

## THE LOVE STORY OF FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE AND JOHN SMITHURST

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Elora has a tradition, beautiful and sad. One of the best beloved women of all history is its heroine. A brief account of her is contained in a letter to a young girl: – "Did I ever tell you the story of another girl who wanted to be a trained nurse? This young lady was born in Florence, Italy, but her father owned estates at Embley Park, in Hampshire, and at Lea Hurst, in Derbyshire, England. Her cousin, a young man employed by a merchant in London, fell in love with her. To break off this attachment, her parents took her from her home, and for several years traveled on the Continent. The young lady wanted to be a nurse, and at all the cities which they visited, she learned what she could of nursing as it was then, and of hospital organization."

After giving the name of the disappointed lover, the Rev. John Smithurst, late of Elora, Ontario, Canada, the letter goes on to say: – "Now you will want to know who she was. When the very urgent need came for nurses during the Crimean War, the only one in England at the time who had studied hospital work, and knew how it should be organized, was this young lady who became the heroine of the British Army – Florence Nightingale."

The letter represents an accepted view of a romance, which has almost been forgotten. It was written to an Elora girl more than 47 years ago.

Florence Nightingale lived until 1910. John Smithurst died in 1867. They never married. But did love's flame die down, or did it ever burn? The letter, as quoted, has told that he loved her, but there is much more in the case than that.

The letter was an attempt to tell the story as it was generally believed in Elora while the Rev. John Smithurst was still alive. Just one more paragraph of this account remains to be given. The letter proceeds: – "But what did her lover do? Come to the Cemetery at Elora, and on that free-stone cross you may read the inscription: "John Smithurst, Clerk in holy Orders, died September 2nd, 1867, aged 59 years, 11 months, and 23 days. A native of Lea Hurst, Derbyshire, England, 12 years missionary to the Red River Settlement; nearly six years Incumbent of Elora; afterwards resident of Lea Hurst, in the Township of Minto, and missionary to that Township."

So concludes the outline of a remarkable love story, as known in a country town and its adjacent townships, a generation ago. But, gradually, like fallen leaves in Autumn, those who knew Rev. John Smithurst intimately have gone to the dust, until the tradition itself has become mythical.

Proof of the story goes back into the forties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Recent research brings back the vital fact that, not only did John Smithurst love his Florence Nightingale, but she loved him.

Out of Elora towards the new settlement rode a sturdy, stocky man of serious face, alone. Strangers were told he was a clergyman who had sought the seclusion of a farm. He had come to Elora when the place was new, but when the hamlet had become a village he went into the bush to live. Although of middle age he was not married.

Acquaintances said he was too close-mouthed about himself. Friends knew better; his secret was not to be spoken of lightly. He might work alone in his garden for long hours, or walk solitary through the beaver-meadow on his farm, but there came times when he sought company, and told his story.

The people of the Irish settlements between the farm and the town, 35 miles away, were his friends. To two sympathetic Irish folk his lonely heart was bared.

Driven out of their homes by the Irish potato famine, many families crossed to Canada. Some entered the bush country beyond Elora in 1846. Among these pioneers of the Township of Peel were many Anglicans. Worthy to be the confidant of the heart-burdened clergyman were Mary McConnell, a woman of great strength

and kindness, and her husband, James McCague.

Another confidant in the later years of the lonely man was his family physician. There was another, whose son has made diligent and fruitful enquiries in recent years. Their accounts, much more intimate than that given in the letter agree substantially. There can be no doubt as to the main outlines of the interwoven lives.

The tender love story of Florence Nightingale, *The Lady with the Lamp*, leads to the Red River Settlement, to the backwoods of Wisconsin and to the upper reaches of the Grand River in Western Ontario, as well as to Florence, Harley Street and Scutari.

How many names and places were interwoven! The Nightingales gave their daughter the name of her birthplace. John Smithurst gave his bush-farm the name of Lea Hurst, after the seat of the Nightingale family. But the story is based on evidence that is more conclusive.

