

– A full account of the Dominican Sisters’ journey to Rhodesia and their share in those pioneering days has already been published by the “Salisbury Sisters”.¹ Yet, for completeness of this narrative, at least a brief record of this period ought to be inserted here. This report is compiled from documents, letters and notes preserved in the Convent Archives at the House of the Generalate, 19 Rockridge Road, Parktown, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Chapter 11 – Pioneering in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe)

An Epic of Nursing

A. Helping to Found a Nation

Towards the close of the 19th Century the African continent was being opened up to European influence. Cecil John Rhodes made himself responsible for a great push into the interior of Africa which was supposed to be rich in gold. He had evolved a far-reaching scheme to secure the entire stretch of land from Cape Town to Cairo for the British Empire by means of peaceful occupation. With this object in view the British South Africa Company was inaugurated, which obtained a Royal Charter from Queen Victoria to administer the territory North of the Limpopo River. The land thus claimed by Rhodes was occupied by Bantu tribes that had migrated in a southerly direction and were ruled over by Lobengula, the Matabele King.

The Catholic Church watched these new developments with great interest, with a view to Christianising the Aborigines of this unknown and untamed country. Pope Leo XIII appointed the English Jesuits as pioneer missionaries for the domain of the British Chartered Company and beyond.

For the above reasons the Sisters of King William’s Town received an urgent call from two sides: the Jesuits required Sisters to help in their missionary enterprise, while the ‘Empire-builder’ had need of nurses for his fever-stricken soldiers. The nuns were teachers by profession, but Dr Leander Starr Jameson² and the medical practitioners subject to him undertook to train the Sisters in the art of nursing ‘on the job’. At that time nursing was still quite a simple art and women could undertake nursing duties without the formal training that is required today. Medical science too was still in its infancy as the great medical and surgical discoveries that were to transform the practice of medicine had yet to be made.

After prayerful reflection Bishop Ricards and Prioress Mauritia came to the conclusion that God was opening yet another horizon before the Dominican Institute. At the Mother House Sisters Amica Kilduff, Frances Condon and Ignatius Haslinger volunteered for the new undertaking in 1889. From the Convent at Potchefstroom Sisters Patrick Cosgrove and Constantia Frommknecht offered their service. The King William’s Town volunteers, accompanied by Mother Mauritia set off on 7th February 1890 for Mafeking, the depot where the column of Occupation was being organised and equipped. Here they were joined by Sisters Patrick and Constantia. Kimberley was then the rail head; so the Sisters travelled from Kimberley to Mafeking in a Cape Cart, which journey took five days. A Cape cart is a high vehicle on two wheels, holding four or more persons, all facing the horses, the whole being covered with a hood. In many parts the road was very rough. Somebody who had travelled that road described it as “one I could recommend to those who wish to break their neck.”

¹ *The Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of the Sacred Heart, whose Mother House is at Salisbury, Rhodesia.*

² *Friend of Cecil Rhodes. He qualified in Medicine at London University and added to his qualifications in Vienna. He was in practice as a specialist when Dr Prince of Kimberley wrote, asking for a partner. Jameson was recommended and he was soon recognised as the ablest doctor on the diamond Fields.*

Three Jesuits were at Mafeking to welcome the Sisters on 22nd February. It was here that Sister Patrick was appointed Superior of the little band of pioneer Sisters. On arrival the nuns were told that the transport mules had run away and the journey of four-hundred miles to Fort Salisbury would have to be made by ox-wagon. It was an even greater disappointment to learn that Father Alphonsus Dagnault, S.J. had been recalled to his headquarters at Grahamstown and would not go with them to Matabeleland.³ This and the departure of Mother Mauritia and her companion, Sister Margaret McConville, for King William's Town, left the five Sisters forlorn indeed.

However, they lost no time in repining. At Mafeking they found a temporary hospital staffed only by male orderlies and Bantu helpers. The patients were without comfort of any kind. For seven weeks the Sisters worked there, nursing those suffering from enteric, malaria and blackwater fever, and teaching the orderlies to provide better services for the sick. Mother Patrick had acquired considerable nursing experience while looking after the sick poor at Potchefstroom. This knowledge now stood her in good stead. Small wonder that the departure, when it came, caused pain to both nurses and patients. On 13th April, Mother Patrick and her four Sisters received orders to leave Mafeking for the unknown North. With Father Andrew Hartmann, S.J. accompanying them, the little band of missionaries entered on an enterprise to which the password was "COURAGE!"

On their journey through the wilds they had Mass nearly each morning and daily recited the Divine Office. At night they had to keep large fires burning to ward off beasts of prey. The Sisters' wagon was of considerable size and held all their worldly possessions, for which reason it became known as "Noah's Ark", while that of Fathers Hartmann and Barthelemy was called the "Vatican".

The Sisters' "Ark" was their living room by day and their bedroom by night. When their limbs became cramped from the sitting position they would alight and walk behind their convoy of four wagons for part of the way. Roads were non-existent; sometimes the travellers could follow some sort of track made by trekkers who had preceded them, but most of the time their wagons were simply bumping, grinding, creaking and groaning across the veld. One particularly bumpy part of the way they named "Biscay Road" because it resembled the Bay of Biscay frozen at the height of a storm.

The Sisters had to face one test of endurance after another. Sometimes their wagons stuck in mud or deep sand. To extricate them the entire load would have to be taken from the vehicles. The nuns would help by pushing while shouting drivers and cracks of the long whip urged the oxen to drag the wagons free from the obstruction. After having re-loaded goods the trek could proceed once more. There were, however, also compensations even if difficulties sometimes seemed insurmountable. The beauty of Nature did much to comfort them. Their first acquaintance with the great open spaces of the land fascinated and charmed them as the country would in after years enthral Kinglsey Fairbridge to describe it in verse:

"The brown of the veld, the unending immensity,
League after league of the houseless and homeless,
The smokeless, the gardenless wealth of the desert,
The rivers unfinished, and the valleys unhunted,
An empire peopled with nothing – a country
Abandoned to emptiness, yearning for people."

On reaching Gaborone the wagons got stuck and the party had to outspan actually inside a large native village. Mother Patrick, in her letters, described how frightened they were. The Africans were making a terrible noise all night, and the din grew worse by morning – women and children screeching and screaming; and the men yelling some weird shout which the Sisters dreaded was a war cry. It turned out that there had been a big dance in the village and in the morning the over-excited dancers proceeded to their fields to chase away the birds from their ripening crops.

