

RED RUBY SERIES

6. The Kings Ransom



MEIRING FOUCHE

THE KINGS RANSOM

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 tranquil waters of the Indian Ocean conceal a deadly secret, a buried treasure that promises riches beyond imagination, and a journey paved with treachery. Captain Simon Verbeeck, a renowned hunter of pirates, finds himself on an unusual quest, not for justice, but for fortune. Guided by a mute former pirate, John Tobey, whose past is etched with cruelty and betrayal, they seek an island whispered about in legends. But paradise is a deceptive facade.

Their arrival shatters their expectations, revealing a hidden presence and a chilling conspiracy that twists the familiar into the terrifying. What begins as a hunt for treasure becomes a desperate fight for survival as loyalties are tested and friendships shatter under the weight of greed and cunning. A band of outcasts, the dregs of the pirate world, rise up to claim their own bloody destiny, and Verbeeck is caught in their desperate struggle. Will his courage and skill be enough when his greatest enemy isn't a foe on the high seas but the very men he trusted?

Against a backdrop of exotic lands and treacherous seas, this is a tale of daring escapes, high-stakes gambles, and the haunting echoes of past betrayals. Who is the true enemy? What is the price of freedom? And can Verbeeck overcome his deepest fears and reclaim what was stolen? Dive into a story where every wave hides a threat, every shadow conceals a deception, and the line between hunter and hunted blurs until it vanishes altogether.

EXTRACT

It was Johan Buyskes who shouted to Simon in the first light of dawn. “What is that on the beach?”

Simon leaned forward as he stared. “There is movement,” he shouted back. “Large things. Doesn’t it look like elephants to you?”

“Yes, elephants,” shouted Johan Buyskes. “It looks like that to me. Yes, it’s elephants. And there are people.”

“They’re going to welcome us,” said Simon. “Who could it be?”

But neither he nor Johan Buyskes could answer the question. They saw the dim forms moving there on the beach and little did they know that they were indeed being awaited.

They two kept staring at the beach, and each one kept wrestling with the question. Would it be friend or foe?

Then they looked at the men in the dinghies. They tried to wake them. They tried to rouse them to life.

“We’re approaching land!” shouted Simon to his men. Johan Buyskes repeated this to his men. Here and there, there was just one who managed to sit upright, open his eyes for a moment, and then fall back with the one cry, “I’m thirsty.” They looked at the few swords that they still had in the dinghies, and then they both felt so powerless.

6. THE KINGS RANSOM

Chapter 1

For days now, the sailing vessel, the Red Ruby, has been ploughing calmly and swiftly through the Indian Ocean. But now, the beautiful craft has almost reached its destination. It is a remote and peculiar destination, without any inherent danger, yet nonetheless extraordinary. There is a man in the crow's nest, and on the deck, everyone is busy with their respective duties. Some are scrubbing, others are working on the sails, and still others are just pitching in here and there. It is during lulls like these that the seaman takes advantage to get his vessel in order. The gun ports of the Red Ruby are closed. The men on deck are not armed. No danger is anticipated.

The only two on the vessel who are particularly alert at the moment are the man in the crow's nest and the helmsman. Especially the man in the crow's nest, as he has a very explicit order to keep his eyes open and carefully observe the surrounding sea. One never knows when one might encounter a pirate or two. They are very fond of appearing on the horizon here on the eastern sea routes and making your life miserable. In the captain's cabin, three men are sitting at a chart table. One is large and dark, and his name is Simon Verbeeck. The second is tall and blonde. His name is Wilhelm Rieckert.

The third is short and insignificant. His name is John Tobey.

Simon Verbeeck and Wilhelm Rieckert, Simon's right-hand man here on the Red Ruby, are spectators. The man who is working is John Tobey. Every time, Tobey indicates something with his hands or with his eyes. He cannot speak, because his tongue has been cut out.

John Tobey is busy drawing a map. He does it thoroughly and neatly. The piece of parchment on which he is drawing the map is held down on the chart table by four weights. Tobey's fingers are firmly clasped around the quill as it scratches across the parchment. First, he draws the outline of an island. Then, he indicates the palm plantations that reach almost to the sea. Then, he continues into the interior and finally makes a dot on the map with a circle around it.

John Tobey looks very pleased when he is finished. "I think this is where the treasure is located," Tobey indicates. "I'm doing all this from

memory, but that's about where the treasure should be.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” asks Simon.

“Well,” replies Tobey, “it's just an approximation. Once we're on the island, I'll be able to say exactly.”

“What I mean,” says Simon, “is are you absolutely certain that there is buried treasure, John Tobey?”

