Florence Nightingale
The Woman and Her Legend

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VIKING
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS
(2008)
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A photograph of Florence, c. 1853–4, while she was Lady Superintendent of the Upper Harley Street Establishment for Gentlewomen during Illness.
8. In the Hey-day of My Power

Florence made her formal acceptance of the position of Superintendent of the Establishment for Gentlewomen during Illness on 29 April 1853. However, before she could do so, there was an embarrassing bit of family business to clear up. At a late stage in the negotiations over her employment, Mrs George Eyre, one of the ladies of the committee, had asked Marianne Nicholson – since her marriage in the summer of 1851, Mrs Douglas Galton – whether Florence’s family had given their consent. Although Marianne later strenuously denied having stirred up trouble, the story according to Mrs Eyre, of which she immediately rushed to inform the other members of the committee, was that she had it on the good authority of a cousin that the Nightingales were very much opposed to the plan. ‘There was a great “scrimmage”,’ reported Parthenope; several ladies announced at once that the news placed Florence’s future at the establishment in jeopardy, while others resolutely refused to believe it. Only a letter from William Nightingale, providing Florence with his official, patriarchal, sanction, set their minds at rest.

Florence was in no doubt that Marianne’s ill-natured tongue had been responsible for the mischief. But there was an unforeseen, and from Florence’s point of view, entirely satisfactory outcome of the affair, when her mother and sister united in support of her. Fanny ‘behaved beautifully’, a cousin recalled later, letting it be known that ‘they wished ... [Florence] to go’, though they were sorry to lose her; while Parthenope, incensed at her sister’s treatment, and stirred by family loyalty, took up the cudgels on Florence’s behalf. First she fired off a letter to Marianne’s younger brother Lothian, describing Marianne’s ‘absolute denials’ as ‘dishonoured notes’. Then, when this strategy seemed to be leading nowhere, she took the case to a higher authority, that of Hannah Nicholson, Marianne’s aunt. Of course, she wouldn’t have chosen such a course for Florence, she wrote to Aunt Hannah, ‘but ... we are honestly & lovingly anxious that she should do what she
thinks right . . . I do wish to exonerate Flo with you & to ask you not to believe all you hear about her from a source which distorts her thoughts & deeds, not for the first time.’ Florence, meanwhile, sat back and left it until late that summer to write to Lothian Nicholson, warning him not to become involved in ‘paper wars’ in support of his sister.

The history of these negotiations, Florence told Clarkey, offered sufficient material for ‘a comedy in fifty acts’. She was pleased, though, to have been given the unconditional terms she had insisted upon, with the right to retire as superintendent after a period of twelve months, and positively ecstatic when, in her first week of admitting patients that August, she scored her first victory over the committee. Lady Canning apart, she had a low opinion of the general council, made up of a gentlemen’s as well as a ladies’ committee, and satisfactorily trounced them when it came to the issue of whether the Institution should become non-sectarian. Florence was adamant that it should, the committee equally certain it should remain Church of England. ‘My Committee refused me to take in Catholic patients – whereupon I wished them good morning, unless I might take in Jews and their Rabbis to attend them. So now it is settled, and in print, that we are to take in all denominations whatever, and allow them to be visited by their respective priests and Muftis, provided I will receive . . . the obnoxious animal at the door . . .’ She also prevented the committee from forcing a new chaplain on the Institution. He was too young and liable to flirt with the patients, spiritually or otherwise.

Since its foundation under royal patronage in March 1850, the establishment at 8 Chandos Street had attempted, with varying degrees of success, to offer care to a specific class of person: ‘the gentlewoman, of good family, well educated’, but of limited income, who in the course of ‘a lingering and expensive illness’ had access to neither the medical treatment paid for by the rich, nor the free service provided for the poor in hospital wards. By far the greater number of patients treated by the Institution were governesses, though admission was also open to the female relatives of clergymen, naval, military and professional men. For a woman of ‘gentle birth’ but low income, becoming a governess remained the only work that she could perform for pay. At the end of the 1840s, however, the number of women seeking such positions, usually in private households, vastly outsoared the demand. The 1851 census demonstrated this in blunt terms: 365,159 unmarried ladies, known as
‘excess women’, for just 24,770 positions. Not that securing one of these jobs necessarily resulted in a happy outcome. Governesses were generally put upon and underpaid, working long hours for salaries as low as £10 per annum (as a comparison, the nurses at Chandos Street were paid more than double this). Miss Draper, governess to the family of Lady Teignmouth, and among those treated under Florence’s supervision, provides one example of the physical and mental stress often suffered by such women. Described as ‘wretchedly delicate’, Miss Draper had been ‘incapacitated from fulfilling her duty, notwithstanding every wish and effort to do so’.

