

## CHAPTER XII

### ESCAPE

1853-1854

IN a still January evening of the year 1853, Florence was once more walking round her enchanted pond in the grounds at Embley. She found that it had not lost any of its enchantment for her. She had returned home only a week before, after an absence of six months. She had just come from Tapton, where she had been doing what was possible for poor Grandmama, including howling psalms at her every morning. Grandmama liked it, and Florence wondered whether it would conduce to the edification of William in the kitchen, it was certainly the "only edification he ever heard." She had just finished her "third book of Cassandra," into which she had poured all the thoughts and feelings that had been repressed for years.<sup>1</sup> It spoke of the lot of women and its hideous emptiness. God had given to women passion, intellect, and moral activity; but Society refused to allow them to use any of the three: they were condemned to wander in a wilderness of triviality, whence there was no escape but death. She did not show the essay to Mrs. Nightingale and Parthe, but they felt her attitude, and as it was very tiresome to have Flo at home treating the drawing-room at Embley as if it were the wilderness of Sinai, they began to be slightly less unfavourable to her plans of going to stay with the Mohls. They did not realize all that these plans involved.

Parthe wrote to Madame Mohl:

"Truth is a good thing, and the history of the last year (the others much like it) is one month with the Fowlers in Ireland, three months with Aunt Mai in London, three more with her at Harrogate and Cromford Bridge, three more with her at the water cure and Grandmama's. Now Aunt Mai is the person she loves best in the world, and whose metaphysical mind suits her best, so that I hope she has passed a very

---

<sup>1</sup> "Cassandra" afterwards formed part of Florence Nightingale's *Suggestious for Thought* and was privately printed in 1860. It was first published in 1928 as an Appendix to *The Cause*, by Ray Strachey.

pleasant year, but meantime those eternal poor have been left to the mercies of Mama and me, both very unwell, and whose talkey-talkey broth and pudding she holds in very great contempt. Now, dear Clarkey, you are a very clever man and wise (which is better) and what you say is very true, I believe she has little or none of what is called charity or philanthropy, she is ambitious—very, and would like well enough to regenerate the world with a grand *coup de main* or some fine institution, which is a very different thing. Here she has a circle of admirers who cry up everything she does or says as gospel, and I think it will do her much good to be with you who, though you love and admire her, do not believe in the wisdom of all she says, *because SHE* says it. I wish she could be brought to see that it is the intellectual part that interests her, not the manual. She has no *esprit de conduite* in the practical sense. When she nursed me, everything which intellect and kind intention could do was done, but she was a shocking nurse. Mariette was ten times better. Whereas her influence upon people's minds and her curiosity in getting into the varieties of mind is insatiable. After she has got inside, they generally cease to have any interest for her."

Not long before this, Hilary, writing also to Madame Mohl, had compared Flo to the strange, glorified, superhuman heroine of George Sand's recently published novel *Lélia*. Like *Lélia*, Flo seemed to be a being from another world, appearing mysteriously among commonplace people and constantly misunderstood by them. Many of the things *Lélia* was made to say bore a startling resemblance to things Flo had said in the past. "But," wrote Hilary, "there remains one great difference, in that Flo has so strong a commiseration *active* and contemplative for all suffering, whilst poor *Lélia* seems (I've not perhaps read enough to say) to be fatally concentrated and absorbed in herself."<sup>1</sup>

Florence received a letter from Elizabeth Blackwell, now practising in New York and seeking to organize a dispensary for the poor. Elizabeth, like Hilary, was sure that whatever Florence did would have a high humanitarian end. She was a little troubled by her friend's leaning to Catholicism, which seemed to her to plant itself on self-annihilation *as an end*. If Florence did become head of an order, it would be one that worked actively to help human suffering, and she would therefore still be admirable: but it would be better for her to remain in close union with her family and *not* to oppose them. In the serenity of her own happy work and happy family relations, Elizabeth found it hard to believe that struggle was necessary, or part of the divine idea. She gave Florence full particulars concerning *La Maternité*, which was, she said,

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Madame Mohl, November 1852.

the best place one could go to for learning about obstetrics, but the life was infernal. Elizabeth's younger sister Emily was now studying medicine at the Chicago University. Later, she thought of going to Paris to complete her studies, but it would be necessary to disguise herself in male attire. She and her sister were looking forward to a medical partnership. It was all very well for these united sisters to preach family contentment. What would Parthe do if she (Flo) proposed to go to Paris in male attire?

