

SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

3. THE SCARLET RIDERS

Meiring Fouche

Translated by Andelene Brits

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by Meiring Fouche and translated by Andelene Brits

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ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

“Andelene Brits was born in Paarl in 1966, the youngest of three daughters. I attended Paarl Gymnasium and matriculated there in 1983. After that, I worked in financial institutions. I got married in 1989, and I have three sons. I do not have grandchildren yet, only a lot of dogs! For the last twenty years, I have been a housewife. I have written many stories over the years but have never published anything, although writing is my passion. I love books and have a whole library in my house. I go and browse second-hand bookstores for treasures. My other passion is people, and I do charity work for those in need. There is not much more I can say about myself, just that what I am doing now is something I have been waiting for all my life to do. Deal with the written word. Words are power. Thank you.”

SUMMARY

The thrilling Sahara adventure series continues in this gripping third installment, “The Scarlet Riders”. Captain D’Arlan, an officer in the French Foreign Legion, sets out across the sweltering Sahara desert with a small contingent of soldiers. Their mission is to present a loyal elderly Arab chief named El Abbas with a medal on his 70th birthday, honoring his decades of friendship with the Legion.

However, en route, they witness a perplexing and ominous scene. A caravan of Arab men, women, and children is attacked by soldiers dressed in Legion uniforms. The caravan is gunned down mercilessly, leaving D’Arlan shocked and baffled. Who are these imposters abducting innocents while posing as Legion? What sinister plot is underway in the desert sands? Pressing onward to the El Wadak Oasis settlement, D’Arlan hopes old ally El Abbas can shed light on the mystery. But on arrival, they are met with rage and blame. El Abbas has been murdered. He is nailed to a cross, supposedly by the French Legion who also kidnapped the young people of the tribe. Utterly confused by the false accusations against the Legion, D’Arlan decides to spend the night and get to the bottom of this. But during the night, he and his men are ambushed and taken captive by the same false Legion soldiers from the caravan attack.

They find themselves prisoners in a secret desert tent

camp, run by a German named Heinz Dietrich. There, D'Arlan's men are hypnotized and brainwashed by Dietrich's henchman, Helmuth. Now under mind control, they are coerced into training a clandestine Arab army in using advanced weaponry, to aid the beautiful Dulac warrior princess El Karima in a rebellion against the Legion. El Karima arrives and takes the hypnotized men away to her stronghold, except for Teuns Stegmann, whom she is besotted with. Imprisoned at El Karima's palace, clever Italian soldier Vittorio Petacci secretly breaks her spell over Stegmann and tells him of their impending execution. Stegmann plots a daring escape and sabotages the weapons training. Pursued into the desert by Dietrich's men and El Karima's army, they stumble upon an astonishing discovery in a cave.

Meanwhile, the Legion's Fort Dini Salam is besieged by twenty thousand vengeful Arabs, believing they were betrayed. Vastly outnumbered, Colonel Le Clerq faces impossible odds trying to defend against the onslaught. Refused reinforcements and surrounded, Le Clerq prepares for a fight until the last man. Just as annihilation seems imminent, the approaching Arab cavalry suddenly makes a mystifying maneuver. From the bleak sands, salvation emerges for the valiant Legion in their sandstone bastion. But is it too late to turn the tide of battle?

Will D'Arlan and his brave soldiers escape the desert and

expose the truth? Can they thwart Dietrich and El Karima's insidious plot against the Legion? "The Scarlet Riders" by the author Meiring Fouche once again deliver pulse-pounding action and diabolical intrigue in the scorching Sahara sun.

EXTRACT

Juin blows his whistle once very loudly, and it suddenly seems like doomsday. It is as if something big has exploded inside the fort when the guns all start shooting together, and the stutter of the machine guns joins the din. It looks like an avalanche of water has suddenly been halted in its path when the bullets hit the first hordes of Arabs. It is terrible and bloody. Still, they keep on coming. Those Arabs on foot behind them merely storm over the fallen while the riders also keep coming. Out of the hot gun barrels, the lead streams continuously from the incoming Arabs, but it sings out fruitlessly over the courtyard of the fort because the men on the battlements hold their heads down low. Le Clerq and Juin move behind the line of them in crouching positions.

But trying their best, it seems impossible for the Legion soldiers to be able to kill thousands of them.

Over the fallen come the men with the throwing ropes, and a thin line of Arabs reaches the fort wall and temporarily disappears out of the eyesight of the defenders.

More Arabas approach on foot and horseback. The men shoot them in bundles out of the saddles, but many break through to join the men under the walls.

The French Foreign Legion soldiers' mouths are hard and dry, and the barrels of their guns lie hot in their hands.

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3. THE SCARLET RIDERS

Chapter 1 THE STRANGERS

“This is utter nonsense,” growls Fritz Mundt, the German, who is also the biggest and strongest man in the French Foreign Legion, while wiping his neck with an enormous red silk handkerchief. He claims he once received this ugly handkerchief from a merry widow in Algiers, who then robbed him of his vacation money after consuming his third bottle of sour wine. “We have to go and deliver a medal to an old yellow beak, and for that, we must trek for miles through the sand and heat. So why could not D’Arlan have taken a horse and delivered the medal himself?”

