

Reisbeschrijving

VAN

J. H. VAN VLEEDER,

DEN 29<sup>en</sup> SEPTEMBER, 1897

VOETREKKELEN NAAR

ZUID-AFRIKA

per S.S. „Mexican”,

AMSTERDAM

*To my beloved Family in Holland, Friends and Acquaintances*

*Although I have wished for a long time to trust my adventures to paper and present them to you as my travelling experiences, circumstances have been such that I was unable and unwilling to execute my intentions.*

*However, now that all barricades have been cleared and I have found work that gives me ample opportunity to comply with your request, I shall hold back no longer and take my notes that I have faithfully made during our journey.*

*I am absolutely convinced that it will be very hard for me to perform this self-imposed task, and I would certainly not be willing to expose myself to the criticism of the more initiated, were it not for the promises that made me resist these urges.*

*My sole intention is, to give in simple words a concise and consistent account of my experiences at sea, in Cape Town and finally in my present place of residence and I hope that I, not being a gifted writer, will be forgiven for the less than correct use of expressions in my report.*

*So the 23rd was to be the last day of my presence in Holland: the day I would set out for an unknown continent to live there for indefinite time; the day I had chosen to sever the bonds that tied me to so many years of love and friendship; the day I was to say goodbye to everyone and all that tied me to Holland, and all that made me dislike my country and had made me decide to try to make a living elsewhere.*

*Having shown no premonitions about the day of departure initially and having regarded only the sunny side of things, the real meaning of the decision to go became manifest on the day itself. It is easy then to forget the suffering and it is just the pleasant memories that spring to mind.+ Objects that used to be unnoticed are noticed and a peculiar feeling of loss manifests itself when one realizes that it is the last time one will be able to see them. Any person can imagine himself in such a position and realize that these final impressions will be carved in one's memory.*

*So there is no need to describe the feelings one experiences after all relations have bade their farewell and one remains alone. Inadvertently one feels oneself at a loss and mixed up in one's thoughts, not willing to be disturbed. It was quite a revelation to reach Vlissingen (Flushing), where we had a few untroubled hours to ourselves and could forget our worries, thanks to our relatives that accompanied us to the ship.*

*After having tried to cheer each other up, we finally walked up in good spirits to the "Wilhelmina", which was to sail at 11.30 hours. A few moments later the ship cast off, the lights were switched off and the last of our acquaintances vanished from our sight. Farewell Holland, fare thee well all my beloved and...until we meet again! Soon a great distance separated us from the Dutch soil, which finally vanished from sight altogether. The first leg of our voyage had begun and we had ample time to dwell upon the past and in particular the day that had passed. Although the night was quite dark and the weather not too favourable, I wanted to be on deck for some time, where I, tucked away in my coat and hat, tried to get acquainted with what was new and unfamiliar to me. It was however, not easy to see anything through the darkness but dark clouds and a foaming mass of water and an occasional shadow of land. So any possible peculiarities went unnoticed and I decided, forced by the strong wind and high seas, that kept me awake all the time, to go below decks and try to get some sleep to give me energy for the day that would soon come.*

*When I entered the saloon, which was neatly arranged, I found most of the passengers to be seasick and, I noticed, quite in distress. Consequently, the atmosphere was rather unpleasant and it was with pleasure that I entered one of the bunks. After being tossed about for half an hour, I really managed, in spite of the ominous and unsavoury noises of my sick fellow passengers above and beside me, to fall asleep until the hour of five, after which I hurried to go on deck before the shadows of the English coast would show. To someone who has never seen anything alike, it provides a splendid show of the rising sun, spreading its light over the sea, chasing away the fog and thus revealing a gigantic shadow that soon announces, in the image of some picturesque landscapes, that Queensborough is near. By the hour of 6 the port showed itself in all its splendour and the boat made port by 6.30 hours.*

*It was only then that the hard part of our voyage began. First we had to take care of our luggage, which some obliging servants, without asking, picked up and transported to the customs' building to be checked, as we soon found out. Our polite guides were there too and with clear gestures showed us what they wanted.*

*The inspection went well and was just a perfunctory opening and closing of one of our suitcases. After offering the spiteful customs officers some cigars they let us pass on our honest looks. No sooner had I closed my belongings than new hands showed up that took our goods to destinations unknown to us then. All we could do was follow them on their way and after a few minutes we found ourselves standing next to a train where our luggage was loaded and finally we too were given a seat in a compartment. On my repeated question whether this was the train bound for London, I soon got a positive answer, after which I had no option but wait to see if the man had really spoken the truth and my question had reached his brain. After getting rid of some impossible faces by offering them some money for their uninvited assistance I decided that I could find a place to sit down.*

