

# **MASKED ROBBER SERIES**

7. MESSAGE FOR THE MASKED ROBBER



**GERRIE RADLOF**

Translated by Pieter Haasbroek

# MESSAGE FOR THE MASKED ROBBER

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## **The Masked Robber Series**

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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## SUMMARY

Message for the Masked Robber by Gerrie Radlof plunges readers into the stormy intrigue of the Cape Colony during the nineteenth century. In this seventh installment of The Masked Robber series, Gerrie Radlof delivers a gripping tale of treachery, suspense, and unexpected alliances.

A merchant ship, the Eastern Sea, is deliberately wrecked on a desolate shore, its valuable cargo the target of a cunning scheme. Hendrik Bierman, a man of ambition and secrets, orchestrates the operation with meticulous precision. But when a young stowaway, Dawie Fourie, uncovers the conspiracy, the plan spirals into a dangerous game of survival and deception. Dawie's disappearance throws his sister Betta Fourie, the determined owner of the Môrester farm, into a whirlpool of uncertainty, just as strange occurrences disrupt her once-thriving estate.

The story deepens when whispers of the legendary Masked Robber reach Betta's ears. Known for defying the odds and confronting injustices, the enigmatic Masked Robber is rumored to be the only one capable of unraveling the mystery that grips the region. Meanwhile, the Masked Robber and his gang find themselves entangled in the shadowy web of smugglers, betrayals, and a silent war for control over the Cape's hidden treasures.

Against the backdrop of towering waves, shadowy forests, and Cape Dutch estates, Radlof crafts a narrative where every character harbors secrets, and every decision carries weight. The story weaves elements of romance, as alliances form in unlikely places, and tension, as enemies clash with their wits as much as their weapons. Will the Masked Robber rise to meet the challenge once more, or will the cunning machinations of his adversaries bring even him to his knees? And can Betta trust those closest to her as she fights to protect her land and her family's honor?

Prepare for high-stakes action, unexpected twists, and a story that leaves you yearning for more as Radlof's masterful storytelling drives you toward an explosive confrontation. *Message for the Masked Robber* is a tale of courage, betrayal, and the relentless pursuit of justice in an era where heroes are forged in the flames of adversity.

## EXTRACT

Maybe he is mistaken. Without a word being uttered between them, they control their horses with their left hand and deliver thrust after thrust with their right. There is only one difference. On Jean's left is one of the men who had emerged from behind a tree trunk. Virtually after every blow he fends off from his opponent on horseback, he has to make Rower retreat a step or two so that he can keep the troublesome attacker on his left side in place.

The result is that within a few moments, Jean has almost drifted in between the other four horses.

He hears a muffled shout from Jacques' side and dimly sees a figure stagger back between the bushes. The next moment Jacques, from his advantageous position in the saddle, also distracts the man who is bothering Jean. Immediately the Masked Robber can apply his full skill with the rider. Without hesitation, he rubs his heels against the sides of Rower and then slowly surges forward. With a whirlwind of blows, he drives the man back a few steps until the Masked Robber's gang forms a perfect circle again.

## 7. MESSAGE FOR THE MASKED ROBBER

### CHAPTER 1

“Twenty feet,” calls the foremast from the forecastle. His voice sounds warning. The few sailors in the rigging near the middle mast stop adjusting the large foresail against the strong northerly wind. They look anxiously at the small round circle of orange light that the lead line lantern makes in the pitch darkness. They cannot hear his exact words, but the meaning is clear to them.

“Tonight we will still sail onto the rocks,” one yells to another who is barely five steps away but whose figure is invisible against the network of masts, sails, and ropes.

They hear the hiss and slap of saltwater droplets driven by the wind against the sails. Around them is the rumble of breaking waves, and to their trained seaman ears, all of this signals danger. Under the large lamp on the quarterdeck, two men stand by the helmsman. From the darkness of the middle deck, the boatswain conveyed the foremast’s words to them. Then they hear him shout at the sailors to haul in the topsail. They know why he is doing this. He wants to lower the center of gravity of the large merchant vessel to counteract the swaying and pounding.

