

*Johannes Hendrikus (John Henry) van Vledder in South Africa (Letter to his brother Max)*

*I take it that the home front will keep you informed about my travels in Africa, which by the way were rather adventurous, but I want to get in touch with you personally.*

*Assuming that you have no clear picture of the life I live here in the Colony, I intend to share with you some of my experiences, some of which are quite popular here. There is so much to tell that I could easily keep you from sleeping for a few nights but that will have to wait for a more suitable occasion.*

*As you will know, I left Worcester in February to go to Laingeburg, where a genuine Russian Jew gave me a job. He employed me as a bookkeeper, but I soon found out that this money-grubber had something different in mind for me. He asked me if I knew something about trading and I answered that I didn't. He told me that it would be a good thing for the both of us if I would take the job as a salesman among the Boers and Hottentots. I could have refused his proposal on the grounds of our mutual agreements but the idea appealed to me because it would satisfy my thirst for adventure, so I agreed to take the job.*

*Three days later I found myself with a cart, drawn by four horses and stacked with all kinds of goods, luxury articles etc. etc. on my way to the unknown. We started at eleven that morning, passed precipices, crossed dangerous mountains and forded rivers with strong currents when finally, at about nine that evening we approached the first boer settlement, muddy, dead tired and half broken by the bumping of our cart.*

*Glad that at last we had found a quiet resting place for the night, I knocked at the door. The family must have been in bed already for it was only after several efforts to get a response that the door opened a little. Behind it I saw a figure and I asked if he would let me in. Instead of opening the door further he coldly denied me entrance and threatened me if I did not leave immediately. So I spent the first night under my cart and the boy lit a fire with dried horse manure because we didn't have any firewood.*

*Because the cart was so full with merchandise we had not brought any bedding, so my mattress was a Kafbaal and I used two of the same for blankets.*

*Because of the unhealthy dew, which is very chilly at night, and the tarp one has to lie under, even well covered, it was a very cold night and it took a stiff walk through the wilderness around me to get warm because the cold had me firmly in its grip. At four the boy had made tea, which warmed me some while I drank it without sugar or milk.*

*At eight o'clock I managed to make friends with the family, a man, wife and two daughters, by saying that I was Dutch and the son of a preacher. I sold them ten pounds worth of sheepskins, baboons' tails, kaffir corn, which they had to transport to Laingeburg by ox cart so I stayed the whole day. To my amazement I found that evening at eight that the Bible was laid in front of me together with a hymnbook with psalms and other hymns and was I requested to "read". Although I managed to perform the ceremony without laughing and managed to find the proper tone reasonably well, I was a bit at a loss when the head of the family signalled that everyone get up from their seats, kneel before them. When I had finally followed their example everything was dead silent. A punch from the woman kneeling at my right gave me the notion that I was supposed to say a prayer for their tender souls. Although I had the idea that I had not done a very good job I was satisfied by the content look on their faces and it was not long before I realised that it was the Dutch language, which they did not understand, that had saved me.*

*After this, I was again pleasantly surprised when Uncle and Auntie (as the boers are usually called) left the room to go to bed. I found myself in the company of two young maidens, pretty and firm, not in the least shy, who proposed to show me my bedroom, helped by the light of a candle. So I followed them to another room, which was to be my bedroom. Instead of leaving for their own bedrooms they suggested a game of cards, which they taught me after I told them that I did not know how to play it. They acted so freely and were so uninhibited that it wasn't long before it became quite a jolly affair. At three we broke up and I decided to leave instead of going to bed. While the boy harnessed the horses I managed to sell the ladies a watch, and with a net profit of 200% I left after saying goodbye to these two lovelies.*

*I was stiff with cold when at six the sun emerged from behind the horizon. I soon warmed up, partially by the jolting of our cart.*