At the beginning of February she did actually find herself in Paris, but in her usual skirts and bonnet: Hilary, who went with her, had strict injunctions to see that she got some really good clothes, and Flo herself was not at all averse to what she called "a grand Panjandrum" of black velvet.<sup>1</sup> She had got a permit from the *Administration Générale de l'Assistance Publique*, to visit hospitals and other charitable institutions, and she worked with all her might, visiting all day, making notes and analyses, tabulating her information as she had learned to do from her youth. But this did not prevent her from going with Clarkey to parties and operas in the evenings. Presently, however, she was to enter on a kind of novitiate. Through Dr. Manning, she had received permission to live for a time with the *Sœurs de Charité* in the Rue Oudinot. She had decided on this rather than on the specialized training at *La Maternité*.

Just as the convent doors were about to open for her, however, she was summoned back by one of the home calls that she never wanted to resist. Poor Grandmama Shore was dying at last. Flo was most thankful to be with her in her last suffering days, and to be able to do something to alleviate her pain. The old lady never lost consciousness of her beloved grandchild's presence. Mr. Nightingale wrote about his daughter:

"Great has been the occasion for her usefulness, great the comfort she has administered—her hands in hers till the last of her moments on earth. Judge of the sensation of Love in the mind of a dying sufferer."

On March 25, 1853, Florence noted in her diary that Good Friday was the day of her grandmother's release. As morning approached, the sick woman, who had been very restless, grew calm. "When the full moon with which we have so many dear

<sup>1</sup> "The grand Panjandrum" was, I think, the name given by the Nightingales and Hilary to a fashionable dressmaker in Paris, and hence to her "creations."

associations set over that waste of snow, she was quite still, and before the cock had crowed many times, all was hushed. She died with the first light."

For years Florence had felt that Grandmama and Aunt Evans were the strongest of all the ties that bound her to her old life. She could not have borne any lot which prevented her from serving them to the end. Now both were gone, and while she was still watching by the death-bed of the last, the opening to a new life appeared before her astonished eyes.

Many of her friends had been looking out for a post which it might be possible to offer to her; and when one of them, Lady Canning, heard that a new Superintendent was required for a nursing home for poor ladies in which she was interested, she at once thought of Miss Florence Nightingale.

The unhappy fate of "decayed gentlewomen" had in recent years excited a good deal of attention among charitably-minded people. This was largely due to the efforts of Frederick Maurice; he had learnt about the subject from his sister Mary, who was a teacher, and could not rest till he had awakened others to a practical interest in it. The result was that Queen's College was founded in 1848, and Bedford College in 1849, in order to give better chances of education to ladies who had to earn their own living. Attempts were also made to help those who were no longer able to earn. One of the most important of these was the little hospital in Chandos Street, which was now being reorganized. The remodelling was in the hands of a Committee of Gentlemen and a Committee of Ladies.<sup>1</sup> The ladies left all matters of business and finance to the gentlemen—as was only proper—but they had a natural interest in personal matters, and when the name of Miss Florence Nightingale was suggested for the office of Superintendent, many of them were agreeably thrilled. Miss Nightingale had the same social connections as they had themselves. It was difficult to think of a lady of their own set attending on the sick, and hardly nice to think of her being present at operations. One of the Committee had the happy idea of asking the charming Mrs. Douglas Galton<sup>2</sup> whether the work was really likely to suit her cousin. Marianne could not resist the temptation to

<sup>1</sup> It must be remembered that it was quite a new thing for ladies to serve on a Committee: probably this was one of the earliest ladies' committees to be formed.

