

**A SUBALTERN'S  
LETTERS TO HIS WIFE;  
SECOND IMPRESSION**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649065738

A Subaltern's Letters to His Wife; Second Impression by Sir Reginald Rankin

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**SIR REGINALD RANKIN**

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A  
SUBALTERN'S LETTERS  
TO  
HIS WIFE

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DISCITE VESANAE ROMAN NON TEMNERE GENTES'  
CLAUDIAN

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*SECOND IMPRESSION*

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO  
39 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON  
NEW YORK AND BOMBAY  
1901

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TO  
MY WIFE



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## SUBALTERN'S LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

### CHILDREN OF THE VELDT

THE first thing is to pronounce 'veldt' properly; not with the slatternly English 'v' sound, but with the crisp German 'fow,' or its parallel the English 'f'—so that it recalls the stuff that hats are made of.

A gifted war-correspondent once wrote, at Bloemfontein, a long article in the 'Friend' newspaper on 'The Inexpressible Veldt.' I thought at the time, after a cursory consideration both of the internal and external evidence afforded by the length of the said article and the general physical features of South Africa, that the writer ought to have headed his screed 'The Expressionless Veldt.' A thing about which a correspondent, busied with other matters, and feeling the effects of the heat, can dash off four columns between sunset and sunrise, is hardly to be termed inexpressible. And yet one could sympathise with that author; there is a fine flavour of the oxymoron about his title which whets the literary appetite, as though a man should say: 'This is not for mortals to express, and lo! here are four columns.' But I have corrected my first impressions.

Do you remember the look on the faces of the Sphinx and the great Japanese Buddha?—the look which the Eastern peoples with one accord have immortalised in stone

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and bronze as the human embodiment of *Nirvana*—the silent, the impenetrable, the all-wise, the eternal? Expressionless they are, because never in the face of child of man was seen that calm consciousness of majesty—that knowledge concerning the things that have been, and the things that are, and the things that are to come: inexpressible they are too, because the soul of man gropes darkly amid the mysteries that seem no mysteries to those awful eyes. So it is with the veldt; it is to *Nirvana* in the natural world what the Sphinx is in the realm of art—illimitable, unfathomable, void. Many writers of a poetic turn have spoken of the 'smiling landscape'; and true it is that countries, like houses, look at us with different eyes, and some are as harsh and frowning as others are placid and gentle. But how can you describe the veldt? It smiles not, neither does it frown; it gazes at you with the passionless, ineffable gaze of the Sphinx: it is expressionless: and—yes, it is inexpressible. Montesquieu has told us why certain configurations of the earth's surface produce certain types of character; but no one as yet has told us why one type of scenery attracts men more than another. The Highlander worships his purple hills; the Swiss clings to his flower-strewn alp amid the snows. Small wonder, for there Nature is at her loveliest. But why should men love, and long for, and go back to with rejoicing, the long, bare plains and stony, chiselled kopjes of the veldt? I know men bred in the fairest parts of England who have been miserable till they got back again to their adopted home. The veldt is like the eye of the basilisk; it fascinates, no one knows why. And yet one may hazard a guess. Perhaps it is the sense of freedom born of the unbroken sweep of the land onwards and ever onwards towards the distant horizon; the glorious

exhilaration of that upland air ; the magic touch of that undimmed sun. Yes, but beyond and above all these, there is a something, baffling and elusive ; a *genius loci*, intangible and undefined ; it is in the shapely grandeur of the clean-cut hills ; it is in the rolling miles of grassy flats ; it is everywhere ; it is nowhere ; it is the calm eye of the Unknowable translated into rock and sand.

The first thing the stranger notices is the colour of the veldt. Even in the middle of summer, when sun and rain are working together for good, there is nothing green but the patches of mimosa that flank the course of a river, or the clumps of exotic trees that mark a settler's farm. Yellow gleams the grass that covers the plain ; the distant hills are yellow in the flickering noonday haze. Look closer, and still you search in vain for the emerald tints of the valley and the wood. The *taibosch* (tough bush)—a handsome scrub that grows on the flanks of the hills—is clad in steely-blue ; the *chevaux-de-frise* of aloes that hedge a garden or a kraal resemble bayonets in colour as well as in form—looking, as David Copperfield remarks, as if they were made of painted tin ; there is the same grey hue about the ubiquitous imported *eucalyptus* ; the fleshy leaves of the prickly pear have assimilated themselves to their neighbours ; the very ferns that look out from beneath the black ironstone boulders on the kopjes have more blue in them than green.

The vast immensities—the immense vastnesses—of the veldt are unrealisable. You look round the great circle of the horizon and see a dozen or twenty little flat-topped, isolated kopjes, rising abruptly out of the plain, for all the world like the towering hulls of a scattered fleet tossed on a rolling sea. You mark one on the line of march much nearer than the rest, and you say to yourself ‘ That is