

RED RUBY SERIES

1. The Red Ruby



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THE RED RUBY

by

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SUMMARY

Simon Verbeek, the great seaman with his long, black hair and elegant black beard, had declared war on all pirates. For pirates had not only robbed him of the Company ship of which he was the captain, but they had also carried off his fair, young wife.

Simon could not find a ship with which he could bring his vengeance to the pirates' doorstep. He and seven of his crew then ended up one day in a skiff in the Cape of Storms, along the southwestern coast of South Africa. In the fierce storm, their skiff was overturned, and they were then left at the mercy of the turbulent sea. But then they see a ghost ship sailing past them, with no crew on board. Simon and three of his men miraculously manage to get on board the peculiar ship. They find no living soul on board, and everything still looks in perfect condition, except for the sails and ropes that have already been severely damaged by the wind.

Then they hear an unearthly shriek from somewhere in the ship, which sounds as if it comes from the dead, giving them the fright of their lives. They then make a shocking discovery that puts wonderful treasures into their hands, but to get their hands on it, they will first have to solve certain secrets. And then Simon and his faithful follower Wilhelm Rieckert embark on the long, long journey that they have dreamed of for so long.

EXTRACT

When Simon Verbeeck hit the water, he sucked in his breath deeply and filled his lungs thoroughly. The weight on his leg pulled him down quickly, as he was powerless to do anything about it. He sank rapidly to the muddy bottom of the river, the water of which was mixed with the saltwater of the sea. It felt like an eternity in which he was submerged. Deeper and deeper he sank until he finally hit the bottom where he lay powerless. He felt his lungs swell and felt a great throb through his head.

He struggled desperately with those ropes that constricted his hands, but to no avail. And even in these moments of death, here where he was so desperately struggling to preserve life, it flashed through him how he had seen two figures swim away from the side of the pirate ship, at that moment just before he had dived off the plank. And that dark head, that flowing black hair, was unmistakable.

One of those figures was his Maria. In a fraction of a second, he even felt grateful that, even if he had to die, his Maria might be freed. He could not understand it at all, but he knew that it was not a dream that was tormenting him.

1. THE RED RUBY

Chapter 1

A SAIL IN THE STORM

It is stormy at the Cape of Storms, and the waves of the southern Atlantic Ocean come rolling in from the west like green dunes, their manes pure white, and the foam flying before the dreaded south-westerly wind.

The eight men in the long skiff wrestle with the oars to keep the small vessel's nose into the wind. This is their only protection against the danger of being swallowed by the raging sea, which one moment boils up into breakers that look like mountains and the next moment sinks back into deep, swirling eddies where the foam swirls and where it looks as if the bottom of the great water will be exposed. Their faces and clothes are soaking wet, their hair dripping, and their muscular arms are already numb from wrestling against the stormy sea.

"Keep her straight," bellows the big, dark man who is rowing here near the bow. "Keep her nose into the wind," shouts Simon Verbeeck, a large, rough, and powerful man with flowing black hair and an elegant black beard.

"I will keep her nose into the wind," calls the man at the helm, Wilhelm Rieckert, a smaller but sturdy blond fisherman who has his hands full keeping the Red Ruby of Amsterdam straight in the sea. Occasionally, the tiller of the rudder swings so violently that Wilhelm Rieckert has his hands full just staying in the skiff.

The other men do not speak. They are gripped by fear, here in the raging sea that threatens to swallow them each time. At the command of Simon Verbeeck, they row as best they can, not to make progress, but simply to keep the Red Ruby of Amsterdam straight and true, with its nose straight into the raging waves, straight into the south-westerly wind, because they know that if their fragile vessel turns sideways, then it is all over for them.

They ride over the water hills, they sink into deep eddies, climb out again on the other side, and all the time they are heading downwind, further and further away from the hazy, almost invisible mass of Table Mountain. They know these waters, because they fish here every day,

not far from Cape Point. But this is a storm of storms. In their eventful careers at sea, none of these men have ever encountered anything like this. Today they understand again why the Cape of Good Hope is often called the Cape of Storms. If the old Cape ever deserved that name, then it deserves it on this day.

“Where are you drifting us, Simon Verbeeck?” shouts Wilhelm Rieckert here from behind the helm, clamping the tiller with renewed strength. “Are you drifting us to the Arctic Sea?”