<sup>2</sup> Marianne Nicholson.

drama, and was not sorry to interfere with Flo's absurd plans ; she gave a piteous description of the anguish which would be suffered by Mr. and Mrs. Nightingale if their daughter deserted them. The ladies were shocked, and some of them said that they could go no farther in the matter. It might all have ended there if Florence had not found out about it and appealed to her father.

During the last eighteen months, Mr. Nightingale had gradually been won over to Flo's plans. He did not agree with her as to the necessity of reforming the world, and he was far from wishing her to attempt it ; but he liked people to have freedom to follow their ideas, and he began to see that Flo would not and could not stay quietly at home. The situation there was unbearable for a peace-loving man, and his sister, his brother-in-law Sam, and others in whom he had confidence, told him that he ought to end it by letting Florence go. He had made up his mind to do it, and to do it in the most liberal manner. He told Flo that he would give her an income of £500 a year, and implied that he would bring Mrs. Nightingale to consent to her acceptance of a post ; he suggested, however, that Flo had better write to him about these matters at the Athenæum Club ; it was no good increasing the commotion at home.

Thus the greatest practical difficulty was overcome. As to the moral difficulty, Florence could only hope that her mother and sister would in time get used to the idea of her taking a post, especially as it was one approved of by so many of their friends. While she was still in the north after Grandmama's death, she wrote to Madame Mohl to explain to her that it would be necessary for her to live at the institution she was to superintend, and that it would not suffice to visit it from time to time, as Mrs. Nightingale would have preferred. She begged Madame Mohl to support her by writing to her mother, "in order that I may come when I arrive, not with my tail between my legs, but gracefully curved round me, in the old way in which Perugino's devil wears it, in folds round the waist."

In London, she discussed arrangements with the Ladies' Committee, and looked at the houses they thought of taking. She had very clear ideas of what was required in the way of hot-water supply, nurses' quarters, and other practical accommodation. She continued to write about it when she went back to Paris to finish her training with the Sisters of St. Vincent.

Fate, however, was against her. After a fortnight of very hard work, nursing and making notes, not only of the Sisters'

methods but of their religious rules and the doctrines behind them, she suddenly found herself laid low with a second attack of measles. In all her queer adventures—and she had had many—which would never be recorded in “the X Books of her Wanderings,” having measles in the cell of a Sister of Charity was the queerest and the dirtiest. Madame Mohl was in England, but kind Monsieur Mohl came to her rescue, and, as soon as it was possible, transplanted her to his own back drawing-room in the Rue du Bac, where he attended on her in a fatherly manner and rejoiced in her “gentle and intelligent conversation.”

On July 13 she returned to England, and went to lodgings in Pall Mall with Aunt Mai. On August 12 she went to 1, Upper Harley Street, where the Home was now established, and entered her “first situation.” The long-sought release had come.

Flo’s experiences during the next few months were a strange medley. Some were so familiar that they seemed to have gone on for untold years; such was the contest with Parthe. Parthe thought her extraordinarily unkind because she would not consider plans for having a nursing home in Cromford Bridge House<sup>1</sup> or in the Forest Lodge at Embley instead of in Harley Street; because she would not say that when her people were in London she would live with them and only visit Harley Street; above all, because she would not come home and discuss it all. “Clarkey, dear,” Flo wrote to Madame Mohl, who had been moved by Parthe’s complaints, “I have talked matters over (made a clean breast, as you express it) with Parthe, not once but thousands of times. Years and years have been spent in it.” Parthe’s doctor had said that, for her sake, Flo really ought not to be with her till all was settled and could not be undone. All *was* settled *now*, but the knowledge that Parthe would continue to complain and would drag her away from her work if she could, was always there.

