

**QUICK READS**

# The Lady with the Lamp

A short story by Cooper Baltis



**Hippo**  
Books

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



© 2014 Hippo Books

@2014 Talk Talk English

All rights reserved.

[www.hippobooks.info](http://www.hippobooks.info)

[www.talktalkenglish.mn](http://www.talktalkenglish.mn)

## Part One

I never imagined I would find myself travelling to the Ottoman Empire. There were thirty-seven other British nurses, all of whom were led by Florence Nightingale, one of the finest women I have ever met. We were on our way to help soldiers wounded in the Crimean War. It was the start of winter in 1854, and most of us were excited about the journey that lay ahead.

Florence Nightingale was a stern woman who always looked serious. She had been my teacher, but I could never consider her a friend. She followed strict orders from Baron Herbert, Britain's Secretary of War.

Our group of nurses was sent by Baron Herbert to the war as an experiment. Women had never been so close to the frontlines before. The British military had their own medical company staffed by male doctors. Because of this, we had two missions that we needed to accomplish: One, we needed to take care of the soldiers. This, above all was the reason we were going on our journey. Two, we needed to do our work without interfering with the male military doctors.

'Problems lie ahead, ladies,' Nightingale said one night as we were on our way to Istanbul. We were in barracks borrowed from the Ottoman Empire. Nightingale had gathered us at the front of the room. She held a lamp near her face so that we could all see her clearly.

'What kind of problems?' Katherine asked.

Katherine was the most talkative of the group. She always asked questions, sometimes she asked the same question more than once. We called her Chatty Katherine.

‘There are two thousand injured soldiers, Katherine. If that isn’t a problem, I don’t know what is. From Istanbul, we will take a boat to the Scutari Barracks, which have been turned into a hospital. It will be hard work, ladies. There will be no socializing with the soldiers.’

Some of the nurses giggled, but they stopped when Nightingale looked at them.

‘We will do our best to keep the place clean. Remember, this hospital has only been taken care of by men,’ Nightingale said. ‘Baron Herbert didn’t give me many details, but we should assume that the conditions are bad. There will be no running water at the hospital, hardly any supplies, doctors who won’t be happy to work with female nurses, rats...’

‘Rats?’ Katherine looked disgusted. ‘I hate rats.’

‘I’m sure rats don’t like you either, Katherine,’ Nightingale said sharply before continuing. ‘We will see some injuries that none of you have dealt with before. Men will die. I want this to be clear... many of the men you will meet are going to die. Your job is to make their deaths easier. Give these men their dignity, ladies. They have fought long and hard for Great Britain.’

We arrived in Istanbul two days later. The city was unlike anything I had ever seen. There were mosques, minarets and huge markets filled with strange food, materials and animals.

Ottoman men and women wearing flowing robes moved past us. Thinking back now, I bet we looked just as strange and exotic to them as they did to us. After all, we were a group of British women travelling through their ancient city, led by a few soldiers and a very serious looking nurse.

We spent a single day travelling through the city. We weren't allowed to get out of the carriages that we travelled across the city in. Katherine and a few of the other nurses complained; most of them had never been abroad before, and they wanted to do some sightseeing. Nightingale insisted that we avoid distractions.

'We are here for them,' she reminded us. 'We are not here to have fun. Tomorrow, we will sail across the Bosphorus Strait and arrive at the hospital. Rest well tonight, ladies. Tomorrow will be a day filled with the horrors of war.'

## Part Two

Florence Nightingale was right. The barracks that they had converted into a hospital was one of the worst places I had ever seen. There were injured soldiers everywhere: in the courtyard, in the dining hall, and in the barracks. There were even a few soldiers on the floor of the washroom. Some of the rooms had blood on the walls, others were filled with rotten food. The place stank of disease and decay. The soldiers had come to the hospital from Crimea, a place across the Black Sea.

'Miss Nightingale,' the head medical doctor said. He

greeted her with a seriousness that only she could match. He had a strong Birmingham accent and a thin mustache.

‘Dr.Parkes,’ she said curtly.

‘I have nothing further to say to you about women coming to a military hospital like this. You know as well as I do that women do not belong in such a place,’ he said, looking at all of us.

‘Dr.Parkes, we were sent here by Baron Herbert, the Secretary of War.’

‘I know that, but it doesn’t mean I have to agree with it. We have everything under control.’

Behind Dr.Parkes, there was a row of injured soldiers covered in bandages. Most of their bandages were red and needed changing. Some of the soldiers groaned, others sobbed. A few sat on their beds looking straight ahead, as if they were looking death straight in the eye. It was clear that the head doctor didn’t have everything under control.

