

# PURSUIT OF LOBENGULA

by W.D. Gale

(1958)



**Major Allan Wilson (third from left) and some of the men of his patrol**

With only his burning kraal to signify his recognition of defeat, Lobengula had sought the safety of the boundless veld, and with him were his impis. They had been worsted in their encounters with the white men, but they had not acknowledged their conquest.

As long as they had the unifying influence of their king they would never bow the knee and they would continue to be a menace to white civilization. It was essential, Dr. Jameson reasoned, that Lobengula be captured and brought to acknowledge his victors. And the sooner the better, before he had time to reorganize his forces and attempt to regain his kingdom.

It was the worst time of year for such a campaign. The rains had broken, malaria would soon be rampant and the waterlogged veld would make progress difficult. Nevertheless the attempt had to be made, unless Lobengula could be induced to come in to Bulawayo by a message instead of an army. On November 7 Jameson wrote him the following letter:

I send this message in order, if possible, to prevent the necessity of any further killing of your people or burning of their kraals. To stop thus useless slaughter you must at once come and see me at Bulawayo, when I will guarantee that your life will be saved and that you will be kindly treated. I will allow sufficient time for this message to reach you and return to me and two days more to allow you to reach me in your wagon. Should you not then arrive I shall at once send out troops to follow you, as I am determined as soon as possible to put the country in a condition where whites and blacks can live in peace and friendliness.

The letter, which was written in English, Dutch and Zulu to ensure that it would be understood, was carried by a Cape Colony native named John Grootboom who tracked the fugitive king until he found him in the Shiloh area some thirty miles to the north of Bulawayo. Lobengula had no missionaries or traders to interpret for him now, but with him was a Coloured man, John Jacobs, with sufficient education to know how to read and write. He wrote down Lobengula's answer:

I have heard all that you have said, so I will come, but let me to ask you where are all my men which I have sent to the Cape, such as Maffett and Jonny and James, and after that the three men - Gobogobo, Mantose and Goebo - whom I sent. If I do come where will I get a house for me as all my houses is burn down, and also as soon as my men come which I have sent then I will come.

This ungrammatical ambiguity was no answer. After waiting the two extra days Jameson decided to send a strong patrol to reconnoitre the country between Inyati and Shiloh and if possible bring Lobengula back a prisoner. His call for volunteers met with a good response and the force of 320 men was composed of volunteers from the Salisbury and Victoria Columns and 150 men of the Bechuanaland Border Police and Raaff's Rangers who had reached Bulawayo ahead of the main body of the Southern Column.

With three maxims and two hundred native carriers and with Major Forbes in command, they rode out of Bulawayo shortly before sunset on November 14.

The first two days and nights it rained almost continually and the horses, which were in poor condition after the main campaign, found the sodden country heavy going. Forbes made for the London Missionary Society's station at Inyati, which had been established before the days of Thomas Baines, and found it a sorry sight. Its normal occupants had abandoned it at the beginning of the invasion and it was now occupied by a party of Matabele in charge of a large herd of cattle. They fled. The Matabele had vented their wrath on the missionaries' houses, which had been wrecked in an orgy of destruction. The veld was littered with torn books, broken furniture and ruined personal belongings.

Leaving a force of eighty men to garrison the station, Forbes went on with the remainder. This part of the country had been heavily populated and in the numerous kraals they found cattle and grain. The grain was a welcome addition to their meagre diet. The force had left Bulawayo before the arrival of the main Southern Column with its food supplies, and their rations, small enough when they had started on the pursuit, were by now almost exhausted. They had kept going with what they could find in Matabele corn bins, but now this source was almost at an end. When they reached the last of the kraals and realized that the further they went the shorter they would be of food, many of the men became discontented. They considered that the pursuit should be postponed until the food position was corrected and did not see why they should have to endure hardships that could be avoided.

Major Forbes saw their point of view, but knew that if they gave up the chase now they would never overtake Lobengula. He paraded his force and ordered the malcontents to step forward. Most of Raaff's Rangers and the Salisbury Horse did so, but the Victoria Column stood firm. The detachment of Bechuanaland Border Police, being regular soldiers, was not consulted. Forbes thereupon sent a messenger to Bulawayo asking for food and instructions and received a reply from Dr. Jameson that reinforcements and wagons carrying more ammunition and what food could be spared were being sent to Shiloh. There Forbes reorganized his force.

