



A RIDE WITH THE MAIL.

IN August, 1867, the *Galatea* arrived at the Cape of Good Hope, under the command of His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh. Within a few hours of his arrival Sir Walter Currie and myself (says Major Bissett) received a telegram at Graham's Town, informing us that the Duke wished to see us before he proceeded to Australia, which he proposed doing in a very few days. We decided, therefore, to start at once for Cape Town, a distance of 700 miles, which we performed in three nights and four days.

This was hard work, as the only railway at the Cape did not lead in this direction, and the greater part of this road was an ordinary wagon-track. The conveyance which carried us was the common "post-cart," a vehicle on two wheels, and sometimes without springs, drawn by two or four horses, according to the stage. This cart travels as fast as horses can go, both night and day, without stopping for one moment, except to put in fresh horses, which are led out and "put to" when the post-cart arrives at the relay stations, the approach being made known by blowing the post-horn. This post-horn also serves to clear the road, as all wagons and other obstructions are bound to get out of the road and make way for H.M. Royal Mail, or "Post," as it is there called.

To perform the first part of this journey there is from Graham's Town to Port Elizabeth, the first ninety miles, a passenger-cart; and in order to gain a little time in advance of the "Post," Currie and I started in it; from Port Elizabeth we hired relay carts on to the Gamtoos River, where we arrived two hours ahead

of the mail. Going down the Van Starzens River cutting, however, we had a narrow escape of our lives. We had changed our horses on the top of the hill, and had four wild, half-broken beasts in front of us. The road down this hill is in a cutting several miles long, on the face of almost perpendicular cliffs. A party of convicts were at this time repairing the road, and as we dashed down at the rate of about twelve miles an hour, our leaders, on suddenly turning a corner, came upon this working party, with wheelbarrows and other lumber, in the road, when they suddenly swerved to the right. As a parapet ran along the side of the road, and there was no room to pass back between it and the cart, they went clean over it, and became suspended by the harness until they could be cut free; the leaders then went rolling down the precipice or declivity for some hundreds of feet. Luckily the parapet prevented the cart and wheel-horses from going over, and the latter were only bruised and cut against it. We never saw anything more of the leaders, and after a short delay passed on with the two horses only to the next relay stage.

The mail-cart arrived at the Gamtoos River about one o'clock in the morning. There were no other passengers, for we had secured the only two places beforehand. These carts are peculiar; the body is in the shape of a large box, into which the mails are packed till it is full, and the lid is then shut down; but there are many other large bags of letters and newspapers which cannot go inside; these are tied on the top of the cart. There is one tolerably fair seat next to the driver in front, but any other passenger must take his chance, and either sit on the top of the bags or recline on them the best way he can.

The night was pitch-dark, and we were going along at a rattling pace towards Humans Dorp down an incline. I was sitting on the top of the bags, when all at once I felt the upper wheel of the cart strike a stone, and from the feeling and sound I knew that the cart was running on one wheel, and it must have continued so balanced for at least fifty yards; then over it went with a crash. I thought there was a flash of lightning, but on coming to I found it was my head that had first struck the ground as I was pitched from the top of the cart, and it must have been phosphoric light from my eyes that appeared to light up the surroundings. Currie, who had also a desperate "pip" from the front seat, soon came to my assistance. Luckily the horses did not bolt; so after righting the cart and re-packing the mails with the aid of a wee bit of wax-candle which my friend had in his pocket, we again started. But we first walked back this fifty yards to see the small *pebble* that had overturned us, owing to the rapid rate at which we were going; and from that spot to where the cart turned over there was only the trace of one wheel on the ground. My head was, as may be supposed, very sore all the way to Cape Town.

At Humans Dorp the relay horses were ready-harnessed, and on we went to the Kroome, or Crooked River. After descending to the bed of this river the road keeps up it for many miles, having to cross the stream itself no less than fourteen times; and many of the fords were then so deep that the horses had to swim, and the cart was covered with water up to the bags; but the lower, or box part, is water-tight. The cart was several times nearly swept away by the rapid current.

