

Lady with a lamp

Florence Nightingale was a nurse. In 1854 she went to south Russia to look after the British men who had been injured in the Crimean War. This is the story of what she found when she got there.

“I told you so!” The doctor stood still and took his companion’s arm. “That woman thinks she’s going to run the whole place!” he said, furiously. “Just listen to her!”

Ahead of them, Florence had stopped at the entrance to one of the biggest wards. Inside there were scores and scores of soldiers, many of them still in the uniforms they had been wearing on the battlefield.

“Why are all these men lying on the floors?” she demanded.

The doctors who were conducting her round the hospital before she set her nurses to work shrugged their shoulders. “What can we do? There are not enough beds for the officers, not to speak of the ordinary soldiers!”

“They will die of cold, even if they don’t die of wounds.”

“I’m afraid you’re quite right, Miss Nightingale. But we can’t do anything about it. There aren’t enough blankets to keep them warm, and we can’t get any more.”

“What about operations?”

“We have to do them in the wards, of course.”

Florence shuddered. “With all the rest of the sick men looking on?”

“Certainly. There are not enough rooms for the men who are sick. We have none to spare for operating-theatres.” The doctor who was speaking looked helpless. “There aren’t even any operating-tables. We have to use ordinary ones. Ever since the war began we have been making do with what we can get.” He turned back into the corridor. “I will *not* have you arguing with me in front of those men, Miss Nightingale.”

“Have you enough anaesthetics?”

“Anaesthetics? We have none at all. When a man has his leg cut off he simply has to grin and bear it.”

Florence stopped in the middle of the wet, dirty corridor. Her beautiful face was white. She controlled her voice when she spoke,



but it beat about the doctors like a whip. “I have never heard anything so disgraceful in my life. *Why* is everything in this state?” she demanded. “*Why* are there no anaesthetics? *Why* aren’t the wards and corridors scrubbed? *Why* haven’t these wounded men got clean clothes? *Why* must they lie in the filthy uniforms and muddy blankets they wore in the battlefields?”

The doctors waited for their chief to answer.

When he did so his voice, too, was calm, though he looked as red as the uniform he wore. “Miss Nightingale,” he said, “you are a woman. You know nothing about war or about the army. That is why we didn’t want you or your nurses here. We knew you would do nothing but criticise. It is impossible to expect women to put up with conditions like these. I admit that. *We’re* used to it. You’d better get your nurses together and take the first ship back to England that you can find.” He turned on his heel, and began to walk away, but Florence’s next words brought him to a stop.

“I am *not* going back to England,” she said clearly. “And I do not propose to put up with these conditions. I have been sent by the Government to superintend the nursing of these wounded and sick men, and I am going to start *now*.” ➡