The new provisions were sufficient to provide three-quarter rations for three hundred men for

twelve days and to see the disaffected section back to Bulawayo. Forbes composed his new force of Captain Borrow and twenty-two men of the Salisbury Horse, Major Wilson and seventy mounted and a hundred dismounted men of the Victoria Column, Captain Raaff and twenty men of the Rangers and Captain Coventry and seventy-eight men of the Bechuanaland Border Police.

Soon after leaving Shiloh the scouts found Lobengula's wagon tracks and followed them for eight miles through thick bush. There were other signs that they were hot on the trail - camp fires whose ashes were still hot, pots and calabashes hastily abandoned, the charred remains of two of the king's wagons which had broken down and been destroyed. It was evident that Lobengula and his warriors were making for the Shangani river.

The further they went the more difficult conditions became. They were drenched by storm after storm, and the veld became so waterlogged that the oxen pulling the wagons carrying their provisions gave up the struggle and collapsed. Forbes decided that the wagons were a hindrance. Forming a flying column of a hundred and sixty men, he sent the rest with the wagons to a place called Umhlangeni to await their return.

The flying column pushed ahead with greater speed. On the evening of November 30, Johan Colenbrander, who had been scouting, brought in an induna he had known when he had lived at the king's kraal. The induna said the Matabele had become dispirited through defeat, starvation, exposure to the constant rain and the ravages of smallpox and most of them wanted to surrender. But remnants of three of Lobengula's best regiments, the Insukameni, the Ihlati and the Siseba, were still loyal to the king and were covering his retreat.

On December 3 the column reached the bank of the Shangani river. They were very close on the king's heels now. Across the river they could see a number of natives frantically driving the last of their cattle in the wake of an impi. They had evidently only just crossed, for on the column's side was evidence of a Matabele encampment with the fires still smouldering. But had the king himself crossed the river or had he gone further along the bank? It was essential to know. Forbes decided to form a laager on open ground about two hundred yards back from the river while a small patrol went across the river to reconnoitre the further bank. He selected Major Allan Wilson, commander of the Victoria Column, to lead a patrol of twelve men.

When Wilson and his men had disappeared into the bush on the other side, Forbes interrogated a captured native. From him he learnt that Lobengula was ill and that with him were some three thousand warriors from different regiments who were determined that he should not be taken prisoner. If reports that the Matabele morale was low were correct, Forbes planned to make a rush the next day, capture the king and at once turn back for Bulawayo. They had now been out for nine days, their rations were dwindling and if they were to get back to their wagons and food supplies in time they would have to move swiftly.

He expected Wilson and his men to return in a couple of hours, but the afternoon wore on and darkness came without a sign of the missing patrol. In the meantime Forbes had received a report that the bulk of Lobengula's warriors, under his chief induna, Mjaan, had turned back and intended to attack the column that night.

It was a dark night and rain fell at intervals. At about nine o'clock an alert picket heard the sound of horses and aroused the laager. Two men rode in who told Forbes that the patrol had followed Lobengula's wagon spoor for some five miles and that Wilson considered the prospects of capturing the king were so good he had decided not to return that night. He wanted Forbes to send more men and a maxim in the morning. Two hours later Captain Napier and two troopers reached

the laager and reported that the patrol had got close to the bush enclosure protecting the king and his wagon but had had to retreat to prevent themselves from being surrounded and had taken up a position in the bush to wait for daylight.

On neither occasion did Wilson state exactly what he wanted, although Napier said he thought he expected the rest of the column to cross the river and join him so that they could make a daylight raid on the enclosure at dawn. This Forbes refused to do. He expected a Matabele attack on his position, and he could not endanger his whole force by crossing the river in darkness, cutting off his retreat and presenting his back to the enemy. He did not want to recall Wilson since he was obviously in a good position to capture Lobengula, and if this opportunity were lost it would never recur. He compromised by sending Captain Borrow and twenty men to reinforce the patrol, and thus made his mistake. The patrol was now too large to be merely a reconnoitring force and too small for the dangerous task of trying to capture the king in defiance of the Matabele impis. But it strengthened Wilson's resolve to undertake his suicidal mission.

At daybreak Wilson and his thirty-two men approached Lobengula's enclosure. The wagon was still there, but when Wilson called on the king to surrender there was no answer. In the ominous silence they realized that during the night he had continued his flight. All hope of capturing him had gone.

