THE STORY OF SIMON VAN DER STEL

Chapter III

While Mydrecht was still at the Cape two French ships anchored in the bay. This was on 31 May 1685. They remained for a week, a very full week for everyone. They were important ships carrying from King Louis XIV of France an Ambassador and his suite to the King of Siam, and six Roman Catholic priests, members of the Society of Jesus, and called Jesuits. The priests, with the help of the King of Siam, were to travel from Siam to China as missionaries. They were all learned men, mathematicians. One of them, Father Tachard. was also an astronomer.

These fathers were not the first missionaries sent to China, nor the first to enquire, as they were ordered to do, into the work of Chinese scientists, mechanics, and artists. This particular expedition came about because the Academy of Sciences in Paris was anxious to have accurate information about what was going on in China, especially as a learned Jesuit father, who had lived there for some years, told members of the Academy that the Emperor of China would welcome learned Christian missionaries.

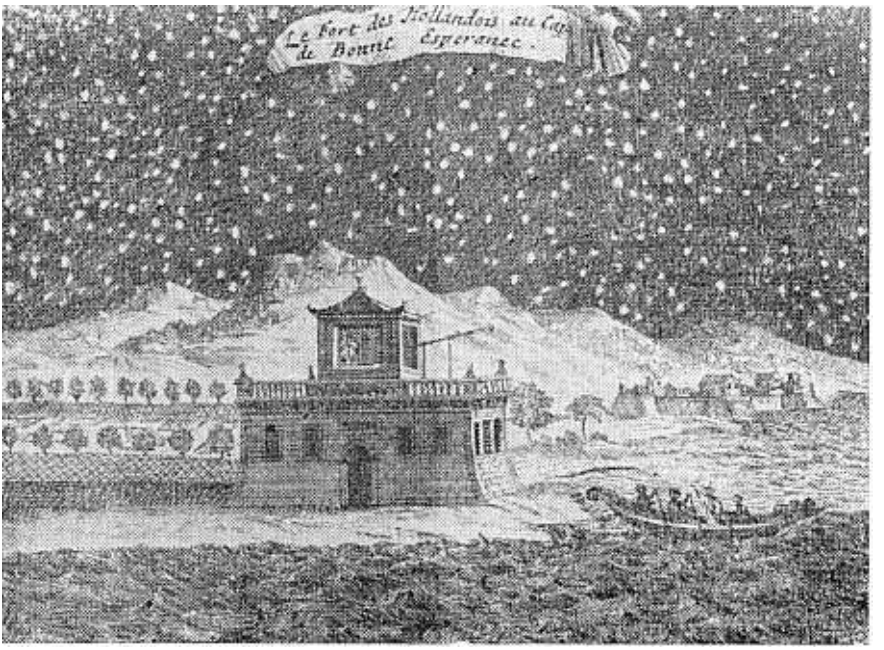
The Ambassador was leading an embassy to the King of Siam because, under the charge of a French priest, Father De Vachet, a deputation of two Siamese mandarins (officials) arrived at the French Court to express to the King of France the desire of the King of Siam to know more about the religion and government of France.

So it was that Father de Vachet advised King Louis to send an embassy to Siam, and described the opportunities of converting the King of Siam and his people. King Louis was pleased, and the Academy was pleased. King Louis, in fact, was eager to enlarge the interests of France in the East. Mydrecht and Van der Stel were not so pleased. They suspected that Louis XIV had cast a greedy eye on the Company's possessions in the East. However, they decided that the French visitors should be given no excuse to take offence, and they treated them with courtesy and hospitality.

The Ambassador was the Chevalier de Chamont, by profession a naval officer. Abbot de Choisy accompanied him in order to take his place should any accident befall him. Another naval officer, Chevalier de Forbin, was senior member of Staff, and a handful of young French noblemen — who wanted the experience of such a voyage — were added to the Ambassador's following.

