

## Chapter 3 – King William’s Town

### *Harbingers of the Good News*

Great excitement prevailed in King William’s Town on that 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1977, when the first passenger<sup>1</sup> train was due to arrive. Though it was expected only in the late afternoon everyone was alert from early morning. A little after five o’clock, amid the cheers of the townspeople the little train slowly steamed into the station. A coach drawn by six horses was there waiting for the Sisters, but as the whole town had assembled to meet the longed-for arrivals, they decided to walk the short distance to their home. It resembled a royal procession for rows of radiantly happy faces lined the streets. A throng of townsfolk escorted the nuns to the hall door. By strange coincidence the Angelus bell rang again – this time as if in welcome to the missionaries. (though the Sisters reached King William’s Town on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, it was decided that Foundation Day should be kept on the anniversary of the day they left Augsburg: the 14<sup>th</sup> September, the Feast of the Triumph of the Holy Cross.)

The convent building, hewn from great blocks of blue quartz sandstone with a white cross over the portal, stood out in relief against the evening sky, the Amatola Mountains, blue in the distance serving as a backdrop. The house consisted of five rooms on the ground floor and four on the upper storey. The largest room on the ground floor had been prepared as a chapel.<sup>2</sup> A scroll over the roughly-made altar read “Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus”, while a small screen in one of the doors showed the way to the sacristy which was, like the temporary kitchen, only a wood-and-iron lean-to.

On the small side altar stood a status of the Blessed Virgin Mary that was donated by Father Fagan. He had no money to buy a new one, so he took the one from his little church in Durban Street. The Bishop made a touching address to all present, after which Father Fagan arrived with the Blessed Sacrament from the parish church. Benediction Service was held and the “Te Deum” solemnly sung, to mark the end of the long journey. As the shades of evening deepened the visitors departed, leaving the Sisters alone with their Divine Master. Before retiring for the night they prayed the Rosary, begging blessings through the intercession of Christ’s Mother on their benefactors and on their future work. The great undertaking which may be called *A MISSION OF WOMEN* had begun...

On entering their new home the Sisters were struck by its monastic simplicity. They also noticed the feminine touches on every side: the Chapel was decked with flowers, the larder was stocked and a fire was burning merrily in the kitchen.

The Catholics of King William’s Town then resembled the early Christians as with one heart and one soul they helped the seven Sisters as though they were one family. One household would supply them with fresh vegetables; another lent them the most necessary furniture until such time as they could afford to buy their own; Mrs Pegler showed them an easy way to bake bread in a three-legged pot outside the kitchen. The convent annals contain frequent entries of which only two can be cited here: “...Today Mrs Niland<sup>3</sup> sent two cows and their calves to supply us with milk,” and again “...Mrs Connellan<sup>4</sup> brought two sucking pigs and a bag of meal. All gratefully received...”

For three weeks after the nuns’ arrival Bishop Ricards remained in King William’s Town, devoting himself to the little community, celebrating Mass daily in their chapel. Every morning and afternoon he and Father Fagan came to give the Sisters lessons in English, which had hitherto been only a schoolbook language to them. Mother Mauritia made careful plans for the school to be opened at the beginning of the coming year, furnishing the classrooms attractively and laying out the gardens.

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<sup>1</sup> Goods trains had been running between East London and King William’s Town, but this was the first train to carry passengers to the Capital of Kaffraria.

<sup>2</sup> Later, the Sisters’ Common Room

<sup>3</sup> Mother of the future Sister M Rose Niland OP

<sup>4</sup> Mother of the future Sister M Liguori Connellan OP

School was opened on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1878 with 20 boarders and 80 day scholars. Although the nuns were experienced teachers there were initial difficulties due to ignorance of English on part of the Sisters. Here again the magnanimous Notre Mere came to the rescue by lending them one of her ablest nuns, Sister Lucy Manley, to teach them English and to administer the school during the first two years.

Besides their class teaching the nuns were engaged in giving private lessons in music, art and foreign languages to the ladies of the garrison who would ride to the convent on horseback and remain until the close of the afternoon session. After school hours the Sisters also instructed some women for the reception of the Sacraments, including some converts.

The pupils of the school were at first grouped into five classes according to their individual attainments. It was not unusual to find children of ten years and more in the alphabet class, for there were no schools in the Eastern Cape at that time. The school was specially patronised by those families that immigrated to South Africa with the British German Legion, but it soon drew pupils from every part of the frontier district of the Colony. The number of scholars on the roll at the end of 1878 was two hundred. The first school year closed with a concert and a display of the children's work which received laudatory notices in the "Kaffrarian Watchman", the leading paper of the day. God's blessing was visible everywhere.