

# **OLOFF THE PIRATE SERIES**

## **15. The Blue Ruby**



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# THE BLUE RUBY

*by*

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## **THE BLUE RUBY**

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## SUMMARY

France teeters on the brink. With the King's untimely death, young Prince Etienne is poised to ascend the throne, but a shadow of doubt looms large. Stolen crown jewels, vital for the coronation ceremony, threaten not only Etienne's legitimacy but the very stability of the kingdom. A desperate plea reaches Oloff van Wagenaar, a man shrouded in mystery and whispered rumors, called Oloff the Pirate.

Once a scourge of the seas, now seemingly reformed, he and his men are given the impossible task to track down the ruthless pirates responsible for the theft. From the gilded halls of Parisian palaces to the lawless havens of the Caribbean, Oloff plunges into a thrilling chase, battling not only cutthroat pirates but also cunning adversaries closer to home. He is forced to infiltrate the pirate world to obtain the stolen jewels and track down the captain, using his charm and wits. Political deception, and a race against time all while dealing with the dangerous, cunning and unpredictable men who threaten all.

But Oloff's past refuses to stay buried. His reputation precedes him, raising suspicion and mistrust, even among those he seeks to help. As he confronts old demons and forges unexpected alliances, he finds himself entangled in a passionate connection with the spirited Rynette du Bois, a woman whose life is intrinsically linked to the fate of the jewels and the French crown. With the coronation drawing near and enemies closing in, Oloff faces an impossible choice, secure the crown, or surrender to the allure of a forbidden love. When double-crosses are revealed and a dangerous enemy puts his hands on the stones first, will Oloff manage to recover the jewels in time, or will he be forced to see France fall to the hands of an evil ruler? Only time will tell.

## EXTRACT

But Oloff kept his cool, blue eyes fixed calmly on the man who had laughed first. It was not actually too pleasant to behold. The man's face was almost flat. He did not have much of a nose, and it clearly tilted upwards so that his nostrils were clearly visible. His eyes were deep in his head, and now that his mouth was wide open, he did not look much different to Oloff from the white skull on the black flag. This man eventually calmed down. He stood up. There was silence again.

"Welcome to San Dieres!" the man called out. "They call me the Skull of Caracas. Perhaps you'll understand why?"

"That's self-evident," Oloff retorted immediately, and now, while dead silence descended again, it was his turn to hold his sides as he laughed. But from the slits of his eyelids, he saw the anger rising in the fellow's face. He calmed down, and with a fine handkerchief, he pressed lightly against his eyes.

"And that laughing fit?" the Skull inquired softly, and deadly serious. His words sounded loud because the others were practically holding their breath. "You apparently found something about me that was worth laughing about," Oloff answered just as cheerfully. "I find you just as comical."

He grabbed for the hilt of a pistol under his jacket.

The Skull of Caracas kicked the chair behind him away. His hands "You impudent whipper-snapper!" he snarled at Oloff, but then, his gaze froze, and his muscles turned to stone. As unexpected and swift as his movement had been, his fingers had barely touched the firearm when he was already staring into the barrel of Oloff's pistol. There was a hiss as when people quickly exhale their breath.

## 15. THE BLUE RUBY

### Chapter 1

“What is your opinion, Captain Nautier? Do we have a chance of getting out of here alive?”

The captain of the Nantes did not answer immediately. It was almost as if he did not hear the question. His strong fingers stroked pensively over the neat black moustache on his upper lip. His sharp eyes slid up the masts and wandered over the full, billowing sails, as if he were judging their capabilities. He saw the sailors clambering around up there and he was aware of the tension in their posture.

He looked over his shoulder at the helmsman. His lips moved as if he wanted to say something, but he changed his mind. It would not help if they tried to change course.

Then his gaze rested on the Nantes’ sister ship, the Lodewyk II, which was sailing about a hundred paces diagonally behind the Nantes. The bow, which was level with the stern of the Nantes, plowed a foamy furrow through the rippling swells that raced before the wind with the two ships.