³ *Matabeleland, Mashonaland or the Zambesi Mission were names given to the unknown territory beyond the Limpopo River, which was later called Rhodesia.*

Macloutsie, the base camp of the Chartered Company and British Border Police was reached on 10th May. What a hearty welcome awaited the ladies herd. Two long lines of happy, high-spirited troops were drawn up for the wagons to pass through. The men raise cheer upon cheer, so delighted were they to see the “Dauntless Darlings”, as they humorously called the Sisters. The bursts of cheering terrified the oxen so that they got entangled in their yokes and the nuns were obliged to get out of their wagon and to continue the triumphal procession to the hospital on foot.

The next day found the Sisters already at the hospital which consisted of two marquees and four bell tents. Dr Frank Rand, M.D., F.R.C.S., had his hands very full trying to cope somehow with the 27 patients. They were lying on the ground in blankets or waterproof material, and they were so closely packed that it was difficult to attend to them. It was very fortunate that Father Daignault had provided the Sisters with a fully equipped field hospital consisting of tents, cam beds, blankets and other hospital requisites.

The following historical statement is given in the B.S.A. Company reports: “The High Commissioner... authorised the advance of the expedition, which accordingly moved forward on 28th June 1890 from the temporary base camp on the Macloutsie River, Colonel Edward Pennefather being in supreme command. “It was a great day! Mother Patrick begged and beseeched the Colonel and Cecil Rhodes to allow her and the Sisters to accompany them, but they decided it was too risky. The Matabele and other tribes were hostile to the arrival of the foreigners in their country and there was every likelihood that the Column would be attacked en route. The lives of these ladies could not be risked until those parts had been made reasonably safe. Mr Rhodes ordered a wattle-and-daub hut to be built for the Sisters as the rainy season had set in. For the next ten months the nuns took care of the sick at Macloutsie where they faced dangers of every kind, including disease.

Letters from the North began to arrive at Macloutsie, but after about two months letters ceased. The rivers were unfordable. During the first few months after Occupation the mails were carried from Fort Salisbury to Fort Tuli by post riders, post stations having been established all along the line. Two or three men of the B.S.A. Company’s Police were stationed at each with horses. The Sisters remembered how their letters from Salisbury used to arrive soaked in rain. These heroic post riders bravely took the mail to the next post station whenever it arrived at any hour during the day or night, frequently through deluges of rain, flooded rivers, past crocodiles and lions. If the horses died of horse-sickness the journey had to be done on foot; and if the men at the next station were down with malaria,⁴ two stages had to be completed by the same postman. At times, during the rainy season, the rivers were quite unfordable.

One of the Sisters told a thrilling story of an extraordinary escape which one postman had from a lion. On Christmas night 1890, one of the police, named Thomas, started from Matipi’s post station, riding a horse and having the mail bags strapped to another pony he was leading by hand. It was night and the darkness intense, while a drizzling rain set in. Suddenly the horses began to snort and set off at a gallop with a lion in hot pursuit. The lion overtook Thomas’ horse and clawed its hindquarters, and Thomas was thrown. The horse wrenched itself free and the lion again took up the chase. Meantime Thomas made for a tree and climbed up. The lion failed to catch up with the horse so it returned to the tree where it scented Thomas. The whole night the lion remained at the tree, sometimes lying down, sometimes walking about. Thomas had a revolver but was afraid to fire in case he should only wound the animal and it might be able to stretch up the tree far enough to reach him, for the tree was not very high.

Imagine the young man’s relief when next morning a wagon came along and the lion slunk away into the bush. Both horses turned up at the next post station but the mail bags had dropped off. The mail was picked up four months later, but the letters were quite illegible owing to the continuous rain they had experienced.

Letters of the Sisters to King William’s Town also told of various narrow escapes the nuns themselves had at the camp... “A Sister was watching beside a dying patient one night. It was dangerous to venture

⁴ *There were no malaria prophylactic remedies in those days.*

out after dark and Sister was afraid of the wolves that were howling outside the hut. The patient died at midnight; the nurse remained beside the corpse all night praying until morning.”

At another time one of the nuns was ill with fever in a tent. “She heard heavy breathing and roused herself to investigate. Imagine her consternation when she was a big puff adder advancing towards her with open jaws from the foot of the bed. Fortunately she had the presence of mind to jump out of bed, fling something about herself and call for help. The intruder was shot by one of the officers.” On another day Sister Ignatius sat writing in their hut when the doorway was suddenly darkened by a large baboon. “...Apparently noticing that he was not welcome the beast scampered off to his den without more ado...”

In appointing Sister Patrick, young as she was, leader of the pioneer community for Rhodesia, Mother Mauritia evidently knew what she was about. Sister was not robust but she had great energy. Reference has been made not only to the “rare loveliness of her countenance” but also to her “sweetness of manner, her deep faith and strong insight”. Although she was a trained teacher she also became a very devoted nurse who would go to any lengths to help the sick. A story is told that she found her patients in Rhodesia one day silent and dejected – a well-known effect of malaria. When her little jokes failed to cheer them she wrapped a blanket around herself and danced the Irish Jig for them. This the men enjoyed and encored her repeatedly. Despite her frail health Mother Patrick never spared herself. Worn out by over-work and successive bouts of malaria she succumbed to pulmonary tuberculosis at the age of thirty-six in July 1900.

Meanwhile, at Macloutsie there was much sickness amongst the garrison and Mother Patrick begged Mother Mauritia to send more Sisters. Before the arrival of the next group, however, a message was brought from Captain Leonard at Fort Tuli that, as 23 men were down with fever, he asked the nuns to push forward. In this emergency Mother Patrick decided that she and two Sisters would move on, leaving Sisters Constantia and Frances (the latter affectionately nicknamed “the Sergeant Major”) to look after the Macloutsie hospital in the interim.

