world before me.' So it proved: 1853 was to be the year of her liberation.

In February 1853 she went with her cousin Hilary to stay with the Mohls in Paris and then to enter for a short period the Maison de la Providence, belonging to the Sœurs de la Charité. At the last moment came the news that her grandmother, aged ninety-five, had been taken ill. Back she had to go to nurse the old lady through her last days. Despite this blow, she was able to write: 'I shall never be thankful enough that I came.' She had done some small things 'which perhaps soothed the awful passage, and which perhaps would not have been done as well without me'.

In April 1853 a movement was afoot to reorganize an Institution for the Care of Sick Gentlewomen in London, run by a charitable committee headed by Lady Canning. A superintendent was needed, and Florence's friend Liz Herbert put forward her name. The committee reacted favourably. Florence was by no means enamoured of charitable ladies and echoed Mary Mohl's description of them as 'fashionable asses'. Negotiations became protracted and involved. To counteract her youth, she was to bring at her own expense an elderly, respectable woman as housekeeper. Although 'no Surgeon Students or Improper Patients' would be there, her family fought the proposal tooth and nail. Threats, hysterics, fainting fits, recriminations so poisoned the air of their rooms in Old Burlington Street that Mr Nightingale retreated to the Athenaeum, where he drafted a despairing note to Parthe: he had 'come to the resolution that it is entirely beyond your mental strength to give up interference in your sister's affairs, and being equally sure that your health cannot stand the strain, we wish to advise you to retire from London and take to your books and country occupations...'. Three days later he added 'I doubt my own thoughts.' It was not from her father that Florence inherited her iron resolution and craving for an active, useful life. But Mr Nightingale did take one positive step: despite his wife's anger, he made his daughter an allowance of £500 a year.

The dogs barked furiously; the Fashionable Asses' caravan rumbled slowly on; and when the dust had settled, Florence was installed for the first time in her life in an independent command in the Institution's new premises at Number 1, Harley Street. At the age of thirty-three, on 12
August 1853, she was at long last launched on her career.

For the next fourteen months, she had scarcely a moment of leisure. She took over an empty house ten days before the patients were due to move in. In that ten days the alterations had to be completed, furniture installed, everything from pots and pans to carpets and curtains organized. And Florence’s ideas were revolutionary. The comfort of the patients and the well-being of the nurses were central to her plan. Unheard-of devices were proposed: bells fitted with ‘a valve which flies open when the bell rings, and remains open in order that the nurse may see who has rung’; a ‘windlass installation’ (i.e. a lift) to bring up the patients’ meals from the kitchen. All her ideas were intensely practical. She instituted bulk-buying instead of deliveries of ‘everything by the ounce’, had jam made in the kitchen at a cost of 3½d a pound instead of buying it for a shilling; got bits of spare material from Embley to cover chairs and ‘contrived bed covers out of old curtain’, brought about ‘a complete revolution as to Diet, which is shamefully abused at present’, and saved the committee £150 a year by combining the offices of House Surgeon and dispenser.

Her titled committee ladies were at first aghast; instead of a ministering angel, they found they had taken on a human dynamo, and an imperious one at that. There was a sharp brush over the sectarian question. The ladies’ committee (there were two committees, one for each sex) wanted only members of the Church of England to be admitted. Florence insisted that any woman who was sick and poor, regardless of her faith, could come. There was a compromise.

So now it is settled, and in print that we are to take all denominations whatsoever, and allow them to be visited by their respective priests and Mufnis, provided I will receive (in any case whatsoever that is not of the Church of England) the obnoxious animal at the door, take him upstairs myself, remain while he is conferring with his patient, make myself responsible that he does not speak to, or look at, anyone else, and bring him downstairs again in a noose, and out into the street. And to this I have agreed! And this is in print! Amen.

Her main difficulty was to find nurses. There were absolutely none who were properly trained. Nor were the doctors always helpful; when
it came to discharging patients, 'my Committee have not the courage to
discharge a single case. The Medical Men say they won't, although the
cases, they say, must be discharged. And I always have to do it, as the
stop-gap on all occasions.'

She had described herself well - the stop-gap on all occasions; and
these included the actual nursing. As to her talent for this art, there are two
opinions. One was her sister's, expressed in a letter to Mary Mohl.

I wish she could be brought to see that it is the intellectual part which interests
her, not the manual. She has no esprit de conduite in the practical sense. When
she nursed me, everything which intellect and kind human intention could do
was done but she was a shocking nurse. Whereas her influence on people's
minds and her curiosity in getting into varieties of minds is insatiable. After she
has got inside, they generally cease to have any interest for her.

The other view was expressed, often in some half-articulate note or
broken phrase, by an enormous number of her patients who perhaps
expected less, and evidently received more, than her sister. 'Thank you,
thank you, darling Miss Nightingale.' 'My dearest kind Miss Nightingale I send you a few lines of love.' 'Were you to give up, all would
soon fade away and the whole thing would cease to be.' Such were the
notes written by her Harley Street patients. She would go round the
wards rubbing their cold feet at night; one patient 'jumped out of bed
when F.N was coming round and stood with her feet upon the hearth-
stone in order to have them rubbed'. The work was incessant but she
loved it all and in December 1853 wrote, 'I am now in the heyday of my
power.' She had even found out how to manage committees, as she
explained to her father. 'When I entered into service here, I determined
that, happen what would, I never would intrigue among the Committee.
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
committee, and then leave it to them, and I always win.'

In August 1854 an outbreak of cholera swept through the foetid
slums of Soho. Florence volunteered to help with the emergency and
found herself nursing dying prostitutes and drunken bawds at the
Middlesex Hospital, undressing them, 'putting on turpentine stopes',

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holding them in her arms as they died. On one occasion she was on her feet without a break for forty-eight hours. "The prostitutes came in perpetually," she told Mrs Gaskell in October 1854, "poor creatures staggering off their beat! It took worse hold of them than of any. One poor girl, loathesomely filthy, came in, and was dead in four hours."

A touch of humour could be extracted even from such scenes. Mrs Gaskell recorded:

I never heard such capital mimicry as she gave of a poor woman, who was brought in one night, when FN and a porter were the only people up - every other nurse worn out for the time. Three medical students came up, smoking cigars, and went away. FN undressed the woman, who was half tipsy but kept saying, 'You would not think it ma'am, but a week ago I was in silk and satins; in silk and satins dancing at Woolwich. Yes! ma'am, for all I am so dirty I am draped in silks and satins sometimes. Real French silks and satins.' This woman was a nurse earning her five guineas a week with nursing ladies. She got better.

When the epidemic subsided, Florence took a brief holiday at Lea Hurst where Mrs Gaskell, the author of Cranford, was a guest. In two