

THE COURTSHIP OF TWO DOCTORS

A 1930s Love Story of Letters, Hope & Healing



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PROLOGUE

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Looking back, I wasn't so favorably disposed toward Alice the day we met. When she first reported to MacCarty's lab, I turned to the other fellows in dismay, "There's a girl in the class!"

A hen medic.

Most every woman medical student I'd ever met sported short hair and slacks, as if she wanted to be one of the guys. Alice, it turned out, was different. She dressed neatly and handled herself like a lady. She had a soft Southern drawl. And she smiled a lot.

Now, five weeks later, our fellowship at Mayo Clinic is nearing its end, and so is our acquaintance. Alice will soon be but a pleasant memory of an exceptional summer. Just one of several girls whom I have met over the years, dated, and bid a quick farewell. Diversions, but little more.

After all, we scarcely know one other. We've been out only four or five times—twice after staff meetings.

Still, she's a grand girl, this Alice Baker of New Orleans. What an accent!

And smart to boot.

Daughter of a doctor. A senior medical student, like me, a year away from a degree and internship. Only, Alice is being readied for big-city practice, while my training at the University of Nebraska aims to produce country doctors.

We are in Rochester as members of Dr. William Carpenter MacCarty's summer fellowship program in pathology. We attend lectures at his laboratory at St. Mary's Hospital and observe firsthand his controversial method of specimen analysis.

"Uncle Mac," as we now call him, also philosophizes. "Progress is made by the minority," he says. "Be not afraid of criticism." He advises self-education and initiative. "Are we to be held back by the foolish traditions of the ancients?" Inspiring words—and good quotes for my growing collection.

Several of my friends in Omaha are pinned or engaged to girls back home, and my roommate got married four months ago. But I have no intention of settling down before I finish my internship. And maybe not even then. I'd like to see the world first. Perhaps I shall take postgraduate training in Austria, as did some of my professors—or in Czechoslovakia, my grandparents' homeland. I must admit, my ambitions have grown since I enrolled in medical school.

Besides, there is so much yet to learn—in the lecture halls at UN College of Medicine, in the wards and clinics at University Hospital, on house calls across Omaha. This year I'll be busy running Nu Sigma Nu medical fraternity—the fellows just elected me president. I'll be student physician at an orphanage. And I still have a doctoral thesis to write. How grand that I may use the Mayo library while I'm here.

No, I did not come to Minnesota looking for romance.

Fascination. That's what this is. Fascination, nothing more.

“LECTURES USUALLY begin about the first of July,” MacCarty wrote in his letter accepting me into the program, “but you may come as early as you like, to observe the routine surgical pathology.” I arrived June 23.

Clarkson, my hometown in northeast Nebraska, is a day's drive from Rochester. I was accompanied by “A.C.” Cimfel, junior medical student and my best friend since high school, who was headed on to Michigan for his own summer course.

A.C. and I are like brothers, especially since his parents died. His thick head of dark curls even reminds me of my mother's. I take after Father, with high cheekbones and blond hair that, to my dismay, is already thinning.

We checked in at the Kahler Hotel—three dollars a night, with a shared bath. The Kahler, which devotes two floors to surgical suites and hospital beds, connects to Mayo Clinic by means of tunnels. What a boon that must be during Minnesota winters.

That night in my diary, I jotted a quick note. *Ambition realized. I am in Rochester.*

Hard to believe, but I'd soon be rubbing elbows with students from Harvard, Dartmouth, and Tulane. I wondered if most of them would be doctors' sons, like many of the Nu Sigs.

My standing in Omaha had to have climbed a notch or two the day I won this fellowship.

In my mind, Mayo Clinic has no peer. It offers the best of care—everyone from the Midwest comes here when local doctors cannot help—and it places equal emphasis on research and training. “There are two objects of medical education,” says Dr. Charlie Mayo, one of the founding brothers, “to heal the sick and to advance the science.”

Most of what I know of Mayo's history I've learned since I arrived. This all started when Dr. Charlie, Dr. Will, and their father set up a group practice, one of the first of its kind. The three staffed Rochester's first hospital, St. Mary's, which the Sisters of St. Francis opened in 1889. The brothers specialized in surgery. Their early adoption of antiseptic techniques cut down the risk of infection in patients, and word of the low patient death rate spread quickly. I learned that in 1905 they performed nearly four thousand operations.

