

SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

3. The Scarlet Riders



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THE SCARLET RIDERS

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SUMMARY

The narrative commences with Fritz Mundt, the most formidable man in the French Foreign Legion, grumbling about a mission to deliver a medal to an elderly Arab, El Abbas. Teuns Stegmann, a tall South African legionnaire, counters Fritz's complaints by emphasizing El Abbas's loyalty to France. The group, led by Captain D'Arlan, marches through the Sahara, where they witness a bizarre spectacle. Legionnaires on horseback attacking and defeating a camel caravan in the distance. D'Arlan is profoundly shocked and perplexed, especially upon discovering that these attackers are also soldiers of the Legion. The situation becomes even more suspicious when a modern Metro revolver, not issued to the Legion, is found at the scene.

The story intensifies when the patrol reaches El Wadak, El Abbas's oasis, only to find the atmosphere drastically altered. The once-friendly villagers are hostile, and El Abbas has been crucified, accusing the Legion of betrayal before succumbing to his ordeal. D'Arlan learns that the same group of soldiers they observed earlier abducted the village's young women. Teuns Stegmann, a loyal soldier, becomes entangled with the perilous Helmuth and succumbs to his hypnosis. D'Arlan and his men are taken captive by a German named Heinz Dietrich, who is in league with the Doelak queen, El Karima.

Teuns devises a daring plan to liberate his comrades and capture Dietrich. Subsequently, D'Arlan finds himself confronting not only the wrath of El Karima but also Dietrich's treachery and the hypnotic powers of Helmuth. Yet, in the end, Teuns discovers an ingenious way to save the day. Will he, however, uncover the secrets buried within El Karima's web of deceit, or will the desert claim all its secrets?

EXTRACT

The machine guns still bark out unceasing death and destruction. But some of the attackers penetrate through to the base of the walls.

Nothing more can be done about them now. The men have strict orders not to expose themselves, for if they wish to shoot the Arabs down here beneath the walls, they must stand up and lean over.

And the Arab lead now sings hot and dense over the fort's walls. Thousands of Arabs have leaped from their saddles within range and fallen flat upon the sand. They pepper the granite walls of the battlements, causing sparks to fly.

Horses run in wild, phantasmal circles over the dead, who lie like a dark sheet upon the sand. And every minute, more Arabs die there on the sand, for a lethal fire is maintained from the battlements. But behind those who die, thousands more wait, following the ones before them...

And then the second wave came storming in... thundering and screaming, just like the first. Again, the horrific slaughter of lead tearing through riders and horses. A few more penetrate to the wall with iron grappling hooks and ropes. Hordes leap from horses' saddles and then fall flat on the sand. Now the lead sings even denser over the fort's walls.

And then, with a soft swish... the first hook swings high over the battlement, and the iron hook catches fast behind the parapet with a clatter and a ring.

3. THE SCARLET RIDERS

Chapter 1

THE STRANGERS

“This is all utter nonsense,” grumbles Fritz Mundt, the German, the largest and strongest man in the French Foreign Legion, as he pulls out an enormous red silk handkerchief and wipes the sweat from his broad neck. He supposedly received this garish handkerchief once in Algiers from a cheerful Algerian widow, who subsequently relieved him of all his holiday pay after he had downed a third bottle of sour wine. “A medal has to be given to some old Arab, and then we have to slog for miles through the sand and heat to go give it to him. Why couldn’t D’Arlan just take a horse and deliver the lousy medal himself?”

“You’ll complain yourself to death yet, big fellow,” says Teuns Stegmann, the tall, blond South African slogging through the searing Saharan sun beside the German. “You ought to feel honoured that the Capitaine chose a few of us to accompany him on this mission. This is a special assignment, and old El Abbas deserves to receive a medal from the French government. You can almost count loyal Arabs on one hand, and old El Abbas is one of them. Tomorrow he turns seventy, and he has never caused the Foreign Legion any trouble. He is a good friend to France, so give the devil his due.”

“What about the colonel, couldn’t he perhaps have delivered this wretched medal too? He could just take a horse.”

“Because Colonel Le Clerq has other duties,” mocks Jack Ritchie, the Englishman walking on Fritz’s other side. “The colonel has more to do than hand out medals. That’s why he sent D’Arlan. Besides, who knows what pretty little thing you might not run into tonight in the oasis El Wadak...”

