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KRUGER'S END AT CLARENS

A Modest Villa that Became a Monument.

By Kees van Hoek.

(The following article has appeared in the July, 1954, number of the paper "South Africa" and is herewith reproduced by the courtesy of the Editor).

All the trains on the great transcontinental route from Calais to Istanbul stop at Montreux, most delectable among the many Swiss residential resorts.

The paradisical corner of Lake Geneva, a dreamy pleasance of terraces, or vineyards, bronze Alpine meadows, and fir forests, rising above the limpid mirror of water has drawn artists from all countries, including Goethe, Manzoni, Balzac and Hugo. Thackeray wrote "The Newcomes" here, Dickens began "Dombey and Son", and Gibbon here put finis to his monumental "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire". Fallen royalty has sought new peace here, in recent years the widow of the last King of Spain and the wife of the ex-King of Italy. Even the newest permanent resident, Mr. Charles Chaplin, may be counted among the exiles.

The town of Montreux arches along twin bays, a lake-side stretch exactly pin-pointed between two historical landmarks, the medieval fortress Castle of Chillon of which Byron sang, and a simple two-storey house prominently marked on every map as the "Villa Kruger". That superb boulevard which beginning at Chillon, winds itself along Territet, ends at Clarens where it was recently re-named "Quai du President Kruger".

Montreux thus honours a name which is for ever part of South African history, because it was here that Paul Kruger died, 50 years ago, on July 14, 1904.

One reaches his last residence in an easy quarter of an hour's walk from the centre of the town. It is a commodious three-storey villa, solid, pleasant, and unpretentious, typical of the suburban style of the change of the century. After Kruger's death it was taken over as a girl's boarding school. Run down to a very dilapidated state, it was bought by the Union Government in 1950, and put back into sound repair.

An impressive bronze plaque on the façade near the entrance recounts in Afrkaans what a similar plaque translates on the garden side of the wall in Latin and English:

> *"In This House Paul Kruger*
> *The Last President Of The*
> *Transvaal Died in Exile On*
> *The Fourteenth Of July 1904."*

Opened to visitors in the spring of 1953, it had about 600 callers last year. Among the signatures in the visitors' book I noticed the Prime Minister, Dr. Malan, Jannie, the biographer-son of the late Field-Marshal Smuts, a Nellie Kruger from Johannesburg, and a galaxy of such good Afrikaner names as du Toit, van de Merwe, van der Byl, Louw, Hoogenhout, and van Rensburg. The second strongest contingent — according to keen, youngish Madame Denise Pflueger, the permanent Swiss housekeeper, always ready to show callers round — are Dutch visitors to this part of Switzerland.

Much to be Done.

The interior is still rather bare. Dr. Philip R. Botha, the Union Ambassador in Brussels, under whose care the *Sterfhuis* is placed since there is no Union Legation in Switzerland, has been planning, in consultation with a local architect and an interior decorator, to buy period furniture to recapture the atmosphere in which Paul Kruger spent his last days. The Union Government provides the funds.

But perhaps sympathisers with this simple monument to the great Boer leader could help furnish these bare walls. So far only the salon has a (bad) oil portrait of the President wearing his broad sash of office. The "Old Pretoria Association" presented a photograph of Government Buildings in Kruger's time and of the church where he worshipped. There should be any amount of photographs, drawings, paintings and other mementoes to turn these rooms into a living monument. Europe alone would furnish a theme, with photographs of his tremendous welcomes in France, Holland, Germany; of his closest collaborators, like Dr. Willem Leyds, his long-time Secretary of State and later Envoy Extraordinary.

Paul Kruger came to this house in the last months of his life. He came here to die. When his mission to Europe failed he retired to Hilversum only to be met there with the double blow of his wife's death and that of defeat in the war. In October, 1903, to escape another hard winter — he had been very bad with pneumonia the winter before — Kruger and his family went to Menton on the French- Italian Riviera.

But his health continued to fail, and by the spring of 1904 the doctors advised a change to the more equitable climate of Montreux.

The present Villa Kruger was rented; his eldest daughter, Mrs. Elott, taking the adjoining house with her family. After his arrival Kruger never left the house again.

Mr. Bredell, his secretary, Dr. Heymans, his physician, the Rev. Dr. Los, his Minister, and his valet Happe lived here with him. A Swiss housekeeper looked after them.

At first his bedroom was on the first floor, but when he could walk no more they fixed up the small ground floor room next to the salon. During the day they would carry him out on the terrace.

One can imagine him sitting there, that heavily lidded, now deeply lined, sagging lion's head, the once colossal frame shrunken and sunk in his deep chair, his Bible with the silver clasp open upon his knees. Over the lawns broken only by a solitary palm tree and a high poplar, the view beyond the wide amethyst lake runs clear to the great buttress of mountains rising almost sheer on the far French shore to the 16,000 ft. of Mont Blanc.

The Ripening of Fate.

Fate had buffeted Kruger — now a long life was closing, remote in both time and distance from home. Yet on his alien *stoep,* serenity returned to his mind as he dreamed those days away facing the mighty glaciers.

That May the Boer Congress at Pretoria had cabled him their loyal remembrance, and a long letter had arrived from General Botha which augured well for local conditions after the first hard time of transition It had deeply stirred the old man. He had felt that after the final defeat of a life-long struggle there was nothing more to live for. But he dictated on June 29, 1904, his reply to Botha. His death soon afterwards, has made it something in the nature of a political testament.

It opens with a touching reference to that loyal telegram, the evidence that his people back home had "thought of your old State President," and by that proved that they had not forgotten the past. "For those who wish to create a future must not lose sight of the past." The letter ends: "I have learned to accept the inevitable, the thought that I shall close my eyes in foreign lands, an exile, almost alone, far away from relatives and friends whom I will never see again, far from the African soil which I shall never tread again; far from the land to which I dedicated my life, in opening it up for civilisation, and where I saw my own nation developing. But the bitterness thereof will be softened as long as I may cherish the conviction that the work once begun will be continued, for that hope and expectation will sustain me in the knowledge that the end of that work will be good.

"So be it.

"Out of the depth of my heart I greet you and the whole nation."

It mixes the heart to stand in the room in Clarens that enclosed the reverberation of the old man's deep voice, between those walls within which the heavily veined hand moved through the ordeal of making its owner's last sprawling signature.

Soon after he wrote, another attack of pneumonia laid him low. Fever tossed him high up on the sands of delirium, leaving him to die quietly in the night.

With reverent pomp the Swiss entrained his body at Montreux Station for Rotterdam; the Dutch nation gave the chartered liner a funeral cortège. In Cape Town the old President lay in state for five days, then, brought by special train to Pretoria, he was laid to rest beside his wife in the simple cemetery of the old capital of the Republic.

Over his grave Louis Botha read that last letter from Clarens: "Take the best things out of your past, and upon them build your future."

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