Tobey smiles. He speaks again with his fingers. “I'm as certain as I am alive,” he indicates. “The treasure is there, unless someone has removed it. I helped bury it myself. That's why my tongue was cut out. That's why I spent months alone on that island. I've already told you the whole story, Simon Verbeeck.”

This is true. Tobey has told Simon Verbeeck the story so often. At Simon's request, he once wrote it out in full on parchment. The dark mariner then read it all. It is a fantastic tale of wealth and cruelty. The pirate in whose company Tobey was had taken him along when he went to bury the treasure. And because he wanted to make absolutely sure that no one would ever know where it was, he had Tobey's tongue cut out and left him on the island. In the meantime, the pirate had died. The treasure must, in all likelihood, still lie where it was buried.

Simon Verbeeck had found John Tobey on the island at the time, but due to circumstances, he could not search for the treasure. He had taken pity on Tobey, and John Tobey had become one of his most loyal and valued crew members. Also one of the bravest. One of the most daring. The island that John Tobey has drawn lies off the east coast of Siam. It is a relatively small island when you look at it on a map, but when you are on it, it is not so terribly small. There are lush forests on it and there is even a small mountain. There are springs, dense undergrowth, and the most beautiful beaches one can imagine. It is one of the jewels of the East, and it is completely uninhabited.

“Now what do we do with you, John Tobey, if we arrive there and the treasure isn't there?” asks Wilhelm Rieckert teasingly. “Can we just cut off your ears then?”

Tobey indicates again quickly with his fingers. “If the treasure isn't there,” he says, “then it's not my fault.”

For Simon Verbeeck, the feared and hated hunter of pirates, this is indeed a peculiar mission. It rarely happens that he searches for

treasure, but this time he is searching for treasure. He has a good purpose for it. For many years, it has been his desire to replace the older members of his crew, who are no longer really capable of doing their jobs properly, with younger men, and then to settle those old-timers somewhere on land. To that end, he would like to get hold of a piece of land at the Cape of Good Hope. But to do that, he needs the money, and he doesn't have it. He has been thinking about coming to unearth this treasure, selling it, and using the money to buy a settlement for elderly crew members, not only from his vessel but also from other vessels.

“You say the island is completely uninhabited?”

John Tobey nods vehemently. In sign language, he indicates that there was not a living soul on the island as long as he was there. He had walked it from end to end. He had had plenty of time to do so because he had been alone on the island for a very, very long time.

He thinks back almost wistfully to the time he spent on that paradise. It was the loneliest time of his life, and he had believed that he would never be rescued. He had firmly believed that he would have to spend the rest of his life there. Only he and the pirate captain knew about the treasure that was buried there, but he knows that the lives of pirate captains are short-lived. When the months went by and the pirate did not return to claim his treasure, Tobey deduced that he had perished.

Tobey had lived by catching fish, eating coconuts and drinking the milk, from sand crabs, from crayfish that he caught in the shallow water, from sea turtles that he got hold of just beyond the coral reef. He never lacked for food, but he did lack for company.

The map is now finished. It is carefully examined by Simon Verbeeck and Wilhelm Rieckert. They have just finished with it when a seaman comes running into the cabin.

“An island right ahead,” the seaman reports.

Simon Verbeeck, Wilhelm Rieckert, and John Tobey leap up and run out of the cabin.

“What do you see?” Simon shouts to the man in the crow's nest.

“I see land,” the man calls back, and in his voice there is the enthusiasm that always characterizes a seaman's voice when he sights land.

“Where?” asks Simon.

“Right ahead,” the crow's nest man shouts back.

Simon smiles at Wilhelm Rieckert. “We can calculate our direction quite well, can’t we, Wilhelm?”

“Yes, I must say,” Rieckert replies, “that’s something we can do.”

Simon hurries to the forecastle and brings the small telescope to his eye. Far on the horizon, like a dark spot, he sees the island emerge from the endless ocean. His heart leaps within him. It had been a safe voyage from the Cape of Good Hope. No mishap and no incident. He just hopes that they will find on the island what they have come to seek. If he succeeds in unearthing the treasure, he plans to sail back past the coast of Siam, through the Strait of Malacca to the West Coast of Malaya. There, he wants to load a cargo of timber and ivory to go and trade it in at the Cape of Good Hope.

They reach the island in the late afternoon, and from a distance, it looks like a blue jewel. It lies there, surrounded by its snow-white beaches, and there is a bluish haze over the lush vegetation of the small island. Simon now stands by the helmsman himself, because he knows how treacherous it is to sail around these islands in the East. Almost without exception, they are surrounded by coral reefs, and Simon Verbeeck does not want his proud vessel to run aground on one of the reefs. He has two depth gauges. One on the port side and one on the starboard side, here at the forecastle. Every time, he admonishes them to measure accurately, but the men themselves know what it means if they measure incorrectly.