Thereafter, he cast his gaze out over the wide sea. The horizon was clear, but far beyond the edge of the sea, four privateers were bearing down on them, and over the past hour, they had slowly drawn closer.

Ever since the lookout in the crow’s nest had spotted the pirates shortly after sunrise, Captain Nautier had felt uneasy. It was known, and the fact was often referred to, that he did not have a single hair of fear on his head. But today a listless feeling of surrender to fate threatened to overpower him from time to time. He might not have chosen to flee of his own volition, but in this instance, he had been persuaded by the young man who had just asked him what their chances of escaping were.

And now he looked at Count Louis Montres. He saw the alert, open face of the nobleman and the flush of tension on his cheeks. “You are not going to fight? He does not defend himself?”

“We have already discussed it, Count Louis. Had I planned an attack tactic earlier, we might...”

“I know! I know!” exclaimed the nobleman. “It was on my

recommendation that we tried to sail out from under them. I realize now that it was a mistake.”

Captain Nautier smiled deliberately. He could see that Louis Montres was completely serious and that he regretted his earlier recommendation. The captain almost asked him what it was that had then made him decide to flee. But he restrained himself. It was the Count’s privilege to share it with him if he so wished.

“We must continue in this manner for the time being,” said the ship’s captain then. “Perhaps the wind will turn. It often happens that the speed of a ship varies disproportionately with the strength of the wind.”

But even as he spoke, Louis Montres knew that the captain did not harbor much hope in this direction. Sooner or later, and it would be shortly after noon, they would have to fend off an attack.

He excused himself and went down the stairs from the quarterdeck. He reached his luxurious cabin next to that of the captain, where his valet, Gilles Destillier, was busy sewing a button onto a silver-embroidered waistcoat of the Count’s. Louis Montres pushed the door shut behind him. He listened for a moment with his ear against it, as if he wanted to determine whether anyone had perhaps come after him in the passageway outside. Gilles watched him anxiously and with a measure of surprise. But there was not much expression in the dark eyes under the heavy eyebrows. In contrast to his master, it was almost as if his movements were clumsy and slow. But in his gaze was a serious glow of loyalty towards the man in whose service he stood.

“It almost seems as if you are unaware of the danger that is creeping up on us, Gilles,” remarked the Count.

Gilles Destillier shrugged his shoulders slightly, and smiled. He saw the determination in the other’s gaze and he knew that, whatever his answer might be, the young Count would accept it calmly and fight to the death. He had often heard that Louis Montres was one of the most skillful swordsmen in France.

And while the privateers so relentlessly bore down on them in this silent race, Captain Nautier felt for the first time the real importance of the purpose of the voyage that he had been asked to undertake. Months ago, Count Louis Montres had approached him and explained to him that he wanted to leave immediately for Cayenne on the north coast of South

America. He had not informed Nautier of the purpose of his visit to the French colony of Guiana.

But Captain Nautier had realized that there was more than an official visit behind the request. This suspicion had been fueled by the fact that Count Louis had received permission from the Royal House to commandeer the Nantes and the Lodewyk II, two ships of the French fleet. And it was common knowledge that this young Count was Prince Etienne's best friend. Captain Nautier also knew that by far the largest portion of the French colony belonged to Prince Etienne personally.

The voyage had proceeded smoothly. They had called at Cayenne and after a few days had begun the return journey. But now, here just east of the West Indian Islands, they were encountering the privateers.

Ever since Captain Nautier had seen them, he had not said much. From Count Louis's attitude, it seemed to him as if the nobleman was not so much worried about his life, although he had asked if they would get out of here alive, but more as if there was a duty on his shoulders that had to be carried out and which was now in danger of being thwarted.

"It depends," answered the captain measuredly, "on whether they are interested in slaves or not."

Count Louis raised his eyebrows.

"So you are convinced that we will not be able to defend ourselves successfully," it was as if his words came slowly over his lips.