Father Tachard, De Chaumont, and De Forbin all wrote books about this voyage, but for us Father Tachard's story is the most interesting. What Tachard was particularly anxious to do at the Cape was to examine the southern skies through his 12 foot telescope, and to find out the correct longitude of the Cape. (As a matter of fact, to discover the correct longitude of any place at this time was difficult. Instruments were not as exact as they were to become later. Spain, Holland and

England had already offered rewards for discovering a means of recording longitude correctly.) Van der Stel lent father Tachard and his helpers the garden house, which he had built out of Governor Goske's tool-shed. The house was the very thing for Tachard's purpose. Here is a picture of it. The little tower with its wide terrace looked out both north and



Observatory used by the Rev. Guy Tachard in Table Valley, 1685 (from Tachard's Voyage de Siam, 1686).

south, which was what Tachard needed. Downstairs there was a little hall with a room on either side of it. The longitude which his instruments discovered was only a little out, a good effort for that time.

Unfortunately, he and his fellows did not confine themselves to astronomy. They had been instructed to find out all they could about the Cape colony. Roman Catholics quietly visited the priests who held services for them. There was also a brilliant young man serving the Company, a physician, artist, and traveller. He came from Breslau in Silesia, and originally had arrived at the Cape in the interests of a physician friend as well as in his own. The Company kept him on because his knowledge was so useful. Not only did he draw beautifully the animals and flowers, and the native people of the country, but he was also a surveyor and drew maps. The story goes that the Lord of Mydrecht was never tired of looking through his portfolios. The young man's name was Heinrich Claudius. He made no bones about giving Father Tachard all the information he could. He also gave him drawings and a map. It was not surprising they became such friends, because not only

could Claudius tell Tachard about the colony, but also about China and Japan to which he had travelled.

Tachard never got to China with the other priests. He would pass through the Cape on another errand in 1686, as we shall see. His book came out the same year revealing all Claudius' talkativeness. It brought Claudius into such disgrace that he was deported from the Cape.

The book expresses gratitude for the kindness of Commander Van der Stel and of the Lord of Mydrecht, and it describes the Commander's house in the Castle: a double-storied house, stone-built, with balconies and iron balustrades, and the large hall used as a church on Sundays. In one of the two fine rooms on either side of the hall the Commander and the Lord of Mydrecht had received him and his fellow priests, and were so gracious to them.

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The Lord of Mydrecht sailed for Batavia on 16 July 1685. His had been a happy and creative visit. On 25 August Van der Stel set forth on his expedition to Namaqualand which they had discussed together. It was to cover a period of five months. Compared with the usual modest and matter-of-fact departures of garrison men bent upon expeditions into far places, this expedition was a very grand affair.

The main body, commanded by captain Jeronymous Cruse, an experienced garrison traveller, set out from the castle early in the morning of 25 August, making for the first camping-place at Hooge Kraal, five miles away. Van der Stel followed with his officials on horseback later in the day. In his train he took a Prince of Macassar, Dain Mangale, who had been deported to the Cape as a political prisoner by the Governor in Council at Batavia (as the more famous Sheik Joseph was to be later on). When Van der Stel arrived at Hooge Kraal he was greeted by the soldiers on parade, and given a salute of three salvoes.

Altogether, the Europeans of the party numbered upwards of sixty, including soldiers, surveyors, miners (equipped to search for and to examine copper deposits); Heinrich Claudius to embellish the journal of the expedition with his drawings (he made seventy-one), and six armed burgers with their waggons, who were to convoy the Commander as far as the Oliphants River. Upwards of fifty Hottentot and Coloured drivers and interpreters and voorloopers, three slaves attending the Commander, and one Macassan in attendance on the Prince, brought up the total to over a hundred people. There were fifteen waggons belonging to the Company, one carrying a boat to aid in crossing the great river of Monomatapa should they happen upon it, and another loaded with two small cannons to strike terror into the hearts of the Namaquas if they proved to be inhospitable. Eight carts and eight asses to serve for lighter and more rapid transport, and the Commander's coach and six horses, and fourteen riding horses completed the cavalcade.

Van der Stel intended to follow the route taken by Ensign Olof Bergh in 1683. They had little trouble in the earlier part of the journey.

