

Levi Pennington

People

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My Love Affairs

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MY LOVE AFFAIRS

I've had hundreds of them, or only two, depending on the point of view.

I can only guess when I became old enough to begin to realize how difficult it is to define a word -- difficult almost if not quite to the point of impossibility. To define a thing, of course, is to fix its limits; ~~how easy it is to define, "define"~~ *it's easy to define* but to fix the limits of a word that has real meaning ~~rather than~~ *is not so easy* something that has exact mathematical meaning and is really an idea, such as "square" or "triangle" or "sphere," for instance, ~~to~~ *is* to fix the meaning of a word like "poetry" or "justice" -- why there are as many definitions of poetry as there are men and women who have tried to define it. It makes one think of the boy who was given a long series of six-figure numbers to add, and who presently came up to his teacher and said, "Teacher, I have added up these numbers ten times." "Fine", said the teacher, and the boy said, "And here are the ten answers."

Well, if I were to try myself to define "love", I think I might have ten answers, or maybe more.

Not long ago a woman ~~said~~ *after the morning service at the church,* to me, "I hope you know that we love you, even if we do not often tell you so." Another woman standing by said "I agree with that. We love you, too." Now if you knew these two women, you'd understand why I could say, ~~with them~~ with their husbands standing by and in full agreement, "I love you, too"; and we all agreed that here was a love that many folks know nothing about, the kind of love which the Bible enjoins again and again, assuring us that ~~one~~ effective witness to the world of our oneness in Christ is the fact that we do have "fervent love one for another!"

This kind of love I learned to know when as a teen-ager I was trying, not too successfully -- who is ever satisfactorily successful in his efforts along this line? -- to be true to the best that I knew in living a Christian life. A woman old enough to have been my grandmother took pains once on a time to speak a personal word of encouragement and appreciation to me, and it was food to my soul, a great and quieting satisfaction to my turbulent emotions, a strengthening of my moral backbone -- do you wonder that my love went out to that elderly "mother in Israel" until the day of her death? And in my work as a minister how many "mothers" I have had; Charity T., and Lydia B., and Amanda W., -- and I could name others, but they won't mind if their names are omitted, for they have all gone "to their long home" and it was years and years ago since it might have been said on their account that "the mourners go about the street."

But dear as any "mother in Israel" can be to a man young or old, nobody can take the place of his own mother. I loved my mother all my life until she went to her heavenly home, and if any saint since the world was created was ready for the mansion prepared for her in her father's house, I ~~am~~ *am* sure she was. The longer I lived the more I learned to appreciate her and love her. It was my privilege to watch by her bedside during her last illness, and the suffering that she had to undergo for weeks was heart-tearing to observe. But never a word of complaint; always unshaken trust in God, always loving

as I told you before,

thought for others. One evening, as the shadows were darkening over the land she said to my father who had loved her with all his heart for more than forty years, "I want to go home in the morning." And as I sat by her bedside ~~man~~ with my father, just as the rising sun threw its first bright beams ~~came~~ in through the window and shone across the bed where she lay so quietly now, her dear, pure spirit left us for the land "where they need no candle, neither light of the sun, for the Lord God giveth them light, and they shall reign forever and ever." *She went home in the morning.*

I loved my mother very dearly; and I loved my father very dearly, too, and he was with us for many years after my mother left us. And it was my privilege to watch by his bedside during his last illness, and to see the fight that his splendid body put up against the forces of invasion that had attacked it. He had recently had an attack of the influenza that was taking its toll by the thousands, but had come through that seige weakened but still active; he had retired from his active ministry as pastor of a mission church; and after rallying repeatedly from what the attending physician thought must be the end, I heard him one night, when he did not know that I was where I could hear, speaking as though to a human friend in the room with him, and telling his Father that he did not want to leave this life until it would be pleasing to Him, but so far as he could see his work was done, and if the Father was willing he'd like to come home. It was not long after that until we closed his eyes, and his five sons and a son-in-law that he loved carried him to the grave where we laid his body to rest beside her whom he had loved so long and so completely.

Having had such parents as were mine, do you wonder that when I was poorest in the things that most men prize, I was among the men of great wealth in some of the best things that this life can afford?

