

MASKED ROBBER SERIES

6. THE MASKED ROBBER'S SECRET



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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'S SECRET
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SUMMARY

In the heart of nineteenth-century Cape Colony, a masked figure rides under the cover of darkness, delivering swift justice to the corrupt and championing the oppressed. The Masked Robber, feared and admired in equal measure, is a symbol of rebellion in a land rife with injustice. For the elite, he is a criminal. For the struggling farmers and middle class, he is a hero.

Amidst this backdrop arrives James Surrock, the ambitious and cunning Earl of Heatly, fleeing London's high society after duels, scandals, and mounting debts. James sets his sights on the sprawling wealth of his estranged cousin, Jean de Moreaux, whose Cape Colony estate overflows with luxury. Jean, poised to marry the enchanting farmer's daughter Willa Rossouw, appears to have left behind a mysterious past. Yet rumors of the Masked Robber's resurgence send shockwaves through the colony, and James suspects that his cousin may harbor dangerous secrets. As James ingratiates himself into Jean's world, he becomes embroiled in the colony's simmering tensions. Daring heists, masked vigilantes, and brutal retribution against corrupt speculators fan the flames of unrest. While James schemes to sabotage Jean's engagement and seize his fortune, the legend of the Masked Robber looms ever larger. Could Jean himself be tied to this shadowy figure, or is the truth even more complex?

Through moonlit raids, elegant Cape Dutch mansions, and the sweeping landscapes of the colony, *The Masked Robber's Secret* weaves a tale of love, vengeance, and deception. Willa, caught between her love for Jean and the chaos surrounding her, becomes an unwitting pawn in James's game. Meanwhile, the Masked Robber's actions grow bolder, threatening to expose long-buried secrets that could upend lives. This sixth installment in Gerrie Radlof's acclaimed Masked Robber series is a thrilling journey into a world where justice wears a mask and every shadow hides a secret. Packed with intrigue, romance, and suspense, the story delves into the clash between wealth and poverty, tradition and rebellion, and the unyielding pursuit of power.

Who is the Masked Robber? Will James succeed in his ruthless plans, or will the shadows of the past catch up with him? Discover a tale where honor, love, and betrayal collide in the The Masked Robber's Secret.

EXTRACT

With his right hand and his legs, he pushes himself up from the ground. He staggers against the wall and a feeling of dizziness descends upon him. He shakes his head, but even the slightest movement causes burning flames to shoot through his shoulder and chest. He keeps his head still. Slowly, the flickering lights before his eyes disappear. Then he sees the hunched figure here in front of him again. He hears the man's gasping breathing and realizes that he could come to at any moment and raise the alarm.

Jean slides along the wall. He finds that if he keeps his torso still and only moves his legs, the pain is not so unbearable. It is even as if he is getting used to the pain! Already at the door, he finds that he can walk more comfortably. Nevertheless, it is with a hobbling gait that he shuffles across the paving stones towards the parapet. He hears Jacques draw his breath quickly.

"We have to flee."

Without hesitation, Jacques turns around. Like a cobra hissing furiously before it strikes, he commands sharply.

"Turn your backs! If you talk or try to stop us, we will shoot!"

6. THE MASKED ROBBER'S SECRET

CHAPTER 1

Moor James Surrock's full attention is on the silk glove he is pulling over his left hand. With the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, he slides the soft material over each finger. "Murder?" he repeats. "There is no such word, my dear Rene. When a lion makes the antelope tremble with its roar and then sends it to eternity with one blow of its powerful paw, when the cannons roar on the battlefield and the massive bullets tear through lines of brave marching soldiers, is that what you call murder, Rene?"

"But you know that Graham is not your equal with the sword, James. You are the best swordsman in London. You realize it, everyone realizes it. You..."

"Did Graham not realize it?" Surrock interrupts, but his voice remains calm. His expressionless, uninterested gaze stays fixed on the young man with the pale face. "Did you not think of that when you had the nerve to accuse me of cheating at cards?"

