

THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA

CHAPTER XV

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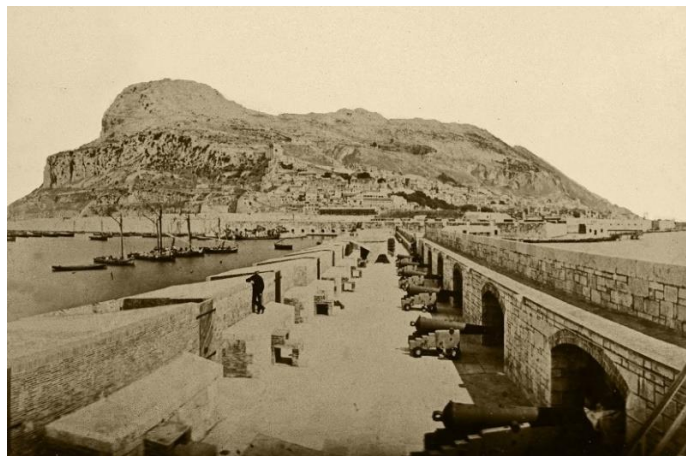
Saucy Sophia's Snippets plus trailer for next month.

July and August, 2024.

Much to her brother's annoyance Annabell was moody again, she had not heard from Nigel, and it was now over two months since he had sailed for Calcutta aboard the "Titania", or so she had understood. Despite his protestations of affection for her, she had only received one letter, posted in Gibraltar, which informed her of a slight change of plan, but did not explain what that change had been. She had written to him care of his parents at the address in Droitwich but had not received any reply. Annabell was suffering from a mixture of emotions over the one young man she really liked, except for her late betrothed of course, had he forgotten her, was he too preoccupied on his Employer's business, or had some dreadful misfortune occurred during the passage to the subcontinent.

George, her elder brother had little patience for such moping around, and was not slow in voicing his opinion, he had a business to manage, and his sister was little help with the bookkeeping while her mind was elsewhere. Emily, their mother tried very hard to keep the peace, but the house at Western under Penyard was not a happy home.

Annabell was quite unaware that the change of plan referred to in Nigel's letter concerned the "Titania" which, as she passed Cape Trafalgar off the coast of southwest Spain, had run into truly awful weather and wallowing along under reduced canvas had obviously sprung a serious leak, and it was all hands to the pumps to keep her afloat. So serious was the situation that they were four days completing the voyage to the Rock, rounding Tarifa and through the Straits. Following inspection of the hull it was obvious that a dry dock berth would be required to repair the damaged rotten timbers, which would mean a delay of some months. The dockyard superintendent had optimistically estimated three weeks, but then, as Nigel had discovered, such estimates were rarely accurate, more a figment of the man's imagination, rather similar to unrealistic estimates of voyage timings, too often based on an assumption of fair weather and favourable winds. Nigel, knowing his employers desired him to arrive in Bengal as soon as possible, made enquiries after alternative ships.



The Rock of Gibraltar from the Old Mole.

The Consular Office recommended a shipping agent, one Jose Marie de la Andrade de Quintanilla y Florez, or so he introduced himself. His actual name, Nigel doubted, elongated for aristocratic effect to enhance his assumed status. However, whatever Nigel's misgivings, he needed a ship sailing without delay for Calcutta and the Agent said he could obtain a berth aboard the Dutch steamer, the "Heksenketel," sailing with the tide that afternoon. Nothing could be better, and Nigel paid the Agent and was taken aboard.

Meeting the Captain briefly on coming aboard he was not impressed by the man's not altogether pleasant manner but given that Captain Swarte was concentrating on getting his ship underway, he overlooked the slight and saw to the stowing of his luggage and his cabin which was on the port side.

It was not long before the vibration of the engines indicated that they had raised the anchor and were leaving the shelter of the Rock of Gibraltar and making their way to the open sea. It was only on coming on deck that Nigel discovered that they were sailing west through the Straits and into the Atlantic, not east for the Suez Canal as he expected. This gave him reason for concern, and he worried that something was wrong, it was as he would soon discover.