On the trek from Macloutsie, Mother Patrick related that, at the Unsingwane River, on 11th June 1891, Willie van der Riet, a young policeman and an excellent shot, left the camp to shoot game for their dinner. The young man was so good an orderly that he was relieved from police duties and was permitted to help in the hospital while at the same time he was appointed escort to Mother Patrick. When he failed to return, Father Prestage, in great distress, organised an extensive search. Several other wagon parties were outspanned nearby who also joined in the quest for about a week, but in vain. Sorrowfully the Sisters continued their journey to Fort Salisbury, but with heart and soul they ceased not to offer prayers for Willie’s safety. Forty-three days later two members of a hunting party discovered him in an exhausted and comatose state at a spot about ninety miles south of where he had left the camp. The kind people gave him every possible attention until, on 4th August, they handed him over to Mr McPherson, who was trekking to Fort Victoria.

The Sisters had got no news that he was alive, and his sudden appearance at Salisbury was a tremendous and most joyful surprise. Will told them that he had fired at a partridge, missed it and followed it up. But he must have been so intent on pursuing the bird that he did not take careful note of his surroundings. When he wanted to return he found he was lost. When his cartridges were spent and his small knife broken the struggle for survival was fierce.

Mr Rhodes also had a great admiration for Van der Riet, and in recognition of his valuable services to the sick gave him a horse valued at sixty pounds.

The Sisters entered Fort Salisbury on 29th July 1891 and lunched in the officers’ mess while Dr Rand and other Macloutsie friends gave them a hearty welcome. The hospital consisted of three large huts, a marquee and some small bell tents. One hut served as a kitchen, one as a dispensary and the other, with the marquee, was used for patients. Neglect and discomfort reigned everywhere. Patients lay on the ground with only one blanket each and their clothes served as a pillow. The Sisters soon transformed the entire atmosphere with the hospital equipment they had brought with them.

There were the usual fever sufferers as well as some casualty cases, for lions and jackals sometimes increased their number of patients. In a letter Mother Patrick related: "... One young man was saturated with fever. We did everything possible but could not save him. I wrote to his mother sending her some locks of his hair. The poor woman was very grateful. She ordered all his belongings to be sold and the proceeds to be handed to us for our own use. This was a welcome addition to our all but empty purse..." (It was one of the peculiarities of Rhodes that he expected nurses belonging to a religious order to work without remuneration except their board and lodging. However, the men of the pioneer column, realising that the nuns received no salaries, often gave the Sisters generous donations.)

As the nuns were the first white women to reach Mashonaland the Bantu looked on them with wonder, and in characteristic manner gave them names in their own language. Thus Mother Patrick was "the lady without a stomach"; Sister Amica, who was energy personified, they named "Sister Quick"; Sister Constantia became "Sister Grasshopper" and Sister Ignatius was called "Lobengula's 58th wife". The king was known to have 57 wives.

(Just two weeks before Mother Patrick and her nuns reached Salisbury three Anglican trained nurses from Kimberley arrived at Umtali after a most arduous and adventurous journey via Beira. They had sailed from Cape Town. The Anglican Church had also a keen interest in Mashonaland and Sister Henrietta Stockdale⁵ persuaded Bishop Bruce Knight to start a hospital in Rhodesia.)

On a certain day the Dominican Sisters missed a scapular, an important part of the Order's Habit. After prolonged and vain search – for "lifting" was not uncommon in those parts – a band of Bantu men appeared, each arrayed in a long white scapular cut out of white blankets, but minus any other clothing. The chief among them returned the missing scapular with a broad smile, explaining that they needed it as a pattern. They then danced off delighted that they had fashioned a new garment.

B. *A Promise to Keep*

Before proceeding with the story of the Sisters in the Zambesi Mission it is necessary to pick up the threads of Mother Jacoba Zirn's Biography. The convent annalist records: "... One of the most striking events in the history of our Mother House took place on 8th September 1890, the Feast of St Peter Claver, patron of the African Missions.

"Mother Jacoba became dangerously ill on the Feast of Our Lady's Seven Sorrows, the 28th March 1890. She had been Superior at the Sacred Heart Convent, East London, but now returned to the Mother Convent's Infirmary. The doctor declared that she suffered from tuberculosis of the spine which could not be cured.⁶ As time went on Sister only grew worse; the pain in her back was intense and her weakness sometimes so great that we thought she would expire.

"It happened that Father Daignault, s.j. of the Zambesi Mission came to ask for more Sisters for Rhodesia. Mother Mauritia regretfully replied that she had none to give at present. So she took the guest to see Sister Jacoba in the infirmary. Hearing that the invalid was a musician the priest thought how useful she might be on the missions as an organist. He then asked leave to pray a Novena for Sister's recovery through the intercession of St Peter Claver, if Sister would be allowed to promise God and the saint to go to the Zambesi Mission when she had recovered. Rev. Mother smiled consent, yet she was not nearly as certain of Sister's recovery as Father Daignault.

"The novena was begun on 1st September. The patient did not improve but rather grew worse, reaching the culminating point on 8th September when she was given the Sacraments of the dying. The following morning when the bell gave the signal for the Elevation at Mass, Sister thought, "now is the moment that I shall be cured." She tried to sit up in bed and, O Wonder! She could do so... She felt the pain in her back

⁵ *A nun of the Anglican Order of St Michael and All Angels, who became Matron of the hospital at Kimberley. It was she who started the formal training of nurses in South Africa and became known as the country's pioneer nurse.*

⁶ *Before the days of antibiotics there was no cure for this disease.*

had disappeared and her strength was returning. Her joy was indescribable. Impatiently she waited for Sister Infirmarian to return, then asked for her Habit which had not been worn for five months. With the help of an umbrella as a stick, she tried to walk about in the room. News of the cure spread and Sisters flocked to her room and found Sister Jacoba pale and emaciated, but walking about apparently cured. In the afternoon Father Fagan made a public act of thanksgiving with the Community during which the great hymn of praise, the TE DEUM, was sung in the Convent Church, while Sister Jacoba stood in her pew...

On 18th March 1891 Mother Jacoba left King William's Town for Macloutsie in compliance with her promise, for she believed her cure had been miraculous. Sisters M Berchman Dreier, Bonaventura Kaltenstadler and Caroline Berchtold travelled with her.

