



CHAPTER II

Sentence of Death

THE dreadful discovery of the nature and extent of the malady from which Mrs. Booth was suffering came upon us with the suddenness and certainty of a sentence of death. From the beginning she accepted it as such. Indeed, in those earliest days of deep sorrow on account of our impending loss, she alone, perhaps, of all her family and personal friends, was able to view the end with the calm and peace of a great soul looking beyond the coming suffering to the glory which should also be revealed. To those around her it was as a bolt from the blue.

Towards the end of 1887 Mrs. Booth had seemed in about her usual health. During the year, the serious illness of her daughter, Eva, had brought an unusually heavy tax upon her, and this had, no doubt, lowered her strength and rendered her, perhaps, a little more nervous than usual. But generally speaking, she seemed even better in some respects than during the previous year, when, for some months, she was entirely laid aside from public work. And yet, when viewed in the light of subsequent events, it is no doubt possible to discern something of changes which were certainly going forward, and indications of the gathering clouds that subsequently proved so dark.

Concerning the circumstances immediately surrounding the sad announcement, I take the following from my own pen.

“It was during the Two Days with God at Bristol, early in February, 1888, that I first heard of the small swelling which had just been observed in my dear mother’s breast. I was instantly startled. The impression made upon my mind as a child by the suffering and death of her mother from cancer has never been effaced, and I instinctively associated this swelling with something of the kind. I urged that the best possible advice should be obtained at once, and, although my mother did not seem at all to share my anxiety, she said that on our return to London. She would go and see some able doctor. Accordingly a few days after she reached home an appointment was made through Dr. Heywood Smith with Sir James Paget.



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"It was on Tuesday, February 21st, that she came home from the West End, after her interview with the doctors, and sought out the Founder who was in his room writing. He has spoken to me many times of that meeting on that dim wintry afternoon, and of the tender, careful way she broke to him the tidings, which had come upon her with such ruthless surprise an hour or two before, of the inevitable parting which she saw and felt must come. Sir James Paget had been very kind, but also very frank; he advised an immediate operation, foretold much suffering, and seems to think that nothing could be done too alleviate it. She was strangely calm, had driven all across London quite alone, and spoke of the future as only she could. Her first thought, after hearing the opinion of the medical men, had been that she would not now be there to tend the Founder when illness and suffering drew near! It was a moment of deepest human sorrow when these two bowed together before the Lord in the solitude, and asked for power and faith to say "Thy will be done."

'That night the Founder was to leave for one of his Continental journeys. Important and long expected Meetings in Holland had been arranged, and Mrs. Booth would not hear of his remaining. On the way to the railway station he came to Headquarters in order to confer with me. I can never forget my feelings when I understood the report of the doctors. My heart stood still. Mrs. Booth had been so much more than a mother – had been so much of a Leader, adviser and counsellor, that it seemed impossible to spare her. How could the War go on without her? The Founder desired me to make some inquiries for him of the doctors, and after praying with me for strength and courage he started for Amsterdam by the night train.

'I left at once for Notting Hill to lead a Half-Night of Prayer. I was deeply exercised. The long ride across the city was filled with the darkest and most sorrowful thoughts, and in the Meeting I found it impossible to throw off my burden. I struggled hard to get hold of my audience – a large and interested one – but in great part failed, I fear. In the second Meeting, when after inviting seekers after Holiness to come to the penitent-form and several had responded, I spoke to one – I received one of the great lessons of my lifetime from her lips. She was a woman of middle life, apparently a Christian of many years' experience, but now deeply moved, and all she could say amidst her sobs, evidently with reference to some matter of controversy, was, "O Lord, I want to be willing – make me willing – let me be willing." I knelt down beside her. All the



gathering storm seemed already to be bursting over me; all that my beloved mother had been and was and could be to me, to us all, to this great War, and to the world crowded itself on to the dark horizon of my soul. I can never forget those moments. Could I for myself say, "Not my will, but Thine be done"? "Lord, make me willing – let me say it," went on the praying and crying seeker by my side – and at last I cried it also, I joined my prayers to hers. She knew perhaps nothing but that I seemed to meet her at the level on which she stood and help her to a higher, while to me her spoken distress and agony of soul were made a guide and beacon amid the storm and darkness of a terrible trial of my faith.

'The next morning I saw Dr. Heywood Smith and Mr. Jonathan Hutchinson, the eminent surgeon to whom Sir James Paget had also referred us for an opinion. They both urged an operation. The latter spoke most strongly, and added that so important was instantaneous action that he would not be willing to operate unless he could do so within a fortnight. I made anxious and careful inquiries from these gentlemen and from others who were likely to have information as to the results of operation in cases of cancer. It did not seem to me that those results justified the very strong opinions expressed in its favour. There was a great deal of uncertainty. Mrs. Booth herself was strongly opposed to an operation. She did not accept the theory of the disease on which alone it can be of any real service to cut, and in all her long experience she had never met one case in which the use of the knife had not apparently increased the sufferings of the patient, even if life was prolonged for a few months.

'Immediately on the Founder's return from Holland there was a consultation of the whole family with one or two of our most intimate friends at Stamford Hill, when a decision was taken as to the course we should adopt. In the meantime Dr. Kidd, who had attended Mrs. Booth's mother in her last illness, had also seen her, and we had been in communication with the one or two medical men who strongly favoured the Mattei remedies. They seemed very hopeful of at least alleviating the more severe suffering, even if they could not effect a cure. Long and anxious consultations took place. Prayer and fasting, accompanied by deepest self-abasement, and I believe, truest resignation, preceded every one of these conferences, and, with the fullest concurrence of the dear sufferer herself, it was at last decided finally to abandon the idea of operating, and to give the Mattei remedies a trial. I have no sort of doubt that the decision as to



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the knife would have been the same had we never heard of the Mattei system, for although Mrs. Booth had more faith in it than any others of us, she was so strongly and firmly opposed to the old-fashioned method of treating cancer, that it is practically certain she would never have consented to be operated upon. To some extent we around her were also influenced by the risk of operation arising from the weak condition of her heart – always an element of the greatest concern where powerful anaesthetics must be used.

'We have never doubted – nor did she – that our decision was a right and wise one. Judged alone by the continuance of her life we were right, for she lived just half as long again as those who are operated upon usually do, and just twice as long as the doctors thought probable if she declined the operation.'