Dame Agnes Hunt

Believing that a fortune might be made in Queensland by breeding Angora goats, Mrs Rowland Hunt, widow of the Shropshire squire whose estate lay in fertile plains between the villages of Baschurch and Ruyton-Eleven-Towns, gathered those of her eleven children who still accepted an imperious domination and arrived in Brisbane, exactly sixty-five years ago, intent on the purchase of a desert island. No desert island was for sale. No Angora goats were in Brisbane—indeed there were none throughout the length and breadth of Australia; but Mrs Hunt refused to believe it and said that if there were no goats there ought to be. She did, however, weaken in her resolve and compromised by purchasing a fifty-acre paddock in which to rear chickens. The stock was not good, and many chickens were born with crippling deformities, but Mrs Hunt was undaunted and when she decided to amputate limbs with a carving knife and replace them with peg-legs made of Bryant and May matches it was the duty of her youngest daughter Agnes to administer the anaesthetic.

Agnes was then aged sixteen. She had been bred in a school of hard and rigid discipline. Her mother disliked children—"disliked them when they were coming, during their arrival, and most intensely after they had arrived." Her father "laughed immoderately at any accident." Her brothers induced a robust spirit of fearlessness; and the only governess who served the family with efficiency gave notice because the children "were allowed to kill themselves in too many different ways." When Agnes was aged ten she developed septicaemia and infective arthritis of the hip joint with high fever, sinus formation, and rapid destruction and dislocation of the joint; but within nine months her bath chair was harnessed to a pony which was raced until the chair was overturned, and within twelve months she was playing ice-hockey—on a home-made sledge, keeping goal. In later years she wrote of her mother: "Her psychology of childhood amounted almost to a crime but her treatment of me as a cripple was beyond praise. I was never allowed to pity myself or consider myself different. My brothers and sisters were never made to fetch and carry for me, and I joined in their play." It is true that at this age Agnes Hunt began her "apprenticeship to crippledom and the great education of pain"; she was destined to limp her way through life with stick or crutch; but already she had learned a first principle—the joy of life despite disability—and this was to be her great contribution to medicine.

When Mrs Hunt decided that the Australian continent had failed to live up to expectation, Agnes knew that "you might as well try to stop Niagara as stop my mother when once she had made up her mind." But a proud spirit of determination in the mother had been inherited by the daughter and, when Mrs Hunt decided to return to England, Agnes Hunt decided to stay in Tasmania to look after her brother Tom. She was influenced in this decision by an accident sustained by a young man who was felling trees. "In splitting a big tree, one of the wedges slipped and the great trunk closed over his hand, holding him fast. The poor lad's axe was just out of reach. He was found dead two months later and from the marks on his wrist he had tried to gnaw his hand off. I decided to stop."

In 1887, at the age of twenty, having received three proposals of marriage in one day—"not very eligible ones" she wrote "but still rather a record," she left the Tasmanian ranch and returned home with her brother. Training as a nurse began as lady-pupil at the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Rhyl, North Wales, and the West London Hospital, Hammersmith. Her one and only term of night duty was devoted to a midnight game of catch-as-catch-can round the wardroom table, chased by an epileptic madman who threw inkpots at her while she threw jugs of water at him. At that time nurses lived in primitive conditions and engaged in astonishingly long hours of duty; the evening meal consisted of bread, cheese, and beer.

The life was hard and arduous, and was indeed a sacrifice. So impressed was this young girl with the adverse conditions under which nurses served that she made a vow: "If ever I rise to be Matron, no girl shall ever be the worse in health because of her work among the sick. This vow I kept." This vow, Dame Agnes Hunt, you did indeed keep. To-day, in the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital the prowess of a nurse in the hockey field is almost as important as her skill in the operating theatre. Never was a staff of girls more able, more happy, and more ready to give of their best.

It was in Rhyl, on the sea-coast of North Wales, that two fundamental principles of the nursing of chronic illness were learned—open air and happiness. The Royal Alexandra Hospital was perhaps the first hospital for cripples ever to advocate fresh air as an integral part of treatment; and it was the teaching of Miss Graham, one of the founders, that "no nurse is worth her salt if she has not the joy of life within her and the power of sharing it with her patients." In due course Agnes Hunt qualified. She was awarded the Queen's badge and brassard, and spent a year in Northamptonshire nursing a typhoid epidemic. After resting in bed for six months on the instruction of a heart specialist she engaged once more as a district nurse in treating five hundred victims of a smallpox epidemic.

