

RED RUBY SERIES

2. The Pirate's Treasure



MEIRING FOUCHE

THE PIRATE'S TREASURE

by

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SUMMARY

Seafarer Simon Verbeeck, a renowned pirate hunter, is ready for his next adventure. After three months of respite, the call of the sea is strong, and his magnificent ship, the Red Ruby, is primed for action. But a chance encounter on the streets of Table Bay throws his carefully laid plans into turmoil. A mysterious, crippled stranger intercepts Simon with an urgent plea. He must visit a condemned murderer, Arie Zeeman, imprisoned in the local castle.

Intrigued, Simon ventures into the castle's depths and discovers Zeeman carries not only guilt but a staggering secret. It is a living map tattooed onto his back, leading to the legendary treasure of the Santa Rosa, a Spanish galleon lost at sea. But Zeeman's secret is also coveted by the ruthless pirate, Devil Harrison, who is not far behind.

Suddenly, Simon finds himself abducted and on a treacherous journey, caught in the crosshairs of a deadly treasure hunt. Imprisoned, tortured, and betrayed, he must use all his courage, resourcefulness, and the bond he forges with fellow captives to outwit Harrison. Simon must decide if he will reveal the secret map and what price he will pay for it to achieve justice and his own survival? Will he be able to escape Harrison's clutches, or will the secret of the Santa Rosa be buried with him forever?

This is more than just a treasure hunt; it's a gripping tale of loyalty, betrayal, and the unbreakable spirit of those who dare to challenge the darkest corners of the sea. Prepare to be swept away on a voyage where courage is tested, secrets are deadly, and the line between pirate and hero blurs with every wave.

EXTRACT

Devil Harrison lowered his sword and measured the distance to the neck of the unfortunate seaman. Then he lifted his sword, glittering...

The movement was so inconspicuous, but as fast as lightning itself. All that Simon Verbeeck saw was the jerk of Princess Dolores's hand when the flashing beam passed through the air, and the next moment Devil Harrison fell to his knees with a terrible scream.

The dagger, which the princess had plucked from under her wide skirt and which she had hurled with such deadly effect, had struck the pirate high in the shoulder. The pain and the impact of steel were so sharp that it threw him off his feet. Simon only saw how the long, thin dagger glittered inside Devil Harrison's shoulder, how the red blood started to spurt, then he saw that the princess had turned around and was storming away towards the sea.

More than half of the pirates rushed to the aid of their leader. Suddenly, they had forgotten everything except the dagger in Harrison's shoulder. A number of others turned around and stormed after Princess Dolores. She had lifted her wide skirts high and she was sprinting like a gazelle over the sand towards the beach where the boats lay.

Simon Verbeeck's command sounded loud and clear. "Come on fellows! To the boats!"

2. THE PIRATE'S TREASURE

Chapter 1

PIRATE IN TABLE BAY

Seafarer Simon Verbeeck and his two companions, Wilhelm Rieckert and John Tobey, walked hunched against the strong southeasterly wind in the Heerengracht towards his residence.

They were in a cheerful mood, for the Cape weather was pleasant. They had enjoyed three months of rest, and now the yearning for adventure tingled once more in their veins.

“Well, lads,” said Simon Verbeeck, “the ‘Red Ruby’ is ready to set sail again.”

“Where will the journey take us?” Wilhelm Rieckert wondered aloud.

John Tobey, whose tongue had been cut out by a pirate, made a broad gesture with his arms as if to indicate that the next voyage of the ‘Red Ruby’ would encompass all the oceans.

Simon Verbeeck felt almost lightheaded with joy and anticipation. He had meticulously repaired and inspected his magnificent vessel here in Table Bay over the past three months. The sails were new again, the masts were oiled, and the encrustations of many months of travel had been scraped away. His crew was well-fed and well-clothed, and everything was in order for the next adventure of this renowned man who traversed the seven seas in search of pirates and other brigands.

A feeling of contentment welled up within him as he thought of the dark eyes of his wife, Maria, in their little house further up the Heerengracht. In these past few months, Simon Verbeeck had also acquired the house for himself. In the past, he had had no home, save for the sea and the deck of his vessel, the ‘Red Ruby’.

Maria had accompanied him on many of his voyages, but now he felt that she should have a place to reside. And the best place for him and for her was in the harbour of Table Bay. Here she would be safe, here she could make friends, and here a home would always await him when he returned from the sea.

It was just as Simon and his two jovial mates reached the house, just as they were about to turn from the street towards the front stoop, that a stooped man with a long and unkempt beard, a wooden leg, and an old

seaman's cutlass at his hip, intercepted them. It was already deep twilight, for after leaving the 'Red Ruby', they had first visited a tavern and drunk a few snifters. In the dim light, the man looked to them like a beggar. Simon was irritated and tried to pass the fellow, but the man grabbed him by the sleeve and brought him to a standstill.

