

SAHARA

ADVENTURE SERIES

1. Witch of the Sahara



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WITCH OF THE SAHARA

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SUMMARY

The French Foreign Legion, stationed at Dini Salam, faces a growing threat from the Doelaks, a band of marauders attacking caravans. Private Podolski, on guard duty, observes a large contingent of Doelak warriors led by a mysterious white woman astride a grey horse. Sergeant Lazarre attempts to defend a caravan but is brutally defeated. With supplies dwindling and local tribes growing restless, Colonel Le Clerq dispatches Captain D'Arlan and two hundred men to El Soer to strike back against the Doelaks. The journey is arduous, and the Doelaks destroy the legionnaires' water supply.

Teuns Stegmann, a courageous South African in the Legion, plays a crucial role. Together with Fritz Mundt and Jack Ritchie, he braves the hardships of the Sahara, including a battle where several members drink from a poisoned water source. D'Arlan, a cunning strategist, manages to steal water and leads his men to Doetra where they confront Karima, the white woman. Teuns is captured and tortured by the Doelaks, but later liberated by Karima and appointed general of her army.

D'Arlan and Juin exploit the situation to free the remaining legionnaires. D'Arlan must then formulate plans and take action set in motion by the relationship Teuns now has with Karima. Or is it rather Karima who is leading D'Arlan into an ambush? Stegmann is divided, torn between his duty and his complex relationship with the enigmatic Karima. Will his loyalty lie with the Legion, or will he succumb to the enchantment of the beautiful woman who now holds the key to his freedom, or is there something far greater afoot?

EXTRACT

Two more eagles appear, diving low over the men, and one inflicts a vicious gash across Jack Ritchie's neck with its perilous talons. He screams, short and sharp, from the pain. The other sinks its beak deep into the cheek of an older Russian, who curses loudly. He twists his shoulders, trying thus to turn his bloodied face away from the onslaught of the mountain eagles.

More and more they come, screeching, wheeling on their great rushing wings, and each time they attack, blood flows. The men throw their bodies back and try to kick at the menaces, but this only exacerbates their fury.

The men strain and twist against the bonds behind their backs, but they quickly give up, for each time they do so, their wrists are only further lacerated by the sharp edges of these bonds.

"We are going to die, Capitaine," the older Russian shrieks almost hysterically, and then he must fight again against a screeching eagle sinking its talons into the poor old man's shoulders and head.

1. WITCH OF THE SAHARA

Chapter 1

A WOMAN ON HORSEBACK

Private Podolski, of the French Foreign Legion, turned his back to the biting desert wind blowing from the distant Atlas Mountains and gazed anew towards the East to see if there was yet any sign of the red dawn. He wished he were rather in the barracks in Dini Salam now, where he could at least have covered himself under the woollen blanket. Dini Salam is a fly-ridden oven of a place, where the Sahara sun scorches you mercilessly, but it is nevertheless better than this solitude in the desert that seeks to destroy you with its heat by day, and then makes you shiver with cold by night.

Podolski wondered what had possessed him to get angry with the Russians. If he hadn't become angry with them for occupying his fatherland, Poland, he wouldn't have had to stand guard here now on this godforsaken sand dune in the cold wind. Here at his solitary sentry post, however, he made a gesture with his hands, a gesture of acceptance. For what would it avail to stand here dwelling on it now? He was in the French Foreign Legion, and that was the end of everything. The French Foreign Legion must guard the Sahara and its inhabitants.

"Accursed Doelaks," Podolski sighed aloud. "If they hadn't got it into their heads to attack caravans, I wouldn't have had to stand here now. They should just shoot the whole lot dead, then there would be an end to this nonsense," Podolski said bitterly.

He felt the slight tingling down his back and he spun around quickly, peering intently into the darkness around him to see if he might perhaps spot a lurking enemy. It was, however, still too dark to see well. Therefore, with his long Lebel rifle, to which he had fixed the bayonet, he drew a circle around him on the ground. Then he quickly swung the

firearm around him again.

For these Doelaks are worse than cats, silent, virtually invisible when the light is not strong, and utterly lethal. Podolski thought of that gruesome night in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains, when the stealthy Doelaks had slit the throats of all the sentries of a Legion regiment before they even knew what was happening.

