

Letters from my grandmother in South Africa 1904-07

By Bente Grue, Denmark

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The Journey 1

Scandinavian Sailors' Temperance Home, West India Docks.

London, the 13th of October, 1904.

To everyone at home,

Now we have solid ground under our feet again – I feel a somewhat more secure feeling immediately. The journey across the North Sea was otherwise excellent, and with beautiful weather. We maintained good speed, and made the journey in 23 hours. We are 200 emigrants on board, of which only 2 are bound for Africa. During the journey I got to know a pair of American ladies who had been back at home visiting Denmark. They were very amiable and I'm sorry that we will not be continuing our travels together on the same route. They traveled together with a young Danish doctor whom was on his way to Cape Town. We were introduced, and now I have a Danish traveling companion for the journey across the Atlantic.

We arrived in Parkeston at 5 o'clock on Wednesday. I probably could have taken the train to London that

same evening, but Captain Worm said that it was probably best to stay on board until Thursday morning, so he could take me directly to London. He was so amiable and kind. In between times, I went with my friends to the station. They were traveling to Liverpool and then on to America.

On Thursday morning we traveled to London. It took approximately two hours. And oh how fast it went! We rushed with the speed of lightning through the beautiful English countryside. I would have preferred that we went more slowly. The turnips in their fields were not as well organised as those at home. In one place they were being harvested, and in another place the field was being ploughed where it would probably soon be sown. Cabbage was also planted. There were old castles and many churches to be seen along the way.

We rushed into the largest city in the world – so monstrous – so dirty, so noisy. We traveled past many stations within the city, but did not stop until we arrived at Liverpool Street Station. "Now you'll have to stand and look as if you've

fallen from the moon (look like a person completely lost)", said the Captain, "Someone will be along shortly".

Waiting wasn't necessary, as immediately a Swede asked after "Miss Olsen." Along with my possessions, I was brought to a small, horse-drawn carriage, sent out by the Sailors Home (Sømandshjemmet). The coach driver was Swedish, so we could speak together. Now began the journey through London. Liverpool Street Station and the

Sailors Home are situated in different parts of the city. I'm now convinced that fate has decided a happy and calm death for me, or else I would've perished on that coach ride!

We drove through a street and across a square where there was a market. Nine, nine lanes side by side, of which three were for trams. I admire the English coach drivers. I think they must be the breed of people with the

strongest nerves! There were all sorts of vehicles – carriages drawn by 1 horse, 2 horses, 4 horses – carriages with 2 wheels and 4 wheels – horses, donkeys, steam-driven vehicles, electric vehicles, bicycles, and automobiles. Yes, there are splendidly dressed people, poorly dressed people, ragamuffins ("Lazaroner"), and also policemen. Yes, everything in the utmost mixed confusion. I prepared for the worst, but it was interesting. The coach driver smiled and said "It will be fine". Yes, for me it was actually fantastic! After an hours coach ride we arrived at the Sailors Home, where I was warmly welcomed. My suitcases were marked, and I ate supper – yellow peas, mackerel and pie – one can hardly avoid it. At the Sailors Home I met a Swedish lady with a maid and children that were on their way to Cape Town. Her husband is apparently the Swedish consul there. She had been visiting at home. We took a ride into town on an electric tram, and even saw a lot. I bought a large suitcase – I had so much in mine. I got it for two shillings – barely two Danish kronor. It's larger than my uncle's smaller suitcase, and has a lock and everything. Everything is so inexpensive here.



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The journey 2

I began the letter at the home with ink, but all of a sudden we had to depart. A train took us to the harbour, and then we were checked in onboard the ship. I came immediately upon the thought of "Ormen hin Lange" ("The Long Snake" – The name of a very famous Viking Ship), I hadn't expected any ship to be of such size. Everything is so nice and new – I will write more about that later. I went to bed at 9 o'clock and thought we wouldn't be sailing until the morning, but when I awoke, we were in the middle of the Thames. We are still there, not moving. There is so much fog that we can't see anything. Fog horns and other commotion sound around us. It's creepy. Yesterday evening we ate chops, stewed beef and carrots, tea, and bread and butter. At 8 o'clock this morning we ate breakfast with porridge, English beef, lamb with sauce, marmalade, milk, tea, coffee, hot elderberry soup, bread and butter. We get a menu, and can get whatever we desire, with clean plates for each dish. The bathroom, W.C. and all other comforts are shared between 4 cabins. Meals are served in a nice dining hall. I've been allocated a nice cabin which I will be sharing with 3 others, although I'm the only one here so far. Now the fog is lifting and we can catch a glimpse of many ships. I am going up on deck. I have sent cards to Kirstine Andersen and Gravengaard.