"Just a moment, Master Simon Verbeek," he said in a shaky, squeaky little voice.

"Who are you and what is your business?" asked Simon. His voice was strong and deep.

"Forgive me," said the man, who was already past middle age, "but I wish to speak a few words with you, Simon Verbeek. Who I am and what I am is of no consequence. I am a seaman who has been cast out by the sea."

He stepped a few paces aside and beckoned Simon to follow him. Simon indicated to his two companions to enter the house, where the light already beckoned invitingly.

In the shadow of the young oak, Simon and the stranger faced each other, while John Tobey and Wilhelm Rieckert stepped onto the stoop and peered curiously over their shoulders to see what was happening down below.

"What do you want to talk about?" asked Simon. "If you have something to say, say it quickly, for I am on my way to my supper."

"Simon Verbeek," said the man, "you do not know me, but I know you. I know that you are one of the most intrepid seafarers on earth. That is why I have come to you. I want you to go to the castle."

"To the castle?" asked Simon, and he frowned in the increasing darkness and the rising wind.

"Yes, to the castle," said the stranger. "It is important, Simon Verbeek, for here in the castle, one of the greatest secrets of your life awaits you."

"What are you talking about, man," asked Simon. "What am I to seek in the castle? The castle is a fortress and a prison, and I do not like prisons."

The stranger in his tattered clothes stood deeper under the shadow of the young oak. Simon could now barely see him. He was on his guard and kept a small distance from the intruder.

"Have you ever heard of the man Arie Zeeman?" came the voice

through the darkness.

“Arie Zeeman?” asked Simon. “It is as if I vaguely remember someone of that name. Is it... is it not...?”

“That is correct,” said the stranger. “Arie Zeeman is the man who was sentenced to death by the Governor because he beat a man to death in the harbour.”

“Very well,” said Simon, “what do I have to do with this man? He is a murderer and he is going to die. I understand that he will be hanged within a few days. Why do you come and bother me with such a man?”

“Listen to me, Simon Verbeeck,” said the stranger, “listen carefully to my words. Do not be hasty or impatient. You must go and see Arie Zeeman. You must see him tonight. You must see him alone,”

“To what end?” asked Simon impatiently. “What should I seek from a murderer?”

“Let him be a murderer,” said the stranger, “but he is also the bearer of a great secret.” His voice grew softer towards Simon, soft and urgent, with a burning earnestness in it. “Arie Zeeman,” said the fellow, “possesses one of the greatest secrets of the sea. That secret you must discover, Simon Verbeeck, before Arie Zeeman dies. I beg you. Do not cast my words to the wind. Go and do as I say. Go to the castle and ask them to allow you to speak with Arie Zeeman.”

“They will not allow me,” said Simon, “look how late it is.”

“Here at the Cape,” said the man, “they will allow you anything, for you are Simon Verbeeck. And you must not allow Arie Zeeman to die before you have spoken with him. I beg you, Simon Verbeeck. I beg you in the name of the sea. Promise me you will go. Promise me that, Simon.”

Simon hesitated where he stood. He did not know what to make of this proposition from a stranger who had simply stopped him here along the Heerengracht in the harsh southeasterly wind and spoken to him in this way. Perhaps the man was just a fortune seeker. Perhaps he was one of those people who was not quite right in the head. But he could not escape the impression that the man was serious. He could not escape the impression that there was an unusual urgency in the man’s words.

“And this secret?” asked Simon, “what is it?”

“No,” answered the stranger, “that you must hear from Arie Zeeman. I

am not entitled to tell it to you, for I do not know the secret. All that I know is that Arie Zeeman knows it. He was part of that secret, Simon Verbeeck, and if you allow Arie Zeeman to die before you have received that secret from him, then you will not be worthy to ever go out to sea again. I am a simple man, I am a needy man. But you must take my word, Simon. You must take my word that I love the sea and its secrets. If I do nothing else, then I want to say that this secret should be entrusted to you before Arie Zeeman dies. What do you say, Simon Verbeeck? What do you say, man of the sea?"

It had now become completely dark, and there was a wild rustling of the leaves of the oak tree. Simon Verbeeck searched for the man's face, searched for his image, so neglected and worn, but he could not find it. Then he looked at the friendly light from the house. Through the window, he saw his Maria moving, her hair shimmering in the light. Then, after a long pause, he said. "I will go. I will speak with Arie Zeeman tonight."

He became aware of movement in the dark, and then he felt how the man grabbed his hands. He caught the scent of old liquor, of rags, and of a body that was not clean.

