

1903

HMS Rattler

January 2nd

Somaliland - Homeward bound. I was informed that the Mullah had been sending some emissaries onto his province to try to gain support, but they do not seem to respond readily. Undoubtedly, a great deal hangs upon the successful expedition in Somaliland. If it proves a failure it is quite possible that there will be great trouble with the natives all over East Africa. At 3:15 PM we left Lamu for Malindi. Every trip we make now is much nearer home. The turning point is when we left Kismayu on 30th when we headed to the south 'homeward bound'.

January 5th to 6th

At Mombasa. We left Mombasa at 2:30 PM for Zanzibar and I must say I was very sorry to leave as I had have had a very good time here altogether and have made a number of friends.

January 7th of 12th

At Zanzibar. I cannot say that I was sorry to leave this place. The climate is too hot for ordinary exercise which limits one to routine which becomes very monotonous. The people too are very conventional and clannish and there is very little to commend it.

January 21st to 27th

At Laurengo Marques [note – now Maputo, Mozambique]

January 22nd

Ferocious bull. In the course of a ramble round the bush at the back of the Telegraph Station, I found myself in close proximity to a huge bull which has been at large for about 3 weeks. Luckily, a man shouted to me to look out for myself for I was oblivious to his approach. I ran mightily and managed to get through the railing before he had got up to full speed, but I confess I was thoroughly scared. I find that he had escaped from one of the droves of cattle landed from the Argentine and has so far eluded all attempts to capture and is fast becoming the terror of the district. He was an enormous beast.

January 27th

Laurengo Marques. Left LM at 2:30 PM and I don't think anyone was sorry to see the last of the place.

January 30th to May 24th

At Durban

January 30th

Durban – Plague – Rats – Emily. The plague has lately broken out at Durban and there has been a few deaths, but chiefly amongst the natives. It is of a sporadic nature, but the greatest number of cases have been at the 'Point' where the ships unload. It is fairly conclusively proved that the plague is caused by rats which have probably been imported in some ship from another infected port. The fleas which infest the rats are also supposed to communicate with disease. Stringent precautions are being adopted to ships securing alongside. Fortunately the 'Rattler' is singularly free from rats and so we have nothing to fear as long as we can be kept 'rat proof'. Only one has been seen since we commissioned and that has been killed. The appearance of the plague has caused some consternation in Durban, chiefly because of the panic has caused amongst of Kaffir labourers [*note – the term 'Kaffir' is a racist slur*]. We received our mails, and I heard with great thankfulness that my sister Emily has arrived at home with her three children after nearly six years in Assam.

February 1st

Dullness of Durban. One finds little to do here. The people ashore are occupied so much in their business that they find no time for ship visiting. After their work are over, they will go out to the Berea, a hill at the back of the town, on which are built picturesque and comfortable houses. In the evenings the town is practically deserted. The club is being pulled down, another fine club being in a state of completion but not yet opened. It is therefore difficult to get to know anyone, and there is consequently little inducement for going ashore.

February 2nd to 6th

Paint ship. We started transforming the ship with a new 'Navy Khaki' paint. An order has recently been issued that all ships are to be painted the horrible looking slate colour which has been uncommonly adopted for foreign navies. Every ship would have been painted this colour in time of war but the Admiralty have thought advisable to make it uniform in peacetime too, and I think it quite right, as there are so many things to be done in preparation for war that there would be little time for painting to.

February 28th

Anniversary of the relief of Ladysmith. Being the anniversary of the Relief of Ladysmith, a good deal of excitement prevailed in Durban today. A large banquet was given at the Volunteer's drill hall in evening by the Natal Naval Volunteers, to which I was invited. The evening was amusing, but I cannot say I enjoyed it very much. One

great drawback was that there was nothing to eat and I made my dinner off bread and pickles with a scanty amount of cheese. The speeches were very mournful. There was also an excruciating cornet solo.

February 29th

Retention at Durban - Naval Volunteers. I have heard lately that the 'Rattler' is being detained Durban on account of these Naval Volunteers. It seems that the proposition has been made that a ship should be obtained for them in order that they make themselves acquainted with the sea. The Admiral has been approached on the subject, and I understand that the 'Rattler' has been offered to the Natal government as it is not likely that this that she will put into commission again when she gets home. The Naval Volunteers at present consist of about 180 men who masquerade in seamen's uniforms and go through gun drill at a battery they have at the Bluff. In the late war they did good service with our field guns but they are in reality garrison gunners and are not seaman. The question of taking over the ship will be brought before the Natal Parliament in April and until it is settled we should probably remain at Durban.