The big man in front wipes the salt spray from his eyes.

“I am not drifting you anywhere, I just want us to stay safe. Keep her straight, brother, keep her straight. She must not swing sideways.”

Here in the dark danger, there is even a strange exhilaration in the powerful Simon Verbeeck, because he likes storms. He grew up at sea. He began on one of the large vessels of the Dutch East India Company when he started sailing to the East as the captain’s servant. In those days, he learned everything that could be learned about a ship, on the long voyage from Amsterdam to the beautiful harbours of the East. Between Amsterdam and Java and between Amsterdam and Bombay, Simon Verbeeck learned what the sky looks like when the storms threaten. How you should let the large vessel ride when the wind catches you from behind. How you should hold her when a hurricane strikes you, and how you should, with great patience and courage, confront the danger when the wind suddenly dies down and the sea becomes as calm as a mirror.

Yes, he knows the dangers of the sea very well, this Simon Verbeeck who today is a well-known and prominent fisherman in the Cape waters.

However, Simon Verbeeck is a bitter man.

He has indeed become a great seaman. A navigator like few others, with an intimate knowledge of all the seas and of all the corners of the earth. A man who can immediately tell you to which power a large sailing ship belongs, the moment the mainsail bulges out from behind the horizon.

And here he is now, riding the thin ribs of a long skiff through a destructive storm. This is because he clashed with a pirate ship that crushed him in the waters near Java. He and Wilhelm Rieckert, his

faithful friend, barely escaped with their lives. They had swum for miles through the wreckage and if they had not each grabbed a large tub, on which they were washed ashore by a merciful sea current on the beach of Sumatra, he would not have been sitting here in the long skiff with his wet beard now.

That day when the fire mouths of the pirate sent his elegant ship to the depths, Simon Verbeeck swore an oath that he would devote the rest of his life to the destruction of the earth's pirates. Together with Wilhelm Rieckert, he sailed back to his beautiful Amsterdam. He wanted to start again somewhere. He went to the authorities to apply for a new vessel, but this time an armed vessel with many fire mouths. The hunt for pirates had become an obsession with him, but the Company simply would not listen to him. They did not fancy a man who wanted to focus on pirates. Shocked and disillusioned, Simon Verbeeck wandered around Amsterdam and tried to find a private financier who would enable him to build or buy his own vessel and then equip it so that he could hunt the ships with the skull and crossbones on their flag. But no financier in Holland was willing to lift a finger against the terror of piracy. Everyone just assumed that Simon Verbeeck would lose out against the pirates.

So disappointed and disillusioned was this strong seafarer that he sailed to the Cape of Good Hope because he imagined that in that new settlement there would be more hope to scrape something together. He spoke to sailors who often visited the Cape of Good Hope, and they told him of the great expansion that was underway in the new colony that was started by Johan van Riebeeck. They had impressed upon him that there were fortunes to be made at the Cape.

Simon Verbeeck then sailed to the Cape of Good Hope, followed by his good and faithful henchman, Wilhelm Rieckert.

But at the Cape, Simon's disillusionment was even greater, because instead of a large and flourishing settlement, he found a small and struggling colony, where there were not many prospects and where the chances were therefore very slim.

There, he first did carpentry work for the Company, but later Simon decided that the call of the sea was too strong for him. He built the long skiff for himself, sought a crew, and started fishing. With that, he would

slowly gather money. For some reason, he felt that something was waiting for him, here at the southern tip of Africa where the large ships come sailing in like swans, from the Far East and from Europe. He was convinced that an unexpected opportunity would be offered to him here, to become his own master at sea, to own his own vessel, and to go out against the pirates who had become such a scourge for all shipping.

That disaster at sea, near the coast of Sumatra, cost Simon Verbeeck dearly, because not only was his reputation as a seafarer damaged that day, much more happened to him.

Here where he is now sitting in the bow of the long skiff, with the south-westerly wind of the Cape waters raging in his face, he relives that scene in his thoughts again. With a large cargo of spices, Eastern food, and precious stones, his vessel was on its way back to the harbours of Holland that day. Then he saw the large billowing mainsail appear on the horizon, and he saw the swift vessel cleave through the water, proud and majestic, like a swan of the sea. He was immediately on his guard and called his entire crew on deck. They tore open the gun ports, loaded the cannons, and stood ready with the cannon torches. But they had no chance. The pirate swooped down on them and with the first full salvo of his stronger fire mouths, he broke Simon Verbeeck's vessel. The main mast was shot down low above the deck, and soon there was just a chaos of fire and sulphur.

