

Chapter 4

The Seventh Frontier War

When the Sisters arrived in South Africa the country was in the throes of one of the frontier wars. It seemed rash, to put it mildly, that the nuns accustomed to cloistered life and new in the country, were going right into the capital of Kaffraria¹ within sight of the Amatola Mountains² whose forests were the haunts of the warring Amakhosa³ tribe.

Bishop Ricards asked Mother Mauritia when she landed at Port Elizabeth whether the Sisters would be willing to help nurse the wounded in case of an overflow of patients at Grey Hospital, King William's Town. They were, however, not called upon to redeem their promise as after their arrival no more wounded soldiers were brought to King William's Town.

Yet the war dragged on. From their convent the Sisters could see the camp fires burning on the heights of the surrounding mountains, and they knew that dark death-dealing forms roamed the forests on those slopes. In the morning the stillness would be broken by the monotonous war chants reverberating from the neighbouring hills.

On one occasion the Africans executed a war dance in front of the convent. Armed with shields and assegais they performed on the very wall of the yard, striking no little terror into the hearts of the poor nuns, who, having never imagined anything so fierce and wild, believed the band to be possessed by evil spirits.

Among those who took part in this war dance was one stalwart Ngabe Manele. Twenty years later he came under the influence of Christianity and decided to separate himself from the wild life. He then spent his time working for the nuns on the convent farm, having accepted the name of "Adam". He became the messenger between the Mother House and the convent sanatorium, the "Mater Infirmorum". In all weathers he walked to and from the town carrying post and many parcels. At that time there were no bridges over the Buffalo River and often Adam risked his life going over the deeply submerged stepping stones; and what did it matter if the water reached waist high – he was not a man easily stopped by obstacles.⁴ Well known to every Sister, Adam had for each a characteristic name which in his Xhosa language sounded like running water. He had taken on himself the duty to dig the graves in the convent cemetery, and as soon as one grave was filled he faithfully dug the next. In November 1929 he developed pneumonia and died "fortified by the rites of Holy Church" on the 17th of that month. He is buried in the cemetery near the many graves he himself had made.

At another time a black man found his way into the interior of convent. The entire community was quickly on the spot to evict him. Though he terrified the Sisters he chuckled at the sight of their combined effort and walked out at the main entrance.

The belligerent Xhosas plundered the surrounding farms, killing the farmers and their sons, but in many instances allowing the women to escape. It was related that many a mother rushing from her farm on

¹ Former separate colony, although under the governor of the Cape of Good Hope.

² A range north of King William's Town. Its highest peaks reach about 2000 metres.

³ These were the Xhosa nation. Europeans could not get their tongues round the click with which the name begins, so pronounced "Kosa". They were originally known as the Abanguni tribe, after an early ruler named Mnguni, of whom virtually nothing is known. A successor of his, at some later date, was known as Xhosa, from whom the tribe has taken its new designation.

⁴ On 26th October 1910, Sister Constantia Wittmann went across the Buffalo River at Izeli to collect fruit for Mother Perpetua Wannorsdorfer's feast day. The errand took longer than expected, and meanwhile the river had become swollen from a sudden storm further up its course. On her way home Sister found the stepping stones already submerged. As she hastened to cross, she slipped and was drowned in the turbulent stream. Sister Constantia was skilled in spinning lambs' wool and weaving it into lengths of cloth. These were used for making the Sisters' Habits in the early days, when it was sometimes difficult to import white serge from abroad.

hearing of the approach of the fierce warriors, hastily dressed her young sons as girls, and fled with her increased number of daughters, while the menfolk delayed with their guns and sandbags the approaching enemy. But in spite of these terrors, the Africans did no harm to the Sisters.

There was great excitement among the nuns and their pupils on the day Doctor John Patrick Fitzgerald,⁵ MRCS (Eng.), M.D. (Glasgow), Superintendent of Grey Hospital and friend of the Sisters, brought the captive Chief Kreli⁶ and his retinue on a visit to the Convent. In full dress, with beaded arms and legs, large ostrich plumes in his headgear, a gorgeous blanket covering his beaded body and loin cloth – but without shield and spear – he formed a magnificent sight. His retinue behind him were similarly attired, but without the splendour of their Chief.

It required no little courage on part of the nuns not to flee from their honourable guests in broken ranks. But Mother Mauritia calmly welcomed the Chief and his followers. The pupils of the school sang a chorus, during which a smile softened the stern features of the warriors. Yet the Sisters were glad when the gate closed behind their visitors, and it was long before they could banish from their minds the picture of those sparkling black eyes. In the heart of the energetic Mother Mauritia there awoke a great longing to evangelise these pagans. This yearning would be fulfilled in God's own good time.

The war brought many hardships to the little community. All the farms in the district had been pillaged and provisions were at a premium. Drought conditions of the worst type prevailed. A typhoid epidemic broke out which brought the Sub-Prioress to the brink of the grave, while Mary Grady, one of the first boarders to enter the school, died of the fever on 8th December 1879.

In spite of the war progress and work continued at the Convent. Mr Albert Deiringer made a new altar for the chapel to replace the rickety brick and wood structure which had been in use since the Sisters' arrival. After this altar had been replaced by the marble altar at the Mother House, it was used at various later foundations until it was attacked by the wood-worm and had to be consigned to the flames. St Hyacinth's stained-glass window in the present convent church commemorates the many generous deeds of Mr Deiringer.

On the first anniversary of the Sisters' departure from St Ursula's, Father Widershofen SJ erected the Stations of the Cross in the Nuns' chapel. They were a gift from Canon Soratroy of Augsburg, and they remained in use until 1928 when they were sent to St Joseph's Mission Church in Durban Street.

By the end of 1878 the number of pupils on the roll had risen to two hundred and it was evident that a wing should be added to the central section of the convent. Like the original building it was made of local stone and consisted of three classrooms on the ground floor. These could easily be converted into a large hall as occasion demanded.⁷ A large room on the upper storey served as a dormitory for the boarders. This west wing facing north and south was completed in 1879.

⁵ *The Chief Medical Superintendent of Hospitals in British Kaffraria in 1856, had known Sir George Grey in New Zealand and received his appointment from him. He developed medical and hospital services in Kaffraria at the time of the great cattle killing disaster in 1857. It was during this crisis period that Black Women were employed for the first time as paid nursing assistants. True to the ideal that education and medical science would reduce the influence and power of witchcraft over the Bantu which had motivated the cattle killing, Dr Fitzgerald organised elementary courses of nurse-training. Although to Lovedale Hospital, in 1908, fell the distinction of training the first Bantu woman, Cecilia Makiwane, to qualify as a nurse, it is Dr Fitzgerald who became known as the "Father" of Bantu Nursing Education in South Africa. For 35 years he was Honorary Surgeon and Superintendent of Grey Hospital, King William's Town. He died at an advanced age at Ramsgate, England, in 1897. He was succeeded by Dr CJ Egan at King William's Town.*

⁶ Paramount Chief of the Xhosas, son of Hints, born about 1818 and died 1893.

⁷ Later the Sisters' refectory.