But Private Podolski spotted nothing. There was only the thin whine of the wind blowing through the tiny camel thorn bushes and through the old desert grass tussocks that stood here and there on the crest of the dune.

If only it would become day, it yearned within Podolski. If only one could see. He could not understand why the commander in Dini Salam had not yet sent out a proper expedition against these Doelaks. They should have been exterminated long ago.

But the ways of the brass in the Legion are utterly obscure. All they do is send a small escort of Legionnaires with the camel caravans each time to protect them. Quite a few caravans, escorts and all, have already been wiped out by these bloodthirsty Doelaks. Just last week, again.

Podolski's reverie was suddenly broken and he turned completely cold where he stood, even colder than the touch of the pre-dawn wind.

Could that be a horse that whinnied somewhere?

He could swear he heard something. Something not far off, perhaps behind the next dune, which now rose up before him out of the darkness like a great black whale, for the dawn was slowly shifting from behind the earth.

Podolski quickly cocked the Lebel, doing it slowly and silently, as they had been taught to do. He suddenly wondered how many hours he had had to spend in the terrible sun on the parade ground, just to learn how to cock a Lebel silently.

There was only a very slight clicking sound as he slid the bolt open and shut. He then stared with intense concentration at the dune before him, at its dark crest. Then he slowly turned around again and tried to survey the surroundings around him. His trained ears searched for the slightest sounds... But there was only the sighing of the wind and nothing more.

Perhaps he had just imagined he heard something. Perhaps his nerves were simply too strained.

If only it would become day, bright day, so that one could see an enemy's eyes!

Podolski completed the circle and stared eastwards again, from where the saving light of day must come.

And Private Podolski, formerly of the Polish army and currently an ordinary private in the Foreign Legion, suddenly stiffened as if he had taken a shot through the heart.

He was no longer aware of the singing wind. He no longer felt the Lebel in his cold hands. He did not even know that he was still breathing.

For there before him on the crest of the red dune, black against the first thin glow of day, was a rider. Black as a statue. A motionless silhouette, menacing and still.

Podolski swallowed hard and ran his tongue over his dry lips.

"Doelak," he whispered into the wind, and he almost choked on the word, so dry was his throat.

He quickly looked around him again with furious concentration. He imagined that every camel thorn bush and every grass tussock had become an enemy, with the feared dagger and the equally feared scimitar in their hands.

When Podolski looked eastwards again, he saw others. Like dark phantoms, they had appeared alongside the first rider on the crest.

And still they came, one after the other, until they stood arrayed on the crest.

The Polish private waited no longer. He sprang around and sprinted back towards the camp, where the small group of Legionnaires had formed a circle around the camel caravan...

He hurried, stooping low, towards the small tent here on one side of the camp. It was completely silent in the small laager. Everyone was still asleep, and one or two snored so loudly that Podolski imagined the Doelaks there on the dune could hear them too. Here and there a camel sighed contentedly.

Podolski flew into the tent and went to shake the man sleeping on the camp cot by the shoulders.

“Sergent, mon Sergent,” Podolski said, panting. “Doelaks, at four hundred paces, eastwards.”

The young Sergeant Lazarre nearly knocked the anxious Polish private over as he sprang out of bed.

“How many?” he asked hastily as he grabbed his revolver belt and quickly buckled it on.

“A good forty, there could be more. I didn’t wait,” said Podolski.

“Mon Dieu!” Lazarre said aloud, slapped his kepi onto his head and flew out of the tent.

“Wake the fellows up,” Lazarre ordered Podolski, “but don’t make noise. Perhaps that band of heathens hasn’t spotted us yet. Could be that they’ll pass us by?” But even as he spoke these words, the young sergeant knew he was being an optimist. Doelaks are some of the best spies in the world, and it would certainly be a miracle if they passed by a caravan lying here openly exposed between two dunes.

Podolski jumped among the fellows and woke them. There was protesting and groaning aplenty, but they immediately got to their feet

and grabbed their Lebel's. Lazarre himself jumped among the Arab traders and woke them quietly. Camels protested, snorting, and Lazarre felt as if he could strike their large mouths shut with the butt of his revolver.

Silently the camp awakened, and some of the other sentries now also came running up.

