

**Miss Nightingale at Scutari**, by C.T. Andrews, M.D., F.R.C.P. *International Nursing Review*, London, October, 1960.

A recent trip to Istanbul afforded an opportunity to pay a visit to Selimiye Barracks at Scutari. The Barrack Hospital is today a Turkish army barracks as indeed it was prior to 1854. The Turkish authorities had lent it to the British for use as a hospital...

...It was on November 3, 1854 that the *Vectis* carrying Miss Nightingale and her party of 38 nurses anchored off Seraglio point not very far from the terminus for passenger ships today. After their enthusiastic send-off and their triumphant progress through France to Marseilles the trip through the Mediterranean should have provided a quiet interlude before the battle. But, alas, Miss Nightingale, though a good horsewoman, was a poor sailor. She was sick all the way. A storm hit them in the sea of Marmara carrying away the steward's cabins and galley. Miss Nightingale staggered on deck to look at the plains of Troy and the Tomb of Achilles, but by the time they reached Constantinople the storm had blown itself out and the whole party assembled on deck to look with more than idle curiosity at a gaunt square building with a tower at each angle which faced them across the narrow stretch of sea, which at this point separates Europe from Asia.

Miss Nightingale and her party crossed in rowing boats. If they had any illusions of a romantic nature they were speedily dispersed by what they saw. A dead horse floated in the sea just off the landing stage and the hollow square which made up the central courtyard of the Barracks was occupied by great piles of rubbish which no doubt provided a fertile feeding ground for flies and insects of many varieties and a breeding ground for the virulent bacteria which were to carry off so many of their patients in the months ahead.

Structurally the hospital seems to have changed but little in the hundred years since the Crimean War. The cheerless corridors, the cold and stony floors are still there. A corridor in fact leads the whole length of each side of the building giving an impression of vastness which brought to mind Miss Nightingale's observation that they had four miles of beds and something of the magnitude of the task even of doing the nightly round.

We were conducted to Miss Nightingale's room in the North West tower. It was from this room that the nursing administration of the Barrack Hospital was carried on and here, in the small hours of the morning, that she would sit down to write those long letters home which today provide us with the bulk of our knowledge of the day to day conflict which was waged not only with disease and death, but with appalling shortage of supplies and worse still with the ignorance and stupidity of those who should have been her helpers.

One of the small pieces of fiction which centres round this story is that her nurses were "ladies" drawn from the upper stratum of society. With few exceptions, mainly amongst the religious communities, this was not so. Most of her nurses were attracted by the higher pay offered. They got 12 to 14 shillings a week, which was nearly twice the pay of a nurse at home. It is worth remembering that, in days when sectarian bitterness could reach incredible depths, Miss Nightingale took with her ten Roman Catholic Sisters (from Bermondsey and Norwood), eight Anglican Sisters (from Devonport) and six Protestant nurses from St. Johns House, London. That a party so constituted should have been held together at all was a remarkable feat of diplomacy and administration. That its impact on the world of nursing should have been such as it became is a tribute to the complex ability of the greatest English woman of the Victorian age.

The party arrived at the Barrack Hospital at a crucial moment, for the next day the battle of Inkermann was fought. The shortage of supplies which she noted on the evening of her arrival was shortly to be accentuated by a fresh influx of wounded. In the ten days which it took the transports to cross the Black Sea her powers of diplomacy and discipline were to be sternly tested. On the one hand there was the fact that the doctors did not appear to want her help and she would let no nurse enter the wards uninvited. On the other hand there was the appalling shortage of supplies which she alone had the means to remedy. They had no plates, knives, forks or spoons, no basins, towels, soap, brooms, mops or trays, no operating tables, no drugs, stretchers, splints or bandages and yet in the bazaars of Constantinople you could buy all these things and Miss Nightingale had at her disposal a fund of £30,000.

But for a week the little party sat making splints, shirts, pillows, stump rests and slings. They went to church and heard an admirable sermon by the hospital chaplain. Grumbles on the part of her nurses were answered by silence. Like Disraeli she did not believe in wasting words on explanation and apology.

I wondered as I looked out at the landing stage where the transports brought their wounded, how nicely her policy of "wait and see" was calculated. Did she know the plight of the army before Sebastopol? The Crimean winter was upon it. On November 14 a hurricane blew all day ripping away the tents, the marquees and even the blankets which covered the wounded. The snow fell and the troops shivered in helpless misery. Some even froze to death. Did she sense the calamity which lay ahead for the great Barrack Hospital itself? Most of the men shipped from Balaclava to Scutari suffered from frostbite, starvation, pleurisy, pneumonia or gangrene. As if not already sufficiently discomfited they were now to have dysentery, typhoid and cholera added. Starved and in rags, swarming with vermin they pillowed their

heads on their boots and used their greatcoats caked with blood and mud as blankets.

Whether she knew or not it is certain that the flood of wounded from Inkermann brought an end to the period of inactivity for Miss Nightingale's nurses. All who could help were now pressed into service and Miss Nightingale was given a chance, albeit a limited one, to show what a combination of knowledge, training and discipline could do.

In her week of inactivity she had not been wasting her time. She had looked around Constantinople. She says nothing about the mosques which draw the modern tourist. But she was captivated by the bazaars. Here was one of the great markets of the world. Here you could buy nearly everything the Barrack Hospital needed. And so gradually it came to be known that if you wanted anything, be it a water bed or a milk pudding, Miss Nightingale had it. Writing to Sidney Herbert on January 4, 1855, she says:— "I am a kind of general dealer in socks, shirts, knives and forks, wooden spoons, tin baths, tables and forms, cabbages and carrots, operating tables, towels and soap, small tooth combs, precipitate for destroying lice, scissors, bed pans and stump pillows."

Looking around the small room—it is about 15 feet square—that served as an office, one reflected on the feverish activity those bare walls had witnessed 100 years ago. Her letters still bring the scenes of the Barrack Hospital so vividly before one that one reads on with a fascinated horror. The amputations in the wards in full view of the other patients and without anaesthetics, the erysipelas, cholera and gangrene, the sublime courage of the common soldier and a hundred daily incidents are all there. There are too, the flashes of humour with which she describes for example the nursing mutiny over the shape of the caps...

...Florence Nightingale had a graphic way of portraying the progress made in reducing mortality. From her diagram it is clear that for the period February 1 to 25, 1855, the mortality was 42 per cent. In the course of six months it was reduced to 5.2 per cent. But mortality figures by themselves gives little indication of the horror and heart-break, the frustration, incompetence and apathy which surrounded this courageous, dynamic and challenging figure.