

REMEMBERING FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Mrs. S. A. Samuel

The biography of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern Nursing inspires young girls to enter the profession of Nursing. Her sacrifice and service for the sick and wounded soldiers at the Crimean war created history. The determination, devotion, and the unique leadership qualities that Florence Nightingale demonstrated amidst chaos, confusion and hopelessness that prevailed in the military hospital at Scutari, turned her into a legendary figure. As a befitting gesture to the services of this great lady, her birth anniversary is celebrated the world over as International Nurses' Day on 12th May each year.

Literature reveals that she had a special affinity to help the suffering right from her early childhood. She was quite different in her ways from her sister and other well to do English children. She even took the courage to take up Nursing profession against the wishes of her parents, William and Fanny Nightingale. But, that resulted in a revolutionary change in Nursing and she laid the foundation for modern Nursing. Her early education in Nursing was all self directed, self-acquired and self motivated. She spared no opportunity to visit the hospitals around; to observe the conditions and record and report to appropriate authorities. Her observation was minute and accurate and she left no stone unturned to make the lives of the sick and wounded comfortable.

She is stated to have been moody and obstinate in her childhood. This, however later helped her turn out to be a good negotiator for the welfare of those under her care. Her major struggles centered around the efforts to maintain sanitation, clean linen,

proper food and adequate supply of stores in the barrack hospitals. Often she had to spend her own money and do a lot of work herself beyond the call of her duty, and her work spread over to the night hours. Even then she is said

This article and the poem are dedicated to the Lady with the Lamp on the occasion of her Birthday on 12th May, celebrated as International Nurses' Day.

to have been moving from bed to bed, with a Lamp in her hand, observing and serving patients with no grumbling whatsoever. This image of hers earned her the famous loving title, "The Lady with the Lamp". The lamp lighting ceremony held for Nursing students during their training initiates them in to their future professional lives and the Florence Nightingale pledge which they take to fulfill from this day, reflects the values required for Nursing and the spirit of dedicated service.

Ms. Nightingale was a calm and composed person with a pleasing personality. She maintained harmonious relationship with people in her personal and professional life. But, where it was essential to deviate from this profile for the sake of the sick, she did not hesitate at all.

In Cecil Woodham-Smith's biography one can recognize the 'sit in' which she used when she was struggling to take direction of Balaclava General Hospital. "Florence Nightingale determined not to offer her Nurses and stores again, but to wait until the Doctors asked for help. She would demonstrate that she and her party wished neither to interfere nor attract attention, that they were prepared to be completely subservient to the authority of the Doc-

tors". Such refusal to allow Nurses to enter the ward would have been branded as a strike today.

Another situation she had to face is described like this. "Just as it was no one's business to clean the lavatories, so it was no one's business to clean the wards. But she insisted on the huge wooden tubs in the wards being emptied, standing quietly and obstinately by the side of each one, sometimes for an hour at a time, never scolding or raising her voice, until the orderlies gave way and the tub was emptied".

The following shows how she managed clean linen services. "For five weeks no clothes were washed. A laundry contract done with a Greek could not fulfill the obligations. He either failed to wash or the clothes came back as filthy as they were sent, still crawling with lice". Miss Nightingale made arrangements to rent a house outside and have the washing done by soldier's wives. She suggested to have boilers put in by the Engineers Corps. "Oh! That is putting you to a great deal of trouble" said Dr. Menzies. Florence Nightingale insisted and the boilers were installed.

At one time when a difference of opinion about the management of pantries came she wrote: "I protest emphatically now, before it is too late against the Koulai plan. It ends in nothing but spiritual flirtation between the ladies and the soldiers. I saw enough of that here, it pets the particular man, it gets nothing done in general. The ladies all quarrel among themselves. The medical men laugh at their helplessness, but like to have them about for the sake of a little female society which is natural, but not our object".

