

MASKED ROBBER SERIES

3. THE MASKED ROBBER AND HIS GANG



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SUMMARY

Step into the thrilling world of the Masked Robber, a mysterious vigilante who fights for justice in the Cape Colony of the 1800s. In this third installment of the popular series, the Masked Robber finds himself in a web of intrigue and danger as he takes on new foes who threaten the safety of the colony.

It all begins when the governor attempts to appease the warring tribal chiefs on the Eastern border with gifts, much to the dissatisfaction of the local citizens. Sensing injustice, the Masked Robber emerges from the shadows to campaign the oppressed colonists against the governor's plans. Slipping into the forbidding depths of the Castle's torture chamber, he stages a daring rescue of his faithful servant. Yet greater dangers await as he becomes entangled in the machinations of the unscrupulous Captain Grattan and his accomplice, the smuggler Gibbons.

Posing as the newly appointed captain of the garrison, Grattan has insidious plans to entrap the Masked Robber. But he hasn't counted on the courage and cunning of Marcus D'Southy and his sister Sylvia, who find themselves unwitting pawns in Grattan's schemes. With lives on the line, unlikely alliances are formed as the Masked Robber and his followers race against time to thwart Grattan and uncover his true motivations. From the lamp-lit streets of Cape Town to the windswept Eastern frontier, the action never lets up. Narrow escapes, surprise twists, and moments of tenderness between the Masked Robber and his allies punctuate the non-stop drama. Through it all, the Masked Robber relies on his wits, athleticism, and sense of justice to evade the governor's forces and turn the tables on his foes. But will it be enough to save the colony from turmoil?

Brimming with adventure and suspense, this book transports you to a long-ago era of chivalry and danger. As the Masked Robber's breathtaking exploits unfold, you'll understand how his legend came to inspire the oppressed. Strap in for a sweeping saga of bravery, sacrifice and last-second reversals that will keep you guessing until the final page.

EXTRACT

A few moments later, the first gunshots rang out. The group of guards in front of the gate moved in that direction, but then one called out that they were not allowed to leave their posts. They turned back.

Shortly after the first gunshots, a great commotion broke out inside the Castle. People and soldiers shouted at each other, and then footsteps of men who were quickly approaching could be heard through the gate. Grattan, with Krause on his heels, emerged. He looked in the direction of the wagons and then called for a group of the inner guards to follow him. Grattan turned around and shouted over his shoulder.

“You guard stay here in case any of the Castle’s inhabitants want to come out, stop them because it may be dangerous outside!”

Then they ran forward to take up position at the wagons. Jean turned to Jacques and whispered softly.

“This D’Southy does not seem stupid,” he said, “but the poor man will have to learn quite a few lessons tonight.”

3. THE MASKED ROBBER AND HIS GANG

CHAPTER 1

It is late in the year 1834. The Southern Swan has already been away from England for two months, and in the faint rays of the setting sun, it now appears to be lying still on the water, not far from the Cape of Good Hope. Indeed, the outlines of Table Mountain are already visible through the mistiness of the sea. But around the ship, the sea protests with small foaming breakers against the wind, and the heavy masts bend almost under the weight of the graceful, white-bellied sails. Groaning, the vessel moves forward, but it keeps pace with the movement of the waves so that the girl by the railings gets the impression that they are anchored on the vast expanse of water.

Sylvia D'Southy's eyes are dreamy, fixed on the beautiful scene before her. She is barely aware of the movement of the large ship and the gentle wind playing with her golden, shiny hair. Her blue eyes reflect the blue of the sea and sky, and her delicate, facial features are blooming with the healthy outdoor air in which she has lived for the past two months. Lost in thought, she watches the approaching mist in which her new home lies.

Footsteps behind her interrupt her train of thought. She recognizes them immediately because she has already spent many pleasant hours on board in the company of Edward Hastings. There were only three passengers on the heavily loaded cargo ship, so they were mostly reliant on each other's company. She and her brother, Captain Marcus D'Southy, both like the wealthy young man and were therefore delighted to have him as a fellow traveler.

