

RED RUBY SERIES

9. Whispers of the Sunken Ship



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WHISPERS OF THE SUNKEN SHIP

by

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SUMMARY

A respected sea captain, Simon Verbeeck, is summoned by the Governor of the Cape of Good Hope for an urgent mission. A Dutch vessel, the *Sluiskerk*, has vanished without a trace, and whispers of resurgent pirates along the treacherous West African coast fill the air. Driven by a sense of duty and a thirst for the mysteries of the sea, Simon embarks on a perilous journey aboard his ship, *The Red Ruby*.

What begins as a search for a missing ship quickly spirals into a desperate hunt for a young woman, the Governor's niece, who was aboard the vanished vessel. Simon's quest leads him to a chilling discovery. He found a longboat adrift at sea, carrying the dead, gold bars, and a crude map hinting at a hidden danger deep within the African interior.

Simon plunges into the unknown, navigating treacherous deserts, battling hostile tribes and pirates and a cunning and powerful pirate who holds all the cards, and a dark secret that could change his destiny forever. As he unravels the mysteries, each revelation leads him deeper into peril. Will he locate the missing girl? What is the secret of the gold? And will he ever see the sea again, or will he join the crew of lost souls who perished on this desolate African shore?

This tale of courage and betrayal, with its pulse-pounding action and hidden truths, will draw you into the heart of adventure, leaving you breathless until the very last page.

EXTRACT

But even more than the shock of the Red Ruby's apparent defeat is the realisation that they are now trapped. Behind them the enemies are coming and in front of them, here on the sea, the enemies are in charge. Simon wonders what has become of Wilhelm and his comrades. Could they all be dead? Or would the commander of Aat van Veen's ship be holding them captive? These are questions that will have to be answered later. His big problem at the moment is how to escape from the pursuers. He looks around and then he sees a sight that surprises him. The pirates and the natives have fallen further behind. They are now walking. They are not even trotting anymore.

That also causes Simon and his men to break down to a quick step. He cannot understand what is now going on. But then, with a damning blow, he realises what has happened. He looks along the beach which is so flat and open here. He searches for the longboat that they dragged onto the sand.

The longboat is also gone. Now Simon understands why the pirates are no longer in a hurry here at the back. They saw first that there is no escape for the fugitives. They also saw that their vessel has achieved victory.

Desperately, Simon and his men look up and down the beach. They search as far as the surf. But there is no sign of the longboat.

9. WHISPERS OF THE SUNKEN SHIP

CHAPTER 1

In the small house on the Heerengracht in the settlement of the Cape of Good Hope, there is quite a commotion and a delight.

In the middle of the front room, the large man turns around, embarrassed, and then looks at his beautiful dark-haired wife. Her eyes sparkle, and she looks at him admiringly.

“You look magnificent, my husband,” says Maria Verbeeck. “You look like a true nobleman. Now you are ready for his Excellency the Governor.”

“Yes,” says Wilhelm Rieckert. “You indeed look like a nobleman, Simon Verbeeck.”

It is the staring and the compliments that make the large, massive seafarer, Simon Verbeeck, feel so embarrassed, because he sees that even his old friend John Tobey is sitting and peering at him admiringly. John has not said anything yet. He cannot say anything, because his tongue has been cut out by pirates.

Simon Verbeeck has reason to feel pleased. He looks neat in his black breeches, his black stockings, his black shoes with the bright, gleaming buckles, and with the black feathered hat on his dark head. Maria herself has trimmed his jet-black beard so that it is now neat and glistening, and his moustache Wilhelm Rieckert has neatly curled with special pomade. But through the admiration, Simon sees the question in all their eyes. It is a question that is not uttered by anyone, but he can sense it. They want to ask him what he is going to do at the governor of the settlement of the Cape of Good Hope. What would be the reason that his Excellency has summoned him so unexpectedly.

“Now for my walking stick,” says Simon.

John Tobey follows the movement of his lips, jumps up, and takes the neat walking stick from the coat rack. Then Simon walks over to Maria, taps her on the cheek, and kisses her lightly.

“Keep your fingers crossed for me,” says the big seafarer. “Maybe his Excellency wants to make me head of this settlement.” They all laugh, and then Simon Verbeeck walks out, accompanied by Wilhelm Rieckert, his bosom friend and his right-hand man at sea.

The two walk down the Heerengracht in the direction of the castle, where the governor has summoned Simon.

And it is then that Wilhelm Rieckert, who shares all secrets with Simon, can no longer suppress his curiosity. “What could it be, Simon?” asks Wilhelm. “Do you have any indication why his Excellency has summoned you?”

