

OLOFF THE PIRATE SERIES

20. The Secret Mantle



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THE SECRET MANTLE

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SUMMARY

The winds of fate shift violently in the saga of Captain Leigh and the Indian Lark, carrying not just precious cargo but a storm of unforeseen peril. When the witty Duke of Hampden boards, their voyage seems blessed, but the serenity shatters as shadowy sails appear on the horizon. It is pirates, intent on plunder and mayhem.

But this is more than a simple maritime clash. Hampden, former Viceroy of India, returns laden with royal gifts, a fortune locked in iron-bound coffers, igniting the avarice of cutthroat pirates like the infamous Javert, captain of the Albatross. Javert is a feared pirate, and Oloff the Pirate is a notorious name whispered even among the boldest buccaneers. Little did they know their destiny were about to collide. A desperate escape, a bloody betrayal, and a hidden map lead to the shores of southern Africa, where the hunt for the Hampden fortune intensifies. Margaret, haunted by her father's death and whispers of a secret drawer, embarks on her own perilous quest, following a trail paved with riddles and danger. Her path converges with that of Captain Oloff van Wagenaar, a man of both noble lineage and a shadowy pirate past.

As Oloff, with his loyal crew, including old flame Anna te Hoogen, takes up Margaret's cause, a web of intrigue begins to unravel. He finds himself caught between duty and desire, battling not only avaricious pirates but also his own conflicted heart. The map, it seems, is more than a guide to riches, but a key to unlocking a legacy of sacrifice and the power to change destinies. But with Javert still lurking, driven by an unyielding hunger for the treasure, Oloff must decipher the map's cryptic clues and unearth the truth before it's lost forever. But even as they draw closer to their objective, Oloff uncovers a chilling truth. The secret of the map is not in the treasure it hides, but in the one it was always meant to protect. Now, even Oloff and his team need to decide of how much are they willing to sacrifice?

EXTRACT

Javert beckoned to a pirate, and the fellow stepped closer.

“Come and stand here beside me,” Oloff commanded the man, and the pirate did so. “My proposal is that you give Hendrik two pistols, loaded. He held up his hand when Javert wanted to interrupt him. “You tie me to that tree on the edge of the plain.”

And Oloff pointed to a tree that was outside pistol or rifle range of the place where they were now standing. “This man of yours can stay with a pistol aimed at my heart. Hendrik stands a few steps behind him, with a pistol aimed at his back. Then I will let you know where you can dig. But remember, it may be the wrong place. So it will not help you to try and rush me.”

“But what will prevent Hendrik from shooting my man in the back, untying you, and you making a run for it?”

“Hendrik will be far enough away that he will not be able to reach me and release me before you can fire on us.”

“But what will that benefit you?”

“As soon as you hit the treasure, your man must untie me and then Hendrik and I will be off.

If this friend does not do it, Hendrik will shoot him in the back. The same will happen if your man shoots me.”

Javert hesitated for a while. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

He stood while Oloff was being tied to the tree trunk. The pirate took a step to take his position. Twenty paces further, stood Hendrik.

Oloff felt completely satisfied. He had carefully observed that Javert had not sent any of his men into the bushes to sneak around behind Oloff them. He had also warned him that as soon as he saw that they were doing this, he would deliberately indicate the wrong place.

20. The Secret Mantle

Chapter 1

“If only I had one extra mast with three sails!” Captain Leigh of the Indian Lark exclaimed.

“Might it perhaps help if I hold my handkerchief taut against the wind?” inquired the Duke of Hampden, equally obliging, beside him.

Captain Leigh glanced at his passenger. The witty remark was, in his opinion, particularly inappropriate at this moment. He did not reply. He looked again at the billowing sails above him and the British flag fluttering at the masthead. If he ever reached England safely, he would devote the rest of his life to developing a method by which a ship could be propelled over the water by a power, an energy, that was adjustable and could be applied to greater speed as soon as it was needed. Now he was dependent on the wind, and it was humanly impossible to make the wind blow harder. Every bit of sail was taut, and still the two ships that had just appeared on the horizon were approaching with relentless certainty.