Graham Bowley makes a helpless gesture with his hands. He stares straight into the sharp, ruthless eyes before him.

"I did not know," he begins, stuttering. "I did not think it would upset you so much, James. I..."

"Upset?" Surrock calls out dismissively. "Listen to him!"

"Graham is still a child, James," adds the tall, fresh-faced man with the ruddy complexion. "It is only the second time he has visited the club."

"Then why did his mother let him come?" Surrock shakes his head.

"No, Harry, if you and Rene are so worried about the welfare of your young friend, I assume I can expect another visit from you tonight?"

Meanwhile, the card players from various tables in the room have risen and gathered in a circle around the speakers, along with others who were wandering around. They had heard the outburst a moment before and saw how the twenty-two-year-old James Surrock, the Earl of Heatly, threw his chair back, picked up his glove, and lightly struck Graham Bowley, who was sitting across from him, with it.

Graham, son of the Duke of Harding, came here with friends. He was only admitted as a member of the club last week, and this was the first

evening he had entered the double room. With beginner's luck, he succeeded in winning large sums from James Surrock, Rene Derry, and Captain Harry Berkly. Surrock's face became increasingly gloomy. Everyone knows how recklessly he gambles, and over the past few months, he has suffered heavy losses. So, when the innocent Graham made a remark, he jumped up and challenged him to a duel.

Derry and Berkly were shocked. As a swordsman, Surrock had no equal in London, and this would certainly not be his first duel of the season. Rene Derry accused him of the fact that a fight between him and Graham would indeed be nothing but murder.

Now, during the few moments of silence after Surrock's last remark, an older man pushes his way through the others. As soon as he reaches the table where Surrock and the three who were still standing with him were, he asks sharply, "What happened, James?"

"He insulted me, Your Highness," Surrock replied calmly. "The matter has been settled. I expect a visit from his seconds."

"But surely that is not the right course of action for someone who is so inexperienced," the Duke begins, but young Surrock interrupts him.

"He was not inexperienced with his tongue, Your Highness."

"There must be another solution." The Duke makes a desperate gesture with his hands. "Graham, I assume you did not mean what you said?"

Graham Bowley lets his gaze wander over the circle of faces around him. His eyes are slightly red because he is not used to the heavy smoke hanging against the ceiling of the gambling room. He moves the delicate lace around his cuffs lightly. It is clear to him that everyone except James Surrock is friendly towards him. Even now, he cannot fully understand what has really happened. He considered it an honor when James invited him to sit at his table. James had always been the epitome of what he would like to be one day, someone who is skillful with a sword, who can move confidently among these experienced noblemen and be considered their equal or even more than their equal.

"I am convinced that Graham was not aware of what he said," the Duke resumes kindly when he sees the bewildered look on the young man's face. "I am sure he did not mean it as an insult. Is that not right, Graham?"

Everyone realizes where the Duke is trying to lead the conversation.

They eagerly await Graham Bowley's reaction. James Surrock stands with his hands on his hips, a mocking smile on his lips. Through half-closed eyes, he looks at the young man in front of him.

"I am sorry if I said something I should not have..." Graham Bowley does not finish the sentence.

"Ah, there you have it, James! Graham did not mean it. Accept it as an apology, man!" The Duke exclaims happily.

"I am afraid I cannot be satisfied with that, Your Highness," Surrock replies coolly. "An insult like the one he did to me cannot be easily overlooked. Maybe," he continues sneeringly, "I will accept an apology from him if he does it on his knees."

A few men exclaim indignantly. Surrock ignores them. He is aware of his position of power. It is a matter of honor, and not just honor. He was obliged to promise a few IOUs to the sniveling little snipe. The arrogant little man had won more than a thousand pounds from him! For months now, it has seemed as if luck has been deliberately avoiding him. His allowances have long been exhausted, and he owes large amounts, but he is not going to pay a penny to this slick-faced punk! He is acting entirely within his rights.

