

# Love is His Meaning

Two lives, one marriage

John Symons



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# Preface

EVERYONE KNOWS that, in our country and in many others, most people rarely go to church, but express a deep interest in spirituality. They are at home with a belief in a supreme spirit and perhaps feel a spiritual presence in their lives, but not with a faith connected with organizations and meeting together in buildings week by week.

In this book I would like to ask any reader a question, and I will explain how I came to face it for myself. It arose from rewriting, as one book, *Stranger on the Shore* and *This Life of Grace*, in the form that the story demands. This has allowed me to draw together into one volume the separate stories of my parents, and of their families, before they were married, and the story of their marriage and of my Mum's life after Dad's death, a widowhood of twenty-five years.

This treatment, of parallel lives, gives something of a picture of life in our country over the whole of the twentieth century. Perhaps there are worse ways to grasp what life was like for many ordinary families and working people in those years. It was a time when many more people went to church quite often, about fifty per cent of the population, as big a proportion in 1958 as had attended in 1914.

The questions that I dare to address to any reader are these: do you think that the current interest in spirituality would have enabled my parents to face what they faced together, in the way they did? If not, what is added by the faith which they professed, and is that faith true?

Perhaps the words of Mother Julian of Norwich point us to the answer:

Do you want to know what our  
Lord meant in all this?

Know it well.

Love was his meaning.

Who showed it to you?

Love.

Why did He show it to you?

For Love.

Remain firm in this love, and you will taste of it  
ever more deeply...

In this love He has made all things for our benefit,  
and in this love our life is everlasting...

In this love we have our beginning,  
and all this we shall see in God without end.

Julian of Norwich, *Revelations  
of Divine Love*, chapter 86.

# 1

## Dad, 1953

THE WOODEN SCRUBBING BRUSH, with its sharp, spiky bristles, moves to and fro on the kitchen table. A little crescent wave of shallow water flows in front of it. And gripping the brush firmly and wielding it vigorously were Dad's hands. There is a rubbing, grating sound, so intense is his effort.

You might catch a glimpse of a pale blue and red tattoo on Dad's inner arm, in the gap above the button of his shirtsleeve. Dad nearly always wore his sleeves rolled down. The table was of pine, before pine became fashionable; before fashion existed where we lived. Dad used to scrub it every week. He bent low over it – for he was a little over six feet tall – working with a block of hard green or yellow soap in his left hand, and all his elbow grease.

The table stood in the kitchen by the window, opposite the Rayburn that was Dad's pride and joy. My younger brother and I used to play under it, imagining that it was a spaceship. We made a little control panel from a block of wood to which we nailed a few revolving wheels from one of the carriages of our clockwork train set. We sat there, partly hidden by the tablecloth, sometimes with our dog Patch, as we cruised around the

Universe, or at least our solar system, in this makeshift cabin. We were good brothers, two and a half years between us. We took it in turns to play the Captain, called Toby.

With a tie around his waist in place of a belt to make fast his corduroy trousers, fawn and well-worn, and wearing a shirt without its collar, Dad came to grips with the stains made by our pencils or crayons, or the splashes from our plates.

It was Dad who inspired our game. One week in three Dad worked a nightshift, and he loved to observe the positions of the stars and planets as they changed through the seasons. He read a good deal about astronomy. He used to talk to me about space and time, creation, and the wonders of life and the Universe.

Dad was always ashamed of the tattoos on his arms and chest. It was a 'silly thing', he thought, done by him in his earliest Army days. After he came back to England from India in 1947, after twenty-five years there, Dad never swam. Mum told us (and we believed her) that that was because the sea was too cold for him here, and perhaps it was, but now I can understand that it was also because of that sad sense of shame.

It was sad partly because Dad's first words were remembered in his family as, 'I could SWUM!' He was only three years old at the time that he said this to his mother and father, who like their forebears for generations, probably centuries, worked a precarious living from the waters around West Cornwall. His mother had told him not to go into the water until he could swim, a typical piece of Cornish drollery. In his youth Dad became such a powerful swimmer that he could swim to St Michael's Mount and back from Newlyn Harbour,

about six miles, and in the Army he was a superb athlete. But in my childhood, on holiday at the seaside, Dad held our towels on the shore and waited at the water's edge while we swam.

