

FLORRIE – A Life Unexpected © Ian D. Richardson

CHAPTER 1

Melbourne, Australia, October 1914

Florence Martha Cox, known to most of her family and friends as Florrie, sat on the swing made by her father 20 years before when she was a little girl. As she was still of slim build, she could fit in it comfortably, although her father had raised the seat to accommodate her long adult legs.

The swing was in a wooden frame erected in the shade of a towering eucalypt that was planted in the corner of the large back garden. The nondescript three-bedroom wooden house with its corrugated tin roof was constructed in the late 1880s in Balwyn, then a sparsely populated outer suburb of Melbourne.

As Florrie moved gently back and forth on the swing, she read a hand-written letter and stroked Tiddles, the pet black-and white cat sitting on her lap.

It was the second time she had read the letter since its arrival from India in that morning's post. It was from the Revd Frank Paice, to whom she had become engaged on the eve of his departure by steamboat for Calcutta, then capital of India and the state of East Bengal, to take up his post as a missionary for the Baptist Church of Australia. Frank's letters were of special importance as they were her only means of getting to know her intended husband a little better before their marriage.

There had been no intimacy of any sort before he had departed. It was an age when courting couples were rarely left alone during the pre-engagement period. Respectable families insisted on such couples being watched over by a chaperone to ensure that they never found themselves in a position where they could allow sexual desires to lead to heavy petting or, Heaven forbid, intercourse. Furthermore, the watchfulness of families left little opportunity for couples to engage in affectionate and revealing conversations.

There is abundant evidence that sexual intercourse often did take place outside marriage back then, despite the watchfulness of families and chaperones. This caused great upset if a pregnancy were to result, though the scandal could be tempered if the couple agreed to what was crudely called a "shotgun marriage".

In Frank and Florrie's case, opportunities to indulge in any form of sexual activity, no matter how restrained, were non-existent as both the Cox and Paice families were pillars of the Baptist Church and consequently deeply conservative Christians. Florrie's mother, Amelia Cox, was particularly vigilant when it came to ensuring her three daughters reached the marriage altar sexually intact.

The letters that Frank and Florrie exchanged over their two-year engagement were mostly devoted to reporting day-to-day missionary and family events. They were rather formal and lacked expressions of passion. This was not surprising because the letters were often expected to be passed around for family and friends to read. Therefore, any expression of sexual desires, explicit or by innuendo, was carefully avoided.

As Florrie perused Frank's latest letter, she broke off from time to time to admire the engagement ring on her left hand. Though the diamond was quite small she accepted that it fairly reflected the modest funds available to Frank as he carried out his religious studies.

Much as Florrie looked forward to the wedding, she couldn't sometimes wonder if she had been Frank's second choice. Before he had turned his attention to Florrie, he had been attentive towards her cousin, Maude Irene Sutton. Maude, universally known by her nickname Rena, attended the same Baptist Church in the Melbourne suburb of Auburn, as did others in the Cox, Sutton and Paice families.

There were rumours that Frank had considered seeking Rena's hand in marriage, but she was stricken down by tuberculosis and had died aged 22. Her autograph book was later found to include an entry by Frank. It was unusual for a single man to put an entry in a woman's autograph book, unless they were related or very good friends.

Ironically, in view of what was to transpire in the coming years, Frank's entry included this quote by the former British prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli: *Circumstances are beyond the control of man. But his conduct is in his own power.*

Florrie's father, Arthur Cox Senior, had sounded a cautionary note about the engagement, wondering whether Frank's unspoken motive might be an anxiety that he might not find a suitable wife among the missionaries in Bengal. His reservations were swept aside by Amelia who was ecstatically proud to have a daughter marrying a clergyman, a Man of the Cloth, as they were often referred to. A social plus for Amelia was the fact that Frank's elder brother, George, had also just been ordained as a Baptist clergyman and posted to Traralgon in Gippsland, Victoria.

Despite having turned 27, Florrie had not had any serious male friends before. Until Frank Paice came along, her mother had taken the view that the potential suitors who stepped forward were unsuitable and they were effectively sent on their way before any emotional attachment could take place. Consequently, Florrie was not entirely sure what it felt like to be in love. All she knew was that she admired and liked Frank.

