

Basic Training

I'd always wanted to become a doctor. It was a dream I had nurtured for as long as I could remember. My imagination had been fired when I was a small girl, by family legend, that I, along with my father's side of the family, was related to Sir William Harvey, a famous 16th century surgeon who had unlocked the mystery of blood circulation. Of course, I had never been shown any documented proof of this relationship and had never thought to question it, believing implicitly that it existed. So, apparently, did everyone else in the family, so much so that no one had ever bothered to undertake the necessary genealogical research to compile a family tree to prove the connection. In any case, tracing long dead relatives in faraway England was extremely difficult, not to say horrendously expensive.

Many very ordinary families at that time harboured similar, often fanciful, notions. Everyone knew someone who had an unclaimed inheritance held in Chancery in London, which should rightly have passed to relatives who had emigrated to Australia. Others boasted of a tortuous, but unfortunately incomplete, genealogical line, linking the bastard side of a family to those born on the right side of some Royal blanket, or claimed a relationship based on an unusual surname they shared with some famous or notable member of British or European society.

In Marjorie's case, the kinship to the eminent doctor was said to be via her grandmother, Emma Harvey, who had emigrated with her family to Australia in 1854 at the age of 16. A most independent young woman, not unlike Marjorie in her youth, Emma was educated, but her father George was an agricultural labourer and could neither read nor write. Any bloodline linking Sir William to Emma's grandchildren had never been investigated beyond the three Australian generations, but this did not stop Marjorie, along with her sister Jean, and brothers Aubrey and John, claiming him.

Australia at that time had been settled for less than 150 years, largely by felons transported from Mother England: a period far too short to encourage genealogical digging lest a most

'unsuitable' ancestor emerge, even among those considered to be aristocracy. Had the Silvers been able to chart even a rudimentary family tree, they would have soon realised that any relationship with William Harvey, if it existed, was extremely distant. The relationship had never been challenged by anyone inside the family and, with no outsider pressing for details or demanding to see the necessary evidence, the story persisted.

Despite my supposedly illustrious relative and my personal aspirations, to become a doctor was a dream destined to remain unfulfilled. For a start, in those days it was generally considered that higher education was wasted on girls who, on marriage, were forced by convention and social pressure to give up work – assuming, of course, that they joined the workforce at all. It was a matter of pride for the males in the family to provide for the women. Many girls, who at that time left school at the age of 14 or so, stayed at home, learning housekeeping and homemaking skills from their mothers until they were old enough to be married. Even if they had aspirations, and were game enough to say so, further education, especially medical school, required a great deal of money – money that was far better spent educating the boys, the potential breadwinners of the family.

I was born on 16 June 1910 at Wickham, in the steel city of Newcastle, and was third in the Silver household's pecking order, after my two brothers, Aubrey and John. While I realised that neither might ever wish to go to university, I knew that, being boys, they were entitled to the best education the family could afford which, in this case, meant private secondary schooling in Sydney, at the very least. As a mere female, there was no hope of my entering university, so I kept my dream to myself.

When I was still a toddler, my father, Richard Lancaster Silver (who was always known as Lang), decided to move to Scone in the Upper Hunter Valley. Set amidst lush green countryside, and backed by misty blue hills, Scone was a far cry from the then grimy, pollution-laden Newcastle, where the tall smoke stacks at the BHP steelworks belched forth smoke and gases twenty-four hours a day.

Renowned for its thoroughbred horses and solid, middle-class values, Scone was a prosperous country town with a wide main street lined with numerous shops and emporiums. It boasted a substantial railway station, a public school, a police station, a small hospital, and also had several fine churches. The Roman Catholics, who got in first, had bagged prime position on the high side of the town, where they built a large and impressive stone church. Known as the Blessed Virgin Mary Queen of Peace, or St Mary's for short, it eclipsed, architecturally, the less flamboyant but nevertheless substantial St Luke's Church of England, which nestled, English-style, in a grassy field surrounded by ageing tombstones on the other side of the railway line. Being C of E, this is where I attended church and Sunday School.

