

## FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE, 1820-1856.

## A STUDY OF HER LIFE DOWN TO THE END OF THE CRIMEAN WAR. BY I. B. O'MALLEY.\*

*Florence Nightingale's real forerunners were St. Catherine of Siena and St. Theresa—mystics, statesmen, and administrators like herself.*

From time to time through the ages there arises a Child of Destiny, and with Destiny comes the preparation for it, conscious and unconscious.

Destiny to a vocation perhaps dimly realised, but ever-present, urging, impelling, eventually bursting all bonds.

Thus it was with Florence Nightingale, who was conscious of a distinct "Call." "She did not know where it would lead her, but follow it she must."

"Though she noted the exact day, February 7th, 1837, on which this Call came to her, and always remembered it in later years, referring to it many times in her private papers, no record survives of the form in which it reached her."

We learn this from an extraordinarily interesting book by Mrs. I. B. O'Malley, just published by Thornton Butterworth, Ltd. Many books have, of course, been published concerning Florence Nightingale, but the special interest of this is that the author has had access to a large number of personal notes, journals and letters entrusted to her by Miss Nightingale's family, to a great mass of unpublished letters and journals, the most interesting, in the opinion of the author, being those of Miss Hilary Bonham Carter.

Amongst the many people thanked by the author are the executors of Miss Nightingale and Mr. Henry Bonham Carter, who entrusted her with the work, and the Marquess of Crewe, with whose permission the relations between Mr. Monckton Milnes (afterwards Lord Houghton) and the Nightingale family are now made clear.

The next point of interest is that it is written by a woman who has made an intimate and sympathetic study of what Florence Nightingale thought and felt and did, and thus is able to throw many sidelights upon her character and to help us to a true estimate of it. This is the easier because the habit of introspection, of committing one's thoughts to the care of diaries, was usual in the pre-Victorian and Victorian eras.

It was a habit which was not unattended with risk, and might easily become unwholesome, but at least it has given us an opportunity of estimating the motives and influences bearing on the minds of men and women who lived in an extraordinarily interesting period of the world's history, and whose vital and individual personalities went to the making of it.

"In January, 1829, a little girl sat down to write her autobiography. She wrote it in French, because it was a schoolroom exercise, but this did not hinder the flow of her ideas. She was used to talking French to the maid Agathe, and she liked writing." (This autobiography *La Vie de Florence Rossignol*, was written in a series of copy books, in a large round handwriting, by Florence Nightingale, when she was between the age of eight and ten.) The passion for statistics, so marked a feature of her later years, peeped out here, for she began by recording essential facts. "She had been born in Florence, whence came her Christian name. She did not give the date, May 12th, 1820—useless, perhaps to emphasise the fact that one was not quite nine—but she noted that she had had a wet-nurse, her mother having been too ill to nurse her. This 'Balìa' was fresh in her mind, because as a French exercise she had lately addressed some letters to her, giving details which would no doubt interest her about

the food eaten in England, and the height and meals of her nursling."

A vocation has its corresponding preparation, and for Florence Nightingale the spacious background of her life, lovely Lea Hurst and Embley for her homes, foreign travel, dear relations, faithful friends, intimacy with some of the most interesting people of her day, all stood her in good stead when her vocation was developed and fulfilled. The East was no strange ground to her. Had she not travelled in Italy, in Greece, in Egypt, with those loyal friends, Mr. and Mrs. Bracebridge? She was a linguist, she had associated with diplomatists and statesmen, and had no mean knowledge of statescraft, all qualifications of great value to her in dealing with men and women of all classes.

And, most important of all perhaps, a superb intellect, which was able to assimilate and to utilise the gifts placed in her hands.

But first there was a long time of testing to be undergone; the Call ever insistent sounded in her ears. She did not know where it would lead her, but follow it she must, and the time would come when she had to decide between the Call, insistent but undefined, and her intense capacity for affection, her desire to be loved and the attraction, amongst many suitors, of one in all respects eligible, Richard Monckton Milnes, afterwards Lord Houghton, most anxious to marry her.

"He was the most sympathetic person in her present world, but he belonged to that world, and her marriage with him would make her escape from it for ever impossible. He would expect her to conform with its usages. The social atmosphere that was stifling her was the breath of life to him: if she married him, she foresaw that they would spend the greater part of their time not in silent, strenuous work for God and His people, but in planning dinner parties. She could not do it. But when she told him so, and let him know that she meant to accompany the Bracebridges on a journey to Egypt, she felt that she was giving up the dearest thing in her life for the sake of an idea which she had little chance of putting into practice. No door had opened by which she could escape from Society to the unfettered service of God; she was merely left comfortless in her prison. But she was certain that what she did was right. If she could not escape from any other condition of her life, she could at least escape from that system of Christianity without the Cross that seemed to her to prevail in her world."

She was now free to respond to the Call.

"Both Mrs. and Miss Nightingale were very much disappointed at Flo's refusal to marry Monckton Milnes. In the circumstances they were glad to send her to Egypt with the Bracebridges. If she would not marry, the next best thing was for her to lead that life of refined scholarship and literary ease which the enlightened nineteenth century had made possible for women."

Slowly a new plan was beginning to glimmer faintly in Florence Nightingale's mind. It arose out of some papers put into her hands by M. de Bunsen in response to that question which she had asked him some time ago, "What can an individual do to help the sorrows of the world?" They were reports of the institution founded in the little Rhineland town of Kaiserswerth by a Protestant pastor, Theodor Fliedner and his wife Friederike. As she pored over the reports Florence conceived in her mind that she might some day join them. For she did not mean to resign herself to her present suffering inaction.

"Resignation," she wrote at the end of her notebook, "I never understood that word. It does not occur once in the Bible. And I believe it is impossible. The Stoics tried it and failed. Our Saviour never resigned Himself. And in all the great sufferings which I have seen I have never felt inclined to say 'Resign yourself,' but 'Overcome.'"

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