When the group of nuns arrive from the Cape Colony, Mother Patrick came from Fort Tuli to welcome them and to discuss matters with Mother Jacoba. As the latter was very tired from the long journey it was decided that Mother Patrick would move on to Salisbury while Mother Jacoba took charge of Macloutsie. These Sisters were destined to wait at this isolated military camp for three years... Mother Jacoba wrote to King William's Town that "... Macloutsie is a very pretty place. Besides a few small brick houses and tin stores there are only mud huts and tents as dwellings here as yet. The Sisters' four huts and two tents stand on a large open space which is fenced in; but the wild animals come prowling round at night. The first night we were here, the wolves gave us a real concert! (One of the men told me this African variety is really a hyena whose terrifying howls sound like fiendish laughter. This carnivorous quadruped feeds chiefly on carrion although its dreadful bites at tender underparts of zebra and antelope often kill, notwithstanding that its victim's weight might well treble the hyena's 70 Kilograms. It is a nocturnal beast of prey whose powerful jaws can crunch bones a lion could not eat. Its strong stomach juices can digest hide, skull, intestines and hooves that are unattractive to other predators. The hyena has flat sides, spotted with dull brown blotches. Its clumsy looking body, powerful legs and its hangdog appearance does not mark it as the great hunter it is...)

"The chapel hut is the best of all the buildings here, looking very neat. We felt very happy to enter a chapel again after six weeks on the trek... The climate here is healthy and fairly mild..."

In one of her letters Mother Jacoba relates their visit to the Zimbabwe ruins while on their trek to Bulawayo: "... We had the good fortune to call at the brooding Zimbabwe ruins, perhaps Africa's greatest unsolved mystery, located approximately 25 Kilometres from Fort Victoria, and discovered about thirty years ago by a man named Renders. The officer showing us around said opinions as to its age and origin vary; but they are generally believed to be over a thousand years old. The ruins are divided into three groups: the acropolis occupies the summit of the hill and is in the nature of a fortification. In the neighbouring valley is an elliptical temple, with great cyclopean walls that have an overall length of more than 80 metres. These stones are not held together by clay or mortar of any kind, yet have wonderfully withstood the ravages of time. The walls rise to a height of nearly ten metres and are about five metres thick; a characteristic feature being the chevron pattern in the stone work. The third landmark is a conical tower, regarded by some to be associated with ancestral worship or with pagan fertility rites. Between the temple and the acropolis are a large number of broken walls, extending for almost 1½ kilometres, which occupy the space in the valley... It is certainly a most interesting place to see..."

Mother Jacoba's departure from Macloutsie was rather unexpected. A wagon was sent to take her to Bulawayo. The journey thither was dusty and to add to their discomfort water was scarce. One Sister wrote that the "dirty state in which one is forced to go to bed without washing is perhaps the most trying we have so far experienced." They reached Bulawayo on 13th July 1894, in an atmosphere of conflict and uncertainty. For some reason no proper arrangements had been made for their arrival and they were obliged to live in their wagon for a week while Dr Jameson and Father Kerr smoothed out the major difficulties. A telegram from Mr Rhodes announcing that the Sisters were to have charge of the hospital settled the matter.

Bulawayo was a new township some three miles from Lobengula's royal kraal. At first it resembled any new town in South Africa in its initial stages, consisting of rough wood-and-iron shacks and huts and

tents. Hopes ran high when rumours of a discovery of gold spread among the Europeans. Prospectors, miners, adventurers – men and women of every sort – flocked to the township seeking their fortune in the tropics of Africa. Bulawayo then grew very quickly, becoming the country's economic centre although Salisbury remained the capital. As can be imagined, such a mixed community produced a public that was not easy to manage. But the intrepid Mother Jacoba dealt courageously with the many difficult situations that arose in her hospital.

The Sisters at Salisbury also had their hardships. One records that just before reaching Salisbury a minor tragedy occurred to their travelling chicken coop. All the way up country the Sisters had carefully tended six hens and a rooster, which travelled in a coop under their wagon. The birds had become great pets and had learned to hop out and hop in again whenever outspan or inspan time came. The Hunyani River, however, proved deeper than had been anticipated and the pets were all drowned inside the coop. Sorrowfully Sister plucked and prepared them for the hospital pot. They made a delightful feast for the patients but there followed a famine of eggs until one day a kind pioneer brought them a dozen eggs procured from some Africans.

At the hospital the Sisters also found the place overrun with the most aggressive rats “that were afraid of nothing... Each patient was armed with a stick to keep these pests at bay. Finally a cat was bought for five pounds! He was well worth the money...”

Like their Sisters at Bulawayo the nuns never had “off duty” except for their devotions. They rendered day-and-night service, week in and week out. Whenever there was a lull of patients at the end of the fever season the nuns would take it in turns at going on leave. This they sometimes spent at Chishawasha Mission or some other farm. If they ever reached their destination it was considered grand, because sometimes the wagon stuck in the mud or broke down, or the oxen would stampede having scented lions. The nurses, after being stranded in the veld, would then return to the hospital without having seen their holiday resort.

In 1892 Salisbury Hospital was handed over to a Managing Board. Doctor Rand, who did not approve of the Board, resigned from the staff to set up a private practice, the first in Rhodesia. De Edgelow, who took his place at the hospital, also became a friend of the Sisters.

On 1st July 1894 there was consternation at Salisbury Hospital when a patient was found suffering from small-pox. He had to be placed in an outside hut and a lazaretto was speedily erected for the African contacts. Dr Edgelow and Mr Francyes, the dispenser, also fell ill and the hospital was placed under quarantine. Thanks to the careful nursing of the Sisters the disease did not spread further.

C. With the Ship of the Veld

Very Rev. H. S. Kerr, s.j., Prefect Apostolic of the Zambesi Mission, asked Mother Mauritia to send some Sisters to ‘Mtoko where Father Hartmann was to found a mission. Mother M Clare Huber, one of the courageous pioneers from Augsburg, again volunteered for this venture. Her journal reads: “... On 5th April 1892, the Feast of the great Dominican, St Vincent Ferrer, Sisters Yolanda Kilkenny, Borgia Graham, Benigna Osterberger and I set out for the Zambesi Mission. Mother Mauritia and Sister Pancratius Webster travelled with us as far as Vryburg...”

At noon on 9th April the missionaries left Vryburg from the Outspan two miles from the town where the wagons had been prepared for them. Father Kerr invoked God's protection and the intercession of St Dominic and St Ignatius, while all present answered the Litany of Our Lady as they walked before ‘those slow ships of the veld’, the laden wagons, at the start of their journey. The party spent Holy Week, Easter and Pentecost in the wilds of Africa where torrential rains and violent winds lashed them. During their brief stay at Mafeking they met some friends among whom a Miss Sheppard made them a gift of two kittens. Remembering what they had heard of the Sisters' previous experience, they gladly accepted the pets.