Although the family was C of E through and through, the name sounded Jewish and on occasion people assumed it was, as Silver was a common Anglicisation of names like Silberman and Silverstein. However, our family came from Thame, a small English town on the Thames River in Oxfordshire, where the name Silver is very localised. There are still Silver relatives living there.



Scone Post Office, 1931

Like all country towns, the community in Scone was tight-knit and everyone pretty much knew everyone else. We lived in town, where I experienced a carefree and pleasantly predictable childhood until January 1916 when, at the age of five and a half, I started school.

Although the family on both sides were from England and were staunchly C of E, my mother Maud, for reasons that I never quite fathomed, enrolled me at St Mary's Convent School, rather than at the state-run school. However, my early childhood education, under the guidance of the ironically named Sisters of Mercy, was destined to be of short duration. Although I was not a particularly naughty child, I was considered to be bright, and was naturally high-spirited and independently minded, even at that young age. This combination was bound to land me in trouble sooner or later and, sure enough, I managed to commit a misdemeanour. What it was, I can't recall. I am sure it was only minor, but whatever it was it certainly riled the nuns.

My punishment was incarceration in a cell-like cupboard, into which not a single ray of light penetrated. The period of detention could have been for no more than 10 minutes or so, but to a child of six years, as I then was, it seemed an eternity. When I arrived home and reported that the nuns had locked me in a dark cupboard for hours and hours, my mother, who was quite a formidable lady, sallied forth like a battleship at full speed and withdrew me from the control of the papists. Deciding that I might fare better in more neutrally religious surroundings, she enrolled me the very next day at the local infants' school.

I soon settled into the rhythm of things, enjoying the company of the other children. I did quite well and at the end of Grade 2 was one of four pupils to receive a merit certificate. So did my sister Jean, who was one year behind me. These accomplishments were evidently deemed to be newsworthy, because they were reported in the *Scone Advocate*. I enjoyed the formal lessons and, being quite outgoing and with a good singing voice, also had no problem performing in public at school concerts. Jean was also musical and we often teamed up to do a double act.

With the memory of the dark cupboard a reminder of what might happen if I misbehaved at school, I tried to stay out of strife in case punishment by the state proved to be worse than that of the church. However, despite my best efforts, towards the end of 4th grade I came unstuck.

After a frustrating day, on which several pupils had been particularly trying, our teacher, a normally mild-mannered and gentle woman, uncharacteristically let forth a stream of invective on the impropriety of our behaviour. Finishing her tirade with the comment that she was at a loss to know why the culprits set out to deliberately disrupt the class, she asked if someone could enlighten her as to why the troublemakers persisted in playing up. I was only 10 years old but, as I generally had an opinion on most things and was not the slightest bit reticent in voicing them, I blurted out, ‘The trouble is, Miss, we all think you’re a bit soft.’

That did it! Believing that I had inferred she was soft in the head, the teacher scolded me severely for being so cheeky, silencing all attempts to explain the misunderstanding with a wagging finger and a look that would have withered the toughest mortal, let alone a 10-year-old. As additional punishment I was detained, sitting at my desk in resentful silence until 5 pm, two hours after the normal going home time. It was summer and there was plenty of daylight left, but my mother was not pleased. Furious that I had been kept in for so long and, on the basis that a grave and unforgivable miscarriage of justice had occurred, she decided to remove me from the control of the public school system.

As the educational philosophy of neither church nor state were to Mother’s liking, after the summer school holidays I was enrolled as a day girl in yet another school – Narwonah, a Private School for Girls or, as the principal, Miss Bode, liked to say, a Private School for Young Ladies. In actual fact, the school wasn’t exclusively for girls. The practical Miss Bode also accepted boys in the junior school – but only if they were under the age of 10.

The school, reminiscent of a large comfortable home, was constructed of mellow brick. Deeply shaded on all sides by invitingly cool verandahs, it was set in the centre of a very large garden, filled with flowering trees and shrubs, and with plenty of room to play. The curriculum offered by Miss Bode, the owner as well as the principal, was specifically designed to cater for the academic and social needs of the young ladies who daily entered its genteel walls.