‘Very well,’ Nightingale said. ‘What shall we do then?’

‘Go to the tower at the west end of the barracks. We’ve prepared rooms for you there. I will tell you if we have anything that we need you to do.’ Dr.Parkes turned and walked away.

‘Ladies, you heard the doctor.’

We followed Nightingale through a narrow hallway that was filled with empty boxes that once contained medical supplies. ‘This place really needs a woman’s touch!’ Katherine said, as soon as there were no male soldiers around.

‘Be quiet, Katherine,’ Nightingale said. We took a left at the end of the hallway and were greeted by a young doctor. ‘Where is the west tower?’ she asked.

‘This way, ma’am,’ the soldier said. He continued past us, smiling at a few of the nurses.

‘No socializing,’ Nightingale reminded us after he’d left.

We arrived at a door that led through a giant archway. We all noticed the smell of mold as soon as we stepped through the archway. Katherine said that it smelt like a bakery next to a swamp. Some of the nurses laughed, the others remained quiet under the harsh gaze of Nightingale.

‘Ah, the west tower,’ Nightingale said, as we walked into a long hallway.

‘Is this it?’ I asked, a bit shocked by the conditions. Stained blankets sat on the floor in heaps.

‘Yes, it is, Frances,’ she said, smiling curtly at me.

‘This is horrible!’ Katherine called from the back of the hallway. She had already run up to the next floor to see if it was better than the first floor. ‘There are rat droppings everywhere!’

‘What kind of animal lives in these conditions?’ a nurse behind me asked.

‘I can think of one,’ Nightingale said with a serious look on her face. ‘Ladies, we have our first assignment.’ She looked around the room. ‘We will clean this place from floor to ceiling. I don’t know about any of you, but I am not sleeping in a place as filthy as this. Let’s begin!’

## Part Three

We cleaned late into the night. Because there weren't many cleaning supplies, a few of the nurses made mops out of some old wood and dirty rags. The rags smelled awful, but at least we were able to clean the walls.

Florence Nightingale made a broom out of a chair leg and one of the dresses she'd brought along. 'We all have to make sacrifices,' she said as she ripped her dress.

After she'd swept the two floors, she got down on her hands and knees and scrubbed the floor with what was left of the dress. Inspired by her work ethic, all the nurses worked even harder to clean the barracks. Even Katherine, who was usually too chatty to be helpful, did her part. We finished just before dinner. Some of us asked if we should help cook the meals, but Nightingale reminded us that Dr.Parkes ran the hospital.

'No matter how badly he runs it, he's in charge. If he asks for our help, we will help,' she said.

As if he had heard his name, Dr.Parkes showed up five minutes later with a frightened look on his face. He ran into the room, followed by two of his assistants.

'Miss Nightingale!' he called out, before he had a chance to look around. 'What... what has happened in here?'

'What do you mean, Dr.Parkes?' Nightingale asked.

'It looks...'

'Yes?' she asked, her lips were a thin line.

'It looks amazing in here!'

‘Well, you gave us rooms that were not fit for dogs, so we did our best to clean them up.’

Dr.Parkes cringed at what she had just said. It was clear that he had met his match in Nightingale.

‘Yes,’ he mumbled. ‘But that’s not why I’m here. I’m here because...’

‘Because what?’ she asked.

‘Because we need your help.’

‘Our help?’

‘Yes, six hundred injured soldiers are on their way from Crimea. They are being brought here tonight. We can’t do this on our own.’

## Part Four

The next forty-eight hours passed quickly. I don’t think I had more than two hours of sleep during the whole two days. All of us were working around the clock, changing bandages, helping with surgery and, our biggest challenge, finding places for all the injured soldiers to lie down.

Nightingale, along with the military chaplain, set up a part of the barracks for those who were close to death. She spent her nights there, sitting with her lamp next to dying soldiers’ bedsides. She wrote letters to their families, telling of how their sons had died bravely and peacefully. These letters weren’t exactly true; most of the soldiers died in pain, screaming out as life left their bodies.

Chatty Katherine became a favorite among the soldiers. She was great with names; she could remember the name of each and every soldier she cared for. There were still many problems with the way the hospital was run. Dr.Parkes wasn't a cruel man, but he was stubborn, and that that made him difficult to work with. Supplies weren't ordered, food was mishandled, but all of us worked as hard as possible to help as many soldiers as we could.

