

OLOFF THE PIRATE SERIES

16. Ghost Ship of Biscay



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GHOST SHIP OF BISCAY

by

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SUMMARY

In the gilded courts of post-coronation France, where lavish balls mask simmering political intrigue, a storm is brewing that threatens to engulf the young King Etienne and plunge the nation into war. Count De Mentz, the Minister of the Crown, a man steeped in ambition and veiled agendas, sees an opportunity to seize power and monopolize the lucrative spice trade by igniting conflict with Holland.

But their intricate plot hinges on a single, perilous maneuver, to frame Captain Oloff van Wagenaar, a daring Dutch captain and a friend of the King. By manipulating events and wielding a cleverly forged letter, they aim to paint Oloff as a rogue aggressor, triggering a devastating conflict. Torn between his loyalty to France, where his beloved Rynette du Bois awaits their wedding, and his duty to his homeland, Oloff finds himself a pawn in a deadly game. With the help of unexpected allies, including the charming Prince Bernhardt of Waiheren, a man with his own heart's desires pulling him towards the French court, Oloff embarks on a desperate quest to expose the true puppeteers behind the looming war.

But just as they believe they are close to victory, a series of bizarre events throws everything into question. A fortune vanishes, and tales of a ghostly ship, the very one Oloff supposedly perished on, begin to haunt the coast of France. Is it a supernatural omen, or a carefully orchestrated deception to conceal a darker truth? With time running out and the fate of two nations hanging in the balance, Oloff and his friends find themselves facing a ruthless enemy, where the stakes are higher than they ever imagined. Can Oloff expose the conspiracy before France and Holland are locked in a war fueled by lies and bloodlust? And can he protect the woman he loves from a plot of a heartless cabal determined to control it all?

EXTRACT

And precisely because she is looking around covertly, she doesn't see the young man next to Marie-Celeste when they reach the side of the hall. It is only when the Princess addresses her that she pays attention to them.

"May I introduce you to a friend, Rynette."

She recognises Oloff immediately. She wants to throw herself into his arms, but a gesture from him, as if he had expected it, stops her.

Their hands touch, and they bow slightly. She wants to speak, but cannot get a word out. Then she also sees the tremor around his lips, and she knows how he feels.

Strangely enough, it calms her down, and she is indeed the first to speak.

"Thank God, Oloff!" she says softly, and then they both smile. She looks at the wig that covers his red hair and can't suppress a little laugh.

"So it's your plan!" she exclaims in a hushed tone. "You disguise yourself and dance with my best friend!"

"And you?" he throws back in the same mood. "Instead of mourning, you are here?"

"Oloff," she begins suddenly, serious and remorseful, but he interrupts her by speaking to the man next to Rynette.

"And what was your finding?"

"There are reasons. I would suggest you forgive her," the other answers.

"I guessed that would be the case," says Oloff. "You see, Rynette, this morning when we arrived here, our problem was how to get in contact with you. While we were still grappling with that, we heard that you would be at the ball. So, I first placed my friend with you to ascertain why your love was so fickle..."

"Oloff," she interrupts him, still serious. "Your friend told me that you are not safe here in Paris. We cannot stand here and talk for too long. We need to go somewhere alone. You haven't introduced us yet either..."

16. GHOST SHIP OF BISCAY

Chapter 1

The gatekeeper frowns. He shakes his head and gazes down the row of giant marble pillars towards the grand portico of Count De Mentz's palace. A single lamp burns on the stoop. Only here and there is a window illuminated. Outwardly, it would appear as if the repose of night has descended upon the luxurious dwelling.

But then, his eyes drift again to the few horses in the dark shadows of the slender cypresses along the main entrance to the courtyard. The riders had arrived one by one shortly before midnight. They were all dressed in ordinary riding attire, and the gatekeeper initially presumed they were merely suitors of the palace staff. But when they darted towards the front door, and he recognized a few of them, he was startled. Simultaneously, the head porter had appeared and ushered them inside. Again, the gatekeeper shakes his head. One of those riders is the Duke of Orleans. He would recognize that haughty countenance any time. The Duke has often visited the Count, but then it was with splendid steeds in tow.

