

RIDERS OF DEATH



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SUMMARY

Set in the rugged landscapes of the Eastern Transvaal during the untamed 1880s, *Riders of Death* plunges readers into a world where gold fever ignites ambition, passion stirs betrayal, and law bends under the weight of revenge. Amidst Barberton's chaotic streets, Snel Benecke, a cunning prisoner, escapes his confines, fueled by a thirst for vengeance against the man he holds responsible for his downfall, Field Cornet Frans Verwey.

As Snel embarks on a perilous quest for retribution and hidden treasures, his escape sends shockwaves through a fragile society already teetering on the edge of lawlessness. The pursuit of Snel's trail pulls Hein Brandis, a steadfast lawman, into a deadly game of cat and mouse. Hein's commitment to justice is tested not only by Snel's relentless cunning but also by the tangled web of love and rivalry between two spirited women vying for his heart.

With murder framing the innocent, alliances shifting under the weight of greed, and tensions crackling in a land ruled by the might of guns and daggers, *Riders of Death* masterfully weaves themes of loyalty, treachery, and survival. As fists clash and bullets fly, the stakes grow higher, leading to explosive confrontations and unforeseen twists.

Will Hein clear his name and bring justice to a lawless land, or will Snel's shadowy pursuit of revenge topple everything in its path? *Riders of Death* is a gripping Wild West-inspired tale where every decision matters, and survival hinges on courage, cunning, and the strength of the human spirit.

EXTRACT

Just one second before Snel wants to issue that order, Hein strikes with his left fist, right from behind his back.

It lands unforgivingly hard between Snel's two eyes. Snel did not expect it, and the blow jerks his whole body backward. He is only aware of stars and smoke. He falls straight back, half unconscious.

Brandis is lightning-fast on his feet. Snel wants to get up, but Hein Brandis dives down onto him. Hein sits wide-legged over Snel and then tackles him, one blow against his left temple and one against his right temple.

It is as if Snel only now realizes that Hein is loose and that his plans threaten to collapse. With the strength of a lion, he kicks into the air to push Hein off him. At the same time, his hands reach for Hein's throat. But Hein sits firm. He is like a furious, wounded tiger who knows that he will only be given this one chance for survival. Snel does manage to deflect some of Hein's hardest blows.

Quickly Hein rummages in the saddlebag for the revolvers. He takes one out and holds it in his hand. The clatter of hooves behind him sounds like a judgment. He knows that they will now shoot to kill. Hammersma's steed is fast, and gradually, the animal comes closer. Once they are in the mountains, Hein will easily be able to shake them off, because Brons is a horse that knows the mountains well and knows how to move there.

Hein swivels slightly in the saddle and then fires, but it misses. Hammersma's riding horse runs at full speed, and the horse's nostrils are flared wide. Suddenly, a bullet sings over Hein's head. It was very close. A second bang follows, and then Hein suddenly presses his lips together. His face distorts with pain. A burning feeling plays through his whole body. He looks down at an angle and sees the blood on his shirt. He instinctively knows that the bullet has pierced the flesh between his neck and his shoulder.

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CHAPTER 1

Only a few steps more between him and the warden...

Quickly Benecke hesitated in the dark.

In the shadows of the high prison walls his figure stood motionless. His big fists are clenched spasmodically, while he stares at a movement there in the moonlit space in the middle of the prison yard.

Over Klapperkop a cold wind is blowing tonight. It whistles ominously through the sky and rages and tugs through the sugar bushes.

Snel does not move yet. There is only one warden on duty tonight and it is also the first time in the past year that something like this has happened. There are usually five guards on duty at night, but the other men were suddenly called away today. Among the prisoners, it is whispered that it is an order from Uncle Paul. Snel knows the Republic, he knows Njabela and he knows Mapog's cunning. Unrest has broken out again, the natives are again belligerent somewhere in the Transvaal and therefore Uncle Paul now needs men to suppress the unrest.

It is on a chance like this that Snel Benecke has been waiting impatiently for the past year. Anyone could have seen today that the prison authorities were in a flurry. The prisoners had to notice this and Snel was cunning enough and his ears were therefore pricked up. It was easy to smuggle in a chisel. He did not disclose his plans to any of the other prisoners. The regular parade to search the prisoners did not take place that evening before they went to their cells. Snel had quickly chiseled open the lock on the inside and then freed himself.

