

Letters from my grandmother in South Africa

By Bente Grue, Denmark

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1904-07

Johannesburg 1

Geldenhuis Deep 20/5 1905

Dear everyone at home,

Now I'm up here in Transvaal I would like to describe how nice it was down in Cape Town – which I am already longing for a little. Everything up here is so native. There is sand, and even naked people. Yes, there is so much gold around but you don't see it. It's very interesting when you get used to it, but still you feel somewhat attached to civilisation. I'm busy trying to find work, my belongings haven't arrived yet, and everything is more or less chaotic.

We left Cape Town on the 11th of May and I was finished in my job on the 2nd, so I had plenty of time for excursions and sight-seeing in Cape Town. It's rather expensive to live.

In the Christian association for young women where I was supposed to live, it costs, in all vulgarity, 8 shillings per day. I avoided that easily though, as I got an invitation to stay with some Scandinavian friends, which was both cheaper and nicer.

Miss Lauridsen and Grostøl were married on the 15th, just after we arrived. We arrived here at Geldenhuis Deep, one hours drive south of Johannesburg, at 6 o'clock in the morning.

Grostøl is a rigger at a goldmine here. He gets 1 pound per day, and from the 1st of July 30 shillings, an excellent wage considering the situation. Yes, everything is getting better now. All of the mines that were closed during the war have opened in the last 6 months, and they constantly need more labour.

I got a couple of hours rest, needless to say, after 3 days travelling by railroad. We put on our best clothes and went to the magistrate in Johannesburg, where the couple were to be married. It was a rather simple affair. A very dry clerical worker asked if they were over 21 (they are both over 30), and if they were unmarried. Then he wrote a little on a type-writer, asked for 5 shillings, and sent a telephone message to a superior, who would need to read over the application form. A short while later he stepped in, with all dignity and unction. Pompously he began the ceremony – something which could have suited him well, if it weren't for a constant conflict between his wig and false teeth. Whenever he turned his head to the side he had to feel his wig, and all the while his teeth had a tendency to fall out. The whole thing was highly comical, so the wedding couple were doubling over with laughter!

Emma and I sat behind the magistrate, so it was easier for us to observe without being noticed. Finally he was finished. Emma and I signed that they were now lawfully wed, and the curtain came down on the show. We ate dinner at a hotel and went home to Geldenius Deep, where Grostøl had rented a house, and we had a lovely evening together.

The other day we were in J'burg to look for work. I could get a job for 6 pounds per month, 108 Danish kronor, that was about to begin soon, but I didn't like the mistress, and I had been promised another job for 8 pounds per month in Doorfontein, a suburb of Johannesburg. The job would be available from the 24th of May, so that's what I'm waiting for now. Grostøl says that under no circumstances should I accept a job here for less than 7 pounds. So we'll see. I've decided to travel home when I have earned 80 pounds (1440 Danish kronor) and sent them home. In addition I have to earn the return travel tickets (about 50 pounds). So with 8 pounds per month, it can be achieved in a reasonable amount of time. It's easy enough to count, but is quite something different in reality.

Best regards Maren

Ps. Please write the address in its entirety. The postal service is a little poor here.

It's much more reliable through the consulate, but as long as I don't have a job here, I don't know how often I'll be able to make it to J'burg.

Places I would like to find/know about:

**Knowledge about to goldmines and to be a rigger?
Geldenhuis Deep**

Places I would like to find/know about:

**Wedding traditions in Johannesburg
100 years ago**

Places I would like to find/know about:

Geldenhuis Deep

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Johannesburg, Transvaal. August 1905

Dear Aunt,

Thank you for the letter. Make sure you write a lot about everything though, as when one only hears news from home every second month or so, there is much to be said if one is to have the slightest idea as to what is going on.

With me it is business as usual – in good health, satisfied, and earning money. Now I have 450 Danish kronor in the bank here. My employer wanted it to be so, because should I become ill or for any other reason wish to travel home, then I have the money. "If you send all of the money home, just remember that you are in a foreign country and never know what might happen", he said. I heeded his wise words. I've sent 90 Danish kronor to little Maria and will now send 126 when I get my first wage payment. When I add up the 10 pounds that the journey up here cost, and other expenses, the total is 846 Danish kroner. This can be called a good income in 10 months.

My employer is travelling to Durban in Natal in September, and maybe also to Madagascar, and would very much like for me to join. At the moment I don't know what I want to do.

I'd never get a job such as this again, but on the other hand I have Danish friends here.

If I travel down to Durban I'll be completely alone. I'm going out to speak with Augusta and will make my decision sometime during next week. So don't write just yet in case I get a new address, and I think the letters will take 5 weeks to arrive.