Captain Meyer wipes the saltwater from his eyes. He looks over the helmsman Verwey’s shoulder at the compass and then at the man standing next to them. He sees Hendrik Bierman’s gaze fixed on them. “We are getting closer, Mr. Bierman,” he says softly but loud enough so the wind does not carry his words away.

“Is this the right place?” Bierman speaks as if he is in charge. He hangs onto a thick rope, and his heavy overcoat flaps against his legs, but even now, his brisk, almost haughty posture is noticeable. His gaze is without fear, like someone who knows exactly where he is headed and whose only concern is that his plans will be completely successful.

“This is the right place,” Meyer assures him. “According to the depth readings, we will soon be stranded on the sandbank.”

“This rough weather...” Bierman observes, “how much will it hinder our unloading?”

“Not much. With this speed, the keel will cut deep into the sand. The

wind and the waves will then have little effect.”

All three of them look at the foremast, where he leans over the bulwark with his lead line. It is as if he is hanging there between heaven and earth, where his lantern casts a circle of light around him.

They see him shouting something but cannot hear him. From below in the darkness, the boatswain’s voice comes.

“Fifteen feet.” He sounds concerned. Again, Captain Meyer looks at Hendrik Bierman. He does not say anything. His eyes search the darkness behind the other man. Then he smiles tensely.

“There is the light, sir.”

Hendrik Bierman looks around. At an angle, on the starboard side of the ship, a light burns like a star in the night. He sighs. He feels more at ease. Since leaving Algoa Bay, he has been waiting for this moment. Daily, he had to fight against waves of impatience because when he was still on land, he was busy with preparations, but since coming on board, he had to trust that everything would go smoothly and that his plans would not fail. Because there were several factors that could upset their calculations and throw months of planning into disarray.

The two messengers who left Algoa Bay at the same time as the East Sea may have faced problems. They may have lost sight of the large ship that had already sailed along the south coast of Africa. In that case, Kellerman would not be here with the wagons tonight, and the East Sea would have been a wreck before they could remove the valuable cargo from the hold.

The map that was brought on board may also not have been entirely accurate. Meyer could have misread it, and Verwey could have sent the ship to the wrong spot on the rocks. Hendrik Bierman sighs. He does not want to be thrown around in the rough waves of the dark, stormy sea.

“How much longer before we hit the bottom?” he asks.

“Any moment now, Mr. Bierman.”

“Will the passengers and crew be able to be transported safely in the lifeboats?”

His question shows no concern for the people he is referring to. It is merely the fulfillment of his own task that he is considering.

“That should be possible,” Meyer assures him.



“As soon as you give the order for everyone to leave the ship,” Bierman commands, “we will not discuss this matter any further. I will join the few passengers, and as soon as we reach land, I will leave. You will, of course, make sure that they all stay together. We do not want anyone coming after us while we are busy. I will return to you before daylight.” He looks intensely at the two men in front of him. “As soon as we run aground on the reef, forget everything that has happened before. From that moment on, your only objective is to bring everyone on board safely ashore. Your reactions must be those of a captain and his first mate who have made a mistake. In Cape Town, I will contact you. I...” He stops talking, seeing the warning look in Captain Meyer’s eyes and the sudden fear in Verwey’s. With apprehension, he turns around. Standing just behind him is a young boy of about fifteen. His intelligent blue eyes are full of bewilderment. His sunburnt forehead wrinkles in a frown of disappointment.

“What are you doing here, Dawie?” Bierman exclaims, his voice sharp with tension. “What in the world are you doing on deck?” he repeats as if he cannot think of anything else for the moment.

Dawie Fourie just shakes his head. He still stares at them as if he cannot believe what he has heard. When his gaze returns to Hendrik Bierman and he sees the anger on the man’s face clearly in the lamplight, a look of disappointment comes over his expression, as if he has discovered that someone who was a hero to him does not live up to his high ideals. “I could not sleep,” he begins hesitantly. “I... I was looking for you, Hendrik.”

“And then you found me here,” Hendrik snaps at him.