Clearly there was a need for the kind of service to be found at Chandos Street, but at times it had been a struggle to fill the beds. A large part of Florence’s work, once the Institution was in its more spacious accommodation in Upper Harley Street, would consist in adapting the skills connected with running a large household to the management of a small hospital and, initially, the most urgent of requirements was to balance the budget. Within months of taking over, she uncovered a £700 shortfall and was forced to set about raising subscriptions. Subscribers of five guineas per annum could recommend a patient for admission, and if considered eligible by the Ladies’ Committee, which met twice a week, the patient would be admitted free of charge for a period of up to two months. She instituted cuts in expenses, saving money, for instance, by authorizing the house surgeon, instead of the local apothecary, to dispense medication, and also by keeping a sharp eye on the weekly running expenses. Edward Marjoribanks, a senior partner at Coutts, was the treasurer, with whom, early on, Florence established a good working relationship. The promotion of the Institution through public advertisements had started before Florence’s arrival; and an article on ‘Benevolent Institutions’, in the July 1853 issue of the journal The Pen, informed readers of Florence’s appointment: ‘... a Lady, eminently qualified for the work, has undertaken, gratuitously, the office of superintendent.’

Many friends and acquaintances were surprised that, with her great powers, and after such a long period of preparation, Florence should have settled for such a comparatively mundane occupation. She was ‘too good for her work’ was a commonly expressed view. As Parthenope later wrote, ‘to the apparent eye it was cutting stones with razors for that noble intellect to be engaged in reducing the bill for flour, looking after tallow candles & pounding rhubarb’. Yet, in small but decisive
ways, the Establishment for ‘Decayed Gentlewomen’, as Aunt Patty insisted on calling it, would enable Florence to put into operation some of the practices she had observed in hospitals on the continent, while allowing her to develop the administrative and purveying skills that were to prove of vital importance at Scutari during the Crimean War. Elizabeth Blackwell, in the process of setting up a small dispensary in New York, recognized the value of the experiment. While she regretted that Florence, consistent with her position as a lady, wasn’t receiving payment for her services (not only that, she was also paying Mrs Clarke’s wages), she sympathized ‘most heartily in your resolve to act rather than to theorize’, and acknowledged the part she was playing ‘in weakening the barriers of prejudice which hedge in all work for women’.

Florence’s letter of acceptance to Lady Canning manifested her grander ambitions for her new post when she asked that the committee consider the terms under which ‘volunteer Nursing Sisters shall be received into the Institution, should any such offer themselves’. She had evidently conceived the plan of offering training to suitable applicants, an idea confirmed by the grandiose scheme she had in mind for the alternative site for the Institution, once a move from Chandos Street was decided upon in the months before she started. In dismissing one possibility, of a house in nearby Mansfield Street, Florence observed that something more than a private residence was required, otherwise ‘the Institution can never be anything but a poor place’, and recommended taking a wing of the new hospital, or of ‘the magnificent new hotel’, recently erected opposite Paddington station. The committee had more realistic ambitions and opted for a three-storeyed house, with attic and basement, and a stable building at the rear, at 1 Upper Harley Street. The area of Harley Street – the upper and lower regions were united in 1866 under one address, and 1 Upper Harley Street renumbered as 90 Harley Street – was not yet the centre of the professional medical establishment that it was to become in the next decade, though as a precursor of this development, the eminent physician Sir William Jenner had set up his practice at 8 Harley Street, two years earlier.

By the time the committee had decided on the new quarters, Florence was back in Paris, visiting the Salpêtrière, with its 5,000 female inmates, sick, old and insane, said to be the best-managed workhouse in the world. Then, on 8 June, she re-entered the Maison de Providence to continue the training with the Sisters of Charity that had been interrupted by her
grandmother's death. With Lady Canning's permission, she had returned to Paris while renovations to Upper Harley Street were continuing. She hadn't told anyone else on the committee about her stay in a convent, as she was certain they would disapprove, 'instead of being very obliged to me for acting as a spy to despoil the enemy of their good things'. Three weeks later, she informed her family of the reason for her silence during the interim: '. . . I have had the measles!'—her second attack in eighteen months. The sisters had nursed her like one of their own, she told them, and she was now spending her convalescence in the back drawing room at the Mohls' apartment in the rue du Bac. As Clarkey was visiting her relatives in England, it was Julius Mohl who cared for her with paternal kindness, though she blushed at the impropriety of the arrangement.

