

Story of Florence Nightingale



We still remember Florence Nightingale although she was born nearly two hundred years ago. Florence was born in 1820, in the Italian town of Florence and her British parents decided to name her after it. She had a happy childhood and grew up in a comfortable home with large gardens in Derbyshire. She always loved caring for animals as a child and as she grew older, she began to be concerned about the poor people living in nearby cottages. She sometimes visited the cottagers with her mother, and became shocked to find that they often could not afford enough to eat, to wear or to keep their homes warm. Florence grew angry that better-off people did not seem to do anything to help the poor. She believed that God wanted her to do something about it. She began to study and work as a nurse.

Her parents did not want Florence to become a nurse. They thought it was not suitable for a young lady. After several years, however, Florence was asked to take a team of nurses to look after the soldiers wounded in a war that was going on at the time. She set off in 1854, with a party of 37 nurses, to travel to the Crimea and work in the military hospitals there. The main military hospital was at Scutari, and this is where Florence first arrived. She was upset at what she saw. There was no water, and no proper beds or wards, just long, dirty halls. The wind whistled down the corridors, rats ran everywhere and the rain ran in through the leaking roof. Florence and her nurses felt powerless to do anything at first because the doctors and officials ignored and distrusted her. They thought she was just a 'society lady' who would not know what to do. They also disapproved of women working as nurses in army hospitals.

As the crisis grew worse, the officials realised that Florence knew what to do and could help them. Finally, they asked her advice and she was able to start work. Florence and her nurses scrubbed the floors, made beds for the soldiers, and went shopping to buy food, clothing and medical equipment. She also bought pillows, mattresses and blankets for the soldiers' beds. When soldiers arrived at the hospital, they would be greeted by Florence. She made sure they had baths, clean clothes, had their wounds dressed and received some food. Some soldiers said it was like heaven after the horrors they had been through.

Story of Florence Nightingale (cont)

At night, Florence went round all the wards with her lamp to check that everyone was safe and comfortable. This is why she came to be called 'The Lady with the Lamp'. William Russell, a reporter for *The Times* newspaper sent back photographs and reports about the terrible conditions at the Crimea. He said that only Florence was doing anything about it. Because of his reports, Florence quickly became a heroine in Britain. A Commission of Inquiry was sent out to find out just how bad conditions were. The Commission found some dreadful things.

Florence also worked in other hospitals as well as the one at Scutari. She became seriously ill at one time, but recovered to continue her work. She wanted the soldiers to have an interest while they were recovering in hospital and brought in newspapers and journals for them to read. She also provided them with writing materials so that they could write home to their families. Many officers did not agree with this. They thought it would encourage the soldiers to be disobedient and steal the books and papers. However, this never happened.

The war ended in 1856 and Florence took a boat back to England. She was very weak after her illness and hard work and could hardly stand up by the time she returned home. Eventually she regained her strength and went back to her work. In 1860, she set up the Nightingale Training School for nurses at St Thomas's Hospital. For many years, until her death, Florence helped to run the school. Queen Victoria was so interested in her work that she invited her to Balmoral Castle to talk about the problems of health in the army. Afterwards, Queen Victoria helped Florence with her work.

Soon after this visit, however, Florence had become so weak that she became an invalid and had to continue her work from her bed. Florence continued her work to improve conditions in the army and in hospitals until her death in 1910. The whole world knew about her funeral, which was held in the small village churchyard near her parents' home. However, a grand service was also held at St Paul's Cathedral in London, where crowds came to pay their respects. Florence is still remembered because her work changed the way of life for many people, particularly soldiers. Florence also changed the idea of nursing and the lives of nurses, who came to be seen as members of an important profession. Hospitals were no longer diseased and dirty places where people merely went to die. Many pictures and statues of Florence have been made to make sure she and her work continue to be remembered.