

# OLOFF THE PIRATE SERIES

## 14. The Pirate's Treasure



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# THE PIRATE'S TREASURE

*by*

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## THE PIRATE'S TREASURE

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## SUMMARY

The year is the early 1700's. The shimmering waters of the Mediterranean are stained crimson with piracy, and amidst the chaos rises Oloff van Wagenaar, a man known only as Oloff the Pirate. But beneath the fearsome reputation lies a truth. Oloff is a captain of the Dutch fleet who has been working to bring down the sea pirates. When news reaches him of a brutal pirate takeover of Den Hagen, a strategically vital Comoro Island on the trade routes to the East, Oloff knows he must act.

But what seems a straightforward mission of liberation soon spirals into a treacherous web of deception. Venturing into the pirate stronghold, Oloff finds himself face-to-face with Fernand Belmonte, a cunning and ruthless pirate captain whose ambition knows no bounds. But Belmonte is not working alone, and Oloff quickly learns that a powerful Spanish nobleman, Don Estaban de Mataro, is orchestrating events from behind the scenes. As Oloff struggles to free the island from the clutches of Belmonte and expose De Mataro's scheme, he is captured. Now stripped of everything and at Belmonte's mercy, Oloff begins to question his alliances, and his role within them. But to save everyone, he knows he must begin to trust the unlikeliest of people. He sets about convincing his jailer, Belmonte, that they will benefit from working together in order to survive, and thrive.

Amid the cutlass clashes and cannon fire, a forbidden love blossoms between Oloff and Maryke, the daughter of the captured Governor of Den Hagen. But their connection is fraught with danger, for Maryke is the key to De Mataro's plans, and her safety hinges on Oloff's every decision. As Oloff navigates this treacherous game of power and passion, he faces a devastating choice. Remain true to a love that may doom them all, or sacrifice his heart to the exigencies of a war that is as much with himself as it is the enemy? The fate of Den Hagen, and perhaps the balance of power on the high seas, hangs in the balance, but will the price of victory cost Oloff more than he can ever imagine?

## EXTRACT

Oloff bends down. He reaches out his right hand toward the sword hilt, but underneath, he glances at the doorknob, barely five paces from him. Like lightning, he shoots away. Without looking back, he storms toward the open door. There is not a movement or a shout near him before he has yanked it open, slipped through, and slammed it shut behind him. It is pitch dark around him, but in the moment when the door was open and a beam of light from the hall fell out in front of him, he saw the table in the middle of the floor and the door in the opposite wall. As the commotion erupts behind him, he races around the table and his fingers search for the doorknob. He has barely found it when the door behind him bursts open as if a cannonball has splintered it apart. A single pistol shot rings out, but Oloff has already closed the door behind him and now finds himself in a corridor that is lit by a single lamp. Directly under the lamp is a door on his left. It leads out onto a side stoep, and he kicks off the high-heeled shoes from his feet as he jumps down onto a lawn between the pillars.

In the dim glow of the lights in the harbour town, objects are visible a few paces around him. He runs quickly. Around the first corner and then diagonally across the garden to the ring wall.

With one leap, he swings over the top and lands lightly on the other side in the street at the moment when the first of his pursuers appear from behind the residence. Down the street, Oloff sees a couple of men. They are, however, at the corner of the ring wall and are apparently looking down along it toward the gate side. Bent over, Oloff races between the buildings into the first cross-street and then runs easily in the direction of the mountain. The shouting dies away behind him, and he infers that Belmonte and his comrades have taken the wrong direction.

## 14. THE PIRATE'S TREASURE

### Chapter 1

“Who’s there?”

The voice is harsh and coarse, clearly audible above the crashing of the breakers against the rocks where the white foam occasionally becomes visible against the dark, rolling Mediterranean Sea. Nowhere, up to the horizon where the pale white stars twinkle, can a light or movement be discerned.

The dark form of the man who spoke is invisible where he stands against the rocks. His rifle is at his shoulder, and the overhanging hammer hesitates above the powder-filled pan. His gaze is fixed steadily ahead on the sharp rocks that are briefly outlined against the splashing foam.