He could not see their facial features too well in the dim light, but he has no doubt that he also recognized Count De Auvergne. This young nobleman is just as frequent a visitor to the Count. The gatekeeper is certain that he is not mistaken.

And these things bother him. They arrived late at night, without fanfare, as if they wished to keep the visit a secret. He feels almost indignant that he must be burdened with this unsettling behaviour of the nobles. He would rather know nothing of their affairs. It makes him uneasy because he gets the impression that all is not right.

Paris had barely calmed from the festivities that followed the coronation of their young king. The whole populace had cheered. The gatekeeper, along with them, had envisioned a future of peace and abundance for him and the entire country.

And now these things are happening. Like thieves in the night, a few of the most powerful nobles are visiting Count De Mentz, Minister of the Crown, the man who, next to the King, holds the most authority in France.

He sighs deeply, steps a few paces down the stoop, but turns around when the door behind him opens.

The head porter beckons. He hastens closer.

“You may go,” the porter orders curtly. “And I would prefer that you say nothing about these late visits.”

“But of course not. I...”

“Indeed,” the porter coolly interrupts him, “you will forfeit your head if I find out that you are discussing your master’s affairs.”

The gatekeeper startles. His lips tremble slightly.

“But I... I...”

“I know you will not speak,” says the porter somewhat condescendingly. “That is why I will also entrust you with the details. The riders here tonight are foremen from His Excellency’s estate in Provence. His Excellency wishes to ascertain from them the sentiments of the people there in their region. However, he does not want it to leak that he is making inquiries, therefore we must not either, agreed?”

“Of course! Of course!” the gatekeeper affirms hastily and convincingly. But when he steps off the stoop, he shakes his head again. It is difficult to believe that the Duke of Orleans and Count De Auvergne are foremen of Count De Mentz.

The porter watches the guard depart. He hopes the fellow will not go blabbing. He ought to have let him go earlier this evening, but he had forgotten about him when he sent the other servants to their quarters. His Excellency had expressly requested him to ensure that the courtyard and the corridors were deserted when the visitors arrived. And if it is His Excellency’s desire, it is the porter’s duty to execute it thus. He has been in the Count’s service for years and has learned that it is by far the best policy to keep his eyes, ears and mouth shut when he deals with the nobility. He knows that his master can trust him, and it is also why he is aware of nocturnal visits and secret meetings that would place the Minister in a precarious position if the wrong persons were to hear of them.

During the few years before the coronation of Prince Etienne, the porter had noticed that the activities that were underway in certain circles were not actually focused on the well-being of the young Crown Prince. But with the coronation ceremony last week, the porter had half-accepted

that if there had been any attempts to prevent the coronation, such plots had failed.

He walks down the dimly lit corridor. Under the door on his right, a sliver of light shines through. He hears voices within, but cannot distinguish the words. For just a moment he hesitates, but then he sternly rebukes himself and walks on.

Behind the closed door of the spacious reading room, Count De Mentz stands next to a table around which five men are seated. A moment of silence has descended on the room, but the visitors look expectantly at the Minister. Their posture is tense. They know that his next words will reveal the purpose of this gathering.

“France must declare war against Holland!” De Mentz emphasizes each word.

They sit in stunned silence. So momentous is the statement that one or two of them suddenly smile because they consider the possibility that the Count is jesting, but then they realize that he is deadly serious.

“War!” It is the elderly Duke of Orleans, the oldest among them, who exclaims thus. “I do not understand, De Mentz.”

“But it is quite simple,” answers the Count swiftly, like one who is prepared for every question. “It is in the interest of our country, and to the benefit of each of us.”

“Possibly,” the Duke concedes. He has apparently considered it. “But what you forget is that it was not even a year ago that we might have had the forces to carry out such a plan. I must remind you of a ceremony that took place a few days ago. Etienne sits today on the throne of France.”

