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FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE AND ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF
MODERN NURSING

Twenty-Eighth Commencement — 1954

H.F.H. School of Nursing

FRANK R. MENAGH, M.D.*

When Miss Moran invited me to address the 1954 Graduating Class of the Henry Ford Hospital School of Nursing, I accepted the assignment with great pleasure, marred only slightly by the added remark, doubtless much appreciated by you, that I was at liberty to roam at will in the one hundred-year history of modern nursing, just so long as I did not take more than twenty-five minutes in which to do my roaming. However, I can assure you that it gives me much satisfaction, a real thrill, to appear before this splendid group of professionally trained young women. And this is not only because you in yourselves represent so much solid accomplishment and are such an invaluable part of the professional assets of the community, but because you are also true representatives of the twenty-seven classes that have graduated before you from our own School of Nursing. Representatives of those splendid women who have received similar training in the last one hundred years, and splendid women they were, too. I know. I married one of them!

You represent, as well, the most respected of the professions today. So convinced is the public of your technical competence and your personal integrity that any criticism of nurses comes as a great shock, and there are not many such made. One of the first lessons that I learned as a young physician was that when a patient, usually, but not always a woman, starts off an interview by telling me with great pride that she has a friend who is a trained nurse and that this nurse had told her so and so, never to question the information so given. To do so would throw suspicion on my own qualifications. I always start with such statements as the law and gospel and when I reach my own conclusions, I make them sound as much like those of her friend, the nurse, as possible.

But you represent even more than this. Your profession has been the spearhead of the most beneficial development of the last one hundred years, the liberation of women from the role of purely domestic servants to a wider sphere, outside the home, where their intelligence, energy and special talents have been released for greater service to society. Nurses are not the only group of trained women, but they were the pioneers and, together with the teachers, form the largest and most valuable group of professionally trained women today. And I might add that so far as I can see, their role as home-makers has not suffered; in fact, it has been improved. This change has not come without great effort. Even as late as my own school days, the women who took up nursing were thought to be exceptionally courageous, though there was never any question as to their moral or intellectual status. But the amazing thing about this change, so far as the nurses are concerned, is that the pattern of service and behavior of this notable group was not a matter of gradual development but was fixed from the start by one remarkable woman who used as her pattern her own abilities and convictions. It is truly astounding how much of Florence Nightingale we can see in this Class of 1954.

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At this point you may well ask, why talk again about Florence Nightingale, and if she was to be selected for our subject, why was I selected as the speaker? It is almost as though I had been asked to talk about flower arrangements. To answer the second question first, my only qualifications are my great admiration for the woman herself and a lively sense of respect for her accomplishments. And again why talk about her? The fact is that she is one of those really great people who are most appreciated when you know the most about them. She has much in common with Abraham Lincoln. The speeches and articles on Lincoln today show a far greater understanding of the man and his worth than did those of his partisans of an earlier day. It is not too easy to grasp the genius of Florence Nightingale. Every time that I have gone back to study her I have come away with a different impression. The woman grows on you. It seems that there are three stages in interpreting her. The first might be called the saccharine stage. This is the period when you think of her as the lady with the lamp, going her rounds, meek and gentle, giving aid and succor to the sick and wounded. This was the popular heroine, and, indeed, she was this too. And then, secondly, there comes a realization of her tremendous power and tenacity in gaining her objectives. Here the emphasis is on what she herself called her "Battering Ram" characteristics. This side of the picture is so forceful that you forget her other qualities. And finally with further acquaintance, you realize that here is no ordinary person at all and that all of her history and activities must be studied. Each time that you go over this material or parts of it, new facets of her personality emerge. She becomes a true genius.

