

Chapter 35

The Last of a Gallant Band

Mother Clare Huber, O.P.

Anna Huber was born on 6th April 1850 at Hofkirchen-Dorf, Bavaria. Philip and Maria Huber, her parents, were devout Catholics and, in addition to being the proprietors of the village inn, they also owned a small farm. Very little is known of Anna's childhood except from a report given by her teacher, that the girl's conduct was exemplary and she was a diligent and painstaking scholar". She entered the convent of St Ursula at Augsburg, where she qualified as a teacher and then received the Habit of the Order on 21st August 1872 from Prioress Hyacinth Schippert and would henceforth be known as Sister Mary Clare. In the following year she made profession to the same Superior on 14th September.

It seems significant that Sister Clare should pronounce her solemn vows on the Feast of the Holy Cross on which, five years later, she was destined to leave her homeland in company of the six other pioneer Sisters to establish the Convent School at King William's Town, South Africa.

After passing fifteen years of even tenor in her duties in the school and convent, Sister Clare volunteered for the Zambesi Mission in 1892. With her companions she made the long trek of 1500 miles northwards to Matabeleland in an ox-wagon. After months on the trek the Sisters arrived at their destination, Fort Victoria. The nuns had no house, their wagon and a few daub-and-wattle huts served them as Convent and hospital wards. So few were the amenities of civilisation that, on Christmas Day, they were obliged to receive a present of a few yards of calico, a small table cloth and a bottle of honey from one of the men. Day and night the Sisters were engaged in caring for the ever-increasing numbers of malaria-stricken patients.

On 9th July 1893 a Matabele Impi approached Fort Victoria. About 50 stalwart warriors rushed into the little town, coming quite close to the hospital. This raid caused great panic; consequently on 12th July Mother Clare, with the Sisters and their patients, had to take refuge in the military fort. Here they remained day and night for six weeks, while the Matabele ravaged the surrounding country.

On the return of less troublous days Mother Clare and her staff went back to their ordinary duties in their temporary hospital and school. Under the date of 23rd April 1895, her journal tells that Dr Leander Starr Jameson gave her a grant of land on which to erect a Convent School. The quiet times were, however, of short duration. In 1896 a second war broke out and the Sisters and their patients again took refuge in the fort where they remained for five months.

In February 1898 Mother Clare left Fort Victoria for the hospital at Bulawayo. In June of the same year she took up work at Salisbury, where she celebrated her silver jubilee as a Dominican Sister. Among the gifts she received on this occasion was a set of kitchen chairs, presented by the officers of the mess... "six unusual luxuries, faint echoes, if one may wrest the metaphor, of a civilisation stoically left behind by brave men and women of those rugged pioneering days."

In November 1898 Mothers Jacoba Zirn and Patrick Cosgrave and Mother Clare Huber, together with their nursing Sisters, were recipients of fob watches, suitably inscribed, from the men of the pioneer force, in testimony, as the men themselves put it, of "their courage and devotion to duty among the pioneers of civilisation in Matabeleland and in always following their noble vocation, toiling unceasingly in times of stress for those who were wounded and sick during the Matabele War."

In December 1899, when Mother Patrick lay dying at Salisbury, Mother Clare was recalled to the hospital there. After nine years spent in nursing and welfare work among the peoples of Rhodesia, she returned to the Mother House at King William's Town. As Superior of the Izeli Orphanage and also, later, of the

Convents at Fort Beaufort and East London, she won many friends and for her work much practical sympathy.

She was elected Prioress General of the King William's Town Dominicans in 1911.