She looks over her shoulder and smiles warmly. Hastings comes to stand next to her and rests his hands on the railing while he looks at the dull lines of Table Mountain and Lion's Head for a moment. Then he turns to her and smiles in her eyes.

"So, Sylvia," he asks in his mellifluous, deep voice, "are you excited?" She does not answer immediately. Once again, she feels that pleasant glow pass through her as she looks into his dark brown eyes. She is aware of his black hair and sunburned features, his slightly high cheekbones that give an almost Eastern look to his eyes, and his nose that protrudes above his thin, firm lips. His broad shoulders rise above

his thin waist, but they do not give the impression of strong power. It is as if they rest comfortably on his body, with only a slight indication of the muscular strength that lies within them.

Her attraction to him lies in that half-hidden masculinity that is reflected in his entire posture. She is now again aware of the mystery that always lurks in his eyes. It seems as if you can only ever grasp a small part of this man's thoughts and feelings. Your knowledge of him will ultimately remain superficial.

Finally, she answers dreamily. "Of course, I am excited, Edward. How else if you had to travel almost halfway around the world to reach your new home?"

"It will not be forever," he consoles her. "After Marcus has distinguished himself in the colony, you can return to your parents' home, and he will, of course, be quickly promoted."

"We no longer have a parental home, Edward," she says softly.

"I am sorry, Sylvia." There is indeed a sound of regret in his voice, but, as always, it is as if there is no feeling accompanying the words. And that is precisely what makes him so interesting to her. She never knows what is going on inside him.

"I sometimes forget that your parents are no longer there."

"It does not matter," she replied more cheerfully. "We are already used to it."

"And where Marcus goes, you go?" he added with a laugh.

"He is all I have," she said softly. "It was not difficult to say goodbye to my friends and family when he got the appointment as captain of the Cape garrison. In fact, I decided without hesitation to go with him into the unknown. It may be difficult at first, but as long as we are together, I am happy."

"I will be there too, of course." He looked into her eyes and for a second, he could see the fleeting emotions in them. Then she looked down to hide the faint blush on her cheeks.

He immediately looked away and laughed cheerfully, giving her a chance to overcome her embarrassment.

"Anyway," he exclaimed, "the journey is finally over, right! We can go ashore early tomorrow morning."

From the bow of the ship, the captain approached them. He saw them

standing against the railing and joined them.

“Miss D’Southy. Mr. Hastings.” He nodded politely and greeted them in his customary semi-formal manner. They returned his greeting and he continued.

“Well, I have finally got you close to your destination, even though it took a bit longer than I expected.”

“It was not your fault, Captain Wycliffe,” Hastings objected. “As far as I could tell, we sailed through at least ten areas of calm.”

The captain laughed.

“Be that as it may, I am in a hurry now! With this wind, I will be able to make good progress, that is, if it holds. Unfortunately, we will not be able to go ashore tonight, but I will get you on land early tomorrow morning and then leave shortly after noon. I do not really have any business to attend to in Cape Town, and besides, we still have sufficient supplies on board.”

He looked back to the north where the breeze was coming from, and then to the west where the sun had already set. “But come, let us have a final toast together before we eat.”

In the corridor leading to the captain’s quarters, the young lieutenant, Marcus D’Southy, joined them. He was neatly dressed in the full uniform of the British Colonial forces. The gold embroidered knots on the shoulders of his red jacket stood out brightly against his blonde hair. He had the same delicate facial features as his sister, but his broad jaw testified to his determination and willpower. Nevertheless, he was unaware of his attractiveness, but his entire demeanor was proud of the high rank he had achieved at such a young age. He was especially proud of his rapid promotion because he knew that his noble lineage had nothing to do with it.

A while later, the four of them are sitting in the captain’s spacious cabin. Marcus and his sister sit next to each other on the soft couch right under the long window. To their right, in an armchair, sits Edward Hastings, and behind his desk sits Captain Wycliffe. In front of him, on a large tray, stand a few bottles of wine and four glasses.

After offering each of them a glass, Captain Wycliffe raises his own. “I drink to the pleasant journey we have had together and to the future.”

They empty their glasses, and Captain Wycliffe continues. “Usually,

my journeys to the East are monotonous, sometimes even boring, so I was pleased when you requested to accompany me.”