And here he now stands in the dark in the interior space of the prison. Tonight his chance has finally come. The single warden with a rifle in his hand has not yet noticed anything wrong.

Snel moves slowly forward. He only needs to strike him one blow, just one tremendous blow against his jaw and without a single groan, the warden must then sink to the ground. And then there are just a few steps, just a few steps between him and the big iron gate that will give him access to the mountains, to the open plains, to the spaces outside and to freedom. Yes, it is just a big iron gate and a distance of more than two hundred miles that separates him from a great treasure. As soon as he

lands in Barberton, he can go and collect his fortune and then he can take revenge on the man who is responsible for him being confined behind these high walls for a year already. Field Cornet Frans Verwey will pay dearly!

The other prisoners are apparently still sleeping peacefully. He hears the soft snoring of men in the closed cells shortly behind him. And far below him, at the foot of the Klein Magaliesberg mountains, Pretoria is seemingly in slumber, deep slumber. The night men have extinguished the street lamps one after the other, long ago.

Snel feels the great power and determination pulsing through his body. He must succeed.

The warden suddenly coughed and is now turning around, his face towards the shadows and towards the cells that are dug row upon row under the rocks.

Snel Benecke's muscles contract. There is a cracking of his stiff limbs and then he springs forward with vigour.

The warden only notices the leaping figure when the blow hits him full and hard against his jaw. His head jerks backwards and he falls-stumbles backwards. He quickly raises the rifle, but it is suddenly leaden in his hands. He sees how the figure approaches again like a furious animal. He realizes that it is one of the prisoners. He wants to scream, but Snel's sinewy fingers fold like an eagle around his throat. The cry stalls in the warden's throat, only a sound comes out that sounds like the raw gurgling of a dying man. A second blow lands on his forehead a second later. His attacker fades before his eyes. He goes limp in Snel's grip. Snel pushes him backwards and he hits the ground the next moment.

In the sleeping cells, one of the prisoners suddenly stops snoring. He slowly sits upright on his mattress. Something has woken him up. Perhaps it is the unbearable heat in the cell. He listens for a moment to the howling wind and to the screech of a single night bird.

For a moment, Snel observes his victim. The warden lies in a motionless bundle on the ground. It almost looks as if he is dead. Snel smiles. He can give him another hard blow. The knowledge that his old strength from a year ago is still pulsing through his body makes him feel stronger for the tasks that lie ahead.

Quickly he kneels over the body of the warden. The man is breathing with a gurgle. Snel's fingers fumble with the bunch of keys on the warden's belt. He has it loose. One of these big keys will unlock the big iron door to his freedom. The next moment he also yanks out the revolver that hangs in a leather sheath on the warden's side and quickly tucks it under his own belt.

He stands up and listens breathlessly. It is good that the wind is howling over the prison walls and raging through the sugar bushes. No one in the large building where the lights are still burning and where a few officials are still sitting behind their desks will hear this muffled gurgling.

Slowly his figure comes into motion and then he runs quickly over a patch of light to the shadows of a building, near the big steel door. In the long shadows he runs quickly but silently. And then he is at the big iron door. The big light on top of one of the grey walls shines fully on him.

Suddenly a shiver goes through Snel's whole body. What if there is another guard somewhere on the walls, what if... He involuntarily presses himself flat against the iron door. But there is no movement up there, no suspicious sound audible. And the wind outside is now tugging at the trees and bushes like a primeval monster. Another last look at the light on the wall and then the keys rattle in his hand. It sounds unnaturally loud to him. His hands are shaking slightly. He tries one big key after another. His breath is sucking feverishly through his lungs. Does he have the right keys?

Finally! The key grinds in the lock. There is a soft metallic sound and then he pushes his shoulder against the door.

It opens.

The dark bushes are stretched out before him like ink stains. The wind rages against him.

He does not hesitate long. He runs blindly into the night. At any moment the warden can come to his senses again and then he will raise the alarm and the people in the large building who work with files and other things will rush to help him.

