

SAHARA

ADVENTURE SERIES

7. Thundering Hooves



MEIRING FOUCHE

THUNDERING HOOVES

by

MEIRING FOUCHE

and

translated, proof-read and edited by
PIETER HAASBROEK

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by Meiring Fouche

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SUMMARY

The story commences in the sweltering heat of Dini Salam, where members of the French Foreign Legion are resting after a perilous mission at Fort Laval. Teuns Stegmann, a lithe South African, and Fritz Mundt, a large German, bicker about the possibility of being sent back to the remote Fort Laval. Colonel Paul Le Clerq and Captain D'Arlan are confronted with a new threat. Madame Bonnet intends to avenge El Karima's death through gas warfare. They receive a disturbing report that thousands of Arabs are converging on Doetra and that the Sabre of Doetra has been stolen, an event that could ignite a general uprising in the desert.

Teuns Stegmann, with his sharp intellect and resourcefulness, plays a critical role in the narrative. D'Arlan's plan, involving Teuns's clever deception, leads to a bloody confrontation, yet a wounded Arab escapes amidst the chaos. Teuns, Fritz, and Jack Ritchie follow the blood trail, only to be led into an ambush themselves by deserters from the Foreign Legion who stole the Sabre of Doetra. The struggle for the sabre and the uncovering of secret plans form the core of the storyline, with Teuns constantly devising strategies to survive and achieve his objectives.

The climax builds as Teuns, Fritz, and Jack are captured by the deserters and forced to lead them to the main Arab army. They escape through cunning and violence, but are nearly overtaken by Arab horsemen during their flight. With the Sabre of Doetra in his possession, Teuns reaches a turning point. Will he succeed in using the Sabre to turn the tide, or will it cause his plans, and those of the Foreign Legion, to collapse, unleashing a new era of danger and uncertainty in the Sahara?

EXTRACT

“Many thanks, brave prince,” Teuns teased back. “We can talk later. Let’s quickly get the horses away from the gate. All hell is about to break loose any second now.”

And so it was. Teuns’s words had barely cooled when it felt as if the entire desert was perishing. Automatic rifles began to stutter lethally, bullets blazed red through the air, and loud explosions erupted just outside the fort. The Arabs cried out and screamed as if being murdered, and overall hung the strange white light of the flares Petacci kept firing from the flag tower.

Teuns and Fritz quickly drove the horses away from the gate, taking them towards the rear where they would be safe. Then they too ran up the steps to the ramparts, where the rest of the men were busy hurling hand grenades amongst the Arabs. Wherever the hand grenades landed, they sowed death and destruction...

7. THUNDERING HOOVES

Chapter 1

NEW WEAPON

Fritz Mundt, the large German in the French Foreign Legion, stirred his toes, shifted his hands beneath his head, and then gazed at the ceiling where the flies circled. Then he decided to ask the question he had long wanted to pose. He swatted quickly with his large hand at a bothersome fly, turned onto his side, and looked at the tall, blond man on the cot next to his. He observed the man's muscular bare torso, the lithe, powerful legs, and the blond head tousled from sleep. And this on an afternoon so hot it felt as though it drew all moisture from one's body.

Fritz shifted the plug of tobacco in his cheek. "South African," he said then, "do you think they'll send us back to that furnace of a Fort Laval?"

Teuns Stegmann, the lithe South African, opened his eyes, turned his head slowly, and looked somewhat dazed at the German.

"Why aren't you sleeping, old giant? Why lie around asking nonsensical questions on an afternoon like this?"

"Do you think they'll send us back to that fly-pit?"

"How should I know?" answered Teuns. "They'll probably send us back. We're supposed to relieve the garrison there for three months. Our lot were probably there no more than three or four days before fate played other tricks on us. No, I think they will send us back, old giant..."

"After everything we've been through? No, they can't! If they send us back to that pestilential place again, I'll rebel! I've had just about enough of that godforsaken place!"

"This isn't a gentlemen's club, old giant," said Teuns, yawning and swatting at the bothersome flies. "This is the French Foreign Legion,

and here you do as you're told – or haven't you learned that yet?"

"But our group nearly died! Surely they can't just send us back to Fort Laval again already? Why don't you go tell the colonel you don't want to return to Fort Laval? Maybe you'll get promoted to sergeant..." The South African turned onto his side, glancing sideways at the German. "You just want to lie around here in Dini Salam swilling wine again, that's all," he teased the German, who lay there with an expression of discontent.

Suddenly, Fritz Mundt pushed himself halfway up onto his elbow. "Surely there are other men they can send! There's scum here who haven't been to Fort Laval once in the past year!"

