

MASKED ROBBER SERIES

5. THE MASKED ROBBER RIDES IN THE NIGHT



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The cover sketch has been specially designed to match the theme of the Masked Robber series. It is a new creation for the cover of the book. This book is available in e-book format for the first time.

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THE MASKED ROBBER RIDES IN THE NIGHT by Gerrie Radlof

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SUMMARY

Get ready for action, drama, romance, and intrigue in the fifth installment of Gerrie Radlof's beloved Masked Robber series. Set in 19th century Cape Colony, South Africa, this thrilling tale follows the legendary Masked Robber as he confronts injustice and corruption while evading capture from the authorities.

The story begins as the elegant ship Martin Deens arrives in picturesque Saldanha Bay. On board is the wealthy Marquess of Langdon and his niece Lydia, a beautiful heiress. That night, Lydia secretly goes ashore to meet her forbidden lover, Guy du Beaufort. But when the Martin Deens unexpectedly departs, Lydia finds herself stranded on the beach. Enter the Masked Robber, Cape Town's champion of justice. Discovering Lydia's plight, this mysterious masked vigilante offers to escort her safely back to Cape Town. During the journey, Lydia shares her incredible story, setting in motion events that will dramatically impact the Masked Robber's quest for justice.

In Cape Town, tensions are rising. Farmers are petitioning the corrupt colonial government for reform but face indifference and increased taxes. The farmers' last hope lies with the legendary Masked Robber, who has historically fought oppression in the colony. But when a cunning imposter commits murder disguised as the Masked Robber, the farmers' faith in their hero falters. Determined to expose the truth, the real Masked Robber pursues a dangerous investigation, uncovering a vast smuggling operation run by powerful officials. One night on a secluded beach, the Masked Robber confronts the smugglers, triggering a stunning turn of events that soon entangles Lydia, Guy, and others in a complex web of secrets. Evading ambush and imprisonment through skill and wit, the Masked Robber must engineer a bold plan to redeem his reputation and bring down the corrupt forces threatening Cape Town. Outnumbered, with time running out, everything depends on his ability to outsmart the enemy in a climatic public showdown.

Brimming with adventure, romance, and crisp dialogue, The Masked

Robber Rides at Night builds on this addictive series with enough spellbinding twists and dramatic tension to thrill both new and returning fans. Can justice prevail against oppression? Discover the answer in this enthralling historical tale of bravery, sacrifice and redemption.

EXTRACT

“He is over here, towards the ravine,” Jean de Moreaux says to Rower by his side. The horse jumps up the slope, heading straight towards a passageway between the torches. In an instant, he passes through the soldiers’ line, but he had to move within the circle of light for a few moments.

“Something’s running between the trees!” a soldier shouts in fear above him.

“You are a coward, man. I could not see anything,” another replies.

The Masked Robber turns left, and a few steps further, he brings the horse to a halt. Herman Gouwer should be hiding somewhere in front of him, not too far away, if he has not already died from his wound. His alert eyes try to see through the darkness. His ears are perked, and he tries to distinguish the sounds between the trees. To his left are exclamations and the heavy grinding footsteps of the soldiers on the rocky ground. Above him is the whispering of the gentle evening wind. Among the leaves and right in front of him, he suddenly hears the rustling of a dry twig and the wheezing breathing of someone or something that is stumbling forward.

5. THE MASKED ROBBER RIDES IN THE NIGHT

CHAPTER 1

“There he goes, the scoundrel!” murmured Klaas Neethling as he aimed a trickle of juice from the raisin stem towards the cobblestones.

“Who, uncle? Where, uncle?” Jors van Rensburg quickly turned to the older man beside him. Leaning against the crossbar next to the three tethered horses, he looked out over the inner courtyard of the Castle.

“The Count De Moreaux,” Klaas answered curtly. “He is the one climbing down the steps of the Cat, that small porch in front of the main door. Of course, you have never been to the Cape, so you would not know him.”

“Goodness, uncle!” exclaimed Jors. “But he is dressed so elegantly. Look at the finely embroidered tie, the silk around the joints, the satin knee breeches and undershirt, goodness uncle, it is as blue as a cornflower!”

