

SISTER DORA OF WALSALL

Following the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854, Florence Nightingale, then working in London, volunteered to take a group of nurses and establish a hospital in Scutari to care for wounded and dying soldiers. Among those who wanted to join her was Dorothy Pattison, a twenty-two year old from Yorkshire. Her father, however, refused to let her go because of her responsibilities at home, particularly in respect of her invalid mother.

The Rev Mark Pattison was rector of East Hauxwell near Richmond in North Yorkshire, where on 16th January 1832 his eleventh child, Dorothy, was born. Though rather sickly, she was a bright, fun-loving, mischievous little girl who brought delight to her parents, and joy to her neighbours. Her father called her '*his sunshine*', and friends remembered her for her laughter and singing. She was an observant child, interested in what went on around her, and always looking on the bright side. The Pattison family were much loved in the village, and would frequently visit the parishioners with food or money to help where there was need. Dorothy enjoyed doing this and quickly became a favourite amongst the people. By the time she was twenty she had become a beautiful and strong young lady, but mostly stayed at home with her sister, looking after their mother. From time to time she would visit local towns, and in Redcar came into contact with a secular sisterhood, the Good Samaritans, who ran a convalescent home in nearby Coatham, as well as working in other parts of the country.

When her mother died, Dorothy found the quiet and solitude of village life increasingly tedious, and looked for something that would give her satisfaction. Initially she considered joining the sisterhood, but her father disapproved. Then in October 1861, she responded to a clergyman's advertisement for a schoolmistress in Little Woolston in Buckinghamshire where she stayed for nearly three years. There she endeared herself to the people of the village, not only because of her love for the children and her teaching ability, but also for her concern for the people themselves, visiting them in their homes and nursing them when they were sick. This experience was to stand her in good stead in the years that followed. However, due perhaps to overwork or to neglect of her own health, she fell ill and was forced to resign. She was sent to Redcar to recover, and returned to Little Woolston only to say goodbye to her friends.

In the autumn of 1864, against the wishes of family and friends, she joined the Good Samaritans, adopting the name 'Sister Dora'. Dorothy found the training very hard though in later years acknowledged how profitable it had been. In early 1865 she was sent to Walsall in Staffordshire, to work in a new fourteen-bed hospital. The people there were somewhat suspicious of a 'Sister' working amongst them, believing the organisation to be Roman Catholic, and Dorothy suffered physical persecution during her first few months. Despite this, apart from a few breaks doing home nursing, she remained in Walsall for the rest of her life. At the end of 1865, Dorothy received news that her father was very ill, and requested permission to go

to him. This was refused as she was being sent to Devon to nurse a private patient. Hardly had she arrived there than word came of his death and, reluctantly, she was allowed to attend the funeral, if she wished. She replied that as she had not been able to see him when he was alive, she no longer cared to do so now he was dead. Despite the pleadings of her family, she remained in Devon, but from then on she became increasingly resentful towards the sisterhood.

On her return to Walsall, Sister Dora, as we shall now call her, threw herself into hospital work with vigour and enthusiasm, her lack of knowledge in nursing skills being quickly rectified under the guidance of an older colleague. '*Nobody*', she said, '*could possibly be more ignorant than I was; I had everything to learn.*' As Walsall was an industrial town many of the in-patients had suffered from accidents in coal mine or machinery workshop. In addition, many came to the out-patients department for treatment to minor injuries. As the reputation of the hospital grew, the medical staff often called on the nursing staff for help, and Sister Dora began to develop surgical skills, soon setting simple fractures under the doctor's supervision.

Though brought up in the Church of England, and to all outward appearances a Christian, Sister Dora does not appear to have been converted until her mid-twenties. During her stay in Little Woolston, she had been attacked with doubts about the authenticity and inspiration of the Scriptures, and struggled for some time over this. Only after her doubts were alleviated, through the influence of the minister of the church which she attended in Walsall, did she put her trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Then the desire to express the reality of her faith in her life became apparent, and she determined to devote herself to the service of her Saviour.

In 1867, because the premises were inadequate for the growing town, a new hospital was built with 28 beds, Sister Dora being put in charge of the nursing department. She became concerned for the many accident victims being admitted with limbs so badly damaged that amputation seemed the only course open. One evening a young man was brought in with his arm badly twisted and torn. When the doctor recommended amputation, the man's look of despair so affected Sister Dora that he, seeing the pity in her expression, pleaded with her to save it. She persuaded the doctor to let her try, but he warned that he would offer no help if things went wrong. For three weeks she tended the arm night and day, and when she called him to look at it, the doctor was astonished to see a straight, healthy limb which he said '*will be a useful arm for many years to come.*' The young man became known as 'Sister's arm' and frequently returned to the hospital to see the one who had made his life worth living. '*How I prayed over that arm*', Sister Dora recalled. With the agreement of the hospital authorities, she now began to take in pupil nurses for a few months at a time to teach them surgery.