The Black man leading the oxen and whom they thought trustworthy, decamped, leaving the travellers leaderless to ford the Notwani River. When they first attempted the drift it seemed plain sailing as the oxen behaved so well; when lo, in the middle of the river the chain got out of its hook so that the foremost oxen went on, while the wagon remained stranded in mid-stream. “But Divine Providence was watching over us”, wrote Mother Clare. “Lord Henry Paulet’s wagons soon overtook us here, and seeing our plight, a Mr Berry, who has a very competent driver, quickly put matters right so our journey could proceed...”

On May 8th, they crossed the Crocodile River where they met Mother Jacoba en route to King William’s Town whither the doctor had ordered Sister Frances for a recuperative holiday. She was so worn out by repeated bouts of malaria that this was considered the only way to save her. Though ill with fever themselves the Sisters tried to keep bravely to their posts; there was often also no other way for lack of staff in the fever season. It was decided here that Sister Benigna would accompany the invalid to the Cape while Mother Jacoba returned to her hospital where she was so badly needed.

On the banks of the river the Sisters did their laundry while an African driver stood cracking his long whip to scare away the crocodiles. The 22nd and 23rd May the Sisters spent at Seleka, the British Border Police Camp, about 90 Miles from Macloutsie. Among the different kinds of wild fruit they were especially interested in the cream-of-tartar tree, or the Baobab (*Adansonia digitata*). This magnificent tree rarely grows more than 14 feet in height, but may have an enormous girth. It is a tree of low-rainfall, forest-free regions of the low veld. Its spongy, fibrous wood is of little use, although some African tribes use the bark fibres. The really large specimens of five metres and more circumference are believed to be a thousand years old. The Sisters secured some of its fruit which resembles a large cocoa-nut and which they opened with an axe. “It contains a white powder which makes a pleasant drink when dissolved in water and it can also be used as a febrifuge. “How wonderful is God’s providence that this remedy should grow in the fever belt,” wrote Mother Clare.

Fort Tuli was reached on 14th June. Though the country is hilly it was not very healthy because five men were down with malaria even in the winter time. The road near the Lundi River was very bad but fortunately the Sisters managed to pass these dangerous places without mishap.

In a letter to the Mother House Mother Jacoba relates that a “nasty accident happened to the Holes at a Hazardous ravine known as Godonkwe Spruit.” It was during the early morning trek before breakfast. One side of the track leading down to the drift had broken away; and in the semi-darkness the wagon capsized completely. Mr Marshall Hole was on horseback at the time; but his wife and little Monica were asleep on the bed in their tented wagon. Mrs Hole awoke suddenly from a bad dream, to find the bed on top of her. The bedstead had to be lifted before Monica and her mother could be extricated – no easy matter in the darkness. Fortunately there was a small store close to the ford, kept by two ex-members of the B.S.A. Police. They helped to carry Mrs Hole, who was badly knocked about, to the store, where they made her as comfortable as possible on the floor. Almost at once Mother Clare arrived with her Sisters en route for Salisbury. They dressed her wounds, but it was some days before Mrs Hole could ride or even walk. Monica was unhurt and thought the whole episode great fun.”

The Sisters were sad to see the many graves of trekkers dotting the road between the Lundi and Sabi Rivers where pioneers were detained by the rivers in flood the previous year. Unable to cross the streams they died of malaria and famine.

“The ferocious Lobengula has massacred and robbed the lesser tribes to such an extent that the Mashonas have fled into the mountains, hoping to escape the raiders. It is difficult to see how the poor creatures can eke out an existence among the rocks where they live. They grow a kind of rice, maize and large sweet potatoes...”⁷

“About fifty Mashonas came to our wagons at the outspan, asking help for one of their chiefs who had been left mortally wounded by the Matabele in a raid two days ago.. They killed about fifty men and a

⁷ *Quotations from Mother Clare’s journal.*

number of women and children were carried off by the Matabele. We gave these poor people what help we could...

“What a day we had on 17th June! The morning was bitterly cold and as the day wore on things grew worse. A storm broke over us in all its fury at sundown and the rain kept coming down in torrents all night. The poor worn-out oxen lay down in the cold and mud and we feared they might not rise again. It was a great mercy that the exhausted animals survived the storm and the cold.

“Near the Umfuli River is a place known as ‘The Lion’s Den’. The name of the halt spells danger, though we were fortunate not to make the acquaintance of His Four-footed Majesty. As usual, large fires were kept burning all night and someone was on guard constantly. Yet, in spite of these precautions, some beast, probably a wolf, succeeded in taking a large bite out of one of the oxen...

“July 27th: Salisbury at last – DEO GRATIAS! Wrote Mother Clare. Mother Patrick and a few Sisters drove to the outspan⁸ to welcome the newcomers, “and what a meeting it was!... To be in a house again after living in a wagon for four months was a wonderful sensation There were few patients in the hospital at the time, but sometimes the three large wards are completely filled.”

Mother Clare remained at Fort Salisbury for four months until she was asked to start a hospital at Fort Victoria. As things finally turned out she did not go to M’Toko.

By the middle of 1892 a number of married settlers with children had reached Salisbury. There were also several Boer families squatting and hunting in the vicinity, so there began to be a crying need for educational facilities. The Dominicans, being a teaching Order, always stressed the value of education. The first school in Mashonaland was started by the nuns on 18th October 1892. It began in a wattle-and-daub hut with 20 pupils. The central block of Salisbury Convent later occupied the site where the hut had stood. The primitive school was honoured by a visit by the Administrator, Dr L. S. Jameson, in November 1892. He promised to build a new school for the Sisters. However, the Matabele War of the following year delayed this project and thus the discomforts of another rainy season in tents and huts had to be endured.