In mid-July, Florence returned to London. Work on the new premises was moving slowly. 'You see, this is just the time London Workmen are busiest,' Selina Bracebridge explained to her, 'every one has their house done up & they will neglect you at any time if some man does not step forward to bully them.' Florence obtained Shore's help with the installation of 'a lift', presumably the dumbwaiter which conveyed food to different floors, and was pleased to have carried her point 'for stained (not dry rubbed) floors & only bedside carpets'. Progress sometimes faltered, but, with Mrs Clarke's assistance, she swept like a new broom through the house. Immediately dispensing with the 'rat-eaten' furnishings from Chandos Street, she patched together pieces of carpet and 'contrived bed covers out of old curtains'. She funded the replacement of the household linen out of her own pocket, after finding vermin running about 'tame in all directions'. Under her instructions, a system of pipes, leading from a boiler at the top of the house, brought hot water to every floor; while a simple but ingenious arrangement of bells and valves, indicating which patient was in need of attention, was designed to save nurses from being 'converted into a pair of legs for running up & down stairs'. From home she brought prints for the walls, bits of furniture and books for the patients, asking Parthenope not to renew her subscription to the London Library for her ('I who never read any books but what are not to be found there'), as she preferred to take out one at Mudie's for the Institution's benefit, though not at its expense. She also bought books for Upper Harley Street, including *The Christian Year*, *Bleak House*, and a copy of Clough's poems. Among other pur-
chases from her father's first cheque were eight 'hermetically sealed' commode pails and six bed-rests; and, no doubt reflecting her belief that the new superintendent should be smartly outfitted, a black silk gown, and a grey one, at a cost of £1 12s. and £1 8s. respectively.

Accommodation for twenty-seven patients was being prepared: ten single rooms and seventeen compartments. As for Florence's own quarters, these consisted of two rooms, newly partitioned, with a fireplace and south-facing window in each; one on the ground floor next to the dining room, the other directly above it on the first floor. With Aunt Mai, who came to London every Sunday, and whose daughter Bertha would occasionally do 'a turn' in her cousin's Institution, Florence also took rooms in St James's Square. These were intended as a bolt-hole, somewhere to rest, spend her days off, and disguise from the patients the fact that she no longer attended church regularly.

Parthenope, who had handled inquiries from the committee while Florence was still in Paris, was keen to furnish Florence's rooms in Upper Harley Street. '...I so well enter into your feeling of seeking to make her more comfortable than she would herself care to be...,' Lady Canning wrote in thanking her. The two sisters were on better terms, with Florence commenting on 'dear Pop's pleasant kindness', though Parthenope's over-zealous concern for Florence's health was a continuing source of irritation. As an economy, as well as to ensure that she was obtaining the best quality, Florence went to Covent Garden to buy her own vegetables. Parthenope was mortified, earning herself an exasperated rebuke. 'You foolish child, don't you see that the Covent Garden expeditions are just the best thing I could do? They get me out – they give me air, exercise, variety.' Meanwhile, welcome gifts of flowers, fruit, partridge and pheasant arrived regularly from Embley.

Frantic preparations continued up to the eleventh hour. 'To settle with Mrs Clarke who is to clear the candlesticks, who the grates, who the passages,' runs one of Florence's last-minute notes about the housemaids; 'to stipulate against artificial flowers either in cap or bonnet'. On 12 August, she took up residence at 1 Upper Harley Street.

Not everything went smoothly at the start. The workmen – who, Florence observed, seemed to have spent the summer striking for their own amusement – were still very much in evidence and, on one occasion, when the foreman got drunk, she had to step in to break up a fight
between them in the drawing room. The system of ventilation was threatened by gas, leaking from a stove and coming out into the rooms, where it ‘went off with a series of partial explosions’. With the exception of ‘John, the Cook & Nurse Smith’, she had quickly dismissed the servants and nurses from Chandos Street, and now had three nurses, one on each floor, with whom she was ‘perfectly satisfied’. That satisfaction didn’t last long. She soon felt forced to give Nurse Bellamy – who had ‘nothing of the nurse but the name and wages’ – a warning, and to read ‘our slovenly, unhandsome nurses’ a lecture on punctuality. Even Mrs Clarke, usually such a stalwart, had displayed an inconvenient tendency to retire to bed whenever anything offended her. In a letter to Pastor Fliedner in September, Florence bemoaned the old problem, that ‘salaried nurses . . . have neither love nor conscience. How happy I will be when we will all be Sisters.’ She added, however, that she envisaged remaining at Upper Harley Street for the next few years, as the difficulties she had encountered there provided such excellent training for her.

The patients, though, were quite another matter. She hadn’t expected to find them so ‘full of joy and consolation’, nor indeed so manageable. Although the maximum occupancy of twenty-seven was never met, numbers had quickly risen from the seven already in residence at the beginning of September to twenty-five by mid-October. ‘We are filling fast,’ she told Parthenope, ‘which I am glad of, as it is easier to manage thirty than three.’ Among ‘our new invalids’ admitted at the beginning of October were women diagnosed as suffering from general debility (described as incurable), from internal inflammation, scrofula and ankylosis (stiffness resulting from the joining together of bones). She almost longed for ‘a good operation case’, and one presented itself early on: a Miss Goodridge, who had cancer of the breast, but was thought likely to recover after an operation to remove it. The medical men attached to the institution, especially Dr Henry Bence Jones of St George’s, and the ophthalmic surgeon, Dr William Bowman, from King’s College Hospital, impressed her. Florence’s ‘Rules for Patients’ specified that ‘The Lady Superintendent will, on every occasion, accompany the Medical attendant on his visits to the patients, unless . . . she deputes the Nurse to take her place.’ At operations, Florence was on hand, closely observing and ready to administer the new anaesthetic, chloroform, or tie up an artery.