“Fate sometimes forges unexpected friendships,” philosophizes D’Southy.

“Yes, and tomorrow, Captain D’Southy, you will surely resume your duties at the Castle, but for you, Mr. Hastings, an unknown period lies ahead.”

“Yes, Captain,” Edward Hastings lowers his head for a moment. “I am afraid to think of the future. My brother has disappeared so completely that I can only hope he is still somewhere in the Cape Colony. It has been almost two years since I last heard from him. Anyway, I feel it is my duty to search for him.”

“Perhaps Captain D’Southy can still assist you. He will have considerable influence and be in a position to aid you in the search.”

He stands up to refill the glasses. D’Southy waits until he has sat down again and then, while looking thoughtfully at the red sparkling liquid in his glass, says, “I will, of course, do everything in my power to help you, Edward, but I do feel a little apprehensive about the responsibility that awaits me. As I understand it, there is much unrest in the young colony. The tribes in the east continually harass and loot the settlers at will. From what I learned in London, this is largely the fault of the frontier farmers themselves, but I reserve judgement until I can get first-hand information. Furthermore, I understand that the farmers in the Western Province are very dissatisfied, and there are apparently frequent protests against the government. Anyway, I have rested so well during this journey that I feel like a bit of hard work.”

“Yes, Captain D’Southy,” adds Captain Wycliffe, “I do not envy your position, but,” he chuckles slightly, “I do think that you might get a bit of help from other quarters.”

“What do you mean, Captain?” Sylvia asks immediately.

“I am actually being a little sarcastic now. I am referring to that mysterious Capetonian, the Masked Robber.” He remains silent and looks at the questioning expressions on his guests’ faces.

“The Masked Robber?” Sylvia asks. “That almost sounds like some kind of pirate.”

“Well, not really a pirate, but a bandit.”

“But, Captain,” said Marcus, “you speak as if this man is an established resident of the colony. As a bush robber, he should have long been behind bars!”

Captain Wycliffe laughed cheerfully. “Captain D’Southy, I must tell you that I’m not very knowledgeable about the matter. I often stay a few days in Cape Town on my way to the east, and that is when I hear the stories. In my opinion, and I base it on those who do not pay attention to rumors. The Masked Robber is merely a legend. However, whenever a robbery takes place in Cape Town, there are always people who want to drag this mysterious name into the matter.”

Sylvia D’Southy’s curiosity was now aroused. She looked excitedly at the captain. “You are not telling us everything!” she exclaimed. “A legend will be forgotten unless it is kept alive in some way.”

“Absolutely right, Miss D’Southy. In this case, however, it is kept alive only by word of mouth and, as I already told you, by the fact that when crimes occur that cannot be solved, they are attributed to this legendary figure. I mentioned it precisely because there was a similar incident some time ago. It is also related to the dismissal of the previous garrison captain and indirectly led to your brother getting the job.”

“But then you must tell us about it,” Sylvia insisted. Before Captain Wycliffe could answer, Edward Hastings interrupted them. All three looked surprised at him, immediately noticing the intense tension in his voice. They also now noticed for the first time that his hands were tightly gripping the arms of his chair and that his face was as white as a sheet.

“You completely reject the possibility that the Masked Robber still exists?” he asked slowly.

Captain Wycliffe did not answer immediately but looked intently at the young man. “If you perhaps associate your brother’s disappearance with this...” Before he could finish his sentence, Sylvia interrupted him. “Edward!” she exclaimed, “You surely do not think that your brother has become a bush robber in Cape Town?”

Edward Hastings tried to laugh off her words, but it was clear that he had not fully controlled his feelings yet. The captain continued.

“I can assure you, Mr. Hastings, that there is no possibility that your brother, whose actions and behavior were known to you until two years

ago, could have any connection with this man. The Masked Robber is a Frenchman, or rather, he was a Frenchman, and his marauding days ended several years ago. According to legend, the Masked Robber was a nobleman who was expelled from his country due to misconduct. He came to the colony and made a living from theft. His nephew, the Count De Moreaux, followed him here and killed him.”

It appears as if Hastings has completely regained his self-control and accepted the explanation.