Night again overtook us in Long Kloof; but here, except for the fords and deep rivers, the road was comparatively good. We passed on, and rattled down the Cradock Pass in the pitch-dark

of night at a fearful pace. This pass is one of the most extraordinary engineering works in the Colony. The road previously passed over the almost perpendicular mountain itself, but science and engineering skill have made the present road a gradual decline. The road is cut out of the very face of the mountain, and zigzags round the precipitous gullies in the most extraordinary manner, with thousands of feet of precipice below and overhanging mountains above. We must have gone down this incline at the rate of fourteen miles an hour, without being able to see the leading horses before us. At the foot of the mountain, on the "George" side, there is a branch road, which carries the mail into the town of that name, and returns to the main road at the same spot. We halted for the post-cart during this brief half-hour, and were able to take "the forty winks" so much required. However, the "post-horn" sounded, and we again got on our perches, and on rattled the two-wheeled vehicle, crossing the two Braak Rivers.

About daylight we reached Mussel Bay in the early morn, and were enabled to snatch a hasty meal with an old friend, who also gave each of us a large piece of "biltong," which we "whittled" at and fed on all the way to Cape Town. Now, biltong, or meat dried in the sun, retains all its nutriment, and is the most sustaining thing a man can eat. It might be made of great service in war-time, because the men could carry many days' supply of it in a small compass without much additional weight.

In a few hours we reached the Gauritz River, which was flooded from bank to bank. The post-contractor, however, is bound to keep a mail-cart on each side; so after the mails and ourselves were conveyed over in a cranky boat we re-adjusted ourselves in the temporary cart (a thing without springs and cramped in size), and thus passed on to Riversdale and Swellendam. This latter town we reached at night; and without halting a

moment drove on to Caledon. where we had a little adventure.

The rule of passage by the mail-cart is, that those coming the longer distance have the preference of going on, to the exclusion of those who take their berths or passage from any given point on the road, or from one intermediate station to the other.

At this time it happened that from Caledon to Cape Town there was a separate and rival contractor, and two of his friends had taken their passage to Cape Town in the mail-cart from Caledon; but we insisted on our right to go on, and it was about to become a question of some importance to us, as

the two gentlemen had already mounted the cart and possessed themselves of the only two places. Near the starting-point there was a bridge, which it was necessary that the cart should pass over; and on looking round I saw my friend Currie on the bridge, revolver in hand, declaring that he would shoot one of the horses rather than let the cart pass over the bridge without us; and he was just the man to do what he said. At this moment the Dutchmen's pluck failed them, and the two passengers quietly dismounted and gave us the seats.

On, on, on we went, as fast as horses could go; and reached Cape Town that night, at about nine o'clock.



THE PERCH FAMILY.

THE perch (*Perca fluviatilis*) is too well known to need any detailed description. It is distributed over the whole of Europe, living in rivers, lakes, and large ponds; it is remarkable for beauty, and the sharpness of the spines of the first dorsal fin, by which latter the hands of incautious or inexperienced fishers are often severely lacerated. These spines serve as very efficient defensive weapons, so that a good-sized perch need not fear even the ferocious pike. The perch is gregarious in its habits, and frequents the still and quiet parts of rivers, rather than the rapid and turbulent. Worms, small fish (as minnows), and frogs, are its usual prey; it is bold and ravenous, and eagerly seizes the bait; and, says Walton, "as one has wittily observed, if there be twenty or forty in a hole, they may be at one standing all caught one after another, they being, as he says, like the wicked of the world, not afraid, though their fellows and companions

perish in their sight." During the winter, however, excepting the day be warm, the perch can seldom be taken by the angle; nor does it bite freely till the mulberry-tree buds, that is, until the chilly portion of the spring is over.

The perch will live long out of the water, and in a basket of wet moss may be carried to a very great distance, especially if a little water be occasionally poured over it. On the continent, where fresh-water fishes are much in request, perch are often carried in this manner to market, and if not sold at the close of the day, taken back, replaced in the pond, and thus reserved for another occasion. The breeding season of this fish is about the beginning of May.

The perch seldom attains a very great size; a fish of the weight of half a pound or a pound is fine, and one of two or three pounds may be considered as extremely large, yet there are instances on record of perch being captured weighing six, eight, and even nine pounds; the ponds at Richmond Park have yielded perch of four pounds.