

SAHARA ADVENTURE SERIES

6. Death at Sunrise



MEIRING FOUCHE

DEATH AT SUNRISE

by

MEIRING FOUCHE

and

translated, proof-read and edited by
PIETER HAASBROEK

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by Meiring Fouche

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SUMMARY

In the unforgiving Sahara Desert, a small patrol of the French Foreign Legion, including the athletic South African Teuns Stegmann, the formidable German Fritz Mundt, and the cynical Englishman Jack Ritchie, is confronted by the looming danger of a colossal sandstorm. Sergeant Catroux, leading the group, struggles to find safe shelter, while Fritz already senses the approaching peril and understands its implications. Suddenly, two camel riders appear far ahead of them, racing eastward. The patrol, driven by desperation, immediately follows in their tracks, seeking salvation from the deadly storm.

As the storm draws near, they discover a hidden oasis, offering welcome refuge within a small clay hut. Inside the hut, they discover an unexpected and unwelcome presence. It is Madame Brigitte Bonnet, the “Witch of the Sahara,” along with her ailing companion, Professor Benesj. Brigitte is notorious for her lethal gas experiments at Fort Laval, where she subjected numerous legionnaires to gruesome torture. Now, fate has forced them together, setting the stage for an exceedingly tense confrontation. Teuns finds himself caught between the need for survival and a burning desire for vengeance, as he and the others must confront their pasts and the escalating stakes in the unforgiving desert.

Teuns, despite his loyalty to the Foreign Legion, begins to question the boundaries between duty and justice and soon begins to formulate a daring plan to overpower the deadly Madame Bonnet. Will Teuns’s desperate gamble succeed, and are the secrets buried beneath the Sahara’s sands more perilous than the storms above?

EXTRACT

The Legionnaires sit down again amongst the soldiers, knowing now, definitively, that they have lost. They feel sore and disappointed, having come so close to achieving a victory here, far above the Sahara, but they realize they must now stay on their guard, lest trouble arise. And in that event, they will certainly draw the short straw. These soldiers are now wide awake, sitting with their submachine guns at the ready. It seems the fight has purged all influence of the alcohol from them.

All of them look rather battered. They are covered in bruises. In places, their clothes are torn to shreds, and elsewhere, trickles of blood run down them.

Teuns glances sideways at Fritz Mundt and cannot help but laugh at the big German, for a splendid black eye is developing on his large, red face.

“Almost looks like you walked into a door, old giant,” Teuns jests.” Fritz merely clears his throat but says nothing.

“That was one who sneaked up on me from behind,” Fritz complains. “Not one of these scum would ever land a blow on my eye in a fair fight!”

He, in turn, smiles at the South African. “You look as though a vulture got hold of you,” he tells Teuns.” Then Fritz looks at Sergeant Catroux. “Sergeant,” he says, “we may have lost, but that was one hell of a fight!”

6. DEATH AT SUNRISE

Chapter 1

WIND OF THE DESERT

They are only seven together. Just seven soldiers in the boundless infinity of the Sahara. They wear the blue jackets and white kepis of the French Foreign Legion.

Sergeant Catroux, the small, grey Frenchman with his jaunty little moustache and lively blue eyes. Then there is Fritz Mundt, the German, largest and strongest in the entire Foreign Legion, Teuns Stegmann, the blond South African, broad of shoulder, but lithe in movement like an athlete, Jack Ritchie, the Englishman, cast out by his family as a black sheep. Then there is also Podolski, the Pole, who joined the Legion because his fat wife nearly drove him to madness at home, Petacci, a little Italian who preached so much hate speech in his fatherland that he had to flee, and lastly Jorgensen, the large, lumbering Norwegian who looks as though he is always dreaming of the cool fjords of his homeland.

Their boots crunch northward through the sand, and their water flasks slap against their sweaty backs.

“I wish something would happen,” yawns Podolski, the brave Pole who has witnessed so much bloodshed in this desert. “This walking is driving me stark raving mad. Even if a vulture attacked us now, just so I could stab it dead with my bayonet.”

“Well, you’re cheerful, you big Pole,” says Teuns Stegmann, looking back at Podolski. “If you have too much energy, why don’t you jog ahead to Fort Laval.”

“He’s completely childish,” grumbles Jorgensen. “Who wants to look for trouble in this heat?”

“Just big talk,” snaps Petacci the Italian.”

