

THE STORY OF SIMON VAN DER STEL

Chapter V

The greatest event of Van der Stel's period of office at the Cape, the event, that is, which was to make its mark on the history of South Africa for evermore, was the arrival of the Huguenot immigrants in 1688-9.

Over two years before, in October 1685, the Directors of the Dutch East India Company had decided to send them, partly because the Netherlands was overrun with Huguenot refugees from France, and partly because this gave them an opportunity to increase the number of colonists at the Cape, in order to relieve the Company of cattle-dealing and other agricultural affairs.

The reason the Directors came to this decision about the Huguenots in 1685 was because this was the year, in October, when the Roman Catholic King of France, Louis XIV, cancelled the 'Edict of Nantes', a proclamation of the year 1598, which gave the French Protestants (called Huguenots) permission to worship in their own way. Horrible massacres of Protestants had occurred before this, and now were to occur again. Louis XIV forbade the Huguenots to leave France, but somehow or other thousands fled, many of them wealthy, but able to carry with them only cash and jewels, their landed property confiscated. They fled to the Netherlands, to England, to Prussia, the poorer classes carrying with them, to the benefit of these countries, their skill as artisans, agriculturalists, weavers and so on. To the Cape colony they brought their skill in the care of vineyards and makers of wine.

In the months of April, May and August of 1688 five parties of Huguenots arrived in Table Bay, and two more in January and May 1689. Altogether they numbered 136 Huguenots and 28 Flemings — men, women and children. Among them the Directors sent eight well-trained Dutch orphanage girls and a few other spinsters, not as many as they had hoped to send, because of the French Huguenots 70 were men and only 31 women; out of the Flemings 14 men and 7 women; and the shortage of women in the Cape colony was still a calamity.

Before the immigrants left Holland they had sworn allegiance not only to the Company but also to the States General of the Netherlands. They had been promised that they might keep the use of the French language, and have their own French pastor and teachers. The Company came to break this promise, or to modify it, so that the Huguenots for a time became very resentful.

Van der Stel was prepared to welcome them with all friendliness, none the less he was determined not to allow the French Huguenots to settle into a community by themselves. They might, he thought, get up to mischief if war broke out again in Europe. The French were already seeking further colonies and more power in the East. In April, when the first ships arrived with Huguenot passengers, three ships of the French

squadron under Admiral Vaudricourt anchored on their return passage, and witnessed the arrival of their countrymen. Tachard was ashore again, and confided to Van der Stel that King Louis XIV had a mind to attach Siam as French territory. Such an exhibition of French treachery did nothing to calm Van der Stel's fears. In May a French warship with 400 soldiers and sailors on board, and 54 cannon, dropped anchor. Van der Stel was all civility, and before it sailed the senior officers called upon him to thank him, and to present to him from King Louis a miniature of himself. Van der Stel, unwilling to offend them, graciously accepted it, and told them that he would report the presentation to the Directors of the Company. They agreed as graciously that this would be the correct thing to do. (In the end, the Directors rebuked Van der Stel for accepting it!)

Except for a handful, the Huguenots were poverty-stricken. They had been given free passages, and were to have free farms, stock at cost price and on credit. Later on Batavia collected a handsome sum to be distributed among them, and at the same time a gift of cattle out of the drove which Ensign Schryver brought home from his expedition eastward as far as the Inquas.

According to his plan to scatter the French farms, Van der Stel gave out to the arrivals in the first ship some lands along the Berg River, where the year before he had settled twenty-three men of the return fleet who wished to become burgers. (Fifty had applied, but as not one of these men was married Van der Stel refused the rest.) He called the new settlement *Drakenstein* — in remembrance of the Lord of Mydrecht. Other Huguenots he scattered among the farms of the Stellenbosch district. This scattering made the French unhappy. They could not speak Dutch, or not all of them, and the other colonists could not speak French. Some of them minded the loneliness it caused so much that they gave up their land and went to live with relatives and friends. The site of one such group came to be called French Corner — *Fransche Hoek*.

The worst happened at the end of the year — November 1688. War broke out in Europe. The news of this reached the Cape on 23 February 1689. The war was to last nine years, until the Peace of Ryswick. This time England, the Netherlands and Sweden were joined in alliance against France.

At the root of the trouble was the King of France. Louis XIV was one of those rulers whose patriotism and ambition were (as in the past and to this day), devoted to the extension of their power to the destruction of their neighbours. Prince Willem of Orange, Stadholder of the Protestant Netherlands, was the finest statesman of his time. He sought a "balance of power" in Europe, a co-operation of rulers in making the best of civilisation. The king of Protestant England, James II, was a Roman Catholic, and in secret agreement with the Roman Catholic King Louis. Early in 1688 a rebellion broke out in England against James II and his Roman Catholic prejudices. Leading Protestants invited the Protestant Prince of Orange to come to their aid. It was not a surprising

thing to do. His wife was Mary Stuart, daughter and heiress of James II, but now a Protestant. Also, she and the Prince were first cousins, both grandchildren of King Charles I. The Prince landed with a great fleet anchored at Torbay on 11 November 1688. King James fled, but fishermen recognised him at the coast and delivered him over. He was brought to London to face his son-in-law, but in the meantime Willem had been offered and had accepted the Crown of England on equal standing with his wife, and was glad to give his father-in-law the opportunity to escape. He fled to Paris where King Louis welcomed him with every dignity.