Florence Nightingale was known as “The Lady with the lamp” but the Dominican Sisters might have been called “the ladies with the hurricane lantern.” They had to run about in the darkness, amidst mud and deluges of rain, from one hut or tent of their hospital to another, all by the feeble light of these lanterns. A letter from Rhodesia related that the Sisters naturally felt nervous when alone on night duty, having to make their way from one hut or tent to the other. Sister Constantia came over one night, to the kitchen for hot water. An animal, which she presumed to be a dog, trotted beside her. On reaching the kitchen she realised her escort to be a wolf. Sister snatched a log from the fire and hurled it at the wolf and shut the door behind her. The following night, however, the wolf returned to accompany the Sisters from the hospital. He seemed quite tame and “was left undisturbed to carry out his self-imposed duty of guarding the Sisters going to and from the hospital... He must have been a descendant of Brother Wolf from Assisi...” states a letter from Rhodesia.

The difficulties under which the Sisters nursed have been described by themselves as “simply heart-breaking”; one of the greatest sorrows being the lack of proper supplies of the right nourishment, because milk, vegetables and eggs were often not to be had.

In 1892 the first township of Fort Victoria was moved a few miles from the site that had been selected by Mr Selous, because its water supply proved inadequate. During the first year the death toll was heavy; accordingly Father Barthelemy, s.j. was allowed to select a site for the hospital which was eventually built at a cost of a thousand pounds. On the arrival of Mother Clare and her companions the small hospital was not yet completed, obliging the nuns to live in their wagon on the banks of the Mshangashe River before they could move into their huts. Their first patient was Captain Chaplin, the Magistrate of “For Vic”. His life had been despaired of before the Sisters’ arrival. The nuns were not trained nurses then, so

⁸ Place where oxen are unyoked or horses are unharnessed. Usually anyone is allowed access to an outspan provided they do not damage anything on the farm. He is also permitted to make use of grazing and water.

they could only do their best to follow the doctor's instructions to the letter and trust that prayer and their devotion would do the rest. When the patient recovered they attributed the cure to the intercession of the Holy Souls whom they had invoked.

When Fort Victoria was founded a block of buildings was erected consisting of a court house, gaol, post office, etc., and the whole was linked with stretches of wall to form a square and a fort. It was within this square that the settlers gathered at the time of the Matabele War in 1893. The Matabele were getting beyond control, robbing coaches and transport riders and even ill-treating the latter. The climax came with an attack on the Mashonas who were in the employ of some settlers. Such is stated as being the real cause of the war – the attempt of the Matabele to enforce their claim to raid the Mashona tribe, to murder them to carry off their men, women and children, as they did before the white man came to that region.

In July 1893 a Matabele impi approached the town. About fifty warriors came to within a short distance of the hospital. This caused great panic in the village and it became imperative for the Sisters and their patients to take refuge in the fort where they stayed for six weeks.

In 1896 the nuns were again obliged to retreat to the fort, this time for five months while the Matabele ravaged the country round about. In October of the same year about 400 of the Makalaka tribe entered Fort Victoria intending to join the Victoria Column against the Matabele. Having obtained leave to do so, they started a war dance about fifty paces from the hospital. After this they marched away accompanied by Mr Hull as guide.

On 26th October the United Salisbury and Victoria Column gave battle to the Matabele in which four white men were killed and ten wounded. After two fierce encounters at the Shangani and Imbembezi Rivers the Matabele retreated. "More than thirty white men were killed by the ferocious Matabele in January 1894. Major Allan Wilson with his 34 men then went in pursuit of Lobengula until they came close to the Matabele king's camp. To the cry "Is the king here?" the Matabele answered "No." Then seeing the small number of white men they prepared to attack. Major Wilson could neither retreat nor get reinforcements because the Shangani River had become swollen with recent rain and was quite impassable. The small company of British Troopers fought bravely while their ammunition lasted; but the end came soon. Those who could stand up rose and sang "God save the Queen" while the Matabele rushed in and assegaied them all. The African tribe was always ready to respect bravery and they were filled with admiration for the gallant little band and said: "These soldiers died like men whose fathers were men...." Some time later the hospital at Bulawayo was erected as a memorial to Major Wilson and his company.

No sooner had the Sisters at Salisbury, Bulawayo and Fort Victoria met the most urgent needs of the Pioneer Column than they created accommodation for the sick Africans as well and founded clinics to provide them with medical assistance.

D. By Mule Coach to Rhodesia

In the Mother House at King William's Town the year 1893 was marked by the election of a new Prioress General and Mother Euphemia Koffler succeeded Mother Tiefenboeck. The latter was now second in command and went to live at Izeli where she founded an orphanage for her Rosary Children. Mother Euphemia showed the same maternal solicitude for the Sisters as that evinced by her predecessor. The new Superior General invited the Sisters who needed a recuperative holiday from Rhodesia to come to King William's Town. Mother Patrick and several Sisters did visit the Cape when it was possible to avail themselves of this kind offer. They were afterwards able to make the journey by sea via Beira when better amenities had been provided along that route.

Sister Pancratius Webster, one of the last survivors of the Rhodesian pioneer group, gave the following account from her rich store of experiences: "... Sisters Humberta Healy, Sebastian Hill and I were sent as reinforcements to our nuns in Matabeleland. We travelled by train from King William's Town to Pretoria

where we stayed at the Loreto Convent until the mule coach was ready to leave for Rhodesia at 5 o'clock on that Sunday morning in September, 1894.

“At the coach office we were joined by sixteen men for the trip. We travelled day and night, changing mules every sixteen miles at ‘stations’. The discomfort of sitting on luggage for hours, and having some of the baggage piled overhead can perhaps be imagined, For some time after departure we were silent; the men, no doubt, not knowing what to make of these nuns. And no wonder for, according to custom, we then wore long gossamer veils over our faces when travelling. Suddenly Sr Sebastian said: “What a gloomy start for a long distance trip, sure. And, Faith, I doubt if we can survive!” a burst of laughter from the men sent the ice crashing. One after the other asked: ‘May we talk?’ and ‘May we smoke?’

“Eventually we were so hungry so I told the men we had a hamper among the luggage. They found it quickly enough and soon we were having a real picnic from the Loreto Sisters’ generous basket. But alas! It was packed for three not for twenty-two... Each time we stopped at the stations the men insisted on paying for our refreshments from the coffee house.

“The coachman had warned us that we must have noise during the night to frighten off any prowling lions or wolves, so we sang lustily – hymns and folk songs. Thus we spent the nights without real rest or sleep. In the malaria belt Sister Sebastian and two of the men took ill, probably with fever. Fortunately we had a supply of medicines and we proudly displayed our little skill at nursing, merely treating the symptoms. The patients were most obedient and grateful. But the journey had to continue. Sister Sebastian suffered the most. Eventually Col. Molyneux could stand it no longer. He made Sister drink a neat toddy and we had to climb out of the coach to enable Sister to stretch out on the bench... She recovered and we were on our way again.

