

August 15, 1964

Florence Nightengale has come to our town. Her real name is Mrs. Carolyn Lane, widow of a New York physician and herself a nurse at the Growenour Hospital in New York. She is a member of a group of physicians and nurses who came to our centers in Mississippi, called the Medical Committee on Human Rights. They are recruited week by week from the east. The presence of the five volunteers in the Mississippi summer project who are children of doctors has given rise to this committee.

Public medical care for the needy is almost non-existent in Mississippi. Moreover, the availability of white doctors and hospitals to the Civil Rights workers is always open to question, which places a heavy burden on the local Negro physicians. So Clarksdale has been fortunate in having the services of a medical team, consisting of a doctor, a nurse and a driver. Heading the team this week is Dr. John Thompson, 2727 Palisade Ave., New York City, a psychiatrist—and Mrs. Lane. The driver is Mr. Richard Moore, graduate student in psychology from New York.

The doctors in the program are unlicensed to practice medicine in Mississippi. They carry not so much as a stethoscope. Their tasks are as varied as the needs of the community and their own professional interests would suggest. One team visited the hospitals and doctors of the vicinity, with more than a passing interest in how the hospitals were complying with the inter-racial provisions of the Hill-Burton program. Another made a survey of the public health conditions in the poverty-stricken section of the city surrounding Freedom House. But inevitably, whatever the risk involved, the doctors and nurses care for the sick of the neighborhood, listening to baby's chests in the old fashioned way, recommending aspirin or kapectate or other non-prescription drugs, and making the rounds of home calls on staff and residents alike—all without fee or favor. Imagine a New York City psychiatrist making house calls for bronchial constriction—so much of it here this past week!

But back to our nurse, not much taller than 4 feet, no doubt in her sixties, a familiar sight with her little bag, trudging the streets, climbing rickety outside stairs, or using her own funds to hire a taxi. More than once has she called at the Thomasons, to keep Loris "home" for two days and see that she drinks plenty of juices. One day she spied a three-year old whose head was a nest of scurvy, and before the little girl had time to be frightened, she gave her a shampoo and combed out her tangled hair.

Today it rained. Within a hour the streets were hub-deep with water. My car had its usual load of workers being delivered to their homes, when Mrs. Lane told of a call she intended to make yet this evening. Details are not important. A white youth who had drifted into town some weeks ago, attracted by the interracial character of our movement but no part of us whatever, had run afoul of a local Negro over his girl, and he was out to "kill him". Moreover, the local police were reputed to be in sympathy with the threat and would "look the other way". No matter what the truth of the report, Mrs. Lane, who had treated the youth when he was ill, announced that she was going to induce him to get out of town. Well, she wasn't going to go alone!

So with newspapers over our heads and water to our shoe-tops, we located the boy and persuaded him of his danger. He quickly packed his few belongings into a duffel bag and moved out of his pitiful lodgings. Mrs. Lane purchased a bus ticket for him, had it stamped non-cancellable, and with some money for food sent him home to New York. In a more civilized community, such a solution to a social problem would be open to question. But this is Mississippi, and so the Florence Nightengale of our little town did what to her was the only practical and humanitarian thing she could think to do.

Such is the character of the folk who are a part of our Mississippi Summer Project. Such are the people we will remember all our lives.

—Frazer A. Thomason