THE PERFECT AUNT—F.N. 1820–1910

From an address given in All Saints' Church, Middle Claydon, on Sunday, 14th August, 1960.

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[Sir Harry is the head of a family in which Florence Nightingale spent much of her life; he is probably the only man who can recall her, and was perhaps her favourite great-nephew. This talk was for a congregation mainly of nurses; its charmingly personal view, heightened by the vivid remembrance of childhood, brings her strongly to life. ED.]

Florence Nightingale was born on 12th May, 1820, and died on the 13th August, 1910. To quote a Harrow song, she died "Yesterday—many years ago." There is a wonderful biography of her by Mrs. Woodham-Smith; I should like to quote it all, but as it is rather long I will only tell you the first sentence. "It was something new to call a girl Florence." By the end of last century hundreds were so called, but hardly any since 1910. So if you meet one you can tell her (though don't say I said so) that she is over fifty. Miss Nightingale was, of course, called Florence because she was born at Florence. Her mother was a society beauty much loved and admired. She was constantly at Claydon visiting her daughters, but before my time. My mother told me that towards the end of her life Mrs. Nightingale lost her memory, and once at Claydon with a large party she thought she was in her own house and apologized to the other guests for the badness of the food. Miss Nightingale's father was rich—banking and beer, still good enough for making money—immensely clever but aloof and detesting family squabbles. Her elder sister, Parthenope, from early days was possessive as regards Florence, as well as being jealous and hysterical; she was not nearly as nice looking as F.N.—rumour has it that they were known as The Pretty Miss Nightingale and The Other Miss Nightingale. The home was never a happy one for Florence. Little girls in the 1820's did not go to school, and all education was given by papa. He taught them Latin and Greek, French and German, mathematics and statistics, Latin Hexameters and Greek Iambics. I have a feeling that not all of us would have passed with flying colours in Hexameters and Iambics; we might have known as much as Parthenope, which was nothing at all. She just would not be bothered. Of what use were they in Society? But Florence lapped it all up, and became a considerable Greek scholar, fit to argue with Benjamin Jowett, the Master of Balliol. So Parthé (as everybody called her except me; I did not dare) grew up not too well equipped intellectually.

Then at the age of sixteen, on 7th February, 1837, Florence had a call from God—the still, small voice that Elijah heard. She had no-one she cared to confide in, so she kept voluminous diaries and wrote innumerable letters, all beautifully written and dated. In 1837 women were not treated with much respect and the nurses in particular were mostly drunken sluts. It was in that year that Lord Melbourne said, "I would rather have men about me when I am ill; I think it requires very strong health to put up with women." So F.N. devoted herself to work, work, work. Her rich family
travelled in England and abroad. The three elders visited old churches and called on Ambassadors. Florence went straight for hospitals and became the authority on them in Europe.

Then came the Crimea with the awful misery among sick and wounded. "Whom shall we send?" wrote Sidney Herbert; "Here am I; send me," wrote F.N. in letters that crossed in the post. The Crimean details are in every book, but she was the one and only one who left the Crimea with enhanced reputation. As well as bringing order out of chaos she was always available when wanted, day or night. A dangerous operation: fetch F.N. A man dying: would F.N. stay with him to the end. The soldiers worshipped her and soon found the anagram on Florence Nightingale, "Flit on cheering angel." The story of her return home is less well known. She would not move from Scutari until every soldier, sick or wounded, had left. The War Office said they would send a warship to bring her home: "No thank you." Then the massed bands of the Guards shall play you on shore at Dover: "No thank you." She came home as Miss Smith, using her mother's name; she stayed a night in Paris with a friend; she crossed by night to Dover; in London she called on her old friend the Reverend Mother at Bermondsey; she caught as it might be the 2.26 p.m. from St. Pancras; she walked up from the station to Lea Hurst and an old retainer, Mrs. Watson, looking out of window said, "Why! there is Miss Florence." There were no photos of her; she had gone out at thirty-four and come home thirty-six.