Miss Bode was a very C of E lady born at the height of Queen Victoria’s reign. She was always referred to as Miss Bode. No one had any idea of her Christian name, and would not have dared to use it, even if they did. Like most young people, I had difficulty in imagining she was ever a child. Being C of E, she had strong affiliations with St Luke’s. It was a fairly ‘high Anglican’ church and Helen Cadell, the Canon’s daughter, was in my class.

Several other women assisted Miss Bode in looking after our day-to-day education and welfare. Two whom I remember particularly were total opposites: Miss Kent, who was said to be entirely without any sense of humour whatever, and the far more loveable Miss Mabel Corbett, the Matron, who was adored by everyone, day girls and boarders alike. Lurking mysteriously in the shadows was a Miss Gertie, whose last name I can’t recall and whose precise role in life I never actually determined. Rumour had it, however, that her sole function, at the direction of Miss Bode, was to spend her day earnestly in prayer, her petitions evidently directed at our wellbeing and spiritual protection.

Miss Amy Maria Jane Bode, born in 1874, was 44 years old when she opened her school, situated on the corner of Liverpool and Waverley Streets, Scone. Advertisements in The

Scone Advocate from 1920 onwards, promoting the school and its virtues, revealed that prior to this she had taught at Astroea College, a Private Girls' School (sold to the Church of England in 1919) in the Sydney suburb of Chatswood and at a Church of England Girls' School in Goulburn, a prosperous sheep town south-west of Sydney.

Besides the 3Rs, the subjects offered at Narwonah ranged from French, English and Australian history to geography, mapping, drawing, and painting and music. Elocution and dancing classes were also available as extracurricular activities. Miss Bode stressed that 'backward and delicate children' would receive 'every care and attention'.

The school functioned continuously from 1920 until 1952, when it became a pre-school, under the auspices of St Luke's. The redoubtable Miss Bode died eight years later at the age of 86.

My mother had also decided to remove Jean from the state school and enrol her at Miss Bode's. Close in age, we were just one grade apart. We got on quite well together and, with potentially bothersome older brothers safely installed in boarding school in Sydney, life was a most pleasant mixture of lessons, horses and friends, although not necessarily in that order.

Although still outspoken and referred to as 'outgoing', I performed well enough on the academic front. However, I could act the fool when the mood took me, and was prone to indulge in practical jokes when things became boring. The most memorable prank occurred one hot and somnolent summer afternoon when, during a particularly tedious English grammar lesson, I accepted a dare designed to put Miss Kent's famous lack of humour to the test. The instigator was Helen Cadell, the Canon's daughter and, to make sure I wouldn't back out, she told the entire grade about it. Fully aware of what was about to unfold, my classmates waited in delicious anticipation as I framed my question.

'Excuse me Miss, but I am having a bit of bother with my grammar,' I said. 'I am wondering which is more correct: the yolk of an egg is white, or the yolk of an egg are white.' Miss Kent, busily marking books while we worked on the exercise she had set, took the bait. With a look of utter contempt, she spat 'IS white, IS white, you stupid girl'. Feigning a look of total innocence, I replied in as meek a voice as I could manage, 'Excuse me, Miss Kent, but I believe the yolk of an egg is yellow.'

Miss Kent's normally pale complexion rapidly turned a remarkable shade of puce. Clutching the collar of her high-necked gown, she dropped her red marking pencil and looked as if she might have a stroke, while the rest of the girls stuffed handkerchiefs in their mouths in an attempt to smother guffaws that might have otherwise summoned Miss Bode to investigate the cause of the disturbance. Meanwhile, I stared at an invisible spot, just above the blackboard, fearful that I too might explode into uncontrollable giggles.

There was no escaping punishment: 400 lines, to be completed after school that day. Four hundred lines, written in my best copperplate handwriting and in pen and ink, took some time, so long that my unexpected lateness almost prompted my mother to call the police to investigate my whereabouts. Fortunately, although it was almost dark when I arrived home, Mother had

more important matters on her mind that day and did not press me for details. The whole school knew I was in trouble, but Jean, being a loyal sister, did not do. When the girls congregated on the verandah before classes the next morning, the opinion was unanimous. I had very definitely proved a point: Miss Kent had absolutely no sense of humour.