Sister Dora's Christian faith undergirded her work. Speaking to a friend she said, '*all who serve here, in whatever capacity, ought to have one rule, love for God.*' She spoke to her staff upon the absolute necessity of constant private prayer, expressing her conviction that no blessing could attend the hospital unless those who worked in it

fulfilled their duty in this respect. Indeed, she herself prayed not of duty but with the conviction that God would answer prayer. Often she would pray through the night by the bedside of a patient. She would not touch a wound without praying for God's healing hand upon it. She would not set a fracture without praying that God would unite the bones. The routine of the hospital was surrounded by prayer, both in the public wards and in her own private room. On Sunday afternoons, a service was held in the hospital to which not only current but former patients would come along. Afterwards Sister Dora would spend time teaching her listeners from the Scriptures, drawing out practical lessons from them. After Moody and Sankey visited Birmingham in 1872, she introduced their hymn-book to the wards, and many happy hours were spent singing. The study of the Scriptures was a life-time habit for her. She always carried a pocket Bible with her and would often use quiet moments in the hospital routine to turn to it. When in March 1873 a mission was held in the town, she took a very active part in it.

In 1874 the sisterhood at Coatham relinquished its responsibility for the hospital, and Sister Dora took over the running of it independently. A few months later a small-pox epidemic struck the town, and for six months, working almost single-handedly in an isolation hospital, she gave her love and care to the patients' health and comfort, not forgetting their spiritual welfare also. She was not able to attend her church and very much missed the fellowship there, but kept in touch by writing. When she finally returned to her normal work, she admitted to being somewhat disappointed that she had not been thought worthy to lay down her life for others.

In October 1875, twelve men injured in a blast furnace accident were brought into the hospital with extensive burns. A ward was cleared so that all could be cared for together, and for ten days Sister Dora, with the help of one or two other ladies, looked after them. Only two survived, one of whom remarked afterwards, *'It did you good only to look at her...What we felt for her I couldn't tell you; my tongue wont say it.'* At the end of the year, the hospital was hit by an infection which stubbornly refused to yield to treatment, and it was decided to demolish the building erecting a new larger hospital to meet the continual growth in population. Temporary premises were acquired in the meantime. In November 1876 a week-long mission was held in the parish and Sister Dora took part with great enthusiasm. As well as running meetings for cab-drivers, she took the Gospel message to the street women in the worst slums of the town, and after the mission was over continued for some weeks to hold midnight classes for them.

During that winter Sister Dora began to experience difficulty lifting patients and was diagnosed as suffering from an incurable and ultimately fatal disease. She refused surgical treatment which she knew might not be successful, and carried on with her work. She told no one of the disease, and only felt the increasing urgency of work and witness in the time remaining for her. When asked for advice on witnessing she told a friend *'When you want to lead any one to Jesus, remember you must point, and take care not to stand in the way.'* In December 1877, sensing that this would be her last Christmas, she gave a dinner for her old patients and many of them came to enjoy

the party. Despite her suffering, she extended her radius of work to towns and villages up to ten miles away, visiting many of her old patients and witnessing to new ones in their homes. A friend wrote after her death *'Sinners sought her help from various parts. She ever had a true woman's loving, sympathising heart and no one in distress who sought counsel of her, ever applied in vain.'*

By 1878 the disease was progressing more rapidly, and in June she took a fortnight's holiday. On returning to Walsall she found that an outbreak of typhoid fever had closed the temporary hospital, and as the new building would not be ready until October she decided to visit family and friends. However she became so ill that she insisted on returning to Walsall to die amongst her own people. She still would not reveal the nature of her illness though it was widely recognised that she was dying. Yet amongst her former patients in the town the conviction was *'Her'll get well, her never can be going to die!'* On 4th November, from her bed, she handed to the Mayor the key to the new hospital which he opened in her name, and a month later a new sister-in-charge was appointed, much to Sister Dora's delight. She died on 24th December, amidst much sorrow and sadness, and many of the people of the town attended the funeral which took place four days later.

Dorothy Pattison was much loved, especially by the poorer people of Walsall. True, she could at times be very stubborn, and she trusted no one but herself, finding it difficult to hand over responsibility to others. But she had a deep love for her patients, pushing herself to the limit to ensure that they received the best possible treatment. She was always optimistic, had a ready wit, was naturally cheerful, and had the ability to remember faces. She also had the facility for telling stories to interest and amuse them. Above all she was concerned for the souls of staff and patients, never cramming religion down their throats but waiting patiently for the right moment to present the gospel of salvation. Many who came into the hospital as scoffers, or at best indifferent to religion, went out convinced that Jesus is the Christ. To a friend shortly before she died she said, *'If I went back to teach patients again, I should dwell more than ever on the necessity of building our hopes on Jesus only.'* So she lived and so she died.

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