Jors van Rensburg stared in amazement at the refined gentleman. Born on a farm and raised on the wild Eastern frontier, it was the first time he had seen the luxurious attire of the Cape elite.

Count De Moreaux leisurely descended the steps, pausing for a moment under the luxury carriage with the magnificent prancing horses while the footman lowered the leather for him. He looked out over the courtyard, but it seemed as if he saw nothing. Bored, he raised his hand and held it in front of his mouth as if he wanted to yawn, but did not even have the energy for that.

“The richest man in the Colony!” spat out Klaas Neethling. “While hundreds of men and women are uncertain of their lives, he rolls in his wealth. I wish he would drown in it!”

“But why is he a scoundrel, uncle?”

“Reinhardt de Klerek and his gang are all scoundrels!” burst out Klaas. “They get rich while others die. And the governor lets himself be influenced by them!”

“Oh, then he is one of the fellows that Mr. Beyers came to deal with here in the Cape?”

Klaas Neethling looked at the young man as if he could not understand why he was so foolish.

“Mertin Beyers is a delegate of the farmers on the Eastern frontier, Jors,” he said emphatically. “He is not coming to “deal” with anyone! He just comes to present the people’s complaints to the governor.”

“I did not mean anything by it, Uncle Klaas,” Jors answered, slightly alarmed. “I just said it because uncle said he was a scoundrel.”

“He...” and Klaas Neethling threw the word towards the carriage, “he is a scoundrel because he is engaged to a Boer girl. Willa Rossouw, if you ever see her, let me tell you that she is the most beautiful girl in the world. Her father was a wealthy farmer here in the Stellenbosch district, but he cared about the cause of the less privileged. This Count De Moreaux is probably one of the most influential men in the Cape. But do you think he will lift a finger to use his influence with the governor to do something about the chaos that prevails on the Eastern frontier? No, he and De Klerek are friends, and they only think of themselves.” The large vehicle rolls past them. On the coach box sit the coachman and the footman. Both are dressed in the tasteful livery of the Count. They calmly observe the two men standing by the three horses. Klaas Neethling purposefully sprays a stream of plum juice over the cobblestone.

The coachman looks away and shrugs his shoulders. He pulls on the reins to keep the well-bred animals in front of the carriage while they make a graceful turn towards the Castle gate.

“Those two fellows look like farmers, do you not think, Philip?”

“It certainly appears so, Pierre,” the footman answers.

“I wonder what they are doing here. There are three horses.”

“The third one is probably inside.”

The coach rattles through the massive gate. The guards stand at attention, and the coachman and footman nod in their direction.

“You have not seen Andre inside again, have you?” asks Philip.

“No. He is probably already gone home. He was just trying to figure out where that troop movement had gone.”

“I wonder what is going on again.” He lets the reins fall lightly on the backs of the four horses, and they trot briskly over the cobblestone street towards Heerengracht.

The Count De Moreaux sits on the soft cushions of the rear seat of the coach. He stares out the window as if nothing in the world concerns

him. His eyelids rest heavily over his brownish eyes with a steel sheen that often makes them appear completely gray. His dark hair is neatly trimmed, but despite his formal attire, it is not powdered, and he is not wearing a wig. His legs are lazily stretched out in front of him, and the silver buckles on his shoes sparkle as he kicks them against the opposite seat.

The coach drives past the Gardens. Here are the luxury homes of the nobility and high officials. Lavish carriages rattle past him. The occupants bow politely, and a few of his close friends wave to him. With each greeting, he lowers his hand slightly and rests them in the deep pockets of his satin jacket.

Where the coach turns right above the Gardens towards Buitengracht, the Count looks at the large corner building in front of which a few light carriages and hansom cabs are parked. It is the home of De Frey Roux, a retired farmer from Constantia. In most of the disputes that the farming community has had with the governor, Roux has acted as a spokesman, and therefore, there are always a few visitors at his house during these times of discontent.

