

SAHARA

ADVENTURE SERIES

9. The Tracks are Calling



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THE TRACKS ARE CALLING

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SUMMARY

The narrative commences in the scorching Sahara, where Teuns Stegmann, a member of the French Foreign Legion, makes a disturbing discovery alongside his patrol. Near the tumultuous region between Dini Salam and Doetra, they observe vultures circling a scene of devastation. A caravan has been attacked, and twelve bodies lie mutilated in the sand. Amidst the chaos, Teuns finds a delicate, golden powder compact, marked with the initials “J.T.”, as well as a waterskin. These are all signs indicating the presence of Berbers and the possible abduction of a white woman, an event confirming the initial conflict.

Teuns’s determination and acuity propel the narrative forward, positioning him as the linchpin of the search, having to interpret clues such as the perfumed handkerchief, an ivory bracelet, and later, a hairbrush which is also found. These confirm that a woman was indeed present during the attack. A sense of escalating urgency and peril builds as their attempts to follow the trail are hampered by the treacherous desert wind. Even amidst the discovery of a tortured man in Harba, Teuns remains focused, although the situation becomes further complicated by the disappearance of Petacci, a member of his own patrol.

Driven by a mixture of duty and a strong protective instinct, Teuns takes increasing risks because he has no other choice. Following a series of perilous confrontations, including disguising himself as an Arab and his own capture and torture, Teuns manages to escape alongside the abducted woman, Jenene. Yet, even in their apparent freedom, the shadow of the Berbers and their enigmatic motives still looms over them. What is the true significance behind the machine gun and the abduction, and what unseen forces might still lurk within the vast, unforgiving desert?

EXTRACT

It is perfectly clear that this Arab intends to ensure that a man he considers dead, is truly dead. He abruptly plants his legs far apart, presses his cheek against the stock, and closes his left eye.

In that very brief instant before death, Teuns Stegmann does two things simultaneously, with the speed and precision drilled into him and the other fellows of the Foreign Legion by sergeants over countless days. This was during the hours spent one after another on the parade ground. Those times when they were taught how to cheat death when it practically touched them.

With the agility of a cheetah, Teuns Stegmann leaps up, and in the same instant he jumps, he flings an arc of sand towards the Arab's eyes.

The shot rings out, loud and deadly through the silent desert, but it passes far over Teuns's head, because at the exact moment the Arab pulls the trigger, the fine sand strikes him in the eyes, causing him to jerk his head back.

9. THE TRACKS ARE CALLING

Chapter 1

STRANGE FIND

Teuns Stegmann, the tall South African in the French Foreign Legion, watched the movements of the man before him with narrowed eyes. If he weren't so tired and if they weren't sitting here under the consuming Sahara sun, he might have felt like laughing. Teuns and the other members of the small patrol lay sprawled on the crest of a high dune, in the heart of the rebellious territory between the Legion outpost Dini Salam and Doetra, capital of the insurgent Doelak Arabs.

"Are you going mad, old Big One?" Teuns asked the man executing such strange movements.

"This is how we drink the cool Munchener, South African," said Fritz Mundt the German, reputed to be the strongest man in Africa. "Like this and this..." He lifted his elbow high, made a flourish with his hand, brought it before his mouth, tilted his head back and pretended to drink the beer with pleasure. Then he smacked his lips together audibly as if he had just downed a glass of foaming beer. He then looked despondently again at his water flask, removed the cork, and drank two sips of the lukewarm water within.

"And this is how we do it," said Petacci the little Italian, lying next to Teuns in the hot sand. He made a twirling motion with his fingers.

"Spaghetti," Teuns guessed.

"That's right," said Petacci, his eyes narrowing. He held up his left hand, fingers spread wide. "I would give this valuable left hand of mine right now for a nice plate of spaghetti in one of the back streets of Rome."

"Interesting trip, this," said Jack Ritchie, the blond Englishman. He lay back with his hands behind his head and pulled his kepi over his eyes

to block out the sun. “Terribly exciting. We’ve been wandering around for almost two weeks and haven’t seen a camel yet. How much longer is Catroux going to drag us through the sand like this?”

“Perhaps excitement will come soon enough, Englishman,” said Fritz, drawing lines in the sand with his boot. “In this Sahara, one can never tell.”