They found good grass and water and fuel. In the Tygerberg two Company's "captains" presented the Commander with a slaughter ox, and were given tobacco and brandy in return. For the rest, they came across only Bushmen who at first fled, and had to be coaxed or forced by the soldiers to come and meet the Commander. He greeted them with kind words and presents. What he wanted were guides who could tell him all sorts of details about the country he was in and the country farther ahead.

They crossed the Berg River. It took them two days to get their baggage over it. On the other side in the Piquetberg country a hippo charged the Commander's coach. The Commander was in it and leapt out firing his blunderbus. It misfired, and the terrified hippo plunged into a group of horsemen scattering the riders in all directions. Fortunately nobody was seriously hurt, not even the hippo.

Marching along one of the burghers shot a huge eland, and for this reason the Commander named the plain where they camped Elands Kraal. He also named the valley they presently passed through *St. Martin's Valley,* and the mountains which surrounded it the *Reedebergen.* On 15 September they reached the Oliphants River. One or two elephants (after whom the river was named in 1660 by a garrison explorer who saw an enormous herd on its banks), made an appearance now, and the soldiers blew bugles and banged drums to scare them away, because an enraged elephant is a very dangerous animal. It poured with rain, so that crossing the river had to be postponed until the 18th. The six burghers left them here. They requested the Commander to give them leave to hunt hippo and rhino on the way home, which he did.

He camped over the river at Bakkeleiplaats (Van Rhynsdorp country) long enough to give the party a real rest, and to patch up their waggons and carts. There was a Hottentot kraal nearby whose headman bore the Company's metal-knobbed staff. They called themselves Grigriquas. Van der Stel sent some of his Hottentots to invite them to the camp, but they had cleared out the night before. Contact was made, however, and thirty of them with a few sheep for barter turned up the next evening. They were feasted and given brandy, with the result that they revelled all night. Van der Stel discovered that they had quarrelled with their chief, and robbed him of cattle. He managed to patch up the quarrel. Best of all, he procured a headman to act as a guide.

On the last day of the month they reached the Kamiesberg. They found it too dangerous for them to cross. This was very near where Bergh had been obliged to turn back. They went into camp, surrounding it for protection with their waggons. When evening fell they caught sight of another campfire in the distance, and Van der Stel sent a sergeant with ten men to find out what was there. They came back bringing a Bushman with them. They had caught him when all his companions fled panic-stricken. Van der Stel ordered him to be kept prisoner for the night, and next day sent him with presents of tobacco, and a Hottentot to bear him company, to persuade his fellow Bushmen to visit the camp.

The errand was successful, and meantime other Bushmen had been found and persuaded to come and greet the Commander. He feasted them all, and they sang and danced in a fashion which the expedition's journalist described as "resembling nothing so much as a herd of yearling calves just turned out of a cowshed".

Several days later, approaching country still well provided with grazing and water, Bushmen who had remained with them revealed that there were Namaqua kraals in the neighbourhood. Out went some of Van der Stel's Hottentots again with presents of pipes and tobacco and an invitation to visit him. They came, but it was not all plain sailing with these people. Evidently, they were not all of one mind in their approach. An aggressive young son of one of the headmen repeated the assurance which one of his fellow countrymen had given Schryver — that the Namaquas were masters here. Van der Stel replied briskly that if he visited the speaker's kraal he would soon find out who was master!

It all ended in Van der Stel getting what he wanted — guides. Two headmen agreed to accompany the expedition to the Copper Mountain. Meantime, it being the 14th October, everyone celebrated the Commander's birthday. His own men saluted him with three rounds of salute. The Namaquas staged a dance for him — a ring of twenty, with a man in the centre conducting with a wand. They played upon their flutes of reed, dancing round as they played, while outside the ring others, men and women, danced and kept time by clapping. Van der Stel slaughtered an ox for them, and all day the feasting and dancing went on.

A week later they arrived at the Copper Mountain. Van der Stel wasted no time. With the foreman miner he set out to explore. Waggons were sent out to gather fuel for smelting. Miners blasted and dug deep. They made no doubt about the rich deposit of copper, but for want of proper equipment they could do little about it. They packed up their samples. The final tests would have to be made on their return to the Cape.