“I don’t have the faintest idea,” answers Simon.

“Do you think it’s something important?” asks Wilhelm.

Simon stops on the flat street that is laid out with round pebbles and looks at his friend. “My dear Wilhelm,” says Simon, “his Excellency does not have a man summoned unless it is of importance. This is no small matter, of that I am certain.”

Then he looks away thoughtfully for a moment at the bright, smooth surface of the water in Table Bay. He looks at the masts and the cross-trees of a large and elegant vessel that is at anchor there. It is his own Red Ruby. He is already longing for his ship. It has been a day or two since he was on board. His men are busy cleaning the Red Ruby neatly and picking here and there where there may be a crack or a tear in the large hull.

Then the two continue, and after a while Simon Verbeeck appears before the quarters of his Excellency the Governor.

He is immediately admitted, and when he enters the spacious, neat and impressive room, the Governor of the Cape of Good Hope immediately stands up behind his huge writing desk.

He comes around and extends his hand to Simon Verbeeck.

“I am glad to see you, Verbeeck. There are matters that I want to discuss with you.”

Simon greets his Excellency and bows low. Then he sits upright in the chair that the Governor has offered him.

“Verbeeck,” says the Governor after they have sat down, “I have had you come here regarding an important matter. In what condition is your vessel?”

“My vessel is currently being refurbished, Your Excellency. It should be ready for the sea within a week. Why do you ask, Your Excellency?”

He sees a frown between the Governor’s eyes. An uncertainty. Also, concern.

The Governor pulls the quill out of the inkwell and looks at it.

“Verbeeck,” says his Excellency. “There is something wrong.”

“Something wrong, Your Excellency?”

“Yes, something serious has happened, Verbeeck. It seems to me that the pirates are active again on the West Coast of Africa.”

Simon Verbeeck feels the pinpricks throughout his body. When one talks about pirates, Simon Verbeeck’s mane stands up immediately. He has declared war on the pirates of the seven oceans. He does not let any opportunity or chance pass if he can engage in battle with the pirates.

“Why does Your Excellency say that?”

The Governor looks steadily at Simon. “Verbeeck,” he says, “a little over two months ago, the Dutch vessel the Sluiskerk departed from Rotterdam on its way here. There is still no sign of the Sluiskerk. The vessel should have arrived here a long time ago, but it has simply disappeared without a trace.”

Simon clenches his fists and looks at the Governor. He looks attentively and with an expression of concern at the head of the settlement.

“Do you think... do you think that the pirates are responsible for that?”

“I am convinced of it, Verbeeck.”

“Two months, you say? The Sluiskerk departed from Rotterdam two months ago?”

“That is correct, Verbeeck. No vessel can sail from Rotterdam to the Cape of Good Hope in two months, even if it has run into a major storm.”

“And the cargo, Your Excellency? Was it an important cargo?”

The Governor lays the quill down on the shiny surface of the writing desk. “Yes,” he says, “the Sluiskerk was carrying a special cargo. Rations for this settlement and... a lady.”

“A lady, Your Excellency?”

“Yes,” answers the Governor, “a niece of my wife.”

Simon takes a deep breath.

“Her name is Helena van Gelderen. A young girl, from our nobility, who wanted to come here to visit my wife. We feel highly upset, Verbeeck, as you can understand yourself. We were very much looking forward to the visit of Miss Van Gelderen. We are very attached to her. Therefore, you can understand that we are highly upset by the events.”

“And you have had no word or tidings of the Sluiskerk?”

Without answering immediately, the Governor gets up and walks to the wall, where there is a large map of the West Coast of Africa hanging.

“Come and look here, Verbeeck,” says the Governor. Simon follows his Excellency with interest to the wall map.

While the Governor looks at the map, he continues to speak. “Yesterday, the vessel De Neuwe Dijk arrived here. De Neuwe Dijk is a vessel that is on our route to the East. The skipper came to me and gave me a certain report. He came across certain wreckage. Beams, pieces of mast and a few bales. He saw it here.” The Governor points with his forefinger at the map.

Simon Verbeeck again feels the peculiar pins and prickles that go through his body when he gets very excited. He feels the tingling in his hair.

The place indicated by the Governor is a place feared by all seafarers. It is on the desolate and deathly west coast of Africa.

Then the great seaman looks at the Governor in surprise. The Governor looks equally surprised at him.