Florence herself inspired great devotion among her patients. She
defrayed fees for some, occasionally paying them herself, covered the cost of sending one governess for a holiday to Eastbourne, and was generally sympathetic to the impoverishment and loneliness faced by many of these women. ‘You are … [the Institution’s] sunshine … ,’ wrote one, acknowledging her generosity. ‘I could not be there without you and were you to give up your influence, all would soon fade away and then the whole thing would cease to be’; another testified to ‘Miss Nightingale’s kindness, attention & affection’; while a story, relayed to Mrs Gaskell, told of a patient who used to stand on the cold hearthstone when Florence was doing her rounds, in the hope that she would rub her feet for her. Word spread of the ‘care & kindness’ to be found in the new Establishment. In the summer of 1854, the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, learning of its burgeoning reputation, considered sending Lizzie Siddal for a spell of treatment there for her fragile health and increasing addiction to laudanum. The ‘Sanatorium’, he informed his brother William, ‘contains only about 20 or 30 patients or so, and is … most admirably managed, the object to make it as much like a home as possible’. It was too much like a home for some. One of Florence’s persistent problems was that the malingerers were using the Institution as a temporary refuge, when they weren’t seriously ill, simply because they had nowhere else to go. ‘There is not a trick in the whole legerdemain of Hysteria which has not been played in this house,’ she stated. Sundays and Thursdays, the days before the bi-weekly committee meetings when admissions were decided upon, would find patients preparing themselves ‘by getting up a case’, leaving their flannels off in order to develop a cough; or going without their meals to prove loss of appetite, and eating them secretly during the night when hunger pangs struck. It was a struggle to make the Ladies’ Committee agree to the enforcement of a rule to limit a patient’s stay to two months – except for the mortally ill – on the basis that otherwise she would have no incentive to get well. But, by the spring of 1854, Florence had got her way.

In her first quarterly report, dated 14 November 1853, she rehearsed the difficulties associated with moving to a new address, and concluded with a summary of the number of patients admitted (eighteen), of how many remained (thirteen), and of the remaining five who had been discharged. ‘I had great reluctance to putting some things in my Report, which sounded like praising myself,’ she told her family, ‘but Ε & Mrs Herbert said it was quite necessary & egged me on … .’ In reply to her
father’s request for her ‘observations upon my Time of statesmanship’, she revealed her propensity for intrigue and, in particular, her delight in pulling the wool over the committee’s eyes:

... when I entered service here, I determined that, happen what would, I never would intrigue among the com’tee. Now I perceive that I do all my business by intrigue. I propose in private to A, B, or C the resolution I think A, B, or C most capable of carrying in Com’tee & then leave it to them – & I always win.

I am now in the hey-day of my power. At the last Gen’l Com’tee, they proposed & carried (without my knowing anything about it) a resolution that I should have £50 per month to spend for the House & wrote to the Treasurer to advance it to me – whereupon I wrote to the Treasurer to refuse it to me. L[ad]y Cranworth, who was my greatest enemy, is now, I understand, trumpeting my fame thro’ London, and all because I have reduced their expenditure from 1s 10d per head per day to 1s.

William Nightingale was taken aback, and wrote to reprove her. ‘I regret very much your unmitigated tone of condemnation of your committee. Your business must be, if you differ with them – to lead them, to teach them, to abide by them... The whole scheme of life is to work through others.’

The winter of 1853–4 was characterized by almost daily conditions of thick, impenetrable fog. At 1 Upper Harley Street the house was kept warm, though smoke billowed so much from the fireplaces that Mrs Clarke and her niece Anne had to take turns in ‘constantly nursing’ them. One January morning, ‘an insane governess’ was brought in by Mr Garnier, the parish clergyman. In spite of Florence keeping a watch over her, she escaped and ‘raised a mob’ in the street. ‘We have recaptured her,’ Florence reported with an air of triumph, ‘but I am now making arrangements to send her to St Luke’s...’ There was just enough variety in individual cases to keep Florence stimulated. One woman, cured of an affliction labelled ‘self-mismanagement’, was of particular fascination. She had been confined to her bed for three years when she came to Upper Harley Street, and believed herself incapable of taking any solid food but port wine and cream. After two months she left the Institution, completely cured, able to eat meat and take long walks. Yet this transformation was achieved almost without a grain of medicine passing her lips. The solution had been to keep the woman isolated.
'from other patients & all influences which would have strengthened her illusions'.