Apart from a proper grounding in basic education, Miss Bode expected her girls to be well versed in the arts, particularly music. She was an accomplished pianist and, in this post World War I period when entertainment was mostly of the self-made variety, she believed that to be musically proficient was an essential requirement for any young woman whose parents could afford a piano and tuition. For the majority of my friends, music lessons were a painful ordeal to be endured, with reluctant fingers stumbling woodenly over difficult pieces and mindlessly thumping out monotonous scales and hated arpeggios.

However, I had the good fortune to be born into a family of considerable musical ability. My mother was particularly talented and could play anything, from improvised, often racy music to accompany the silent films screened at Uncle Aubrey Dobson's Olympia Picture Theatre, to the work of great composers. I had inherited her love of music and, for me, playing the piano was as natural as breathing. As soon as my feet could reach the pedals, I had begun formal lessons. Unlike most of my classmates, who gave up once an acceptable level of competency had been achieved, music tuition continued throughout my teenage years.

Playing the piano was pure joy, so much so that I abandoned my secret dream for one that I believed was attainable – if I couldn't be a doctor, I would become a concert pianist. Miss Bode, realising my talent in this field, encouraged me to perform in benefit concerts held at the school or in town on a regular basis. Although these events were attended by uncritical townspeople and biased family members, it didn't take much imagination for me to see myself on the world stage, with adoring fans giving me a standing ovation and calling 'encore' as they showered me with roses.

Highly motivated by these images, I had no problem finding time for the mandatory four hours' practice each day required to reach a level of expertise to sit for the Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music. Without this qualification, known as the LRAM, along with an equally important recommendation from the examiner, aspiring musicians had no hope of securing a place at the prestigious New South Wales Conservatorium of Music, a crenellated, castle-like colonial structure overlooking Sydney Harbour.

On the appointed day, the all-powerful examiner steamed into town on the morning train. Aware that my future depended on how well I performed, I had tried to leave nothing to chance. My theory was well rehearsed, my technique as perfect as I could make it and the works to be examined practised with unrelenting determination. As none of the three candidates presenting for the examination was keen to go first, we drew lots to determine the order of appearance. I drew the short straw.

I played competently enough, but the enormity of the situation was too much. Although I had performed at quite a few concerts in town, I was overcome with stage fright and my nerves disintegrated. The kind but realistic examiner let me down gently. Diplomatically praising my theoretical ability and near perfect technique, he nevertheless made it absolutely and abundantly

clear that, although very talented, my temperament was not suited to the pressures of the highly competitive and sometimes cut-throat world of the concert pianist. I received the much coveted LRAM, but there would be no recommendation to attend the Conservatorium of Music to further my career.

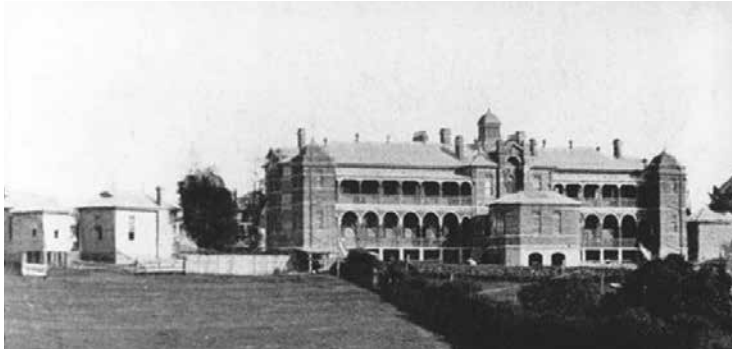
Although bitterly disappointed, I tried not to show it and reassessed my options. What was this product of Miss Bode's School for Young Ladies going to do now? Career opportunities for young women, in fact women at all, were very limited. Most educated girls of my age and background who didn't remain at home opted for secretarial work or teaching, where they marked time until they snared a suitable husband. I had no desire to do either. The world was a far too interesting place to spend my time drumming the 3Rs into unwilling pupils, or tapping out reams of letters for unappreciative bosses from nine until five, five days a week. It was all so frustrating. A musical career as a concert pianist would not only have opened up new horizons, it would have been the perfect way to avoid that other career option: tedious domesticity, centred on husband, child-rearing and endless afternoon tea parties, at which guests were expected to indulge in polite conversation while sampling thinly sliced cucumber sandwiches and Victoria sponge cake.