*After the "take seats" and "tickets please" the doors were closed and the train started without any notice to the passengers. When the train halted at a station this also went unannounced, so the passengers had to be very alert where they had to get off the train. No warning, no opening of the doors by a conductor enabled the passenger to know where he was and he was forced to lean out of windows to see whether he had inadvertently passed his destination.*

*The trip to London was very interesting because of the changing landscape with various beautiful panoramas and at 8.30 we arrived at Victoria Station where we took a cab to take our things to Waterloo Station. We thought it wise to move on immediately because of the amount of packs and bags, so there is not much that I can tell about London. At Waterloo Station the Southampton train was waiting and we arrived there by noon, which meant the end of this leg of our voyage.*

*Staff of Hoffmann's Hotel, specially assigned for this job, took our luggage to that establishment, which meant that we had to go there too. First however, we checked if everything was present after which we gave permission to take our stuff to the hotel. It is remarkable to see how quickly these people know to find out the stranger and immediately make arrangements so that the traveller has no opportunity to make his own choice of accommodation.*

*Our stay in Southampton left nothing to be desired and we made good use of it. Well, the kitchen may have been good to English standards, our refined palates found it rather bland and unappetizing. By chance a small*

group had formed -all future Afrikaners- and we took some walks through Southampton, an ordinary town with no special features or beauty. We spent the evening prior to our departure -including the sick and healthy- as real emigrants in a manner as pleasant as we could before we went to our respective rooms at about 9 o'clock.

The next morning we got up early to inform our family in Holland about our well-being and to make a final stroll on land. Notified by a member of the hotel staff, we left for the "Mexican" by noon, where our fellow travellers had already assembled in large numbers and were busy sorting out and collecting their luggage. It had been piled up in a disorderly way and it took us great effort to retrieve our belongings. After that we got permission to take them below decks ourselves, which was no easy task; we managed to stow them after some pushing and punching.

Our first inspection revealed no problems. The cabins were not very spacious, which can be attributed to the large number of passengers that were to be their temporary inhabitants, but they were clean. It may happen that one is not very happy with the co-occupants of one's dwelling and many unpleasant situations may occur. The lengthy voyage makes it worse and soon one condemns all that is life on board and sea voyage. Added to this are the complaints about food and in the end the overall impression is often very negative.

As far as I am concerned, I have had no reason to complain so far. I met some unsavoury characters, it is true, but in the end I can say that life on board was quite pleasant. It is important to try to establish friendly relations when and where possible. When someone isolates himself he will have a most unpleasing voyage while the other passengers have a good time with one another. By taking into account that these friendships will not last for a long time, it is easy to overcome drawbacks and not so pleasant encounters when meeting with extraordinary characters and pass the time in an agreeable way. The same goes for the quality of the food. By bringing various snacks, including something tasty and even bringing a case with these things when boarding, one provides for a certain need. The daily menu is not too good and there is ample opportunity to experience the meaning of the word "faint".

In the cabin that had been assigned to me, I met with a "German" who could brabble some Dutch, three Englishmen that were assigned to a gold mine by some company, and a Scotsman who was on his way to Africa with his wife and children. Although I thought that I was rather fluent in English, I soon found out that it was

entirely the opposite and it was not easy to comprehend even a few words that my honourable colleagues spoke. Little by little however, I grew accustomed to their language and gradually we became good friends.

Few Dutch as we were on board, we quietly united and soon we found ourselves in the company of our nation: at first of course my German colleague and then three Dutch ladies with children en route to their husbands and two Germans, very nice people, one of which had been living in Africa for some years and who had been to Europe for pleasure. We met everywhere and on every occasion; at the table, on deck, and the atmosphere was always very harmonious. For fear of becoming too tedious, I think it will be better to give a description of the voyage from my notes and elaborate only on things that are worth mentioning.

Saturday 25 September. - At about 4 o'clock this afternoon the ship cast off, assisted by two tugs. Many people were present, mostly to say goodbye to relatives, a small reminder of the goodbye that is still so fresh in my mind. There is a general apprehension about seasickness among the passengers.