“Who’s there?” he calls again sharply.

Captain Francisco de Ville lies motionless, holding his breath where he has fallen flat on his stomach, not far from the surging water’s edge. He had expected that there would be guards around here, but had still hoped that he could reach the pirate village without being caught. He hesitates, tense, for a little while longer as he decides what the best course of action will be.

“I am a friend,” he answers then, clearly.

The crack of the rifle shot reverberates above the splashing of the breakers. The lead sings past his head and smashes against the rocks on either side of him. The guard shoots accurately! He had apparently been standing attentively, listening to determine whether there was indeed someone among the rocks, and then fired in the direction of Captain De Ville’s voice.

There is a wry smile on the Spanish captain’s lips. The dangers of his mission are only now really sinking in. He had expected resistance therefore he had prepared himself for suspicion, but moments of murderous action such as this are making him now seriously doubt his own judgement. These people shoot before they investigate.

“I am a friend!” Francisco shouts urgently. “I am looking for Captain Fernand Belmonte.”

His words elicit no reaction. However, it somewhat reassures him that

he is not immediately shot at again. Perhaps his direct request to speak to Belmonte might carry some authority.

“Who are you, and what do you want from Captain Belmonte?”

“My business with Captain Belmonte is strictly confidential.”

“Put your hands in the air and walk to that open patch of white sand.”

Francisco obeys. To get involved in a fight here would be fatal for him. His eyes search towards the rocks from where he heard the other voice. But he can see no figure, and he comes to the conclusion that the man is most likely hiding because he is not yet sure of Francisco’s intentions. He stops on the open patch of sand. The palms of his hands, where he holds them above his head, are slightly damp with sweat, and there is an uncomfortable tingling in his back. He can still see nothing of the pirate village ahead of him. He knows that it is around a bend, hidden in an inlet. He hears no sound except that of the breakers, and he is startled when the man speaks here, close behind him.

“That is better, friend. Now at least I can see you. Who are you?”

“I have an important message for Captain Belmonte,” Francisco answers reasonably firmly and with a degree of annoyance, which he does not actually feel. The attitude he is deliberately adopting is that of a captain towards one of his men who is bothering him with unimportant matters at an inconvenient time. He wants him to understand that he is not willing to discuss his identity or the reason for his visit with him.

“Does Captain Belmonte know you?” Francisco’s attitude apparently does not impress the man. His voice is cold and impassive, even brutal.

“It is essential that you take me to the captain urgently.” Francisco de Ville experiences a surge of helplessness, but he shows no sign of it.

“Captain Belmonte will not be pleased that you are delaying me here so long.”

The man laughs harshly. The barrel of a rifle nudges roughly into Francisco’s back. The young Spanish captain clenches his fists. A shiver goes through his body, and resistance to this treatment surges up in him. But he manages to control himself.

“Walk then!” the man snaps at him, now with strong glee. “We will hear what Captain Belmonte has to say.”

“I am unarmed,” says Francisco as he walks along the beach, between

the rocks, towards the mouth of the inlet. "May I lower my hands?"

"Keep them in the air," comes curtly from behind.

The breakers in the sheltered bay are smaller than those outside, and above their washing over the white sand, Francisco can now hear sounds of men carousing ahead. He sees lights in the windows of buildings close to the water's edge. In their dim glow, a few large privateer ships lie at anchor in the bay.

Before he goes around the point of the isthmus, Francisco de Ville looks just once back over his shoulder at the dark sea. Somewhere there lies the Spanish warship with which he came here, and to which there will be no return for him if his mission fails.

The boisterous shouting of men and the shrill laughter of women echo through the narrow passages between the buildings. A few of the pirates who are loitering in the street call out in surprise to their comrade when they see him approaching with Francisco at the point of his rifle.

"He is looking for Captain Belmonte," the man answers.

They laugh uproariously. Francisco shudders at the sound of it. It contains a hidden threat, and it is mocking, as if only a fool would have the audacity to come and disturb this dreaded pirate captain.

"I want to see that!" one of the fellows calls out, and Francisco knows that he is referring to the meeting between him and Belmonte.

"You may not go in here," the guard interjects when they arrive at a door in one of the buildings.