Fritz just snorts, and it is perfectly clear that all this talk does nothing to alleviate his concerns. He walks on silently, staring ahead through

the heat. He sees Captain D'Arlan's kepi's long white neck-cover fluttering in the light breeze, where he strides at the head of his small column of twenty men through the burning sand.

"Just take a sip of water, Marshal Rommel," jests Podolski the Pole from behind Fritz, offering his water flask. Fritz's own flask had been empty for an hour already, as it takes a lot of water to keep his large frame going.

Fritz snatches the flask from Podolski's hand and takes a large gulp. The next moment, he jerks forward, coughing and sputtering, because Podolski had laced his water rather strongly with brandy. Fritz practically bellows as he coughs and chokes, and D'Arlan, the small, sunburnt man at the head of the line of men, is just about to turn around to see what is happening, when his eye catches something else...

"Halt!" calls the captain commandingly, and the men need no second invitation to stop. They lean on their long rifles and then, for the first time, truly look up. The sun hangs low above the western horizon, and a cool breeze has risen from the direction of the Atlas Mountains, which tower far to the right through the blue haze.

"What the devil," says D'Arlan, raising his binoculars to his eyes.

They are on a large sandy plateau, as flat as a tabletop. But near the southwestern end of the plateau lies a long, steep dune, formed during last week's sandstorm.

D'Arlan walks a few paces forward as if thinking he might see better that way.

He quickly adjusts his binoculars.

Is he seeing things, dreaming dreams?

It simply cannot be! No, his senses must be deceiving him.

Legionnaires... No! And yet it is... What on earth is going on?

The men all see it with their naked eyes, although they cannot discern the details as well as D’Arlan. Bent far forward, Fritz Mundt walks quickly towards the captain, stops beside him and says, “Mon Capitaine, what on earth is going on now? Those are Legionnaires... and yet...”

“I wish I knew what was going on here,” says D’Arlan. “It leaves me utterly bewildered...”

The men all draw closer, their necks craned forward, and form a semicircle around their commander.

Around the point of that dune, perhaps a mile ahead of them, a line of camels had come running, at full speed, their tails in the air. When the men first saw them, those camels were moving as if the devil himself were behind them. On each of those camels is a rider, and on some, even two.

And then the horsemen came out from behind the dune... They move up alongside the line of camels, as if intending to surround the camel riders.

And then the shots began to ring out.

One camel after another is brought down, collapsing in a cloud of dust.

All this is a mystery to D’Arlan.

But the greatest mystery for him is that those riders are soldiers of the Foreign Legion! Yes, those horsemen are soldiers of the Legion.

And it is they who are shooting. They are busy shooting down those camels one after another!

“Mon Dieu!” sighs D’Arlan, staring intently through the binoculars. “Are you seeing what I see?”

“Oui, Capitaine,” say the group of men in unison.

“But there are no Legionnaires in this vicinity! We are the only patrol

currently outside Dini Salam. And the next closest fort is 250 miles from here. And yet, those are Legionnaires. Look at their cloaks, look at their kepis... They are wearing blue trousers..."

"They are, without the slightest doubt, Legionnaires," says Fritz Mundt, choking again on Podolski's brandy.

The shooting has now ceased, and the remaining camels have been brought to a standstill. The group of about fifteen camels is now completely surrounded by the horsemen.

In the light of the late afternoon sun, they see the short flashes and know that the Arabs on the remaining camels are apparently trying to offer resistance with their curved knives. However, it does not last very long.

"Forward!" D'Arlan suddenly commands and begins to trot through the heavy, loose sand in the direction of this strange spectacle before them. The men follow him at a comfortable trot, for although they are dead tired after today's long march through the consuming heat, they now feel excited to see what is going on here.

While running, D'Arlan draws his large German Luger revolver and fires three short shots in succession into the air.

This causes a stir among the group there before the point of the dune. A few of the riders break away from the group and gallop a short distance towards D'Arlan and his men. Then they halt again and turn around.

The next moment, there is movement. The riders have formed a circle with the remaining camels between them. They wheel around and begin to move rapidly back in the direction from which they had just come.

D'Arlan shouts at them to wait. He fires a few more shots, but the strange caravan pays no heed to D'Arlan.

Within a few minutes, they have disappeared again behind the point of the dune.

D'Arlan suddenly stops in the sand, out of breath. "Well, strike me

dead!” he says. “I’ve seen many strange things in the Sahara, but this is surely the strangest spectacle I have ever witnessed.”

“Perhaps those men come from Fort Metz,” suggests Teuns Stegmann.