One day when John Smithurst rode past the McCague homestead to his distant abode, his thoughts were of the old Lea Hurst and his head drooped. Mrs. McCague called him to turn in and he did. That day he told his story. The crux of the narrative came when he said, "I asked Florence what I was to do since she could not marry me, and she replied 'John, I would like you to be a missionary to the Indians in North America.'"

It was in obedience to her request that he gave up business and went into training for the new work, which led first to the Red River Settlement, now Winnipeg.

Why her refusal to marry him? The renunciation, it was said, was because of their blood relationship. They were said to be first cousins, and, influenced by their parents, she concluded that this was an insuperable obstacle to their union.

The Red River experience was but the commencement of the great romance. The family of Florence Nightingale was closely associated with the Church Missionary Society – C.M.S., which had been receiving repeated appeals from the Indians at a far flung out-post of the Empire, the Red River Settlement in Canada, to send them another *Praying Master* to relieve the over-worked missionary who was ministering to them. It was to such appeals that Florence decided John should respond, with the result that he entered the Church Missionary Training College at Islington to prepare for his work.

In 1839, after an impressive ceremony of ordination by the Bishop of London, John set sail for the Red River Settlement, now Winnipeg, Manitoba, then at the end of the earth, to be the first exclusively Canadian Church of England Missionary to the Indians.

John came to Canada first as a Chaplain of the Hudson's Bay Company and it was intended that he should live at the Fort Garry Post. But *en route* he learned that the Indians had built a house for him in their village. Upon his arrival at the Fort, accompanied by the overworked missionary, Mr. Cochrane, John made representations to the Governor of the Fort for his release from Chaplain's duties in order that he might minister exclusively to the Indians.

In his diary, John writes: ' . . . the consequence is I am no longer a Chaplain of the Hudson's Bay Company, but simply a missionary. Ambition might have been gratified by the title of Chaplain, worldly interest served by the salary attached to the office with a residence at the Fort, but conscience would not have been satisfied.'

Some idea of the privations and sacrifices which resulted from this decision may be gleaned from his diary in which he describes his 'horse up to its knees in water so that it took three hours to travel fifteen miles', or, 'through storm and snow, my shoes freezing to the stirrups, my horse white with hoar frost and icicles of frozen breath hanging round its mouth', or so plagued with mosquitoes that he wrote desperately, 'how truly thankful I shall be when winter returns again.'

But not all his work was spiritual! Gravely concerned over the hardships and hunger suffered by the Indians

through the winter months, he turned his hand to farming and encouraged the Indians in community efforts in order to preserve their life and health throughout the long winter months. Some extent of this work is recorded in his journal. One year he notes freezing and storing '2000 pounds of buffalo meat and a larger quantity of beef and mutton'.

September 1<sup>st</sup> 1841 – 'We have now securely stacked all our corn. It is estimated at 300 bushels of wheat, 200 bushels of barley, and 200 bushels of potatoes. With this I trust I shall be able to provide for the schools and the poor and the needy.'

Under his leadership the work grew to such an extent that he was given an assistant, a superintendent for farm work, and three school teachers. And still he found time to experiment in horticulture. He introduced to the Red River cucumbers, kidney beans, melons and other novelties. He published an English-Cree Dictionary, and a book designed to help the Indians learn English. He established needed schools in other parts of the country, calling meetings, traveled many miles to attend them, and transacted the necessary business with the Church Missionary Society, which financed them.

In two instances his work was publicly recognized. In 1846 a detachment of 150 men was sent to the Red River Settlement from England and were quartered at the Lower Fort.

Quite voluntarily, John rode seven miles every Sunday to hold Services and visited the sick during the week. Someone later wrote to England about this fine work, and John was suitably honoured. In 1849 he was honoured by being made a member of the governing body of the Red River – the Council of Assiniboia.

But throughout this great work the inspiration behind his activities was that of this great woman back in England who had sent him to minister to the spiritual welfare of the Indians. It is doubtful if there has ever been a finer piece of work done amongst the Indians than John Smithurst achieved almost a hundred years ago at Netlet Creek. And one wonders if it was only coincidence that John's first work was at Netlet Creek, and Florence's first crowning reform in England was at Netley Hospital. After twelve long, hard, weary years, of faithful service at Red River, John returned to England, and friends who later had his confidence, affirm that he went with the hope of marrying Florence.