As time wore on, however, it was becoming increasingly obvious that Upper Harley Street was not going to provide Florence with the opportunity to carry out the scheme closest to her heart, the training of volunteer nurses. A single suitable candidate, a Mrs Foster, applied for instruction in the spring of 1854, but in the absence of the means and facilities for a properly developed programme, Florence had little choice but to reject her. Instead, she paid out of her own pocket for Mrs Foster to attend the London Nurses Institution, at King William Street, in the City. Meanwhile, she began to spend her spare time visiting London hospitals to collect facts to establish a case for reforming conditions for hospital nurses. This was a subject that strongly interested the Herberts. After Florence inspected St Bartholomew's, Liz Herbert wrote asking for information, on her husband’s behalf, about the 'bad pay & worse lodging' of the nurses there. Since the end of 1852, Sidney Herbert had once again been in Government, as Secretary of State at War in the coalition led by Lord Aberdeen.

At the end of May, the Institution faced its most anxious case in Florence’s time as superintendent, when an operation to remove a cataract went disastrously wrong. No blame attached to Dr Bowman, but the woman was left blind and, according to Florence, faced the prospect of insanity. ‘I had rather, ten times, have killed her,’ she wrote. There was some doubt that she would be free to attend Blanche’s wedding to Arthur Clough at Embley on 13 June, though in the end she was present to join in the celebrations for a couple whose path to matrimony had been interspersed with setbacks. ‘... There have been difficulties enough to make one sometimes turn faint,’ wrote the bride’s mother, Aunt Mai, ‘but I think it is impossible to live side by side with these two, without feeling that it would be wrong not to let them join their fates.’ Clough had at last found a job, as examiner in the Education Office in Downing Street, remunerative enough to satisfy Sam Smith’s conditions. Back in London after the wedding, Florence let her family into a secret. Through the recommendations of Dr Bowman, who was highly impressed with her abilities, she had been approached by King’s College Hospital for the post of Superintendent of Nurses in the reorganization that was being planned there. ‘They have asked me to send in my conditions,’ she told her mother. ‘This must, of course, be mentioned to no one.’
All the old objections were immediately raised as Fanny and Parthenope attempted to dissuade her. Even Mrs Bracebridge did not approve of a move to King’s because of its ‘Physical & Moral’ atmosphere. ‘... I do trust that Flo will be brought to see the undesirableness ...’, she wrote in agreement with Fanny. Florence, however, was having none of it. Away from home, out of the line of direct interference by her family, she was more of a free agent and had, in any case, decided to leave Upper Harley Street to pursue her goal of nurse training. In her final quarterly report, dated 7 August, which marked her first anniversary at the Institution, she noted the satisfactory results ‘as to good order, good nursing, moral influence & economy’, and ended: 

I therefore wish, at the close of the year for which I promised my services, to intimate that, – having as I believe, done the work as far as it can be done, – it is probable that I may retire, if, in pursuance of my design & allegiance which I hold to it, I meet with a sphere which is more analogous to the formation of a Nursing School. I would wish to give notice of three months, to be extended, if possible, to six months ... 

Lady Canning’s letter, written the next day on behalf of the committee, expressed sorrow at the loss of Florence’s ‘devoted services’, but recognized that ‘the great work you have always had at heart’, to improve hospital nursing, ‘cannot be carried out in such an institution as this ...’. 

By the end of Florence’s period of notice, they hoped to have found another Superintendent to continue her work – ‘tho’ we are without the slightest hope of meeting with your equal’. Florence’s decision to leave was kept a secret for the time being, while she attended interviews with the ‘leading Men’ at King’s. They didn’t intimidate her; on the contrary, she thought that they themselves seemed frightened, in the course of paying her meaningless compliments, of what they might be letting themselves in for. ‘If I don’t turn up in one Hospital,’ she confidently predicted to Parthenope, ‘I shall be in another.’ 

Florence never forgot the Upper Harley Street Institution. A year after her return from the Crimean War, she returned there on a committee day, ‘where all received her with the greatest reverence & affection’. And she continued to follow its subsequent incarnations – as the Hospital for Invalid Gentlewomen, and eventually, from its new address at 19 Lisson Grove, as the Florence Nightingale Hospital for Ladies of Limited Means – with interest. In The Times, in 1901, she made an appeal for funds for
the Institution. 'I ask and pray my friends who still remember me not to let this truly sacred work languish and die for want of a little more money.'