“And this Count De Moreaux,” he asks casually, “is he still in the Cape?”

“Oh yes,” Captain Wycliffe responds. “He is a man of stature and one of the governor’s closest friends. He is engaged to a young Cape woman who,” and Captain Wycliffe smiles apologetically in Sylvia’s direction, “as I understand, is a stunningly beautiful girl. Apparently, he plans to settle permanently in the Cape.”

“But, Captain Wycliffe,” Marcus D’Southy interrupts again, “if this robber was killed so long ago, why did you connect him to my appointment in the Cape just now?”

Captain Wycliffe shrugs and refills their glasses.

“As I have already told you, Captain D’Southy, one cannot place much value on all the stories surrounding the so-called Masked Robber. However, there was recently some discontent among the farmers and then a black-clad rider suddenly appeared at night and made himself the champion of the oppressed farmers who were being punished. The captain of the garrison was then a certain Otto Mehrens. He was famous for being unbeatable, but he had to leave the Cape with his tail between his legs because one man made a fool out of him, and he appeared inexperienced. Of course, this man was the black-clad rider. Immediately, the people of the Cape Town lowlands began to recall the Masked Robber who had dressed in the same manner in the past.

In any case, Mehrens, with the help of a certain young man, Percival Philip, a nephew of the well-known Dr. Philip who was also here in the Cape at the time, tried to catch this night hawk. However, they failed. Philip was killed and Mehrens was dismissed. Since then, the Masked Robber has not appeared again. Most rational people believe that some young farmer simply revived the legend to instill courage in the

farmers. After achieving their goal, he then abandoned his tricks.”

“Well,” says Marcus D’Southy, after taking a sip of wine, “we will surely hear enough of this kind of story in the Cape.”

“But I find it fascinating!” exclaims Sylvia. “And I am eager to know more. How did this legend actually originate?”

The three men turn to laugh, and although Edward Hastings still seems slightly uncomfortable, it appears that he also wants to hear more about this mysterious rider.

“Miss D’Southy,” the captain begins, “I have already told you several times that I do not know much about the matter. The Masked Robber gained notoriety as a bush robber, but many people said that he only stole from the rich and government officials and generously distributed his loot to the poor and oppressed. It is actually because of this that the whole legend originated and people still talk about him. Whether he can really be considered a hero or was just a common thief, I do not know.”

“It sounds romantic,” sighs Sylvia and looks apologetically at Edward Hastings. However, she cannot suppress her curiosity and asks the captain to tell her more.

The conversation is interrupted by a knock at the door. A moment later, the first mate enters and salutes Captain Wycliffe.

“Jennings?” asks Wycliffe.

“The wind is getting stronger, Captain. I think we can expect a storm.” Wycliffe does not immediately respond. Then he waves his hand.

“Thank you, Jennings,” he says, and as soon as the first mate has left, he turns to his guests. “We will be in Table Bay in an hour or so. As I have already told you, it was my plan to visit the Castle tomorrow, but I wonder if I should not proceed tonight instead.”

His three passengers look at him perplexed. Hastings is the first to understand the captain’s intention.

“You mean to say that you want to disembark us tonight and take advantage of this wind to reach Cape Point as soon as possible?”

“Exactly. It is not necessary for me to go into Cape Town. Moreover, if I drop anchor in Table Bay tonight and the storm breaks out, I will be in trouble, especially since the wind is coming from the north.”

“But that poses no problem,” Marcus D’Southy interjects. “As long as you just drop us ashore, it will suit us just fine.”

The captain thanks him for his compliance and continues.

“Then I advise you to prepare a meal immediately to go ashore.” He stands up. “If you will excuse me, I will just give orders to that effect. Once I come back, we can start the meal.”

Around ten o’clock at night, the three passengers stand by the bulwark. The captain extends his hand and greets the two young men. He then gallantly bends over the young lady’s hand. He hands a package to Captain D’Southy.

“I would be pleased if you could deliver this package to the governor. There are some letters in it, as well as the usual reports we prepare regarding passing ships and other matters.”

They promise to do so, and after thanking him again for his kindness during the journey, they prepare to leave the ship.