More soldiers came in the second week. These ones in particular were suffering from sword wounds, which were the most difficult to treat because of our lack of medical supplies. Things came to a head one cold night, after a day in which fifteen soldiers had died.

'But we are out of supplies!' we all heard Dr.Parkes scream at Nightingale. They were walking down the corridor that led from the nurses' quarters to the main hallway.

Katherine and I dropped the sheets we were folding and ran to hear what they were arguing about.

'Let me see!' I said.

'Shhhh, Frances,' Katherine said, peering around a corner. We saw Dr.Parkes standing at the end of the hallway with his arms crossed in front of his chest. Florence Nightingale was in front of him, her hands behind her back.

'Dr.Parkes,' Nightingale was saying. 'I'm well aware that we are out of most of the supplies. This is why I am suggesting that we go to the local Turks and ask for more.'

‘The British Army doesn’t ask for more supplies! Don’t you realize this, Miss Nightingale? We must remain strong. The world is watching!’

‘That’s ridiculous, Doctor. This is a hospital! We need basic supplies if we hope to help any of the wounded soldiers. If we don’t get medical supplies, many of them will die. Surely you understand that.’

‘You...’ Dr.Parkes growled. ‘You’ve been trouble since you arrived here!’

‘Oh, he’s really angry!’ Katherine whispered.

‘Shhh,’ I said.

Nightingale cleared her throat. ‘Trying to find a solution and trying to cause trouble are two very different things, Doctor. I suggest that you grow up, and realize that too many people are dying in this hospital. I should know, I’ve witnessed many of these young men’s deaths personally.’

‘Yes, I know all about you sitting by their bedsides with your lamp,’ Dr.Parkes said mockingly. ‘I’d sit by their bedsides too, but...’

‘But what, Doctor?’

‘Miss Nightingale! The way you are talking to me is very unladylike!’

‘I’m sorry if you feel that way, but I care more about the lives of these soldiers than trying to behave in a way that is ladylike.’

‘Fine! You win, but I won’t forget how rude you have been to me. I will send a letter to the Baron tomorrow!’

Nightingale ignored his childish behavior. 'Thank you, Doctor. Please make sure to get the medical supplies from the Turks tomorrow. I will look after the soldiers while you are gone. I too will write to Baron Herbert, informing him of my decision.'

Katherine grabbed my wrist. 'Come on,' she said, pulling me away. 'We need to get back to the soldiers.'

I could tell by the look in Katherine's eyes that she was inspired by what Nightingale had just done. I, too, was impressed by her passion for the injured soldiers. It was incredible to think that she cared more about men she'd never met than herself. I quickly returned to my duties, doing the best I could with the supplies we had.

## Part Five

Florence Nightingale had a troubled look on her face. She was writing in her notebook, as she usually did in the morning. Sunlight was coming through the single window of the west tower and the birds were chirping outside.

'What are you always writing about?' Katherine asked. I was next to Katherine, folding sheets.

Nightingale looked up with a frown. 'As both of you know, there have been too many deaths in this... hospital.' I could tell that she didn't like calling it a hospital.

'It's war,' Katherine said.

'I know it is war, Katherine, but that doesn't mean something can't be done about this. Look.'

She walked over to us with her notebook. I noticed a few charts listing the number of soldiers that had died in the various rooms of the barracks. The highest number of deaths occurred among the soldiers in the basement. 'Why do you think so many soldiers are dying in the basement?' Nightingale asked.

'There is no light down there,' I said.

'Correct, Frances, there isn't any light down there. But that isn't the only reason.'

'The basement is damp,' Katherine said, 'and really dirty.'

'Yes, it is damp and quite dirty.'

'There are also rats in the basement,' I added.

'OK, so both of you have identified that the basement doesn't have light, that it is damp, and that it is filled with rats.' Nightingale showed us her notebook again. 'Look at these numbers again.'

I looked at the figures. The number of people who had died in the basement was twice that of the people who had died in the east tower. 'So you think that the conditions in the basement have something to do with the number of soldiers dying?'

'Exactly,' Nightingale said. 'Sanitary conditions are very important. Without good sanitary practices, more soldiers will die. This is why I plan to move all the injured soldiers out of the basement today.'

'While Dr. Parkes is gone?'

‘Precisely, Katherine. We will need to move them to the large storage room located between the east tower and the main hallway. It is the room they are currently using to keep supplies in. The room is well lit and cleaner than the basement.’

