

The Lady with the Lamp

By George Mathew

THE world knows Florence Nightingale as the "Lady with the Lamp". Her deep sense of dedication and service and her concern for the sick as a nurse and a sanitarian will be remembered once again on May 12 when her 150th Birth Anniversary will be celebrated throughout the world.

Nightingale's birthday is set aside in many countries as the "National Nurses Day." Nursing leaders will exhort the nurses to look back on the career of the "nurse extraordinary" and emulate her spirit in nursing and the great ideals she stood for.

Nursing has grown in dimension ever since the imprint of the great nursing ideals was first expounded by Florence Nightingale. Nursing has developed into a profession and its various aspects have become subjects of specialisation. With all the advancement and the technical knowledge associated with nursing today are the modern nurses the nurses of "Nightingale's dreams?". Even if we give sufficient allowance for adaptation in tune with the modern trend the question is debatable. The set back is not in the scientific development but in the diminishing sense of vocation which is most essential for a profession like nursing.

In her diary Florence wrote in 1850: "I had three paths among which to choose. I might have been a literary woman, or a married woman, or a Hospital Sister." She chose the latter for which she had the "call".

At the age of 17 she heard an objective voice, a voice outside herself, speaking to her in human words. In a private note she wrote: "On February 7th, 1837, God spoke to me and called me to His service." She did not know what type of a service it was since the idea of nursing never struck her mind. Eight years later it became clear to her but it took another eight more years (in 1853) for her to gain freedom to pursue her vocation against heavy odds. Her decision marked the beginning of the history of modern nursing.

Florence Nightingale was born on May 12, 1820 in Florence, the gayest city in Europe. Her mother was Fanny and Father William Edward Nightingale. She was christened Florence after her birthplace.

Nightingale won "three cheers" during the Crimean War when the British Government looked upon her for help and advice. She led a party of 40 nurses to serve the Army in the forward camps braving the cold and fevers of the Crimea. She looked after the wounded and sick soldiers who suffered in poor sanitary conditions. It was here she earned the title "The Lady with the Lamp" as she moved briskly from bed to bed at night with a lamp in her hand attending to the screaming soldiers. Her mission was successful and in fact she "saved the British Army."

Nightingale never visited India. Her first contact with Indian affairs was in the earlier part of 1859 when the conditions of the British Army in India was



(Sketch by M. Holkar)

found to be unsatisfactory. She was asked to help. The Royal Commission on Sanitary State of the Army in India was appointed by Queen Victoria and Florence started her work by sending questionnaire to all stations in India. She tabulated the data herself and submitted her "Observations".

Her concern was not limited to the Army. She felt that all efforts to save the troops would be useless unless matched by similar efforts to improve the sanitary conditions of the vast civilian population of India. Florence wanted the benefit of the improved sanitation to go to everyone in India. In October 1863 she contributed a paper to a Social Science meeting entitled, "How men may live and not die in India" which aroused much interest and discussion.

Her knowledge of India became an encyclopaedia for the British government that there was one time a legend that she had actually visited India. Indeed she earned the title: "Providence of the Indian Army."

On May 12, 1900 Florence celebrated her eightieth birthday when her dedication of the old days were recalled. The tempo of her life slowed down. She no longer spoke after 1910. The iron frame and the strong will which kept her mission successful during the forty years lingered on though deprived of memory, sensation and sight.

The end came on August 13, 1910 when she fell asleep about noon and did not wake again. She was ninety years and three months.