Then came the development they had all been expecting and dreading. In the half-light they heard the clicking of rifle bolts and from behind a tree stepped a warrior wearing the induna's heading. He fired his rifle. It was the signal for a scattered volley which intensified as more warriors came running through the bush. Most of the shots went over their heads, but two horses went down. A trooper, Dillon, ran to them, cut off the saddle pockets carrying ammunition and regained his horse as Wilson gave the order to retreat to an anthep behind which they had sheltered the previous night.

They reached it without losing a man. As horses were shot down their riders jumped up behind men still mounted or ran alongside holding the stirrup irons. The volume of Matabele fire steadily increased and the exposed position of the anthep became untenable. Wilson ordered a retirement into the trees, and as they went the rearguard, firing with cool accuracy, kept the Matabele at bay. But the Matabele were in no hurry. They had the white men at their mercy and could take their time.

Several men had been wounded and a number of them were dismounted. Wilson grouped these in the centre and started off slowly for the river in the hope that some at least might reach the main Column. For nearly a mile they marched without harm, their progress dogged by warriors keeping pace among the trees. Then they saw that their path was barred by a line of warriors waiting for them to come closer. An attempt to break through that barrier would mean sacrificing the wounded. That was unthinkable. They would face it together.

Three men, however, got away. An American and two Australians galloped unscathed through the Matabele line, threw off their pursuers by doubling on their tracks and reached the bank of the Shangani in safety. Shortly after leaving the patrol they heard heavy firing and the shouting of hundreds of warriors as they attacked Wilson and his men. When they reached the river they saw that there was no hope whatever for the patrol. Heavy rains upstream had swollen the waters of the river and now it was in flood, and rising every minute. They managed to get across only with the greatest difficulty.

The subsequent fate of the Wilson patrol, whose bones now rest beneath their memorial on the

Matopo hill on which Cecil Rhodes lies buried, was gathered afterwards from Matabele sources. They had selected a clearing among the trees for their last stand and, some standing, some kneeling, poured a hot fire in all directions. The Matabele had the advantage of better cover and took time to aim accurately and make their shots tell. But so calmly and steadily did the patrol fight back that in spite of the bush and the trees they took a heavy toll of the enemy.



**Painting of the Shangani Patrol's last stand**

At one stage in the fight, said the Matabele, they had offered the white men their lives provided they laid down their arms and surrendered. Their offer was scornfully rejected. There would be no surrender.

The patrol used their dead horses as cover, but their number steadily dwindled. Many were killed outright, and the wounded went on fighting until they lost consciousness. The fight went on until late in the afternoon. Just before the end the few surviving white men staggered to their feet, sang a few bars of "God Save the Queen", shook hands with each other, and waited for the end. It was not long in coming. The Matabele charged them with their assegais, and gave no quarter. One last man escaped for a few precious minutes, gained the top of an anthill a few yards away and shot down several Matabele before a bullet smashed his hip. He was still firing a revolver as the assegais ended his life.

There were no survivors, and this is the proud epitaph on their memorial. No one knew of their fate until two months later, when James Dawson, the trader, was led to the spot by a party of natives and found their skeletons. The trees all round were scored by bullet marks. The Matabele spoke of them reverently and had been so impressed by their bravery that they had refrained from mutilating their bodies and had left them where they fell. Dawson dug a large grave and gave them temporary burial close to a tree on which he cut a cross and the words, "To Brave Men". Their bones were later interred at Zimbabwe, since they had all come from Fort Victoria, and in 1904 removed to the Matopos, to the hilltop "consecrated and set apart for ever for those who had deserved well of their country."



The night before this fateful day of December 4, 1893, Lobengula, accompanied by three of his sons, some of his wives and a few faithful indunas, including Mjaan, lumbered northwards in his wagon. He no longer feared pursuit, but he was a broken man, sick in body and soul, and with his kingdom destroyed he

had no will to live. They got to within forty miles of the Zambezi, and there they ran into a belt of tsetse fly. The oxen perished and in that inhospitable country they were stranded. Lobengula died towards the end of January, and the evidence found on his grave site when it was officially discovered and examined in 1946 suggests that he took poison.

So passed the last of the great native despots of Southern Africa, son of the founder of the Matabele nation. And as he died one wonders whether he remembered the prophetic words he had uttered to Thomas Baines more than twenty years before: "You may promise fairly now, but in future time when you are strongly established you may forget your promise and exceed the liberty I have given." He knew then that, inevitably, his way of life was doomed .

