

SAHARA

ADVENTURE SERIES

2. Footsteps to Death



MEIRING FOUCHE

FOOTSTEPS TO DEATH

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 narrative commences in the heart of the Sahara with a patrol of the French Foreign Legion, weary after their patrol in the searing heat of the Sahara. Under the command of the colossal Fritz Mundt, they yearn for the marginally better comforts of Dini Salam. Among them is Teuns Stegmann, a South African haunted by a historical connection with El Karima, the ruthless leader of the Doelak Arabs. Their mission takes a dark turn with the discovery of two dead horses bearing Spanish women's side-saddles and the absence of any riders. A golden locket belonging to El Karima is also found, generating considerable unease within the patrol.

The shocking discovery escalates the Legion's troubles. Colonel Le Clerq, the garrison's commander, is stunned to learn that his wife, Antoinette, is one of the missing riders, presumably abducted by El Karima. A ransom demand reaches them shortly thereafter, presenting them with a difficult choice: Teuns Stegmann's life in exchange for Antoinette's freedom. Captain D'Arlan faces the impossible decision of sacrificing one of his bravest men or condemning his commander's wife.

D'Arlan wrestles with his decision, well aware that El Karima's word is worthless, while Teuns grapples with the possibility of dying for El Karima's vengeance. In an astonishing act, Teuns disappears. He attempts to surrender himself to El Karima, only to create even greater danger for everyone involved. Teuns keeps his plans secret, leaving it to the reader to discover what he is hiding. Will Teuns succeed in saving everyone, or is he walking into a deadly trap far more complex than he could ever imagine?

EXTRACT

At that very moment, Akbar Krim swiftly raises his ornate sword there in the desert and then brings it down again. It flashes in the early sunlight.

There is the thundering of hooves, and a thousand young Doelaks, their lips dry because this is their first battle, charge in a great circle towards the cluster of Legion soldiers.

The older warriors raise their war cry and watch the scene before them with satisfaction. At a hundred paces, the Doelaks leap from their horses and, with a horrifying scream that turns the stomach of even the most hardened Legionnaire, they storm Captain D'Arlan's column.

"Death to the Legion!" screams the Arab officer leading them. He intended to say "Legion dogs," but he does not get that far, for when he is fifty paces from the Legionnaires, he falls forward with two bullets in his chest.

He did not even hear D'Arlan blow sharply on his whistle. He does not even hear the deafening volley that rasps across the silent desert. He dies right there, his face in the cool sand.

2. FOOTSTEPS TO DEATH

Chapter 1

TWO HORSES

The line of men is but small and insignificant here in the immeasurable sandy wasteland of the Sahara. They trudge with heads bowed through the sand, no longer even hearing the crunch of their heavy boots. The heat of the relentless sun chastises and torments them, and their lips feel swollen and sore, but they are grateful. They are grateful that they are returning to Dini Salam, the southern outpost of the French Foreign Legion. Away from this vast desert where the rebellious Arabs, as cruel as one can find, are not their greatest enemies, but rather the sand and the heat.

“Do not weep, brothers, and do not mourn either,” says Fritz Mundt, the colossal German. “Before the sun withdraws its head, we shall be in that hive of flies they call Dini Salam, that famous place where we can once again drink a little wine and reflect on how Arabs can stink when the sun is truly hot. Do you not look forward to seeing your esteemed comrades of the garrison again? Do you also not look forward to the delightful experience of drill exercises?”

Most of the ten fellows marching here clearly snort their disapproval. They are indeed grateful that their patrol work through the desert is now almost behind them and that they will not have to do any more of it for the next three months. However, they simply cannot muster enthusiasm for this miserable Dini Salam now. It is a stinking old Arab town full of dirty, oppressive blacks, groaning camels, and braying donkeys. With millions of flies that feel as if they are stripping the skin from your body.

But still, Dini Salam is certainly better than the ordeal of patrol work in the desert. Patrol work! This patrol of theirs had been a complete waste of time, for they had scarcely even seen a vulture. Nor encountered any strange tracks, not even seen a camel or an Arab lying dead.

“You have a strange sense of humour, old giant,” says Teuns Stegmann, the tall, athletic South African with his bright blond curly hair and lively blue eyes, walking here beside Fritz Mundt. “What do you find so amusing about this wretched Dini Salam? It is just a den, a dark cavern full of drama. I would almost rather walk here through the desert than go and sit in that hole.”

“Yes, but you have no taste for the finer things, Teuns,” Fritz playfully counters. “Can one drink a little tippie here in the desert? Can one lie here on one’s back in the shade and think of the days when one was still human? Does one ever see the swish of a skirt here, brother? And what is the old life worth if a man doesn’t even see a skirt swish?”