“Form a circle!” Sergeant Lazarre ordered hoarsely and not too loud. “Number off for now.”

Forming a circle is the only tactic here in the open where the small group of Legionnaires is going to be far outnumbered by the Arabs.

When the men had formed a circle, they numbered off. Then the even and odd numbers would fire in turn so that uninterrupted fire could be maintained on the attackers. In this way, some fellows could also reload while other fellows continued firing.

This proven tactic of the Foreign Legion was so familiar to this small group of men that everything was ready within seconds. Around the Arab traders and their pack animals, the thin line of men knelt, their Lebel's cocked in their hands.

In the middle of the circle stood Sergeant Lazarre, his heavy Luger revolver ready in his right hand, while he still gave orders to the Arabs. Some he sent in amongst the Legionnaires, where they took up positions with their antiquated old muzzle-loaders. Others he ordered to tie the camels together and hold them fast.

It was quickly becoming light, for here in the Sahara, day comes suddenly, just like the night. There was a bright red band in the East, and now one could at least see better. You could even make out camel thorn bushes against the nearest dune, where moments ago they were still veiled in darkness.

“The odd numbers will fire first,” Sergeant Lazarre ordered. “It will be rapid fire, and every shot must count. We are fifteen and they are

probably more than fifty. I will fire one shot with the revolver and that will be the signal for the first volley. Mes amis, this morning you must shoot as you have never shot in your miserable lives, otherwise the vultures will soon be frolicking here among you. I know you. Remember, you are soldiers of the Foreign Legion. Long live France!”

It rang in Lazarre’s head. This was not his first skirmish with the Doelaks. He knew them. He had seen their torture. He had seen how men were spreadeagled on the hot sand, how their nails were removed... how their tongues were split... how their eyelids were cut off...

“Mes amis, we must prevail,” he said, and it was a strange, urgent command, and his voice sounded unsteady. “On this beautiful morning, we must not lose as you know what awaits us.”

“Mon Sergent,” said Schmidt, a German with a large red face, gesturing upwards with his hand.

Lazarre looked up, and what he saw filled him with revulsion and also with fear.

High above the dunes, the first vultures circled, screeching and bold, as if they were already preparing for the outcome of the battle.

“Vultures have good noses,” said Podolski, and the laughter went like a ripple through the small circle of men.

Lazarre closed his eyes and was grateful anew for the courage of these desert fighters, some of them scum from the streets of many cities, some of them men with heavy sorrow in their hearts. Ruffians, murderers, and those who had innocently fallen by the wayside, but all braver than brave, all almost entirely without fear.

“Those accursed vultures are knocking on the wrong door,” Lazarre said courageously, looking up again at the circling birds.

“Where does one shoot a Doelak, mon Sergent?” someone asked.

“Between the eyes, mon ami,” the sergeant said grandly, toying with

the trigger of his revolver.

“Silence!” Lazarre suddenly commanded.

Above the sighing of the wind, they heard it. The thundering of many hooves on sand.

“Here come the heathens,” said Levy, a Jew who had fled from Tel Aviv.

“Rifles ready!” the command snapped from Lazarre’s mouth.

Above the rushing of the wind, there was the single harsh glint of steel on steel, as the bolts of the Lebel’s were quickly slid open and shut.

The clang of rifle bolts still hung on the wind when the first Arabs appeared in the East on the nearest dune. Their white cloaks billowed and fluttered in the wind, and they sat as firmly on the backs of their horses as only the proud Doelaks can.

“Mon Sergent,” whispered Petacci, a thin little Italian, suddenly behind Lazarre. “Look there!”

The sergeant spun around quickly and saw how a whole line of Arabs had just appeared behind them on the crest of another dune.

A cold shudder went through the Frenchman. He felt that astonishing powerlessness one feels when you know you are lost. In these few seconds between him and death, he desperately sought a way out, but found none. He just stared, terrified, at the vague glint of the first light on the scimitars of the Arabs, the thin steel blades held proudly aloft.

But he did not have much time for fear. There were still a few terrifying moments in which he could be brave.

“Mes legionnaires, ready!” Lazarre bellowed and quickly cocked his revolver.

The next moment, more than two hundred Arabs came thundering down from the dunes towards the small circle of men, whose fingers trembled