Podolski pays no attention to the others. "Or what do you say, old giant?" he turns to Fritz Mundt. "You're always looking for action, aren't you? These old patrols through the sand are making me fed up!"

But Fritz Mundt does not answer. He puts his forefinger in his mouth, holds it there for a moment, and then raises it into the air, just like someone pointing to something in the deep blue sky.

"Looks like the old giant is starting to go childish too," Teuns jests. "He's sucking his finger like a child now."

"Wait, I think he's about to venture another grand prediction," teases Jack Ritchie. "He is, after all, the great oracle of the desert."

They look surprised at the big German who is always so quick to react, ready to respond and quick-tempered by nature, not only with his mouth but readily with his fists too.

He turns his head, looking around, glances upward, and scans the entire horizon with narrowed eyes.

"There's a strong wind coming," Fritz Mundt then says softly."

"Wind!" Teuns Stegmann scoffs, and the others all start laughing. "The only wind in this desert right now is the wind coming from that big windbag mouth of yours!" the South African continues."

"I tell you there is wind. One cannot feel it, but it is there, and it is a kind of wind I do not like. I think Podolski will soon get all the action he craves." Without another word, the German steps out of the short line and hurries towards where Sergeant Catroux is striding ahead of them, head down."

"I think old Fritz's head isn't working right anymore," Jorgensen remarks from behind, but Petacci corrects him. "He knows this desert thoroughly. He never predicts incorrectly."

"Then Field Marshal Rommel has at least one admirer in the Foreign Legion," Podolski teases Petacci."

Then they fall silent and listen to what Fritz Mundt is saying to Catroux. However, they cannot hear it, and then Catroux suddenly brings his small patrol to a halt.

He immediately looks westward to where the colossal Atlas Mountains rise bluish and vast from the desert, pushing their peaks seemingly up to the heavens. He takes out his binoculars and also looks around while the other men, except Fritz, gratefully sink onto the warm sand to rest their weary legs a little.

Catroux puts his binoculars back in their case, and then he does the same as Fritz Mundt. He puts his finger in his mouth and then holds it up.

“Mon Dieu,” Catroux exclaims. “It is entirely true. There is wind coming, wind one cannot easily feel.”

At that very moment, a small whirlwind comes skipping over them, just a little one, and it cools their flushed cheeks. The men glance quickly at each other, for they know what this means.

“Look there, mon Sergent,” says Fritz to Catroux, pointing with his hand up into the air.”

Catroux looks up and sees them, tiny black specks, so infinitely high one can barely discern them. The specks are moving eastward.

“They don’t fly that high unless there are strong air currents, mon Sergent,” Fritz Mundt observes.”

“That is true,” Catroux affirms. “Vultures know when they must get out of the way.”

The other men also look up, their eyes now narrowed, and suddenly, without realizing it themselves, their breathing becomes deeper and more uneven.

“And look there, mon Sergent,” says Fritz Mundt, gesturing towards the sun.”

Catroux looks in that direction. The Sahara sun is completely different today. It is not a bright, blinding ball of fire. It is a copper disc that glows fiercely, as if polished to a brilliant shine.

But it is no longer necessary for them to look as they can now feel it too. It suddenly feels to them as if they are in an airless void, hot as an oven. It drives the sweat from their bodies, makes breathing difficult, and one's head feels as if it is pounding and about to burst outward.

“Sandstorm approaching, mes amis,” Catroux says simply, and the sergeant has surely never spoken words that held such dreadful significance for these men.”

“Still feel like action, Podolski?” asks Petacci, and there is a world of meaning in those small dark eyes of his.”

Podolski just looks at the horizon and says nothing, for he would rather march a thousand miles through the desert than become entangled with one of the Sahara's sandstorms.

“What are we going to do?” asks the practical Jorgensen. “We are still eighty miles from Fort Laval! And if it catches us here in the open, it could be the end of us.”

They know that this is the truth, for they know how these Sahara storms can drive pebbles and sand horizontally along the ground, stripping the clothes from your body, scouring the skin from your hands and face, and penetrating your mouth and nostrils until you finally suffocate, if you are not extremely careful. They also know that these storms sometimes last for four days.

No human can survive it if it is severe and catches you in the open. It simply presses all moisture from your body, eventually driving you mad with thirst.

They have seen victims whose eyelids had been eaten away by the flying sand, so that their eyes sat open, bare, and horrific in their sockets.