Although I had reluctantly put aside my secret dream, and had failed in the concert pianist stakes, I suddenly realised that the medical world was not closed to me entirely. Nursing was a viable and socially acceptable alternative. Furthermore, I would not be depleting the family finances because nurses were actually paid while they trained. It was not a fortune by any means, but full board and lodging, free training and an allowance of 10 shillings a week – the going rate at the time – were not to be sneezed at.

As the minimum age to begin nursing training was 18, I filled in the next 18 months by opening my own music school. My exposure at Miss Bode's concerts now stood me in good stead and, as my mother was a well-known pianist, I soon had enough pupils to keep me going. In early 1928, after informing my surprised but supportive family of my rather unexpected career change, I applied to the Maitland Base Hospital for an interview with Matron Stacey. This time my nerves did not let me down, despite the machine-gun rapidity with which Matron, who was all starch and crackle, fired off the questions. Finally, after a grilling worthy of the secret police, I was ordered to present myself for duty on 16 June 1928, my 18th birthday.

With the admonitions of my mother that I must try and save something from my measly pay packet ringing in my ears, buckets of tears freely flowing and 5 shillings, all my worldly wealth, jingling in my pockets, I boarded the train for the great unknown with high hopes and great expectations. For a relatively naive country girl, who considered an excursion to a neighbouring town a noteworthy event, this translocation to Maitland, fully 40 miles (60 kilometres) away, was on par with emigration to a foreign country.

The base hospital was an imposing, three-storeyed brick building, housing surgical and medical wards and surrounded by large, open-sided verandahs providing plenty of fresh air for the 'chest' patients. About one hundred yards away was an infectious diseases ward for the specialised nursing of patients suffering from scarlet fever, diphtheria or measles. The nearby Nurses' Home, which was to be my accommodation for the next four years, had a large number



Maitland Hospital

of single rooms. We six ‘commencers,’ however, were housed for the probationary period in the one dormitory. To my delight, I spied a piano in the sitting room and looked forward to some lively jam sessions when off duty.

After unpacking my few belongings, I proudly presented myself on my first day of duty, dressed in a crisp uniform consisting of a traditional blue-striped dress, starched collar and cuffs, sensible black lace-up shoes with low heels, black lisle stockings and a stiffly starched white apron cinched with a wide belt. Covering my hair, tortuously scraped clear of my face and neck in the approved regulation manner, was a rather jaunty white cap. The uniform was the same for all trainee nurses except for the difference in the number of small blue bars embroidered on the front of the cap, one for each year of seniority.

First-year trainees, being the lowest in the hospital pecking order, began at the bottom and worked their way up. I was rostered to the Men’s Surgical Ward where, on arrival, I was greeted with wide smiles from the patients and a bottle of metal polish and rags by Sister Mendham, who pointed me in the direction of the nearest plumbing fixtures. Feeling somewhat deflated, I was busily shining taps in the sluice room when I heard the magical call of ‘Nurse!’ It was a patient, and he wanted attention. A second call galvanised me to action. The moment had come to be a ministering angel.

The patient who had called out was a grumpy individual, who ordered me to bring a ‘bottle,’ and be quick about it. Hurrying to the anteroom, I looked around. I had not the slightest idea what kind of a bottle was required so I selected two from a crate awaiting collection, one soda and one lemonade. The patient was not impressed. ‘What do you think I am, Nurse, a bloody horse?’ His voice was loud and by this time he had the full attention of every patient in the entire ward. On being told exactly to what use the bottle was to be put, and where to find it, I told him that, as he was allowed out of bed, he could use the bathroom. Gathering what dignity I had left, I retreated to the safety of the sluice room where I resumed my tap polishing, red faced with embarrassment and confusion.

However, despite my rather bad start, and the good deal of ribbing that followed, I soon came to enjoy working in the men’s ward. In actual fact, I looked forward to being rostered there, as it was the one place in the hospital sure to revive flagging spirits.