Durban, also called Port Natal, is situated on the east coast of Africa, and has a completely tropical climate. J'burg would have the same if it wasn't so high up – 8000 feet above sea level. I'm looking forward to the journey, if I actually end up going. It will be in 1st class and through historical and tropical habitats. Ostriches, monkeys, bananas, oranges, everything the heart could desire, yes, naked men and women and entire villages of kaffirkraals. There will apparently be a stop in Ladysmith. I'll send a card from that once much mentioned town.

I was going to tell you a little about J'burg, but don't really have my storytelling mind working this evening as it is late and I'm tired, as I probably wrote earlier. I'm having a great time, I don't know anyone. The people here and I don't like one another, so no tears are shed on either side because I'm going. I've said that I want a holiday for either 8 or 14 days so that I can go to Pretoria and have a look around. I'm going to try wooing Grostøl so that Augusta (nee. Miss Lauridsen) can also come along. Then it will be fun.

Emma is working in a sewing room so she doesn't have time, and wouldn't be able to put up with the hardships we like. It's rough travelling around. The roads aren't always smooth.

At that time you will get some more frivolous epistles again. You know how things go up here, and also how we look after our children, if we have any.

I haven't been able to contact the Consulate these past 3 weeks. It is only open from 10 until 1, very unfortunate hours, so there's been no letters during this time. I haven't been at Geldenhuis in over a month and I can't have any visits from them, so it is a little lonely for me.

Now it has started to rain. It's lovely here now. Everything grows so quickly, yes, it never stops as it's never really Winter here. Violets, callas, camellias, and roses are blooming so delightfully. All of the southern flowers will be blooming next month and finally in November before the first harvest. I will be home in 2 years, so I won't be home at this time next year.

Best regards to everyone.

PS. A card as soon as I know something definite – don't write before then.

If I travel to Durban, the address will be The Danish Consulate, Durban, Natal, S. Africa.



Bente Grue

Anglo Austrian, November 1905

Dear Aunt,

I have the feeling that you are expecting a letter from me.

I don't know where the time has gone. It is now one year to the day that I arrived in Africa. Even though it has been a short time, I have experienced more here than in many years at home. I've been very busy recently.

I've changed jobs, and am now working as a cashier and accountant at the Anglo Austrian, and have more free time than before.

I don't need to be at the office before 2 o'clock, but to make up for it I have to be here until 12 midnight. It would be unthought-of at home, but here one turns one entire existence upside down. Sundays are like weekdays. Every 3rd Sunday I am free until 8 o'clock. I eat here, but live in town. I have 144 Danish kroner each month and am promised a gradual increase up to 216 Danish kroner per month. But it's not all profit as rent is so expensive.

The 1st week I paid 18 Danish kroner for a small furnished room with a bed, 1 chair, and a washing table. It became too much, so now I pay 46 Danish kroner per month for a room that is a little prettier, but the downside being that it is further away. I could of course get a cheaper room in the suburbs, but at 12 o'clock one can't walk too far here, as it is anything but safe. My "husband", who we always used to call my employer as a joke, has travelled to Germany instead of Durban, as he is going to have an operation. If he doesn't die, and comes back, I'll get my old job back again.

In Geldenhuis they are well, and send their regards. I was there yesterday.

Mrs. Grostøl's brothers have come here, but she herself will be travelling home in the Spring, and is tempting me with talk of the Egyptian pyramids and Italian pleasantries. I'd very much like to travel with her, but I probably won't be ready in time. I sent first 260 Danish kroner and then 144. Please write to let me know that you have received them. If you haven't, I still have the receipts and can draw the money out again. The money should get there rather safely. We have rain and thunder here every day at this time, and they say it will continue for the rest of the month. Otherwise the weather is lovely. The rain falls only in the morning so everything is fresh and lovely in the afternoon.

On Friday and Saturday there will be a bazaar for the benefit of the Scandinavian church. I'd love to be there where I could meet other Scandinavians, but it is not to be. My job is so boring because I never get an evening free.

I don't know anyone here yet, yes, of course a few Englishmen, but no one I hold dear, so it would be fun to meet some of my own countrymen.

Two Sundays each month there is a church service in Swedish at the German church, but at a time where I can't come. Neither Mrs. Grostøl nor Emma can tolerate the climate up here. They have a fever and are never completely well, but not really sick. I, on the other hand, am still enjoying my robust constitution.

Best regards to all,

Maren.

PS. I am constantly looking out for stamps for little Kristine.

The two I am sending are now very rare.

Places I would like to find/know about:

Does The Anglo Austrian, boot- and shoshop still exist?

Places I would like to find/know about:

Knowledge about working in shops in Johannesburg, 100 years ago.