“You are going to moan yourself to death, old chap!” says Teuns Stegmann, the big blonde South African walking alongside the big German. “On the contrary, you should feel honored that the captain chose us for this mission. This is a special mission, and old El Abbas deserves to receive a medal from the French Government. You do not kick loyal Arabs out from behind every bush, and El Abbas is one of them. He is turning 70 years old tomorrow and has never caused any trouble for the French Foreign Legion. He is a good friend of France, and he deserves this.”

“What about the colonel? He could have taken a horse and delivered it himself.”

“Colonel Le Clerq has other fish to fry, Jack Ritchie,” the

Englishman jokingly says. “That is why he sent D’Arlan. The colonel has too much to do. On the other hand, you might meet a beautiful girl at the El Wadak Oasis.”

Fritz sniggers, but it is apparent that this kind of talk does not alleviate his concerns. Silently he plods on through the heat. He notices how the long bill of Captain D’Arlan’s kepi flutters in the wind. He is in front of the convoy of twenty men marching through the burning sands.

“Take a sip of water, Field Marshall Rommel,” teases the Polish Podolski and hands over his water flask to Fritz. Fritz had finished his water about an hour ago. Fritz takes the flask and takes a deep gulp but starts coughing the next moment because Podolski has added a generous amount of brandy to his water supply. Fritz is coughing and choking, and D’Arlan, a small, swarthy man, turns around to see what is happening, but something else catches his eye...

“Halt!” the captain commands, and with relief, the men come immediately to a standstill. They lean on their long rifles and look up for the first time. The sun sits low above the western horizon.

* * *

A cool breeze has started from the Atlas Mountains that climb up to the right in the blue mist.

“What the hell?” asks D’Arlan and peers through his binoculars. They are standing on a giant sand plateau that is as flat as a tabletop. On the southwestern side lies a tall dune that had formed during last week’s sandstorm.

D'Arlan walks forward as if he would be able to see better. He tunes his binoculars. Does he see a mirage, or is he dreaming? It cannot be true! Legion soldiers! What is going on?

The other men can also see them but cannot make out the details so well. Fritz Mundt walks over to the captain and asks.

“Mon Capitaine, what is going on? That is Legion men, and yet...”

“I wish I knew what is going on. It completely baffles me...”

Now all the men approach, their necks craned forward, and they stand in a semi-circle around their commanding officer. On the tip of the dune, a row of camels with their tails upright comes running along in full flight. To the men, it seems as if the devil himself is chasing the camels. On everyone's back is a rider and on some, even two. Next came the horse riders, moving in alongside the camels as if to incorporate them.

And then the gunfire starts.

The camels start falling one after the other and slough down in the warm sand and dust.

To D'Arlan it is an enigma. The biggest riddle, though, is those are soldiers of the French Foreign Legion! Yes, those riders are definitely Legion soldiers. It is they that are shooting. They are busy killing the camels!

“Mon Dieu!” sighs D'Arlan, still busy looking through his binoculars. *“Do you see what I see?”*

“Oui Capitaine,” chorus the men.

“But there are no Legion soldiers in this region! We are the only patrol currently outside Dini Salam, and the nearest fort is 250 miles away! And yet those are Legion men. Look at the cloaks, the kepi’s... the blue pants...”

“They are, without a doubt, legionnaires,” says Fritz Mundt while taking another sip of Podolski’s firewater.

The shooting has stopped, and the remaining camels have been halted. The horse riders have surrounded the group of roughly fifteen camels. In the light of the late afternoon sun, they can see the flashes and know that those are the Arabs’ curved knives with which they are trying to defend themselves. However, it is over quickly.

* * *

“Forward!” orders D’Arlan and starts running through the thick sand towards this strange tableau. The men match his pace, and although they are tired after this long journey through the heat, they are curious and excited to see what had happened there.

While running, D’Arlan upholsters his big German Luger revolver and shoots three shots into the air. It causes a stir under the party there on the tip of the dune. A few riders leave the group and start approaching D’Arlan and his men. After a while, they halt and return to their group. The next moment there is more movement, and the riders form a circle around the rest of the camels. Then, they start to move back in the direction they came from.

D’Arlan shouts at them to wait and even pulls off another couple of rounds, but this strange caravan ignores him.

Within minutes, they again disappeared behind the tip of

the dune.

D'Arlan is out of breath and stops. "What the devil? I have seen a lot of strange things in the Sahara before, but this must be the strangest spectacle I have ever witnessed!"

"Maybe those men are from Fort Metz," offers Teuns Stegmann.

D'Arlan shakes his head. "No, *mon legionnaire*, Fort Metz is at least 200 miles to the east, and anyway, what would they be doing here? And even if they are from Fort Metz, they would not venture into this area without telling Colonel Le Clerq about it. After all, this area is under his command."

"Yes," Jack Ritchie interrupts, "if those men were from Fort Metz, why turn tail and run when they see a convoy of the Legion approach?"

"That is the most peculiar of all," sighs D'Arlan, increasing his pace towards the five camels lying dead on the sand. "Legion men will not run away from fellow legionnaires now, would they?"

"Strange business," says Fritz Mundt, and he takes a big bite out of a piece of chewing tobacco to try and remove the taste of Podolski's brandy from his mouth. "Very peculiar indeed, and yet those are Legion men..."

"Five dead camels are on the sand, but no Arabs!" blurts Teuns.

D'Arlan stops at a big pool of blood and follows the path of the drag marks with his eyes. He looks at the footsteps. He looks up questioningly at Teuns Stegmann.