Sunday, 26 September

Because the first day on board passed without seasickness for most of the passengers, we thought that our troubles were over. However, when we approached the Gulf of Biscay by noon, that hope vanished into thin air. There were many anxious faces and it was not long before we experienced the effects the Gulf had on us. The Gulf is a rough stretch of water and it does not take long before one is initiated in the life at sea. We also noticed that the "Mexican" had justly been called a bad ship. She rolled continuously and more often than not one saw people rolling down the deck or on top of one another when they forgot to hold on to something solid. Waves splashing noisily across the deck would sometimes douse a passenger that thought it was possible to relax in a deck chair. My sisters met the same fate and it was amusing to see how they, together with children, some sick people and some chairs rolled across the deck to end up in the lower part of the deck where they lay in the most amusing positions until the wave had passed under the ship and the ship started to list to the other side. By holding on to something they were able to prevent themselves from making the same journey again, this time to the other side. The patients were really looking forward to the end of the Gulf of Biscay because of their predicament.

Monday 27 September

*The rolling of the ship made our night very uneasy. We have not yet found our sea legs and run the risk of being tossed out of the basket. By day we go carefully, holding on to everything that can support us. Gradually we are feeling more at ease in our "Montagne Russe" and here and there people begin to get settled. I even noticed some people playing cards and one might even say that it is getting cozy here.*

*Tuesday, 28 September*

*Today we left the Gulf and the ship settled somewhat. Seasickness is getting rarer and the weather is fair. If all things go as they are going, we hope to make landfall at Madeira tomorrow afternoon at four. Everybody is curious to see this island. A feeling of togetherness is growing among us.*

*Wednesday, 29 September*

*We arrived at Madeira this afternoon. We had spent hours on the foredeck, watching the spectacular sight of the island that grew larger and larger as we sailed nearer. As we got closer we could distinguish at first one, later more colours and finally we could see trees and houses that seemed to be glued against the mountain. As soon as we rounded the cape of the island, the sea went dead calm. After having floated without steam for some ten minutes we saw a sign of life at the waterfront and soon our ship was completely surrounded by a host of little boats, furnished with dirty, coloured Jews, all of them possessed with cheeky and ominously turning eyes and well stocked with all kinds of familiar and unknown fruit. In between, the sea was swarming with screaming and gesticulating boys who, while uttering the most dreadful noises, dived after pennies that were thrown into the water by passengers, and which they knew to salvage from the depth with infinite skill, much to the pleasure of the passengers.*

*Hardly had the mail for Madeira been sent ashore when some men clambered up the ship's side and threw down ropes to their comrades so they too could climb aboard. Very soon the deck was swarming with black people that tried in a very noisy manner to sell their merchandise and every time accidentally tried to shortchange us, which made us very alert. All passengers bought a good supply of fruit and cane chairs were also not forgotten. When everybody had what they wanted, the suppliers were sent away after being skilfully plundered by the sailors.*

*It is impossible to describe Madeira's splendid nature. Words fall short if one tries to depict it all adequately and install a faint understanding of an island so close to Europe and, contrary to that continent, gifted with such a beautiful climate.*

*When at last the coalbunkers were filled, we weighed anchor at about seven o'clock, and stocked with the most delicious fruits we set sail and left Madeira behind us. Once at sea the air was noticeably cooler but less then it had been some fifty miles back.*

*Friday 1 October*

*The atmosphere on board was very sociable today. Everywhere on deck one could see people playing dames, dominoes, cards, mandolin or violin, while others, were lazing on deck, talking. Tonight the band performed in the second class and some passengers put on a little show. All went very well and everybody went to bed in good spirits.*

*Saturday 2 October*

*The heat today, already terrible yesterday, is scorching. Nearly undressed, I am perspiring terribly. I do not venture below decks and our storage case comes in very handy now. We have our meals mostly on deck, as our stomachs do not need much food in this heat. In the well-furnished bathrooms we can find some refreshment. We decide to remain on deck because of the high temperatures.*

*Sunday, 3 October*

*A preacher, one of the passengers, organized two religious services today, while in the evening there was a concert in the third class area; first and second class passengers were also present.*

*Monday, 4 October*

*Stormy weather, seasickness all over the ship. The weather forecast is not good.*