"We know that. We are looking through the windows."

One jumps past Francisco and pushes the door open. Warm air, heavy with tobacco smoke and the disgusting smell of sweet wine, strikes against Francisco's face. Inside he sees the long tables and the chattering, laughing, singing groups around them. Against the wall are rows of bottles on shelves, and wine is being drawn into cups from large barrels. The wine is running in streams over the floor because the taps are simply left open while one after another holds his cup underneath them. In the dim light of the few lamps that are hanging from the massive beams under the sloping roof, the colours of the extravagant pirate garb are nevertheless sharp.

"Captain Belmonte!" bellows the man behind Francisco when they have stepped over the threshold. "Here is a visitor for you."



Most of those present look around. The others simply continue with their banter and racket and take no notice of what is going on around them.

Francisco's anxious gaze wanders over a group of men at the furthest table. He senses that one of them is the man he has come to look for and of whom he has already heard so much.

Then he recognizes him, because descriptions of this pirate have often reached the Spanish coast. He sees the black hair, which glistens with oil and which falls in curls to his shoulders, a black beard, neatly groomed, outlines his dark, sharp face from which two eyes glitter fiercely at Francisco.

Fernand Belmonte's attitude is relaxed and indifferent. But his movements are like those of a cat as he slides down from the table into the passageway that runs from the door across the floor. There, where he stands across the room from Francisco, the lamplight falls brightly on his face. A subtle smile plays around his lips, and it is only in the cold, black eyes that Francisco finds confirmation of the inhuman cruelties that have already been attributed to this man, and which apparently leave no traces on his attractive features.

"Where did you find him?" the pirate captain asks coolly. His voice is deep and refined, devoid of all brutality.

"He was lurking there on the beach among the rocks, Captain," answers the man.

"Bring him here."

Francisco immediately begins to walk between the tables, but even so, the fellow's foot kicks him from behind. A few of the rowdies along the passageway laugh harshly and call out jeering remarks to Francisco. But when he stands in front of Belmonte, they are quiet again.

Francisco has lowered his arms. He is wearing ordinary seaman's clothing, and his shirt is torn in one or two places. But his shoulders are back, and although it takes all his effort, he does not lower his gaze. He is fully aware of the implications of the callousness with which he is being treated. It gives him the impression that in this pirate nest, more value is probably attached to a cup of wine than to a person's life.

His senses are alert, and his facial expression is without emotion. He sees the lightning-fast movement in front of him, and then he fixes his

gaze on the razor-sharp blade of a knife that Belmonte has pulled out and whose point hovers here against Francisco's chest. Even the noisemakers in the furthest corners of the hall are now staring tensely at the scene in the middle of the room.

Slowly, Francisco looks up again. He feels the clammy sweat on his forehead and prays that it will not be visible. He sees the glee in the black eyes before him. But he imagines that he also detects a degree of surprise in them, as if Belmonte had expected a different reaction.

"You are looking for me?" the pirate asks softly.

Francisco nods.

"We do not like strangers!" There is a hissing sound in Belmonte's voice. "Who are you, and what do you want?" For just a moment, the black eyes flicker in the direction of the knife. It is all too clear to Francisco that if his explanation arouses the least suspicion, that knife will be the instrument of his death.

"I come with a proposal," he answers carefully and quietly, and the tension in which he finds himself is not detectable in his words. "A proposal that will be to your advantage, your personal advantage." With this, he wants the other to understand that they should discuss the matter elsewhere, alone. But he has scarcely completed his sentence when he realizes that he may not have acted entirely so wisely.

Fernand Belmonte throws his head back and bursts out laughing.

"You sneak up on us here along the beach!" he calls out, "with a proposal that will be to my personal advantage. Do you know who I am? I do not need proposals from every Tom, Dick and Harry. I am the creator of my own future. I make my own proposals!" A note of bravado creeps into his words. "I am the mightiest ruler of the sea. I..."

"Since Oloff perhaps," comes languidly from one of the group at the table where Belmonte had been sitting when Francisco came in.

Fernand Belmonte swings around. The corners of his mouth droop, and the black eyes are suddenly cold and expressionless, like those of a snake.