He struggles through the hook-and-thorn bushes. It scratches and tears at his meager prison clothes. But Snel does not feel it tonight. It is as if

he allows the strong wind to blow him onwards, aimlessly onwards. Away, ever further away from Klapperkop. By sunrise he wants to be far in the field, very far. Only then will he calmly make plans on how to get rid of his prison clothes and how to reach Barberton. Only when he has disappeared into the many folds of the Drakensberg, will he be safe. Then it will take a whole army to track down Snel, because he knows the area, every inch of it. There is only one man who has to be eliminated, field cornet Frans Verwey. As long as Verwey lives, he will not be able to continue with his plans in the vicinity of Barberton. In fact, he will not dare to set foot in Barberton. Verwey is almost the only person standing between him and his inheritance or his fortune. Like the wind, his thoughts swirl on as he strides through the night. He does not allow himself the time to stand still or to look for a path. He only knows that he must keep moving down the hill in a north-easterly direction.

An hour has already passed, but Snel is not tired yet. Now he is already pushing up a hill again. The sugar bushes are denser here, the pieces of rock are more numerous and the wind subsides slightly in it.

He is now easily about five miles from the place where he was confined for a year. He was given five years in prison for cattle theft and for culpable manslaughter, because one man who dared to save his livestock from his gang paid for it with his life. Snel sinks down wearily behind a rock. In the dark, a smile creases around the corners of his mouth. That Verwey! How terrified he would be to know that he, Snel Benecke, the fastest man with a firearm in the vicinity of Colts Creek, Kaapse Hoop and Barberton, is back again. Back to continue with his plans. To collect his treasures and to deal with the field cornet. Snel thinks deeply. Any man would have shot old man Wessels, anyone, because if he, who is Snel, had not pulled the trigger first, Wessels would definitely have beaten him to it. And Verwey made sure he was locked up because he is afraid, afraid of Benecke's fast movements. Yes-no, Verwey fears him in that area. There was not even enough evidence that he had felled Wessels. Nobody would have known that he, Snel, was a master smuggler, if it were not for that Verwey guy. In Kaapse Hoop, Barberton and as far as Rosano Garsia on the border, they regarded him, Snel, as an honest man and they had respect for him,

for him and the two revolvers on his hips.

But then Verwey exposed him. He had become too complacent.

Snel strokes his brown hair with his fingers. The darkness still lies around him like a heavy veil and there is still no sign in the east that the day is breaking. The wind is still decreasing in intensity.

Snel struggles against the tiredness and the drowsiness that wants to overwhelm him. He just needs to rest for a while and then stride on again. He must be at Wilgerspruit when the sun rises and then start making his plans there.

What did he say to Verwey again that day during his arrest?

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back, Frans. Even if it’s just to put you in your place. You know that I didn’t shoot the old man. You won’t be king in Barberton for much longer.”

Frans Verwey laughed, as always, that little laugh of self-assurance. And he hated him for it. The devil of a field cornet! If he only knew what treasures were still waiting for him, Snel, and if he only knew what he had still smuggled. He, Snel, will be rich when he is back in Barberton. Very rich!

Where would he, who is Snel, not have been now if it were not for that Verwey! He would have been the heir to a farm of 600,000 morgen on the border of the Portuguese territory one of these days. He secretly wonders if old man Peter O’Hara, Verwey’s uncle, is still alive.

Suddenly Snel becomes hasty and also a little nervous. He, as the respected foreman of the frail old man, would have inherited the farm, but then Verwey threw him in jail. The old man will naturally disinherit him now ... and then ... Heavens, it has not dawned on him before. Verwey, as the only relative, will of course then get everything, just everything. O’Hara had great faith in him, Snel. What grief has Verwey not caused him!

Quickly Snel gets up. For a moment his figure of six foot four inches is vaguely etched against the skyline. He cuts a robust figure. Under the tight-fitting prison clothes, now torn and full of nicks as the thorns have grabbed him, his muscles are clearly visible. His shirt sleeves are rolled down so that one cannot see the muscular bulges on his forearm. In the dark, his face is just an outline, but there is something like determination to be seen in the whole attitude of the man.

He stretches his stiff limbs, stretches his arms out and suppresses a yawn, because the unpleasant thoughts have made him hasty out of fear that he may be too late. He must reach Barberton before another twenty-four hours have passed, but how?

The question throws him into confusion again. He feels the firearm that is tucked under his belt. He will have to stop the mail coach and ride along with it, but not in the clothes he is wearing. When they enter the mountains at Colts Creek and Murphy's Denn, he will have to get off. Then everything will be better. There are still people in the area who will swear that he is innocent and they will help him. He will gather his gang again, those that are left and then he will put Verwey in his place. He runs up the slope. The stones grate against each other as he disturbs them and they roll a little way down the mountainside. He jumps over a ditch. Later he is on the crest of a hill. A lovely breeze washes around him. He stares down for a moment and then he pricks up his ears.

