HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICA.

CHAPTER XXI.

JAN VAN RIEBEEK, COMMANDER, LANDED IN SOUTH AFRICA
7TH APRIL 1652, RETIRED 6TH MAY 1662.

The Portuguese, who were the first Europeans to visit the shores of South Africa, did not attempt either to form a settlement or to carry on commerce below Delagoa Bay, and a century and a half after their occupation of Sofala had never penetrated beyond the coast belt of any part of the present Cape Colony west of the Umzimvubu river. They were mere traders, and the Hottentots not only had nothing which they wanted to purchase, but were regarded by them as the most ferocious of savages, with whom communication should be avoided. The Dutch, who wrested from them the traffic of the East, for a long time had no thought of colonisation either, but from the entrance of these people in the Indian seas the south-western part of the African continent acquired an importance it never had before. The Portuguese ocean road was almost invariably west of Madagascar, consequently they did not need a refreshment station between St. Helena and Mozambique, but the Dutch, who passed south of the great island, required one at the turning point of the long sea journey between Holland and Batavia. Owing to this, their fleets were in the habit of putting into Table Bay for the purpose of obtaining news, taking in fresh water, catching fish, and trying to barter cattle from the Hottentots, which they were not always fortunate enough to procure.
On the 26th of July 1649 a document setting forth the advantages that might be derived from the occupation of Table Valley was presented to the directors of the Amsterdam chamber of the United Netherlands chartered East India Company. It was written by Leendert Jansz—or Janssen as the name would be spelt now,—and bore his signature and that of Nicolaas Proot. The style and wording of the document show that its author was a man of observation, but it contains no clue by which his position in the Company’s service can be ascertained. He and Proot had resided in Table Valley more than five months, and they could therefore speak from experience of its capabilities.

The Haarlem, one of the finest of the Company’s ships, had put into Table Bay for fresh water and whatever else could be obtained, and in a gale had been driven on the Blueberg beach. The strongly timbered vessel held together, and the crew succeeded in saving not only their own effects but the ship’s stores and the cargo. The neighbourhood of the wreck was not a desirable site for a camping-ground, and therefore when the Company’s goods were secured against the weather, and a small fort had been constructed in which a few soldiers could be left, Janssen and Proot with the rest of the crew removed to Table Valley. Close by a stream of pure sweet water, on a site somewhere near the centre of the present city of Capetown, they threw up a bank of earth for protection, and encamped within it.

They had saved some vegetable seeds and garden tools which chanced to be on board the wreck, and soon a plot of ground was placed under cultivation. Cabbages, pumpkins, turnips, onions, and various other vegetables thrived as well as they had seen in any part of the world, and among them were men who had visited many lands. The Hottentots came in friendship to trade with them, and brought horned cattle and sheep in such numbers for sale that they were amply supplied with meat for themselves and had sufficient to spare for a ship that put in with eighty or ninety sick. Game in abundance fell under their guns, and fish was equally plentiful. They were here in spring and early
summer, when the climate is perhaps the most delightful in the world.

At length, after they had spent between five and six months very happily, the return fleet of 1648, under command of Wollebrant Geleynsen, put into Table Bay. The cargo of the Haarlem was conveyed to Salt River, and thence re-shipped for Europe. And when the fleet set sail, it bore away from South Africa men whose reminiscences were of a pleasant and fruitful land, in which they had enjoyed health and peace and plenty. The document which Janssen and Proot laid before the directors of the East India Company took its tone from their experience. It pointed out many and great advantages, and overlooked all difficulties in the way of forming a settlement in Table Valley. The author considered it beyond doubt that fruit trees of every kind would thrive as well as vegetables had done in the garden made by the Haarlem’s crew, that horned cattle and sheep could be purchased in plenty, that cows could be bred and cheese and butter made, and that hogs could be reared and fattened in numbers sufficient to supply the needs of the Company’s ships. Then there were birds to be shot, and fish to be caught, and salt to be gathered. He pointed out how little was to be had at St. Helena, and how necessary for the refreshment of the sick was a victualling station between the Netherlands and the sources of trade in the East. Already there was ample experience of the benefits derived by the purchase of a few head of cattle and the gathering of wild herbs at the Cape.

