

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Heather Brenchley grew up in Melbourne and qualified as a Nursing Sister at Austin Hospital, Heidelberg. Shortly afterwards she undertook further study and training at the Footscray and District Hospital, qualifying her as a State Registered Midwife. Her nursing experiences have included working in large and small hospitals in metropolitan and country areas, mainly as a midwife.

INDEX

PART I

PROLOGUE	7
1 SICK PARADE	9
2 NIGHT DUTY	18
3 UNEXPECTED MISHAPS	28
4 IN THE OPERATING THEATRE	36
5 THE CHILDREN'S WARD	45
6 A HOLIDAY	54
7 SUICIDE	66
8 A FIRE	72
9 FINALS	82

PART 2

10 AN INTRODUCTION TO MIDWIFERY	91
11 AN OUTING WITH IAN	101
12 BECOMING A STATE REGISTERED MIDWIFE	114
13 MAURA VALLEY	122
14 THE BY-PRODUCT OF SEXUALITY	134
15 MARRIAGE	146
16 SCHOOL NURSE	159
EPILOGUE	167

PROLOGUE

During the latter part of the nineteen fifties, Marie was a student nurse at The Stilmore Hospital. After the Preliminary Training School, one of the wards that she was assigned to was set aside for patients with terminal cancer. For a seventeen year old who until then had been protected from the harsh realities of life, it was a traumatic experience. Was it any wonder that out of the twelve students who commenced Nursing Training in the Preliminary Training School, only five remained to complete the three year nursing course. Only two of them went on to complete the Midwifery Certificate and to practise as midwives.

CHAPTER I

SICK PARADE

An unreasoning, unofficial feeling prevails towards all nurses in hospitals who claim they are sick. Marie knew this, and hesitated before knocking on the martinet ward sister's office door to ask permission to attend the sick parade held daily. A voice from within called, "Come in." Marie opened the door carefully, but as she was closing it, the door slipped from her grasp and slammed. After an interval, during which Marie felt the pounding of her heart, a voice said, "Yes?"

This was spoken severely by Sister Charlesworth, who sat very upright on her office chair writing furiously.

"Sister, may I have permission to attend sick parade?" Marie asked. There was a pause.

"And what's wrong with you Nurse Stebbins?" enquired Sister Charlesworth.

"I have a sore ear Sister," Marie answered trying to remain calm outwardly. There was another pause.

This time, Sister Charlesworth deigned to remove her spectacles, put down her pen and look up.

"All right," Sister Charlesworth said. "You may go, but report to me at once when you return."

"Yes Sister," Marie agreed meekly.

"And Nurse," Sister Charlesworth continued.

"Yes Sister?"

“Please close the door quietly.”

“Yes Sister.” There was exasperation in Marie’s voice.

“Don’t answer in that insolent tone Nurse Stebbins,” requested Sister Charlesworth.

“No Sister. Sorry Sister.” Marie slipped out quickly, and quietly closed the door.

Once outside the door, Marie walked briskly along the passage way through the bright and sparkling ward where nurses busied themselves with the sick. Over in one corner of the ward, Mrs. Brown was demanding, “Nurse. Nurse.” Marie approached her and inquired, “What is it you want Mrs. Brown?”

Mrs. Brown replied demandingly, “Push the glass of water nearer to me Nurse; I can’t reach it.”

“Certainly Mrs. Brown.” Marie answered, endeavouring to sound cheerful.

Marie had suffered her painful ear for three days, for it is an unwritten law that a nurse must make quite certain she is really ill before reporting sick. Consequently, Doctor Speirs, the Medical Superintendent who attended ailing nurses, should have been assured that nurses who sought his medical advice were well in need of it. However, this was not the case. Each nurse was suspected of malingering, of being pregnant and of being neurotic. No age was exempt. Nurse Cedric, a nursing aide, who was fortyish and old-maidish, (as well as being one), had presented sick sometime ago, and she too was asked, “Do you think you are pregnant?” Nurse Cedric indignantly replied, “If I am, it’s the second immaculate conception.” Rising, Nurse Cedric stalked from the surgery with

never a backward glance. Those medical or nursing staff who had had this story repeated to them, remarked drily, "Well, fancy asking Nurse Cedric that."