But there were other gloriously new experiences which made her forget it. For the first time, Flo was at the head of an institution, a little department of human life. For the first time, she had bodies and souls committed to her, and could feel that she had the right to devote herself to them at the expense of everything else. For the first time, she had a share in the triumphs of the healing made possible by modern science. She assisted at an

<sup>1</sup> The house in Derbyshire (near Lea Hurst), in which Aunt Evans had passed her last years.

operation for cancer performed by Mr. Bowman on a patient anæsthetized with chloroform, and afterwards nursed the patient back to health.<sup>1</sup> She gave her whole heart and mind as well as the labour of her body to the task of comforting a consumptive girl, and this time she was not torn away as she had been years ago from the Clayton boys.

When, as often happened, the patients were merely suffering from hysteria,<sup>2</sup> the result of their weary, disappointed lives, she tried to inspire them with fresh courage, and the doctors always left her the unpleasant task of turning out a patient who seemed disposed to linger in the shelter of the Home. Her counsels were not always successful; but some of the younger patients began to say, like the village girls at home, that she was as good as a mother to them, and some of the old ladies began to depend on her, as Grandmama and Aunt Evans had been used to do.

She liked doing everything herself and having the right to do it—not only nursing and comforting and inspiring—but keeping all the accounts, looking after all the household details, sniffing the medicines when they came—whereby a poison case was once prevented—catching in her arms the flue of a new stove when it was falling down bodily upon a patient, and, in fact, giving herself body and soul to her charges.

There were also some new experiences when she did not feel at all glorious, such as her dealings with her Committee. She had sworn to herself when she went to the Home that nothing should induce her to intrigue. But she found herself managing the ladies by telling them that the medical men wished for certain improvements, and then persuading the doctors that they did wish for them. Though she had Mrs. Herbert's support on the Committee (for Mrs. Herbert had joined it on purpose to help Flo), she could not always get things done except by methods for which she despised herself. Some of the ladies were very foolish; "Fashionable Asses," Madame Mohl had called them, and had advised her to "ride them roughshod round Grosvenor Square." But she could not quite do this. She stood out on essential matters, such as receiving patients who were not members of the Church of England. The Committee had wanted her to refuse Roman Catholics, and she had said that she would receive not

<sup>1</sup> Chloroform had been first brought into notice as an anæsthetic by Sir James Simpson in 1847; it had made possible many operations which could not have been done before.

<sup>2</sup> All forms of neurosis were called "hysteria" at that time.

only Papists but Jews, Turks and Infidels or not be Superintendent at all; but she had to fall in with the Committee's wishes by meeting any Minister of Religion who did not belong to the Established Church, at the door, remaining with him all the time he was in the house and not allowing him to speak to anyone except the patient he came to visit. She only gave vent to her feelings by writing: "From Committees, Charity and Schism, from the Church of England and all other deadly sin, from philanthropy and all the deceits of the Devil, Good Lord deliver us!"

There was a more serious objection to the work at Harley Street than the narrowness of the Committee, and that was the narrowness of the sphere of action. Only a small number of patients could be taken in, and pitiable as these poor ladies were, they did not belong to the downtrodden masses for whom Florence had so longed to work. She was not in St. Giles's, and she was not at a Kaiserswerth; there was no opportunity for training nurses to go out to others whom she could not reach. It was hard to imagine a school of nursing arising from the establishment in Harley Street. Mr. Bowman said plainly to his medical colleagues that Miss Nightingale's great powers were wasted. The Bracebridges and the Herberts said the same thing to each other. King's College Hospital was being reorganized, and a superintendent of nurses was needed. Who could be better for the post than Florence Nightingale?

Rumours began to reach Embley. Mrs. Nightingale and Parthe forgot their worry over what Flo had already done in their anxiety as to what she might do next. If the patients at Harley Street were governesses, they were at least ladies! A general hospital with patients of both sexes, all belonging to the lower classes and some of them afflicted with horrible diseases, would be much worse. They feared that it might be useless to urge her to stay at Harley Street; her ambitions soared too wide; so they wrote and suggested that she might take a position at a children's hospital. There at least the patients would be harmless. Meanwhile, accounts of Flo's extraordinary success at Harley Street began to reach them from their friends. Mrs. Herbert was careful that they should hear how much the fashionable ladies on the Committee admired her; Mr. Bracebridge and Uncle Sam forwarded every good report. Mrs. Nightingale, in the midst of her distress and anxiety, was moved and a little awed by the progress of her "dear child."