"I have work here, Your Highness. As soon as you need my services elsewhere, I know that you will call me. In the meantime, there is not much I can do about the matter."

"As always, nonchalant and calm, Gilles." The Count laughed, but immediately he was serious again. He walked through the cabin to one of the iron drums against the bulkhead. Two heavy locks hung on the lid and the Count took a couple of keys from an inner pocket of his jacket. This drum was the only one to which Gilles was never granted access.

Count Montres unlocked it and from under a few pieces of material, he took out a small packet. It was barely four inches wide, about an inch thick, but about twelve inches long. It was flexible, so one could easily hide it against one's body under one's clothing. The Count handled it as if the contents were extremely fragile.



Gilles had only occasionally lifted his eyes from the needle and thread. He now put the jacket down when the Count approached.

"It is this packet, Gilles," began Louis Montres seriously, "that necessitated the trip to Cayenne. The contents are all that I went there to fetch."

Gilles said nothing. There were few of his master's affairs of which he was not aware. But the purpose of this voyage had been kept secret even from him. He still remembered the urgent visits of Prince Etienne and his sister, Princess Marie-Celeste. He still remembered their discussions behind closed doors. The princess was a few years older than the young Crown Prince. Their father had died a year or so ago, and Prince Etienne would officially ascend the throne on his eighteenth birthday. These visits to Count Louis Montres had taken place shortly after the king's death.

Gilles had often wondered why such secretive arrangements had been made for Count Louis to travel to French Guiana. He knew about the Crown Prince's vast estate in the colony, but he had never asked about it, and now it seemed as if he would finally hear the explanation. Yet his master's words left him almost more perplexed than before.

"Gilles," said Count Louis seriously, "I am concealing this package under my clothes, here, so that it presses against my side." And as he spoke, he acted on his words. "Whether we will succeed in fending off the pirates and escaping, I do not know. But whatever happens, Gilles, this package must reach the royal court of France." He emphasized every word. "It must be personally handed over to Prince Etienne or to Princess Marie-Celeste."

And without his having to say it, Gilles knew that the Count regarded the necessity of this far above the value of both their lives. It was as if he realized that the young nobleman, who was known everywhere for his honesty and his staunch loyalty to the French crown, would kill and threaten as long as he could succeed in delivering the contents of that package safely to the French court.

Gilles Destillier nodded. He folded the jacket that he had been working on neatly and while silence reigned between them, he packed it away in a trunk.

"I will stay with you, Your Highness," he said simply.

“That is what I wanted to ask you, Gilles,” added the Count. “By virtue of my rank, I will have to take up position close to Captain Nautier if the pirates come on board. If I fall, there is a strong chance that my dead body will be plundered. You must be there first, Gilles. Take the package and throw yourself down among the ordinary sailors.” He hesitated, then made a half-helpless gesture with his hands. “After that, your life is in the hands of Providence, and also the throne of France.” And again Gilles knew what his master was thinking about. If the pirates decided to loot the two French ships, the survivors would be killed and thrown overboard or carried off as slaves. On the other hand, they might decide to sink the two ships and then they would leave the bodies on board. If Gilles was still alive then, the sea would be his only enemy.

Louis Montres returned to the quarterdeck. He frowned. The privateers were much closer, and as a result of the shorter distance, it seemed as if they were speeding even faster towards the French ships.

Before he could say a word to the worried captain of the Nantes, a single cannon shot thundered over the water. Dark gunpowder smoke rose from a gunport in the bow of the nearest privateer. Diagonally in front of the Nantes, a cannonball plowed into the blue-green swells.

Captain Nautier looked in the direction of the quarterdeck of the Lodewyk II. It was as if he wanted to consult with the captain of the Nantes’s sister ship. However, he turned to Count Louis.

“I had hoped that misty weather might come to our rescue,” he said calmly, but tensely. “There was also the possibility that we could stay ahead until tonight and perhaps change course in the dark.” He hesitated and the Count immediately understood.

