

# **SAHARA**

## **ADVENTURE SERIES**

### **8. Blood in front of the Sun**



**MEIRING FOUCHE**

# BLOOD IN FRONT OF THE SUN

*by*

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## **BLOOD IN FRONT OF THE SUN**

by Meiring Fouche

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## SUMMARY

A young woman, captive in a desert fort, faces her certain death. She is Brigitte Bonnet, a leading figure among the Doelak Arabs, condemned for sedition and bloodshed. Her last night on earth is filled with memories of her power among the Doelak people as their ruler, her sister's death, and the approaching execution. The tension is palpable as twilight descends upon the desert and the tolling bell signals her end. It is revealed that she is a powerful woman who acted barbarically, yet now sits sobbing with fear, alone in a prison cell.

Teuns Stegmann, a legion soldier, is with his comrades in an Arab café where the execution is being discussed. Tempers flare, particularly those of Fritz Mundt, who regards Bonnet as a witch. Teuns, burdened by guilt for his role in her capture, is reminded by his comrades that the Arabs will seek revenge. The café's atmosphere is thick with tension and dark shadows as Abdoel Hoessein, an enigmatic merchant, unexpectedly makes an appearance and openly discusses the execution with them.

A night of betrayal unfolds, and by dawn, it is discovered that Bonnet has inexplicably escaped. D'Arlan, the astute captain, suspects internal treachery. Teuns is urgently summoned to the colonel, where he recounts his encounter with Abdoel Hoessein the previous evening. An investigation identifies Wodiak, Antonetti, and Renner as the culprits, and one of the traitors is found murdered. D'Arlan departs with Teuns and other men to confront Hoessein, but they walk into a deadly ambush. Teuns miraculously manages to escape, but the others are captured. What awaits Teuns, and what secrets lie behind Bonnet's escape?

## EXTRACT

Jack sank onto the sand and waited. He knew it was only a matter of time. The strain of getting hold of D'Arlan's jacket and struggling to put it over his back had exhausted him further. He felt as though he had no strength left, as if even with unbound hands, he would be unable to contend with a vulture. He felt the hot sand on his chapped lips, causing him to turn his head quickly. He wrestled against a faintness threatening to drag him into dark depths. He fought against it, knowing that if it overcame him, it would be the end. Hunger and thirst tormented him with renewed ferocity, and he felt tears burn in his eyes.

He quickly drew up one leg and yanked, but all that happened was a jolt of pain shooting through his body. He did the same with the other leg, but then he knew it was futile.

Or was it?

He rolled onto his side.

Then he rolled onto his back, and first he began to laugh, and then he began to cry.

"You lowlives!" screamed Jack Ritchie, his voice sounding small and insignificant in the vast, still desert where the only movement was the mad dance of the heat haze.

His one foot was truly free.

With the final jerk, he had pulled the peg from the ground.

## **8. BLOOD IN FRONT OF THE SUN**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **DEATH AWAITS**

The young woman with the auburn hair and green eyes rose once more from the hard wooden bench and walked to the small barred window, through which the cool evening wind blew onto her face. It caressed her warm cheeks as she gazed out at the twilight slowly descending over the desert, the desert she loved so dearly and longed for so intensely. She watched the ribbon of red cast by the setting sun against the purple sky, and then looked further southward, to where the sky deepened to blue, to where the Atlas Mountains must lie.

Somewhere, a clock struck eight.

Slowly, stroke by stroke, the chimes sounded like damnation to her.

She quickly shut her beautiful eyes and then slowly let her forehead rest against the bars.

“One more night!” she murmured, her hands clenching convulsively. “Just one more night!”

Suddenly, she felt the sweat cold on her brow and felt her hands tremble with disbelief and fear.

For now, for the thousandth time, she realised again that this was her last night on earth, the very last. Perhaps tomorrow morning she would still see the sun rise. Perhaps not.

She swiftly turned away from the window and returned to the wooden bench. She sat down upon it, her head between her trembling hands. She felt the pounding of her heart and the throbbing of her blood like hammer blows against her temples.

“The last night, the very last!” she whispered despairingly, her gaze suddenly fixed on the deep, grey granite of the cell walls surrounding

her. If only she had the strength, she would have pushed these walls down with her hands to be free again, to feel the heat of the sun on her hands once more, to feel the cool caress of the desert wind on her glowing cheeks again, and to feel the rhythmic sway of a great horse beneath her once more.