"One day you will go too far, Bonart!" and it is clear to Francisco that Bonart is very likely the only man who would dare to raise his voice against Belmonte. He also realizes that Belmonte is jealous of his leadership of the pirate community. The insinuation that a more

powerful pirate captain than him can exist is an insult to him. "In any case," he continues, annoyed, "Oloff the Pirate is gone. I..."

"There are still people who say that he is still alive," Bonart throws back indifferently.

"I tell you, the sharks have long since finished him off! Like everyone!" and his voice becomes threateningly soft, "who gets too big for his boots, he ran his course!" He leaves no doubt that he is directing these words at Bonart. "He became too sure of himself!" he shouts again then. "He imagined he was imperishable, and he was shot down like a dog and his fleet was destroyed. He was a failure, and I, I, Fernand Belmonte, will not be!"

For another moment, his gaze bores into that of Bonart, who is now shifting his feet uncomfortably under the table. Then Belmonte slowly looks around the room. Nobody stirs or speaks.

"And now," the pirate captain resumes then, "now we two can talk further." Again, the point of the knife is against Francisco's chest.

"I am in the service of the most powerful nobleman in Spain," says Francisco without hesitation and so softly that only Belmonte can hear him.

"Name him." Francisco gets the impression that Belmonte is suddenly interested and that he will accept Francisco's willingness to mention his master's name as proof of the authenticity of his proposal.

"Don Estaban de Mataro."

Fernand Belmonte slowly lowers the knife. His eyes narrow, and the keen suspicion in them alternates with an expression of surprise.

"Estaban de Mataro?" he whispers almost inaudibly and with a degree of awe. "Come," he continues suddenly, "walk in front of me."

A carriage rattles over the paving stones in the courtyard of the palace of Don Estaban de Mataro in Valencia. There are already many other vehicles, and in the dim light of the coloured lanterns under the verandas, the gilded coats of arms of the aristocracy glitter on the doors. Under the massive chandeliers, hundreds of couples can be seen in the large halls, because the windows are open and the heavy curtains are moving in the evening breeze that is blowing in from the sea.

A couple that has just entered bows before the host. A lackey in a satin livery calls out their names. The nobleman nods his head slightly. His

lips show a slight smile, but his attractive, refined features remain virtually expressionless.

Then the couple bows before the beautiful Dominica de Mataro. She greets them kindly and cheerfully and walks with them to the seats that are indicated by an attendant. Her black hair is piled high and is without a wig. Her soft, dark eyes are smiling at everyone she passes.

"Your brother seems tense," remarks her friend.

"Yes." Dominica casts a fleeting, worried glance over her shoulder. "I have also got the impression that there is something that is troubling Estaban. "But," and with a little laugh she shrugs her shoulders, "he has so many irons in the fire that one never knows what is going through his mind."

She leaves the guests and returns to the side of the young man who, so early in his life, has already become the head of the house of the De Mataros. There is a tender expression in her soft eyes as she looks at him.

"Estaban," she asks concerned, "you seem withdrawn."

"Do I seem so?" he answers evasively and takes her hand. "It's... it's nothing of importance. I just don't feel too well."

"But why didn't you tell me, Estaban?" she scolds him. "We could have cancelled the invitations. You are entertaining too much."

"It is not that serious, Dominica," he assures her. "I will perhaps just withdraw for a while later. You keep the guests company. It is after all mainly for your sake that most of them are coming here."

"Estaban!" she exclaims indignantly, but says nothing further. It is not the first time that her brother has made this kind of remark. It is as if, on occasions like this, he feels self-conscious and out of place.

She has wanted to talk to him because he never really relaxes. She is aware of his numerous responsibilities, because the De Mataros are regarded as one of the richest families in Spain, and it is generally known that Estaban is a personal friend of the Crown Prince.

Her train of thought is interrupted when other guests arrive. Nevertheless, it does not prevent her from noticing that one of the door guards is handing a note on a silver tray to Estaban. He unfolds it, and she sees the sudden trembling in his hands as he reads it. Immediately, she knows that that note has something to do with his tense condition.