On 31 August, she took temporary leave of absence from Upper Harley Street. The worst outbreak of cholera in the history of London was decimating the population of the area of Broad Street on the north edge of Soho. Over 500 lives were lost in ten days. Florence volunteered her services at the Middlesex Hospital, superintending the victims of the disease, going without sleep for two nights as the seriously ill poured in. Among the worst affected were the prostitutes, who were brought in from their ‘beat’ along Oxford Street. She undressed them, placed turpentine stupe on their stomachs, and managed to avoid falling ill herself (meanwhile, John Snow, the physician and epidemiologist, was setting out to show that the majority of deaths took place in the vicinity of Broad Street’s water pump). As the intensity of the epidemic receded, she returned to the Institution, but was unable to shake off a heavy cold. Assured that the rest of the staff could cope in her absence, she decided to take a short break with her family at Lea Hurst.

There she coincided with the arrival of the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell. Mrs Gaskell had fallen behind with North and South, her latest novel. With its serialization in Household Words lapping at her heels, she needed urgently to make some progress with her writing, and had been invited to the tranquility of the Derbyshire countryside to try to do so. Her acquaintance with Nightingales was relatively new, but she shared with them a Unitarian background, as well as an interest in reformed nursing with Florence. In Ruth, her last novel, Mrs Gaskell had argued for the dignity of the nursing profession through the main character, who ends up nursing typhus victims; and, later, she was to encourage her younger daughter, Meta, to become a nurse, when Meta showed signs of wishing to follow in Florence Nightingale’s footsteps. In her mid-forties, warm and confiding, she was always hungry for stories to fill her writing, not least her voluminous correspondence. Florence’s story, already in the process of being nicely burnished by her mother and sister for the novelist’s benefit – Florence as their ‘wild swan’ in the Hans Christian Andersen tradition – utterly enticed her.

In a ‘privatishe’ letter, written one evening during her stay, to her friend Catherine Winkworth, Mrs Gaskell described Florence’s childhood in
terms reminiscent of the lives of the saints: her desire from childhood always to be taking care of the sick poor, her rejection of pleasure-seeking, and her eventual study of nursing at Kaiserswerth and in Paris. ‘She is like a saint,’ Mrs Gaskell averred, perhaps St Elizabeth of Hungary, a medieval princess who had devoted her life to works of charity, and built a hospital at the foot of her father’s castle. ‘She must be a creature from another race so high & mighty & angelic, doing things by impulse – or some divine inspiration & not by effort & struggle of will . . . she seems as completely led by God as Joan of Arc.’ Not many saints, perhaps, have been practised mimics, but Mrs Gaskell thoroughly enjoyed Florence’s imitation of ‘the way of talking of some of the poor governesses in the Establishment’. Florence’s literary skills also inspired admiration. Her letters from Egypt were being prepared for private publication at Parthenope’s insistence, though Florence had more than once refused to be bothered with correcting proofs (and a year later, when Florence’s name was ‘in every one’s mouth’, Fanny had to go to great lengths to ensure that the surviving proof sheets were destroyed, for fear that they might fall into unauthorized hands). Mrs Gaskell didn’t care for travel, still less for Egypt, but she couldn’t help being impressed when the letters were read out loud, and longed for a published copy of her own.

Yet within a short time, Mrs Gaskell’s attitude towards Florence changed. She had seen an aspect of her character, the complete reverse of her own, that chilled her. Having been told by Parthenope that Florence ‘does not care for individuals . . . but for the whole race as being God’s creatures’, Mrs Gaskell then witnessed an illustration of this, in the ‘extreme difficulty’ with which Parthenope persuaded Florence to visit a widow in the village, who had recently lost her husband, and was well known to Florence as she had nursed her son on his death bed seven years earlier. ‘She will not go among the villagers now,’ Mrs Gaskell wrote to Emily Shaen, another friend, ‘because her heart and soul are absorbed by her hospital plans, and as she says, she can only attend to one thing at once. She is so excessively soft and gentle in voice, manner, and movement that one never feels the unbendableness of her character when one is near her.’

She and I had a grand quarrel one day. She is, I think, too much for institutions, sisterhoods and associations, and she said if she had influence enough not a
mother should bring up a child herself; there should be creches for the rich as well as the poor. If she had twenty children she would send them all to a creche, seeing, of course, that it was a well-managed creche. That exactly tells of what seems to me the want – but then this want of love for individuals becomes a gift and a very rare one, if one takes it in conjunction with her intense love for the race; her utter unselfishness in serving and ministering.

Observing the elder sister’s devotion for the younger, Mrs Gaskell surmised correctly that Parthenope’s ‘sense of existence is lost in Florence’s’. Her description, though, of Parthenope as having ‘annihilated herself’, forgoing her own interests and tastes to take over Florence’s home duties so that she could be set free to do her great work, shows how closely she had been influenced by Parthenope’s version of events. This sympathy for Parthenope’s position formed the basis of a friendship between the two women that would last throughout the next decade, until Mrs Gaskell’s death.