Many regards to you all, and thank you for everything.

Your Maren.

PS. I was delighted with Mr. and Mrs. Jensen, they were both so nice.

I hope to have this letter sent in Southampton. I managed to avoid the toll as I didn't have to open my suitcase.



Dunluce Castle

The Atlantic Ocean, Sunday 23/10/04

Yes, we are sailing and sailing in the most delightful weather you could possibly imagine. The sky is as blue as blue can be, the ocean is clear, and the sun! There is much more than we could wish for! We are sailing up to 300 nautical miles each day, which isn't so much. This same route has ships that sail 400 nautical miles, but our ship is so enormous and has so many passengers that we probably can't go any faster. I don't think that anyone on board has anything against staying at sea a couple or even 3 – 4 days more. As I mentioned before, the ship is called Dunluce Castle, but I call it "Ormen hin Lange" ("The Long Snake"). The Captain is a proud man and could easily pass for Olaf Tryggvesson (a Viking king who was captain of "Ormen hin Lange"). The Danish doctor I spoke of isn't on board. He didn't stay at the same hotel as me. The agent had written that we could board the ship either on Thursday evening or Friday morning, as we pleased.

The doctor, a Swedish lady, and I were out and about in London on Thursday. When the Swedish lady and I arrived

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back at our hotel, the people there said that we should board our ship – immediately. We arrived at the ship and boarded, and it sailed not so long after. The doctor believed that we could board Friday morning and so was left behind. He won't be arriving until next week. It was lucky that the Swedish woman was there, especially during the first few days, as I didn't know anyone and had no one else to speak with. She is exceptionally nice. She has 3 children and a maid with her. The time goes very quickly here on the ship – there are many people and much is new. I understand them quite well and can also speak with them. I am the only Dane on board. People think therefore that they have an obligation to me, so that I wouldn't find the time onboard boring.

"We should definitely be able to help you learn English rather pleasingly before we reach Cape Town", they say, but this is something I rather doubt. I have an English lesson each day and am becoming accustomed to the language. Also, I've now learnt what articles of clothing, food, and everything on the ship are called in English.

Thursday 25/10/04

On Sunday the 16th we sailed through the English Channel. The waves were so high and many on board were more or less seasick, but I avoided it. I stayed up on deck and didn't eat. Since then no one has been sick, so there's a good chance I will make it to Africa without being seasick.

On Thursday the 18th we sailed along Portugal's coast barely a couple of nautical miles from land – what fun! On Friday we reached the island of Las Palmas, where we would disembark. Lovely! The ship weighed anchor 1 mile from land. 10 minutes later we were surrounded by small boats bearing fruit, oranges, grapes, all sorts of tropical fruits, the most delightful knitted silk clothes in radiant colours, tobacco, coral, large tapestries of Tenerife lace for 100 Danish kronor, and much more. I bought a small one for 3 pesos, approximately 21 Danish øre (1 Danish crown, or krone = 100 øre). The people were Spaniards and mulatto, and hawked their wares with the most deafening din. Small baskets were pulleyed up and down and when they couldn't manage it, they clambered up on to the ship with rather thin ropes.