“Hear, hear!” breaks in Jack Ritchie, the lanky Englishman. “But Teuns hasn’t bothered with women since he was involved with El Karima.”

These words hurt Teuns Stegmann. He does not even look at the Englishman. His thoughts fly back to those few days, more than six months ago, when he was involved with El Karima, the fair leader of the Doelak Arabs. The most beautiful of all beautiful women he had ever seen. He thinks of their thrilling hours together in the palace of Doetra, where she gave him her love. He had been her prisoner, just like so many of his comrades. But she had loved him. And then he had betrayed her.

El Karima, the white woman with her blonde hair and deep blue eyes, her peerless body, who became sovereign of the Doelaks.

El Karima, the fiend who shows no mercy.

He sees her eyes before him again, he feels again the soft burn of her lips on his. He feels again the touch of her exquisite body, he catches again the scent of her shimmering hair.

“Don’t hurt old Teuns,” mocks Fritz Mundt. “El Karima holds tender memories for him. But if she ever gets her hands on him again, she’ll surely skin him alive, won’t she, mon ami?” The big German looks

down at Teuns and sees how the youthful South African's blue eyes flash fire.

"You have a lot to say today, Fritz Mundt," Teuns threatens, his large fists slowly clenching.

"Last time she had you on the rack," the German continues as if he hadn't even noticed the threat in Teuns's posture. "But this time you'll be tied between wild horses, brother. Have you ever seen when the Doelaks tie a man between two wild horses?"

The next moment, it is as if something snaps inside Teuns Stegmann. The movement of his long, slender body is like that of a mamba. The short hook connects with the point of the large Fritz Mundt's jaw, and the German first staggers sideways a little way and then crashes down like an ox onto the hot sand. His eyes are wide with astonishment and shock. Then fury erupts from him, as the other fellows begin to roar with laughter.

"You wretched scum!" threatens the German, leaping up from the sand.

Teuns plants himself squarely in front of Fritz, but before the German is properly upright, another voice cuts through the hot silence.

"What the devil is going on here? Are you a bunch of ruffians or soldiers of the Foreign Legion?" It is Sergeant Vermeer speaking, the short little Dutchman with his terribly bald head and his two legs so bow-legged that he probably couldn't stop two pigs side by side.

"What is going on here?" he bellows again, and then Fritz Mundt speaks, alternately dusting off his clothes and then touching his sore chin again, for that short blow from Teuns had hurt him badly. "A small misunderstanding, mon officier," says Fritz almost pleadingly. "It is all right again now."

Fritz looks into Teuns's blue eyes and sees the small smile slowly spreading across the South African's handsome face, upon which the beard had now appeared thick and dark, for they had been in the desert

for almost a week trying to determine what the Arabs were up to.

“Save your misunderstandings for later,” says the tolerant Vermeer. “I am not in the mood for nonsense now.”

“Qui, mon Capitaine,” says Fritz Mundt subserviently, but his eyes are alive and sparkling with pure fun and mischief.

“Forward!” orders Vermeer, and the small column begins to move slowly again up the steep dune, where the last sandstorm left ripples, like small flat waves on the sea.

Teuns looks up at Fritz. “I am sorry, old giant, I lost my temper.”

“But you hit like a Spanish mule kicks, mon ami,” says Fritz, touching his chin again. “You are the first one in a very long time to succeed in knocking Fritz Mundt down.”

The German suddenly stumbles forward, because Jack Ritchie, walking just behind him, tripped him.

But Fritz does nothing, for Vermeer just then glances back quickly to see if his small column is indeed marching as befits a Legion patrol.

“Speaking of El Karima,” says Podolski, the Pole, from behind them. “I wonder what she has in mind. I don’t trust this silence. I swear she is busy cooking up another pot of trouble for us. Since that day in Doetra when she slipped out from under Private Stegmann on the dapple-grey, nothing more has been heard of her.”

Fritz Mundt, who considers himself the oracle of the garrison at Dini Salam, shrugs his large shoulders, loosens his water flask, and takes a sip of water. “I think we shall hear from her sooner than we imagine,” he says. “She is not the type to sit still for long. In Doetra that day, we shot a bunch of Doelaks dead and blew up their armoury, but where are all the other Doelaks? Where are all the Arabs?”

One of these days she will be after our hides again. She promised a holy war, didn’t she, and I think a holy war is what we’re going to get. Then

the devil will truly be loose, mes amis. When every Arab descends upon us again, the sparks will properly fly.”