In fact, I loved the pale colours and the fading shapes of the tattoos. Dad was happy to let them be seen briefly sometimes in the summer when, with his sleeves rolled up, he swept the garden paths.

As his hands wield the scrubbing brush, easing out all the grease and dirt of the past week, sometimes both hands together, sometimes just the right, you can see that they are browned by the sun of all his years in India: strong and hard hands, yet also gentle and sensitive. They have undertaken all manner of work of the heaviest sort in Cornwall, in Ireland and in the East. They have gripped a pewter beer tankard as he sat outside his tent in the heat of the jungle. But they have also carefully turned the pages of the Book of Common Prayer and the Bible at worship in St Peter's Church at Saugor, in the Central Provinces of India, and they have received the elements of the Holy Communion. They held his mother in an embrace during the last hours of her life and comforted her. They received his first son with delight from Mum when she presented me to him outside his bungalow in India in February 1946. I can see the joy and humour in his face in the photographs of that event. He had waited forty-four years for children of his own. You can see the same character in his face that you sense in his hands.

There is only one photograph of Dad with his mother and his six sisters. All seven children are gathered around Florence Louisa, perhaps on the day of her husband William's funeral in November 1914. There is



no photograph of all eight of the family together with William, who had been a fisherman and a member of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. His death followed some early action at sea in the First World War. But there, at the focal point of this single photograph of his family, rests Dad's right hand – gently, firmly – on Florence Louisa's left shoulder, comforting and reassuring her. He was not yet thirteen years old.

And there it is again, resting lightly on my right shoulder in another photograph taken when I was six years old. The four of us are standing in front of a line of trees. We had been gathering mushrooms. Dad's left hand, cupped to hold some of them, is on my left shoulder, and his trilby hat is partly visible, lying on the lush



grass to our right. Beyond the trees, in the valley of the River Plym, our village of Plympton is already rapidly expanding. Within twenty years it will be little more than a dormitory suburb of Plymouth.

But in the photograph there is a contrast with the steadiness of Dad's touch on my shoulders. It is the look on his face. What does it show? Worry? Uncertainty? Confusion? Perhaps I also look confused or quizzical. What is happening? Time will tell.

## 2

# Florence Louisa and William

DAD WAS BORN in December 1901. He was the only son and the eldest child in the family. My Auntie Florrie, named after their mother, and the first of six sisters, was born a couple of years later. It was she who helped me to build up a picture of their life. I had been too young to take it all in properly when Dad was alive and well.

Auntie Florrie lived longer than the others and she was in good health almost to the end of her ninety-one years. In the 1980s and 1990s, as her life began to draw to a close, I used to travel down from London and visit her at Heamoor, only a hundred yards from Wesley Rock Chapel, where her parents were married. She lived in Wesley Street quietly with her youngest son, Coulson, in the well-built stone cottage that had come to her through her late husband, Charlie Paul.

The sleeper from Paddington used to arrive at Penzance, at the end of the line, by about 8 o'clock. I would take a taxi and call in at a florist's shop to buy Auntie Florrie some freesias or anemones, and then, at number 3 Wesley Street, she would give me a Cornish

welcome and a grand breakfast of eggs and bacon and fried bread. Wearing a long apron over her cardigan and tweed skirt, she wielded her frying pan and fish-slice boisterously. She stood straight for her years. Her thick grey hair, her quiet smile, the shape and angle of her forehead and her dark, blue-grey eyes spoke to me of Dad, and I dare to believe that, in some way, I made his presence real for her.

Then we got down to business. Sitting at the kitchen table by the fireplace with paper and pencil, we would roam over what she remembered of her family's life. Coulson would stay on the edge of this, listening with interest to parts of the conversation, never making his presence and keen attention too obvious to his mother, moving in and out of the kitchen, sometimes going for a while into the back yard where red pelargoniums and other bright flowers grew strongly in carefully tended pots.

Coulson told me that, whenever he asked Auntie Florrie about the family, she used to say, 'Why do you want to know about that? You never know what you might find out if you ask questions like that!' But with me she was always at ease and open in talking about the family. She seemed to delight in passing on what she alone now knew. Often she seemed to sense in advance the questions I was about to ask, particularly when the matter was sad, and then we would shed a few quiet tears together, but just as often we laughed at stories from the past. Perhaps we both knew that time was short; the years were running out. We were talking just in the nick of time.