A few minutes later, the Count De Moreaux's elegant coach stops in front of a high stoop with massive pillars. The Count's residence here high up in Buitengracht is one of the largest and most luxurious in the Cape. From the garden stoep on the opposite side of the street, there is an unparalleled view of the city.

The footman jumps off and lowers the step. The Count steps out slowly and climbs the stairs. When he reaches the top steps, the large front door swings open, and a doorman bows low as the master of the house enters. As the door closes behind him, the nobleman turns to the doorman. The latter has straightened up, and he looks at the man in front of him as if he is dealing with an equal.

"What have you found, Andre?" asks De Moreaux, and in the sound of his mellow voice, there is not the slightest hint of annoyance.

"Not much, sir," André replies, shrugging his shoulders and shaking his gray head slightly.

"I did not accomplish much either," De Moreaux replied. "De Klerek was busy, and one of the officers could not tell us anything more than what we already know."

“Yes, sir. Among the soldiers, I could only confirm once again that Herman Gouwer must be shot on sight. Their orders were simple: Gouwer is a dangerous agitator who will defend himself to the death.”

“Well, Andre,” De Moreaux said slowly, “you will agree with me that this is odd. If this Gouwer is so dangerous, we should have known about him. Such a character has a reputation, and the community is usually aware of it before he is apprehended. But nobody has ever heard of Herman Gouwer, and suddenly he escapes from the Castle and the entire army is mobilized to track him down and shoot him on sight.” He shook his head as he turned and walked down the thickly carpeted hallway to the sitting room. Andre followed him. “Things are starting to spiral out of control,” De Moreaux continued. “It is all well and good to levy such high taxes, to impose unreasonable restrictions on trade, to threaten the entire economy of the Colony with the policies of the local government, but when they start playing with human lives, it is time that...”

“The Masked Robber steps in?” Andre interrupted softly. They were already in the spacious sitting room, and he had closed the door behind them.

Jean de Moreaux turned around and looked at the old man for a moment. “Yes, Andre,” he said then. “The Masked Robber and his loyal gang must once again take action. That Reinart de Klerek must be put in his place once and for all. Since he succeeded in becoming the colonial secretary through his sycophancy, he has been controlling state affairs from his office. That position has always been the most important in the Colony, but in his hands, it is a threat to peace.

“Yes, he is the second-highest official in the country and the only Colonial in the entire Executive Council. Yet he is responsible for all the wrongdoing, because precisely because he is a child of this land, the governor completely relies on his judgment. Even the Treasurer-General and Attorney-General are influenced by him. They simply refer all complaints they receive from the Boer community or other citizens to De Klerek. And he makes a mess of things to his heart’s content!

“In my life as the Count De Moreaux, I am apparently his friend. So I know him. He has a weak character, Andre, and he abuses his authority. We must definitely step in and find out what is going on.”

Andre stood before his master. There was a concerned expression on his face.

“M’sieur Jean,” he said seriously, “you have already done so much for the inhabitants of this colony. You, a foreigner, have taken their cause to heart. You...”

“Listen, Andre,” the Count interrupted. “Regarding this Herman Gouwer, it is not just a matter of a human life. Even if it was nothing more, it would have been enough reason for us to try to save him, or at least ensure that he is properly tried. I appreciate what you are saying, but we are now citizens of this country, and we have a duty to our fellow human beings. Herman Gouwer knows something, he knows something so important that De Klerek does not dare to let him be captured even by his own soldiers. That is why they must shoot him immediately, otherwise he may even talk to them.”

“Are you aware of the value it would hold for us if we were to get our hands on Herman Gouwer? It could potentially provide us with a weapon to counter De Klerek’s reckless, unwise, and certainly unjust exercise of authority. Do you agree, Andre?” The old man lowered his head. He now nods without saying anything.