Florence Nightingale was born in 1820 and lived to be ninety years old. During most of this time the "stuffed shirt" reigned supreme and this stuffed shirt as often as not surmounted petticoats. By a "stuffed shirt" we mean persons with fixed opinions, guided solely by precedent and social custom, indifferent or hostile to the introduction of new facts and of any interpretation of these facts that might upset their preconceived notions. Such persons are apt to be in the higher echelons of society and government and are accustomed to having their prejudices treated with respect. Florence Nightingale took them all on — first in the domestic circle, then in the leading social circles of her day, then in the Army, the worst of all and, finally, in the government. Red tape had for her no terrors and she knew how to use it for her own advantage. By the sheer power of her mental capacity and her persistence she was able to greatly accelerate toward purely liberal attitudes those forces that were already present. She was not a person who was ahead of her times; she was just in time to lead a popular movement and to give to it a desirable character. Good timing, in fact, played a large part in her success.

If any further apology is needed for talking about Florence Nightingale, the fact that 1954 is the one hundredth anniversary of the British entry into the Crimean War could be cited.

Florence Nightingale was born in Florence, Italy, and was named for the city of her birth. It may be prophetic that she was so named because up to that time, and for thirty years afterwards, Florence was a masculine name but so many girl babies were named after her that the name came to be wholly feminine in English-speaking countries. A few years before you young women were born, the biggest theatrical production each year was the Ziegfeld Follies, produced by a fine showman named Florenz Ziegfeld, born, I believe, in Austria. He had as his leading lady a very fine actress and musical comedy star, Billie Burke. In due course of time they decided to marry and once this

decision was reached they lost no time. They procured a license and presented themselves before a minister who had never heard of either of them. The minister learned that their names were Flo and Billie, but the ceremony had to be stopped and explanations made when the minister persisted in trying to get Billie Ziegfeld to take as his lawfully wedded wife Flo Burke.

The Nightingale family was wealthy, very intelligent, and moved in the best of English society. They had only two children, both girls, and these were brought up in the standards of their social level. In those days all gentlewomen were pure and chaste because their families saw to it that they never had a chance to be anything else. Everybody, including the gentlewomen themselves, subscribed to the rather insulting proposition that if they were allowed to rub elbows with the world they would very shortly cease to be gentlewomen. Perhaps this is where the opposite concept of "wild women" originated. At any rate these girls lived very sheltered lives. They were, however, widely travelled, lived much in Paris and Italy, and spoke the European languages like natives. Florence proved to have an unusually keen mind and a restless one that must always be at work on something. She became an excellent Latin and Greek scholar, was widely read in history, and followed closely the economic and political problems of her day. In fact she knew many of the people who were engaged in the various European revolutions of that time. She also was an excellent mathematician, much to the distress of the family, as this was supposed to be outside of a gentlewoman's sphere of interest. She had a flare for statistics, was always compiling them, and learned to use them effectively.

When she was about sixteen years old, she felt that she had had a divine call to do some kind of work. What the work was to be she did not know but she was not then interested in nursing. During this period she carried on the normal social activities of her family. Her father and uncle engaged an entire floor of the Carlton Hotel for the London season during the coronation of Queen Victoria. She had an adequate number of beaux, kept them dangling as long as possible and then said, "No." She apparently never had the least intention of marrying. She was interested in the welfare of the common people, an interest that her friends found it hard to understand. Gentlewomen were not supposed to be interested in workmen and their families. She was well trained in philosophy and, realizing the popular religions of her day did not too successfully meet the needs of the intelligent artisans, she devised a religion, within the framework of Christianity, that would appeal to them. She tried writing but did not like it. In her late twenties she fixed on nursing as her great objective. She did not even dare to mention this to her family at first, and when she did do so there was a storm. Her sister had a nervous breakdown because of the shock. But Florence Nightingale was no rebel. She didn't renounce her family and its advice. She just kept boring ahead. Finally in her early thirties she was allowed to take some instruction in the best hospitals of Germany, France, and England. And at long last after years of ceaseless opposition from her family, she was installed as the superintendent of a small nursing home called "An Establishment for Gentlewomen During Illness." It was of course not adequate for her plans which she had now crystallized. Her goal was to train young women as nurses and to teach society that such training was a proper vocation for nice women and that they should be accepted at their true worth—two very difficult objectives, especially the latter. She was now thirty-four years old and the year was

1854. This was the year Britain entered the Crimean War and the year of the great opportunity for Florence Nightingale.

There will not be time enough today for us to refight the Crimean War. There has been a new book on the subject, just published, called "The Reason Why" by Cecil Woodham-Smith. The author is a woman who has emulated Florence Nightingale by being christened with a boy's name. Appropriately enough, she published in 1951 a life of Florence Nightingale. It is interesting to note that she spent eight years working on the Nightingale papers and then followed largely the classical biography of Sir Edward Cook.

