He was selected to lead the patrol into the desert to show the few recruits the ropes in the Sahara. He did so to the best of his ability, and now he even feels grateful that they endured the torment of the storm so that these greenhorns could see what a sandstorm in the Sahara looks like.

Teuns Stegmann's eyes narrow further until they are just two gleaming slits against the bright light of the Sahara sun, against the brilliant reflection off the dunes.

Then he turns his head and looks at the others. No, they are dead to this

world. They have simply collapsed onto the sand, faces propped on their arms, and it seems to him that most of them are already asleep.

But as he stares down at them, one lifts his head. It is the big German, Fritz Mundt.

Fritz Mundt discerns the meaning in Teuns Stegmann's eyes. Therefore, he half rises and crawls on all fours to the South African's side.

"Take a look over there," says Teuns.

"Is something wrong?" asks Fritz as he comes to lie with his chest on the sharp crest of the dune and gazes out across the wide sandy plain towards the small round fortress, Fort Laval.

Fritz Mundt's eyes narrow immediately.

"What do you see?" asks Teuns.

"I don't know what I see," answers Fritz, "but it looks a bit peculiar."

He turns his head and then becomes aware again of the gentle breeze blowing across the desert.

"Where is the flag?"

That is the first thing Fritz asks. From where he lies, he first looked up at the flagpole of Fort Laval. It is the very first thing a man looks for when returning to a fort from the desert. The Sahara is an unrelenting world, full of secrets and nasty surprises, sometimes deadly surprises, as these men know all too well. Therefore, it has become a second tradition for them, upon returning, to first look at the flagpole to see if the French tricolour still flies undisturbed.

Hence Fritz now poses the question, because as far as he can see, there is no sign of the French tricolour.

"I don't see the flag," answers Teuns. "But what else do you see, Fritz?"

The fort is still quite a distance from them, but Fritz Mundt and Teuns

Stegmann both possess sharp eyes capable of seeing over great distances.

“I perceive no one on the parapets,” says Fritz, and a cold feeling runs through his body as he says it.

It is impossible that there should be no one on the parapets of any Legion stronghold. There must always be guards on the parapets, but however intently they look, today they discern no guards on the parapets of Fort Laval. It is easy to spot guards on the parapets from a great distance. Their blue uniform jackets and the stark white kepis are clearly visible when the guards move along the parapets. And if they are not visible, there is always the glint of the Sahara sun on their bayonets. If guards are walking on the parapets, their bayonets flash, and you can see it for miles.

On this afternoon, no bayonets flash on the parapets of Fort Laval.

Fritz Mundt glances at Teuns Stegmann and sees that the South African’s face is motionless and expressionless.

Then the German looks again towards the fortress, but now he looks at a different place. He scrutinizes the terrain around the stone walls of Fort Laval. And it is as he does this that he suddenly sits bolt upright beside Teuns.

“Do you see it too?” asks Teuns.

“Yes, I see it,” says Fritz softly. Fritz Mundt is not a fearful man. He is a hardened German. He is a colossus of a man, the strongest in the entire Legion, but now there is a hint of anxiety in his voice.

It is unnecessary for them to tell each other what they see. What they see is, after all, clear enough. There, on this side of the fortress, on the sand, is a ghastly black patch of writhing things. Vultures. It appears as though all the world’s vultures have gathered there. To see more clearly, Teuns takes out the small telescope that the commander of any Sahara patrol carries. He looks through it for a long time before handing it to

Fritz Mundt without a single word. Fritz hears Teuns sigh as he aims the telescope at the fortress.

“Good heavens,” says Fritz as he surveys the terrain outside the fort. “It’s swarming and teeming with vultures there.” Now he can see that some of the birds of prey sit undisturbed, lined up on the parapets. His stomach turns. Vultures on the parapets of any fortress mean only one thing, and that is disaster. Vultures would not dare to sit on a fortress if there were guards on the parapets, or if there were men in the quadrangle. But those vultures sit calmly today on the parapets, on the towers of Fort Laval.

He stares at the scene for quite a while before returning the telescope to Teuns.

Then they look at each other first, and although neither says anything, much is communicated between the two of them. They know what it means. They know what awaits them. They have been through it before, but then they had strength, strength to do something and to think and to fight if necessary. But today, they barely have the strength to keep their eyes open.

“What are we going to do?” asks Fritz after a long pause.

“What can we do?” asks Teuns, shrugging. “We cannot perish in the desert. We must drink water and we must eat.”

“Yes, that is true,” admits the German. “Whatever awaits in Fort Laval, we must go there, must we not?”

“It is so,” says Teuns and stands up.

“Legionnaires,” he says sternly. “On your feet. We move on.” Some of them hear his voice as if through a dream. They begin to struggle upright. The first one on his feet is the Pole named Podolski. Of the old guard who are always together, only Teuns, Fritz, and Podolski have come this time for relief duty at Fort Laval. The other pair from their fellowship, the Englishman Jack Ritchie and the Italian Petacci, did not