"I thank you, Simon Verbeeck," said the man. "I thank you because you will go. But as I told you, you must go alone, and you must go tonight."

"I will do it," said Simon. "I will go and seek out Arie Zeeman."

Then he heard the shuffling movement, and even before he could speak again, he realised that the man had slipped past him and was moving down the street, against the wind. Vaguely, he saw the figure, and he marvelled at this strange apparition. At a man who had come so unexpectedly with such an unexpected communication and who had then disappeared just as unexpectedly.

Deep in thought, the seafarer stepped onto his stoop to the front door and went inside.

When Simon entered, Maria was just placing the large soup tureen on the table. She smiled welcomingly at her husband, and Simon looked with great tenderness at her dark beauty.

"Well, my husband," asked Maria, "what did the stranger, of whom Wilhelm Rieckert told me, have to say?"

Simon saw how Wilhelm and John Tobey looked at him curiously.

He stepped further inside, kissed Maria on her cheek, sniffed at the fragrant steam of the bean soup with the pork fat in it, and then he said lightly.

“The strange stranger asked me to go and pay a visit tonight.”

“A visit?” asked Maria. “To the Governor?”

Simon laughed, making his large body shake. “No, not to the Governor,” he said, “but to the castle.”

“To the castle?” asked Wilhelm Rieckert and leaned forward on the chest where he had taken a seat.

“Yes,” said Simon, going to the cask in the corner and pouring each of them a cup of wine from the Governor’s vineyards. “This man asks me to go to the castle and seek out one Arie Zeeman.”

“But he is the condemned man,” said Maria. “He is the murderer!”

“That is correct,” answered Simon, “he will probably be hanged in a few days.”

“Now, what must you go and do there?” asked Wilhelm.

“Well,” said Simon, “the stranger says that Arie Zeeman has a great secret of the sea. A secret that must be entrusted to me before Zeeman dies!”

“What kind of secret?” asked John Tobey in sign language. Simon shrugged his large shoulders.

“I do not know, John. The stranger would not say.”

“You must tread carefully, Simon Verbeeck,” warned Wilhelm Rieckert. “You must not allow yourself to be led by the nose by anyone who just stops you in the street.”

“Yes,” said Maria, and she pressed her hands involuntarily to her cheeks, “I think you had rather let it go, my husband. What kind of secret can this murderer have?”

“Well, I do not know,” said Simon. “In any case, I promised the man that I would go. He asked me to go alone and to go tonight. I promised that I would do it. I believe that he is honest, and I believe that he has no ulterior motives with me. Let us sit down to eat.”

They drank, they ate, and they conversed cheerfully. But through the gaiety, there was a hint of tension. Repeatedly, Simon became aware that Maria was looking at him in a peculiar way, and when he looked John Tobey and Wilhelm Rieckert in the eyes, he saw in them a

warning, an unease, and an uncertainty.

It made him feel strong and sure. When Simon Verbeeck saw others doubting, when he saw others fearing, then he always felt powerful, sure of himself, courageous. And the stranger's communication excited him more and more. What if there truly was a secret of the sea? How precious could it not be for him, not in terms of money or jewels, but in terms of adventure, danger, courage, bravery. This is what he was born for, for dangerous adventure, for the good deed amidst all the brigandage on the sea.

They had drunk their wine, they had eaten their food, and they were just busy drinking Maria's excellent coffee when the front door flew open, and Simon's neighbour, Jan de Swardt, came flying in, quickly closing the door behind him. His hair was dishevelled. Jan de Swardt was an official in the service of the Dutch East India Company.

"Well, Jan," said Simon heartily, "I am glad the southeasterly has blown you in here."

Jan laughed and straightened his tousled hair. "Yes," he said. "You are just as scarce, Simon Verbeeck."

"What is the news?" asked Simon, while Maria offered Jan de Swardt coffee.

"I came to hear if you know anything about the ship?" asked Jan de Swardt.

"Ship?" asked Simon, "what kind of ship?"

"A strange ship off the coast of Robben Island," said Jan. "Have you not noticed it?"

"We were so busy on the 'Red Ruby' until late," answered Simon, "that we did not have much time for looking around. What about this ship?"

"The whole Cape is talking about it," said Jan. "Apparently, a large ship that lies there. Firmly anchored, the sails furled."

"But why off Robben Island?" asked Wilhelm Rieckert. "Why not come into the harbour?"

"Probably afraid of the wind," answered Simon. "In a southeasterly like this, I also would not lightly bring a large ship into Table Bay harbour. I would rather remain in the open sea."

"That is true enough," said Wilhelm.

"You say it is a large one?" asked Simon.