In 1900 "mother broke it to me that she was becoming old and deaf and intended to live with me. This was rather a blow." It was a blow because at first it appeared that the daughter's career of nursing might be ended; there could be no more travel and there could be no more responsibility as a district nurse. But, on reflection, this indomitable girl realised that it might still be possible to live at home and yet to nurse—and thus began the story of Baschurch, the pioneer convalescent home from which developed and spread throughout Great Britain and the world the ideals of country orthopaedic hospitals, after-care clinics, preventive treatment, and resettlement of the disabled. Now, in 1948, the vast resources of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour are engaged in the treatment and resettlement of nearly one million disabled persons. Orthopaedic hospitals and after-care clinics have been established throughout the country. Hundreds of orthopaedic surgeons and thousands of orthopaedic nurses, physiotherapists, almoners, and resettlement officers are solving the problems of the crippled and the disabled. But what was the beginning? The beginning was: "mother intended to live with me." A small and broken-down country house with an estate of no more than three-quarters of an acre was adapted. The drainage was primitive; the garden was so run-riot that it was a jungle and became known as the lion's den; there were a few cowsheds with broken walls and leaking roofs—this was the Baschurch Convalescent Home. Very soon the accommodation was unequal to the demand and stables and cowsheds were used for sleeping quarters. The sheds were more damp and draughty within than without, so that open-air treatment was quickly enforced. The lesson had been learned in Rhyl—open air and happiness. Open air was inevitable. Happiness may be judged from the pages of "Ye Olde Baschurch Cripples' Journal," produced in 1905 by two cripples and illustrated in colour by Mrs Rowland Hunt. The total circulation was two handwritten copies. An editorial, signed by Brother Aaron, reads:

"What causes the most excitement is the picnics. We put the cripples on drays with springs and the others on wagonettes. When we have reached the spot planned, the horses are taken out and fastened to the trees and all the cripples who can't get about are put on rugs. Then we get sticks and put the kettle to boil and tea is ready in no time. We have a good game of something such as rounders. Those on crutches play as well but they are far more artful for when they are about a yard off the base they suddenly drop; of course the crutches reach it if they don't and they are let stand up as if they got there by fair means. All sing until they have hardly any breath left to sing the National Anthem. The people in the cottages all come out and by the look on their faces we could almost believe they wished to be ill just for the sake of the picnics."

There were picnics to the country and picnics to the seaside. The famous pony, Bobby, "the dearest and wickedest of ponies," made history for himself when he was so often left in sole charge of a cargo of cripples. Sir Frederick Kenyon recorded an incident in verse. Motor cars had recently been introduced; the roads of Shropshire were narrow; and the

Baschurch Home was out for a picnic as usual. Bobby met Jonathan Hustler's new car with its rush and hoot and roar.

"Bobby thought this is something new, something very unpleasant too! It may be right but I don't quite know, so back to home I am going to go. Round he turned with his precious load, and off he set in the middle of the road. The road was narrow, the road was long; Jonathan's language grew very strong. He hooted, he tooted, he shouted, he swore; Bobby went steadily on before. The neighbours laughed to see the sight; Bobby looked neither to left nor to right; till the dray and the whole of its cripple crew, safely back to the home he drew. When Jonathan started out that day, he swore that nothing should bar his way, though police traps in every hedge were hid, no bobby should stop him. But Bobby did."

Three years later, recurrence of infection in the hip joint made it necessary for Sister Hunt to consult Robert Jones in Liverpool. For some months thereafter she was immobilised on a Jones' abduction frame. "Immobilised" is perhaps hardly the term to use in relation to Agnes Hunt even when she was secured on a spinal frame with its bars, bandages, and traction tapes. "One day," she wrote, "soon after I had returned from the Royal Southern Hospital and was still on a frame, I drove the black cob in the dray to Shrewsbury to do my Christmas shopping. I had several cripples with me, one of whom was disabled only in the arm and could climb on and off the vehicle to ask the shopkeepers to come out. As luck would have it the cob was restive and a new bobby came up and asked 'Who is in charge of this horse?' With all the dignity I could muster I replied haughtily that I was. A frame is not an instrument that adds to one's dignity and the bobby's only answer was that he considered it unsafe and must take my name and address. I told him, and thinking to impress him added that I used to live at Boreatton Park. Unfortunately he knew this place only as a private lunatic asylum; my brother had let the house for that purpose some time after my father's death. The policeman remarked acidly that it was just the sort of place he would have expected me to come from."