I think I am one to whom the adage that "Blood is thicker than water" means more than to most folks. There were ten children of us, and I loved every one of my brothers and sisters, including the brother with whom I had more fights (I mean real fist fights, the black-eye-and-bloody-nose kind) than with all the rest of the world. (He won with disgusting regularity, as he was older and bigger than I was; but ^{was a fighter for punishment} nobody else dared touch me when he was around. ^{and would not long remain "licked" but} He would have fought Samson and Hercules both at the same time in my defence. ^{He} I loved my relatives to the third and fourth generation, and there were any of them that were five or six generations from me, they were counted with the others (though strict honesty would ~~have~~ require me to say that some of them needed the maxim of my youth -- a maxim that was handed me; ^{it} you may be sure that I did not invent it, -- "I love everybody, but I don't love some people's ways." And there were degrees of my affection, as in the case of a nephew of mine at a family reunion. He was asked, "Which do you love more, Aunt Christine or Aunt Emma?" With true courtesy he replied, "I won't tell you. I don't want to hurt Aunt Emma's feelings."

Well, enough about family love and Christian love, though you can readily see that I have good reason to say I've had hundreds of love affairs.

But when you read the title of this chapter, I am sure

"Licking" me in a fight was his personal prerogative.

you were thinking of what is called "romantic love", what Solomon called "the love of a man for a maid", which he confessed that he did not understand. Well, that, at least in some respects, is like certain disease germs; one may be infected, but the invaders are overcome, before they have any profound effect. How many escapes of that sort I have had "deponent sayeth not", because deponent doesn't know.

I remember well the first attack. It came when I was six years old, or possibly seven, though I know it was before I was eight. There was an orphanage near where we lived, and on Sunday those little girls and boys (I think there were boys, but they did not impress me) would come to Sunday School and church at the Westfield meeting house. And of all the girls in that list (whether ten or fifty I do not know) I could see only one. Maggie Hudson. How my little boy heart turned over and did metaphorical cart wheels whenever I saw her. For my size I think it was a violent attack; but we moved away to the wilds of northern Michigan, a change so great that it wiped out that very juvenile love affair of which nobody on earth knew but me, as it wiped out many of the memories that should be keen of those very early years before that exodus.

I remember certain romantic feelings that I had toward Elvina S., but they could not have been very strong, for when I found that she was older than I was -- I think it was only two days, but that was enough, for I'd never love a girl that was older than I -- I dropped her off my list, though I had carved her initials along with mine on my favorite beech tree north of the house -- do you remember that tree bent over as one of Frost's birches?

I might have cared for Cordia Z. if it hadn't been for "Cock-Eye" B., my rival for her favors. It was not a fair contest, for "Cock-Eye" had a horse and buggy, and I did not even have a bicycle. What chance did I have? At any rate there was no real attack there; possibly there might have been, but "Cock-Eye", while he did not win in a walk, won easily with a horse and buggy. And anyhow that does not count. Don't read this paragraph, or if you have read it, go back and un-read it. (And when you ~~remember~~ have done it, tell me how. I've read some things that I wish I could un-read, and heard things that I wish I could un-remember.)

as I have told you.

The first time I ever studied was when, in 1892, I did a year's work in six months, ~~in the Mantou High School, under the leadership of Lewis N. Tupper, one of the finest men and one of the finest teachers I have known. I had never taken a book home to study before. For that six months I carried seven solid studies, and did extra work outside of the class in four of them.~~ My mother's brother had literally worked himself to death making his way through Earlham College strictly on his own. He died just before the graduation of his class, and his body lay in state in the president's home while his diploma was presented to his vacant chair. My mother and my father were both fearful that I ~~may~~ ^{might} have overdone it by working so hard all day and a good part of the night to get the required work done before graduation time for the "Columbian Class" of 1892, and after graduation Father said to me, "Now Levi, I want you to go to cousin Josiah White's place near Maple City, and forget that there ever

was such a thing as a book. Just do anything you please up there except study. You've earned a good rest, and we want you to take it." And so I went to the home of Josiah and Lizzie White.

I knew that Elsie S. was helping them during the busy days of harvest, and I thought it would be nice to see that little girl again. She had been a playmate of my sisters, one six and the other eight ^{years} younger than I, and she had hurt her bare foot the last time she had visited the girls, and I had carried her to the house. That may have been two years before, but I never thought of that, ~~mm~~ I had reached the home ^{of the White cousins} while she was caring for the milk, taking it down to the spring where almost icy water was bubbling out of the sand. I was talking with "Joe" and Lizzie when Elsie came walking in.