Dawie Fourie recoils. Hendrik Bierman has never spoken to him like this before. He knows that Hendrik is an important man, but since Hendrik met his sister and regularly visits M<sup>o</sup>rester, they have become friends, and Hendrik has become the perfect example of everything he wants to be in life. He was excited like a child when Hendrik agreed to take him on a business trip to Algoa Bay, from where they would return to Cape Town on the East Sea. But now...

“What did you hear?” Hendrik asks eagerly.

“I... You want to steer the ship onto the rocks,” Dawie bursts out, as if only now realizing the full extent of their previous conversation. Shock

gives way to disgust. He steps back, tense and ready to flee like a wild buck.

The pillar on the forecastle waves wildly with its arms. The boatswain screams something from the mid-deck, but his words are unclear as a tremendous blow from the East Sea jerks the ship, and it suddenly lies motionless and creaking in the breaking swell. From the rigging around the mainmast come the yells of the crew who had stood ready to adjust the sails according to the boatswain's commands. The foremast breaks in two as if struck by lightning. Screaming and stamping, it falls through the sails and rigging, flinging two of the cross-trees onto the deck. A sailor falls below with a long, drawn-out cry that cuts through the thunder of the breakers, the howling wind, and the swishing of splashing foam in the darkness.

The group around the helm on the quarter-deck is thrown forward against the slope of the planks as if an invisible hand had pushed them from behind. But of all those on board, only the three who had originally stood there were truly prepared for this disaster.

Hendrik Bierman lands on his hands and knees on the deck. Quickly he rises to his feet, and in the same motion, he pulls his sword from under his thick coat. Then, as Dawie Fourie, who had fallen beside him but with youthful agility of body and mind, rolls and jumps up, Hendrik hits him with the heavy pommel against the side of his head.

They are now outside the circle of light from the lamps above the stern. Without a groan, the boy collapses while Hendrik grabs the helmsman Verwey by the shoulder and shakes him vigorously.

"Drag him behind the bulwark," he growls hoarsely. "Leave him there." Verwey stares at the lifeless figure at his feet. Hendrik cannot see the expression in his eyes, but it is as if he guesses that Verwey does not approve of his actions and that Verwey, when he was originally talked into this scheme, did not expect murder to be part of it.

"Mind your helm," Hendrik bellows. "Do you want us all to die? Drag him back there." His own disturbed mood drives him to ruthless impatience. This incident is not part of his plan. Dawie Fourie is Betta's brother, and Betta Fourie owns the magnificent M<sup>o</sup>rester farm. Hendrik Bierman wants to own that farm someday. But it is the boy's own fault. He kept insisting on being taken along to Algoa Bay. At first, he thought

Dawie's presence might be a problem, but later he saw the benefits of it. As Secretary of Marketing in Cape Town, Hendrik could easily find a reason for his visit to Algoa Bay. Yet, the danger is always there that something could go wrong, and his decision to return to Cape Town by ship could be linked to the shipwreck. Hendrik is a respected Capetonian, and Betta Fourie moves in the highest circles. She is personally friends with the governor, a circumstance that makes a marriage to her more attractive for Hendrik Bierman, who had to climb the ladder of success from the very bottom. The fact that he took Dawie with him has led many to remark that they did not expect the ambitious, hardworking Hendrik Bierman to become so relaxed that he would care about the desires of a young boy. But others winked and said that it was just another carefully planned step on Hendrik's path to Betta's heart. But in the moment when Hendrik was thrown against the deck, he considered all aspects of the situation with a clear mind. The boatswain, perhaps the lead line puller, and certainly the sailors who were up there in the rigging, will be able to testify that Dawie was at the helm when the ship hit the sandbank. The impact could have thrown him against any object, and there will be little left of the Eastern Sea in daylight anyway.

Verwey is shocked by the recklessness in Hendrik's command. Self-preservation takes precedence, and without hesitation, he drags the limp body of the young boy into the darkness, to a corner behind a bulwark. The Eastern Sea tilts slightly to port. Captain Meyer hangs on the railing of the company deck and yells at the boatswain.