I'd only been at Maitland for about six weeks when I was bitten on my lower leg by a red-backed spider. If this sounds dramatic, it was. The pain was excruciating, and while I was assured that, as I had just been bitten once, I had not received sufficient toxin to kill me, it was a most unpleasant experience. There was no antidote in those days, so treatment consisted of cutting across the bite mark with a scalpel and rubbing in a solution of Condy's crystals. As the doctor had predicted, I didn't die, but my leg swelled alarmingly and I had a few weeks off work.

One afternoon after my return, the patients were all quietly reading when someone gave a whistle. To a man, they slid under the bedclothes feigning deep sleep, books abandoned where they fell and conversations cut off in mid-sentence. The reason for this odd behaviour was evidently a female visitor, who entered the ward loaded with sweets, cigarettes and books, but, in spite of her swag of goodies, no one stirred. I watched, fascinated. After surveying the two rows of seemingly comatose forms, the bewildered woman retreated. With her departure, the ward was restored to noisy normality. She seemed harmless enough to me, but apparently none of the patients could stand her, so much so that they preferred to forgo the goodies than put up with her company.

Like all rookie students, I spent an inordinate amount of time in the 'pan room', mastering the art of emptying and washing a seemingly endless supply of bedpans. Weeks of pan detail were followed by lessons in bed making, an exacting science peculiar to hospitals – not unlike precision engineering, but studied only by trainee nurses. The corners of a hospital bed had to be absolutely exact, mitred to a precise angle of 45 degrees before being tucked under the mattress, with sheets and blankets stretched as tight as a drum, so tight that I wondered how patients managed to breathe. After beds had been made to a standard to satisfy Matron, woe betide any patients who rumbled the sheets before she arrived on her rounds, or allowed visitors to sit on the bed. It was only after I graduated from bed making that I was actually allowed to be let loose on patients. Even then, my tasks for some time did not extend beyond the taking and recording of temperatures, under the watchful and very strict eye of a senior sister.

Once I managed to master the basics and ceased to be a probationer, a distinction that gave me a room of my own, I was given more responsibility and was rostered on the night shift. I was working in the men's ward one evening, when a practically naked psychiatric patient, who had been secured to the bed to limit his movement, somehow freed himself from his bonds and made a beeline for the front door. Raising the alarm, I chased after him, but he was up and away, putting on a great burst of speed as he passed beneath the Maitland bridge. By the time the police took over the chase and cornered the fugitive, he had reached the main street, where his dignity was partially restored with a strategically placed sugar bag. He then passed what was left of the night in the cells, which were deemed far more secure than the hospital.

If security was lax at the hospital, it was non-existent at the Nurses' Home, which was totally open, front and back, day and night. With such free and easy access, we were honour-bound to check in after an evening out and the night sister would also do the rounds to see that all was well. This arrangement worked admirably, but did not take into consideration unauthorised entry by members of the public.

One night, after an extremely busy day in theatre, I flopped into bed, exhausted. I fell

instantly into a deep sleep, only to be awakened in the early hours of the morning by someone, or something, trying to push me off the bed. The light from the shaded lamp at the end of the hall was far too dim to allow me to see properly, so I staggered to the light switch, bleary eyed and not a little apprehensive. Light flooded the room to reveal a strange man, fully clothed, trying to huddle under the bedclothes. It was obvious, from the stale, beery odour emanating from every pore in his body, that he was in a state of gross inebriation.

Ripping the covers from the bed, I dragged him onto the floor. In response to my demand that he tell me what he wanted, and how he had gained entry, he mumbled, 'I wanted a bloody bed for the night, and as the front door was open I bloody well came in, and now I'm here, I'm bloody well going to stay.'

With a great deal more serenity than I felt, I said in what I hoped was my sweetest, most cajoling voice, 'If you come with me, I'll find you a bed for the night, and arrange for breakfast in bed in the morning.'

The ploy worked. He padded obediently down the hall and followed me into the empty night sister's office where I invited him to wait, saying that I would find the night sister and arrange for someone to show him his room. He received both the promised bed and breakfast: in response to the night sister's urgent call for help, two burly police officers arrived and escorted him to the local lock-up. The following morning when I awoke, rather later than usual, I found that word had circulated about my adventure and I was now considered to be a heroine.