But it was **not** to be. No doubt he found family feeling in the matter still unchanged. Florence had in the intervening years refused several offers of marriage, and entries in her diary the year John was home indicate that she was most unhappy.

Disappointed and unrequited in his love, John returned to Canada in 1852 after almost a year in England. But never again did he return to the Red River Settlement. He took charge of St. John's Church, Elora, Ontario, where he became Rector in 1852.

Under his guidance and leadership the Parish progressed and flourished. Elora received two Services a Sunday. The Rectory was completed. The work was extended to Fergus where occasional Services were held.

Florence Nightingale had her way about choice of a career, and went into a systematic and continuous training for her profession. Quite definitely, John Smithurst had lost. At least, he was certain of never winning her for his wife. But there are many evidences that his influence was proving decisive in her life, as her influence had shaped his career. If she could not marry him she would marry nobody. Her parents saw that. Their opposition to her plans now proved ineffectual – perhaps it had weakened. It looked as if the two had reached an understanding. She had challenged him to give his life, and he had done so. In that year after the Missionary's return to their childhood haunts, she had accepted his challenge to give her life. In the Crimea she made good abundantly, her promise to the man she loved.

The visible sign of their tender and abiding attachment is, curiously enough, the Communion Set which is now in the Church of St. John the Evangelist, Elora. On the underside of one of the pieces, that one which is called a Paten, is engraved the following Latin inscription: –

*DONO DEDIT  
HOC MUNUSCULUM  
REVERENDO JOANNO SMITHURST  
AMICO DELICTISSIMO  
ALUMNUS EJUS  
EBENEZER HALL  
OFFICIORUM IN SE GRATE  
MEMOR  
A.D. MDCCCII."*

The only name mentioned, is not that of Florence Nightingale, but whose is the "AMICO DELICTISSIMO" of the inscription? A free translation will explain:

"ACTING AS AGENT FOR SOMEONE EBENEZER HALL GAVE, AS A GIFT, THIS SET OF COMMUNION SILVER TO REVEREND JOHN SMITHURST, A VERY DEAR FRIEND, IN GRATEFUL RECOGNITION OF HIS MANY KINDNESSES. A.D. 1852."

The "someone" – whose "very dear friend" was John Smithurst – was none other than Florence Nightingale.

As soon as he had left for the last time, she devoted all her time to the study of nursing. As a newspaper account has it "*From this time, after her declaration of independence and the beginning of her serious training for the work of her life, there is never a syllable in her diary or letters which denotes anything but happiness and satisfaction.*"

Little did the newspaper writer know that the "declaration of independence" was really a great renunciation of a loving soul. A New Year's letter of 1851 says, "I have never repented or looked back, not for a moment."

What made it necessary for her to speak in this way? What was there in her outward life to explain these words? It was her heart's cry that she sought to stifle with this reiteration, "I have never looked back, not for a moment". While her lover went to Canada, she went to Germany. At Kaiserwerth, on the Rhine, she trained under Pastor Fliedner and his wife, and afterwards at the Maison de Ia Providence in Paris. Returning to London she undertook the post of superintendent of the Harley Street Hospital for Sick Gentlewomen. It was at Harley Street in October 1854, that her call to the Crimea came.

Florence Nightingale accepted. If she could not lavish her love on one man, she could care tenderly for thousands. Henceforth her ministry was the more spectacular and crowded. Are the horrors of Scutari's sufferers all that explain the abandon with which she spent herself?

When the Reverend John Smithurst recrossed the Atlantic it was said he could not endure the climate of England. That was the reason given for his return to this Continent. He went to the Township of Grantham, near St. Catharines, but was stationed there for a very brief period. Before the end of 1851 he was in Elora. Soon came the mysterious silver Communion Service. The new Rector became something of a mystery. He was incurably a bachelor and the people wondered why.