March 24th

A day at sea. Fortunately, the weather was beautifully fine and so I was able to go outside and carry out the second half of our quarterly allowance for target practise. Returned to our anchorage about 5:00 PM. I took a pilot to come inside as I did not like the look of the bar.

March 28th

A near miss. As a sequel to the boat firing last Wednesday, yesterday I received a letter from the Engineer of the Harbour Works to the effect that a ricochet bullet from the machine gun had grazed the leg of a European working on the breakwater and nearly killed two Kaffirs also. The man produced the bullet which had flattened itself against a stone. It might have been a very serious thing for me if they had been hit, but a 'miss is as good as a mile' and I think the man was making a fuss about nothing.

April 5th to 9th

Trip to Johannesburg and Pretoria

April 8th

Pretoria. Unlike Johannesburg, it is situated in the hollow surrounded by hills and we soon found the climate was not so bracing in spite of its being 4462 feet above sea level. I was rather disappointed with the place and its contrast with Johannesburg is very striking. It seemed to me to be no more than an overgrown village with some ostentatious buildings. The absence of business and the hurry are very noticeable. It is,

however, a well kept, clean town. The most striking feature of the town is the square in the centre of which is the Dutch Reformed Church, and facing it, two handsome buildings, the Palace of Justice (with two towers opened by Kruger 8th June '97) and the Government and public offices.



A church complex that stood proudly on Church Square for some 20 years (circa 1904). On the right is the Palace of Justice (Northern side of Church Square)

Also in the square stands a granite pedestal at one time destined to receive the statue of President Kruger, which I saw lying in at Laurence Marques last July. It still remains without an occupant. Near the square is the Mint in which the Transvaal money was coined. We visited the Kruger's house, outside of which are two white horses presented to him by Barny Barnats [*note – Barney Barnato was a British Randlord and diamond magnate who was one of the entrepreneurs who gained control of diamond mining, and later, gold mining in South Africa from the 1870s up to World War I. He was known as a rival of Cecil Rhodes*]. The house is used as a mess for the officers of the S.A.C and looks rather dilapidated outside. I am told that the old man is getting a considerable rent for it from the government. Following the road, we visited the cemetery in which so many of our brave men are interred. There were many graves to those who fell in the disastrous Boer War of '80. Prince Christian Victor (who died at Pretoria) is buried here. We left by the 4:50 PM train on our return for Durban. I am very interested in Pretoria, which has become so historical and struck me as being a typical Dutch town, but there is no knowing what possibilities are before it.

April 17th

Cricket versus the Ladies. Lunched at the club after which we went to the Oval Ground and played a cricket match 'Navy versus Ladies of Durban'. It was great fun but we severely handicapped having to play entirely left handed and substitute pick axe handles for bats. The consequence was that we were badly smashed.

April 18th

Emily's daughter. Received news by the mail that my sister Emily has had a daughter born on March 22nd last. She now has three boys and a girl.

April 24th

Disaster in Somaliland. News was received today of the shocking disaster in Somaliland in which a force under Colonel Plunkett was cut up by the Mullah's men and many officers killed. It seems to have been due to mismanagement, too small a force being employed for such a dangerous service. It appears from all accounts that we shall cease hostilities, another sad blow to a prestige, and it cannot but have a very bad effect on the nations of East Africa, whose estimation of the white man will decrease seriously.

May 22nd

Decision on 'Rattler'. I received a signal from Captain Martin saying that he had received a telegram for me from the governor the contents of which were that the Minister has decided that they did not require the 'Rattler'. This news was received with disapproval by the ship's company, who had been looking forward to going home by a transport, but personally I am very glad, as it will be much more satisfactory to me in every way to take the ship home myself. The behaviour of the Natal Government in the matter has been very disgusting I think. They asked for a ship and the 'Rattler' was offered to them for nothing and would, I should have thought, suited the requirement of the 'Naval Volunteers', at any rate for a time until they could show themselves worthy of another ship. After keeping us at Durban for four months, they at length 'turned up their noses' at us. It is not likely that the Imperial Government will ever offer them another ship, and so I suppose the 'Naval Volunteers' will cease to exist and they will not be much loss. Soon afterwards I received orders to proceed to Simon's Bay. Everyone will, I think, be glad to get away for a change.