He tried approaching Captain Swarte, but was promptly waved away by the First Mate, one Bauke Beenhouwer, and now Nigel was seriously worried. The First Mate had stood four square at the top of the ladder leading to the bridge displaying aggressive menace and barring Nigel's way; the Englishman had no other option than to retreat. He repaired to the saloon in search of liquid stimulus and possibly congenial company. There he found a respectable dutchman, he judged to be in his mid to late forties and a most delightful lady he took to be his wife or mistress, clearly not European, but not Indian or Chinese either.

"If it's a drink you are after" said the Dutchman "You had better bang loudly on the door marked Privé (Private), the steward is a lazy oaf, but don't be too rough with him or you will not receive any dinner this evening, not that its worth having."

Both Nigel and the Dutch couple spent the next hour or more exchanging pleasantries though neither side made any mention of the captain, nor his officers and crew. While they were talking the "Heksenketel" passed through the eight-mile-wide Straits between the Sierra de la Luna of Spain and the Atlas Mountains of North Africa. The Atlantic swell soon caused the ship to lift her bows to the waves, only to plunge down as the surge passed beneath the vessel and the sea swept over the foredeck to pour overside as the bows lifted again to the oncoming sea. In the saloon they held onto their seats, but it was not long before the lady thought it wiser to retire to their cabin, laying down she would feel less sea sickness. The Dutchman escorted his wife to the cabin, leaving Nigel alone, but with the promise that he would return.

Dinner that evening, when it was eventually served was so uninspiring that a day later Nigel could not recall what they had eaten. There had been little choice, and none of it could remotely be described as good. The Dutchman had returned without his wife who was suffering with seasickness, while the tea garden manager discovered that she went by the name of Katja.

Over the following week or so, while they sailed southwards with the coast of Africa barely visible on the horizon off the port bow Nigel gradually became much better acquainted with the Dutch couple, who were also very wary of Captain Swarte and his crew. The Dutchman had introduced himself as Klaas van Zijl, at your service, sir, in perfect English, and his lady wife Katja, while Nigel had introduced himself adding that he is travelling to Bengal to resume his managership of a tea garden. Nigel also was made aware that Klaas is employed by the Dutch Colonial Government administrating a region of the East Indies, and that they are making for Batavia, the principal city located in the northwest of the island of Java. Nigel had been surprised that a fairly senior government official should be openly married to a native woman, and one evening, when they were

enjoying a glass of schnapps each Klaas explained to Nigel that unlike your practice of discouraging inter marriage between themselves and the native Indians, in the East Indies there is no such demarcation. He had continued to state that when a Dutchman married a girl from any of their oriental possessions, the numerous islands you refer to as the Dutch East Indies, the bride is automatically granted Dutch nationality and citizenship, and has the same rights and privileges as a girl from the Netherlands. Nigel was surprised, but thought it wisest to say little, although from then on, he increased his courtesy towards her.

They passed the Atlantic Island of St. Helena and since leaving Gibraltar had not put into any port, but now the ship changed course to the east heading for the Belgium Congo and the river port of Matadi on the River Congo to obtain refuelling of coal for the ship's bunkers and fresh water and food. Securing the ship to a rather flimsy jetty a strict guard was placed at the head of the gangway to prevent any of the passengers going ashore, and after coaling the course southwards was resumed. Darkness had resumed as the "Heksenketel" cleared the estuary of the Congo leaving King Leopold's colony far astern. While the passengers slept, they passed the Portuguese possession of Angola a mere smug on the distant horizon.



Inland port of Matadi with the River Congo in the near background.