For 40 Danish øre, 6 pesos, we got 15 large oranges and for the same price, 12 apples. The apples here are more expensive than oranges and not as good as those in Denmark. They are certainly large enough, I've never seen larger, and so sweet – much too sweet! Grapes cost almost nothing. Las Palmas is part of the Canary Islands, where the real canary birds are. These birds were sold in such a large quantity, so now we live in constant birdsong. Apart from the canaries, no other birds are to be seen. As the ship wasn't able to go all the way in to Las Palmas harbour, those that wanted to had to climb down a rope-ladder to very small rowing boats. Climbing down the ladder wasn't extraordinarily pleasant, but it was ok. We went ashore and saw the town of Las Palmas and the surrounding area. There were vineyards, flowering orange trees and many other southern trees on the slopes of high, steep mountains. Further up the mountains it is barren. The town itself is built on terraces up on a hill. White houses, rich and poor, Spanish aristocrats and miserable mulattos moving through the not always so clean streets. Streets where one has to push ones way through. Everything happens on the street: buying, selling, eating, fighting, everything in the utmost Babylonian confusion. Yes, one could write much, but it is so hot and would be altogether too tiresome for you to read in its entirety.

Yesterday, Monday, we saw Cape Verde on Africa's west coast. We see big groups of flying fish every day. They fly up to two cubits above the water. Today we saw a shark for the first time. You can believe that it's hot here, intolerably hot. To begin with we had a woollen and a linen cover on our beds. The woollen cover disappeared a long time ago, but now the linen one is also gone, and last night I even had to remove the sheet. The others and I take off our underwear each night and lie completely naked with sweat running off us. We can bathe. I bathe each evening in the bathroom. Salt water straight out of the ocean runs out of one faucet, whilst warm water runs out of another, but that certainly isn't needed! We are allowed 10 minutes in the bath. In the mornings there are so many that want to bathe that it can be hard to get to the bathroom. I wash myself in fresh water – we have a faucet in our cabin. Well, it can't really be called fresh water. It's only sea water that has been filtered. It tastes awful! And it's warm! We can get drinking water from the steward. It is the same type of water, just a little cooler. We are so thirsty! And the salt water doesn't make things much better. But we won't be getting anything

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else until we reach Capetown. But the food is excellent. A printed menu is on the table, and from that we can have what we like. Breakfast: Porridge, beef or chops and stewed meat or fish, coffee, tea, milk, marmalade and jam. Dinner: Soup every single day, 7 different types, without dumplings. Two roast dishes with potatoes, cabbage, green peas, beans, and other trimmings. Dessert: plum pudding, pudding with figs, I don't remember the name – also 7 different types – one for each day of the week. And an apple or an orange every other day. Tea, boiled eggs – two each, or smoked fish and cold meat, stewed fruit and buns. Tea, milk, bread, butter, pickles – in the evening biscuits and cheese. The menu is good you see, if only we weren't so thirsty! The coffee is salty, tea is salty, and the milk that they make, is also salty. Blah!

Every Wednesday evening is a big concert. Singing, music, story-telling. Musicians play on deck every second day in the late morning. We dance two evenings a week, and two days a week there is sport for the men. On Friday we are going to have a proper ball. There is also betting, as well as a hoop game and other games, but only after sunset. While the sun is in the sky we prefer to sit still. We hire deck chairs on board and sit in them. It costs a couple of shillings, but the benches are so full and can't be moved. We can move the chairs around as we like.

Thursday

Today we are passing the equator. To mark the occasion we are having a big equator ceremony. All who wish can be dunked in a pool of water. Of course it's only boys and a few men. They get a couple of cigarettes and a piece of chocolate as a memento. There are also sports and betting games, boxing, and other pastimes.

Saturday the 5th of November.

Tomorrow we will reach Cape Town. We are a little melancholy that the journey is about to end. The last three days we've had storms. It was unpleasant, but interesting. Many were seasick, but the few of us that were on deck could have a relatively nice time. Everyone is so nice during such times. We were in 1st class. Sailors are especially amiable towards those who don't get seasick during storms. The next time I write I should have reached land. I hope you will be able to read my letter – the ship is swaying a lot!

Monday the 7th of November in South Africa.

Finally we've reached our goal! We arrived yesterday at 10 o'clock. Miss Lauridsen and fiancé and several other Scandinavians were there to welcome me. Now that I'm here, I'm going to move on Monday to an English family with only husband, wife, and general servant. I will cook, but first I have to learn how! Laundry and ironing are not my job. On Saturday Miss. Lauridsen will get married to a Norwegian captain.