“But now, what do you have in mind now?”

“They are all still on port side,” Nautier replied immediately.

“It will still take some time before they can divide their forces and two of them can get to our starboard side. But...” He shrugged his shoulders.

“You don’t think it will help much,” the Count completed for him.

“It will only delay the inevitable somewhat, won’t it?”

“That is so, Count Louis.”

“Then we must decide what the best way to resist will be.”

Captain Nautier gazed at the young nobleman intently for a moment.

Again he came to the conclusion that much more than just his life was at stake for the Count. But he did not ask. He just knew that quite a few of the pirates who might succeed in getting on board the Nantes would never leave it alive. He saw the strong, slender fingers on the Count's left hand where it rested on his sword hilt.

"Haul the sails of the mainmast in!" he called to the boatswain who was standing just below him on the main deck, anxiously awaiting orders.

"Helmsman, veer diagonally against the wind and across the course of the privateers. Gunner, keep a full broadside ready."

It was as if these sharp orders spread like wildfire through the crew. For long enough they had already endured the tension of the race where they had seen the enemy approach with folded hands and the humiliation that they had had to flee. They sprang to work with determination and the orders were quickly carried out.

From the beginning, the pirates had made no attempt to conceal their identity. Boldly and confidently, the black flag with the white skull and crossbones depicted on it fluttered at the mastheads. It was as if the pirates had assumed from the outset that they would catch up with and loot the prey.

Count Louis balled his fists in a moment of helplessness. He looked at the two rows of gunports on either side of each of the privateers. He saw the swivel guns on the railing. The Nantes and the Lodewyk II collectively had barely as many cannons as one of the privateers.

But the sailors and soldiers on board were trained. Count Louis felt proud of his compatriots when he saw how orderly they took up their positions and he knew that they realized that they would have to fight for their lives, they would acquit themselves well of their task.

Two of the privateers veered to starboard. They would try to cut behind the French ships. The Lodewyk II maintained its position. The two warships protected each other, but could shoot freely on both sides.

"Captain!" came a hail from the forward privateer. "We are only interested in your cargo. Let us come on board to fetch it. After that you can continue unhindered."

Captain Nautier did not deign to answer. He turned again to the boatswain.

"As soon as they are within range, we will fire."

It was as if his attitude instilled courage in the crew. The captain did not humiliate them by making an agreement with the pirates.

The privateer was barely a hundred paces from the Nantes when the dark smoke billowed up from the side of the ship here. The salvo shook the ship and foamy crests were cut away from the side.

The deck shook under Louis Montres's feet when a full broadside thundered from the port cannons. The crew cheered. The foremast of a privateer boat that was heading straight for them, toppled over and tumbled onto the deck. There were two large rips in the top sails of the mainmast, otherwise the privateer was undamaged.

"Swing around quickly," Captain Nautier ordered sharply and Count Louis understood the implication of his order.

He naturally expected that the privateer would veer to port in order also to be able to fire a salvo at the Nantes. By therefore turning towards the privateers' side, the Nantes would receive that full broadside from the front and the chances of serious maiming would be much smaller. And when the Nantes had then turned completely, the starboard cannons would be aimed at the privateer. With luck on their side, they should then be able to disable one of the pirate ships. It would place the battle on a more even footing.

"Such scoundrels!"

It was Captain Nautier who exclaimed. Immediately Louis Montres knew that his deductions about the captain's train of thought had been correct. But now, to his dismay, he saw the reason for the captain's exclamation.

The privateer had not turned sideways as they had expected. It simply kept course straight towards the Nantes. And the Nantes was halfway through its own movement. The two ships were now heading straight for each other.

"Keep turning!" thundered the captain and Count Louis understood that it was the only way out. The turn would be completed before the privateer could reach them and then the starboard cannons might perhaps halt the attack.

Most of the cannonballs whistled past the privateers on either side. Count Louis could see but three places where the pirate boat had been hit.