May 24th to June 2nd

Passage to Simon's Bay

May 28th

Gale. We made little progress during the night, but I was most anxious to get on the Bank so as to get a smoother sea, and this we just managed to do fortunately for us, for a 10:00 AM it came on to blow a furious gale from the northwest, so that I was obliged to set storm sails, and in doing so our inner jib was blown to atoms and the foretopmast sprung. At noon, we had only made good 63 miles, with no current to help us. The gale increased in fury all day, and I had to lay to in the afternoon, as it was useless to try and steam against it. A gigantic sea was running, and life on board absolutely miserable. I had to batten down, which increased the discomfort and my cabin and the wardroom were a sight to behold. Absolute chaos reigned supreme and it was almost impossible to eat anything as the ship was knocking about so badly. I tacked in the afternoon and stood out to sea, my greatest anxiety being that we should be blown off the Bank and so get a worse sea. The ship on the whole behaved splendidly and proved a most beautiful seaboat. We hardly shipped any water, although at times we rolled over 40° each way. The weather showed no signs of improvement in the evening, and if anything, it was worse and so by about 10:00 PM, I tacked and decided to stand for the land in the hope of getting a lee somewhere. *[note - the gale continued for a further 24 hours entailing a short stay of refuge in Mossels Bay].*

June 2nd to 20th

At Simon's Bay

June 4th

Admiral's remarks. The Admiral sent for me and was most kind in his remarks. He said that he was very pleased with the way in which we had done our work on the station, and that he was very sorry to lose the 'Rattler'. He told me that he would write to Lord Walter Kerr (First Sea Lord) about myself.

June 19th

My 31st birthday

June 20th to 28th

Passage to Saint Helena

June 28th to July 4th

At Saint Helena

June 29th

Prospects for Saint Helena.

The place looked very deserted now that the Prisoners of War have gone, and the islanders complain bitterly of want of trade. Ships very seldom call now and then only for orders. They were therefore glad to see us, especially as men are on general leave and have just been paid their monthly allowances so that they will circulate some money. The people of the island are very much to blame, as they are indolent and lazy and expect to live without working. It seems to me that in years to come they will either die out altogether or emigrate for Saint Helena has no doubt had its day and is of no earthly use now except as a coaling station and very indifferent one too.

July 4th to July 11th

Passage to Ascension

July 11th to 15th

At Ascension

July 11th

Warning of inspection. To my surprise, soon after securing to the buoy, I received a signal to “prepare for inspection at 10:00 AM on Monday”. This is not giving me much time for preparation (2 days) but most fortunately owing to our painting and cleaning we were quite presentable and it will be good thing for us all to have a ‘shake up’.

July 13th

Inspection. Captain McAlpine arrived on board at 10:00 AM and the usual formalities gone through. The only sail drill we did was to ‘bend storm sails’, a most unusual evolution, but as masts and sails have now been swept away wholesale, very little consideration is given to them. We carried out a great many other drills and by noon we were fairly through the ordeal, which seemed to go satisfactorily.

July 14th

Inspection report. I learned today that yesterday's inspection was a great success and that Captain McAlpine was very pleased with everything he saw on board. He subsequently gave me a copy of extracts from his report to read to the ship's company. He said that the ship was very clean, smart and efficient, etc, etc, which was very comforting to me.

July 15th to 20th

Passage to Freetown

July 20th to 22nd

At Freetown

July 22nd to 25th

Passage to Bathurst

July 25th to 27th

At Bathurst (Gambia)

July 27th to August 3rd

Passage to Teneriffe

August 3rd to 8th

At Teneriffe

August 6th

Nelsons colours. Visited the Cathedral of San Concepcion and saw the colours which were captured from Nelson when he attacked Teneriffe which ended in disaster. They are rolled up and stored in boxes and closely looked after, for they are much prized by the Spanish. Some years ago they were stolen by a British Midshipman who had to eventually return them owing to the ill feeling created by his prank.



United Kingdom flag measuring 4.38m x 2.19m in the Military museum in Santa Cruz on Tenerife in The Canary Islands. The flag was captured by Spanish forces during the battle of Santa Cruz on 25th of July 1797. Admiral Nelson led the unsuccessful attack on Santa Cruz in which his forces were repelled by local forces. Nelson also lost his arm in the battle. The flag is the union flag prior to Northern Ireland joining the United Kingdom in 1801 - hence the red cross of St Patrick is missing.



Sir Horatio Nelson when wounded at Teneriffe by Richard Westall.

August 8th to 14th

Passage to Gibraltar

August 14th to 19th

At Gibraltar

August 19th to 27th

Passage to Sheerness

August 20th

The fleet. In the forenoon we were nearing Lagos (Portugal) where a huge fleet of 60 battleships and cruisers was assembled after taking part in the manoeuvres. I hear that last Sunday there were over 30,000 men victualled. We made our number to the flagship which was 'affirmed', but we were rather too far off to distinguish individual ships. The fleet appeared as a mass of masts and funnels.