"I will not do that." The color creeps into Graham Bowley's cheeks. The words come stuttering out, but the young man stands proudly and the trembling has left his lips.

"Very well." Surrock steps away from the table. The spectators step aside as if trying to avoid him. Surrock makes a slight bow.

"Then I leave the arrangements to you," he says curtly. "Rene, you and Harry will..."

"Captain Berkly!" the big man with the ruddy face growls at him.

"From now on, it is Captain Berkly, Earl Heatly."

Surrock smiles. The expression in his eyes remains unchanged. It is just his features that twitch briefly, like the leaves of a tree touched by a gust of wind.

"Of course, you will act as Bowley's seconds," says Surrock.

"I will." Everyone looks surprised as the Duke of Surrock interrupts. "It would be an honor to make the arrangements for you, Graham."

A glow of gratitude passes through the young man. He smiles now with renewed courage.

James Surrock sets his gaze on a man among the spectators. The fellow immediately ducks behind his mates. Surrock shrugs.

“Your eagerness to offer yourselves as my seconds overwhelms me,” he says dryly. “Unfortunately, I do not need your services.”

He bows again lightly. Then he walks leisurely to the corner where he takes his coat off the rack. He swings it over his shoulders and clasps it in front of his chest. Meanwhile, there is dead silence in the room as he walks out and goes down the broad staircase.

From one of the large sitting rooms on the ground floor comes the pleasant sound of women laughing and chatting. He stands still for a moment at the foot of the stairs, aware that he can be seen from the sitting room.

Surrock steps closer. A young girl with a silver wig floats towards him. She smiles, and her sparkling eyes are fixed on him expectantly. Surrock bows. He greets her with a nod, then brushes past her. He does not look back, but he knows she is disappointedly watching him go, and that she hurries out the door to hide her dismay. He looks over the groups in the room. He bows and nods. Meanwhile, he realizes that the merriment has subsided and the conversation is now continuing in a more subdued tone.

Twice as he walks among them, it seems as if some of the young ladies want to approach him, but after his smile has lured them, he immediately averts his gaze. Finally, he joins a few men sitting around a group of tables. He chats for a moment and delights in the hasty, apologetic smile of one of the men as he catches him and his friend staring at him as if he were an intruder. He inquires about a certain person, even though he knows she is not present. Her question creates the impression that there is no one in the room he could possibly be looking for.

As he exits through the grand front door and steps under a streetlight, he still smiles. This is the third season he has spent in London. So far, he has not made a single friend, but there is also no one who would openly pose as his enemy. Those who have dared to do so no longer exist! The fingers of his left hand stroke the ornate hilt of the sword on his left side.

During the past three years, he has proved that he is superior to everyone

he has encountered. He does not need anyone's help! That bunch of sheep in the gambling room had the nerve to stay quiet when he was looking for seconds. Last month, there were ten who jumped forward, then they were still too afraid to refuse because it might provoke his wrath. But tonight, he realized, they could easily cite the excuse that they did not want to take sides against the Duke. That is why he left the room immediately. But down in the hall, he deliberately stroked his ego. He knows that there is not a single young lady who would not consider it an honor to be seen with him. Even the men realize this.

James Surrock laughs immediately and loudly. He needs no one's friendship, in fact, there is no one who is worth his friendship!

A few streets away, he enters a club where the less important nobles gather. He arranges with two men who are unaware of the circumstances to act as his seconds and requests that they get in touch with the duke to make arrangements. The two eagerly accept the task, even if it means only being involved in the affairs of the prominent ones, it is an honor for them.

From here, Surrock hires a sedan chair. He is carried to the steps of the townhouse where he, his mother, and his sister stay during the season. He becomes annoyed when his sister opens the door herself.