In the autumn of 1854, a lady staying at Lea Hurst wrote a letter. She was the wife of a Unitarian Minister in Manchester, and had published two stories entitled *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*, which had shocked some people, but had moved and delighted those who cared about social conditions and the position of women. Mrs. Gaskell cared very deeply for these things herself. She belonged to the circle of thoughtful women among whom Aunt Julia had so many friends, and she was also well known to Madame Mohl.

Mrs. Nightingale, always on the look out for celebrities and always kind, had been delighted to secure her as a guest at Lea Hurst, and had arranged that when the family went south in the autumn, she should remain on in the Derbyshire house and rest. Mrs. Gaskell, a hard-worked mother and housewife, was thankful for the quiet, but her greatest pleasure in coming to Lea Hurst was that the first part of her visit coincided with Miss Florence Nightingale's summer holiday at home. She had heard a good deal about this remarkable lady, and had been very anxious to see her. She now sat down to tell her great friend, Miss Catherine Winkworth, the result of her observations.<sup>1</sup>

"LEA HURST, NEAR MATLOCK.

"20 Oct. 1854.

"MY DEAREST KATE,—

"I am going to begin a letter to you, which you must forward to Emily.

"Miss Florence Nightingale went on the 31st of August to take superintendence of the cholera patients in the Middlesex Hospital (where they were obliged to send out their usual patients in order to take in the patients brought in every half-hour from the Soho district, Broad Street, etc.). She says that cholera is not infectious from person to person. Only two of the nurses had it. One of them died—the other recovered.

---

<sup>1</sup> This letter—giving as it does the impressions of one of the greatest of biographical writers about Florence Nightingale—is so important that I do not regret having quoted it fully, although, when my book had already gone to press I found that Miss Elizabeth Haldane had done the same in her book on *Mrs. Gaskell and Her Friends*. I have the kind consent of Miss Haldane and of Miss Margaret Shaen, representing Mrs. Gaskell's family, to keep it in.

Miss Haldane also gives another letter of Mrs. Gaskell's, written about the same time, which is most interesting because it contains a report of all that Parthe Nightingale told Mrs. Gaskell about her sister and herself. In it we see Parthe's conception of herself as one whose whole life was devoted to smoothing away the obstacles in Florence's path and making greatness possible for her. In the reconstruction of this picture of herself "launching Flo" she was seeking consolation for Flo's obstinacy about leaving home.

—none of the porters had it. She herself was up night and day from Friday afternoon (Sept. 1) to Sunday afternoon, receiving the poor creatures (chiefly fallen women of that neighbourhood—they had it the worst) who were being constantly brought in—undressing them—putting on turpentine stupes, etc., doing it herself to as many as she could manage; and yet she never had a touch of the complaint. She says, moreover, that one week the chances of recovery seemed as one to ten, but that since then the chances of recovery are as twenty to one.

“She is tall; very slight and willowy in figure; thick, shortish, rich brown hair; very delicate complexion; grey eyes, which are generally pensive and drooping, but when they choose can be the merriest eyes I ever saw; and perfect teeth, making her smile the sweetest I ever saw. Put a long piece of soft net, and tie it round this beautifully shaped head, so as to form a soft white framework for the full, oval of her face (for she had the toothache and so wore this little piece of drapery), and dress her up in black silk high up to the long, white, round throat, and with a black shawl on—and you may get *near* an idea of her perfect grace and lovely appearance.