I looked down at her chart again. The numbers didn’t lie. It was clear that more soldiers were dying in the basement. With Dr.Parkes gone, it wouldn’t be difficult to transfer all the soldiers. I didn’t know at the time, but record-keeping was one of the many ways Nightingale would change medical practices for all of Britain.

‘That settles it,’ she said, snapping her notebook shut. ‘As soon as Dr.Parkes leaves, we will begin moving the soldiers. Alert the other nurses, and make sure they don’t tell anyone.’

Dr.Parkes left a few hours later to meet with some Turks at a hospital across the city. He would gather supplies there and at another hospital, not far from the barracks. We only had about six hours to move all of the soldiers and transfer all of the items in the storage room to the basement.

Nightingale divided us into three teams. One team was responsible for moving the crates out of the storage room. The second team was responsible for transferring the soldiers. The third team, Nightingale’s team, was responsible for cleaning the storage area and later the basement. As soon as we began, Dr.Parkes’s assistants protested.

‘Did Dr.Parkes order this?’ one of them asked.

‘The doctor isn’t here right now. You’ll have to ask Miss Nightingale,’ was Katherine’s response.

We entered the basement and I looked around me. About fifty soldiers lay on the ground. Some of the soldiers were moaning and some were sleeping. The basement smelled horrible. It was almost completely dark apart from two lanterns on the far side of the room.

‘Where are we going?’ one of the soldiers asked. His face was bandaged. There was a red spot where his eye used to be.

‘We are moving you to a better place,’ I said.

‘Just the two of you?’ he asked.

‘Others are coming.’

Sure enough, six more nurses came down the steps that led to the basement. We began loading the soldiers one by one onto stretchers. We carried the injured soldiers up the stairs and to the main hallway. We laid them next to one another in front of the storage room.

After the storage room was cleared out by the first team, and Nightingale’s team finished cleaning, we began moving the soldiers into the new room.

‘Do you like it better in here?’ Katherine asked one soldier.

‘It’s much brighter,’ he replied.

It took us all afternoon, but by about five o’clock, we had finally moved the last soldier into the storage room. As soon as they were all inside, we began changing their bandages and

giving them sponge baths. The first team appeared and helped us with this task. We were finishing up when we heard someone shouting in the hallway.

‘Who is it?’ Katherine asked.

‘I think Dr.Parkes has returned,’ I said.

‘Let’s see!’

We peeked out of the door and saw Dr.Parkes arguing with Florence Nightingale.

‘You moved the soldiers without my permission?’ he said. He appeared to be both angry and shocked at the same time.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘if you look at the numbers you will see that more soldiers were dying in the basement. I believe this was due to the poor conditions in the basement. It is damp and dark down there. It is also filled with rats.’

‘You will...’ His face turned red. ‘You will move the soldiers back tomorrow!’

‘No, I won’t, Doctor,’ she said in a calm voice. ‘If you want, you and your assistants can move the soldiers back, but I don’t think you have enough people working for you to make this an easy task.’

‘I will tell the Baron!’

‘Doctor, lower your voice. Let me ask you a very serious question: do you want more soldiers to die?’

‘What? I...’ He shook his head. ‘Of course not! Why would you say such a thing?’

‘Well, if I am able to save some soldiers’ lives by moving them to the storage room, that would be a good thing, wouldn’t it?’

He scratched the back of his head. 'Of course, but there is no scientific data that says people die because of being in damp rooms.'

'There is no proof, because no one has tested it.'

He raised his fist. 'These are human lives we are talking about, Miss Nightingale!'

'I am aware of that, and I am trying to save them. Now, will you help me or not?'

The doctor took a deep breath to calm his nerves. He looked down the hallway and saw Katherine and me peeking out of the door. I could tell by the look on his face that he was concerned for the soldiers, and that he really didn't want anyone else to die.

'Fine,' he said reluctantly, 'I will help you. But next time, ask me before you make a decision like this. Remember, I am in charge here.'

'Fine,' Nightingale said. A small smile appeared on her face.

'But I am still writing to the Baron!' Dr.Parkes said.

'And so am I. Now come on, we have work to do.'

Florence Nightingale is now considered the founder of modern nursing. She was able to reduce the death rate at the Scutari Barracks from 42% to 2% during her time at the hospital. During her time in the barracks, she also collected data and proved that record-keeping was important for public health. At the end of the war, she returned to London, where she opened a nursing school. Her actions at the

barracks were soon known all over England, where she quickly became a celebrity. Today, Florence Nightingale is honored worldwide on International Nurses' Day.