“When we arrived at the Crocodile River we halted at a small inn for mule exchange. The lovely expanse of water tempted us to make our ablutions, not thinking that Crocodiles really infested the river. We began to disrobe and I had my feet already in the water when a shout from the men arrested our attention. We were commanded to come out of the water at once! Reluctantly we did as we were bidden. The coach was waiting for us, and after a quick cup of tea we continued our journey.

“At about 8 miles from a place called ‘Fig Tree’ an African runner was hired to give a message to the occupants of a small house to prepare refreshments for 22 people. One can imagine the chagrin of the proprietors at having to feed so many people from their scanty store in the wilderness. On arrival we found a couple who apologised for what they considered a meagre fare. To us it was a veritable feast: eggs, bacon, home-made bread, butter and hot coffee! There were not enough knives to go round but one could use a pocket knife. The kind people were quite overcome when the travellers insisted on paying them a good round sum for giving us the first real meal since we left Pretoria.

“The driver had refused to come to the house, so a goodly portion was sent out to him. He was not being unsociable, as we discovered later: he had a large sum of money to be delivered to the Standard Bank at Bulawayo and did not dare leave the coach unattended.

“As the coach drove up to the post office at Bulawayo great cheers bade us welcome. Outside the office all the passengers first joined hands and sang ‘Auld Lang Syne’. We then shook hands before parting, each one declaring that it had been a wonderful trip despite the inconvenience of such a journey.”

E. Helping to Found a Nation

“The first European school⁹ in Bulawayo was opened on 28th October 1895, with ten boys and girls. Four pupils arrived seated in a pannier, or baskets on the sides of donkeys. They had come three miles to be present at school. Before the end of term the number of scholars had increased to thirty-eight.” Though the teaching staff consisted of only Sisters Sebastian and Pancratius, the nursing Sisters joined the force

⁹ *Only a wattle-and-daub hut.*

when they could. One would teach the girls needlework with others showed various kinds of hand-work to the boys.

Not long after the arrival of the last two Sisters in Bulawayo the Matabele rose in rebellion. An African servant came running to the hospital, wounded and bleeding, to say that the rebels had burnt his master's store and also killed two young men who were there. That same evening Father Prestage hastened to warn the Sisters that the Matabele were indeed approaching. Some Sisters hurried to the hospital while Father Nicot packed the sacred vessels of the chapel into an iron chest and had them stored in the Standard Bank.

The market hall was hurriedly turned into a laager with sandbags, for the 600 women and children to be defended by 900 men. The Sisters did not go into laager but acted under Mother Jacoba as matron at the hut hospital. Sister Sebastian kept the school open and proved a boon in calming the terrified children and their mothers. Sister Pancratius was drafted to the nursing staff. The surgical cases in the hospital needed to most care for the "wounded men suffered pitifully. The injuries were invariably large and jagged, for the old-fashioned guns the Matabele used were fed with bullets containing fragments of quartz, pieces of broken glass and bits of wire. Their assegais had teeth like saws.

"An old Irishman, too old to be on guard, did his bit by bringing a cup of hot coffee to each of the 'gals' as he called the nursing Sisters. This was strong, without mild or sugar. At first it tasted like poison, but it was soon hailed with gratitude and the old man blessed for his kindness in giving a hot beverage."

For seven weeks on end the Sisters never undressed except for a quick change of clothing. They and Dr Vigne worked day and night snatching an occasional nap when possible, lying on the floor with their heads resting on their arms. The hospital was overcrowded and even the Sisters' beds were used for patients. Yet the nuns continued to count their blessings. Many brave men lost their lives and lack of proper nourishment for the children made the death toll high. Everything possible was done for the dying. If their respective clergyman could not be present the Sisters also prayed with them in preparation for the last journey. Then the watches, bibles, etc., of the dead were labelled to be sent to their families as mementos.

This tremendous work-load was far beyond the strength of the staff, so Prioress Euphemia sent more Sisters from the Cape Colony to Zambesia. When some measure of calm was restored to the war-torn country the Sisters urged Mother Jacoba and a couple of nuns to go for a little rest to the house Dr Sauer¹⁰ had kindly put at their disposal. It was during their absence from the hospital that the terrible tragedy of the explosion of the Bulawayo Magazine took place. "The wounded were victims of unspeakable suffering. Some were literally flayed alive; others lost arms or legs or suffered other mutilations. To accommodate these heartrending cases all the ordinary patients were quartered on private families..."

After the rebellion Sister Pancratius was on duty in the fever ward at night when a young German was admitted. His temperature was high and he was delirious. While Sister was busy at the far end of the ward the African helper came running to her saying: "Au, Nkosazana, umlungu uyahamba!" The man had gone. He wore only a cotton night shirt and the rain was pouring down. Through the slush and mud Sister ran after him. When she overtook him she had to coax him to return with promises of "Eine echte Tasse deutschen Kaffee; ein Glas Bier; Sauerkraut und Schweinefleisch." He yielded to such bribes and two dripping people at length returned to the hospital. Beyond expectation the patient recovered. "But", Sister Pancratius would say with a twinkle in her eyes, "he would not leave the hospital before he had enjoyed the good things he had been promised."

Mother Jacoba wrote to the Mother House that in "July 1895 Dr Farmer's little dog bit his hand at play. Doctor took no notice of it and did an autopsy in the gaol. After a few days the finger became most painful; little white blisters appeared on the affected limb and spread over the whole arm. He was unable to continue working and was admitted to the hospital. Doctors J. N. Wilson and A. Levy who did duty for

¹⁰ *Dr Hans Sauer, Rhodesian Pioneer, was born in Smithfield, O.F.S., 1857. He studied medicine in London and Edinburgh, returned to Kimberley, where he became Medical Officer of Health. After the discovery of gold, Sauer moved to the Rand as Medical Officer of Health. In 1893 he went to Rhodesia.*

him also attended him, but the malady grew more serious by the day. Doctor was very patient during his illness, but he was depressed when he had to admit that no medicine was doing him any good, for he suffered terribly. I proposed to make a Novena for him to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Doctor realised that if prayer did not help he was done for. To our great relief he began to grow better and finally recovered. He has since become a Catholic although he tells me he had been thinking of it before he left England.”

