

Chapter 1

MYSTERY PATIENT

A dense, black cloud was gathering over America in the fall of 1930 - the cloud of the Great Depression. Big cities would soon grow shabby and grim-faced like half-starved hobos huddling in a storm.

Even smaller cities, such as Portland, Oregon, would suffer. Before long, men in tattered jackets would wander in Portland's streets, searching for work among silent shops.

But the sparrows that chirped and flitted above the pavement didn't know about the Depression hovering over Portland. And neither did the morning sun, still at its post, warming the uneven rooftops of the city.

Its rays beat down on a massive, red-bricked building, a hospital in the northwest section. Hazel Weston worked there. In fact, this was her first day of nurse's training.

Hazel's excitement showed clearly on her well-scrubbed face. For years she had waited, hoped, dreamed for this moment.

The brown-haired girl brushed her hands hastily across her apron, then picked up another bowl of wash water. "I've got to get my General Morning Care over before the breakfast trays arrive," she resolved, stopping short before a frowning patient.

"Really, nurse!" the wiry brunette scolded. "I should think one washing per morning sufficient! You were just here minutes ago."

"Indeed, I was!" Hazel replied. "I - er - must have taken a wrong turn. Sorry!" she apologized as she backed up and bumped into a doorpost, sloshing the water precariously close to the rim of the bowl.

Confused, Hazel halted in the corridor. "Let's see, I'm on the third floor, west - no, east!" She blinked. "North?" Drawing a deep breath, she tripped off to the next room.

IN GRANDMA'S FOOTSTEPS

This time a smiling elderly woman greeted her. "Hello again!"

"I've been here already, haven't I?" Hazel asked in a meek voice.

The woman nodded.

Hazel sighed, then carried the basin back to its cart. How could she learn her way around the hospital? After all, she was a country girl, and the largest building in her town of Hood River was the high school. "And that place isn't filled with so many small compartments!" she thought.

In exasperation, Hazel looked for help, which she soon found in a student nurse.

"It's actually quite simple," the older girl explained as she closed a door partway. "See? There's a number for each room"

"Oh!" Hazel replied with genuine relief, then blushed.

"Don't worry!" the other girl consoled her. "It's always hard on Probies the first few days. I was in your shoes myself not long ago."

"Thank you!" Hazel said, returning to her job.

Probies! That awful word, short for "Probationers," had haunted her since she had first heard it in chapel that morning.

Probies ranked lowest in the nursing staffs "caste system." They were the awkward ones, the ones with no caps or bibs, the ones who looked like great-grandmothers in their prim, gray-and-white-striped dresses and stiffly starched aprons, and most humiliating of all - the ones who were assigned seats at the rear of the chapel.

"Only three months till I'm capped!" Hazel thought. She would be a freshman then and no longer a lowly Probationer. It would take her three years to become a full-fledged nurse.

While Hazel prepared another bowl of warm wash water, she mulled over her favorite daydream. Picturing herself in a crisp, white uniform, she would go out into Hood River Valley among the sick and nurse them back to glowing health. She would work as unselfishly as her Grandma Smith had worked among the Indians and settlers along the Imnaha River.

IN GRANDMA'S FOOTSTEPS

Quite recovered from the earlier incident and now comparing herself with Florence Nightingale, Hazel marched off to the next room. How noble she felt!

Then, like an elevator out of control, her daydreams came crashing back to the third floor of the hospital.

"May I have your right hand?" she asked the sallow-skinned woman before her.

"I have no right hand."

Hazel swallowed hard at the sight of a scarred stump poking out from the other side of the patient.

"Oh, I - I'm sorry," Hazel stammered. She felt her face reddening again.

"No bother!" the woman said. "Been this way for years. It's my leg I'll truly miss. Infection got away from 'em, and the doctors just took the leg last week." The heavysset woman patted the sheet where a knee should have been.

Hazel gave her a sympathetic smile, then changed the conversation to chitchat about the weather. She wrung the washcloth one time, then two. And all the while the distorted flesh on the half-arm loomed menacingly before her.

"I mustn't hesitate," she thought. Then with an assurance that surprised even herself, Hazel took hold of the dreaded stump and washed it as tenderly as a mother would wash the face of a feverish child. At that moment a warmth shot from her fingertips to her heart, then radiated throughout her body.

"So this is what nursing is all about!" she mused, feeling a new love for the career she had chosen.

Hazel finished her General Morning Care just when the breakfast carts came rattling out of the service elevator.

A few hours later the girl left floor duty and joined her classmates for a tour of the hospital. By the time the group reached the fifth floor, Hazel's head whirled with scenes of storage rooms, "hoppers," wards, and a multitude of patients in various sizes and shapes and conditions.

After their tour the Probationers trooped out of the hospital and crossed the street to the Nurses' Home. There in a basement classroom they would begin a course in Technique.

IN GRANDMA'S FOOTSTEPS

The teacher had not arrived yet, and the room seemed charged with a restless, first-day-of-school excitement.

The students chattered gaily, sharing their blunders from floor duty. Hazel grinned when she learned that others had become lost also.

Suddenly, a strange hush settled over the girls, and Hazel turned to stare at what had captured their attention.

At the side of the room stood a large hospital bed, unnoticed until then, and in the bed lay - a body, well shrouded with a sheet up to its forehead.

One of the girls murmured out of the side of her mouth, "Do you suppose it's some sort of joke? The morgue is just across the street, you know."

"Eeeee!" came a faint cry near the bed.

Hazel suspected something far worse - an eavesdropping teacher! And she, Hazel Weston, had just confessed her bunglings aloud.

Then crisp steps echoed outside, steps of authority, setting a death-like silence upon the roomful of Probationers.