Marie passed from the ward into the brilliant sunshine, across the spacious grounds flanked with flower gardens, until she reached an old Victorian styled building. This was the only remaining part of the original Stilmore Hospital. She entered the building and walked along the cold, dark passage until she came to a door marked, 'Surgery Waiting Room, Please Enter.' She opened the door to the waiting room. Two other occupants with melancholy expressions were already assembled. They both looked up curiously to see who else had the misfortune to be sick.

Marie knew both people in the waiting room. One of them was Judith Thompson. Judith was likable but quite hopeless. She had the uncanny ability of dropping and breaking hospitable equipment, which she had then replaced. Her feet were a disadvantage too. They got in her way, and everybody else's.

The other occupant was Bill Steckler, an efficient male nurse. Male nurses were a relatively new institution at Stilmore Hospital. The staffing position in times past had been desperate. The hospital committee put forward the suggestion of recruiting male nurses for training. At the time, the idea was not favourably received by the matron and the senior sisters. However, something had to be done about the staffing situation, and male staff were better than none. Altogether, the idea had worked far better than had been predicted by certain senior female members. "Can you imagine a male taking orders from a female?" asked one. Of course she had a point. The male nurses did adjust to taking orders, but at the same time each

reappeared. He whispered, "I have to treat the boil with a poultice and in the meanwhile, I have been exempted from all ward treatments to prevent spread of infection in the ward."

"Next please." Doctor Speirs was calling for the next patient. Judith got up, sneezed again and was still groping for her tissue handkerchief as she closed the door of the Surgery. Bill left the waiting room and Marie was alone. Quite sometime passed before Judith re-entered the waiting room. Actually it was only minutes, but to Marie sitting alone it seemed interminable.

"Well?" questioned Marie.

Judith responded very sadly, with streaming eyes and nose and accompanied by another sneeze. "I'm to go back on duty, but I'm to wear a mask all the time." Normally masks were only worn on the wards for treatments such as aseptic dressings.

"Crumbs. That's a bit difficult. However will you blow your nose?" asked Marie sounding shocked.

"I'll manage," Judith replied. "I'll have to, won't I? Anyway it's only a coryza, and as Doctor Speirs said, there's no cure for the common cold." Doctor Speirs was a small, dark, middle-aged man who wore spectacles and a hearing-aid. The latter accounted for his apparent vagueness at times, as he had developed the habit of turning off his hearing-aid and forgetting he had done so.

"Next," Doctor Speirs called. This time, Marie rose and entered the Surgery. Doctor Speirs was busily writing on a medical report card. "Sit down," he said without looking up. He completed his writing. "Now, how are you feeling?" he asked. Marie suppressed an urge to reply, "With my hands."

one believed himself to belong to the superior sex.

“What about accommodation?” asked another. This problem was also overcome. Stilmore Hospital did not provide separate accommodation for male nurses, consequently they lived away from the hospital. This arrangement proved very satisfactory, particularly to the matron and senior sisters who could not envisage male and female nurses being accommodated at the hospital, without obvious problems being created.

Marie greeted both her companions. “Hullo there.” Judith responded with a very down-cast expression and a very nasal sounding, “Hullo Marie.” Judith obviously had an upper respiratory tract infection. Then Bill addressed Marie with, “Hi. I say, what’s up with you?” “I think I have a staphylococci infection of the middle ear,” replied Marie.

“Really?” Bill sounded almost pleased. “I have a staphylococci infection of the arm, or boil if you like.” “Oh well, that figures,” responded Marie. “Poor diet predisposes to boils, or so they told us in our Dietetics Lecture the other day, and look at the hash they serve us here.”

Just then the Medical Superintendent arrived and went into the Surgery. From within, he called, “First please.” Bill rose and disappeared into the Surgery, closing the door behind him. At this instant, Judith sneezed. “At-choo,” and again, “At--choo.” “I say, steady on Judith. You sound as though you’ve got Pneumonia,” Marie remarked appraisingly.

Judith responded disconsolately. “Feels like it anyway.”