There were sources of wealth also. Whales put into Table Bay at times in shoals, and could easily be made prize of. Seals were to be had in hundreds, and their oil and skins were valuable. The hides of the large antelopes would also in time readily find a market. The sickness caused in getting fresh water, by the men being compelled to wade in the surf at all seasons of the year, was referred to, and, as a contrast, a jetty and wooden pipes were pointed out. The Hottentots were spoken of as a people indeed without
such institutions or forms of government as those of India, but peaceably disposed and capable of being taught. It was true that Netherlanders had sometimes been killed by them, but that was because other Europeans had taken their cattle by force. There was no doubt that they could learn the Dutch language, and in course of time could be educated in the Christian religion. Finally, the author expressed surprise that the enemies of the Netherlands had not already formed a settlement at the Cape, and with a small war fleet captured all of the Company’s ships as they were about to pass.

The memorial of Janssen and Proot was referred by the chamber of Amsterdam to the supreme directory of the Company, who, after calling for the opinions of the other chambers, and finding them favourable, on the 30th of August 1650 resolved to establish such a victualling station as was proposed. The deputies at the Hague,* who were instructed to draw up a plan for this purpose, availed themselves further of the experience of Nicolaas Proot, who was then residing at Delft, and to whom the post of commander of the expedition was offered. On the 20th of the following March the supreme directory approved of the plan submitted by the deputies at the Hague, and the chamber of Amsterdam was empowered to put it in execution. Thus twenty months were occupied in discussion before anything else was done towards carrying out the project.

Five days later, instructions concerning the expedition were issued to the skippers of the ships Dromedaris and Reiger, and of the yacht Goede Hoop. These vessels, which were destined to bring the party of occupation to our shores, were then lying in the harbour of Amsterdam. The Dromedaris

* Four deputies from the chamber of Amsterdam, two from the chamber of Zeeland, and one from each of the small chambers formed a committee called the Haagsche Besoignes, whose duty it was to arrange documents for the assembly of seventeen. The Indian correspondence, in particular, was prepared by this body for submission to the supreme directory. The committee had no power to issue orders or instructions of any kind.
1650] Jan van Riebeek.

was one of those old-fashioned Indiamen with broad square sterns and poops nearly as high as their maintops, such as can be seen depicted upon the great seal of the Company. In size she was but a fourth rate. Like all of her class, she was fitted for war as well as for trade, and carried an armament of eighteen great guns. The Reiger was smaller, with only one deck, which was flush. She was armed also, but the number of her guns is not stated. The Goede Hoop was merely a large decked-boat, and was intended to remain at the Cape to perform any services that might be required of her.

The skippers were directed to proceed to Table Bay, and to construct close to the Fresh river a wooden building, the materials for which they were to take with them. They were then to select a suitable site for a fort, to contain space for the accommodation of seventy or eighty men, and to this fort when finished they were to give the name Good Hope. Four iron culverins were to be placed on each of its angles. As soon as they were in a condition to defend themselves, they were to take possession of sufficient rich and fertile ground for gardens, and also of suitable pasture land for cattle. The framework of some boats was to be taken out, and the boats when put together were to be employed in looking for passing ships and conducting them to the anchorage. All this being accomplished, the ships were to proceed to Batavia, leaving seventy men at the Cape. These men were to pay special attention to the cultivation of the gardens, so that the object might be attained for which the settlement was intended, which was to provide the crews of the Company’s fleets with refreshments. They were to take care not to injure any of the Hottentot inhabitants in their persons or their cattle, but were to endeavour to gain their attachment by friendly treatment. A diary of all events was to be kept, and enquiries were to be made for anything that could tend to reduce the expense or be of profit to the Company. A copy of the document signed by Janssen and Proot was annexed to these instructions for the guidance of the expedition.
Nicolaas Proot having declined the offer of the directors, they selected as the head of the settlement about to be formed in South Africa an officer who had been previously a surgeon in their service. His name, according to modern spelling, was Jan van Riebeeck, but he himself wrote it Johan van Riebeeck, and it is found in the records of his time also spelt Riebeeceq and Rietbeeck, the last of which forms shows the origin of the word. A ship’s surgeon of those days was required to possess some skill in dressing wounds and to have a slight knowledge of medicine, but was not educated as a physician is now. Very often a copying clerk or a soldier, with no other training than that of an assistant in a hospital, if he had aptitude for the duties of a surgeon, was promoted to the office. Mr. Van Riebeeck was of this class, but he was nevertheless a man of considerable ability, who let no opportunity of acquiring knowledge escape him. A little, fiery-tempered, resolute man, in the prime of life, with perfect health, untiring energy, and unbounded zeal, he was capable of performing a great amount of useful work. No better officer indeed could have been selected for the task that was to be taken in hand, where culture and refinement would have been out of place.