He was mistaken or not! Far below him he suddenly hears it again, the whinnying of elated and prancing horses.

The blood pulses faster through his veins. Somewhere below him there must be a farm and very close and there are horses. He is still standing and listening and drinking in the night air.

Horses! And they are moving closer. Now there is also the call of a man. It sounds clearly through the quiet night. Clear and pure without echoes that follow. It must be later than he thought. Probably already three o'clock, maybe later. He wasted his time unnecessarily next to the rock. He moves downwards, slowly and without making any noise. The sounds of snorting horses, the ardent whinnying of mares and the shouting of a man's voice merge. And it is coming closer to his side. He can already hear the grating of the hooves against the stones. It is clear that the person is chasing the horses up the slope. The animals are probably grazing on the plateau on top of the hill from where Snel has just come down.

Quickly he sinks down behind a mopane bush the next moment. The figures of prancing horses have risen here before him in the dark, stately and muscular. A slight breeze is drawing from the animals' side towards him. They have not yet noticed or smelled him. These are Arabian mares, extravagant with vitality.

Snel waits breathlessly. He already has a plan in his head. The first bunch moves past him. But the next moment one of the horses comes straight towards him and suddenly stops four feet in front of him. The horse's slender neck is quickly jerked upwards, its ears pricked and its nostrils open wide. The animal has noticed him! Then follows a single curt snort. The animal swerves smartly, throws its tail in the air and stands aside so that the stones actually splatter from under its hooves. Immediately the whole troop of horses comes into motion. They swerve, mill, turn and make preparations to flee. They have all now noticed the strange figure, crouching under the mopane bush.

The watchman shouts at the troop of exuberant, but now startled horses. Snel hears a rider approaching at a gallop, also in his direction, apparently to determine what the cause of the sudden unrest among the troop is. Snel falls flat. The rider looms out of the darkness before him. Snel groans deeply and anxiously.

"Who's there?" it sounds in the night stillness.

"Thank goodness, I ... I ... I think my leg is broken... My horse threw me off... I..."

The man sends his horse closer.

"Who are you? Why are you riding along here? The road is further west. Are you a stranger?"

The questions follow each other quickly. The rider has pulled up close to him, but he is not getting off yet. The exuberant horses have suddenly taken flight, all along the mountainside, in the direction of a deep ravine.

"Van is Benade. I come from Kloofzicht. My wife is lying extremely ill. I am on my way to the doctor in Pretoria. I decided to take a shortcut over the mountain. My horse must have been startled by something. I came to land here between the stones. Oh, the pain is unbearable! If only I could get on a horse. Sorry I chased your animals away. I really couldn't help it, old friend."

"Never mind. They know where the pasture is. The bunch of exuberant things were in the lucerne tonight and trampled the wires there. But let me help you."

The rider quickly swings out of the saddle. He cleverly swings the reins over the horse's head and hooks the other end over a mopane bush. It is

a young man. Snel notices this in the semi-darkness. You can also hear it in his voice. Snel's breathing comes faster.

The young man is with him and then kneels in front of him.

"Which leg?"

Then it happened!

Snel Benecke's right hand flashes up. His knuckles actually hurt when it hits his benefactor's jaw. The man groans and falls backwards. He wants to quickly get up again, but then Snel drops on him. Snel's left fist, which he aimed at the man's temple, is deflected. His opponent manages to get up slightly.

In the dark Snel can barely see how the person's right hand moves to his leather sheath in which his firearm is stowed away. But Benecke's name is not for nothing Snel. The warden's pistol is lightning fast in his hand. The tongues of fire splatter into the darkness. The young man's head slams against a stone behind him. In the semi-darkness, Snel cannot see the bloodstain that is slowly forming on the man's chest, a dark, sticky stain that is seeping through his khaki shirt.

The two bangs rush away in the night and for the last time slam against the white Magaliesberg mountains. Against the hill, the horse herd thunders further away and the saddled horse at the mopane bush snorts restlessly. The animal has jumped aside, but it is undoubtedly a horse that is used to gunshots, because it has not broken loose. The horse's muscles are trembling slightly and it looks as if it is preparing to jump away too.