Places I would like to find/know about:

Photos from Johannesburg life, streets etc 1904-07

Places I would like to find/know about:

The Scandinavian Church. Does it still exist?

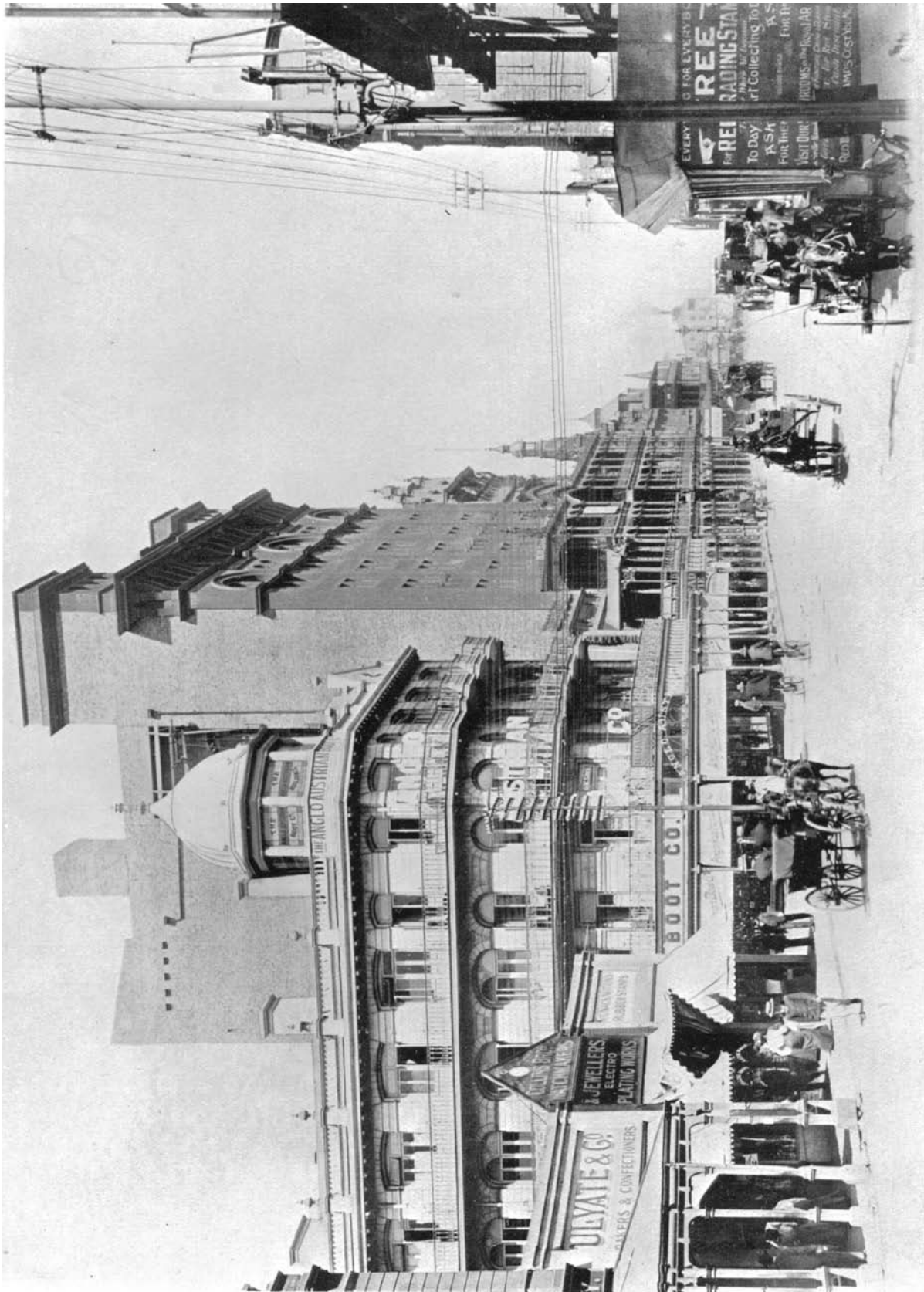
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Johannesburg 4



PRITCHARD STREET, JOHANNESBURG

The Regent Street of Johannesburg, and is the second only in importance to Commissioner Street. The finest shops of the town are to be found in this thoroughfare.

The Anglo Astrian Boot Co. in Pritchard Street, where my grandmother Maren worked as cashier and accountant.

From the photobook: "A Photographic Souvenir of South Africa"

Published by Sallo Epstein & Co.