"Perhaps they're sending us because they consider us so brave. Maybe they're afraid the other chaps won't be able to do the same good work as our group." Teuns bent down, picked up his cigarette butt from the floor, and lit it. He took a deep drag on his cigarette and surveyed the large dormitory. The beds were almost all empty. Only a few fellows were resting here on this scorching afternoon. There was himself, Fritz Mundt, Podolski the Pole, Jack Ritchie the blond Englishman, and Petacci, the little Italian, who snored so loudly no one could stand it.

Having arrived shortly before noon, they had been granted permission to rest for the remainder of the day.

With a faint sense of satisfaction, Teuns listened to the rest of the men in the Dini Salam garrison parading outside in the hot square. He listened to the short, sharp commands of the sergeant drilling them.

"I'll rebel if they send us back to Fort Laval again," Fritz murmured once more, but the South African paid him no further heed.

In the office of the garrison's commanding officer, Colonel Paul Le Clerq snorted through his grey moustache.

"Well now, Sergeant Catroux," said the colonel. "Tell me quickly how it came about that a French Foreign Legion patrol, supposed to be

relieving the garrison at Fort Laval, arrived here from Doetra in a strange aircraft. At ease!”

Sergeant Catroux, the small, sallow man, relaxed and clasped his hands behind his back. He looked first at Colonel Le Clerq and then at Captain D’Arlan, who was also seated beside the desk. He noticed the amused glint in the captain’s eyes, but in the colonel’s eyes, there was only a cold gravity. Then Catroux looked at the elderly Arab also seated beside the desk. In the old man’s dark eyes glowed signs of a victory.

“Mon Colonel,” said Sergeant Catroux, “those of us who returned by aircraft today were members of Lieutenant Juin’s relief detachment heading to Fort Laval. We, along with Lieutenant Rousseau’s men whom we were to relieve, were overcome there by a woman accompanied by a band of strange soldiers, one Madame Bonnet, sister of the late El Karima...”

“Yes... yes. That is already known,” said Le Clerq impatiently. “She has some conceited notion of driving the Foreign Legion out of Morocco with gas weapons...”

“That is correct, mon Colonel. We later regained the upper hand, and she and a certain Professor Benesj fled in a jeep. Lieutenant Juin sent me with Legionnaires Stegmann, Mundt, Podolski, Ritchie, Petacci, and Jorgensen to try and ascertain where she had fled. We were caught in a sandstorm and, in an Arab hamlet at a deserted oasis, we came upon madame and the professor. We attempted to take her back to Fort Laval, but then one morning an aircraft appeared, and they overwhelmed us again...”

“Who are ‘they’? The madame and the professor?” There was a spark of humour in the colonel’s sharp eyes.

“The aircraft was full of soldiers with automatic rifles, mon Colonel,” he evaded the colonel’s question.

“I see...”

“They took us to Doetra, and had it not been for Sheikh El Dota here with us, we would surely have died there. With his help, we reached the aircraft and escaped in it. Fortunately, Legionnaire Ritchie was a bomber pilot in the Second World War. That is how we came to arrive here by aircraft, mon Colonel.”

“A singularly interesting tale, mon Sergeant,” said the old colonel, thoughtfully tugging at his moustache.

“Any questions, mon Capitaine?”

“El Dota here gained the impression that this woman is entirely serious when she says she wants to annihilate the Foreign Legion in Morocco by means of gas,” said Captain D’Arlan, the small, sallow man – the bane of warring Arabs, the ‘Houdini’ of the desert, who had miraculously escaped death every time the Arabs managed to corner him. “Is that also your impression, mon Sergeant?”

“Without the slightest doubt, mon Capitaine,” answered Catroux. “This woman seems utterly insane to me. She wants to avenge the death of her sister, El Karima, and she intends to do it by means of gas warfare.”

“Is her gas dangerous at all?”

“The gas they use is lethal, mon Capitaine. Absolutely lethal. And it can also be used over long distances. We have nothing resistant to it.”

“Do they have large stockpiles?”

“They left behind considerable supplies and gas weapons at Fort Laval, and I am certain the bomber was full of gas supplies when they took us to Doetra.”

“I assume they use gas projectiles?”

“That is so, mon Capitaine. They use powerful rifles to fire the things, and they explode as soon as they hit something. They will be deadly against our garrisons in the forts.”

“Do you have any idea what the madame’s campaign plans are, mon Sergent?”

“Not many details, mon Capitaine, except that the attack is to be launched very soon.”

“So we also gathered from El Dota,” Colonel Le Clerq interjected.

“Oui, mon Colonel. She indicated that she intends to attack Fort Laval, Fort Petain, and Dini Salam first.”