*Tuesday, 5 October*

*At midnight we passed the equator. The wind persists and the sea is hollow.*

*Wednesday, 6 October*

*The weather was quite rough tonight. A big wave made the ship list so much that at a certain moment a whole range of plates and cups that were on the table were smashed against the wall. The wind abated somewhat by morning. All day long people were doing sports on deck, which brought some life on the ship; in the evening prizes were distributed with a concert in the end.*



*Thursday, 7 October*

*Continuation of sports on deck with a concert in the evening.*

*The days that followed were uneventful. The ship's captain did what he could to make life on board as agreeable as possible for the passengers. The passengers too tried to make life easy for one another. In the end a general feeling of boredom could be noticed and everybody longed for a glimpse of land. Understandably, the ship's company was quite agitated the day we heard that Cape Town might be made the next day. Every time the number of miles that had passed under our bow was checked and the hours that separated us from our destination.*

*It was early in the morning of 13 October that every hand was present and on the lookout for land, which would not be visible for the next few hours. But at last, at about two in the afternoon, the cry could be heard from all around the ship: "Land!"--"Land!". In a flash everyone was on the foredeck, many not to go below decks until the ship would enter the port of Cape Town. It was only then that everyone was very anxious and longing for the moment to set foot ashore.*

*Hundreds of interested and longing eyes screened the dock for relatives or acquaintances and the noise of yelling in all kinds of different tongues was enormous. White, black and brown swarmed over the quay, every one of them for himself, pushing others aside, hoping to be noticed by one of the passengers on the ship, who had a good view from the deck, high above the mixed crowd below.*

*There is no need to mention my gratitude when I noticed Carel Geyer among the crowd. He was busy making all kinds of gestures with a handkerchief and stick, clearly trying to be noticed.*

*Hardly had the anchor been cast and the gangplank placed when everybody ran to somebody, greeting, congratulating or in silence - the majority with open arms-with the risk to embrace the wrong person(s). Now that we had arrived in our new world I would soon find out what this **Land of the Future** had in store for me.*

*I spent my first days ashore visiting the town, which helped me stretch my spoilt legs. I was very surprised to find, in stead of a rather primitive town, as I had been told it would be, a town in optima forma, a town where surprisingly large and well decorated shops gave testimony of civilization. Electric street cars and everything that concerns liveliness and commerce are well represented and make it with its great buildings and splendid*

*gardens a town that can match many a large town in Holland. As far as nature is concerned, it is to be preferred to nature in Holland because in the high, proud mountains one can find the picturesque landscapes an all that we call scenic beauty.*

*It was mainly the negative information I had been given about the Transvaal that made me stay in Cape Town to try to find a job in stead of moving up north. So on Monday, after my relatives had set off for the "Land of Dust, Cattle Plague, Epidemics and Troubles" I began my search for a job. After a few unsuccessful days it was clear that I would have a very hard time finding a position here, which was confirmed by the Dutch consul who had by then promised to look after my interests*

*The efforts made by His Excellence were also fruitless and Mr. De Waal (the consul) advised me to try to find work in one of the towns nearby. Following his advice, I sat out the next day to try my luck elsewhere. After having met no positive response I decided to go to Worcester, a small town 109 miles North of Cape Town. The trip there was very variegated and interesting and it took me some 6 to 7 hours. At three in the afternoon I arrived in Worcester, where my roaming life, that I had enjoyed for a month came to an end.*

*The first address where I presented myself was the house of Mr. J.E. de Jong, Publisher of the "Worcester Advertiser". They had a vacancy for a director of this weekly magazine and I was given the job. It would be impossible to describe all my adventures in the Cape, and moreover, I rather wish to leave these days of tribulations behind me without mention. It should be enough to say that South Africa is past the good days and that with the advent of civilization, overpopulation and unemployment, bad times have arrived.*

*Every Dutchman beware, before moving to the Southern Continent, disappointment will surely be awaiting him. Only the working man has an opportunity here, in particular capable craftsmen will have a good life here.*

*With this I have informed you in brief and I will add to this that I am very pleased with my employment, the more so because I have the chance to practice my old profession of printing and it gives me great pleasure to finish this report myself. Nature here is beautiful and very good for one's health. The environment here leaves nothing to be desired. The end of my journey is a very happy one and I have found my situation to be too good to have recriminations about my voluntary leave for South Africa.*

*Hoping to have informed you to your satisfaction, and hoping for news, I sign with many greetings from house to house*

*Your very loving:*

*J.H.VAN VLEDDER*

*translation by P.J. van Vledder*