I rose to my feet, and did not fall backward, though I felt as if I might. I had never seen anything like what my susceptible eyes saw then. A vision of loveliness that simply overwhelmed me. I had expected to see a little girl, or anyhow a girl, and what I saw was a beautiful young woman or a goddess, I was not quite sure which. Why, she was -----

What's the use? I taught my first country school in that neighborhood beginning that fall; Elsie taught me how to walk home from church on the icy road where there was a comb of soft snow between the hard beaten lines where the horses traveled and the sleigh runners slid. And Elsie was very nice all the time, and I hope she was happy with the man who married her later. But a love was coming that left me able to admire and respect and appreciate other women, but so far as any possibility of romantic love for any other woman was concerned, that was impossible, ~~and~~ ~~even~~ unthinkable.

Bertha May Waters was a compositor in the office of the Grand Traverse Herald when I first made her acquaintance. We lived near the Waters home, and I had already come to a pleasant acquaintance with her, when my father and another minister held some evangelistic meetings in the Fernwood Union Chapel, in that suburb of Traverse City in which the Waters and the Pennington families lived. Bertha had always been a good girl, but she felt a real spiritual need, and it was my good fortune to help her find peace with God. She became a member of the church of which the Penningtons were members, a leader in the work of the young people, and one of the very substantial Friends in that meeting.

And I was calling at the Waters home more and more frequently, with no thought that anything serious was developing between Bertha and me, ^{as far as she was concerned,} ~~till~~ ^{from} a young man returned for a stay of some years out west (or down south or back east or up north or somewhere), and I knew that I could very well be spared from the Waters home for him to enjoy the very warm welcome that was extended to him by the entire family. So as soon as I thought it was the proper time I excused myself and took my way out through the front hall, picked up my hat and opened the door to leave, when I realized that Bertha had followed me to the door. I was astonished and still more delighted to hear her say, "Don't go. I'd much rather be with you than with him."

Dull? Dumb? Slow on the uptake, as the English say? Yes,

I was all that, and more. It was actually hard for me to believe that there had been building up in her heart the same sort of thing that had been growing in my heart.

Sometimes people "fall in love". We had not fallen in love; we rose into love, or love rose in us, ~~and~~ say it any way you like. It was many months before we were married, and I had been teaching ⁱⁿ what proved to be my last public school, ^{work} in a county seat town where I was head of the educational system of the place. If ever a man loved a woman, I loved Bertha. She became the mother of my children, Mary Esther, named after my mother and Bertha's mother, and Bertha May, named after her mother—really named after her mother's wasted body had been laid to rest in Oakwood Cemetery, where my parents sleep.

How it tears at the heart to recall the months of the losing fight against tuberculosis. But how a glorious light strikes through the darkness as I think of her triumphant death. Too weak to lift her hand she had given birth to Bertha May, a two and a half pound mite; the days passed into weeks, with the flame of life flickering and growing dimmer and dimmer, but with ^{the} blessed light of her faith growing brighter and brighter, till one night she dropped quietly to sleep, and awoke, I am sure, ~~from my mother's arms~~ where my mother joined her before ~~many years~~ two years had passed, the land where "there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain." *(Yes, she quoted it repeatedly, and I never quote it again. It means more and more with every passing year. When you are 90 years old....)*

My mother, who had raised ten children of her own and I do not know how many for others, had taken the tiny baby, and with the neighbors and friends, the relatives and the doctor all knowing that the little mite could not live, she had brought it through the early perils without baby incubator or any of the helps that modern babies get in their struggle for life (she is still living, and ~~almost~~ ^{more than} sixty years old), and I was living with my parents and my two daughters, and I am sure that the daughters were no more a burden on my parents than I was. *for the sake of the children if for no other reason;*

For I did not care to live. I knew I must, but when I thought I recognized symptoms that indicated that I was due to go as my wife had gone, I did not care. If I had known that my hand lying on the desk would enable me to live if it was palm upward and that I'd die if the palm were down, I felt that I would not look nor feel to see which way it was lying. Those were very black days for me, and it was during that time that I wrote the sonnet that stands first in my first book of verse:

To B. M. W.

When, in the dusk of evening, o'er my soul,
Like the dull glow that lights the dimming west
Comes the remembrance of that hour most blest
When my lone-wandering spirit found its goal
In thy dear heart, and of its love the whole
Rich treasure offered, finding perfect rest
In sweet fulfilment of thy love confessed
My heart rejoices -- then the church bells toll.
The light dies in my spirit as the glow
Fades from the distant sky, for thou art gone.