“A young pup!” one of the others interjects, but the Count merely nods as if he finds the Duke’s remark intelligent and as if he is glad it was mentioned.

“A young pup, yes,” the Duke concedes, “but Etienne has issued proclamations and he has made promises in public in which he took a sacred oath to rule the country in peace. And as I know him, he is entirely serious. No, it will not be easy to get him to change his mind.”

“Possibly.” The Count shrugs his shoulders. “But it is precisely because of those promises of His Majesty that war must now be declared, now, while those promises still resound clearly in the ears of the people.”

“In other words,” says the Duke slowly, “you propose that France be plunged into war just because Etienne made public promises...?” But while he is in the process of uttering the words, their implications strike him. He lets his head fall and sits in thought. The others also begin to realize what the Count is aiming towards.

“A keen understanding...” begins the Count with a satisfied smile, and leaves the sentence incomplete. Then he continues. “Etienne has a strong will. Before the coronation, we did everything in our power to place the future of our country under more competent leadership.” He nods towards the young Count De Auvergne. “Your brother, Count,” he says sedately, “had, it is believed, almost succeeded in achieving this goal even at the last moment. He was our dear and good friend. We know that if he had sat on the throne today, he would have shown an affinity for our advice and suggestions at all times. But unfortunately, fortune has not favored France, and your brother is no longer with us. We are nonetheless grateful that you have come tonight.”

Count De Auvergne nods politely and gratefully. It has barely been a week since he became head of the House De Auvergne, but from a young age, he has lived in a world of intrigue and conspiracy. He fits into this group.

“The fact remains, therefore,” he now remarks, “that Etienne does indeed occupy the position of power and that he has a strong, obstinate will.”

“Precisely for that reason!” exclaims De Mentz vehemently, “that is why the people’s trust in their new young ruler must be shaken. They must realize that it is to us that they must look for guidance.”

“And we are going to accomplish this by war with Holland?” asks the Duke of Orleans somewhat drily.

“A war that will fill the coffers of France to overflowing,” the Count assures him. “A war that will bring glory and honour to our armies.”

There is a sparkle in the eye of the young De Auvergne. It is as if he already sees himself at the head of the victorious troops and hears the adoring people cheering around him. But the elderly Duke still shakes his head.

“It is still war,” he says sedately. “And war brings misery and suffering.”

“The battle will not be fought on French soil,” the Count counters. “For the most part, it will be at sea. We all know that the Dutch East India Company is no longer what it was. Their naval power has been weakened by their war with England. We, the English, and also the Spanish, today share in the trade with the East. Holland no longer has the monopoly. But do you think that any one of the four, and that includes us, is going to be satisfied with a quarter of the business?”

He shakes his head and looks fixedly from one to the other. He does not expect an answer, because he knows that his words cannot be refuted.

“No,” he continues. “England will continue to monopolize more and more of the trade for herself while the Dutch will try to regain what they have lost. It will be a long, bitter struggle unless...” again he hesitates before continuing measuredly...

“Unless two of the powers unite their forces.”

“And now we must forcefully bring the Dutch fleet to our side.”

“Immediately!” exclaims the Count. “We must immediately take steps in that direction. Because believe me, we are not the first to have reached that conclusion.”

“Of course,” the Duke of Orleans allows, and it now seems as if he is being convinced. “There is strong talk of a marriage between Prince Charles of Holland and Princess Magrita of Spain.”

The Count does not deign to elaborate on this. The consequences of such an event are clear to all. Nonetheless, De Auvergne says,

“But is there not a peaceful way in which we can achieve our goal?”

“That would be humiliating!” De Mentz sounds almost impatient. “If the Stadtholder of Holland harboured any peaceful feelings towards us, he could have at least also paid a visit to the French Court before he went courting Magrita. Will you tell me that he is unaware of the fact that Marie-Celeste is a sister of the reigning monarch of France and that she has reached marriageable age?”