She heard again the distinct words of the French general, as clearly as if he were uttering them now in her presence.

“The tribunal finds you guilty, Madame. You are guilty of sedition, criminal incitement, and bloodshed. You will be executed by firing squad in this fort tomorrow morning at sunrise. Is there anything you wish to say?”

There was so much she had wanted to say, so many things she had wanted to scream at these French authorities. But strangely, while those devastating words still echoed in her ears, she had been unable to utter a single word. She who had led the desert warriors in so many bloody attacks, she who had ordered great men tortured until they cried like lost children, she who had done all that, had then found no words to say.

For a moment, she thought of the Atlas Mountains, of the great basin where the capital of the Doelaks lay. She thought of the large, cool palace she had inhabited there and of the subservience of the fierce desert warriors she had commanded.

But only for a moment, because then her thoughts immediately returned to everything that had happened today. The heat in the small hall of the barracks building, the high-ranking French officers in their impressive uniforms, the questions, the cross-examination, and the accusations. She thought of the long days she had spent in this cell before they began their trial. The long, solitary days that had dragged by so slowly.

She sprang up from the bench again and went back to the window, grasped the cool bars with her hands, and stared into the evening light that slowly deepened across the world. There was a catch in her throat, and then she let her face sink, sobbing, against the cold granite.

One more night!

Just one more night!

When morning comes, when the light returns, then comes death.

She sobbed, and the tears rolled down her cheeks, the first time in many years. The last time she had sobbed was when she learned that the Foreign Legion had killed her sister Karima, leader of the Doelaks, here in the desert. That was the last time.

But now she sobbed, because fear had made her a woman again. It had torn the warrior's mantle from her and removed all the brutality and rage from within her.

She was now just an ordinary, sobbing woman again.

The night crept slowly closer across the desert.

The morning was surely already being born somewhere across the sea in the east. The morning of her death.

"Drink and be merry, Brothers, for tomorrow or the day after, we might meet our end!" The harsh voice rose above the drone of many voices in the Arab café. It was the voice of Fritz Mundt, the big blond German, the strongest man in the French Foreign Legion. His enormous hand closed around the bottle again, and he refilled the four glasses before him.

"Prosit!" bellowed Fritz, raising his glass high. "Prosit, Boer fellow!" he yelled again, slapping Teuns Stegmann so hard on the shoulders that the blond South African gasped for breath.

A slight resentment flickered in Teuns's blue eyes as he looked up sideways at the German.

"You need to keep your paws to yourself, big fella," said Teuns. "If I were to get angry now, I'd punch holes through that carcass of yours!"

"Ho-ho-ho! Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Fritz, throwing his large head back.



“Listen who wants to punch holes in Fritz Mundt! Just listen!”

“I’ve seen Teuns knock you to the ground before, big fella,” said Podolski, the Pole.

“He’s all talk,” added Jack Ritchie, the Englishman. “He can only drink and boast. I swear little Petacci will give him a thrashing one day if he annoys him enough.”

“But you’re all rather defiant tonight,” complained Fritz, putting his glass down and glancing sideways at the other three. “Everyone just wants to murder me.”

“You talk far too much, big fella,” said Teuns, taking a sip of the syrupy, unpalatable wine that was so sticky you could almost choke on it.

“Why can’t I talk?” Fritz wanted to know.

“Mundt,” said Podolski sharply. “Have you forgotten that a woman is going to be executed here tomorrow morning? I don’t think we’re in the mood for your extravagance tonight.”

“To him, it’s probably a big joke,” snapped Jack Ritchie.

Fritz quickly wiped his hand over his large forehead, and his eyes changed. Then a deep frown creased his face.

“Is it, is it really about this woman that you’re all so morose tonight?” He leaned far forward over the table as he asked the question. There was profound shock on his face. “She’s not a woman. She’s a witch.”

“Let it be as it may,” Teuns Stegmann rebuked him. “She is still a human being. And tomorrow morning she will be shot.”

“She’s a witch!” yelled Fritz, slamming his hands hard on the table. His eyes narrowed intensely, tension etched on his face. He clenched his hands. “Have you forgotten what she did to us? Have you forgotten how many innocent people she sent to a horrible death? She’s a menace in the desert! They should have put her against the wall long ago.”

“But she is also a woman,” said Jack Ritchie. “One doesn’t shoot women.”