“It will soon be dusk,” continued the count. “Tell Pierre and Philip to be ready immediately. And then one of you must go and fetch Monsieur Jacques. If possible, make sure that Miss Willa and Miss Elmien do not hear about this until we return. Hurry, my friend! We cannot allow Herman Gouwer to die!” The porter leaves the room. Jean de Moreaux turns around and walks to the large window on the opposite wall. He pulls back one of the heavy curtains and gazes over the city towards the Castle and the beach beyond. He follows the white strip of sand as it curves in the direction of Blouberg. Then he looks to the right, to the slopes of the majestic Table Mountain. His eyes wander in a wide circle back towards the sea. Somewhere in that region, Herman Gouwer is hiding or fleeing from a troop of soldiers. The man would not have tried to enter the city unless he had friends. Most likely, he tried to escape towards the mountain.

He turns around as the door behind him opens. The sun has already set, but in the room, it is still quite light, and as usual, he stops when he sees the beautiful Willa Rossouw entering.

Her dark hair hangs in natural locks along her temples and down to her neck. Her brown eyes are now worried, and there is a blush of excitement on her cheeks.

She quickly comes up to him and stretches out her hands. He takes them in his.

“So Andre did not succeed in avoiding you after all,” he says jokingly. “You are laughing again, Jean!” she exclaims reproachfully. “Why do you have to put your life in danger again, and for someone you do not even know, someone...”

“Does it matter if I know him, Willa? Listen,” he says seriously, putting his arm around her shoulders and turning them around to look over the city, “this land has given you to me. I will, therefore, remain forever indebted. The people who are being oppressed today are your people. I may not be able to serve them as the Count De Moreaux, but as the Masked Robber, they have my full support and my sword.” He quickly tells her the circumstances of the Herman Gouwer case. When he finishes, she just shakes her head.

“Elmien and Jacques are so happy,” she says softly. “Little Wilma is six months old today. Are you saying that Jacques should be harmed?” He lightly taps her on the shoulder. “Look, Willa!” he whispers. “I have known your sister’s husband since we were children. Do you think I will allow anything to happen to him?”

“There you go again, making jokes,” she replies, but apparently, she already realizes that his decision is final.

An hour later, five riders gallop high against the slopes of Leeuwberg towards Kloofnek. At the front is a large black stallion that is almost invisible among the trees in the strong twilight. The rider on its back is dressed entirely in black from head to toe. The mask over his eyes and the tight-fitting sweater and pants make him and the animal blend into the shadows.

The four riders behind him wear similar outfits. They all crouch low in their saddles to avoid the overhanging branches.

When they turn left against the slopes of Table Mountain, the front rider raises his arm. They come to a halt. “I am going straight to Devil’s Peak from here,” he says succinctly. “Jacques, you should follow and then head towards the plain later. Andre, you three should spread out on the

other side of Monsieur Jacques until you reach the beach. Remember, the world is teeming with soldiers. Stay on their heels but make sure you are not seen. There will be enough noise if they are lucky enough to catch Herman Gouwer. In that case, we must be ready and reach our prey before a crowd of soldiers rushes in on him. Be careful,” he concludes seriously.

“You too, Jean,” replies the rider addressed as Jacques.

Quickly but silently, they move away. Like ghosts, the horses glide through the bushes and shrubs. Years of experience have taught them the field, and this terrain is as familiar to them as their owners’ backyards.

Even before he hears a sound, the Masked Robber sees the row of lights against the slant of Devil’s Peak. Andre, who regularly visits the garrison at the Castle, had already determined what their plan was shortly after the soldiers’ departure. The commander, Captain Redley, arrived in the country only three months ago after his predecessor, Captain D’Southy, resigned because he could not deal with De Klerek. Redley knows the area poorly. He is accustomed to the densely populated London and is trying to apply the same tactics here.

When Andre spoke to them, the troops were just following the captain’s orders. Redley ordered a line of guards from Devil’s Peak to be stationed on the plains to the sea. He reasoned as follows: Herman Gouwer will progress slowly, as he must crawl from one hiding place to another. The soldiers are close on his heels from the Castle because his escape was quickly discovered. Half of the troops had to rush to take up positions while the other half had to systematically search every corner from behind and comb the area. In this way, they will drive Gouwer ahead of them until he is trapped against the chain of guards.