No wonder, then, that the undisturbed smile on the middle-aged nobleman’s lips somewhat stuck in his craw. Hampden ought to realize the seriousness of their circumstances, for Leigh had already informed him that these were privateers heading towards them.

But despite the fact that the captain had had the Duke on board for six weeks and that they had been in each other’s company daily, sharing every meal, he was mistaken in thinking that the other was indifferent. The Duke was aware of what might possibly lie ahead for them. He was just as disappointed as the captain that at this stage of their journey, when they had believed that the greatest danger was behind them, this misfortune should strike. The pirates usually confined their activities to the Strait of Madagascar and the Indian Ocean. Here on the southernmost part of the coast of Africa, with the Cape of Good Hope only a few days away, it was rare for a privateer to make an appearance. But the Duke had a sober mind. With practical resignation, he had learned to accept the things that could not be changed. If a sea battle was upon them, it should be tackled with calmness, deliberation, and resolute courage. And he had demonstrated not once, but often, that he

could stand his ground in a fight. He was likely one of the few colonial appointments made in recent years on merit and not for political reasons.

As viceroy of the British possessions in India, the Duke of Hampden had acquitted himself admirably. With his measured advice, which he could substantiate with a sword in his powerful right hand, he had befriended many an Indian Prince and Maharaja.

Without thought of reward, it had nevertheless come to pass that he was so richly laden with gifts that he was now returning to his homeland after five years with two iron-bound coffers in his cabin in which a royal fortune was locked.

And what Captain Leigh perhaps also did not realize was that the Duke was yearning for the reunion with his daughter whom he had last seen five years ago.

Margaret was now twenty.

When she was fifteen, there were already few at the royal court who could rival her beauty.

She had the soft eyes and features of her mother, who had died so early in her life, but the Duke remembered with pride the fire in her gaze and the firmness of her lips and chin that she had inherited from him. For even at fifty, the Duke showed only a few grey hairs along his temples and his skin was smooth with the attractiveness of a much younger man. "Do you recognize them?" he now inquired calmly of the captain, who was watching the privateers through a spyglass.

"You speak as if I have made their acquaintance before," Leigh replied, slightly dryly.

"An experienced captain, such as yourself," the Duke interjected with his subtle smile, "a veteran of these routes has surely often had this experience?"

"A few times, Your Grace," Leigh admitted. "But rarely have I been alone and rarely have they been in the majority. No one could have foreseen that this adversity would befall us. But it now appears that we made an error in judgment to let the two escorting ships turn back at Algoa Bay."

"It is a done deal," the Duke remarked. "You ought to view this incident as a challenge, Leigh. You admit that the advantage has always been in

your favour. Let us see what we can do now.”

“It seems to me,” the captain began seriously, refusing to be cheered up, “that you do not fully realize...”

“Blast it, man!” the Duke interrupted him. “If we cannot run away, we must fight. At least do it with a belief in your invincibility.” He smiled. “If you will excuse me, I am now going to make myself battle-ready.”

“Your Grace,” the captain turned to him, startled. “It was my commission to fetch you in India. It is my duty to deliver you safely to London. I must request that you go to your cabin until the danger has passed.”

With his hand on the round knob of the stanchion of the railing where the steps from the quarterdeck went to the main deck, the Duke regarded the captain with a patient, indulgent smile. Then he shook his head, almost resignedly.

“My dear friend,” he said calmly. “You have just informed me that they are in the majority. Do you also want to weaken your forces? I can assure you that this will not be my first field or sea battle. I have never hidden behind the lines. I will be back soon.”

With a light step that indicated the healthy condition of his body and the alertness of muscles that were in good practice, he trotted down the steps to his cabin. Against the railing of the main deck stood the sailors and marines. Anxiously, they looked over the vast undulations to the two approaching ships that were now clearly visible to the naked eye. On the rope ladders, many were already clambering to the cross-masts so that they could be ready to adjust the sails and give the ship greater mobility when the attack took place.