A little taste of heaven here below,
 Then night which ever since has darker grown.
 God called thee home, although I loved thee so;
 God called thee home, and I am left alone.

When Bertha died, I knew that there was no other woman on earth who could ever take her place, and I was right.

Some folks believe that when a man has truly loved one woman, he can never love another, and they are wrong.

Rebecca never took Bertha's place; she made a place for herself. And how well she filled that place for more than fifty-five years!

I had left the work of public school education to come back from Rogers City to Traverse City, which had long been the Pennington home, to take the job of city circulator of the Daily Eagle, the Democratic daily in a strongly Republican town. The job was in part satisfactory to me, but the task of soliciting new subscriptions to the paper, knowing that less than one home in three was Democratic in its politics, was never to my liking. But the gathering and writing of news was a job that I loved. The Spanish-American War had come, and the Morning Record put on a telegraph service that the Daily Eagle did not by any means match. They employed a city circulator who loved to go from house to house and get subscriptions. And more and more I was writing news for the Eagle. A nephew of the elderly man who had been the Traverse Bay Eagle, the weekly, and then the Daily Eagle, ~~was~~ was not the man of strength and energy that he had been, and his nephew, who had inherited considerable means, had come and was now the real head of the force. One day he said to me, "We ought to be hustling subscriptions these days." I asked him if he was going to be in the office after dinner that evening, and he said he was, which was the usual thing for him.

I took the paper home with me that had just come off the press, and I marked with a red pencil all the news articles that I had written, and with a blue pencil all that had been written by all the rest of the force, which included ~~many~~ E.L.S., the elderly editor, L.A.P., the principal owner now, E.E.W., the city editor, S.A.P., a ~~nephew~~ nephew of the editor, G.S., the editor's daughter, and E.G.S., the editor's adopted son, all of whom did some news writing; and what I had written (it had been an unusual day) measured two inches more than all that had been written by the rest of the force. I showed this paper to Mr. L.A.P., and told him that if he could get a man who could do as much news coverage as I was doing and at the same time do a good job of subscription soliciting, he'd better get him.

I think with real enthusiasm,

Well, he took me at my word as far as getting another man was concerned. But this new man, O.F., came with the understanding that he was to write no news, not so much as a personal telling that Jane Jones of Richmond, Indiana, was visiting her sister, Mrs. James Brown of 105 Union Street.

And after some time for the dust to settle, I was a cub reporter on the Morning Record. Little to tell about that, although there were some exciting times and some stirring incidents

during the months and years of my climb from cub reporter to city editor. I was told at one time that I could buy in and be a partner in the firm that owned both the weekly and the daily, but what I would have used for money I ~~had no idea~~ had no idea then, nor now.

At any rate a great change was ahead that was to put journalism permanently out of my life, much as I had enjoyed it. A call came for me to take the pastorate of two little country churches in Indiana. I was not a preacher, and though I had frequently taken the lead ^{in the Sunday service of the churches} when our pastor was away for any cause, I would never let anybody call my talks sermons.

When I was away from the God my mother had taught me to reverence, I was kept from surrendering my life to Him by the fear that if I did I would have to be a preacher, and that I did not want to be. When I surrendered and began living the life that I felt I ought to live, there was no worry about preaching any more. I had taught school for years, and then had spent some more years in the newspaper work, I had married, I was the father of two children whose mother had died, and was living with my parents and these two daughters, with a good job and good prospects, and then this call came to become a Quaker pastor. I felt as clear as to what I ought to do as I had ever felt in my life.

And soon I was in the heart of the Hoosier State, pastor of these two little meetings in the quiet corn land country where nothing happened every day in the week. It was a big change from the life in the best city in Michigan north of Grand Rapids, where I as a newspaper man had been in everything from a union evangelistic campaign to a dog fight, from a church wedding to a political convention, from a big fire to a Sunday School ~~conference~~ ^{conference}, from ~~from~~ a Fourth of July celebration to a Quaker quarterly meeting. It was a big change.