“So it would seem, Verbeeck,” says his Excellency, “that something has happened to the Sluiskerk. No one knows for sure if these pieces of wreckage are those of the Sluiskerk, but there is a very interesting indication. In one of the bales, the skipper of De Neuwe Dijk found meat that had been pickled in a certain way. Such meat is, among other things, ordered from Holland for the garrison of this castle. I am almost certain that an ordinary vessel would not have had such meat on board. It is meat that I specifically ordered for the settlement. It makes me think that the pieces of wreckage are those of the Sluiskerk.”

Simon stares at the place on the map indicated by the Governor, and all sorts of thoughts flash through his mind. Could it be a storm? Or could it really be pirates who sent this ship to the depths? And if it is so that the Sluiskerk perished, why exactly in this place? From his experience, Simon knows that most skippers who know the West Coast sail as far away from this place as possible. They know the treacherous currents and they know the deathly coast, which is why they keep as far away from this place as possible. And now it seems as if the Sluiskerk found its downfall here.

“And you think it’s pirates, Your Excellency?”

“It’s just an impression, Verbeeck,” answers the Governor. “But I feel almost certain that it is the work of pirates. At the Sluiskerk, or at least a little behind the Sluiskerk, there must have been another vessel whose name I do not know. I was informed in advance on what date the Sluiskerk would depart together with another vessel that was supposed to go and fetch certain government supplies from the East. There is also no sign of that vessel. I have not had any word or tidings of it either. It makes me think that something big is wrong on the West Coast.”

Then the Governor turns around and sits down again. He signals for Simon to come and sit down.

“I had you come, Verbeeck,” says the Governor, “to hear if you feel inclined to try and find out what is going on here. I need to find out what happened to these supplies, to the ship, and especially what has become of the girl. For me and my wife, it is a sad matter that she has not yet arrived here. I know you as a good and intrepid seafarer, Verbeeck, and if there is one man who may be able to find out what is going on, it is you, Verbeeck. That is why I had you come. If you are prepared to do this, I can assure you that the Dutch East India Company will reward you duly for this voyage.”

Simon Verbeeck does not have to think about it. Secrets of the sea are irresistible to him. He simply must solve them. Especially secrets that have to do with ships that disappear and with the possible presence of pirates.

“I will go, Your Excellency,” says Simon. “I will have my vessel finished immediately and take on supplies.”

The Governor smiles with relief. “I am so grateful, Verbeeck,” he says, “that you are so willing. It is actually more than one or two vessels that have disappeared. It is much more than personal concern on my part regarding a family relation who seemingly does not arrive. This is about much more, Verbeeck. It is about the issue of piracy. I cannot afford it, and I also cannot allow pirates to become active in this part of the coast. It will completely cripple us here in the Cape of Good Hope. If there are any indications of pirate activities, we will have to devise a plan to end it. They will cut off our arteries. They have apparently now discovered that the West Coast route to the East is a good hunting

ground for pirates. In the future, my dear Verbeeck, it will always become a better hunting ground for them because of the increasing traffic to the East now that our settlement here is well established as a halfway station. Verbeeck,” says the Governor, and his eyes are serious and commanding, “we cannot afford to allow pirates in the vicinity of the Cape of Good Hope. I am grateful that you want to help me, Verbeeck. I have the fullest confidence in you. I am certain that you will leave no stone unturned to find out what has happened to the Sluiskerk. Or what is going on here on the West Coast. I am willing to equip your vessel with ammunition. That is the least I can do. After all, you are going to do something for the Dutch East India Company. So make your preparations and come and get as much ammunition as you think you will need. I expect you to equip yourself well, Verbeeck. So well that you will be equal to any pirate you encounter.”

Simon Verbeeck gets up. He thanks the Governor, and then he walks out.

The great seafarer is full of misgivings and doubts. He does not lack courage and daring, or seamanship.

But to search for a pirate here on the west coast is about as good as looking for a needle in the proverbial haystack. Yet, he must do it.

Outside, Wilhelm Rieckert is waiting for him. When they start walking, Wilhelm immediately sees that something has happened. Simon immediately takes his friend into his confidence and tells him about the request of the Governor.

“It will not be that easy,” says Wilhelm. “Where are we going to look for pirates in the boundless distances of the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of West Africa? And, Verbeeck, I am not looking forward to looking for pirates off this dead, desolate coast on the West Coast.”

Simon feels the same way, but he does not show it. It is a part of the water that no seaman likes, because they believe that the sea there is just as dead, as dangerous as the coast. But he has now committed himself, and there is no way out anymore.

In the days that follow, Simon immediately has the refurbishment work on the Red Ruby accelerated. He immediately begins to take supplies on board with the help of the garrison. From the Governor, he receives all possible help, and within two weeks, the Red Ruby is ready for its