*And so we moved on, finding a boer after 6 hours, then not until after 5,6,7 or even after 12 hours travelling under the scorching sun or in the paralysing cold. I was being treated well at one place, but mostly in a very bad way. By day we found distraction by hunting springbok, baboon, snakes or, when we would discover a bees' nest on a rock. We tried to empty it, which gave me a very disfigured face the next day, but it was worth it because it provided me with variation in my diet, which in general was utterly sad and tasteless. It was always bread and dried meat, poorly prepared over the fire by the boy. So a titbit of honey was always a real delicatessen, you can imagine. We would also shoot an occasional hare or buck, but there were not many of them to be found. When we*

*shot a buck we cut meat for two or three meals, and because of the limited space available, left the remainder of the carcass for the birds of prey, jackals and wild cats, which are as big as full grown sheep.*

*Later, when we had bought some sheep, we had to take turns keeping watch all night looking out for jackals and cats, which show up only at night, jump upon a sheep, tear open the breast of the animal and feed without being noticed. When keeping watch, large fires must be kept burning around the sheep, guns and traps must be placed at different locations and it is important to have a loaded gun by one's side.*

*Sitting between the wheels all day and using the most difficult tracks, danger is a constant companion because it is easy to get an accident when one of the horses is frightened by something. So it is important that the boy is a good horseman. I cannot seem to comprehend how this black boy knows the way so well, considering the fact that we are constantly surrounded by high mountains.*

*One more small fact about snakes and bees I want to tell you about. The first can mostly be found as "Puff adder" in gorges or on the banks of stagnant water. The name Puff adder is given to it because it attacks people by striking backwards and planting its fangs in a man's shoulder, a bite that is lethal. When you stand in front of it the snake is harmless. Because most people forget or do not know this, they often stand behind the snake and get stricken mortally. I will not elaborate on other snakes as you have read enough about them. Instead I will tell you about a species of bees that can be found in every nest. When emptying a nest it is important to watch out for it because it is very dangerous with its sting, which is very long. The first impression one gets is that it is fleeing but that is only to get time to extend its sting to the full length of a dagger, come back and kill a person instantly by stinging right into the brain. I could go on describing more of these remarkable creatures but that would take too much space and it would be better if you could come over and have a look for yourself so I can get you acquainted with various kinds of vermin. It is almost time for dinner now so I have to conclude and keep many more encounters for a next occasion.*

*There is however, another story I have to tell you. It is about my encounter with ostriches. On one of my journeys I met a boer who sold ostrich feathers. As these are usually sold when still on the bird it is custom to ride on horseback with the owner to the camp to assess their quality. I happened to see one of these birds on her eggs while the male kept watch. I fell a little behind when suddenly I noticed that I had strayed close to the nest. The next moment the male was chasing me. Beak open and wings spread he ran after me and I realised that the speed of my horse was no match for the bird's. Fortunately the boer saw what happened and he managed to divert the*

*bird's attention from me, which is not too difficult because these birds know their owner and will never harm them. When we left the camp the man told me that a few weeks ago the bird had killed one of his boys. It had chased the victim, who had stumbled after which the ostrich had used its cat-like claws to rip open the boy's back from the neck to his bottom and kick him. Yet this animal can be stopped in a moment. A blow on the neck can kill it, a jump from a low fence, a large boulder or hitting a rock can break its leg like glass.*

*Although I haven't told you one percent of what I have gone through, I have no more time to write it down. You have no idea how hard my life has been. No wonder I fell ill after three months, unfit to endure these hardships any longer. My condition grew worse and worse and finally I was forced to leave for Cape Town to recover there. The money I had made was used up for this; Fifty pounds is not much when one is ill and unemployed and has to stay in an expensive home, pay the doctor and must take all kinds of medication. The doctors said that the unhealthy climate and my nights in the open air had done me in. After staying in Cape Town for two months I left for Johannesburg where I have recovered entirely and have a good job. Will you please write to me how you are doing? I hope you are doing as well as I do. I am very happy and have no worries. Because I do not know whether you are at home or not, I will send this letter to mother. Accept my greetings and keep faith in me.*

*Your loving brother Jan*