"Where is the porter?" he asks sharply, while hanging his coat on the rack in the hall.

"You know he does not work evenings, James," she answers cheerfully.

"He must also rest, and we can only afford one."

"I am tired of it!" Surrock exclaims. "This eternal chatter about saving! Where is mother?"

"She is in the sitting room. We are doing needlework."

"Needlework! You will make me ashamed to be seen in public later. I realize, of course, that Mother's health leaves much to be desired, but even she..."

"I have already been to a ball twice, James," his sister answers as they step through to the sitting room. "It is not necessary to be out every night. You know how Mother feels about the clubs and the gambling halls and..."

"I know, Mildred. You do not have to remind me. Is there something to drink?"

“I will just make tea now.”

“Tea!”

“You do not have to sound so indignant.”

“And then you have to make it yourself?”

She puts her arm around his body and laughs cheerfully.

“Do not be so grumpy. Mother and I are perfectly happy. And you go out enough!” Before the sitting room door, she suddenly turns to him.

“I wanted to ask you, James.” She sounds concerned. “Mary told me the other day that you were involved in a duel. Is it...?”

“It was a joke,” he quickly interrupts her. “You women talk too much about things you know nothing about.”

“Oh, I am glad, James! You hear such awful stories.”

They go into the sitting room. Although he has expressed that he does not like his mother and sister being shut up in the house, he secretly feels grateful for it. Everyone knows that the Countess Heatly is an invalid, and stories of her son’s reckless existence never reach her.

Due to the quiet existence that the Heatlys lead on their estate, and even here in London during the season, almost everyone is under the impression that it is their nature to live like that. There are few who are aware of the fact that their income has decreased significantly lately. James has absolutely no interest in managing their financial affairs. Any contribution he makes is to squander their small income from taxes and rent to his heart’s content.

He kisses his mother on the cheek. The countess’s eyes sparkle as she sees her son’s upright, neat figure.

“You are home early tonight, James,” she says with her deep, half-sorrowful voice of someone who has suffered much but accepted her fate with quiet resignation. “We see so little of you when we are in London. Where were you tonight?”

“I played cards with Peter Lindl and we decided to call it an early night.”

“That is nice. You sleep too little. But you young guys always have something going on. Sit. Mildred will bring the tea shortly.”

Half an hour later, there is a knock on the front door. Surrock excuses himself and walks to the foyer to meet his two seconds, who inform him that the duel will take place at daybreak on the banks of the Thames

behind the Lutheran church. He thanks them and asks to meet them at his house half an hour before the designated time.

In the sitting room, Mildred pours him another cup of tea. The countess learns who the visitors were.

“Just two friends, Mother,” he answers uninterestedly, taking a book off the shelf and settling into one of the armchairs. He crosses his legs and opens the book. “They want us to go for a ride tomorrow morning. The morning air is quite refreshing.”

“I am grateful, James, that you have not fallen into the habits of the city. It is good that you still crave the fresh outdoor air while there are so many other entertainments.”

James Surrock sighs. A little later, he yawns and goes to bed. He does not care about the duel, but he will have to wake up early, and although he does not consider Graham Bowley a worthy opponent, it will not do him any good to show up half-asleep.

At least two servants are in the kitchen when he descends the stairs just before dawn. He requests that his horse be saddled, and ten minutes later, he meets the two seconds at the door. They gallop through the quiet streets. Twenty minutes later, the church tower looms before them. The morning mass is in progress, and a sharp wind cuts through the small churchyard. One of the seconds dismounts and opens the wooden gate in the stone wall. They ride through to the grassy bank behind the church. A few horses and four men are visible under some trees a little way off. One of them quickly comes to meet them.

James Surrock swings himself out of the saddle. He makes a slight bow as he recognizes the duke.

“James!” The nobleman speaks quickly, without greeting. “I must again ask you to forgo this... this duel. It will not be to your credit as a young man...”

“I gave him the opportunity to apologize, Your Highness.”