However, Snel is with him the next moment. He pacifies and strokes the animal's muscular neck. The brown stallion calms down slightly. Skillfully, Snel lifts himself into the saddle the next moment. He does not look back at his victim. He sends the horse diagonally down the slope, down to the ravine where the smell of running water tickles his nostrils.

Halfway up the hill, behind the mopane bush, the young man groans and wants to get up, but only a raw gurgle comes over his lips and then he falls against the stones again. He hears the clapping of the hooves as Snel rides further and further away from the scene with his horse. Through his clouded brain, the reality seeps through to him. He has been outwitted by a highway robber. Spasmodically he struggles to get

up again, but he does not succeed. Then his hand slowly drops down to his other revolver that is still in its leather sheath. He takes out the firearm and with tremendous exertion and his face contorted with pain, he pulls the trigger. Two, three, four shots bang. It rudely disturbs the night stillness.

Snel only hears the shots when he goes through the stream. He jerks his horse in. To his dismay he realizes that it is the young man who has raised the alarm. So he is not dead yet. Now he does not linger any longer to quench his parched thirst. He immediately gives the brown horse spurs and gallops up the opposite hill.

The echo of the shots sounds ominous in his ears. He knows that the search for him will soon be in full swing. He will not dare to ride in the direction of Barberton. The prison authorities will undoubtedly guess that it is his goal. He immediately changes course. There remains only one grace. First, he must get rid of the horse and he must get rid of these clothes. Luckily that there are not many police available now and if he is in the mountains first!

The horse's nostrils are wide open and he gallops thunderously over the uneven field. He has now reached a plain and lets the horse slow its pace.

In the east there are already the first signs of the approaching day to be seen. Unrelentingly the horse gallops on and Snel continues to spur the animal mercilessly. There are no signs of pursuit. They will not be able to track before it is completely light. And by that time he will already be calling on Billy Lightfoot. There are only a few miles left, at most twelve. Billy was one of the gang for years.

He is now completely in an open plain, just ahead of him is the ridge, an extension of the Klein Magaliesberg mountains and behind it lies Billy's farmhouse. A cold morning breeze pushes against him. Somewhere in the long grass sheep are bleating, but otherwise the world is wrapped in a pleasant morning sleep.

Under a karee tree he pulls the horse in. The sweat is standing in puddles on the animal's skin and in places it is already forming white spots.

Snel stares around him. The sounds of awakening animals rush to him. But he does not listen to the call of a cow to her calf, nor to the soft cooing of doves. His ears listen if he can distinguish one specific sound,

the sound of horses' hooves, the sound of possible pursuers. But there is nothing. Then he sends the horse on at a trot.

When he comes out on the crest of the ridge, he sees Billy's homestead lying below him. Would the old cattle thief still be staying there or has he already moved on?

On the porch of the house he sees someone stirring. And that person is busy spying on him again. Snel sends the horse behind a patch of thorn bushes. But he is not completely hidden from the eagle eyes that are watching him from the porch.

The elderly man on the deck chair on the porch has long since noticed the rider. He has cupped one hand in front of his eyes, because the morning sun is already bothersome in his eyes. That rider is acting strangely, because he is trying to hide. Now he sends his horse behind some shrubs.

Billy Lightfoot shouts to his stout wife.

"Bring my binoculars and my revolver! There is a man on the mountain who looks rather suspicious. Quick woman ... what are you struggling with again this morning as if you are getting old?"

"I'm coming old man."

"Don't come without the binoculars and the revolver."

Billy keeps his gaze fixed on the rider. The man is not making any preparations to come closer yet. If it is one of Uncle Paul's spies, he will live hard this morning. They always remain suspicious of him since Benecke went to prison a year ago.

A fat woman struggles slouching down the corridor. Every step she takes requires laborious effort. She hands the binoculars and the firearm to her husband.

Billy gets up. He fastens the revolver around his waist. His hair is already turning gray along his temples. But he is a big man and the blue veins are clearly visible on his forearms. He brings the binoculars to his face. The rider is no more than five hundred feet from him. He looks for only a second and then he yanks the binoculars away from his eyes. "Heavens!" the man swears and looks at his unsightly wife with wide eyes, but there is a hint of a smile around the corners of his mouth.

"Was it?" and a silly expression appears on the stout woman's face.

"That is Snel or I am not Billy Lightfoot."