Maren bought the book during her stay in Johannesburg 1905-07

Christmas Day 2005

Dear Aunt,

I would like to ask nicely for forgiveness this time. In the past fortnight I have been busy more than 15 hours a day, so I haven't had any time. And so comes Christmas. But what a Christmas – no Christmas feeling, no happiness. Last night, Christmas Eve, I didn't get home before almost 2 o'clock. I've only been to church for one mass on Christmas Eve. That was when I was staying with grandmother. And the only thing I remember is that "The delightful rose" was sung. Since then this psalm has represented the essence of Christmas. I read this psalm – that was my Christmas cheer. Today I am not working. I am going to travel to Geldenhuis once the heat has gone down.

Yes, it's hot here at the moment. I'm sorry if it's cold up there in Denmark. The managers here at the Anglo Austrian have asked me to write home to my acquaintances and ask if any would like to come down here. She'd like to take them straight away, 6 pounds per month and an increase after two months. I explained to her that they wouldn't be able to speak the language upon arrival. But that doesn't matter, they'll pick it up soon enough. She very much wants to have Scandinavian maids across the board. There is a very nice Swedish girl here. Of course I haven't written to anyone. Several have written to me saying that they would come to Africa if I could get them job. But I've always replied that I wouldn't advise anyone to come down here. When one writes home from a foreign country, one always writes about the interesting, the big, and the new that one is greeted with. One keeps the darker sides, even if they are many and big, to ones self. I have never regretted coming here, but that is no guarantee that others would be satisfied. I've also been very lucky here. Mrs. Grostøl has been here for 2 1/2 years now and still not paid off her tickets for the journey. We didn't actually come here just to earn money, but still, money is something we all need. She has been very sick with internistfever, but she is well again now. It cost over 30 pounds, even with a free doctor and medicine. Nurses are very expensive here.

I'm going to a ball this evening in a white dress, gloves and shoes, a red poppy (red and white is the colour of the Danish flag). There will be the Scandinavian association's Christmas gathering and dance.

H. P. Thomsen Aastrup has been in Fredericia on a drinking treatment and is healthy. Let's hope it lasts.

With best wishes for a Happy New Year to everyone,

Maren.

what is internistfever?

The Scandinavian association - does it still exist?

Or other danish/scandinavian clubs or groups?

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Johannesburg 6

St. Agnes Mansions. 7/4/1906

Dear Aunt,

I've been waiting for a letter for a long time, but haven't received any since Christmas. I've wanted to write for such a long time, but I have almost no free time. As previously, I've been working from 12 until 2. I've been busy sewing for an exhibition in Pretoria on the last day of March in the few free hours I have in the mornings. I embroidered a baby dress in English embroidery and got a "highly commended". I won first prize for a doll clad in Hardanger costume, and got 1 guinea (20 Danish kroner). A Hedebo table centre (a mat embroidered in the Hedebo tradition), if you remember it, got nice reviews, and they absolutely wanted me to send the travel blanket you gave me for Christmas, which I did. That also won first prize – 20 Danish kroner.

In May there will be a big exhibition in Kimberly, a couple of days from here by train. They have offered to pay my return travel and accommodation expenses if I would like to go down there and demonstrate spinning for the week there during the exhibition. (It would be a fun time, as I'd be able to look around. But I can't go as my job is too good to resign from).

I wouldn't get 10 pounds per month anywhere else during the Winter, and it might be difficult to get a job as the times are very bad. I can always get a job doing housework, but I don't want to do that up here in Johannesburg, and the pay is also worse.

Miss. Jensen is engaged to a Norwegian. He is travelling home in May and coming back again in August, which is when they will be married. Miss. Jensen and I live together at the moment, and have a nice room, which we pay 5 pounds (90 Danish kroner) per month for, unfurnished. It is a lot, but we can't get it any cheaper in a good area. We take turns at paying the monthly rent. I've paid Maria Hansen now, and from now on I hope to be able to send 10 pounds every other month and 5 pounds every other month. The salary will add up to be a reasonable amount of money in the end.

Every day I'm counting the months until I come home. The time goes fast, but even so it feels like a long time until my journey home. It's interesting enough to experience the unknown, but one can't live on that, and it's absolutely not pleasant to work over here.

I've been in J'burg for almost a year and still know almost no one, and have never been to church. There's no where

to go in the mornings, and I haven't had an evening free since the ball last Christmas. I have one Sunday off per month, but only until 8 o'clock. Augusta Grostøl will have been at home for 2 months by the time you get this letter.

That was the last letter in the collection.

From other sources we know that she had a considerably more happy time with some new Scottish friends.

And I am working on translating her diary from parts of her stay in Johannesburg.

In the middle of February 1907 she travelled back home to Denmark via Durban.



Maren and her new friends in Johannesburg, just before going home to Denmark.