In August 1896, Earl Grey was sent from England as Administrator and troops came from the Cape under the command of Major F Carrington. A regiment of Hussars arrived in Gwelo from Natal, while Bulawayo and Salisbury were notified in anticipation of further insurrections from the Matabele. It is believed that the rebellion was instigated by the witch-doctors.

Relief parties went forth courageously to rescue farmers who were unable to defend their farms. Each Sister at Bulawayo was asked by the Magistrate what she wished done for her safety in case the Matabele broke through the line of defences. When Sister Pancratius’ turn came, who was the youngest of the nuns, she turned to the lieutenant standing by and said: “Will you keep a bullet for me, please?” The startled magistrate said: “No! I hope that will not be necessary”, and ordered Sister to join the women in the laager. As the youthful nun walked out the subaltern saluted her respectfully.

Fighting commenced and gradually the Matabele were hemmed in in the Matopo Hills. Several attempts were made to drive them out but with no success. To starve them out of their stronghold would have taken long and would have been very costly for the Chartered Company. Cecil Rhodes, anxious to put an end to hostilities arranged to meet the African Leaders in the Matopos. He bravely went up unarmed to the Matabele to hold an “indaba”¹¹ with their Chiefs and arrange terms of peace. The Makalaka tribe that had afterwards joined the general rebellion only submitted to peace some months later. The war had caused much destruction besides the loss of 400 lives and 200 wounded among the white men. The African losses were not known. Food was very scarce everywhere. For a time Salisbury Hospital was without bread for patients and staff. The Sisters prepared “cakes” from ground rice and the men were issued with peanuts in lieu of bread.

In January 1898 Mothers Patrick and Jacoba were awarded the Royal Order of the Red Cross by Her Majesty Queen Victoria in recognition of the valuable services they and their Sisters had rendered Rhodesia, especially during the time of the rebellion. The Matabele War Medal was also bestowed on the two Reverend Mothers, while each Sister in Bulawayo Hospital was presented with a handsome souvenir watch with the engraving: “From the people of Bulawayo in grateful appreciation of services rendered in the Memorial Hospital (1894 – ’98).”

When the Matabele War came to an end the Dominican Sisters were planning the development of formal training for nurses in Rhodesia. Accordingly Mothers Patrick and Jacoba undertook a voyage to Europe in quest of postulants and also in order to finalise their own training as nurses. The two Reverend Mothers were accepted at the famous St Vincent’s Hospital, Dublin.¹² On the grounds of their wide experience they were not expected to undergo much further training but, after a short intensive course of study, were admitted to the nurses’ qualifying examination and awarded the certificate. They were also subsequently admitted to the register for trained nurses by the Medical Council of the Cape Colony on 3rd February 1899.¹³ Mother Jacoba had arranged, before her departure, for the training of nurses to be commenced at Bulawayo Hospital by the end of 1898. The first candidates of the course she thus inaugurated sat for the final examination in 1901.

After taking all the trouble to equip herself as a nurse, Mother Jacoba was to learn that the Governing Board of Bulawayo Hospital declined to recognise her certificate because she had not undergone a full course of formal training. This was a terrible blow to her and to her many friends who admired her

¹¹ A meeting.

¹² From this hospital came the Nursing Sisters of St Vincent de Paul who assisted Florence Nightingale at Scutari Hospital during the Crimean War.

¹³ South Africa was the first country in the world to grant State Registration to nurses and midwives. This was achieved in 1891, principally through the untiring efforts of Sister Henrietta Stockdale of Kimberley.

greatly. The people of Bulawayo were indignant at the action of the Hospital Board and recorded their disapproval in a document addressed to Mother Jacoba and the nuns who assisted her.¹⁴

Mother Jacoba Zirn consequently resigned from the Memorial Hospital she had pioneered and handed over its management to secular nurses coming from the Cape Colony, after which she returned to King William's Town. Here the Sisters of the Mother House recognised her worth and elected her as Prioress General in succession to Mother Euphemia Koffler.

Mother Patrick's certificate, on the other hand, was accepted by the Hospital Board of Salisbury when she returned from Europe with six postulants. However, the voyage had not improved her health as she had hoped.

Meanwhile Rev. Dr H. MacSherry, now Bishop of the Eastern Cape Vicariate informed Mother Euphemia Koffler that the Convents in Zambesia would, in the future, have to provide their own recruits. Breath-taking news! Bishop Mac Sherry and Very Rev. Father R Sykes, S.J., Prefect Apostolic of Rhodesia, arranged to grant the convents in Rhodesia independence from King William's Town without consulting the Sisters of either group. The agreement also stated that the nursing services in Rhodesia could be relinquished to secular nurses if the number of nuns there could not staff the hospitals adequately. The Sisters much regretted to do this just when general conditions in the country would improve, but after a while it was evident that there was no other course left to them.

In 1899 the Sisters who had gone to Rhodesia were given freedom of choice between returning to the Mother House at the Cape or remaining at their new mission. About twenty Sisters decided to remain in Rhodesia while the following went back to King William's Town: Mother M Jacoba Zirn

Mother M Clare Huber

Sister M Benigna Osterberger

Sister M Antonina Dowd

Sister M Udalrica Schneider

Sister M Benvenuta Saumweber

Sister M Pancratius Webster, and lastly,

Sister M Bonaventura Kaltenstadler.

Mother Patrick Cosgrave, O.S.D., R.R.C., became the first Prioress General of the new Congregation of Dominican Sisters of the Sacred Heart with its Mother House at Salisbury. But this Reverend Mother was not to be on earth much longer. Her health declined rapidly until on 31st July 1900 God crowned her life of labour and sacrifice with the grace of a holy death. Mother Clare Huber, who in her quiet unobtrusive way had been a tower of strength among the pioneers here, postponed her return to the Mother Convent in order to help and guide the bereaved community until their second Leader was installed in Office on 24th January 1901. It was natural that the Sisters should choose late Mother Patrick's trusted companion, Sister Ignatius Haslinger, as their new Prioress General. The newly-elected Superior took up her duties with vigour to make the new branch of her Order in Rhodesia viable.

¹⁴ *This document is preserved in the Archives of the Congregation in Johannesburg.*