Days later they reached the German colony of D. S. W. Afrika and the "Heksenketel" swung her bows south eastwards for the coast and in particular the landing at Luderitzbucht. Three days earlier, unbeknown to the crew and most certainly the passengers, as the First Mate stood watch alone except for the helmsman on the bridge he was unexpectedly joined by Captain Heinrich Swarte, who in a voice loud enough for the helmsman to hear, "There's a halyard come adrift on one of the davits and I need your help to secure it, won't take long."

The pair descended the ladder leading to the boat deck, which on this ship also served as the main deck, and pretending to secure the rope for lowering one of the ship's boats the captain announced that they would be altering course for D.S.W. Afrika, and that the alteration is not to be entered in the ship's log.

"You mean that we are not to record the change of course?" said the burley First Mate, "but that's against the law, and what do I write in the log."

"It isn't the first time you've prefabricated evidence and knowing your record I'm sure it won't be the last. I don't care what you write, but it had better read right, we sailed direct from the Congo to Cape Town, and if you desire to enjoy the ladies' favours after we reach Java, don't make a mistake." There was real menace in the captain's voice, although spoken quietly but not softly. They both knew well the criminal record of the other. Captain Swarte had started his marine career aboard a slaver at a time when there was good money to be made transporting negros, usually sold by their parents with more children than they had the ability to feed, to the Louisiana port of New Orleans to be sold in the slave market before the defeat of the Confederacy in 1865 put an end to the

lucrative trade. By then he had acquired enough money to buy his own ship, another fast schooner rigged vessel, and with a crew of mainly ex criminals, outlaws, and other undesirables which he ruled with an iron rod and his fists, freely used, he maintained absolute control. Now Swarte was gun running to any group causing trouble for the legitimate government. Any customer with ready cash, be they revolutionaries, gangsters, outlaws, or ranchers with plans to obtain a neighbouring property by “friendly persuasion”.

His current enterprise involved supplying the Boers of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal with armaments, i.e. guns and ammunition. Not just rifles, but the occasional field gun, all crated in wooden boxes fictiously labelled. The preferred harbour would have been Walvis Bay, but this natural sheltered landing was under British control so an alternative had been located at Luderitzbucht. Not ideal, but less politically problematical. The consignment would be transported by the railway into the hinterland in the general direction of the Orange River as far as Kalkfontein. From there to the Orange River slow plodding ox wagons would be pressed into service, and at the river a group of native canoes had been engaged commanded by boerevolk (boer farmer people) to paddle upstream to eventually reach the Orange Free State at Vaalburg (fictious name). From there wagons would transport the military supplies into safe storage. Much planning had been involved to achieve success under the noses of the Cape authorities, and generous bribes to the German guards.



The Railway Station at San Luis on the Buenos Ayres and Pacific Railway.

The First Mate, one Bauke Beenhouwer had been recruited by the captain when the two became acquainted while waiting for a train at Avenales Railway Station on the Buenos Ayres & Pacific Railway traveling via Villa Mercedes to the capital. Herr Beenhouwer was on the run from the Chilean Police after murdering a poker player in a San Felide saloon whom he falsely accused of cheating. This was not an isolated incident. To avoid capture Bauke had somehow walked across the Andes avoiding human contact as far as possible and at Punta on the Argentine side of the great mountain range had risked boarding a train to Mendoza via San Luis. From there, now traveling on the Buenos Ayres and Pacific Railway, to the capital on the Atlantic coast, it was while waiting on the



Mendoza Railway Station.

platform at Avenales while the locomotive was being changed that the two met. Heinrich had been looking for offices for the steam ship he had recently purchased to replace the schooner and would re-name the “Heksenketel”, while Bauke, with naval experience, was seeking a means of urgently departing Argentina. As the train made its way to Buenos Ayres via Villa Mercedes, a comparatively comfortable journey on a railway with 5ft 6inch gauge, the two came to an agreement, born out of expediency, and Bauke was hired as first officer. They left the train two stations short of the terminus to avoid detection at the principal station and hired a cab to take them to the docks.