All this they know. That is why they now glance anxiously at each other and then again at the horizon, which at the moment still looks so calm and peaceful.

But they also know that these desert storms can appear within moments, suddenly from behind a dune or on a flat plain.

“What are we going to do? There isn’t even a stone here to shelter behind?” Jorgensen asks again plaintively.”

“You just turn your back to the storm until you no longer have a back,” Teuns Stegmann advises him. “By the time you no longer have a back, you’re done for anyway.”

“Your hide is so tough a desert storm wouldn’t even kill you,” says Jack Ritchie.”

They speak light-heartedly, not out of joy, but out of fear, for they have seen how a desert storm can conjure a massive rock from the ground overnight. Where there had never been one before, simply by carrying away the sand and exposing the rock that lay beneath the ground.

Catroux has sat down on the ground and pulled a map from its long, cylindrical container.

A small whirlwind flies over them again, making the map rustle in Catroux’s hands. With his finger, he quickly searches the surrounding area. He searches desperately for a place where they can shelter from the storm. Fritz Mundt stands over the sergeant’s shoulder, peering with interest at the map.

Fort Laval, eighty miles away, out of the question. Wadi Dinar, seventy-two miles eastward, out of the question. The Bihar highlands with their strange rock formations, a hundred miles to the southeast, out of the question. The Harba oasis, seventy miles to the west, out of the question.

“Very pleasant,” Catroux finally says, but he cannot conceal the dismay

behind his words. “We have at most an hour, perhaps a little more, before the storm hits, and the nearest shelter is seventy miles from us. Do any of you fancy reaching Harba oasis within an hour, mes amis?”

They just laugh uncomfortably and look at each other, without speaking.

Suddenly Teuns Stegmann jumps up. “Look there, mon Sergent!” he shouts. “It’s already approaching!”

The others jump up immediately too. A light wind, like from a fan, touches their hot faces, but they do not even notice it.

For the Atlas Mountains, which they had seen just five minutes ago, have vanished!

There is no longer any sign of the mountains. For before them hangs the terrible curtain, almost crimson red, trembling, bending, and swaying. Dust and sand churn upward in curls until it seems they could touch the blue sky itself and paint it red.

Again, a sudden strong gust catches them, making their trouser legs flutter.

The pressure now rapidly increases, and the desert’s heat intensifies.

Their eyes are wide and gleaming, and they try to swallow the fear in their dry throats.

“Let us take shelter behind the nearest high dune!” Petacci calls out enthusiastically. “We cannot stay standing here on the plain.”

Catroux stares at Petacci with a kind of pity, almost as a father would stare at his child when great ignorance is revealed.

It is Fritz Mundt who completely dampens Petacci’s enthusiasm. “Have you never heard that Mother Sahara shifts the largest dunes completely within a few hours, Italian? Or do you feel like being buried under a dune?”

“But, but...,” Petacci tries again.”

“Do not trouble yourself, Petacci,” says Podolski, his eyes fixed starkly on the storm, “because in an hour or so, it will no longer be necessary for you to make plans. You have at most an hour left to repent your sins and rejoice in your good deeds.”

“But we cannot just stand here and do nothing!” shouts Petacci, and Catroux immediately sees the hysteria wavering in his eyes.”

They all stare now at the storm, and the preceding wind, which whirls, turns, whistles, and then falls completely silent again, makes the neck-flaps of their kepis flutter wildly.

Catroux is initially so frozen that he cannot move. It is as if the sergeant is hypnotized by the terrible spectacle rolling towards them. The dust curls skyward like dragon tongues, and the air has now turned completely reddish-grey, as if an indescribable power is slowly sucking the entire earth’s crust skyward.

“The only solution is for us to dig ourselves in, mon Sergeant,” Fritz Mundt finally says.”

His words jolt Catroux back to reality.

“Dig yourselves in!” commands the sergeant. “Your heads must point eastward!”

He gives this order simply because he can think of nothing else, for he knows very well that even if you manage to cover your entire body with sand, the inexorable force of the storm will eventually uncover you and then snatch you up and fling you away. It will roll you up and carry you away to where you are no longer aware of what is happening. Afterwards, it will blow you towards a high dune, where it will bury you beneath tons of sand.

After the storm is over, they will not even know where this patrol died. Catroux knows this, for whom this is not the first Sahara storm he has