"Good morning, class!" A stout, uniformed nurse with short, gray-black hair greeted them.

"My name is Mrs. Fritz," she said with an air of command, "and I'd like you to meet my assistant, Dolly."

All eyes followed the teacher to the ominous figure in the bed.

Long, drawn-out breaths from two dozen sets of lungs exhaled in unison when Mrs. Fritz drew back the sheet and everyone realized that Dolly was just that - a life-sized doll.

Hazel swallowed a giggle, then watched the instructor demonstrate bed-making procedures with Dolly remaining in place.

Mrs. Fritz carefully turned the manikin on its side. "Remember, girls, be very gentle with your patient. You don't want to add to her misery."

Next the students took their turns as, one by one, they changed sheets for Mrs. Fritz and Dolly.

IN GRANDMA'S FOOTSTEPS

Technique class sped by quickly, and before long the group was heading for the cafeteria back at the hospital.

Afterward, Hazel reported to her floor again for duty until five o'clock. She spent the afternoon keeping fresh ice water in bedside pitchers and waiting on patients.

When Hazel arrived at her cottage on Northrup Street, she met Miss Best, the housemother, just returning from her job in the hospital office.

"Hello, Miss Weston!" Her smile flashed at Hazel in a warm welcome. "How did your first day go?"

"I'm not sure," Hazel laughed self-consciously. "But I feel I learned a lot."

"Good!" Miss Best exclaimed, then added, "Your roommate, Cassie Little, is finally here. You'll have to fill her in on what she's missed."

A few moments later Hazel met Cassie and liked her instantly. Cassie stood several inches taller than Hazel, and she seemed brimful of energy from the tips of her well-manicured toenails to the top of her blonde head. She was quick to smile, quick to laugh, and quick to grasp Hazel's hand and plead, "Tell me everything about yourself, where you're from, about your family, everything! Then you can tell me about the meticulous Mrs. Fritz."

"Oh, she's meticulous, all right!" Hazel agreed. "But I'm glad, because she leaves no doubt about what she expects from us."

After an hour of sharing their backgrounds, Hazel Weston and Cassie Little had become best friends.

That evening they met the rest of their cottagemates, a dozen in all. Hazel's dark hair stood out in the houseful of blondes. The girl soon discovered she and Cassie were the only Probies in the cottage. They were told, however, that a few more would arrive with the "B" Division later on.

"You see, we can't have too many girls running around in the hospital at once who don't know what they're doing," explained pretty Ruth Chandler.

IN GRANDMA'S FOOTSTEPS

Hazel nodded knowingly. Recalling her own blunder-filled morning, she wasn't the least bit offended.

Each day started at five-thirty when Hazel and Cassie dressed, then straightened their room for inspection. Off to breakfast, the girls gulped down their meal in time for the required half-hour chapel service. Then they separated for their respective floors where each would remain on duty between courses in Technique, and Principles and Practice.

On Monday the Probationers started classes at the University of Oregon Medical School some distance away. At eight o'clock, limousines waited in front of the hospital to carry the girls up to Marquam Hill.

Hazel climbed into a car, taking a place by the window. The limousine cruised past blocks and blocks of tawny-colored buildings, a few whitewashed, some red-bricked, "all so close together!" she thought.

As the car climbed up Marquam Hill, Hazel came to life. Her window commanded a wide view of the eastern horizon where massive Mount Hood rose ghost-like against a sky of pale, unbroken blue.

She just couldn't take her eyes off the mountain, knowing that below its northern slopes lay Hood River Valley, her home. She could easily imagine the leafy orchards, their plump apples nearing harvest, and the rolling pastures that were fanned by the faint breezes of Indian summer.

And best of all, Hazel's family was there. Her father, a man of few words and hard work. Her mother, also a hard worker, but gentle and expressive. Her nine-year-old brother, Kelly, ever in motion. And her little sister, Betty, a sweet combination of blonde locks and giggles. How she missed them all!

Mount Hood blurred as her eyes misted over.

"So this is the University of Oregon Medical School!" Cassie exclaimed, unaware of Hazel's sudden gray mood.

Among scores of other student nurses from around the city, the girls were herded into a large, auditorium-type classroom.

IN GRANDMA'S FOOTSTEPS

The doctor-teacher marched up to the front and cleared his throat, peering over his spectacles at the large array of girls. "I surely feel sorry for me," he began in a feigned whining tone, "one lone man and all these women!"

Laughter rippled through the room, and chemistry class began.

That week Hazel came to grips with the overcrowded schedule of a student nurse. There were classes at her hospital, classes at the University, and eight hours of floor duty each day. Somewhere in between she was expected to find time to study and sleep. Then adding to her workload, Hazel offered to tutor a few classmates who were struggling with chemistry terms.

Weeks passed, and signs of fall colored the smattering of trees near the hospital and Portland's thickly forested West Hills.

It was a sad day for the student nurses when the limousines were replaced by common taxis. Too many girls were forced to pile into too small an area for the ride up Marquam Hill.

"I feel a size smaller every time we reach the top of this mountain!" Cassie puffed as she unfolded her tall self out of the taxi.

Hazel nodded, but she wasn't smiling. Cassie's words roused a fear that had nagged her for several days. Hazel really did feel thinner, a major concern for the girl.

Already ten pounds too light, Hazel had been accepted for nurse's training on the condition she gain weight.

"I'll just have to take bigger helpings at the cafeteria," she decided as she tagged after Cassie.

Still, she worried. What if she continued to lose weight? What would happen when the superintendent found out? Hazel knew the answer - all her beautiful dreams of a nursing career would come to an abrupt end.