

Famous Women of History:

Florence Nightingale

Lucy E. Parsons

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If our social arrangements were so adjusted that each person could follow that calling in life which they are by nature adapted for, what a great gainer society as a whole would be. These few who are so fortunate as to be able to follow the calling of their heart's desire make a success of life. Florence Nightingale was one of the fortunate few, who could engage in that occupation for which she was best adapted. Florence Nightingale was a born nurse. In her was found that rare combination of heart, brain and sympathy which makes the ideal nurse. It is when one is laid low by the ravages of disease that they can appreciate to its utmost depth the value of human kindness.

Many charming stories are told of Florence's sympathetic nature even in her childhood: how she sought out wounded animals, and tenderly nursed them, and how she would scientifically bandage her dolls and would work earnestly at this occupation for hours at a time. Florence Nightingale's parents were of the well-to-do class. Still she was not contented to sit down and live a life of idleness and ease, as so many do who belong to that class. In early womanhood she took an apprenticeship of nine years in different hospitals. This course of training amply equipped her for the arduous labor she was to perform among the wounded from battlefields.

During the Crimean war, Wm. H. Russell wrote a number of letters from the Crimea to the London Times. In these letters he demonstrated so clearly that the unsanitary condition of the British army was killing off more men than the deadly battles of the Crimea, that England became panic-stricken over the mortality list, yet seemed helpless to curtail it. In the hurry and enthusiasm at the outbreak of the Crimean war (1854) Great Britain had dispatched shiploads of men improperly provided with food or clothing for the severe Russian climate. Starvation, cholera and agonizing suffering were the results.

Amid the general consternation, the minister of war wrote a letter to Miss Nightingale, stating that he considered her the only person in Great Britain capable of bringing order out of confusion, and imploring her to organize and direct the reform of the military hospitals; and this letter was crossed by one from Miss Nightingale, volunteering to place her strength and ability at the service of her nation. Good trained nurses were almost unknown quantities in those days; yet, nothing daunted, Florence Nightingale sailed from England with thirty of the best nurses that she could muster within a week from her letter. It required a good deal of tact to overcome the prejudices and jealousies among the physicians and surgeons at the "womanly prominence" and

to conciliate the general disapproval of medical and military officials. For these were the days when it was considered that “the proper place for woman is at home.”

Overcoming professional jealousy, she set herself to the task of cleansing the Augean hospitals containing over 4,000 patients. These barrack hospitals at Scutari, which had been loaned to the British government by the Sultan of Turkey, were 100 feet above the Bosphorus. The day before the arrival of the staff of nurses the wounded from Balaclava had been landed; packed in the overcrowded transports, their wounds had not been dressed for five days, and cholera and fever were reaping their fearful harvest. The poor men outside with cold and starvation were faring far better than the sufferers in the tainted wards of the disordered hospitals.

After comparative comfort had been established, Florence Nightingale opened a diet kitchen, where specialties were prepared for the 800 men who could not eat ordinary food; a laundry where, for the first time since they had been brought down from the Crimea, the ragged clothes of the soldiers were washed, and a combination library and schoolroom, where the chaplain aided her in instituting games and lectures for the convalescents.

The most difficult of all the provinces was of course that of nursing, yet it is said that wherever there was the greatest danger of distress, there the faithful head was to be found silently superintending, never allowing a severe case to escape her personal treatment. To accomplish this she often stood twenty hours at a time, and after the doctors had retired she was to be seen making her nightly rounds through miles of suffering patients, shading with her hand the lamp that she carried, that it might not disturb the sick, many of whom as she passed kissed her shadow on their pillows with passionate enthusiasm. Longfellow has commemorated this incident in his exquisite “Santa Filomena” with such sympathetic touch that no biographer of Florence Nightingale can refrain from quoting it:

Lo! in that house of misery
A lady with a lamp I see
Pass through the glimmering gloom,
And flit from room to room.
And slow, as in a dream of bliss,
The speechless sufferer turns to kiss
Her shadow as it falls
Upon the darkening walls.
On England’s annals, through the long
Hereafter of her speech and song,
A light its rays shall cast
From portals of the past.
“A lady with a lamp shall stand
in the great history of the land,
A noble type of good,
Heroic womanhood.”

In the future, when the war drum will be heard no more, and the only reveille to be sounded will be that which shall call men to the peaceful walks of life, the name of Florence Nightingale will be revered, as a woman who, though delicate and far removed from want, nevertheless was willing to risk her own life, that she might bring relief to that most stupid victim of our present system, the soldier.

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