

## A Golden Opportunity

“Hans, you old renegade. You’re the last person I expected to see in Cape Town today.”

Pulling away from their impromptu embrace Piet continued, “It must be a matter of some importance to drag you away from the frontier?”

His brother took his arm and led him away till they were out of earshot, “Piet, I have an interesting proposition. We’ll discuss it tonight over some good red wine.”

That evening, in Piet’s house, Hans began, “The Natives are giving the English a hard time on the frontier. Fighting has escalated and there have been heavy casualties on both sides. The English can’t hold out for much longer with their current troop strength.”

“What has caused this latest flare up? I assume it’s Maqoma who’s behind this?” Piet asked.

“Yes, and with good reason. That half-wit brother of his, Sandile, has sold his soul to the English. He’s been tricked by the governor into granting the English a settlement in the disputed area where they want to place coloured folk as a buffer between the Natives and the settlers,” Hans explained.

“Just like the English,” Piet retorted angrily, “Always sacrificing someone else for their own colonial gains.”

“Precisely,” Hans said. “Now, Maqoma is totally against this and has started a campaign of hit and run attacks to derail the so-called agreement. The terrain is wooded and he’s using it as a cover to carry out highly successful forays against the English. Smith has spread his troops to try and counteract this but the net result is that Maqoma’s chaps easily outnumber them and are inflicting heavy casualties.”

“Good man,” Piet said, “I hope he annihilates them. They must pay for what they did to us in 1806. But what has your trip here got to do with all this?”

“Everything,” Hans smiled. “Maqoma has an extensive network of spies; Englishmen with a grudge against Smith; naval deserters with a price on their heads; and foreigners who hate the English.”

“Kindred spirits,” Piet ventured, “So what has the old rascal found out from his informers?”

“Well,” Hans began, “First, let me digress. Providence stepped in on my voyage, which proved extremely useful. We had an English major on board. Seeing his interest in navigation I plied him with whiskey. Then I ventured to make inferences to what Maqoma knew. He was so proud of forthcoming

events that he opened up like a morning glory, 'The English are sending out HMT Birkenhead with troops for the Eastern Front,' he beamed."

"So this is where I fit in," Piet observed.

Hans smiled, "Precisely, dear brother. You are key to the idea that Maqoma and I have thought out. You see, there is the utmost urgency in this trip so that when the ship calls in at Simon's Bay to replenish its supplies the crew will both be tired as well as anxious to get to Algoa Bay. They will probably not be as vigilant as they should be. So, as your company has the provisioning concession for the English ships in Simon's Bay you'll have no difficulty in going aboard and that, you old sea dog, is where our golden opportunity arises."

Piet looked quizzically at his brother.

Hans continued, "Not only do we have a mutual vested interest with Maqoma in preventing the troops from reaching Algoa Bay, you and I have another interest in that ship."

"Apart from giving the English a blood nose, what would that be?" Piet asked.

"The Kaffir war is costing The British Governor a great deal of money and, in addition to paying his troops; he also owes his provisioning creditors a goodly sum. Therefore, not only is the ship bringing out troops but she is also bringing out specie to pay them."

Piet raised his eyebrows, "What. How much?"

"Gold and silver coins, four tons of them," Hans offered.

Piet whistled softly through his teeth and his eyes brightened.

"I thought you might like it," Hans smiled.

Piet knitted his brows, "What's your plan?"

"First let me say that if we can succeed in wrecking the ship and preventing the troops from reaching Algoa Bay, Maqoma has promised trading concessions to your company. He will also give me free and safe passage across to the whole area. In addition, when in his camp, I will have access to any wife that he is not lying with that night," Hans said.

"You randy old bastard, you are still going to pick up some dreadful disease one day," Piet chortled.

Ignoring the comment Hans went on, "Of even more interest is the specie on board. If we can accomplish our objective of wrecking the ship, we will not only fulfill Maqoma's wish but we will have a chance at collecting the treasure."

"Hang on, hang on," Piet interjected, "Do you know what you are asking?"

Hans smiled, "Listen. That major tells me that the specie is in a sealed, reinforced compartment in the stern. The probability is that, if the ship breaks

up, the compartment will survive and break free. It is likely to be buoyant because of the trapped air and it will most likely reach shore due to the prevailing onshore currents. And, being the first Ironclad with steam power in the English navy, they will keep close to the coast as they did on Birkenhead's maiden voyage out here last year, particularly as they will be in a hurry."

"I think I understand where your mind's going but how do we wreck an English troopship. Just the two of us. Are you mad?" Piet asked.

Hans smiled, "This is where you come in. You see the major explained to me how they sailed on the previous voyage. They will leave at night and the chances are at this time of year that there will be little wind and an onshore flow. They will aim to miss Danger point by about six nautical miles. They probably won't use their sails so that they can skirt close to the coast on steam power. Now, as your company has the concession to replenish the ships in Simon's Bay you will have no difficulty in going aboard. You must then get near the wheel and compass. How? I suggest by taking special gifts for the captain and officer of the watch, in appreciation of them using your company. Once there you can tweak their compass. Its child play for you, for goodness knows how many times you've swung a compass in your sailing career. They will not have time to swing their compass in Simon's Bay and you'll know just where to place the little "correcting" magnets to pull her off course, I suggest that just two degrees will do the trick."

Piet's eyes gave away the fact that the lure of specie had overcome any doubts he had about, what had seemed to him, a hare-brained scheme.

Hans continued, "The major described in some detail the track they followed on her maiden voyage some months ago, and the reasons. He seemed like a frustrated navigator. Here is his sketch of their track."

Piet studied the paper, "Ah yes, I see your point. If the compass appears to be dragging them towards the shore, they will correct the course but, the chances are that they will not take into account their crabbing due to the onshore flow."

"Precisely," Hans responded, "If we sit down and plan this meticulously we can get them to wreck themselves on Danger Point. You can camp there with a couple of helpers and assist survivors, if there are any, as well as keeping an eye open for the specie compartment if the ship breaks up. I'm sure that local settlers will take over helping with any survivors. As it will take a couple of days for word of the accident to reach the Cape, this will give you time to search for the specie compartment."

"As I see it, If I don't get caught fiddling with the compass, the only other danger is that they detect the error and suspect me of planting the magnet," Piet said.

“Why you?” Hans asked, “There is any number of disgruntled seamen on board a navy ship. Piet, what have we got to lose? If we just wreck the ship Maqoma will do anything for us. But if we can salvage the specie . . .,” his voice trailed off.

It was a calm night with a gentle onshore flow when HMT Birkenhead struck an uncharted rock at two in the morning, about a nautical mile off Danger Point. The ship quickly broke into three with a heavy loss of life.

Despite this setback the English eventually overcame Maqoma.

But the specie?

Many subsequent attempts over the years to recover it failed and no trace of it has ever been found.

However, the descendants of Hans and Piet own vast tracts of land in the Bredasdorp area, all around the spot where HMT Birkenhead went down.

**Ray Hattingh**