"Help the passengers out of the cabins. Let the crew lower the ship's boats. Evacuate the ship."

The boatswain stands directly beneath him on the middle deck. Meyer cannot see him but he is reflected against the glow of the lamps behind him.

"I feel like we are on a sandbank, captain," the boatswain answers firmly, "maybe it is safer."

"Evacuate the ship," Meyer bellows after wiping the salt drops from his lips. "Can you not hear we are near rocks? The breakers are breaking close to starboard. We cannot be too far from the shore."

"That is why I am saying it, captain," the boatswain persists. "I just saw

a light. It was completely still and must have been on land. We will never make it through the rocks with the ship's boats."

"I know," Meyer retorts, controlling his impatience.

The boatswain's objections are understandable and sensible. "I think I know the coast along here. I, I know where we are. There is a place nearby where we can safely reach the beach." He explains purposefully. He does not want to arouse any suspicion.

Without further ado, the boatswain obeys. Apparently, the captain's words have reassured him, and because he has already concluded that they are not in immediate danger, he works calmly and efficiently.

Near the middle mast, two sailors groan on the deck. Their mates, who have climbed nimbly down to the bulwarks, have heard the conversation between the captain and the boatswain. It almost excites them because they, who live daily with the possibility of death in the cold, green water, thought the end had come. They help the two injured men to the gate in the railing so that they can be loaded first into one of the boats. From the forecastle, the crew pours out, unexpectedly woken from their sleep, and many of whom opened their eyes only after they were thrown out of their bunks. In the passageways of the aft castle, the few passengers run aimlessly back and forth and bump into each other. The fact that the ship is now so still gradually calms them down, but a few of the women become upset when one of the officers comes in and requests that they only take their personal belongings since the ship must be evacuated immediately.

Hendrik Bierman stands by the railing. His attractive face is stern and humorless as usual, but his firm voice and encouraging words as he helps the women down the ladder inspire confidence in the others, and Hendrik finds it easy to focus his full attention on the orderly evacuation because the sooner everyone leaves the ship, the sooner his men can start their part of the work. As with every mistake, disappointment, or setback he has ever had in his life, he has pushed every thought of Dawie Fourie out of his mind and shut the door on it. Hendrik Bierman looks to the future, and everything that happens to him, good or bad, is just analyzed so that he can avoid it again, and then forgotten.

There are three large boats. All the passengers and even a portion of the crew, except for the rowers, make up the first load. Captain Meyer is at

the helm of the front boat. He knows the coast, as he said, because the landing spot is clearly marked on the map that Hendrik brought for him. Here, after they have rowed a bit deeper into the sea, the swells do not break, and although the boats have to withstand the full force of the wind on the crests before plunging back down into the troughs, they make good progress. The boats are easily controlled, and the little bit of water that they take on is quickly bailed out.

Meyer sharpens his senses. He steers the boat through the darkness in the direction that the Eastern Sea had come from a while ago. Some of the crew members shout to the other boats so that they do not stray.

It is as if the wind suddenly calms down. The passengers sigh with relief, but Meyer knows that it is only a small strip where a hill forms a narrow passage, and where they are therefore hidden for a moment. He steers the boat to port, and when the bow is once again lifted high into the air before plunging back down with foaming spray into the trough, a woman begins to sob. Meyer calls out reassuringly that they are not far from the beach. He knows that they are now passing a wide river mouth and that there is a sandy beach on the opposite shore.

Scarcely five minutes later, the rowers rest, and Meyer surveys the swells as they roll under the boat. Then he sharply cuts through the wind with his command. The boat jolts as the oars dig into the water. A moment later, the keel touches solid ground.

Meyer is the first to climb the ladder when they return to the Eastern Sea. Hendrik Bierman is waiting for him at the railing. He nods as he passes, and Meyer immediately asks that the boatswain get the remaining crew members into the boats. Once again, the boatswain notes that the ship feels quite sturdy to him, but Meyer patiently explains that he is not willing to risk anything, because the breakers could possibly tear the Eastern Sea loose later and crush it against the rocks. They can come back to investigate tomorrow.