For Simon Verbeeck, that battle was a twofold battle. Together with his men, he fought until the blood ran down into his boots. They wiped out about a quarter of the pirate crew when the thugs jumped on deck. But all of that did them no good.

Simon fought furiously to try to retain his ship.

But he also fought to retain his young wife, Maria. She had made that voyage with him from Amsterdam. They were then strong in their youthful love, because they had recently been married, and because Simon was such an excellent and reliable seafarer, the Company had allowed him to take his young bride with him on this voyage to Java.

But that day, Simon lost her. In the confusion of blood, death, and flames, he lost his Maria. The last he saw of her was when a tall pirate grabbed her and stood on the side of the burning vessel, looking for a rope to swing across to the pirate ship. Simon had charged at him with

his sword, but at the very last moment, the pirate swung over to the pirate vessel with a cry of victory. On that confused deck, Simon saw her disappear. That was the last he saw of her.

When all was lost, Simon and Wilhelm Rieckert, together with a number of other men, jumped into the sea among the debris. They each got a tub in their hands and swam out with it to the beach of Sumatra. Simon's tears were mixed with the salt of the sea.

That day, he swore a curse on all pirates. That day, an ideal was born in him, to fight against them until he died or until he had regained his wife. After many months, Simon returned to Holland after his failed mission to get a new vessel into his hands. He crossed over to England. He even joined a pirate vessel as a crew member, in search of his wife. Unfortunately, this became known, and then Simon knew that he would never get another vessel from the Company. This, together with the prospect that he could make a new start at the Cape of Good Hope, drove him to the southern tip of Africa.

Here on the beach of storms where so many ships perish, he and Wilhelm had salvaged and carried out one piece of wreckage after another. They had already gathered enough to lay the keel of the ship that they want to build for themselves. But it is slow and soul-destroying work, and it will certainly take months if not years before Simon Verbeeck will finally be able to sail out.

A mountain of water grows again under the long skiff and slings it high. Here from the crest of the raging breaker, it looks to Simon as if he can survey the entire sea.

And it is then that he suddenly jumps upright here in the bow. He lets out a loud cry, and with his large hand, he points downwind.

The long skiff has already taken in a lot of water, and it does not have much freeboard anymore. Two of the men are already busy bailing water out as best they can. But Simon has long since realized that the days of the Red Ruby of Amsterdam are numbered. Only a few more breaker crests have to break over them, then they will sink away, and in his blood, he feels that this is only the beginning of the storm. It will become much more cruel and mighty as the day progresses.

But here where he is now standing upright, with his legs planted far apart and his hand stretched out downwind, Simon Verbeeck no longer

thinks of the death that awaits them. He no longer thinks of the moment when the Red Ruby of Amsterdam will slowly sink away beneath them. "Look there!" he shouts downwind, turns to his crew, and then turns back again. "Do you see what I see?"

For a moment, Wilhelm Rieckert shoots up here at the helm and stares ahead. The other men stop rowing and are now also staring ahead.

And just before they glide back down with the Red Ruby of Amsterdam into the deep trough of the sea, they see the fluttering mainsail above the raging choppy waters. They see the proud bowsprit standing high above a breaker for a moment.

"A ship!" shouts Simon Verbeeck. "A lost ship!"

With sudden new strength, the Red Ruby of Amsterdam is driven out of the trough up the smooth slope of the next breaker, and when they reach the top, they only see the swinging crow's nest of the strange ship which has disappeared into a deep trough a short distance in front of them.

"Row!" shouts Simon Verbeeck. "Row as hard as you can!" In his eyes is a new gleam and in his heart a new urge.

For here where he is standing in the bow of the long skiff, he knows that that strange vessel is being swept aimlessly and hopelessly by the south-westerly wind onto the Cape coast. A strange constriction goes through his heart, and he stretches his neck to see better over the breakers. Slowly but surely, the Red Ruby of Amsterdam glides in the direction of the strange vessel...