King Willem — William III — and Queen Mary were crowned in Westminster Abbey on 21 April 1689. After Queen Mary's death, King William reigned until 1702. An arrangement which helped to secure the safety of the Cape.

With the outward-bound fleet of 1689 Van der Stel received a despatch from the Directors ordering him to take a detachment of men out of the fleet to strengthen the garrison. They also ordered that as French ships were attacking Dutch ships in the English Channel he should take the opportunity when the return fleet came to anchor to capture any French ships within reach. As it happened, six days after William and Mary were crowned King and Queen of England, the French naval vessel *La Normande* (one of the French fleet, you remember, of 1687), on her return from Pondicherry, and ignorant of the outbreak of war, approached Table Bay, flags flying, and was reported from Lion's Head signal station. The two first ships of the return fleet, *Nederland* and *Saamslag* were anchored in the Bay. Van der Stel called a meeting of his Council. (In passing, it is interesting to remember that the Captain in charge of the garrison, and of course present at the meeting, was Dominique de Chavonnes. He had succeeded the fine old campaigner Captain Jeronymous Cruse who died in June 1687, when the French squadron was in the Bay. De Chavonnes was among the earlier Huguenot refugees to Holland, a number of whom entered the Company's service.)

The Resolution passed by the Council ordered that the women passengers in *Nederland* should be brought ashore, and that she and the *Saamslag* should seize the French vessel when she came to anchor. *Nederland* was to sail in behind her, with *Saamslag* as near as possible to her side. The coxswain of *Saamslag* was to man the ship's boat, and others the skiff, all armed with muskets, pistols, hand-grenades, swords and battle-axes. The coxswain was then to board *La Normande* and endeavour to persuade the captain to surrender without bloodshed.

All went according to plan. When *La Normande's* consort *Le Coche* anchored a little later she suffered the same fate. On 14 May they were renamed *Goede Hoop* and *Afrika* respectively, and were sent to Holland with the return fleet. Some of the French prisoners out of the ships were also sent away in the return fleet, others in the outward-bound fleet to Batavia. Van der Stel had no suitable place in which to keep them at the Cape, and was also afraid that if the Cape were attacked they would add to his difficulties.

Towards the end of the year the behaviour of the French Huguenots increased his uneasiness. The French parson whom they had been promised — the Rev. Pierre Simond — arrived in one of the August outward-bound ships. He was a married man and arrived with his wife and children. His salary was paid by the Company. It had been arranged that he should preach every other Sunday in the Stellenbosch Dutch Reformed church, and at Drakenstein in a suitable farmer's dwelling. It was an arrangement to which he very much objected, and he lent a willing ear to the grievances which the leading men among the Huguenots set before him. He minded their being scattered, so scattered that he could not get round satisfactorily to his congregation with the comfort and encouragement which he and they expected. At the end of November he accompanied a deputation of leading Frenchmen to the Castle, and requested that Van der Stel should talk with them.

Van der Stel records his reaction to this interview in a Resolution in Council on 28 November 1689. The Rev. Pierre Simond had insisted that his own church should be built at Drakenstein. The question of the French language came up, and the desire for its preservation. Van der Stel turned furiously upon his callers. He told the Rev. Pierre Simond to co-operate with the Stellenbosch Church Council until time and money were forthcoming for a church at Drakenstein. He rated them all for neglect of duty to the Company. His prejudice and anxiety led him into exaggeration, for he went on to declare in Council that the Protestant profession of faith in these men was simply a cover for leading an idle life. They wanted to be treated better than the Dutch nation, and having got their own predicant they now wanted their own overlord and magistrate and Prince!

The Council decided to "curb the French impertinence", and to prevent plots. The deputation of Huguenots, it recorded, was seriously warned not to let this sort of thing happen again!

Later on the Directors arranged that when the Rev. Pierre Simond's five-year contract of service came to an end his successor should speak and preach both in Dutch and in French, and that teachers of French children should be bilingual. "Let the French language die out with the old people," they said. And so it was. Besides, marriage between Dutch and French brought it all about more speedily, and the grandchildren of the young men of 1689 spoke Dutch, until there came a time when even their own names became mispronounced, and today we hear of Siljees, Trons, Mar-ayers, Kootsee-ers, and so on.

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(To be continued)