Much of the Cox's back garden – or back yard, as most Australians referred to this patch of land – was taken over by vegetable plots and fruit trees, proudly cultivated by Florrie's neatly-bearded father when he was not at work driving one of Melbourne's cable car trams. Today was a day off for Arthur, so he was busy erecting frames for his climbing tomatoes and hoeing weeds around the neat rows of newly-sprouting beans and lettuces he had planted in the Spring. He was a man of action and few words, letting his wife Amelia do most of the talking.

As Arthur busied himself, Amelia appeared at the back door and called to Florrie in a strong Australian accent. "C'mon, or we'll be late for the doctor," she shouted. "Coming, Mother," replied Florrie in a softer accent.

Florrie stepped down from the swing and gently placed Tiddles on the ground. "I'm going to miss you," she murmured. As she crossed the garden into the house, she exchanged a wave and a smile with her father. She was quite tall – taller by about five centimetres than anyone else in the family – with dark hair and deep brown eyes inherited from the paternal side of the family. As was usual, she was wearing a plain cotton dress, ankle-length and high-necked with long sleeves, typical of conservative women at that time.

"Are you sure that I need to do this, Mother?" Florrie asked with a frown. "Yes, of course," replied Amelia, "so let's just get it over with."



Florrie and Amelia left the house and walked briskly down the tree-lined street with its concrete pavement and recently-laid bituminised road. Despite it being sunny with an early summer temperature, both mother and daughter wore a hat, coat and gloves. Amelia regarded a visit to a doctor as just one small social step down from attending a church service, and she always dressed accordingly.

As mother and daughter strode along the empty street, Florrie took Frank's letter from her pocket and began re-reading it. She became so engrossed that she tripped on an unstable paving stone and nearly fell. "Careful, girl," ordered her mother with a frown. Florrie returned the letter to her pocket.

"Well, what does Mr Paice have to say?" Amelia demanded. "Oh, he says everything is progressing well," she replied, "even though there are fears about the war and predictions that it might not be over as quickly as some people expect."

Amelia put her hand out in a gesture that made it clear she wished to see the letter. Florrie shook her head. "It's private, Mother."

Amelia was annoyed. "Is there something the reverend doesn't want me to see?"

“No, of course not,” replied Florrie, “but it’s personal and I don’t see why I always have to show all his letters to you. I’m not a little girl anymore.”

Amelia grunted her displeasure and they continued along the street in sullen silence until arriving outside a large single-storey brick house with a polished copper sign fixed to the iron front gate: *Balwyn Surgery – Dr R. Brownlow & Dr T. Jones*. They went inside and took seats in the gloomy waiting room with its collection of medical posters and notices attached to the walls.

They each chose a magazine from an ageing and tattered assortment on a low wooden table and flicked through them without any genuine interest in the contents. Eventually, Dr Jones emerged from his consulting room. He was tall and in his mid-thirties and greeted them with a soft Welsh accent. “Well, hello ladies! Please come through.”

They followed him into his room furnished with bright striped wallpaper, several straight-backed chairs, a large oak desk and cushioned seat, a shelf stocked with medical books and a metal-framed examination bench covered with a thin mattress encased in oil cloth.

Dr Jones pulled a blue cotton screen around the bench. “Right, Florrie, remove your outer things and pop up on the bench while I check your file. Your mother can take that seat over in the corner.” Amelia sat down, still wearing her hat, coat and gloves.

The doctor took Florrie’s folder from a wooden tray and flicked through its contents while she went behind the screen, removed her gloves, coat, hat, dress and petticoat, and put them neatly on a chair. She sat shyly on the edge of the examination bench, wearing just her sleeveless bodice and bloomers.

Dr Jones pulled back part of the screen at the end of the bench and went behind it, a stethoscope hanging from his neck. “Well, Florrie, I see from your file that it is some time since you have had to call on the services of Dr Brownlow or myself.”

“Yes, doctor. I keep in good health, I’m pleased to say,” she replied with a confident smile.

Though the screen obscured her view, Amelia could hear the conversation. “I can confirm that, Dr Jones,” she called from her seat.

“In that case,” Dr Jones responded, “this shouldn’t take long. As you know, the Mission Society just needs to have a doctor’s confirmation of good health before their people go onto the field.”

“Yes, I understand,” replied Florrie.

“Right, young lady, let’s begin by checking your chest.” Dr Jones slid his stethoscope under Florrie’s bodice. “Breathe in ... breathe out ... breathe in ... breathe out.” Florrie did as she was instructed. The doctor was satisfied by what he could hear. He then repeated the exercise with the stethoscope checking her back. Again, he was satisfied.