“Why didn’t they send a bunch of us to occupy Doetra? She’ll just go back and occupy the place all over again,” says Jack Ritchie.

“Lord Haw-haw,” Fritz Mundt mocks the Englishman, “remember, you are just a soldier. You are not supposed to think or express your opinion about what the higher-ups do. You just have to march and shoot your rifle. If you talk too much, they might put you against the wall. Who are you and I to wonder why Algiers doesn’t do this or that? Maybe they reckon El Karima is done for after we dealt so roughly with her garrison in Doetra. Maybe they think she has fled to Timbuktu, or maybe they think she has taken a husband and is sitting quite happily under a palm tree somewhere in the Sahara.”

“She’ll sit still just as little as a hard-working ant,” says Jack Ritchie, but then speaks no further. They have reached the high crest of the dune, and then they all see it simultaneously. A cluster of circling vultures in the sky, to the north of them, but not far ahead.

Sergeant Vermeer raises his hand, and the short column immediately comes to a halt. Then he raises his binoculars to his eyes.

“Hmm,” snorts Fritz Mundt, “looks like we are not going to have such an uninteresting journey after all?”

“Perhaps just a camel lying dead there,” sighs Teuns Stegmann and sits down on the hot sand to rest a little.

Fritz and the others also sit down groaning, and Fritz says, “I have a feeling in my bones that isn’t just any camel. Why would a camel die here so close to Dini Salam?”

“What else then?” Teuns wants to know.

“Perhaps one of old Father Christmas’s reindeer dropped dead there,” mocks Fritz, rolling a little fine tobacco in a piece of paper. He lights

the cigarette and then subsequently passes it to Teuns and Jack Ritchie for each to take a few puffs. Teuns pulls a terrible face. "Where did you get this rubbish?" he asks, spitting onto the sand.

Fritz leans forward and whispers to the South African. "Stole it from Zakof's pocket last night. It's probably the kind of tobacco they Russians smoke."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," Jack Ritchie chides him mockingly.

"Ashamed? About what? Zakof is just a Russian. He's not human, is he? Besides, didn't he once tell Lieutenant Juin that I had hidden half a bottle under the mattress?"

"Forward march!" commands Vermeer from the side, and they stand up and follow him down the dune. Now, however, Vermeer sets a brisk pace. And the men strike it out properly over the sand, for everyone is equally curious to see what the vultures are busy with. Most of these men have seen death many times, in many gruesome forms, but just like for any other human, death still holds a morbid sort of attraction for them.

Finally, they emerge onto the crest of a horseshoe dune, and below them, in the depression between the two dunes, they see a dense cluster of vultures bundling and fighting. They screech back and forth, and there is a light rustling of wings from those who cannot reach the carcass, impatiently having to keep flying overhead.

Vermeer has the men descend quickly towards the depression of the dune. As they approach, they scatter the fighting birds simply with the barrels of their short carbines. Only then do they see what it is.

Here before them lie two dead horses.

They are two riding horses. The bloodied saddles still sit askew on their backs, which have already been mangled by the vultures.

“Just two horses, not particularly interesting,” says Jack Ritchie, almost a little disappointed.

“It is more than interesting,” says Fritz Mundt.

“How so?” Podolski wants to know.

“Can’t you see the blood on the sand?” Teuns asks the Pole.

“Yes, they did not die a natural death, you Polish ape,” Fritz Mundt mocks him.

“And the saddles, look at the saddles,” says Teuns. “Not Arab saddles, nor French saddles. These are two Spanish women’s side-saddles...!”

“It almost sounds like you were in the Prussian cavalry,” Vermeer says to Teuns, while they walk around the horses, examining them. The vultures above them in the air constantly protest their meal being so drastically interrupted.

“But it is the truth, mon Sergent,” says Fritz Mundt.

Teuns stoops here in front of the two horses. “And here is something else, mon Sergent,” says Teuns.

Vermeer comes to crouch beside the South African. “Hmm, apparently they were shot neatly and deliberately,” says Vermeer.

Fritz sticks his hand under a horse’s shoulder blade. “Still warm. This must have happened just now, mon Sergent,” he says.

“Every baboon knows that, otherwise the vultures would have devoured them long ago,” says Vermeer loftily.

“Yes, these are indeed women’s side-saddles,” Vermeer adds.

“There are fresh horse tracks here, mon Sergent,” reports Jack Ritchie, who has come across deep tracks in the sand.

Vermeer hastily goes to look, and his experience of the desert has already taught him that these tracks were made very recently. “Zakof,