When the reinforcements had left to join Allan Wilson's patrol, Major Forbes reorganized his laager and waited for the expected Matabele attack. It did not come. When daylight came he prepared to move down to the river bank and cross the Shangani to the help of Wilson, but as they were nearing the bank they came under fire from bush some three hundred yards to their left. They were pinned down for more than an hour, when the enemy fire slackened. They retired slowly until they reached the shelter of a strip of bush six hundred yards back, where they were able to dig in while the medical officer attended to five men of the Bechuanaland Border Police who had been wounded. At intervals during the fighting they had heard the sounds of battle on the other side of the river, but realized that the rising Shangani made it impossible for them to go to the rescue.

They remained in their new position all day, and when darkness fell two troopers were sent with a verbal message from Forbes to Dr. Jameson telling him that the Column was retreating to the main drift on the Shangani river and asking for more food and ammunition. Shortly after dark a storm burst over them and they spent a miserable night. During the height of the storm their slaughter oxen, on which they depended for their main food supply, were terrified by the thunder and stampeded into the bush.

Next morning the Column began its retreat and the Matabele did not impede its going. But their main enemy now was the threat of real hunger. Their rations were almost exhausted and the loss of their slaughter oxen meant that they had no reserve. Many of the men, also, were suffering from malaria. Their clothes were in rags and their boots, constantly wet, were falling to pieces. Their horses, also, were weakened by lack of adequate grazing and were almost useless for work. The men had to manhandle the maxims across difficult stretches.

Groups of Matabele were dogging their progress. On December 10 they were struggling through broken country of rugged hills, thick bush and long grass when they entered a deep dry gully. It gave good cover for the horses and Forbes decided to let them rest and graze. After a few minutes they came under a heavy fire. Warriors had crept up through the grass until they got close to the horses, and several animals were stabbed to death before the Column could take action. It was difficult to see the enemy in the long grass and all the troopers could do was to take pot shots at the smoke puffs rising above the grass. After about an hour of desultory firing the Matabele withdrew. The Column lost eight horses but only one man - a Bechuanaland Border Police sergeant who was shot dead while sitting near his maxim.

Two miles further on they reached a small valley lying across their path. The men manhandling the guns were halfway down a steep bank when a party of Matabele among rocks on their right flank opened fire. They dragged the guns back to the top again while the rest of the Column returned the fire, but a heavy thunderstorm put an end to the fight. Night was coming on and Forbes decided to laager where they were.

Their plight was desperate. The Matabele could harass them at will in this difficult country, made infinitely worse by the rains. Men and horses were steadily becoming more exhausted from the strain of a forced march on empty stomachs. Their hunger became so compelling that they were forced to slaughter some of the horses, which they ate with a seasoning of wild root with a garlic flavour.

It was Johannes Raaff, drawing on his considerable experience of native warfare, who found a way out of their predicament. Twenty of the most useless horses were left behind, and a tree trunk was propped under a bush to resemble a maxim. The gun carriages were abandoned and the dogs with them were quietly knocked on the head. With each of the maxims balanced across the saddle of a horse and a man holding it on either side, they started at about ten o'clock that night to move quietly down the slope and along the valley. The men were so worn out that whenever there was a halt they promptly fell asleep and when dragged to their feet again went on mechanically. When dawn came they were clear of the bush and hills and could see the Shangani river in the distance.

Raaff's ruse was effective. The Matabele wasted a good deal of ammunition and several hours before they found that their victims had escaped. They overtook them the following day and there was a sharp engagement in which two policemen were wounded. This was the final encounter. The Column avoided possible ambushes and after two more days and nights of forced marching, in the last stages of exhaustion and despair, they were found by two scouts of the relief force which had set out to look for them. With the relief were Rhodes and Dr. Jameson. Their ordeal was over. Three days later they reached Bulawayo, and here Johannes Raaff paid the price of fatigue and exposure. He imprudently ate a heavy meal, was taken ill and died on January 26, 1894.

With active campaigning at an end the Matabele drifted back to their villages. One of them reported that before Forbes's Column reached the Shangani, Lobengula had decided, in a last effort to halt the pursuit, that if they would not stop for anything else, they might stop for money. He had accordingly sent two messengers, Petchan and Sehuloholu, with a box of sovereigns and orders to intercept the Column. They were to say that the king admitted he had been conquered, and that the white men were to take the money and turn back. The two messengers met the Column the day before it reached the Shangani, hid in the bush until it went by and then followed and gave the money to two men in the rear guard. This incident had not been reported by any member of the Column.