The euphoria did not last long. In fact, it ceased the very next day when I received A Summons From Matron. This was not a good thing. A Summons almost always meant that a breach of discipline had been detected and, for the guilty party, this meant trouble with a very large capital T. Furthermore, any judgement handed down was absolute. There was no hope of any appeal to a higher court, because Matron was at the very top of the hospital pecking order.

Scurrying along the highly polished floors as fast as my leather-soled shoes would allow, I racked my brains to figure out what I could possibly have done to attract the unwelcome attention of Matron, especially after my well-publicised heroics of the previous day. Never one to indulge in preliminaries when dealing with trainees, Matron came straight to the point.

'How many cigarettes a day do you smoke, Nurse?' she barked.

I immediately realised that this was no idle question as a forerunner to a lecture on healthy living. It was a loaded question, a question that, if answered in the affirmative, would lead to instant dismissal. Smoking by nursing staff in the hospital precincts or, heaven forbid, anywhere at all in public was a Cardinal Sin.

Taking a deep breath, I looked her straight in the eye and replied, 'I have never smoked in my life.'

Compressing her lips into an even thinner line, Matron fixed me with a glacial stare before continuing in a voice heavily laced with sarcasm.

'How then, Nurse, do you account for the fact that every morning, when the cleaning staff arrive, your room smells strongly of cigarette smoke?'

Well I couldn't, so I didn't. I had no defence, save the truth, and so I used it. Making a supreme effort to overcome the feeling of doom that threatened to engulf me, I squared my shoulders,

returned her gaze and replied in as firm a voice as I could manage, 'Matron, I do not smoke.'

There was no question of Matron allowing me to be placed on remand, much less acquitted. The sole judge at this trial had already made up her mind before one word of a plea had been entered by the accused. The verdict? 'Do not report for duty until the matter is investigated.' In other words, I was suspended.

However, all was not lost. One of the senior sisters, on hearing that I had been carpeted, embarked upon some extracurricular detective work. The following day she told me to follow my usual breakfast routine but not to return to my room.

While I twiddled my thumbs in the sitting room waiting for the time to pass, Sister and Matron made their way to my bedroom. Bursting in, for there was no other word for it, they caught three trainees puffing away. As the sole judge and jury, Matron convened an on-the-spot hearing and handed down the mandatory sentence. By morning tea time the culprits were on their way, and our six trainees had been reduced to three. From then on, I always made sure that the door to my room was locked – I'd had quite enough of unauthorised entries in the past two days.

As nursing was very much 'on the job training', lectures and study had to be fitted into an already heavy workload. However, despite broken shifts, lack of sleep, the constant physical and mental demands, and Matron's ingrained habit of publicly humiliating any trainee who failed to meet her exacting standards, I loved every minute. It seemed no time at all before I had a full set of blue bars on my cap, signalling to everyone that my training period was almost over.

With final examinations looming in May, I grabbed what spare time I could to furiously study. I had to do it on my own, as by this time my remaining companions had fallen by the wayside and I was the only trainee from my group left. Matron Stacey was also no longer at Maitland. She had departed, during my third year of training, to greener pastures at a newly opened Masonic Hospital in Sydney. I don't know if I was sorry to see her go or not. Although she was tough on junior staff, we were assured that she had a softer side, which she displayed to others, but we only heard about. Her replacement was Sister Mendham who, on elevation to Matron, proved to be just as steely as her predecessor.

As I was due for a day off, I decided to combine some study with a day at the beach in Newcastle. Surrounded by lecture notes and various books on anatomy, I started out with good intentions but, seduced by the warmth of the sun and the rhythmic sound of the surf, I fell asleep.

The following morning was sheer agony. Unable to report sick without revealing how badly sunburnt I was, I arrived for duty at the isolation ward pinned into a theatre gown, all that I could bear to wear. My valiant attempts to disguise the severity of my condition came unstuck, however, when Matron Mendham and the doctor arrived on their daily rounds. The loose theatre gown, often worn when attending to isolation patients, attracted no comment, but the odd way in which Nurse Silver was moving about most certainly did. What a battering my ears took as I was escorted to the Nurses' Home where, every day for the next four weeks, my blistered back was subjected to Matron's cure for sunburn: a thorough swabbing with methylated spirits, followed by immersion in a hot bath.