He had been a great voyager, and had seen many countries. The directors placed in his hands the document drawn up by Janssen, that he might comment upon it, which he did at some length. He thought that the settlement could be enclosed with hedges of thorn bushes, such as he had seen in the Caribbees, and which constituted the chief defence of the islanders. He had noticed how hides were preserved in Siam, and how arrack was made in Batavia. He remembered what was the price of antelope skins in Japan when he was there, and he had seen a good deal of Northern China, and believed that its varied productions would flourish at the Cape. In Greenland he had observed the process of procuring oil from whales and seals, and saw no difficulty in carrying it out in South Africa. At the Cape he had resided three weeks on shore, during the time the cargo of the Haarlem was being
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Jan van Riebeeck.  

transferred from the beach to the fleet under Wollebrant Geleynsen.

His opinions concerning the advantages of a settlement and the resources of the country coincided with those of Janssen, but they differed with respect to the character of the Hottentots. Van Riebeeck had frequently heard of white men being beaten to death by them, and he considered that it would be necessary in building the fort to provide for defence against them as well as against European enemies. He did not deny that they could learn the Dutch language, or that Christianity could be propagated among them, but he spoke very cautiously on these points. If it were as Janssen appeared to believe, it would be a good thing, he observed. In this respect a clergyman would be able to perform the best service, and if the Company chose to be at the expense of maintaining one, his presence would tend to the improvement of the Europeans also.

In those days ships were not despatched on long voyages with such expedition as at present, and hence it need not cause any surprise to find the Dromedaris and her consorts still in Netherland waters in December 1651. On the 4th of that month the directors resolved that Mr. Van Riebeeck should have power to convene the broad council of the ships, and should preside therein, or, in other words, he was appointed commander-in-chief of the little fleet.

On the 12th additional instructions were issued concerning the expedition. Precautions were to be observed against surprise by an enemy. No offence whatever was to be given to any one calling at the Cape, except to subjects of the king of Portugal residing within the limits of the Company's charter, who were open and declared foes. No representatives of any nation were to be interfered with who should attempt to form a settlement beyond the Company's boundaries, but marks of occupation were to be set up without delay wherever the ground was serviceable. The Reiger was to be sent to Batavia as soon as her cargo for the Cape should be landed. The Dromedaris was to remain in Table
Bay until the completion of the fort. There were strange
rumours concerning the designs of Prince Rupert, and
although the directors did not credit all they heard, it was
necessary to be constantly on guard. Ships returning hom-
eward from beyond the Cape were therefore to be warned to
sail in company and to be always prepared for battle.

Attached to these instructions was an extract from a
despatch of the chamber of Middelburg, giving an account
of Prince Rupert. One Captain Aldert, who had been cruis-
ing off the coast of Portugal, had just arrived at Flushing,
and stated that he had frequently met the prince's fleet
of eight ships, all of heavy burden, and had seen them
plunder a vessel of Castile in which was a large amount of
specie. The prince had prevented him from making prize
of a Portuguese ship laden with sugar. It was supposed
that he intended to proceed to St. Helena, and lie in wait
there for the return fleet of the English East India
Company.

