

**Maud Powell and South Africa**

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My Dear Miss Jefferson:

As one of my hobbies is photography (would that it took less time, and that the chemicals were less messy for violin fingers to work with, then I would become more expert!) it may interest you to see some of the pictures I took while on my recent tour in South Africa.

On the way out from England we stopped at St. Helens, that magnificently lonely island-prison of the great Napoleon. This beautiful Canova bust in purest Carrara stands on a pedestal, placed between the windows in the death-chamber, where stood the bed on which the Emperor lay so long in agony of mind and body.

Longwood House, long ago stripped of all household furniture or other evidence of Napoleon's occupancy, now reverberates only to the sound of the occasional visitor's footsteps on the bare boards. The one saving grace is the little English garden of which one gets a glimpse through the bedroom windows, and which is kept up by the old French caretaker and his English wife. The poor woman, grown almost inarticulate through years of isolation on the lonely mountaintop, showed, however, that her heart still beats with sweet human sympathy, for at parting she shyly handed up posies of old garden flowers, plucked from the little plot which she had cultivated so lovingly.

Among the first impressions of Cape Town, where we landed on South African shores, was of Table Mountain, rising sheer 4000 feet from sea level, a giant rock, awful and forbidding, but impressively beautiful in its silent grandeur. The little view I got of it was from my balcony at the Mount Nelson Hotel.

At Kimberly we were conducted through the diamond mines. The cars of this little train are locked safes, containing diamondiferous soil. If you and I could share the wealth of this precious trainload, we could buy many jeweled chess boards and "Strad" fiddles and still have something left over for a rainy day.

The picture of the bridge in course of construction at Kronstadt is an illustration of an amusing definition given by a small Boer child of a river, viz: "a piece of dry ground under a bridge!" Which is not far wrong after all, at any rate during the long South African dry season.

We gave our concert in Ladysmith at the town hall – you can see our poster outside – the tower of which has never been restored since the "relief."

The falls are Howick Falls, near Pietermaritzburg, 365 feet high. Unadvanced as they are in South Africa, struggling with the terrible climate and a race problem hardly less terrible, they have nevertheless had forethought and artistic sense enough to preserve the falls from the water power fiend. They stand there or rather fall there, in serene and refreshing beauty, apparently conscious of the protecting arm of the law.

The last picture, that of the basket, shows how we landed at East London (at the south coast). There is no natural harbor and the water is so rough and the fires so treacherous, that only small tugs may reach the peaceful waters penned in by two monstrous breakwaters. The descent in the basket to the deck of the tug was disturbing, but as we made for the break water, headed as it seemed straight for a terrible stone wall, I held my breath and fully believed I should never draw another stroke of the bow. But we suddenly rose on a giant swell, which lifted us clean out of our course, and then we found ourselves steaming into safe water between two huge masses of masonry. I should not like to repeat that experience.

It was at this same East London that I had a distracting time with breaking strings. The air was heavy with moisture and at the concert, before I had fairly gotten under headway in my first solo, snap went the E string! While I was replacing that the A string broke. I got the violin strung up again, however, and was congratulating myself that all would end well, when the trouble simply began all over again. My second instrument was useless because of more broken strings, so in desperation, I resorted to the Paganini variations on the G string, my accompanist vamping the piano part. This brought down the house so for an encore I gave the Bach Aria arrangement also on the G string.

I am often asked about South African audiences. They are exceedingly well-behaved in the matter of listening, but the Boer element is rather noisy in its demonstrations of delight, resorting to stamping and whistling for applause. Most of the English settlers are money-seekers who care more for amusements than the fine arts, but in every town there is a nucleus of music – hungry exiles for whom it is a delight to play.

The Kaffirs, of course, are not allowed in any public gathering (indeed they are not allowed at large after 9 o'clock at night) but frequently when practicing in the hotels I discovered a dusky native listening stealthily just outside my door, or glued to a spot on the pavement in front of my window, apparently fascinated by the unaccustomed tones of a violin.

And that reminds me of an incident that occurred in Ellensville, N.Y., one summer, when I practiced in a large empty house near the hotel where I was staying. I often noticed a young barefoot Negro girl who loitered about when I was studying, apparently drawn by the music. She slipped into the house one day, and presently I found her just at my elbow ready with questions and criticisms for it seemed she liked certain pieces in my repertoire better than others. She also vouchsafed the information that she could dance, whereupon I begged her to trip the light fantastic toe for my benefit, saying that I would play for her. To my intense surprise, she danced delightfully to the measure of the music. But when I praised her achievement, she merely grinned and then added, "You doan play's good as my 'ma!" But evidently she did not treasure this up against me, for the next day she returned and tiptoeing into the room, she laid a single hollyhock

flower on my music desk, then flew out of the house and down the path, as if ashamed of her little display of sentiment. Ada is dead now, but I have among my most treasured souvenirs a pencil sketch by E. L. Henry, the well known artist, which is a likeness of my dark-skinned admirer. Leaning against the door jamb in an attitude of listening absorption while the figure of a woman within is faintly perceived playing the violin.

With pleasant recollections of our meeting, believe me, sincerely yours,  
Maud Powell

*From the Archive of The Maud Powell Society for Music and Education*