Meyer is the last to leave the ship. Once more he looks at the burning lamps on the stern castle, and then he takes his place at the helm again. Only he, Verwey, and Bierman know that there are still two people on board: the body of a young boy and a man hiding under the deck. Neither Bierman nor Meyer talked to him during the evening, but he knows how long the boats were gone with the first load, and he knows

how long he must wait before he can give the signal from the stern castle.

Without haste, the three boats reach the beach. The group that was first unloaded sought shelter behind the high dunes and the dense thickets that stretch a few steps inland from the water's edge. Captain Meyer orders his officers to ensure that everyone stays together and that they settle in as comfortably as possible because they will wait there until daylight.

No one sees Hendrik Bierman as he quietly steps away from them and begins running along the beach. The wind calms down slightly, and he knows he is now moving towards the river mouth.

This place has been carefully chosen. The river stretches wide to the foot of the first hills. Across the way is the isthmus, which prevents the shipwrecked from reaching or seeing the Eastern Sea over land.

"Mr. Bierman." The voice comes from the thickets a little further away. He expected it.

"Yes, is my horse ready?"

"Since early tonight," answers the rider who suddenly appears in front of Hendrik. Without hesitation, Hendrik is in the saddle of the horse.

They gallop quickly up the river. Hendrik holds his horse back slightly because he does not know the way. The man in front of him keeps his course with complete confidence, as if he has eyes that can see in the dark.

According to Hendrik's estimate, it should not be long before midnight. If Ben Kellerman had started right away, they could leave long before daybreak.

Carefully, Hendrik's guide leads his horse into the river. Hendrik follows without hesitation. The animals only have to swim for a few steps, and then they stumble out onto the opposite bank and gallop up a slight slope of the hills at full speed. From the top, Hendrik sees the two groups of lights down there. Those are the lanterns at the wagons on the beach, and the others are the lamps of the Eastern Sea. There are also lanterns on the deck and against the masts now.

A few men are startled when the riders unexpectedly and silently appear on the sand between them. A well-built man waves to Hendrik. His body is bare and glistening with sweat. He stands by a post planted deep

in the sand. At the top of the post, a thick rope runs through a wooden pulley. "It works easily, sir," he shouts. "It will be fast."

"Good, Ben." Hendrik swings out of the saddle and throws the reins to the guide who brought him here. His eyes wander over the fifteen or so men who pay no further attention to him and continue with their work. It is low tide, and the sand is hard. By morning, the sea would have erased all traces here. Where the hard, rocky ground begins, stand the six large wagons. The mule teams are lower down on the beach, and Hendrik can hear them snorting. Here on shore, the wind is not as strong, and it almost feels as if it has calmed down slightly.

The lanterns cast strange shadows on the white sand. It is as if the activities are taking place within a circular sphere of light, for the shadows are thrown against the mistiness, and the dark night closes in on them.

There are two poles planted. One is much higher than the other. At the top of the highest, a rope runs through a pulley, and it falls a few inches to a pulley attached to the midship rail of the Eastern Sea. The ship lies barely a hundred steps from the shore. With this rope, a group of men have flown through the air over the sharp rocks.

On board, the sailor whom they had waited for and to whom they had thrown the ropes so that he could secure them, took them to the ship's holds and showed them the crates and bales that were packed in such a way that they could easily be moved. While some lowered it from the holds, others pulled it up towards the middle mast because from the first platform, a second rope was stretched to the second pole on the beach where Ben Kellerman stands. Box after box and bale after bale were tied to the double rope. From this high point, it slid down with a pulley until Ben and a few others skillfully turned it so that it would not be crushed against the pole.

Hendrik Bierman does not show his relief. As with everything he does, he expects it to be successful beforehand. He had planned it to go this way.

"There are already about two waves, sir," Ben Kellerman remarks when he looks over his shoulder at the growing pile of bales on the beach. Hendrik smiles. He makes calculations in silence. The contents of one of those packages will cover the wages of the men. For each of them, it