On the 15th of December the directors named David
Coninck, skipper of the Dromedaris, to succeed the com-
mander in case of any accident. The day following, Mr.
Van Riebeeck, with his family and some relatives of whom he
was guardian, embarked in the Dromedaris, which vessel
was still taking in stores for the voyage. Among the com-
mander's relatives who accompanied him were two nieces,
Elizabeth and Sebastiana van Opdorp, both of whom were
afterwards married in South Africa. In those days, when
the United Provinces possessed the largest mercantile marine
in the world, Dutch women often lived on board ship with
their husbands, and children were born and grew up almost
as in a village on shore. Hence the young ladies of Mr. Van
Riebeeck's family probably did not look upon coming to
South Africa as much of a hardship, especially as they were
accompanied by others of their sex. On the 17th the family
of the chief gardener, Hendrik Boom, went on board, and
a small cabin was assigned for their use. Shortly after this,
everything being at last in readiness, the little fleet dropped
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Jan van Riebeeck.

...down to Texel and cast anchor there, waiting for a favourable wind.

On Sunday the 24th of December 1651 an easterly breeze sprang up, and about noon the Dromedaris, Reiger, and Goede Hoop, in company with a great fleet of merchant ships, hove up their anchors and stood out to sea. The Dromedaris was now found to be so topheavy from bad stowage and want of ballast that in squally weather it was dangerous to show much canvas, and it was even feared at times that she would overturn. In consequence of this, the commander signalled to the other vessels, and on the 30th their skippers went on board and a council was held. There were present Jan van Riebeeck, senior merchant, David Coninck, skipper of the Dromedaris, Jan Hoochsaet, skipper of the Reiger, and Simon Pieter Turver, skipper of the Goede Hoop. Pieter van der Helm was the secretary. The council resolved to put into a port on the English coast and procure some ballast, but the skippers had hardly returned to their own vessels when the wind set in dead off the English shore, and they were obliged to face the bay of Biscay as they were. Fortunately they had fair weather, and as soon as they got beyond the ordinary cruising ground of the privateers, the Dromedaris sent nine of her heavy guns below, which put her in better trim. The fear of Prince Rupert alone prevented them from reducing her available armament still further. They believed he would not make much distinction between a Dutch ship and an English one, and for aught they knew, he might have a Portuguese commission. Very likely he was somewhere between them and St. Helena or Table Bay, on the watch for Indiamen, and therefore it was necessary to be constantly on guard and ready for defence.

The weather continued favourable, and the vessels seldom parted company. On the 20th of January 1652 they were off the Cape Verde islands, and the commander summoned the council again. The skippers met, and decided that as there was no sickness on board any of the vessels they would
continue the voyage without calling. From this time until the 29th of March nothing of any note occurred. Then, for the third time during the passage, the council assembled on board the *Dromedaris*. The probable latitude and longitude they were in was first determined by the very simple method of striking the mean between their different calculations, and they then resolved to use every exertion to reach 34° 20' S., after which they would direct their course eastward to the Cape.

On the 5th of April, about the fifth glass of the afternoon watch, the chief mate of the *Dromedaris* caught sight of Table Mountain rising above the eastern horizon, and won the reward of sixteen shillings which had been promised to the first who should discover land. A gun was at once fired and the flags were hoisted to make the fact known to the crews of the *Reiger* and *Goede Hoop*, which vessels were some distance to leeward. During the night the little fleet drew in close to the land, somewhat to the southward of the entrance to Table Bay. The 6th opened with calm weather, and as the vessels lay idle on the sea, a boat was sent in advance with the bookkeeper Adam Hulster and the mate Arend van Iveren, who had orders to peer cautiously round the Lion's rump, and report if any ships were at anchor. About two hours before dark the boat returned with the welcome intelligence that the bay was empty, and, as a breeze sprang up just then, the *Dromedaris* and *Goede Hoop* stood in, and shortly after sunset dropped their anchors in five fathoms of water, off the mouth of the Fresh river. The *Reiger* remained outside all night, but early next morning she came running in before a light breeze, and at eight o'clock dropped anchor close to her consorts.

And so, after a passage of one hundred and four days from Texel, on the morning of Sunday the 7th of April 1652 Mr. Van Riebeek and his party looked upon the site of their future home. The passage for those days was a remarkably quick one. The officers of every ship that made Batavia Roads within six months after leaving Texel were entitled to