“She is so like a saint. Mrs. Nightingale tells me that when a girl of fifteen or so she was often missing in the evening, and Mrs. N. would take a lantern and go up into the village and find her sitting by the bedside of someone who was ill, and saying she could not sit down to a grand seven o'clock dinner while this was going on, etc. Then Mr. and Mrs. Nightingale took their two daughters to Italy, and they lived there till it was time for them to be presented at Court. In London she was excessively admired and had (this I have heard from other people) no end of offers—but she studied hard with her father, and is a perfect Greek and Latin scholar, so perfect that, when she went to travel a few years later with Mr. and Mrs. Bracebridge, and they were in Transylvania, she was always chosen to address the old Abbots and others at the Convents in Latin, to state their wants. She travelled for a year and a half with them, going to Athens and all sorts of classical Greek places; then up the Nile to the Second Cataract. Her mother says that when she started, they equipped her *en princesse*, and when she came back she had little besides the clothes she had on; she had given away her linen, etc., right and left, to those who wanted it.

“Then she said that life was too serious a thing to be wasted in pleasure-seeking, and she went to Kaiserswerth, and was there for three months, taking her turn as a Deaconess, scouring rooms and doing all the other menial work. Then she went to Paris, where she studied nursing in the hospitals, in the dress of a nun or abbess; and besides was for a month serving at a *bureau* in an *arrondissement*, in order to learn from the Sisters of Charity their mode of visiting the poor.

“And now she is at the head of the ‘Establishment for Invalid Gentlemen’; nursing continually, and *present at every operation*.

She has a great deal of fun, and is carried along by that, I think. She mimics most capitally, mimics for instance, the way of talking of some of the poor governesses in the Establishment, with their delight in having a man servant, and at having *Lady Canning* and *Lady Monteagle* to do this and that for them. And then at the cholera time she went off, leaving word where she could be sent for, for she considered her 'Gentlewomen' to have a prior claim on her services, to the Middlesex Hospital.

"I came in here for the end of her fortnight of holiday in the year. Is it not like St. Elizabeth of Hungary? The efforts of her family to interest her in other occupations by allowing her to travel, etc.—but the clinging to one object!

"*Friday.* She must be a creature of another race, so high and angelic, doing things by impulse, or some divine inspiration—not by effort and struggle of will. But she seems almost too holy to be talked about as a mere wonder. Mrs. Nightingale says with tears in her eyes (alluding to Andersen's *Fairy Tales*), that they are ducks and have hatched a wild swan. She seems as completely led by God as Joan of Arc. I never heard of anyone like her. It makes me feel the *livingness* of God more than ever to think how straight He is sending His Spirit down into her, as into the prophets and saints of old.

"*Saturday evening.* And now they are all gone, and I am left alone, established high up in two rooms, opening one out of the other—the old nurseries; the inner one—very barely furnished—is my bedroom now, but usually Miss Nightingale's. It is curious how simple it is. The old carpet doesn't cover the floor. The furniture is painted wood: no easy chair, no sofa, a little curtainless bed, a small glass. It is curious to see how simply these two young women have been brought up. . . . In the outer room—the former day nursery—Miss Florence's room when she is at home—everything is equally simple; now, of course, the bed is reconverted into a sofa, two small tables, a few bookshelves, a drab carpet only partially covering the clean boards, and stone-coloured walls—as cold in colouring as need be, but with one low window on one side, trellised over with Virginian creepers as gorgeous as can be; and the opposite one, by which I am writing, looking over such country! High as Lea Hurst is, one seems on a pinnacle, with the clouds careering round one. Down below is a garden with stone terraces and flights of steps. The planes of these terraces being perfectly gorgeous with masses of hollyhocks, dahlias, nasturtiums, geraniums, etc. Then a sloping meadow losing itself in a steep wooded descent (such tints over the wood!) to the River Derwent, the rocks on the other side of which form the first distance, and are of a red colour streaked with misty purple. Beyond this, interlacing hills forming three ranges of distance; the first deep brown with decaying heather; the next in some purple shadow, and the last catching some pale, watery sunlight.

"I have not told you half about Miss F. N. It must keep till I see

you. But she is thinking (don't name this: it is a secret as yet) of becoming the Matron of one of the great London Hospitals as soon as she has got this small Establishment in Harley Street into training."

But while this letter was being written, Miss Florence Nightingale was already on her way to another and more important sphere of work. She started for Scutari on October 21, 1854.