Redley apparently did not consider that Gouwer could easily escape between the soldiers on the vast plain. But the Masked Robber did keep it in mind. During the day, it would be relatively easy for him and his gang to track down the guy. However, he could not risk assuming that the soldiers would not chase the refugee tonight. Therefore, he ordered his friends to stay on his trail in case Gouwer was caught.

He rides between the trees at a quick gallop. The gray eyes sparkle through the slits in the mask, and there is a calm smile on his lips.

Indeed, he does not expect to stay here in the forest against the slopes of Table Mountain and Devil's Peak late at night. How Redley can expect to catch a single man in the darkness between the rocks and cliffs, he does not know. He can understand that the man may be just a routine officer. He has been ordered to catch the refugee, and he will try to do so even if he has to do it in an impractical way. Nevertheless, thinks the Masked Robber, it should not take him too long to realize that it is a fruitless attempt.

He pulls gently on the reins. He can already hear the crunching of twigs and the breaking of bushes in front of him where the soldiers, with their heavy boots, are trudging up the slope. Every second soldier carries a burning torch in his left hand and a pistol in his right. Beside him is a comrade with his rifle at the ready. If Herman Gouwer is caught, he will not live long.

From where the pitch-black rider moves on the black horse between the trees, he can clearly see the shapes of the soldiers in the light of the torches. He sits comfortably and relaxed in the saddle. On the horse, which has become known as Rower over the past year or so, he can easily keep up with them without them being aware of him.

He slides the reins gently over the horse's neck. Silently, he moves through the dark tree trunks, in a parallel line with the soldiers. He realizes that the success of his plan depends on many factors. If he moves down the slope towards the plain and Gouwer is caught up here against the slopes, the poor guy could be shot dead long before he can reach him. However, he must accept this possibility because there is nothing he can do about it.

An hour later, while the Outlander looks at the light columns and flickering shadows from between two high boulders, he scratches his head thoughtfully. He had honestly expected Redley to decide by now to give up the task and to continue the search again the next day.

Suddenly, he jerks his head around. A moment ago, he heard a loud exclamation below.

"There he goes!" one of the soldiers shouts. "Shoot, Bertus! Shoot, man!"

A shot rings out. The bushes crackle from various directions as the soldiers rush towards where the shot was fired. The Outlander has

tapped Rower's flanks with his heels, and the faithful animal quickly moves out between the rocks and down the slope. Herman Gouwer will be in front of the line of soldiers.

Jean de Moreaux smiles. In his thoughts and in his conversation with Jacques and the others, he accused Captain Redley of ignorance and foolishness. Now it seems that the man's foolish behavior may pay off. Often, he thinks, the smartest and most rational plans go awry, and the simple actions of a child or a woman with her unfathomable sixth sense succeed.

A few steps in front of him, a group of soldiers are gathered with their torches. They trample around between the bushes.

"This is about where I saw him!" one of them shouts.

"There are a few blood spots on the bush," another points out.

"He is nearby, heading towards the ravine."

Jean de Moreaux taps Rower on the side. The horse leaps up the slope. He heads straight for a gap in the torches. A moment later, he is through the line of soldiers, but he was forced to move within the light circle of the torches for a few moments.

"Something's running between the trees!" a soldier above him shouts in panic.

"You are silly, man. I could not see anything," another replies."

The Masked Robber turns left, and a few steps later, brings the horse to a halt. Somewhere ahead of him, not too far away, Herman Gouwer should be hiding, unless he has already died from his wound. His alert eyes strain to see through the darkness. His ears are pricked, trying to distinguish the sounds between the trees. To his left are exclamations and the heavy crunching footsteps of the soldiers on the rocky ground. Above him is the rustling of the gentle evening breeze. Among the leaves, and right in front of him, he suddenly hears the rustle of a dry twig and the panting breath of something or someone stumbling forward.

He urges Rower in that direction. Hastily stepping feet and bodies brushing against the bushes indicate that the soldiers are rapidly approaching. A dull twilight emerges in the dark shadows as the torches draw nearer. Behind a clump of trees, the Masked Robber spots the figure of a man lying on the ground. Apparently, Herman Gouwer has