Suspicion fell on two men, Daniels and Wilson, both officers' servants who had not been members of the rear guard that day, though it was possible that they had dropped to the rear. Soon after the Column's return they had been seen to be in possession of large amounts of gold. Daniels explained that he had won the money at cards and Wilson said he had brought his money with him. They had both bought farm rights from various members of the invading forces and had paid for them in cash.

A point in favour of the two men was a statement by Sehuloholu that the man to whom he had given the money could speak his language well. Neither Daniels nor Wilson knew Sindabele. The only man knowing the language who had been in the main body of the Column that day was the hospital orderly, and he had never been in the rear guard.

Indignation over this report ran high. It was generally considered that had the receipt of the money, and Lobengula's message, been reported Forbes might have been induced to turn back on reaching the Shangani, and the tragedy of the Wilson Patrol would have been avoided. The circumstantial evidence against Daniels and Wilson was too strong to be ignored. They were tried by the Resident Magistrate and four assessors at Bulawayo, found guilty and sentenced to

fourteen years' imprisonment with hard labour.

But the High Commissioner's legal experts pointed out that the magistrate's powers did not entitle him to pass sentences of more than three months' imprisonment. They also considered that the conviction was against the weight of evidence. The sentences were afterwards quashed and the men released. The identity of the Sindebele speaker alleged to have received the money was never established, nor, beyond the Matabele statements, was it ever proved that there had been a box of sovereigns, which, of course, could have been part of the payments for the Rudd Concession. It is inconceivable that the Matabele would have invented the story, and Lobengula's unflattering view that the white men might stop for money rings true. The whole incident remains a dark blot on the pages of Rhodesia's story.

A question that intrigued the pioneer population when the fate of Allan Wilson's patrol became known was why so many officers were permitted to accompany him across the Shangani river. Major Forbes had granted him the privilege of picking his own men, and it was only natural that the officers of the Victoria Column - many of them his own personal friends, men he had known in civilian life - should clamour for the honour of helping him to capture Lobengula. Dr. Jameson paid Allan Wilson a tribute when he reported officially on the Shangani episode.

Major Allan Wilson was one of the most gifted leaders of men I have met. Personally brave to rashness, yet extremely careful and considerate of the men under his command, it followed that the men would go anywhere with him. It is to this hero worship of Wilson, so well deserved, that I attribute the large number of officers who accompanied him on that last fatal reconnaissance.

Jameson's first task, now that hostilities were finally over, was to secure the complete surrender of the Matabele and to establish suitable conditions for white and black to live together in amity. The main need was to impress on the Matabele the fact that they had been conquered, that their military system could no longer be allowed to exist and that their impis must be disbanded. The first essential was to compel them to surrender all the weapons in their possession, especially their rifles and ammunition, not only to impress on them the fact of their defeat but also to ensure the safety of the white population. Jameson sent messengers round the kraals to announce that only those who surrendered their arms would be allowed to return to their villages and proceed with the cultivation of their crops.

At first the response was good but after a few weeks the Matabele seemed to be holding back. As long as the fate of Lobengula was unknown (and it was not discovered until a long time afterwards) and as long as the impis with him remained in the field, there was the hope that he might try to regain his kingdom. And as long as this hope existed the Matabele wanted to retain their weapons. This reasoning compelled Jameson to see that a sufficient police force was organized to maintain law and order and to hold what had been won. His appeal for volunteers met with a good response and he formed a civil police force of a hundred and fifty men in addition to four hundred Bechuanaland Border Police who were posted for duty in Matabeleland. Garrisons were established at Inyati and on the fringes of the Matopo Hills, and patrols supervised the task of disarmament and took possession of cattle belonging to Lobengula, which were confiscated by the Company. These cattle were subsequently returned to the Matabele for custody pending a final settlement of the cattle question.

But the men on the spot were not allowed to handle their own affairs. In Britain the "Exeter Hall" party, led by Henry Labouchere, editor of "Truth" and a member of the House of Commons, which had long been vehemently critical of the British South Africa Company and all its works, was



roused to new heights of clamorous indignation by the invasion of Matabeleland. Jameson's order that they would not be allowed to cultivate their crops until they had surrendered their arms was seized upon as an example of oppression. The Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Ripon, instructed the High Commissioner, Sir Henry Loch, to notify the Company that the surrender of arms was to be construed "in a very liberal spirit".

Jameson was compelled to countermand his instructions for the disarmament of the Matabele. They therefore buried their rifles and ammunition and assegais and waited for the day when they would attempt to re-establish their old savage way of life. That day, when it came less than three years later, subjected the pioneer settlers of Rhodesia to the severest test that could have been devised.

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