Fortunately, my back healed in time for the final oral and written examinations, held at Newcastle Base Hospital. As Matron was less than confident in my ability to uphold the honour of the hospital and pass the finals, I was not exactly overcome with confidence myself, particularly as she had remarked that it would be a miracle if I struggled through the exams. To add extra sting, she also observed that it would have been far better if my brain had been given to someone who may have made better use of it. Looking back, perhaps it was a ploy for me to work hard enough to prove her wrong.

Nevertheless, she had undermined my confidence. Worried that she might be right, I made my way to Newcastle with a feeling of dread and foreboding. The first part of the oral section, conducted by two doctors, involved the identification of various surgical and dental instruments. As Maitland had a dental ward, with a set of tools identical to those on display, I had no trouble at all in passing this test with flying colours.

The second stage of the oral was conducted by the hospital's Matron Hall, a woman said to be even more intimidating than her counterpart at Maitland, and whose reputation for posing tough questions was legendary. What questions, I wondered, would this coldly efficient arm of the nursing service spring upon a hapless final-year trainee? Would it be a full dissertation on blood circulation, or perhaps a complete rundown on some tropical disease encountered nowhere outside the remote jungles of the Belgian Congo? Would she expect detailed knowledge, in precise medical terminology, of the most obscure parts of the body or, worse, throw in a question based on an area of study that the tutor sisters had somehow failed to cover?

I sat nervously while Matron framed the two questions that, in her opinion, would confirm beyond all doubt my degree of nursing ability, thereby allowing me to sit for the written exams and, provided I passed, to become a registered nursing sister. At last, after a theatrical pause that I felt sure was simply a ruse to create a deliberate state of tension, my inquisitor was ready.

'What is a leech and what is its use, medically speaking?' Matron asked.

I was sure that it must be a trick question but, as I knew of only one kind of leech, I identified the blood-sucking creature and described the medical uses to which it could be put, all to Matron's obvious satisfaction. I then waited in silence, unable to gauge from her deadpan expression what the next question might be. It was even more amazing than the first.

'Tell me Nurse, how does one make a bed in the correct hospital fashion?'

This was best answered by practical demonstration, rather than a verbal account, so under the steely gaze of the highest authority possible in terms of bed making, I set to the task with an energy that would have astounded many, lest Matron change her mind and substitute another question. How many perfectly made beds had rolled off my personal production line so far, I wondered, as I smoothed into place a bed entirely free of wrinkles and with corners that would have satisfied even Pythagoras. Matron Hall was evidently impressed by the depth of my medical knowledge and my level of bed-making expertise after years of intensive training, for I was soon on my way for the last and final test – the written examination at a Newcastle college of education.

Aided by a moderate amount of study and a fairly retentive memory, I found that the questions were well within my capabilities. Despite Matron Mendham's poor opinion of my

intellectual capacity, I left the exam room far more buoyantly than I had entered, satisfied with my attempt and confident that I stood a good chance of passing. All I could do now was to return to Maitland and await the results.

Finally, the long-awaited summons from Matron arrived. After dashing into a bathroom to check that nothing was amiss with my appearance, and that no stray hairs were peeking out from beneath my cap, I hurried to the administration block where, after a short but nail-biting wait, I was ushered into Matron's immaculately tidy office.

As usual, there were no preliminaries or any social chitchat. Neither was I invited to sit. In a style reminiscent of a Supreme Court Judge handing down a most unexpected verdict, Matron, without the vestige of a smile, simply intoned, 'I congratulate you, Sister. You passed your examinations well.'

This news was delivered in such a bland style that it took me a second or two to absorb the implication of her words. I'd passed! And passed well! The one and only candidate from Maitland Hospital that year had actually passed her final exams!

Presuming the audience was at an end, I thanked Matron and turned to leave. I had almost made it safely through the door when her voice stopped me mid-stride. Although the hospital's newest nursing graduate had just enjoyed a fleeting moment on centre stage, there was no way Matron was going to allow me to have the last word. Predictably, she added the sting that I knew she could not resist. 'I thought, Nurse Silver, that YOU would be here forever.'