“There must be something afoot if they have us patrolling so diligently,” said Teuns, looking out over the high dune crests towards the south where the Atlas Mountains rose, pale blue, from the dancing heat.

“What could there be?” asked Podolski the Pole, irritably. “The Arabs are currently very peaceful, like, like...”

“Like vultures,” Teuns corrected him.

“I’m perfectly content walking around doing nothing,” Petacci related. “I’d rather walk around here in the desert than be trapped in that fly-infested Fort Laval. At least here one can breathe freely.”

“Who says there’s no excitement?” asked Podolski, looking up at the sky. “Look there.”

They all looked up at the sky, even Jack Ritchie, who reluctantly pulled his kepi away from his eyes.

A heavy vulture slid slowly over them towards the south, its wings wide and its neck stretched far out.

“Perhaps it sees a desert rat that died of boredom,” Teuns opined.

“Or perhaps a fair maiden who got lost and is staggering towards us at this very moment,” Fritz ventured.

“Private Stegmann.”

It was Sergeant Catroux’s voice. He sat a short distance from the others, right on the sharp crest of the dune, surveying the world with his

binoculars.

Teuns stood up and sauntered over to where the sergeant sat.

“Don’t tell me we’re going to see something, Sergeant,” said the South African drowsily. “In the past two weeks or so, we’ve barely even seen a camel track.”

“Come look here, your eyes are strong,” said Catroux. “I can’t make it out.”

Teuns crouched beside the sergeant, took the binoculars from him, and followed the direction Catroux indicated with his thin, sallow hand. “Do you see that rugged slope directly to the south?”

“I see it, Sergeant. It’s far. One won’t easily make anything out from here. It looks like vultures to me.”

“There is something,” said Catroux. “But it’s very difficult to see. It’s almost just over the crest of that slope...”

“Yes, there is something,” Teuns affirmed, narrowing his eyes behind the binoculars. “There are definitely vultures, but I can’t make out anything else.”

“We must go and look,” said Catroux.

“That would be interesting. If we don’t see something unusual soon, we’ll die of misery,” Teuns reckoned. He handed the binoculars back to the sergeant and walked back to where his pack and rifle lay with the others.

“Arabs?” asked Fritz Mundt, a little more life now in his blue eyes.

Teuns shrugged his shoulders.

“Not Arabs, but vultures.”

“Vultures are sometimes more interesting than Arabs,” Podolski opined.

“We must go and look,” said Teuns, picking up his pack, swinging it onto his back, bending down, and picking up the long Lebel rifle.

“Go look? We’re on our way back to Laval and now we have to walk kilometres back again to see what the vultures have found,” complained Jack Ritchie, his eyes narrowed against the sharp sunlight reflected by the sand.

“Who knows what we’ll see there,” said Teuns resignedly, looking at the Englishman.

“I’m really not in the mood for nonsense now,” said Jack. “We’ve wandered around long enough. Now we can head back for a bit.”

“We march in one minute,” ordered Catroux, who had meanwhile walked back as well.

The other few rose lazily and reluctantly from the sand. They stretched and pulled down the neck flaps of their kepis so the sun couldn’t touch them there. They swung the packs onto their backs and slung their rifles over their shoulders.

Then they started walking, and Jack could simply not hide his annoyance.

“What can we actually accomplish if we do see something?” he asked Teuns as they walked. “There are only six of us.”

“We are actually seven,” said Teuns. “Fritz Mundt counts as two. Have you forgotten that so quickly?”

The big German turned halfway around and looked at the South African. Then he looked ahead again and spat in the sand.

“And you count as half a one,” said the German good-naturedly, but he knew his words must sound ridiculous, because everyone knew this South African. He was slender, broad-shouldered, swift on his feet, a dangerous man with his fists, and highly intelligent. Everyone knew from what dangerous predicaments Teuns’s quick mind had already

helped them. Everyone knew his calm and incredible courage. They all knew, as they trudged through the burning sand, that this tall blond man didn't have a cowardly hair on his head.

They shuffled up one dune and down the other side, then up again, then down again. Catroux had them move slowly. This was a furious spot in the Sahara. Here the dunes were high and sharp, and from a distance, many of the crests looked as sharp as blades. Behind the highest crests lay black patches of shadow, and the smooth sides of the dunes were untouched. Not a track was visible. Only the soft ripples left on the sand by the last wind broke the smooth glistening along the flanks of the great sand mountains.