As evening closed in the “Heksenketel”, the Dutch name means Witches Kettle, the choice of Captain Swarte, slowly approached the jetty and once night completely obscured all vision, the illicit cargo was silently swung over the side and lowered to the waiting hands of the negro dockers. They had all been promised extra pay and swiftly the crates were loaded onto waiting railway waggons to begin the next leg of their long journey. While all this activity was in progress, and the crew padded about the decks in bare feet to minimise disturbance, the passengers slept oblivious of the piratical activity going on overhead. By early morning, when a bleary-eyed Nigel peered out of his cabin porthole there was nothing to see but sea, and the same for the passengers on the starboard side.

Some days later sailing into the natural harbour of Table Bay, the approach to Cape Town with Table Mountain towering above the city, was another experience for Nigel, passing the numerous warships anchored at the Simonstown Royal Naval dockyard, battleships and armoured cruisers, all shipshape and Bristol fashion unlike the “Heksenketel” was



The docks at Cape Town with Table Mountain.

another experience. Nigel had hopes of seeing something of Cape Town, but the captain had other ideas and organised a guard on the one gangway from the ship to a jetty against which the “Heksenketel” was moored. Coaling was achieved with gangs of negros, mainly Kaffirs and Zulus carrying bags of coal from railway wagons drawn up on the quay side along the jetty and up the gangway, then tipped into the bunkers in the hold. A physically exhausting labour, but then the natives were used to hard work and seemed happy enough chanting their strange songs. All morning the coaling continued while the passengers were confined to their cabins. The brief visit to Matadi on the River Congo had been only partially successful as coal and native labour had been in limited supply. For their own good the ship’s officers maintained as clouds of coal dust smothered the ship in black debris. The normal practice would be for the decks to be hosed down with sea water to wash them clean, but apparently the captain considered the sea could do that for them once they left the shelter of the sound.

The “Heksenketel” had cast her moorings and early afternoon with the engines at slow ahead she began to turn her bows in the direction of the open sea when a cutter was seen speeding towards them which Nigel spotted from the porthole in his cabin. The master of the cutter hailed the steamer, and the ship heaved to awaiting arrival of the smaller vessel, for which the accommodation ladder was lowered. It later transpired that two passages

had been booked from Cape Town to Batavia, but Captain Swarte had told his new arrivals that he would be sailing by noon and not waiting for them if they were late. Deftly swinging to the foot of the timber and metal stairway lowered from a davit on the port side the skipper of the cutter made his craft secure and assisted his two passengers to ascend the “ladder”, the lady taking care not to lose her footing. On reaching the boat deck a seaman rapidly descended returning immediately with their portmanteau and assorted ladies’ cases to be deposited in the cabin set aside for the pair.

Without the assistance of a pilot the captain manoeuvred his ship south out of the shelter of the natural harbour of Table Bay towards the open sea, while the late arrivals were conducted to the wheelhouse on the bridge.

“You are late!” declared Master Swarte, “another few minutes and you would have been left behind. What caused the delay?”

“We were held up by an overzealous port official, thought we are Boer spies.” At which they all laughed heartily. The gentleman put down his typical broad brimmed hat, and from within his serviceable hardwearing jacket removed a package wrapped in oilskin which he passed to Swarte with the assurance, “From Herr Pieter Fourie, who sends his thanks for your help.”

Captain Swarte took the offered package merely grunting by way of acknowledgement. The First Mate who stood nearby looked his usual fiercest, standing with both feet firmly planted on the bare floorboards. Dressed in blue serge trousers with a once white shirt and navy-blue peaked cap, the laughter quickly having vanished from his unshaven features.

“A glass of schnapps to celebrate your success. Glasses and a bottle, Herr Beenhouwer.” Demanded the ship’s master, and the First Mate promptly disappeared, only to reappear moments later with a new bottle of Danziger Goldwasser and four glasses. They all participated drinking to the future of the two Dutch Republics, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, after which the captain said that they would be briefly landing at Gansbaal, some 87 miles southeast of their present position, adding that in view of the risk associated with Danger Point on the approach they would not attempt a landing other than in good weather and daylight.