The following illustrates her capacity for action where it was needed most. "Dysentery, Diarrhoea and Rheumatic fever increased by



leaps and bounds. More and more shiploads of sick inundated Scutari. The men came down starved and in rags. They were without shoes and shirts as they were thrown away due to swarming vermin. Sometimes they came out without coat at all," said Mr. McDonald. The men told Nurses to keep away as they were so filthy. The whole hospital management was in disarray. There were no funds to remedy the situation. "And then in the misery, the confusion, a light began to break. Gradually it dawned on harassed Doctors and overworked officials that there was one person in Scutari who could take action—who had money and the authority to spend it—Miss Nightingale". And she solved the problem.

There are many anecdotes of this kind given in her biography. Now when I am reflecting on Nursing, in the past and the present, I see many similarities and wonder at the slow progress of this profession, which is invariably stated as noble. While harping on the need for Nurses to still adorn and maintain compassion, commitment, sacrifice and service of supreme nature as a watchword, no concerted effort seems to be in the offing to take care of the Nurses in relation to their personal or professional needs. How can the members of a profession who do not enjoy the privilege of being cared for properly, care for others at the optimum level?

A strange thinking is coming to my mind at this moment. What would happen if Florence Nightingale resurrects and plans to visit us during this year's Nurse's day? Wouldn't she be interested in having at least an overall view of the present status and standard of Nurses and Nursing? Wouldn't she like to see the progress of the profession she established way back in 19th century for the welfare of the sick? What is the fruit of her sacrifice and labour?

Walking through the corridors of hospitals she is sure to be attracted by the modern Nurses in their variety of designs and colours of the uniforms. A

gentle stroll through the hospital wards and a peep into the lavatories would evoke nostalgic memories of the good old days in the barrack hospitals in Scutari. The varieties of antibiotics and disinfectants with fancy names are likely to make her have a nervous breakdown as hospital infection seems to be stronger than many of them.

A comparison of the notes on Nursing which she carefully maintained with that of the present day notes will cause her severe pain in the neck. The disappearance of the words compassion and commitment from the dictionary of not only Nurses, but also of other categories of workers would make her regret her visit to the modern hospitals. The frustrating working and living conditions of Nurses coupled with low remuneration and status might even cause her a sudden heart attack.

Friends, Let us wake to the reality that Florence Nightingale is not going to resurrect and come to our rescue, nor we can go to her grave. It is for us Nurses to be united, join hands and work hard to maintain our professional identity. Nursing is a practical oriented profession wherein it is essential for one to be an expert in the field of knowledge, skill and attitude. This requires utilization of our head, hands and the heart for the welfare of the patients. Let us work hard to acquire expertise in the care of the sick. During this year's Nurses' Day celebration, let us rededicate our sincere services to the cause of the suffering humanity, which would, I hope, let our pioneer rest in peace. For all my Nurse colleagues, it is worth remembering the words of Robert Frost.

*"The woods are lovely, dark and deep
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep".*

Reference:

Smith, Cecil Woodham (1968) Florence Nightingale, London Lowe and Brydone Ltd.



A FRIEND IN NEED

God made the Nurse as a friend,
Someone on whom patients
can depend
As a caring person who'd understand
And always lend a helping hand.

God knew the sick need someone to care,
To comfort them when resources are rare
Using healing skills and knowledge with a
smile
To make them feel life is worth-while.

With a Nurse they can always share,
Matters yet not disclosed anywhere
Helping doctors to treat and cure
Leading them to better health for sure

God has made a Nurse to be
One that patients are glad to see
Who else could God Almighty send,
Than a Nurse as their eternal friend.

Florence Nightingale has come and gone
The seeds of modern Nursing were sown
It is apt to remember her today
And follow her footsteps every day.

Caring with competence and confidence
Adding commitment and conscience
Will be our unique and visible stamp
The followers of our virtuous Lady with the
Lamp;

Mrs. S.A.Samuel

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