D’Arlan shakes his head slowly. “Fort Metz is located at least two hundred miles to the east, mon Legionnaire... What would they be seeking here? And even if they were men from Fort Metz, they wouldn’t move in this area without informing Colonel Le Clerq. After all, he commands this territory.”

“Besides,” interjects Jack Ritchie, “if they are men from Fort Metz, why turn tail and flee when they see a column of the Foreign Legion approaching?”

“Yes, that is the most remarkable part of it all,” sighs D’Arlan as they now stride quickly towards where the five or so dead camels lie. “Legionnaires surely wouldn’t run away from Legionnaires, would they?”

“A strange affair,” says Fritz Mundt, biting off an enormous quid of tobacco to rid his palate of the taste of Podolski’s peculiar brandy. “A very strange affair... and yet they are Legionnaires...”

Five camels lie dead in the sand, but not a single Arab!

D’Arlan stops beside a pool of blood... and he looks from the drag marks to the bloodstain and then at the tracks. He looks up questioningly at Teuns Stegmann, who has come to stand beside him.

“Wounded, that Arab is wounded, mon Capitaine,” says Teuns. “But they apparently took him along. Even though they were in such a hurry...”

“Who says it wasn’t one of the horsemen who fell here?” asks D’Arlan, testing this brave South African’s powers of observation.

“The tracks here prove that this man fell from a camel, mon Capitaine, and the tracks further show that he was then lifted onto a horse,” says

the tall, blond man with a faint smile.

D'Arlan claps him lightly between his broad, angular shoulders and says appreciatively, "Correct. You ought to be in the secret service of the Foreign Legion, mon ami..."

"I am perfectly happy as a legionnaire under Capitaine D'Arlan," says Teuns, embarrassed. Then he springs a few paces away, bends down quickly, and picks something up from the sand.

Teuns's face contorts with astonishment. With intense concentration, he stares at the object in his hand... The object that the camels and horses had almost trampled under the sand during the brief struggle here.

Step by careful step, Teuns walks towards D'Arlan. "Mon officier," he says softly and hoarsely, "just take a look at this!"

D'Arlan practically snatches the object from Teuns's hand, and then all the men gather around him, staring at the object in D'Arlan's hands.

"Good heavens!" D'Arlan exclaims loudly. "What on earth is going on here? This is a Metro, one of the very latest rapid-fire revolvers being made. It has just appeared on the market. They say it shoots like a modern machine gun... Just look at its cylinder... It must hold at least fifteen small, high-velocity bullets... Three weeks ago in Dini Salam, we received details about this fellow."

"Where could these people have obtained it, mon Capitaine?" asks Jack Ritchie, voicing the question on the minds of all the other men.

"The devil alone knows," says D'Arlan. "But of two things I am absolutely certain of. This firearm has not yet been issued to the Foreign Legion, and I would be surprised if simple camel drivers, like those who were apparently intercepted here, would carry such a modern weapon."

"That makes the mystery even more interesting," says Fritz Mundt, his blue eyes sparkling, for if there is one thing this big German enjoys, it

is secrets.

“I tell you, there’s a major screw loose here,” says D’Arlan, walking towards the nearest camel. “Come, open this one’s pack,” he orders the men.

They immediately loosen the ropes around the pack on the dead camel. And what they pull out confirms D’Arlan’s suspicion that it was merely an ordinary trading caravan that had been intercepted here. From the pack come dates... sweets... pieces of silk... linen... tobacco... a leather bag of Arab wine... beads...

There is nothing else of particular note inside.

They also examine the packs of the other camels. It is exactly the same story there. They contain only common merchandise.

“Hmm,” says D’Arlan when they have finished, “this caravan was probably on its way to old El Abbas at El Wadak. These goods were likely all intended for the festivities related to the presentation of the medal...?”

Then the captain looks down along the high dune and sees the column of dust heading in a south-westerly direction, but the strange riders are no longer visible, for they have descended from the plateau and disappeared among the chaos of smaller dunes below it.

“If only we had been closer,” D’Arlan says then, disappointed. “Then perhaps today we might have uncovered a great secret here. Come, let us push on to El Wadak. El Abbas expects us. And perhaps he will be able to shed light on this peculiar event.”

D’Arlan suddenly swings south-eastward and now sets a brisk pace. He walks with the old suppleness for which he is known. He carries the strange revolver in his hand, and the men notice him glancing at it occasionally.

Before long, they reach the south-eastern edge of the plateau, and there