All through the surrounding townships he ministered energetically. In the neighbourhood of the McCague's he had a Mission Church. The McCagues were the second couple he married after arriving in Elora, and they became fast friends. But at this time he told them little.

During the Crimean War, the Rev. John Smithurst was in Elora, and his interest in reports from the theatre of war was amazingly intense. The name of the woman he loved came to be on the lips of everyone. He admitted proudly their blood relationship, but that was all. She was keeping her promise splendidly.

The story has often been told how Mr. Sidney Herbert, then Secretary for War, wrote to Miss Nightingale, asking her to undertake the task of evolving order out of chaos in the Military Hospital at Scutari, and how his

letter crossed one from her to him, offering her services.

That exchange of letters was on October 15, 1854. On October 21, less than one week later, she started for Bosphorus, accompanied by a band of forty-two trained nurses. The departure of this gentlewoman shocked Victorian England. It opened a new era in nursing as in war. Its success was surpassed only by its toil and sacrifice.

Florence Nightingale broke her constitution. The Lady with the Lamp was ever afterwards an invalid. Her unhappy state might have aided in the break-up of her lover's health. The last lingering hope of their life together was gone. Shortly after the war he had to retire to his open-air life on a bush farm. A new portion of the Six Nations Reserve was being opened up for settlement, and thither he went.

Haldimand had given Brant and his Indians the land on each side of the Grand River, six miles each way, and from mouth to source. As White settlements had surrounded the strip, the Crown had bought back portions. Minto was one of the last areas to be made into a township and offered for sale. Smithurst bought 400 acres, two and a half miles east of the Village of Clifford, and thirty-five miles northwest of Elora.

The workmen from Elora who were employed by him to put up buildings, long remembered the winter evenings when, seated around the large, open fire-place with its blazing logs, the owner of rustic Lea Hurst would read novels to them in his deep rich voice, or relate even more interesting tales of that far-off and little known region, Rupert's Land, the home of the Indian, the trader and the settler. Sometimes he told of the old Lea Hurst and his early life.

But they heard much less than Jamie McCague and his wife, Mary McConnell, when the aging man would call in to renew friendships as he drove to Elora for supplies.

Ten years he lived on the bush farm, clearing some acres, but without the hope of sons to inherit the arable land, or drain the beaver meadow.

Then his health failed utterly, and he needed to have medical attention and nursing. Strange the irony of his fate, the one woman who knew best of all how to care for him, lay helpless in the old home. So he returned to Elora, and found a haven in St. John's Rectory. He received every attention from his successor, the Reverend C. E. Thompson.

Perhaps the complete avowal of his love affair came under these circumstances. During the final illness he was attended by Dr. A. H. Paget, who came to Elora in 1858. When Florence Nightingale died in August 1910, Dr. Paget felt that the time had come to make it certain that the real facts would be put beyond dispute.

From his place of retirement in the city of Toronto he wrote the following letter:

Jarvis Street, August 17th, 1910.

"I had the pleasure of knowing the late Reverend John Smithurst, of Lea Hurst, Minto; a fine, educated gentleman. He was engaged to the late Florence Nightingale.

I attended him, with Dr. Clarke, of Guelph, during his last illness."

But the actual engagement was something which was not allowed for in the earlier accounts as they were circulated by word of mouth in the Elora district.

With Dr. Paget's statement the terrible earnestness of Florence Nightingale's "declaration of independence" becomes clear. In 1839, or earlier, she had broken the engagement. In 1801 she had finally given up any idea of marriage. In 1854 she could write in her diary. "I have never repented, nor looked back, not for a moment."

Just as this simplification came, a new complication entered. The following despatch was printed in a daily paper:

"FOX LAKE, WIS.. AUGUST 18 – The death of Florence Nightingale, 'The Angel of the Crimea', in London this week, recalls a very pretty romance, in which Fox Lake is indirectly interested.

"William Shore and Florence Nightingale were cousins and lovers in England in the long ago. English law forbids the marriage of cousins, so they pledged their troth and separated, neither ever to marry.

