

‘MY MIND IS MADE UP’

‘Disgraceful!’ Florence folded the newspaper and slapped it down on the table. ‘Shocking! It makes my blood boil!’

The maid heard the noise and came hurrying from the kitchen. ‘I beg pardon, Miss Nightingale, but is something wrong? The eggs were fresh, I saw to it myself ...’

Florence took a deep breath. ‘No, Sally. Breakfast is fine. It’s what I read in the paper that makes me so cross.’

‘You mean the war?’ Sally began clearing the table. ‘Hasn’t started too well, has it, miss?’

Florence stood up and crossed to where her pet owl, Athena, sat on her perch by the window. ‘Started too well!’ she repeated, gently stroking the bird’s feathers. ‘It’s a shame, Sally! A disgrace! A tragedy! The army hospitals don’t have enough doctors or medicines or even bandages! And there isn’t a single nurse – not one!’

The maid did not reply. Miss Nightingale was a determined lady of strong opinions. When she was in this sort of mood, it was best to keep quiet.

Florence bent down and looked Athena straight in the face. ‘You’re a very wise old bird’, she whispered. ‘You know it’s true, don’t you? Not one nurse! Oh, those poor soldiers!’

Meanwhile, Sally had piled the breakfast things on her tray and was walking quietly towards the door. Suddenly her mistress turned back into the room. 'Of course, I could go myself', she announced.

'Beg pardon, miss?'

Florence's eyes shone brightly against the grey glass of the window. 'I said, Sally, that I could always go myself. To nurse the soldiers.'

The maid almost dropped her tray. 'You can't do that, Miss Nightingale!' she cried.

'Why not?'

'Because of – well – because of the guns', Sally stammered. 'And the horrible fighting and blood and so on. Not to mention all them rough and rude soldiers. I hope I don't speak out of turn, Miss Nightingale, but war is no place for a lady.'

Florence smiled. 'You forget, Sally, that I am not a lady. I am a nurse. And war is where nurses are needed most.' She crossed to her writing desk and sat down. 'My mind is made up. So hurry up and take those things out – I'll need you to help me pack!'

Sally shook her head and bustled off towards the kitchen. 'I know there's no stopping you, Miss Nightingale', she called over her shoulder. 'But please don't get yourself killed.'

Florence was not listening. She had already begun to make a list of the things she needed to take with her.

By the weekend, Florence was packed and ready. One matter remained to be sorted out. If she turned up

in Turkey saying she had come to nurse the soldiers, she would be laughed at – or worse. She needed the support of her powerful friends.

On Saturday morning she went round to Belgrave Square to call on the Herberts. Sidney Herbert was Minister for War in the government. If anyone can help me, Florence reckoned, he can.

Unfortunately, the Herberts had gone to Bournemouth for the weekend. Back in her room at the hospital, Florence decided that as she couldn't see them, the best thing was to write. She sent a long letter to Elizabeth Herbert explaining what she was doing and asking her husband for help.

Early on Monday morning a letter arrived from Bournemouth. Florence recognised the handwriting at once. How very odd! she thought. Sidney Herbert must have written to me while I was writing to his wife.

She opened the letter and glanced through it. The minister announced that he had just sent out masses of fresh supplies to Scutari and the Crimea. 'Good for him!' Florence muttered.

He went on to say that he was also planning something new: female nurses for the Scutari hospital. Would Florence, he asked, organise the whole project? He would call round that afternoon to hear her answer.

Florence put down his letter and looked round at Athena. 'Sorry, old bird', she said with a sigh, 'But I'm going to be leaving you'.

‘POOR LITTLE BEASTIE!’

‘Emma Blenkinsop!’

The ladies sat back in their chairs and waited for the nurse to come in. It had been a tough morning. Of the ten women they had interviewed so far, only two had been at all suitable to join Florence’s party.

The door opened slowly. A large, scruffy-looking woman waddled into the room and stood swaying gently on the carpet.

‘Emma Blenkinsop?’ Florence asked.

‘That’s me, ma’am’, the woman wheezed. Florence noticed that all her front teeth were missing. ‘Bestest nurse in the ’ole of London, they say. Seen more corpses than most people ’as ’ot dinners.’

Lady Canning, who was sitting on Florence’s left, frowned. Mrs Blenkinsop noticed the look. ‘Oh! Don’t let that worry you, ladies. It was only my dead cert coffin-fillers what died. Them as what ’ad ’ope, I bringed back to life. Amazing what a drop of gin’ll do!’

‘You use gin as medicine, do you?’ Lady Canning asked.

‘Course I do, ma’am! Nothing like gin for raisin’ the pulse, calmin’ the fever, healin’ the wounds ...’

‘Thank you, Mrs Blenkinsop’, Florence cut in, ‘But you are not quite the sort of person we are looking for. Good morning!’

It took Florence and her friends two days to gather a band of suitable nurses. Most of the women they talked to thought that nursing meant sitting beside a patient, drinking and watching them die. They behaved – and most of them looked – little better than vultures.

On Thursday Florence heard that the government had made her Superintendent of the Female Nurses in the Hospitals in the East. The title sounded grand, but it gave her control only over her nurses. She had to be careful. The other hospital staff would not like it if she turned up and started teaching them their jobs.

Florence had now collected thirty-eight nurses. She had heavy grey uniforms specially made for them. The words ‘Scutari Hospital’ were neatly embroidered in red letters on their scarves.

Many of the recruits were middle-aged women rather too keen on strong drink. There were fourteen nurses from London hospitals, the same number of Church of England nuns, and ten Roman Catholics led by the warm-hearted Reverend Mother Bermondsey. In the months followed, Florence grew to admire the Reverend Mother as much as anyone she had ever met.

The last members of Florence’s band were two of her oldest friends, Charles and Selina Bracebridge. Charles was given the job of making the travel arrangements. Eager to help, he spent three days dashing about London buying tickets, booking seats and getting foreign money from the bank.

Florence’s mother and sister came to London to

help her pack. In the chaos Athena went missing. Sally searched everywhere for her. When she finally found her, shut in the attic by mistake, the poor bird was dead. Florence burst into tears. 'Poor little beastie!' she wept. 'It was odd how much I loved you!'

In all the rush and worry of getting ready, it was the only time she lost control of herself.

Mrs Nightingale, however, was worried. She hoped Athena's death was not a bad omen.