On 5 November the expedition turned for home. It was never to come to anything. It would have been a tremendous operation to establish a mining community, and lack of transport would give it the final blow.

The return journey was harder, for it had become hotter and drier. Draught-oxen died of exhaustion and of drinking brackish water. However, the whole party, without the loss of a single human life, arrived back at the Castle on 26 January 1686.

Astonishing news awaited them. While they were away there had been an earthquake at the Cape. It took place in the evening of 4 September. People said that it had lasted while one could count 100. They heard "a loud noise in the foundations of the earth". On 30 October, about 3 a.m. "a tailed comet appeared with a pale, broad tail sloping upward, and remained for fully three weeks". (About five years before, a slight earthquake had been felt at the Cape.)

Chapter IV

Van der Stel returned to the Cape to face long years of anxiety. His fears of the French increased. He had not seen the last of the Siam fleets. A couple of months after he arrived back from Namaqualand Admiral de Vaudricourt dropped anchor again, returning to France with the Ambassador de Chaumont, accompanied by Father Tachard and the Abbot de Choisy, and carrying despatches from the Court of Siam to the Court of France requesting that twelve more learned Jesuits should be sent to Siam, for whom the King promised to build a church, a college and an observatory. He also requested King Louis XIV to send a detachment of French troops to Siam.

Nine ships of the Dutch East India Company's return fleet also lay anchored in the bay, and the respective admirals formally saluted one another with seven cannon-shot. It had to be seven shots as that number represented the amount of courtesy due to the King of France. Van der Stel felt pretty secure with the Company's fleet in the bay, but he treated his visitors with cautious civility. Admiral de Vaudricourt wrote that he walked in the Company's garden, which reminded him of the gardens of France. His ships were provided with "excellent" vegetables and fruit and other provisions.

Tachard climbed Table Mountain with a fellow priest and a guide, and had a map made of the wide views of the country from the top. Van der Stel did not offer him residence in the garden house, which, he said, was being altered, but suggested that if he wanted to reside ashore he might go to the Company's house about a league away. (That must have been the Company's house at Rondebosch.) He warned members of the Namaqualand expedition not to discuss it. Tachard told him that he would be back again next year in the fleet bringing the further twelve learned Jesuits.

In June of next year (1687) a fleet of six ships, again commanded by Admiral de Vaudricourt, anchored in Table Bay on the 9th. The Admiral reported that he had three hundred sick in the fleet. His demand for succour was somewhat abrupt. Among his ships was the French Royal Naval vessel *Normande* of which we shall hear again. The flagship carried two envoys from the Court of France to the Court of Siam. The twelve extra Jesuits were only too willingly on the way to Siam — any number had applied for this opportunity when it was made known in France. Under the command of a General sailed the detachment of troops which the King of Siam had asked for — over six hundred of them.

This time Van der Stel made ready for every emergency. On the 11th he called his Council together and passed a Resolution. It ruled that the fleet's sick might remain ashore only in relays of sixty at a time. No healthy men armed or unarmed might remain ashore after sunset, or come ashore before sunrise. They were to have permission to buy trifles from the burgers.

There were not enough soldiers in the garrison to meet the strength of the fleet. Country militia were ordered to remain on the alert for signals to ride in for relay duty at the Castle. Forty men from Stellenbosch who had already sown their grain were to come at once, and "none", reads the command, "shall dare to leave the Castle at night".

The signals flashed away and Stellenbosch rose nobly to the call, sending a mounted corps of militia as well as the forty men demanded. Ploughing and sowing took its chance while they served at the Castle.

The Castle guns were privately trained on the fleet. Boats were withdrawn from the jetty at sunset. Roman Catholics, and anyone else likely to make friends with the French, were packed off to Batavia. One man who contrived to visit a ship was very severely punished and deported.

On 16 June Van der Stel received a written request from the senior officers of the fleet for sufficient refreshment for their sick. He thought it wise to relent in order to give them no cause for resentment, and to encourage the King of France to regard the Dutch East India Company with approval. In the name of the Directors — the "Seventeen" — he presented the invalids with 800 lbs. of rice and 600 lbs. of meal, and to each ship a young ox and six sheep.