Those of you who may be a little vague as to the geography of the Mediterranean basin will find a very interesting half-hour in going over this area in an atlas. It is about 2500 miles from the Straits of Gibraltar to the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea at modern Israel. To the north long fingers of water reach out to Southern France, Italy, the Adriatic and the Aegean Seas. From the upper end of the Aegean Sea, the Dardanelles lead to the Sea of Marmara and across this to the Bosphorus, opening out on the Black Sea. On the European side is Istanbul or Constantinople. Across the narrow strait is the suburb of Scutari. About 300 miles further east, hanging like a pear from the north shore of the Black Sea is Crimea, practically an island. On the southern point of Crimea is Sevastopol, where the Russians had built a strong naval base with the idea of opening up the straits and so giving Russia an unhampered warm water port. When the British entered the war in 1854, the object was to capture and destroy Sevastopol. The base for the care of their sick and wounded was at Scutari, 300 miles to the west.

The Allies invaded Crimea on September 14th and the battle of the Alma was fought on September 20th. It was a hard-won victory. The losses were heavy and in addition to the wounded, cholera had added to the number of the sick. No adequate preparations had been made for the care of these men and by the time they reached Scutari their condition defied description. They had no clothing, no food, no medicine and few Medical Officers to care for them although the Army had one Medical Officer to each ninety-five men. There were supplies but they were always in the wrong place. Forty-two percent of the men who lived to reach a hospital died. So far as the care of the sick and wounded was concerned, it was a thoroughly bungled job. And yet the men and equipment were there and, given enough time, they would probably have muddled through somehow. However, the British Army had a new departure from the past wars in that the London Times had sent out its own Special Correspondent, one William Howard Russell. While not welcomed by the Army, he seems to have been given a free hand. While England was still wild with excitement over the great victory of the Alma, Russell's dispatches began to arrive telling of the condition of the sick and wounded. He was a man capable of high indignation and his stories told the exact truth. England was horrified and there was a great public demand that something be done at once. In his dispatches Russell noted that the French soldiers were much better cared for than were the British, and he noted that the nursing sisters who were with the French Army were in part responsible for this. Why could not the British have some similar service?

Russell's dispatches arrived in London on October 9th, 12th and 13th. Among others, two persons of importance read these dispatches with special interest. One was

Florence Nightingale in her little Establishment for Gentlewomen During Illness, and the other was a friend of hers of many years, Mr. (afterwards Sir) Sidney Herbert, Minister of War, and the man in the Ministry who was responsible for supplying the Army. Miss Nightingale wrote to him on October 14th saying that she would be willing to head such a nursing Corps, provided her family would consent, etc. On October 15th, Sidney Herbert wrote to Miss Nightingale asking her to do just that. The letters crossed. Six days later on October 21st, Florence Nightingale and her party of nurses left London. She had promptly seized this golden opportunity to establish nursing in the minds of people generally as a respectable and valuable profession.