“Does she have the Arabs’ trust?” D’Arlan asked again.

“Without the least doubt, mon Capitaine. I think they worship her, just as they worshipped the late El Karima.”

“Did you see many Arabs?”

“Many thousands. When we flew towards Doetra, the capital of the Doelaks, it seemed as if the desert itself was alive, with Arab warriors converging on the gate to Doetra. In Doetra itself, too, it teemed with warriors.”

“Rather a depressing tale, wouldn’t you say, mon Sergent?” said Colonel Le Clerq, looking searchingly at the sergeant.

“I’m afraid so, mon Colonel,” answered Catroux, slightly tense.

“That will be all for now, El Dota... Sergeant Catroux,” said Colonel Le Clerq, extending his hand to the old sheikh who, along with Catroux and the few Legionnaires, had escaped from Doetra in Madame Brigitte Bonnet’s aircraft. “On behalf of France and the Foreign Legion, I thank you for your bravery and loyalty. You shall receive your reward for it in due course.”

El Dota bowed slightly and then walked out of the office with Catroux.

Le Clerq sat down with a sigh and glanced sideways at D’Arlan. “Now this is a fine mess indeed,” the colonel remarked. “Thousands upon thousands of Arabs gathered in Doetra, and with a new leader and gas

weapons, no less. It wouldn't surprise me if the Foreign Legion soon has to contend with flying saucers, D'Arlan."

"Good heavens," said D'Arlan slowly, twirling his officer's baton. "This is about the hottest potato we've ever had to handle, mon Colonel. This is no child's play. They can inflict tremendous damage on us with this gas, and likely overwhelm us with it too, ten to one. We will have to act swiftly."

"Act? How am I supposed to act when this witch apparently wants to attack three places simultaneously? Do you believe this story about the gas and the hordes gathered in Doetra?"

"We must believe it, mon Colonel. We know all about the gas weapons they left behind at Fort Laval, and the accounts of Catroux and El Dota correspond exactly. I don't think there's any doubt about it."

Le Clerq jerked open the top drawer of his desk, pulled out a bottle of cognac, poured a glass half full, and then downed it neat in one go. Then he held the glass up questioningly, but D'Arlan shook his head.

"Not just yet, mon officier," he said with a slight smile. "I am too preoccupied by this looming gas war to feel like drinking anything."

"We must inform Algiers immediately," said Le Clerq, pushing the drawer shut again. "Send them a report at once, D'Arlan, and ask what assistance we can expect, if any. They will, of course, laugh at us as usual. Also, inform the commanders at Fort Laval and Fort Petain straight away about what is happening and tell them we are still considering what steps to take. We will keep them informed."

"Very well, mon Colonel," said D'Arlan, standing up. "I shall portray the situation as gravely as possible."

"You'll have to portray it as more than grave before that lot in Algiers takes any notice of us. They might think old Le Clerq has gone off his rocker when they hear about this looming gas war."

D'Arlan left the office, and Le Clerq stood up and went to the wall map of the southern Sahara. With a pointer, he drew circles and lines around certain places and areas. He tried to follow Madame Bonnet's logic, attempting to make head or tail of her expected plan of attack. But then he turned away from the map disheartened, slumped down in his chair, and brought out the cognac bottle once more. When Colonel Le Clerq encountered situations like this, the bottle became his only friend – the bottle, and Captain D'Arlan.

He lit a small black cigar and looked through the window at the heat shimmering over the desert. It stretched right from the fortress away to where the dunes of the Sahara, beyond the town of Dini Salam, danced and trembled in the hazy heat. He had been in perilous situations before, but as D'Arlan said, this was surely the hottest potato they had ever had to handle.

In less than ten minutes, D'Arlan was back, and he came and sat opposite the colonel in front of the desk. "I've had the messages transmitted, mon Colonel," D'Arlan announced. "Whether it will help, we shall have to wait and see."

"We must meanwhile assess the position and formulate plans," said Le Clerq. "We will, in any case, have to bear the brunt of it again. Of that you can be absolutely certain, mon ami."

"As if I didn't already know Algiers!" D'Arlan agreed, getting up and also going to stand before the map. He carefully studied the relative positions of Fort Laval, Dini Salam, and Fort Petain. Laval is closest to Doetra, where the first attack will likely be launched. Fort Petain is a bit further and situated more to the west, and Dini Salam is the furthest of all.

He pressed his finger on Fort Laval. "Laval will be the first to feel the pinch," said D'Arlan, who had learned through necessity to view any situation from an angle and attempt to resolve it from an angle. "It is, of course, closest to Doetra. Fort Petain will have a few days' more