Turning to the lady, Captain Swarte enquired, “Can you please write a letter to Herr Fourie to inform him that the goods were landed at Luderitzbucht and consigned by railway, but hide the meaning, we cannot trust the British not to open letters to prominent persons in the republics,” adding “You had better show it to me first.”

Fraulein Nala, for that was the young lady’s name descended the ladder from the wheelhouse and made her way to their cabin on the starboard side to compose the required letter which when completed read as follows:

Addressed to Frau Zora Fourie at an address in the Orange Free State, after a preliminary paragraph devoted to fictitious family trivia she described the few days rest they had allowed themselves which she described as follows “We sat by a slow flowing river enjoying the solitude and watching as adult fish made their way upstream to their spawning grounds further to the east. As the sun dropped towards the western horizon and in anticipation of bad weather tomorrow it turned the sky orange which was reflected in the waters of the river. Tomorrow we will be making our way to Leydenville to meet with our friends from Atlantis” At which point the letter concluded with a paragraph of good wishes.

Showing the brief epistle to the ship’s Captain, he read it through and congratulated Nala on the magnificent way she had disguised the true meaning of the letter.



A Boer family in 1886, Nana could be second from left in first row.

That evening, riding the current which swept around the south pole of the Globe in an easterly direction the four conspirators gathered in the captain's cabin on the boat deck sharing the dinner the steward had prepared, and had Nigel been present he would have marvelled at the ability the steward had acquired in a few hours, so appetising was the spread compared with that served to the passengers. Captain Swarte had included Bauke Beenhouwer the First Mate who had discarded his soiled clothing and managed somehow to make himself look almost respectable. It being the 27th February they all drank a toast to the Boer victory over the Cape Colony government at Majuba Hill in 1881, seven years earlier. As the conversation flowed and more toasts were drunk to the future success of the Republics, and the vain hope that they would eventually replace Her Imperial Majesty's possession of those regions of South Africa which had been Dutch before 1803. They did not mention slave control of the natives, but all knew that their collective hatred of the British Empire stemmed in part from the introduction of laws which prohibited slaughter and slavery. It meant that farmers in the Republics had to work harder and were less profitable.

The "Heksenketel" sailed on, standing well clear of the coast to avoid the catastrophe which had befallen HMS Birkenhead 36 years before on that fateful night when the vessel carrying troops of the 2nd and 74th Regiments of Foot, and others plus women and children struck an uncharted rock at 2 am in shark infested waters on the 23rd February.

Nigel, standing by the stern rail with his two friends from the East Indies, watched the setting sun descend into the watery western horizon above the wake created by the ship's screw, with streaks of red and yellow illuminating the darkening sky.

Saucy Sophia's Snippets



Another post card from the Author's private collection.

The lady's hairstyle alone should date that postcard to the late 19th Century or early 20th Century, further confirmed by the shoes, whalebone corset and parasol. It was posted and dated 9th March, 1911 with a half penny King Edward VII colour green, the internationally agreed colour for inland postcards. The card is to a Miss Eliza Pearson in Sheffield, and the message thanks Eliza for her card, says he is sorry to hear Lizzie's eyes are no better and is going home to Mother, signed "so good night & goodbye from Walter", whilst in the semi-secret language of stamps the position and angle of the postage stamp means "Do you still love me, dearest."

Trailer for September.

Annabell in Herefordshire begins to doubt Nigel's sincerity and intentions. She has not received a letter since receiving the one posted in Gibraltar, and not knowing that he is on a ship making for Batavia via the Cape of Good Hope, she reasons that by now he will have enjoyed time ashore in Brazil and Cape Town where he could have written to her. There are other exciting developments, all will be revealed as the saga unfolds.

Dorian M. Osborne

1st July, 2024.