This association with Robert Jones was a milestone by which the Baschurch Convalescent Home became an orthopaedic hospital. McCrae Aitken was at that time house surgeon at the Royal Southern Hospital, Liverpool, and he wrote: "There arrived from time to time in the out-patient clinic a woman, an outside porter from the railway station, and a home-made handcart like a baker's tray on perambulator wheels. The cart contained crippled children, perhaps as many as eight, in various forms of splints. The woman was Miss Hunt of Baschurch. A return train had to be caught so the party was soon inspected. Those requiring operative treatment were admitted; cases left at a previous visit were put on the handcart; it was as simple as changing books at the library." The outside porter was employed on arrival at Merseyside because this was so much cheaper than bringing an assistant from Baschurch. Even the perambulator wheels were of significance. The railway ticket for a child's perambulator cost only one shilling; the ticket for a handcart was much more expensive; and it needed only the good-humoured domination of Miss Hunt to persuade railway officials that this unusual form of transport was indeed a perambulator.

As work increased, Robert Jones himself went to Baschurch and operating lists were performed every month on the kitchen table. Doctor Urwick of Shrewsbury accepted the responsibilities of medical superintendent. More and more beds became available and the facilities were steadily improved. After the 1914-18 war a hutted Army hospital was taken over. Many original huts still remain and the private wing, known facetiously as Harley Street, consists still of the horse-boxes which were unwanted after the first war. Staff was gathered and the talent of Alwyn Smith, Girdlestone, Naughton Dunn, McCrae Aitken, and many other distinguished contemporary surgeons, made it certain that the Baschurch Convalescent Home should serve the county and become the Shropshire Orthopaedic Hospital, and in due course should serve the whole country and become the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital. Gradually, the hospital was rebuilt in accordance with Agnes Hunt's ideals. "I can see in my mind's eye a hospital with its long, low, one-storied wards and big French windows opening out on to lovely lawns, flowers, and big spreading trees.

Is this dream impossible? " It was not impossible; John Menzies saw to that. He was the man who was "found" by Sister Hunt, was inspired by her, and for so many years has served and is still serving faithfully as Secretary-Superintendent. Under his direction new open-air wards were built; the gardens, lawns, and trees which were imagined by Miss Hunt became a reality; and the laboratory facilities, X-ray equipment, and operating theatres which are essential features of a modern hospital became available. Consultants visit from Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Cardiff, and London. The resident staff includes surgeons from England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Australia, Canada, South Africa, and the United States of America.

A short visit to this hospital may convey the same impression as a visit to any other important country orthopaedic hospital. Was this the contribution of Agnes Hunt? It was one of them; but it was perhaps the least. As early as 1907 it had become obvious that extensive accommodation and excellent facilities in the central hospital did not solve the problems of preventive treatment and follow-up supervision. Many families had spent their lives in the wilds of Blaenau Ffestiniog, or some remote hamlet, with a geographical horizon limited to a twenty miles' radius. Were they to be expected to travel with a crippled child to Shropshire, a journey which seemed as venturesome as one of the explorations of Columbus? And if initial fear was overcome, and the child was admitted to hospital, could the week-by-week supervision of after-treatment be continued over many months and years when every hospital visit called for one day's travel in each direction? It was not enough for the patient to go to the hospital; the hospital must go to the patient. And so a system of after-care clinics was established—a plan which may now appear obvious but which at that time called for vision, enterprise, and a complicated organisation. The first after-care centre was established in Shrewsbury, and as the influence of the hospital widened so were its outposts created. To-day, in an area which includes many counties, and covers hundreds of miles of rural and sometimes densely populated country, there are thirty-six after-care centres visited daily or weekly by orthopaedic nurses, physiotherapists, and social service workers, and at less frequent intervals by orthopaedic surgeons from the parent hospital.

In this activity Agnes Hunt was responsible for the development of a vast scheme of voluntary service which might well be recalled in this day of State direction and centrally planned health service. Every clinic is served by a County Voluntary Orthopaedic Association. Hundreds of women, previously untrained as nurses but quickly acquiring sufficient knowledge to recognise early cases, using their influence to ensure that such cases were brought within the ambit of the centre and thus applying themselves to the important tasks of preventive treatment, learning to carry out the instructions of orthopaedic nurses and orthopaedic surgeons, giving encouragement and moral support to cripples and their parents during long months and years of treatment, have devoted their lives and given whole-time service, five days a week, throughout the last thirty years. They were inspired by Agnes Hunt because she worked with them; she herself attended the clinics and was one of them. Let us hope and believe that this spirit of devotion which has been maintained for a full generation will not be dispelled, or even dimmed, by the reforms of hasty planning.