“She behaved like a barbarian,” hissed Fritz furiously, quickly drinking his wine.

“They could have taken her away from here and imprisoned her, even deported her,” Teuns opined. “I shudder to think that a woman must be shot.”

“Heaven knows why they tried her here and why they want to execute her here. Why couldn’t they have done it in Algiers?” complained Podolski. “It will just needlessly set the world ablaze here in the desert again if they execute her in Dini Salam.”

“Brother,” said Fritz, “they can shoot her wherever they like, but the sparks will fly regardless. This is just the thing to get these yellow-bellies back on the warpath. And I think you’re the first man who’s going to pay the price, Teuns Stegmann,” said the German. “You’re the one who led her into the trap so Captain D’Arlan could catch her, aren’t you?”

“You make me tremble with fear, big fella,” said Teuns, trying to brush off the German’s remark. And yet, it stuck in his mind. He was the man who had so fatally led this woman into the arms of Captain D’Arlan and the Foreign Legion. He was the man who had stampeded the horses in the desert back then, when they trampled her sister El Karima to death.

“You don’t have to laugh, Teuns,” said Jack Ritchie. “These Arabs have it in for you, Brother. They certainly won’t miss any chance to cut off your eyelids and throw you in the sun for the vultures.”

“Don’t try to get on Teuns’s nerves,” consoled Podolski. “These yellow-bellies aren’t picky. They’ll roast any one of us if they get the chance.”

“Why so suddenly quiet, big fella?” asked Teuns.

Fritz first wiped his face.

“Funny,” he said, “she’s a witch, but I think of her eyes. Such beautiful green eyes and such beautiful hair. I really like that kind of hair.” He fell silent for a moment and then continued speaking. “But I hate her. When I hear the shots from the firing squad tomorrow morning, I will be grateful.”

“You unfeeling beast,” said Jack Ritchie, gulping down the rest of his wine.

“This is a very melancholy evening,” said Fritz, looking down at his hands.

“And then?” said Podolski, looking past Fritz towards the door. The others looked there too.

“It’s Abdoel Hoessein,” said Teuns Stegmann. “The biggest merchant in Dini Salam.”

“He looks rather friendly,” observed Jack Ritchie. “Probably made more money today than he’s entitled to again.”

“And he even dresses like some sheikh,” mocked Fritz.

“I don’t trust the scoundrel at all,” Teuns remarked calmly.

They all quickly looked at Teuns, who spoke so disparagingly of the prominent Arab. The Arab was large and impressive in his pristine white robe, with the purple trim and the neat white turban, in which a single red ruby glittered brightly.

“I thought Abdoel Hoessein was such a good citizen of colonial France?” said Fritz mockingly.

The large Arab stopped in the doorway and slowly scanned the café hall with his dark eyes. As if searching for someone specific. He looked around as if there was a secret in his eyes.

Then a smile broke across his narrow, dark face, and he walked straight

towards the men.

“His Highness is going to honour us with a few words,” said Jack Ritchie sarcastically. “I suppose we’ll all have to jump to attention.”

They couldn’t say more, because with a few long strides, the Arab was suddenly beside their table.

“Good evening, Messieurs,” he said in perfect French. “I haven’t had the honour of selling you anything or enjoying a drink with you for a long time.”

“We belong to the poor brigade, Hoessein,” said Fritz Mundt, and it seemed his disrespectful form of address brought just a flicker of annoyance to the Arab’s eyes.

“It surely can’t be that bad,” said Hoessein easily. “I’ve received some of the finest silk again, fresh dates, pocketknives, and smoking supplies. I look forward to a visit from you.”

He couldn’t speak further, because someone almost knocked him over. It was Wodiak, a South Slav, a dark man with an ugly pockmark on his face. He was apparently so drunk he could barely stand on his feet.

“Excuse me, Your Royal Highness,” babbled Wodiak. “Wouldn’t you like to have a little drink with me?”

Hoessein looked annihilatingly at the South Slav and said not a single word. He just surveyed the man up and down, as if trying to destroy him with his sharp eyes.

“Messieurs,” said the Arab condescendingly, “I’m afraid some among your ranks are not endowed with particularly good manners.”

Wodiak, however, paid no attention. He reached out, wanting to pick up Teuns’s wine glass, when the South African grabbed him by the wrist and pulled his hand away.

“Wodiak,” said Teuns hissing, “we’re not in the mood for your