



HAUNTED HOUSE OF HOHENFALS

By Pat Hensyburne

The Author.

The author is one of the "old sweat" of the Police Force in South West Africa. He joined the South West African Police in 1916 and served at various stations in the territory in this force and later in the South African Police.

From 1931 to 1936 he patrolled the "Sperrgebiet" (prohibited area) as a member of the camel patrol while stationed at Oranjemund.

He played a prominent part in the Scout movement in the territory and led a contingent of S.W.A. scouts to the World jamboree in England in 1929.

He has travelled extensively in the territory and has led and participated in numerous safaris.

Promoted in 1945, he joined the Security Staff of the Consolidated Diamond Mines and served in this capacity until he retired from the service of the C.D.M. in 1948.

Unable to be inactive, he rejoined the South African Police as a "special constable" and is now stationed at Keypes.

He has contributed numerous articles on his experiences in S.W.A., including the controversial "Flying Snake" (1943) and relates a true South-wester at heart.



Haunted House, Author's camel team in foreground. (Photo: P. Hensyburne.)

daughter brought out from Germany. It must have been a lonely life for them there, cut off from civilization. Once a month a camel patrol arrived with mail from Angas Jantes, more than 100 miles up the coast towards Lüderitz. These sun-banned soldiers were the only Europeans this lonely woman ever saw, and a year after her arrival she died in childbirth.

The Wachmeister sent his daughter to the Roman Catholic Mission at Pella, Namaqualand, to be educated. Later she attended a convent in Cape Town. On her usual holiday trip home in 1914, the daughter, now almost 15 years old, sensed that things were not at all as they should be in her parental home. The Hottenrot woman who had been keeping house for the Wachmeister appeared to be more than just a housekeeper. As her Cape convent the daughter had learnt a good deal about the place of the servant in the household.

One day, while the Wachmeister was away on patrol, his daughter had a difference of opinion with the Hottenrot woman who, they each had assumed, was the "spook" of the house. Going to her father's study, the daughter took out her father's revolver and shot the Hottenrot woman dead, and it is the ghost of this woman which haunted the house.

The Hottenrots on the Namaqualand side of the river maintain that Hohenfels is haunted by a huge snake with a diamond on its hood. I have spoken to a European family who actually lived in the house at Hohenfels but were forced to leave it because it "spooked".

Standing high up on the rocks, the building had a beautiful view right down the Orange River. Occasionally a police patrol from the newly opened diamond fields at Oranjemund could be seen winding its way along the

THE old German military post Hohenfels was built in 1900 on the north bank of the Orange River, about 12 miles from its mouth. It was a battlemented building, on a high rocky outcrop overlooking the river and the Namaqualand frontier. This once sturdy building is now a mass of ruins, but when I first saw it in 1932 it was intact.

I could not understand why such a fine building remained unoccupied, when just across the river white families were living in primitive wattle-and-daub huts. The reason, however, was that Hohenfels was haunted!

It seemed that a Wachmeister and a corporal had been stationed there to patrol the frontier against incursions by lawless Hottenrot bands that roamed Namaqualand, at that time a sort of no-man's-land.

The Wachmeister had his wife and seven-year-old

tally to be transferred.

There was a farm immediately opposite Hohenfels on the Namaqualand side of the river, called Great Dorn. (Now farm Beersvalles, crossed by the Consolidated Diamond Mine.) There was a farm school on Great Dorn which catered for about 20 Namaqualand children. The manager was Johnny Folcher, a so-nomasse Afrikaner whose feet were planted firmly on mother earth and whose farm stood four-square with that of his Calvinist forebears.

The Namaqualand side of the river was cut-off-boards to members of the S.W.A. Police as we had no jurisdiction beyond the Territory's borders. Nevertheless, we often slipped across the border when the river was low as the going was much easier on that side. But perhaps our main reason was the "home cooking" provided by Mrs. Folcher. Also the female company of the little school marm was refreshing after the all-male company of the mining community at Graanpansdam. At Great Dorn I first learnt of the Great Slang, the Big Snake of the Orange River. The Mossosets believed this snake had a diamond in its head which glittered in the moonlight, and was brilliantly visible for long distances during the day.

The Hottentots believed whoever the snake looked in the face, would die. Thus, when it was about its lawful serpentine business during the day and the diamond on its head betrayed its presence, the farm labourers on Great Dorn would look the other way, just in case. . . . The snake was also said to float well above the ground.

On returning from a patrol to Zandingsdorp one morning in 1935, I crossed the river about five miles above Hohenfels and arrived at Great Dorn about 8.00 a.m. Mrs. Folcher excitedly told me I should have seen there the previous evening, there I too would have seen "the thing".

In a scopped-up corner of the abandoned schoolhouse has been an elevated light floating in circles around the Hohenfels building. They called their teacher to come and look. She in turn called the Folchers. At the same time a din arose from the native huts as their occupants started banging tin and other objects together in order to ward off the evil influence of what they believed to be the Great Slang. After quite a while the light disappeared northwards towards the small blue-gum copse at the foot of the dunes.

Mr. Folcher joined us for breakfast. He too was convinced that there was something definitely spooky across the river. Up to now he had been sceptical of the stories concerning Hohenfels, although he once told me he would not like to live in "that house". After breakfast we rowed across the water. A minute examination of the ground around the building revealed nothing unworldly.

The soft soil in the blue-gum copse showed a sizer or mark, two or three inches wide and about ten feet long and perfectly straight, as though a pole of some kind had lain there. Otherwise nothing.

A puzzled Mr. Folcher rowed me back to Great Dorn, and the mystery of the floating light remained unsolved. Many years previously I had ridden into a swarm of fire-flies. I suggested to Mr. Folcher that what they had seen was a swarm, but he was positive it was not. Fireflies were unknown in that area. When the schoolchildren dispersed for the holidays, Namaqualand was again agog at the fresh appearance of the ghost of Hohenfels.

It was towards the end of my stay in the Sprengelbos that I thought I had solved at least part of the story of the Hohenfels ghost. Constable Hanses van Zyl and I were returning from a patrol to Debeersdorp one moonlight night. From the high dunes we looked down on Hohenfels sitting on its high rock above the silvery water. As we descended the dunes we had to pass quite close to the building. Just as we arrived opposite the entrance we heard a soft tinkling sound of falling glass. At the same time our horses reared up, almost unseating us. They leaped half-for-leather down the sandy track. For almost half a mile Van Zyl and I raced neck and neck before we could pull up. We looked at each other with the same questioning look.

We turned our horses and rode back. Near the building the horses started getting restive again. We dismounted, hitched the horses firmly to some trees, and climbed up the track to the house on foot. Quietly we approached the entrance. The only sound was the water lapping against the rocks below.

With drawn revolvers we tidied up to the door. Van Zyl covered me as I turned the handle and thrust the door inward. No sound. No movement. We moved forward cautiously from room to room in the crescentular light permeating through the dusty windows. Only queer feelings ached through the empty rooms.

In one of the rooms facing the river we found a basket done on the floor and a few shivers of glass. I picked the bird up. It was still alive but appeared to be dazed. Then the crash descended upon us. Bush doors had taken to sailing in the doused building, gaining entrance through broken window panes. The approach of our horses had evidently startled the doves who flew out into the moonlight night. One of them had crashed into an unbroken pane, causing the crash to echo through the building and then upon our horses.

Had we not returned to Hohenfels we could credibly have added our quota to the numerous tales doing the rounds about its sinister reputation.

Hohenfels now is just an untidy heap of rubble, taking its secrets with it into oblivion. Few know of its existence and fewer know its history. I am one of the few.