It was in 1927 that Sister Hunt succumbed to the stimulation of Robert Jones and agreed that the problem was not yet solved. It was not enough to search out cripples and arrange hospital and after-care treatment. Crippled adolescents must be taught not only the joys of normal recreation but also the responsibilities of normal work. A retraining scheme was necessary. She wrote: "I collected four boys, already training in the boot and blacksmith's shops, and two girls from the splint-making department, and solemnly informed them that they were 'The Shropshire Orthopaedic Training School for Cripples.' They were suitably impressed but were anxious to know what happened next. As this was more than I could tell them the meeting adjourned." Miss Hunt decided to write to the County Councils and Poor Law Guardians and "offer this splendid opportunity of making their cripples self-

supporting." The replies flabbergasted her. "Before you could say 'knife' we had one hundred and fifty names on the waiting list and not even a hut to put them in. Where were they to be housed and fed? What trades would be suitable? What about instruction? How would the hospital committee take this new venture? And where on earth would the money come from?" As usual, enthusiasm came first; but accomplishment came next. With Miss Sankey, who is well remembered as a superb After-care Superintendent, Miss Hunt moved into the Derwen which was to become the Cripples' Training College. There was an early stage when after being granted £50 by the Committee "we also annexed some unconsidered trifles from the hospital." In the next stage Miss Hunt tried to work out the cost of surgical boots and wrote: "Ten shillings for leather and two days of man's time at three pounds ten shillings a week plus 5 per cent. profit equals —? Eventually I put x which I had been told meant an unknown quantity, and went dismally to bed." Mathematics and financial acumen were not her strong points but, within a year, Mr Rhaiadr Jones and his wife were appointed Manager and Matron, and thereby the Cripples' Training School gained the services of a first-class financier and a devoted woman who have applied themselves to this task ever since. A college was established for the training of crippled children, of whom no less than 90 per cent. have made their own livings.

Twenty years later the Disabled Persons' Employment Act was passed by the Government of this country, and the Disabled Persons' Corporation was established. Of the one million disabled who are now registered in Great Britain a high proportion have been trained to take their place in the open labour market and proved themselves to be no less efficient than their able-bodied colleagues. Those few whose disabilities were so grave that they could not have been expected to compete in the open market have been engaged in the sheltered factories of the Disabled Persons' Corporation, the trade name of which is "Remploy." At the same time voluntary effort has continued at the St Loyes' College for Training and Rehabilitation of the Disabled, Exeter; the Queen Elizabeth's Training College for the Disabled, Leatherhead; the Heritage Crafts' School, Chailey; the Lord Roberts' Memorial Workshops; the John Groome's Crippleage; the Robert Jones' Workshops; the Papworth and Enham Village Settlements; the St Dunstan's Institutes for the Blind; the National Institute for the Deaf; and the Duchess of Portland's Training College for the Disabled, Nottingham. Little did those four boys and two girls realise, when they were appointed solemnly as a Training School for Cripples, that they were to be forerunners of a great reform in resettlement of the disabled of which Great Britain is now proud.

Agnes Hunt, the "Florence Nightingale of orthopaedic nursing," who received the Royal Red Cross in 1918, and was created a Dame of the British Empire in 1926—the highest honour which can be awarded to any woman in this country—was responsible for important advances in preventive treatment, the creation of an orthopaedic hospital, the organisation of an after-care system, and the development of a Cripples' Training College. In recent years she asked herself to name the essential qualities of a nurse and replied: "Common sense, gentleness, kindness, and the power of giving hope and joy to those who are suffering." In these words she linked herself with those who are ageless, for was it not Galen who wrote: "Confidence and hope do more good than physic. He cures most in whom most are confident"? Most were confident in Agnes Hunt. At the early age of eleven she learned to enjoy life despite disability; at the age of eighty-one she died as she had always been—cheerful, brave, courageous, indomitable. She proved by example rather than by precept, and the decision of history may well be that the greatest of all her contributions was her own life.

REGINALD WATSON-JONES

The quotations in this appreciation are from "This is my Life" by Agnes Hunt (Blackie & Sons, Ltd., London, 1938) and "The Story of Baschurch" (Caxton Press, Oswestry). I am also grateful to Mr Rhaiadr Jones for access to many unpublished documents. The colour print of Dame Agnes Hunt has been reproduced by kind permission of the Derwen Cripples' Training College, Oswestry.