I had met Florence Rebecca Kidd when I was teaching in the log school house at Onaway and she was teaching at South Forest, seven miles away, though her home was little more than a mile from the school house where I taught. She was a very good friend of my mother, before I had ever met her, and she and my mother really loved each other, while I was engaged to Bertha Waters. And after Bertha and I were married and Rebecca came the 120 miles from Onaway to Traverse City for quarterly meeting, Bertha and Rebecca became fast friends, closer than sisters. The last word that Bertha spoke was my name, but the last sentence she spoke was of thanks for a gift that Rebecca had brought.

was declining,
My mother was not a match maker, but before I left to take up my duties as pastor of these country churches, she had said to me, "Levi, if anybody but thee marries Rebecca Kidd, I am going to be greatly disappointed."

So Many months ~~had~~ ^{after} passed since Bertha's death. The burden of caring for my two children with their father 400 miles away ^{was great}, my mother's health, and my loneliness and longing for a home of my own, kind and helpful as my parents had been, ^{all this and more} had combined to make the thought of having a companion again not so impossible as it seemed for months after Bertha's death. Now she was gone; now she was no longer a woman; now if she could know, I knew she would

There was no death of those who seemed willing to undertake the task of being the pastor's wife and a second mother to his children -- one very good young woman even so expressed herself. But there was a little lady at Conway.

desire whatever was best for me and her two daughters. I need not tell of the correspondence that began between me and Rebecca; of my doubt as to my right to ask her to leave her successful work as a teacher and take up the task of caring for me and for my two girls, on the very meager finances that the Quaker ministry provided in those days. But I had come to love her, and she loved me -- I never did understand that -- and we became engaged, and planned to be married at the close of the pastoral year early in the fall.

And then came my mother's last illness and death. Rebecca was visiting her. My father called for me, and I went, and Rebecca and I were giving my father all the help we could until Mother's life here ended. This made advisable an earlier marriage than we had planned, and in the little Friends church of which my father was then pastor the simple ceremony was said that united our lives together. *our hearts were already united.*

The story of our life together ~~will~~ occupies most of this book that I am writing. Surely few men have ever been so blessed as I have been during more than fifty-five years that we lived and worked ~~together~~ *side by side*. Whatever of good I may have accomplished in all those years she had a part in. She doubled every joy; she halved every sorrow -- took half of it herself. She lightened every labor by carrying more than her share of the load, and she increased the value of every success by her own joy in it. Every honor that came to me made her prouder than it made me. But better than anything else, better than anything else that the world has for man, was her unwavering love and loyalty. Never any doubt, never any fear of her failing in this dearest and sweetest thing that can come to a man. It did not need outward expression, though there was an abundance of that. But just to sit in the same room was a joy, even if there was not a word said -- and if one of us did start a conversation it was often on the very subject that had been occupying the mind and heart of the other.

The years passed, and the decades piled up. her last

I will not attempt to describe the months of illness, the long stay in the hospital when it became impossible to do for her in the home all that was needed, the months of successive hope and hopelessness. *and more* The last few years of our life together, especially the five years between our Golden Wedding and her promotion to a higher life, our love was sweeter and dearer than it had ever been before, which is saying a ~~great~~ deal. *and when her dear, brave, loving heart ceased to beat.....*

I thought I knew how to weep, but I had not known how until she was gone, and the irreparable loss and the utter loneliness and the crushing grief had settled on me. More than half my heart was buried in that grave looking toward the sunrise. I loved my children, not less, but more. I loved my relatives and my friends, not less but more. But the thing that filled every day and every night was expressed by the poet who said,

But this I know, though I grow old
Beyond the years of men,
I shall not ever, ever
~~stretch~~ *hold* my arms for her again.

My second book of verse, for which I had little heart after her death but which I knew she would want me to have published, must be pretty sad reading in the more personal parts of

How the nurses loved her. Her smile was the sweetest thing on earth, and how much she smiled, her best smiles always for me.

it. There was real grief in the simple lines of some of the verses. The first one in the section of the book that is more than any other the expression of myself is:

LONELY

Since you have gone away
 I am lone, dear, and sad without you.
 Since you have gone away
 Earth seems empty and dead to me.
 Though you have gone away
 Memory longingly lingers about you.
 I am so lonely, so lonely, dear,
 Since you have gone away.

Another that I called by a bit more cheerful name begins:

ROSES IN DECEMBER

And you are gone, my darling.
 I cannot hold your hand;
 I cannot kiss your dear, sweet lips;
 I do not understand
 Why God should take you from me --
 I need you, need you so.
 And did He need you too, my dear,
 And so you had to go?

As I said at the beginning, I have had many love affairs or only two depending on the point of view.

How good God has been to me! *My loss could not have been so great if my Treasure of love had not been so marvellously rich.*