When Simon has approached the island to a safe distance, he orders that anchor be dropped. It is too late to go ashore now. Simon Verbeeck has learned that the sea, and especially islands, sometimes present nasty surprises. He has a feeling that he should not enter this strange island now. He must wait until it is light again. Until he is fully prepared.

The anchor is dropped, and the Red Ruby comes to a standstill outside the coral reef of the island. The skipper gives the order that two longboats be made ready to take a number of men ashore early the next morning. He orders the men to get their weapons in order. He orders them to place shovels in the longboats. Everything is done as he orders, and he decides to go to rest early that evening.

“How many men are you taking ashore tomorrow, Simon?” asks Wilhelm Rieckert.

“Three-quarters of the crew,” Simon replies. “I think we will have to take three longboats.”

“Isn’t that a little risky?” asks Rieckert.

“I don’t think so,” Simon replies. “I don’t see any vessel here by the island.”

“We couldn’t see the other side of the island, you know that, Simon.”

“That’s true again,” the skipper replies. “We were a little foolish, weren’t we?”

“As I know these parts,” says Wilhelm Rieckert, “I would have sailed around the island first to see if everything was in order.”

“Very well,” says Simon. “This time you’ve thought further than me, Wilhelm Rieckert. What would I have done without you? To be very careful, we will weigh anchor tomorrow at dawn and first sail around the island to see if everything is right. Then we will go ashore.”

“Why do you want to take so many men along?” asks Wilhelm.

Simon smiles. “I’m a sensible man, just like you, Wilhelm. One can never know what surprise is waiting on the island.”

“A surprise?” asks Wilhelm. “John Tobey says the island is uninhabited.”

“It’s been quite a few years since Tobey was here,” says Simon. “And remember, this island is not at all that far from the coast of Siam. No, I’m taking a whole lot of men along. I don’t want to be ambushed or surprised on the island.”

Wilhelm turns to go to sleep. “Bring each of us a glass of wine,” Simon requests, and over the wine, they discuss the treasure that is buried here. According to John Tobey, it is one of the most valuable that has ever changed hands between the rightful owners and the pirates. The treasure was carried by a Spanish galleon that was on its way to the West Indies. There is not much money in the treasure. It is mostly gold and silver in the form of jewels that were sent by the Spanish governor of one of the islands to be distributed among the beautiful women of the island. Part of the treasure is from the Spanish crown jewels that were sent to the West Indies for safe keeping. This Spanish galleon was intercepted by the pirate, and the fantastic treasure was confiscated.

“Now I wonder,” asks Simon, “whether members of the pirate’s crew know about the treasure. John Tobey certainly wasn’t the only member

of the crew.”

“Tobey has assured me repeatedly,” replies Wilhelm Rieckert, “that only he and the captain went to bury that treasure. No other living person knew where they had hidden it. And to search for such a treasure on an island like this would be like searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack. Tobey says that he and the captain buried the treasure, and immediately after that, they departed. There was not the slightest possibility that one of the crew members or a group could have gone ashore.”

They finish their wine, and then Wilhelm Rieckert leaves to go to sleep. Simon climbs into his bunk. A quiet, uninhabited island, and yet, they both feel a little suspicious. It is almost as if it is too good to be true. Somewhere, there is something that is warning them, and although they cannot define or pinpoint it, they can clearly feel it.

The night passes without any incident, just like the sea voyage here, and when Simon Verbeeck comes on deck early the next morning at dawn, he finds that his suspicion has intensified. He feels a peculiar unease. When things go so smoothly, then he usually does not trust matters. He orders that the anchor be raised, and with the help of the soft breeze, the Red Ruby swings parallel to the island and begins to sail around it. They keep well clear, for fear of the coral reefs, and Simon has a reliable man up in the crow’s nest.

Wilhelm Rieckert has also gotten up, and he and Simon remain on deck. Further and further they sail around the island, and they admire its beauty in the early light. It looks like a paradise, but there is also a peculiar mysteriousness to it. As if something is lurking in the lush green vegetation of which they are not aware. But their sail around the island yields nothing. It is high tide, and the sea is running high up against the beaches to the tree line. They do not sight a vessel or anything that disturbs them. And when they reach the place from which they had set out a while after sunrise, Simon drops anchor again, and one, two, three, he has three longboats lowered. The men who are to accompany him have already been selected. They are armed and ready. They clamber down the rope ladders into the longboats, and soon they depart through the surf.

The part of the crew that remains behind stands sullenly against the