“Oh, come, come. You’re not dead yet,” Marie replied in an endeavour to cheer her up. The door of the Surgery opened and Bill

Instead she replied very circumspectly, “All right Doctor Speirs, except I have a painful ear.” It is considered quite unethical for a patient, whether nurse or otherwise, to ever present their views on what they are suffering from to the doctor. At best, describing the signs and symptoms is permissible.

“How long have you had this er, sore ear?” This last was said rather vaguely. “You did say ear didn’t you?” Marie replied, “Yes, that’s correct. It’s the right ear.” “Oh well, we better have a look at it.” Doctor Speirs picked up an auriscope which was on a bench behind him. He did this by swivelling his chair around enabling him to reach the instrument. He then got up and approached Marie who was still sitting. Placing the auriscope in the appropriate ear, he proceeded to examine the ear. After a few seconds, Doctor Speirs withdrew the auriscope and said, “Yes,” which meant nothing but he continued by saying, “Nurse Stebbins, you have a boil in the inner ear. I will write a prescription for some antibiotic capsules for you. That should clear it up. By the way, is it very painful?” This was by way of an after thought.

“Quite painful Sir”.

“It certainly looks very nasty,” Doctor Speirs responded. He then scribbled on a piece of paper that he handed to Marie. This was the prescription for the antibiotic capsules. “Of course there is no need to go off duty,” Doctor Speirs added. Marie was not expecting to be released from duty anyway. “No Sir,” she agreed.

“Mind you, I don’t go off duty myself if I’m sick,” Doctor Speirs continued.

“I’m sure you don’t Sir,” answered Marie. Doctor Speirs brought the consultation to a close. “You may go now Nurse.”

Marie got up and left the surgery in order to return to the ward. Marie knew the state of affairs in the hospital was such that every ward sister's ever present fear was her staff would become ill, and then what would she do for staff? Consequently, the seemingly harsh treatment of nurses prevailed. Many girls commenced their nursing training holding their blazing Florence Nightingale lantern aloft. The flame soon dimmed. Sometimes the flame was extinguished; this happened when girls left nursing forever. Marie used to wonder why girls failed to continue their nursing training, but lately she was beginning to understand. Sometimes it became all too much for them.

Nursing was not the noble profession that the glowing advertisements would have you believe. A nurse was cheap labour. For three years while she trained, a nurse worked full-time and in her off duty times she attended lectures. This meant that nurses on night duty had to miss out on valuable sleep to attend lectures that were held during the day. If a nurse was unfortunate enough to sleep in and thus be late for a lecture, or perhaps even miss it altogether, the lecture had to be made up by attending another.

When on duty, no one appreciated the nurse. The medical staff did not appreciate the nurse, and neither did the senior sisters, or patients, or so it seemed to Marie when she was in the doldrums as she was now. Another thing, remuneration was poor. Even once trained, the salary was well below standard for the specialised treatment given. The general accepted belief in the community was that nurses had a vocation and loved their job but this did not require paying them adequately, and yet even nurses had to live. Why spend three years slaving, studying and attending lectures, putting up with

the apparent lack of appreciation, inconvenient hours, and all the other disadvantages there were in nursing? Marie was of the private opinion that because Nursing was primarily a women's profession and women had always been taught to know their place in society, they did not know how to fight for their rights.

At the same time, Marie realised conditions had improved immeasurably in the last few years, but there was still plenty of room for improvement. Marie was pondering all this as she made her way back to ward thirteen to report to Sister Charlesworth. She even asked herself why she continued on. She came to the conclusion that despite all, she received a great deal of personal satisfaction from helping people.

For the second time that day, Marie knocked on the door of Sister Charlesworth's office. "Come in," Sister Charlesworth called.

Marie entered.

"Oh yes Nurse, how did you get on?" Marie told her.

"All right then," Sister Charlesworth said in way of reply, "I want you to put Mrs. Brown out in the sun on the verandah, make the fruit drinks, and clean the sterilizing room after you have completed the treatments. As it is, we're very behind in the work this morning." Marie felt the last was said for her benefit as she had used ward time to attend sick parade.

"Now Nurse, get cracking," said Sister Charlesworth.

"Yes Sister," Marie said obediently, and her ear ached all the more.