August 27th

Hubert's son. Today my brother Hubert was presented with a son and heir.

August 28th

Arrival at Chatham

August 28th to 31st

Weekend leave. I reached Warwick at 9:58 PM. Jack and Ida met me at the station and I was overwhelmed with joy at seeing them again, especially the latter, who since I have been away has been a most regular correspondent and her letters always full of interest. On arriving at home, I found my dear Mother at the door to greet me. She seemed fairly well and much better than when I left home. I was especially thankful for this for when I left home it seemed doubtful whether we would ever meet again. Walter and Oliver were dining out but I met with them later. Walter I have not seen for seven years. He seemed very much the same but was looking older and more grey haired. Lucy was staying with Emily (Morley) at Bedford.

September 18th

Last day in Commission. The last day in the old 'Rattler'. Everything is now out of the ship and she is a mere empty shell. The officers of the Dockyard Service came on board for their inspection and took the ship over, where she goes into D Division and will probably be sold off out of service. I addressed the men in the forenoon and told them I was very sorry to see the last of them. They have been a fine ship's company and worked well and I felt every confidence in them.

[note – According to Dreadnought Project: 'In June 1906, though lying at Chatham Dockyard, she was listed for sale at a July 10th Portsmouth auction of "Obsolete War Vessels and Other Craft" as "Lot 9". In April 1910, she arrived at Portsmouth from the Clyde to begin service in training stokers, attached to Argonaut. She kept at this work until at least 1913.']

September 19th

Decommissioning. Commander Marescaux came on board at 8:00 PM to pay off the ship. The men were mustered and given their money and the pendant hauled down and the ship put out to commission. They went away on their well earned 5 weeks leave which a 'generous' country gives after 2 and a half years foreign service, part of which spent in pestilential climate. I was not long in saying goodbye to the old ship and on the whole I left her without many pangs, although I have spent many happy days on board her.

September 19th

Left 'Rattler'

October 10th

Christening. Attended the christening of my Godchild who was named Richard Harman Tibbits (Humbert's son, born 27th of August) at Saint Mary's.

October 13th

Masons. At Oliver's invitation I visited the Shakespear Lodge of which my brother John is the WM. Unfortunately there was no working to do. It was curious that my brother should be in the chair, Hubert also Senior Warden and two of us Masons in the lodge.

October 22nd

The Devil's Wheel. I dined with my brother Arthur and we saw that entertainment at the Euston Music Hall. The final turn was the Devil's Wheel. This consists of a wheel the height of the stage and inside is a cyclist who rides with such pace that he finally overcomes the rate of the wheel is turning and describes complete revolutions within it. It is, I should say, a most dangerous performance and will doubtless be discouraged when a few people have lost their lives by it.

October 24th

Leave. Tomorrow my full pay leave expires and so I expect to get a fair spell of half pay which I shall be glad of as I want to recruit my health.

October 31st

Emily and Ida. Today my sister Emily's husband (Ted Morley) left England for Assam. It is sad to think that they will be separated for perhaps some years and it must have been a great wrench for him to part with his four children as well. Ida left today for Bedford to help comfort Emily.

December 8th

A murder case. I went up to the Assizes in the afternoon to hear the end of a trial for a peculiarly brutal murder committed by Compton Henry a few weeks ago. The prisoner's sweetheart having written to him sundry letter expressing her resolve to break the acquaintance, he put a razor in his pocket and travelled from Hertfordshire for the express purpose is of putting an end to her. On arrival at C Henry, he induced her to walk out with him at night and cut her throat. The youth was only 18 years old and was said to suffer from epileptic fits. This was a very strong point in the defence who submitted to strict cross examination on the subject of fits, two medical officers, one of them my brother, Hubert, who was attending the prisoner during his incarceration, as MO to HM Prison. In spite of a very able defence, the man was condemned to death, but the jury recommended him to mercy on the score of his youth, and this sentence was subsequently committed. In the opinion of most people, he should have suffered accordingly and with this I myself concur, for no man ever was ever more guilty of a more brutal and cold blooded murder.

December 25th

Xmas Day. The first I've spent at home for three years (1900). We had a very quiet day and the only members of family present were Arthur, Ida, Lucy and myself, besides dead old Mother who in spite of her years seems fairly well and happy. Attended church at St Mary's and in the afternoon we went to the Marble House to see John's two children, Mary and John dance round their Christmas tree which was a very happy sight. In the evening we all went to Bert's House and had some good fun playing consequences and other intellectual games.

End of Volume VII