“Your request was unreasonable.” He looks around to make sure Surrock’s seconds are not within earshot. Then he continues in a lowered voice. “You know what will happen if your mother hears of this.”

“She will not hear of it from me,” Surrock replies coolly. “If there is anyone else who wants to cause her grief, it is his problem. Then the

consequences will rest on his conscience.”

“Is there nothing that will make you reconsider your decision?” the duke cries out desperately.

“There is my requirement.”

“He will never go down on his knees before you.”

“Then he must do it with a sword.”

The duke turns around. He quickly walks back to the other tree. Surrock loosens his coat and hands it to the second who has approached in the meantime. The other one followed the duke. Surrock knots his jacket tight and takes it off. He walks away from the horses and examines the grassy slope carefully. Many of the duels that have taken place recently were settled here. Few of them were fatal, this season there were only three of them, and James Surrock was involved in two of them. Usually wounded egos are satisfied by drawing the first blood, even if it is just a scratch.

The rest of the party approaches. The doctor stands aside. The duke holds the box with the two swords in front of him. Just around the point, the blades are razor sharp.

Surrock gestures with his hand that Graham Bowley should choose first. The young man takes a sword without even looking at it. His dark eyes, with the unmistakable circles of sleeplessness around them, remain fixed on his opponent.

Then they step back. The seconds step aside. The swords scrape against each other.

With three quick movements, Surrock’s weapon avoids Graham’s frightened defensive chopping. A lightning-fast thrust tears the side of the young man’s shirt. Surrock laughs. He has already established that he is dealing with an uninitiated.

There is fire in Bowley’s eyes. He charges towards Surrock. His sword swings through the air and jumps off the other weapon with a clatter. Surrock firmly grips the handle of his sword. He just turns and enjoys the clumsy attempts of his opponent. He even slides lightly backwards on his feet.

Then he delivers two blows on either side of Bowley’s sword arm. The young man chops here towards the venomous tip, but he misses it. He jumps back.

Suddenly, Surrock moves forward. Bowley retreats. Like a madman, he swings his sword back and forth in front of him, but the flashing point constantly avoids his blows. There is a sharp pain in his right shoulder. It shoots paralyzingly down his arm, and he involuntarily opens his fingers. He kneels down, and the sword falls from his hand.

Surrock stands two steps in front of him. His right arm pulls back. The long steel blade of his sword is horizontal, and the point aims precisely at the kneeling man's chest.

"Surrock?" The Duke jumps forward with a bare sword in his hand. He knocks the point of James Surrock's sword just as the thrust is delivered. Surrock jumps back. He stares at the Duke.

"You had no right to do that!"

"No right?" The Duke hisses the words. "No right to prevent murder? Is there no sense of humanity in you?"

"I did not provoke this duel." Surrock's voice is calm. He looks at Graham Bowley. He shrugs his shoulders. "There he is now on his knees, where he should have been last night!"

While he speaks, he turns away and starts walking towards his horse. The doctor bends down next to the wounded man.

"Surrock." The Duke looks at him contemptuously and continues softly. "I will advise you not to show your face at the club again. Moreover, I will make sure that you are not received in any decent house in London. My advice to you is to return to Heatly and stay there until no one who knew you here is alive anymore."

James Surrock continues to walk. He knows what those words mean. He is now banned from the higher social circles of London. He suddenly feels bitter. Until now, he could get credit anywhere, his creditors treated him with respect. But if the Duke openly takes sides against him, they will turn on him, and there may only be one end, the debtor's prison.

Without waiting for his seconds, he grabs his coat and cloak and jumps into the saddle. He cruelly whips the horse into a gallop. As he reaches the gate in the stone wall, he pulls hard on the reins. The horse jumps free over the gate. Surrock rides through the streets like a madman. Although it is still early, several people are already on the street. A vegetable seller coming around the corner with his cart is knocked to