“It is actually an insult,” the Duke corroborates these assertions and, after a moment of silence, he slides his chair back and stands up. He stretches his legs. “Very well then,” he summarizes. “We conquer Holland and unite our fleets. That gives us a position of power at sea and in the trade with the East. It is, as you said at the start, for the benefit of our country.”

“Not only that,” De Mentz interrupts him. “Thereby, it will also become clear that we,” and his gaze rests on each of them, “that we,” he repeats, “are the real leaders of France. Etienne will merely be our mouthpiece.” “Right.” The Duke nods. “But you also spoke of our personal gain.” “That follows naturally!” exclaims the Count.

“We all have shares in the French East India Company. Each of us, therefore, who supports the movement that will lead to the merger of the fleets, will enjoy preference in the expansion of his interests.”

They nod. They know well that they will not have to pay a penny for their share. It sounds good.

“But,” the Duke interrupts their train of thought, “Etienne is still sitting on the throne.”

“He will have no choice,” asserts De Mentz vehemently.

“Yet he does,” the Duke replies drily. “He has a full choice.”

“Relations in the East are already strained,” says the Count earnestly.

“Every now and then, we hear of incidents where the different fleets are clashing with one another.”

“That is simply routine. That applies to England and Spain as well.”

“And Etienne will do his best to put an end to the friction,” adds Count De Auvergne. “After all, he promised to maintain peace.”

“In any event,” another opines, “incidents of that nature surely cannot be cited as a reason for war. In that case, we should also issue an ultimatum to England and Spain.”

De Mentz gives them the opportunity to raise their objections. Only when they come up with no further arguments does he answer.

“You are absolutely right. On the basis of the current state of affairs, we will not move Etienne, and we will make ourselves ridiculous. But in case there should be an incident that is directly and, apparently, deliberately aimed at us...” He makes a gesture with his hands as if they should understand what he means. And they understand.

“You want to create such an incident?” inquires the Duke.

“Yes.”

“I assume that you already have something in mind?”

“Of course. A Dutch ship will make a treacherous attack on a few of our merchant vessels.”

“Oh.” The Duke of Orleans raises his eyebrows. “You mean we write a

little note to the Admiral of the Dutch fleet and request him to sink a few of our merchant ships.”

The Count smiles. The fact that he has an answer to all these questions and a solution for the obstacles that seem insurmountable to the others puts him in a good mood.

“No. But someone here in Paris will receive instructions from a Dutch admiral.”

“Here?” exclaims De Auvergne. “But that will be of no avail! What good will it do to equip one of our ships with a Dutch flag and attack our own merchant vessels with it?”

“It will be a Dutch ship.”

“But who is there in Paris who...?”

“Oloff van Wagenaar!”

Again, they stare at him in astonishment. Then they erupt with vehement objections.

“Oloff the Pirate!” begins De Auvergne.

“Captain Oloff van Wagenaar of the Dutch fleet,” the Count corrects him.

“It makes no difference,” De Auvergne insists. “He is engaged to Rynette du Bois, the best friend of Princess Marie-Celeste. He is a personal friend of Etienne. It is claimed that if it were not for him, Etienne would not have been sitting on the throne today.”

“He, yes,” the Count interrupts him. “We all know that. Whether it is true or not, does not matter. But Oloff is a Dutchman. He is a captain of the Dutch fleet. Surely, he will not fight against his own people. If the two countries are plunged into war, he will choose his own side.”

“Possibly, but with such an attack, it may be thought that he has returned to piracy.”

“It has apparently been proven that he was never actually a pirate,” the Count answers. “But that does not matter, let them think so. As long as we can prove that he did indeed act on the orders of an admiral of the Dutch Fleet...”

“But how on earth are we going to manage that?”

De Mentz smiles. He walks to a desk and, from a hidden hatch, he retrieves a few documents. He brings them and spreads them open on the table. No one asks further questions. Intrigued, they lean closer.