Up in her turret room at Lea Hurst, well stocked with candles and coal, and with only Athena for company, Mrs Gaskell hurried on with North and South following the departure of the Nightingales for London in mid-October. A quarter of a mile of staircase separated her from the remaining servants packing up the house, and she found it difficult to imagine a more complete solitude. Thoughts about Florence Nightingale, and of their recent conversations, lingered in her mind as she attempted to resolve the fate of her heroine, Margaret Hale, in the novel’s final chapters. Following the deaths of her parents, and a return to her former home, Margaret’s dark musings about her future reflect Mrs Gaskell’s own ambivalence about her recent encounter with a woman who appeared to place love of mankind above love for individuals: ‘If I were a Roman Catholic and could deaden my heart, stun it with some blow, I might become a nun. But I should pine after my kind; no, not my kind, for love for my species could never fill my heart to the utter exclusion of love for individuals.’ Despite, however, her cousin Edith’s fears that Margaret will become ‘strong-minded’, Margaret is on the brink of matrimony with the mill owner John Thornton as the novel ends.

The Crimean War cuts obliquely across the pages of Mrs Gaskell’s North and South. In the climactic riot scene, the ‘thread of dark-red blood’ that trickles down Margaret Hale’s face is suggestive of the ‘thin
Notes

ABBREVIATIONS

BJ  Benjamin Jowett


FN  Florence Nightingale.
FaN  Fanny Nightingale.


PN  Parthenope Nightingale (later Verney).
PRO  Public Record Office (now part of the National Archives).
WEN  William Nightingale.

The indispensable guide to the 200 or so books, pamphlets and articles that make up Florence Nightingale’s own published writings is A Bio-Bibliography of Florence Nightingale, compiled by W. J. Bishop, and completed by Sue Goldie (Dawsons, 1962). Where possible, I have used the texts printed in the Collected Works. Where these are not yet available, I have used other editions listed in the select bibliography.

MAJOR ARCHIVAL SOURCES

BL  British Library Additional Manuscripts. Nightingale Papers. Donated to the library in three main tranches of material: 1) Add.MSS 43393-43403; 2) 45750-45849; 3) 47714-47767. There have been smaller supplementary
CHAPTER 8: IN THE HEY-DAY OF MY POWER

p. 188 formal acceptance: FN's acceptance of the post of 'Lady Superintendent of the Hospital for Invalid Gentlewomen' was made in a letter of 29 April [1853] to Lady Canning (BL 45796/17. Copy).

"scrimmage": PN to Lothian Nicholson, [n.d.]. Claydon 283.

'behaved beautifully': [?]. BL 72826/97.

'absolute denials': PN to Lothian Nicholson, [n.d.]. Claydon 283.

'... but ... we are': PN to Hannah Nicholson, [n.d.]. Wellcome 9039/9.


'a comedy': FN to Mary Mohl, 8 April [1853]. BL 43397/306. CW8, 559.

'My Committee': Quoted in Cook I, 134.

'the gentlewoman': Establishment for Gentlewomen During Illness, 3.


'... a Lady': Benevolent Institutions, 100.

'too good': Fanny Allen to PN, 21 October [1854]. Claydon 95.

'to the apparent eye': 'Memoir'.

p. 191 'Decayed Gentlewomen': Patty Smith to FaN, [summer 1853]. Claydon 283.

'most heartily': Elizabeth Blackwell to FN, 27 March [1854]. Claydon 240.

'volunteer': FN to Lady Canning, 29 April [1853]. BL 45796/17. [Copy].

'the Institution': FN to Lady Canning, 18 May 1853. BL 45796/33.

three-storeyed house: 90 Harley Street was demolished in 1909–10, and a stone plaque mounted on the new building to commemorate FN's association with the site. No photograph has come to light of the original building, though it's almost inconceivable that such a record of the house's appearance would not have been made.

p. 192 'instead of being': FN to FaN, [June 1853]. Wellcome 8994/23.

'... I have had': FN to FaN, 27 June [1853]. Wellcome 8994/28.
'You see': Selina Bracebridge to FN, [summer 1853]. Claydon 240.

'for stained': FN to PN, 24 July [1853]. Wellcome 8994/32.

'rat-eaten': *Florence Nightingale at Harley Street*, 1.

'converted': FN to Lady Canning, 5 June [1853]. BL 45796/40.

'I who never': FN to PN, 20 August [1853]. Wellcome 8994/37.

p. 193 'hermetically sealed': BL 4340/1/141.

'a turn': Mai Smith to FaN, [1853–4]. Claydon 303.

'... I so well': Lady Canning to PN, 20 June 1853. Claydon 315.

'dear Pop's': FN to WEN, 6 September 1853. BL 45790/148.

'You foolish': FN to PN, 19 October [1853]. Wellcome 8994/48.