The Duke smiled. Every drop of his noble blood pulsed with the daring and courage of his ancestors through his veins. Of all on board, his loss would be the greatest if they were to fall into pirate hands. Of all on board, his resistance would be the strongest.

In his private cabin, he took off the embroidered satin jacket. He tore the cravat from his neck and kicked off the high-heeled shoes with the silver buckles. Then he fastened a strong leather waistcoat over the satin shirt and folded the side edges around his wrists and rolled up the long sleeves of his shirt. He stuck two pistols in the gold-decorated belt and put on two light flat-heeled sandals. A long, gleaming rapier hung

loosely in its sheath at his side.

He peered into the mirror and tore the wig from his head. He adjusted his black hair slightly and smiled. Then he stepped back and regarded the broad sleeping-couch against the bulkhead. A blanket was tucked under the mattress, but he pulled it out so that it hung down to the floor on the side. This would hide the coffers. Perhaps they would not be noticed, and there was always the possibility of salvage if the ship should be scuttled, for perhaps it would not be too deep. He was a strong swimmer. Two miles would not pose too much of a problem for him, provided he was not wounded, and there were, of course, no sharks in the vicinity.

With an alert gaze and a firm stride, he returned to the quarterdeck. At that moment, Captain Leigh shouted to the boatswain and ordered that the cannons be brought into readiness. Loudly, the boatswain sang the order down a hatch to the gun deck.

The two privateers were less than half a mile from the Indian Lark. Captain Leigh stood with the spyglass to his eye.

“Any further news?” inquired the Duke.

“Yes.” Leigh lowered the spyglass. He leaned with his hands on the rails. “One is the Albatross,” he said despondently. “I can recognize the captain too. He is a pirate by the name of Javert. About a year ago, he dared to attack three of us alone. There are reportedly no limits to his recklessness.”

“What happened then?” asked the Duke, interested.

“He is reckless, but not indifferent,” replied Leigh. “He fired a few shots at us and then made off.” He sighed. “But I have heard a lot about him. I must tell you this, Your Grace, there is surely only one pirate I fear more than this Javert.”

“And who is that?”

“They call him Oloff the Pirate. I have only heard of him, but he is reportedly the most powerful of them all.”

The Duke laughed. He clapped Leigh on the shoulder.

“Now look there!” he exclaimed. “How grateful we must be. Our situation could have been much worse.”

Leigh merely shook his head. His eyes wandered despondently to the sails with their limited capacity and then again to the privateers who

were swiftly approaching over the undulations like jumping tornadoes. Half an hour later, there were gunpowder flashes in the forward gun port of the Albatross. Almost simultaneously, the shot cracked and then the bullet splashed diagonally in front of the bow of the Indian Lark.

“Rather impudent,” remarked the Duke. “What do they expect? Should we stop and take them on board?”

Captain Leigh said nothing. It was not necessary to give an order, for they could do nothing to sail faster.

The masts of the Albatross slowly moved past the Indian Lark. And then both privateers swung into a parallel course until they were proceeding on either side of the Indian Lark. However, they remained out of firing range.

“It seems to me as if they are going to escort us,” said the Duke. “Perhaps we have underestimated the friendly disposition of these people, Leigh.”

The captain made an exasperated gesture over his shoulder and called to the helmsman. “Hold course!”

“Captain!” came loudly from the Albatross.

“Haul in your sails. Let us come on board and you will get off with your ship and your lives unharmed.”

“A reasonable proposal,” said the Duke calmly, but without heeding him, Captain Leigh grabbed his speaking trumpet.

“Thank you for the information!” he bellowed. “However, we would prefer to use our own discretion!”

Slowly, the two privateers pulled ahead of them. Then both swung inwards. It was clear that they wanted to intercept the Indian Lark, but they would also be in a position within a few minutes to unleash a volley that would strike the Indian Lark diagonally from the front. The English ship would not be able to answer the cannon fire as her cannons were aiming far behind the privateers on either side.

“Swing to starboard!” shouted Leigh.