At the end of the morning I would gather all my papers into my briefcase and Auntie Florrie would take

out of the oven three of her golden-brown Cornish pasties. Coulson would join us. And then I would be away, usually for another twelve months, on the train heading for London.

I owe Auntie Florrie so much.

Like Auntie Florrie, Dad loved and revered their mother, Florence Louisa and their father, William.

William and his father John Hocking Symons, and their ancestors, had lived in the far west of Cornwall and worked the seas around Newlyn, or laboured on the land there, for all of the nineteenth century, and probably for many centuries before that. It is a surprise that, by contrast, John Hocking's wife Peace and her family came from the industrial towns of Batley and Dewsbury, just south of Bradford and Leeds in Yorkshire.

Probably, in the mid-1860s, John Hocking visited the east coast and for a while worked on the fishing fleet at Scarborough – that is what his grandchildren believed – when the fishing was bad in the western seas off Newlyn. He moved inland to Mirfield and married, but his first wife died only two years later of tuberculosis, 'phthisis' in the medical language of those days. They had no children.

John Hocking stayed on in the Mirfield area, working at an iron foundry, and in due course he met Peace there. They married in 1875. In 1881 the Census records that the family was living in Jack Lane in Newlyn.

At the time of the Census in April 1901 John Hocking was still working as a fisherman, but he was no longer fit. His three eldest sons, Frank, William and Ernest, all in their early twenties, were fishermen, and perhaps they joked with him that he had been at sea too long – even on land he seemed to keep his sea legs and to

sway unsteadily. That was not because of drink. The Wesleyan, teetotal influence was strong in Newlyn. John Hocking and Peace and their family were Methodists. Perhaps the young men thought that the same thing would happen to them if they stayed at sea for too long. Had not their grandfather, Frank, ended up like that, working as a labourer on the land at the end of his life, after so many years at sea, until he died of malaria? So, like his father before him, John Hocking sorted out and cleaned the nets on the quayside and left the fishing to his three eldest boys. The youngest son, and last child, Alfred, was only twelve years old, in his last year at school.

By the turn of 1901, when Queen Victoria died and, in the last moments of her life, sensed the presence of her consort Prince Albert and called out to him on her way to be reunited with him after so many years of widowhood, William had met Florence Louisa. Later that year they married.

Florence Louisa's background was much less settled than William's. The marriage certificate in August 1901 gives her full name as Florence Louisa Groves. She was twenty years old. No father is mentioned in her line in the certificate, which just reads: 'Florence Louisa Groves. 20 years. Spinster. Residence at time of marriage – Marine Place, Penzance.' No 'rank or profession' is listed.

The 1901 Census shows that in April that year Florence Louisa was living alone at 26 Back Marine Terrace. It states that she was nineteen years old and was working as a charwoman, but, seeing the family photograph taken in November 1914, someone said to me, 'You can see that she was a lady.' I can. Like Dad,

I too have come to love Florence Louisa for what she did and suffered; for what she was – for her loyalty and courage. Perhaps you will see what I mean.

Florence Louisa and William both signed the register after their wedding service, but John Hocking Symons, William's father, one of the witnesses of their marriage, made his mark with a cross. His hand was now too unsteady to write. Twenty-six years earlier he had been able to write his signature on his own marriage certificate, whereas Peace had made her mark with a cross.

So, on 4th August 1901 my grandparents were married in the chapel at Heamoor. The chapel had been built on the site of the Rock on which Wesley used to stand and preach the gospel in the fields a hundred and fifty years earlier. Wesley's work in the area led to many people being converted to a deep Christian faith, and they in their turn exerted a dramatic and beneficial influence on the morals and way of life in Penzance and Newlyn, and generally in west Cornwall for many years to come.

After the wedding William and Florence Louisa went to live at number 3 Marine Place. On 11th December Dad was born there.

The family lived for a little longer in Penzance, but soon William and Florence Louisa moved to Newlyn where they spent the rest of their short lives, living first at Paul Hill, then Duke Street, and then Paul Hill again.

Finally, in 1913 they settled at number 4 Jack Lane.

Dad's six sisters were born between his arrival at the end of 1901 and the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914: Florrie in 1903, Suzie in 1905, Nora in 1908, Rene in 1910, Clara in 1911, and Kathleen in 1913.

The family was complete.