During her tenure of office several important educational developments took place. She co-operated with Dr Thomas Muir for the establishment of the Training College for Teachers at King William's Town by the amalgamation of the pupil-teachers of the Convent School and those of the Girls' High with Miss A Emery, whose services she had secured as Principal. In 1913 she opened the first school conducted by her Sisters for the benefit of the Chinese, Indian and Coloured Children at East London and King William's Town. In 1917 she opened Calaroga House at Grahamstown to serve as a hostel for her Sisters and others of the Dominican Order, who wished to obtain academic degrees at the Rhodes University College.¹

At the close of her term of office Mother Clare received the following tribute from none other than Bishop MacSherry: "... I have a strong sense of gratitude towards you for the excellent way you have managed everything during your six years of office. God's blessing was on your government... I wish you many more years of life to do good, and a happy, holy death at the end."

After nearly a quarter of a century of further service, the venerable Mother reached the great age of 92 years. Busy in various small ways right to the end, Mother Clare, somewhat unexpectedly but most peacefully, closed her eyes on this world at about seven o'clock in the evening of 21st September 1941, just a week after the celebration of her 69th anniversary as a Dominican.

The obsequies were celebrated by Bishop James Colbert at the "Mater" cemetery where a large crowd had gathered to pay their last tribute of respect to this gentle but heroic nun.

Mother M Reginald Fischer

Maria Fischer was born on 13th May 1851 at Herzogenau, Bavaria. She received the Dominican habit on 13th June 1869 at Wettenhausen from the saintly Mother Aquinata Lauter and was thereafter known as Sister Mary Reginald. On the 21st August 1872 she made profession into the hands of Mother Hyacinth Schippert at St Ursula's, Augsburg. The young nun qualified as an art needlework teacher and joined Mother Mauritia's party to South Africa in 1877.

In the early days she gave lessons in needlework and painting and also had charge of the boarders. People said that Mother Reginald was a very gifted artist, for when doing art needlework she never seemed in doubt about the colours she should use for her designs. Many of her pupils have handed down as heirlooms articles of fancywork and painting done by their girlish hands under the direction of this competent teacher. Mother herself plied her needle till her 88th year.

There was an exquisite alb of point-lace which Father James Colbert had borrowed when he accompanied Bishop MacSherry to the World Eucharistic Congress in Rome. On the return voyage their steamer ran into a dreadful storm on the ocean. When Sister Agatha Geiger, the sacristan at the Mother House heard of this, she urged her fellow nuns to pray, "because O Lord, if the ship goes down that precious alb will be lost"..."

Mother Reginald's large-heartedness made her a favourite with the children and gained her a host of friends throughout South Africa. She would sometimes resolve to be very firm, but she very soon relented and showered kindness on all whom she had shown any severity. Endowed with qualities that made her an excellent pioneer religious, she was often called upon to begin new foundations and to tide over initial difficulties. At these new establishments money was usually very scarce. The junior nuns, however, discovered that Reverend Mother was not a fearless woman, for she was terrified of thunder storms. The 'youngsters' would then choose a storm as the best time to present their requisitions for costly articles, like shoes, etc. and Mother would then say at once: "Oh yes, darling, you may have it",

¹ *Mother Paula Wahlspeock and Sisters Amica Gebhart and de Victoria Sporrer were the first of our Congregation to live at Calaroga as students in 1917.*

without pausing for a moment to consider the price of the article. Mother 'Regi' was a lovely personality who could also laugh at herself.

At the Izeli the nuns used to bake their own bread for the whole establishment. Sister Reginald always volunteered to help remove the loaves from the oven, so she could hide a loaf or two under her scapular for her hungry boarders. The Sister in the laundry was very puzzled at Sister Reginald's scapular that was usually so dirty...

At various times Mother Reginald held the office of Prioress in the convents of East London, Klerksdorp, Fort Beaufort, Cradock and Belgravia. Though she lived to her 94th year, almost to the very last she retained the full use of her faculties. She remained active until just a couple of weeks before the end when she had a fall. Her favourite thought was of the goodness of God. In the morning of 9th June 1944, Holy Communion was brought to her bedside. In the afternoon of the same day she literally just gently "fell asleep in the Lord" at the Mater Infirmorum, leaving a happy memory of one who was dear to God and to her community.