And why did she never marry? She had countless suitors. Here are four: Richard Monckton Milnes, afterwards Lord Houghton; Benjamin Jowett of Balliol—they were content to study Greek together; a publisher whose well known name shall remain unrecorded—he wrote to Mr. Nightingale enclosing a letter not to be delivered if there was no hope (it was not delivered and I have it by me): and my grandfather and namesake, Sir Harry Verney, who having been refused, married sister Parthe in 1858. In 1881 I appeared on the scene and was christened in Middle Claydon Church by the Dean of Ripon; but that is only hearsay; I do not remember it. I suppose I began to take notice about the time of Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887. It must have been about then that F.N. became to me a Guardian Angel. Claydon was not an easy place for a child to live in. The huge nursery seemed about the size of the Albert Hall. But the real problem was four old people, two nice and two nasty. Of course they were not nasty in fact, but I thought they were.

Most frightening of all was Great Uncle Frederick, brother of Grandpapa; he was fierce and very rich and childless. Children were to be seen and not heard; gladly we agreed, if only we need not be seen: but twice a day there was the inevitable kiss. After breakfast we had mustard or egg from his lips; by the evening his beard was hard on our tender cheeks ("our" included my sister Ruth); but worse, there was generally a drop from his nose which had to be kissed away. I claimed Ladies First, but my sister objecting, we took alternate days. He seemed to us an ogre who would certainly have gobbled us up, but for F.N. of whom he was afraid. The last time I saw him was at a memorable lunch when he was going "funny" and helped himself to potatoes, eating them out of the dish to the embarrassment of a footman. Later when my mother taught me the Book of Daniel I wondered whether, like Nebuchadnezzar, Uncle Frederick took to eating grass in the park. The other "nasty"
was Parthé; she had arthritis, was always cross, poor dear, and disliked children: couldn’t we go away? Of course we could, but it was she who went away. During my first term at Wixenford with my delightful elder cousin Ralph, a telegram came. I thought, “What a relief,” but seeing Ralph was sobbing I thought I had better sob too, though I do not think either of us minded much. How unfair we were. Among the “nice” came Grandpapa; a lovely person full of fun, athletic and holy and loving children. He lived to be 92 and died on a Monday, 12th February; he was riding the Tuesday before. On his monument we put “Such as are gentle them shall he learn his way.” Each year I remember the date.

The other “nice” was F.N. She was the perfect aunt. One saw her constantly. She was much at Claydon after 1874 when her father died, for her two homes were entailed on the male heir, and she had no brother. When privileged to see her as a tiny boy one took a flower or a feather; she always knew what bird it belonged to. Then later a book or a youthful problem; she always knew, for she was vastly clever and understanding. Parthé died in 1890, and F.N. came more and more to Claydon. About this time I had two letters from her. One concerned a Tom Tit:

“My Dear Harry . . . A Thomas Tit, rather smaller than an under-sized walnut, comes to my windows for his luncheon, dinner and tea, but says he can find nothing which suits his digestion (which he is obliged to be very careful of). And he requests that a mutton bone with a good deal of nutriment on it, should be hung up for his special refreshment.

Ever, your loving Aunt Florence.”

So off I went with my letter to the kitchen and procured and hung up the required bone. Here is the inscription on the first page of a diary for 1895, the year I went to Harrow:

“For our dear Harry with Aunt Florence’s love and may each day of this New Year 1895 be better and happier than yesterday, and may the young boy and the old woman make and find this a better and a happier year than any that has gone before.

So help us God. New Year’s Day, 1895.”

With the new century I went to her beloved Balliol; but gradually she began to fail, first eyes and then memory. The end came in 1910. I was at Dunphail in Morayshire and I received a telegram with alarm; I was busy courting a young lady and thought that if I went south to the funeral, some one else might have found my pearl and run off with her. I need not have worried, and we have been happily married for close on 49 years. There was a vastly attended Memorial Service in St. Paul’s. I went to the funeral at Wellow to represent our part of the family; there were perhaps a dozen of us, Mr. and Mrs Vaughan Nash, Mr. Shore Nightingale, four Guardsmen to carry the coffin, a few nurses and myself. On her grave was F.N. 1820 to 1910. There was no other memorial. What! no memorial? Look at the fourteenth Chapter of St. Mark’s Gospel and the ninth verse: “What she has done will be spoken of throughout the whole world.” She was so kind and generous, particularly to those in trouble and particularly to Nurses. It was her personality that dominated—her strength and courage, her love unending, her immensely high standards of work and conduct. She was a Saint.
Florence Nightingale

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INSPECTOR GENERAL W. C. MACLEAN
Professor of Military Medicine, Royal Army Medical College
1860 — 1886