Each time they reached the top of a dune, the men looked far ahead. Almost entirely mechanically, because that is how this desert teaches you to behave when you have lingered here long enough. You eventually develop a sixth sense for the extraordinary, for the dangerous, for surprise, even for the death that waits around every corner.

But there wasn't much to see now. The few times they caught sight of the long, rugged slope ahead, they could only make out a black cluster far in the distance with the naked eye. It was the moving mass of vultures that apparently had found something there.

When they crossed the last dune before the slope began to rise from the deep trough below the dune, Catroux stopped again and took out his binoculars. He studied the peculiar phenomenon on the distant crest attentively.

"I still can't make anything out," he said finally. "There are too many vultures. It's quite clear they've found something there, and it's not just a dead horse or a dead camel. There are too many of them for that."

"Perhaps a group of Arabs dead from thirst," Petacci suggested.

Fritz Mundt looked at him disdainfully.

“You’ll never learn either,” said the big German. “Where have you ever heard of Arabs dying of thirst in the desert?”

Petacci blushed under his black beard at his thoughtlessness and said nothing further. None of the others said anything either, for they stared almost unconsciously at the heap of writhing vultures.

“Let us proceed,” ordered Catroux, leading them down the steep dune, through the dip below, and then up the long slope.

This was a kind of sand plateau lying slanted like the sloping roof of a house. It was one of the wonders of the Sahara. It was one of those peculiar interruptions in the sharp rows of dunes that followed one upon the other. This incline was as flat as the top of a table, but it continued to rise higher until it reached a blunt crest where hordes of vultures scurried about. Beyond that ridge, the men knew, it dropped almost perpendicularly down to the infinite flat plain where the small oasis of Harba was situated.

“We might as well keep walking to Harba and rest there for a while,” Jack Ritchie suggested, saying it loudly enough for Catroux to hear. Catroux initially wanted to reprimand the private, but he held his tongue. He knew only too well how some men’s nerves could fray on these dangerous and exhausting patrol marches. On these kinds of desert wanderings, he had seen men go completely out of their minds.

Therefore, he did not place too much emphasis on discipline when they conducted these patrols. He thus allowed the men to say more than would otherwise be permissible. He had often wondered about the value of these patrols. And yet, it was an institution of the Foreign Legion because it was assumed that the Arabs needed constant watching. One never knew what these treacherous creatures were plotting.

More urgency entered the men’s movements as they progressed up the long sandy slope. It was not just curiosity that spurred them now, but also their sense of adventure. Those vultures they saw struggling ahead, shooting into the air and then descending again, could lead to something

interesting. Something exciting or even dangerous.

And danger is the best companion in this forsaken desert because it at least keeps you going. Once one starts losing interest in the Sahara, death might just be waiting behind the nearest dune.

“That’s quite a flock of vultures,” Teuns said breathlessly to Catroux.

“Yes, there’s a whole bunch. I wonder what happened here? Perhaps a sandstorm caught people here.”

But the moment he said it, Catroux realised it couldn’t be so. Arabs would not leave themselves exposed on such a crest at the mercy of a sandstorm. For that, they knew the dangers of the Sahara far too well.

“Let’s scatter that bunch of greedy filth, Sergeant,” requested Petacci as they approached the churning, leaping, and fighting mass of vultures.

“You should know better than that, Petacci,” Catroux said sharply, without looking back at the bow-legged little Italian.

“Yes,” Fritz added, “I told you you’d never learn. How do we know what’s going on here? And now you want to wake up the whole desert by shooting vultures.”

The men lowered their rifles, fixed their bayonets, and charged into the vultures as if they were the enemy. They stabbed and struck and kicked among the stinking creatures, which tried to give way with cruel cawing. Many darted away and rose into the air, but many also fell victim.

Then, just as quickly as they had stormed the fetid scene, the men retreated from it. They stood at a distance and looked with revulsion at what they saw before them.

“What a disgusting affair,” said Catroux, his face pale beneath his jet-black beard that had been growing for many days.

At least twelve bodies lay twisted and mutilated there in the hot sand.