'To settle': FN, Notes. Claydon 240.

p. 194 'went off': FN to WEN, 30 August [1853]. Wellcome 8994/38.

'John, the Cook': FN to Lady Canning, [c. August 1853]. BL 45796/50.

'nothing of the': FN to Lady Canning, 13 September 1853. Harewood Collection, 177/15.

'our slovenly': FN to PN, 30 September [1853]. Wellcome 8994/44.

'salaried nurses': FN to Theodore Fliedner, 10 September 1853. Wellcome 9083/3.

[Copy. Translation from French]. For FN’s plan, pre-Harley Street, for a private London hospital, run on non-denominational lines by nursing sisters, one of whom would be called the ‘Mother’, see CW8, 528–34.

'full of joy': FN to FaN, WEN and PN, 16 September 1853. Wellcome 8994/42.

'We are': FN to PN, 30 September 1853. Wellcome 8994/44.

'our new': FN to FaN, [11 October 1853]. Wellcome 8994/47.

'a good operation': FN to PN, 30 September 1853. Wellcome 8994/44.

'Rules for Patients': Wellcome 8994/80.

p. 195 'You are': Barbara Fleetwood to FN, 14 June [1854]. Claydon 240.

'Miss Nightingale’s kindness': Christina Murray to [?], n.d., Claydon 240.

'care & kindness': Bessie Marks to FN, 13 May [1854]. Claydon 240.

'Sanatorium': Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Rossetti, 14 May 1854, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 347. Rossetti’s ‘manic aunt’, Eliza Polidori, later managed the stores at the Barrack Hospital at Scutari. His sister Christina applied to accompany her aunt to Scutari but was rejected as too young.

'There is not': *Florence Nightingale at Harley Street*, 11.

'I had great': FN to FaN, WEN and PN, [November 1853]. Wellcome 8994/64.

p. 196 'observations': FN to WEN, 3 December 1853. BL 45790/152–5. CW1, 237.

'I regret': WEN to FN, [1853]. Claydon 240.

'constantly nursing': Anne Clarke to FN, 9 January [1854]. Claydon 240.

'an insane governess': FN to PN, 17 January 1854. Wellcome 8994/93.

p. 197 'bad pay': Elizabeth Herbert to FN, [1854]. Claydon 36.

'I had rather': FN, to WEN, [c. 26 May 1854]. BL 45790/158. CW1, 239 (where it is misdated to April 1854).

'... There have been difficulties': Mai Smith to FaN, [June 1854]. Claydon 289.

'They have asked': FN to FaN, 26 July 1854. Wellcome 8994/107.

p. 198 'Physical & Moral': Selina Bracebridge to FaN, 6 August [1854]. Claydon 240.

'as to good': *Florence Nightingale at Harley Street*, 33–6.

'devoted services': Lady Canning to FN, 8 August 1854. Claydon 315.

'leading Men': FN to PN, 25 August 1854. Wellcome 8994/110.

'where all received her': Claydon 276. See Smith, *Florence Nightingale*, 17: ‘There is no evidence that Miss Nightingale ever revisited Harley Street or took any further interest in it.’ This is just one example of Smith’s tendency to make categorical statements to the detriment of FN’s reputation without examination of the available evidence.

NOTES TO PAGES 199–210

Bibliography of Florence Nightingale, 99, who suggest that the letter was written for FN by Elinor Dicey (née Bonham Carter).

Florence volunteered: Again, this is disputed by Smith, Florence Nightingale, 17, who states that the story of FN’s work at the Middlesex is not supported by the hospital’s archives. But it is confirmed in ‘Memoir’.


p. 200 ‘in every one’s mouth’: FN to William Spottiswoode, [1855]. Claydon 286.

p. 201 ‘If I were a Roman Catholic’: Gaskell, North and South, chapter 15. A copy of Gaskell’s novel was requested by FN at Scutari, in August 1855. Goldie, 144.

p. 202 ‘We hope’: Elizabeth Herbert to FN, 29 September [1854]. Claydon 204.

p. 203 ‘Well, here we are’: A. H. Clough to C. E. Norton, [February 1854]. The Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough, 2, 476.

p. 204 ‘all buoyant’: Quoted in Royle, Crimea, 178.

p. 205 ‘than to march’: FN to Selina Bracebridge, [15 October 1854]. Wellcome 8994/113.

p. 206 ‘to say’: FN to Elizabeth Herbert, 14 October 1854. BL 43396/11.

p. 207 ‘Government has asked’: Quoted in Cook I, 154.

p. 208 ‘to tamper’: Sidney Herbert to FN, 26 October 1854. BL 43393/1. Goldie, 27.

p. 209 ‘sudden questions’: Rickards, Felicia Skene of Oxford, 111. Skene writes that Mrs Bracebridge acted like the Duchess in Alice in Wonderland when she clearly means the Queen of Hearts.


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