"William Shore drifted to Fox Lake, and lived here many years, finally dying in 1868, and his remains are now resting in beautiful Waushara Cemetery in this village. Florence Nightingale remained faithful to her vow."

Some inaccuracies in this despatch are obvious. English law does not forbid the marriage of cousins. The Mosaic Law forbids the marriage of second cousins, but it is silent as to first cousins, such as John Smithurst and Florence Nightingale. But still, the despatch might be true, if John Smithurst were a consummate liar, or if Dr. Paget and Mrs. McCague had misunderstood.

Refutation of this despatch came with the discovery of a man who had received from Mrs. McCague an unusually detailed report of the story given her and her husband by their old Rector.

John Smithurst told her that he was born at Lea Hurst, Derbyshire, England, on September 9th, 1807. In early manhood he was in business and for a time he was employed with the firm founded by Sir Richard Arkwright, inventor of a famous machine for spinning yarn. But a change came in his career, for, according to Mrs. McCague, he and a cousin fell in love with the same girl, who was also their cousin – Florence Nightingale.

And then follows her story of the decision to separate, prefaced by her homely words: "Then, says John to Florence, what would you have me do, says he." (Although of Irish parentage, Mrs. McCague had grown up in Ashton-under Lyne, England, and acquired there the 'says he, says she,' mannerism). Hers is homespun evidence, but she had a remarkable character. To accept the evidence of an unsupported and obviously inaccurate story against the testimony of a friend, and a physician, would not seem tenable, especially when all the facts in connection with the critical years, 1839 – 1854, point to the correctness of the story told by the known witnesses.

The fact that John Smithurst had told that his cousin had also fallen in love with Florence Nightingale supports the better known version of the whole affair. If a man were making up such a story out of whole cloth, would he mention the other man?

The Wisconsin story cannot be tested by such method, for William Shore is supposed to have died in 1868, and nobody is mentioned as having heard his version. The Fox Lake despatch is much farther from the original sources of information than the Elora letter, which is the weakest piece of evidence supporting the Ontario story.

On the other hand, the Elora evidence is direct, personal, and circumstantial. Mrs. McCague gave an interview and the notes of that interview have been seen by "The Sunday World" Dr. Paget wrote a letter, and this paper has seen the document. The known and public circumstances, as reviewed in this article, fit in with the interview and the letter.

Perhaps Dr. Paget is more direct as to a formal engagement than Mrs. McCague, but "engagement" may mean two different things. It may be, that, because of parental disapproval, Florence Nightingale never formally engaged to marry John Smithurst. That does not lessen the probability that she confessed her love for him.

It is enough that they loved each other. Renunciation brought no unique opportunity to him, but in her case renunciation made history. Their loss of happiness was the world's gain. All may sympathize with the pair who highly resolved to give up the chance of happiness, to accept the cross of loneliness, taking upon themselves a life of service, if, perchance, their love thereby might be forgotten and separation made endurable.

When they parted, as John Smithurst went out as a Missionary, each might have thought that there might come an attachment to some other. But twelve years later they had no illusions. They loved each other. Of this the Silver Communion Service to her "dearest friend" was the token.

When the invalid in London heard, in 1867, of the lonely grave in Canada, she could only realize that for her the end had come. For another generation she remained. Of all that she suffered in that time little can be known. If John Smithurst was restrained, she was even more restrained. Her diary tells only by inference. In it she says that she 'never looked back!' Hers was an iron will, but did she never look back – across the ocean to the grave that she could never see?

It may be that as the facts became better known, the love story of Florence Nightingale and John Smithurst will take rank as one of the greatest love stories of history.

There is one curious difference between this and the classic example of Dante and Beatrice. Without Dante his sweetheart would have been forgotten. Without Florence Nightingale her lover would not have the same appeal. Beatrice inspired Dante's muse. The Reverend John Smithurst fired Florence Nightingale into action.

Whatever the world may say, Canadians at least will not forget John Smithurst, whose story is here made public for the first time.