The ship heeled over to port, and with a turn they chose a course towards the coast. From the main deck, the boatswain yelled at the sailors in the rigging. The ropes creaked through the pulleys and the sails swung askew to catch the wind from the new direction.

The Duke nodded approvingly. Leigh was not foolish. By this

maneuver, he not only came out between the two privateers, but if he continued towards land, it would eventually no longer be possible for them to engage him from both sides.

The reaction of the privateers was so quick that it almost seemed as if they had expected Leigh's tactic. The one that was on the starboard side made his turn shorter, and scarcely a moment later he sailed close past the Indian Lark.

A booming sound shook through the air. The two ships had simultaneously fired a full broadside at each other. The blood coursed faster through his veins as he saw a gaping tear in the side of the privateer. On deck, a piece of the railing was gone and the part of the aft mast above one of the privateers hung crooked in the ropes. But the Indian Lark had not come away unscathed. It almost looked as if the bulkhead of the forecastle had been swept away by a giant hand. The bowsprit was no longer where it had been a moment ago, and the two long foresails fluttered in the wind.

If only that was all! The Albatross, which was on the left of the Indian Lark, had turned toward the land. Now the privateer shot past close behind his sister ship, and it almost seemed as if Javert intended to ram the Indian Lark in the side with his sharp bow. But this was not the case. Barely thirty paces away from them, he swung parallel with the Indian Lark. It seemed as if the whole side of the ship was engulfed in a cloud of smoke when a full broadside thundered at that short distance. And Javert could dare to come so close because with the volley that the Indian Lark had fired a moment before, the cannons on that side had not yet been reloaded.

The Duke had fallen flat on the deck. An inch away from him, the massive, splintered aft mast crashed down and the deck planks in the area splintered apart. Carefully, the Duke peered over the main deck. Only the middle mast was still standing. Little remained of the railing. The sails hung in tatters, and then he heard the helmsman's cry.

"The rudder is gone, captain!"

The Duke jumped up. Behind him, Leigh's order thundered that the sailors who still clung to life up there in the rigging should attack. Everyone should prepare to repel the pirates.

A few single shots bellowed from the remaining port cannons, but the

Albatross did not heed them. The other privateer came around the stern of the Indian Lark, and then grappling hooks whistled through the air. The sailors tried to throw them overboard, but many hooked into the deck planks or against the railings. Slowly, the privateers were pulled closer, and then the side timbers scraped and grated as they crashed against the Indian Lark.

With wild cries, the pirates swung through the air on ropes. Others jumped over the railings, and scarcely a minute after the few volleys of rifle and pistol shots, the clashing of sabers echoed, and the defenders were slowly driven into a huddle in the middle of the deck.

The Duke had remained on the quarterdeck with the captain and the few officers. The stern of the Albatross was diagonally in front of them, and they were therefore only attacked from the other privateer. He had fired both his pistols, and with his razor-sharp rapier he came up against a trio of pirates moments later. He fell back slowly in the direction of the steps. His lips were pressed tightly together. His eyes searched for every movement of his opponents, and with quick, powerful blows he stopped the wall of steel in front of him.

And then a young man emerged from among the pirates. He had a sharp face and a fine black mustache. From his attire, it seemed as if he might be the privateer captain. His black eyes were greedily fixed on the Duke. Perhaps he had seen that here was a worthy swordsman and he wanted to test his ability against him. Perhaps he had realized that he was dealing with a nobleman for whom a ransom could always be demanded.

The Duke was still falling back. Of the pirates, he kept an eye on their captain. When the Duke saw that he had reached the top of the steps, he quickly jumped down, but immediately he was driven against the bulkhead of the aft castle. Again the privateer captain pushed his men ahead. The Duke felt the knob of a door behind him and yanked it open. One fleeting glance over the main deck was enough to make him realize that the fight was almost over. Against the overwhelming numbers of pirates, the defenders did not have the slightest chance.

He jumped into the passage. He wanted to slam the door shut behind him, but a pirate had thrown himself against it and into the Duke's sword as well. But this meant that the privateer captain and a few others