The fleet, to his relief, sailed on 27 June.

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An odd thing had happened in the previous March. It turned Van der Stel's thoughts to another problem which he thought it to be his duty to tackle. A little craft sailed into Table Bay. She had neither chart nor compass. Of the men who sailed her eleven were Dutch and nine English. They told their story. They had all been ship-wrecked, in three different ships, two of them English — the *Good Hope* wrecked when trying to cross the bar of the Bay of Natal in May 1685; the *Bona Ventura* from London wrecked in St. Lucia Bay on Christmas Day 1686, and the Dutch East India Company's return ship *Stavenisse* wrecked on the coast about 70 miles south of the Bay of Natal in February 1686.

Some of the men of these ships had died; some set out to walk to the Cape, and except for a handful were not seen again. Another English ship had called at the Bay, and several of the men had returned to Europe in her. There were a few others who decided to remain among the natives. Meantime men from the *Stavenisse* had reached the Bay of Natal and joined forces with the *Good Hope* men. In the *Good Hope* wreck there were enough materials for building a boat, and these men set about it. It took them eight months. They called her *Centaurus*. They still had enough trading goods to get sufficient provisions from the natives, and a load of ivory. All the way to the Cape they had sailed keeping the coastline in sight.

In October Van der Stel for very little money bought the *Centaurus* on behalf of the Company to use on the station, but particularly to send her to Natal again, and on her way,when at anchorage, to keep a lookout for the *Stavenisse* men. He had been exceedingly interested in all

that the *Centaurus* men could tell him about the Bay of Natal and the country of "Terra Natal", and wanted to discover what the Portuguese, French, and English ships were doing there; what might be got out of the natives; what the soil was like; whether there was any likelihood of finding minerals there, or anything else of use to the Company. He had the *Centaurus* rerigged and generally made more ship-shape, and provisioned her for five months. This time she was also provided with a chart! That he was determined to get a foothold in Natal was evident by his order to the skipper to choose a site on the strand where a fort might be built in due course.

From the mouth of the Kei River country she picked up fourteen *Stavenisse* men and a French boy (the only survivor of a French boat's crew wrecked on the coast), and at the mouth of the Buffalo River the crew heard that there were three other men ashore, but these men were obviously not interested in being rescued, and kept out of the way of the ship's people. So the Skipper turned for home. The little craft had had pretty heavy going, and he decided not to carry on to Natal.

This was not the end of Van der Stel's attempts to set the Company's foot upon the soil of Natal. Twice during this period he sent the Cape station galiot *Noord* on expeditions up the east coast to find out what other nations were doing there in the way of trade, and to keep an eye open for *Stavenisse* castaways. On the second voyage he gave the skipper, Teunis Gebrantzer, orders to buy the Bay of Natal and the surrounding country! Armed with about a hundred rands worth of red beads, tobacco and arrack, Gebrantzer got hold of the headman nearest the shore, and in the name of the Company solemnly persuaded him to sell the place. He then proceeded to erect V.O.C. standards in prominent positions. Nothing came of this idiotic performance. In 1705, after the death of the headman, the same skipper again landed on the shores of the Bay of Natal. The son who was reigning in his father's stead denied any knowledge of the transaction. "My father is dead," he said, "buried in the floor of his hut, and the hut over him burned. None may pass there now, and whatever he agreed to was his own affair. I have nothing to say to it."

Van der Stel also hoped to find an overland route to Natal. A deputation of Hottentots from what sounded very far away to the East, calling themselves Inquas, had visited the Castle wanting to arrange for garrison men to visit them and barter for cattle. So when Van der Stel sent out Ensign Isaac Schryver in 1689 to barter for the fleets he ordered him to find his way to the Inquas. It was a very successful expedition as regards barter and the distance he covered. He reached the Camdeboo, as far as where the town of Aberdeen stands today, but the Inquas knew nothing of a road to Natal.

M. Whiting Spilhaus.

(To be continued)