The sea is already much rougher than in the afternoon, and they are carefully helped by the first mate and a few of the crew to climb off the ladder and into the boat that moves up and down alongside the ship. A moment later, everyone is safely inside, and the sailors push the small boat away from the ship’s side.

Sylvia and Marcus sit next to each other with their faces turned towards the land. She reaches out her hand to him, and he holds it tightly in his. Since childhood, she had been accustomed to relying on him for everything, and he had accepted it as his duty to protect her. Before them, they can already see a few house lights of the Cape, and both are filled with the excited anticipation of approaching an unknown destination.

The sailors rowed vigorously, and the rolling waves propelled the boat swiftly forward. A quarter of an hour later, they felt the boat rise higher and, judging from the surrounding sounds, realized they had already reached the shore. The night was pitch black and even the outlines of the mountains could not be distinguished. Moments later, they saw the dark shapes of boats ahead of them, and the boat scraped against a wooden quay. The sailors jumped up and grasped the sides of the quay to keep the boat still. The three passengers disembarked, and their luggage was unloaded. The helmsman, Jennings, asked if he could be of further assistance, but it was clear he was eager to return to the ship. “I doubt that it is necessary, Jennings,” replied D’Southy politely. “We

are already truly grateful for your help.”

“That is very kind of you, Captain,” said Jennings relieved and then continued. “I suggest you walk up to the quay. It will take you to a street that leads to an inn. It is there at the first lights you see. You will find someone there to help you with your luggage.”

They thanked him again, and the next moment, the three travelers stood alone in the dark night. Behind them, they could hear the oars of the boat groaning. In front of them was the Cape, almost completely shrouded in darkness.

“Well,” said Mehrens, “one of us will have to stay here to watch the luggage. I suggest Sylvia and I go ahead, and you can wait here for now.”

“A good plan, but I do not think it will be necessary.” There was a sudden hardness in Edward Hastings’ voice. Brother and sister both turned around in surprise and then looked with shocked at the gun in Hastings’ hand. They were close enough to each other to see it clearly. With an exclamation, Sylvia moved closer to her brother and instinctively reached out to take his hand. Marcus had already stepped forward to place himself between Edward and Sylvia.

“Stay where you are!” Hastings barked. Any hint of civility and friendliness had now disappeared from his voice.

Totally stunned, they froze in their tracks. Then Marcus D’Southy laughed.

“Edward,” he said lightly, “if you are trying to play a joke...”

He hesitated. He wanted to talk to Hastings because he still could not understand how this man, who had been with them on the ship for two months, could suddenly change like this. They knew nothing of Hastings’ past except what he had told them himself, but the man had so far behaved like a true gentleman. What made his words falter on his lips, however, was the sudden movement of the gun in the direction of Sylvia. He now realized that Hastings was serious and that he would use Sylvia to keep him, Marcus, under control.

“I am not joking,” Hastings’ voice is now calm, but there is a chilliness in it that makes the girl shudder. She gets the impression of a cold-blooded snake that has trapped its prey...

“I am not planning on wasting my time here on the pier either. You both

will simply have to listen to me, and I warn you that the slightest hint of resistance will send you to eternity. Turn your back, D'Southy." The command is curt and brooks no delay.

In the darkness, the red glow of anger and helplessness on Marcus D'Southy's face cannot be seen. However, he tries to control his temper because he knows that resisting now will not benefit him. He shrugs and turns around.

"I am going to remove the gun that you have in your pocket," Hastings says behind him, "and I warn you that mine is aimed at your sister."

He steps forward and pulls the weapon out of D'Southy's pocket. A moment later, the water splashes as it hits the sea.

"And now, walk in front of me," Hastings commands. "As soon as we come into the light, I will walk alongside your sister with my gun in my pocket, and I warn you not to attempt to escape. You also do not speak a word to each other. Walk now."

Marcus D'Southy hesitates for a moment, but then he stretches out his hand to Sylvia resignedly.

"Let go of her and stay away from each other. You both walk at least two paces apart!"

D'Southy shrugs his shoulders again. Then he starts walking.

Edward Hastings remains a pace or two behind them, and the three of them walk quickly. After they turn the first street corner, they see the sign of the Old Coast Inn.