Like their father, the younger Mayos traveled often and returned with new ideas about medicine. “The glory of medicine,” Dr. Will once said, “is that it is constantly moving forward, that there is always more to learn.”

The brothers invested their savings in a graduate education program in clinical medicine, associated with the University of Minnesota. They believed that excess earnings should return to the sick in the form of better-trained physicians—a noble thought—and placed physicians on salary. They created the Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research to run their clinic. It soon won national recognition, and Rochester swelled in size. The Civic Weekly, I see, reports a 1937 population of 23,000, with ten hospitals and sanitariums, four movie theaters, and forty-seven apartment houses.

My first morning in town, A.C. and I walked to St. Marys Hospital, found MacCarty in the seven-story Surgical Pavilion, and introduced ourselves. MacCarty showed us his laboratory,

the operating room suites, and the surgical amphitheater, which can seat 200 observers. Before A.C. left to catch his train, he and I watched one operation from the gallery. The rest of the hospital I explored on my own. Enlarged half a dozen times, St. Mary's is a rambling facility with 600 patient beds.

I discovered a large chapel with vaulted ceiling, marble floors, and corridors wide enough for people in wheelchairs and hospital carts. A golden light bathed the aisles. I sat in the quiet for some time, enjoying the same sense of a higher being that I feel in the cathedral in Omaha.

Finally, I returned downtown and sought out Mayo's library. It's on the 12th floor of the 1928 Plummer Building, a soaring structure of limestone and brick that commands downtown Rochester. Floodlit at night, the Plummer's bell tower casts an inviting beam deep into the darkness over southeastern Minnesota.

In the library's reading room, marble arches drew my glance upward to the oak ceiling. It's embellished with gilt and green paint. Inscribed on beams 17 feet above are the names of dozens of physicians and scientists. Lavoisier. Osler. Lister. Curie. Pasteur....

I looked around and took a deep breath, committing to memory the handsome room, the reverent hush, and the tantalizing smell of leather-bound books promising untold riches of knowledge. Here, I knew, was where I would spend most of my evenings.

I introduced myself to the librarian on duty and was elated to hear the research materials were at my disposal. Now I could write a good senior thesis. The subject is climate—that is, the effect of the climate on health. It's a topic of great interest to my dean, Dr. C. M. W. Poynter, who also chairs the anatomy department. He helped Nebraska's College of Medicine consolidate from two campuses to one—in Omaha—in 1913.

How well I remember my first day of medical school. Dean Poynter greeted the freshman class with an edict. "Gentlemen, as of this day you are members of a distinguished profession. I expect never to see you out of proper dress—a suit and tie." And so it has been for three years.

I found a room with the Keily family on 1st Street SW, between the hospital and the clinic. The household includes three girls of high school age. They remind me of the boarders my mother takes in back home—farm girls who arrive every Sunday afternoon and go home after school on Fridays.

As the other summer fellows turned up in Rochester, I acted as welcoming committee. I greeted them in MacCarty's lab and showed them around the hospital. That is, until Alice appeared, and then Mary Giffin, a pre-med student at Smith College whose father was Mayo chief of staff.

So women claimed two of the spots in the summer fellowship program.

I let them find their own way around.

Later, after my first evening with Alice, I would regret my rudeness.

ON WEDNESDAY NIGHTS, we were privileged to attend staff meetings. The papers presented were published and widely disseminated in the medical world as *Proceedings of the Staff Meetings of the Mayo Clinic*.

One week into our course, I took a seat in Plummer Hall and prepared to take detailed notes. Until that day I had exchanged few words with the girl student from Louisiana. But that was about to change.

The meeting started promptly at 8:15 p.m. as the summer sun, pouring in through the bank of leaded-glass windows, lost its grip on the day. I admired the grand setting—an oak-paneled assembly area that claimed two upper floors of the Plummer Building. Equipped with

stereopticons, motion-picture equipment, and theater-style seating, Plummer Hall accommodates an audience of 250. It was full that night. The special guest, hearing reports on gastric carcinoma and low-potassium diets, was the First Lady herself, Eleanor Roosevelt.

Only 30 minutes into the presentation, however, I began to wilt under my suit coat. July nights could be sweltering, even in Minnesota. A drying wind from the south had chased away June's rain, delivering several days of high-mercury temperatures that hung on past nightfall. I needed some air.

I slipped out with the first members of the audience, just as the meeting drew to a close, and entered the first bronze-fitted elevator. Moments later Mrs. Roosevelt, trailed by assistants, swept out of the hall into the lobby.