The most difficult detail in arranging this expedition was the selection of the nurses who were to be taken. One of the reasons that Florence Nightingale's family had objected so strenuously to her entering nursing as a career was the low esteem in which nurses generally were held. And not without some reason. The best of the nurses, both from the point of view of morals and training, were the nursing sisterhoods. The trouble here was that there were not enough of them and that their religious intolerance made it very difficult to weld them into one organization. The hospital nurses outside of the sisterhoods were in general a hard lot. It was taken for granted that all nurses were addicted to alcohol; in fact, it was thought that they could not carry out their difficult work without it. The average hospital nurse was not trained at all in the usual sense and only took up this work because she was fit for no other. It was decided to take no young women as nurses and it was with difficulty that thirty-eight were finally selected who would go and who seemed likely to prove useful. Strict regulations were issued as to their conduct. For one thing the amount of alcohol that they were to receive was limited. They were to get a pint of ale or bitters with their dinners, and half a pint of the same or an ounce of brandy with supper. Later from Scutari, Florence wrote back home that "fat drunken old dames of 14 stone and over must be barred, the provision of bedsteads is not strong enough." Even so, many had to be sent home because of drunkenness, including several of the Presbyterian nurses who had been sent out to equalize the religious representation. With the exception of the sisterhoods, who wore their habits, all the nurses must wear the same uniform. This uniform appears to have been selected, not to set off the grace and allure of its wearer, but quite the reverse. It had the advantage of easy identification at distances up to one mile and like the classical uniform of a recruit, it didn't fit. One of the nuns wrote, "That a 'lady' could be induced to appear in such a get-up was certainly a triumph of grace over nature."

The party left London on the 21st of October and sailed from Marseilles on October 27th. They sailed in the *Vectis*, an old mail-ship that was so uncomfortable and hard to handle that the Government had trouble recruiting crews to man her. The second day out, a good Mediterranean gale hit her astern and blew her across the 2000-mile journey in record time. They had to jettison her guns, and the steward's cabin and the galley, built like small garages and bolted to the main deck as was the custom in the old sailing ships, washed overboard. But on she went, up the Aegean Sea, through the Dardanelles and across the Sea of Marmara to the Bosphorus where she dropped anchor in front of Scutari, seven days out of Marseilles, including a one-day stop at Malta. It was a fast trip and they arrived on November 4th. The timing was again just right and the next day, November 5th, the battle of Inkerman was fought.

Again, the wounded in horrible condition flooded in. Things were still very difficult but the new nursing corps was given a chance to prove themselves. That they did succeed is a matter of history. But that they succeeded because Florence Nightingale was a great administrator, a fine quartermaster, a diplomat and a skillful politician, as well as a sympathetic and skillful nurse, is not so well understood. She herself contracted the Crimean Fever and nearly died but she never deserted the Army and she made her Nursing Corps an accepted and respected organization.

When she returned to England in 1856, she was a national heroine. Books, pamphlets and imaginary pictures of her (she never released her own photograph) were published. Ships were named for her and, as we have noted, so many girl babies were named Florence that it is still a popular feminine name. They even named a race-horse for her and this filly, unlike most horses named for prominent persons, proved to be a good one and the newspapers carried the announcement that Miss Nightingale had won the Forest Plate Handicap over, appropriately enough, Barbarity and nine others. And I suspect that she rather liked that, as she was an accomplished horsewoman.

Her influence in England was tremendous. She was the friend of royalty and the master of Ministers in the Government. A threat to appeal to the people usually won her point for her. She lived for fifty-four years after her return to England and whether it was the result of keen psychology or by accident, her decision to withdraw from the public eye increased and prolonged her influence. She spent most of the rest of her life in bed but did a tremendous amount of work. Her greatest contributions came during this period. She established her training school for nurses, and the first graduates of St. Thomas would compare well in training and character with you who are graduating today. Beyond this, her work and interest were largely in what we today would call the field of Public Health, but the welfare of the enlisted men in the British army was always close to her heart.

If Florence Nightingale were alive today and had sent to you a personal message on the event of your graduation, I wonder what she would have said. It might be that she would repeat two bits of advice that she had previously given to nurses. First, to gain the greatest satisfaction from the training that you have had and in the work that you will do, you will need first of all a sense of devotion. May I quote, "I use the word in a very wide sense, meaning that state of mind in which the current of desire is flowing toward one high end. This does not presume knowledge but very soon attains it." And second, use the fine training that you have received to introduce into your own life an ordered pattern of living. With these two precepts, life should bring you much satisfaction.