“Now let me have a look at your throat.” Florrie opened her mouth wide and was told to say “Aaaah”. He saw nothing to concern him. He instructed her to swing her arms around in a circle, then reach down to her toes, which she managed. “Good,” he said, “no muscular problems.” He next picked up a small rubber hammer which he tapped on her knees. Her lower leg jumped forward as each knee was tapped. Florrie gave a little nervous laugh. “Your reflexes are also fine,” announced Dr Jones cheerfully.

“So, um, is everything in order ‘downstairs’,” he asked, nodding towards Florrie’s crotch.

Florrie was unsure how to react, but before she could, her mother again interjected: “Yes, no problems there, doctor,” she announced.

“So, your ‘monthlies’ are regular, are they?” he asked Florrie.

Florrie was baffled and again her mother hastily interjected: "Dr Jones, we just need to know that my daughter is well enough to go to India."

Dr Jones detected that he had touched on a sensitive area. "Of course, Mrs Cox, but it might be worth me having a little check." He opened a cupboard and took out a white cotton sheet, which he handed to Florrie. "Lie down a moment, put the sheet over you, and slip off your bloomers."

Florrie was acutely embarrassed but did as she was instructed. Amelia, increasingly uncomfortable, leant forward in her chair and could see Dr Jones lift the sheet and gently ease Florrie knees apart, giving him a view of her genitalia. He adopted a reassuring voice. "Right, Florrie, try to relax. It won't take a minute."

Amelia squirmed as she heard Florrie's catch her breath behind the screen. "It's all right, Florrie," Dr Jones said, "you can get dressed now."

Dr Jones pulled the screen back across the end of the bench and went to a sink to wash his hands.

Florrie got dressed, immensely glad the examination was over. Dr Jones hesitantly made notes in Florrie's file. Then, as she emerged from behind the screen, he pointed her to a spare seat and addressed both her and her mother. "Well now, Florrie does seem to be in good health, so I see no serious reason why she isn't well enough to go to India. You're due to leave quite soon, I believe?"

"Yes," replied Florrie, "I'm booked on a steamship leaving for Calcutta in two weeks."

"Oh good," said Dr Jones, "I'm sure you're looking forward to seeing Reverend Paice after such a long time apart. It must be disappointing that you've not had a chance to really get to know each other during your engagement."

"Yes, I suppose," admitted Florrie, "but the church doesn't like unmarried couples being on the field."

"So, when did you get engaged?"

"Just as he was about to leave for India. A few days before."

"And how long had you been courting?"

"About a year, I suppose, but we've known each other as worshippers at our church."

"And I suppose in the time you were courting you were always chaperoned?"

"Well, of course."

"Of course she was chaperoned," said Amelia with a frown. "Why these questions?"

"No particular reason," he replied with a shrug. "I was just interested."

"Well, Dr Jones, I hope you weren't suggesting that we failed in our parental responsibility to be present during all stages of the courtship. I know only too well what can happen when some young couples are left to themselves before a marriage commitment is made with an engagement."

"That's true," admitted the doctor.

"Take the case of that dreadful Jenkins girl at our church. She had relations with some boy she'd known for just a few weeks. Look where that took her. I blame her parents for not keeping a better watch over her."

"Oh well," Dr Jones replied, "these things can happen in the best of families."

“Not in our family, it doesn’t,” she declared with irritation as she and Florrie prepared to leave.

There was one other thing that troubled Amelia: “What did you mean by ‘no serious reason’ why Florrie shouldn’t go to India?”

Dr Jones realised he had returned to a sensitive area and attempted to make light of his comments. “Oh no, nothing to worry about, Mrs Cox, just my careless choice of words. Nothing to worry about at all. I wish Florrie and the Revd Paice a happy and rewarding marriage spreading the word of the Lord.”

“Thank you, Dr Jones,” said Amelia, reassured.

“Yes, thank you,” added Florrie with a relieved smile as she and her mother gathered their things and left the room.

Dr Jones went to his bookshelf, took down a copy of *Gray’s Anatomy* and flicked through to the section on female internal organs.

As the two women emerged into the street from the surgery, Florrie had a question for her mother: “What was that all about?”

“What was what about?”

“You know, Mother, monthlies, or whatever they’re called.”

“Just be glad you don’t have them. It’s not something discussed in polite circles.”

“Why not?”

“It just isn’t,” Amelia asserted. “It just isn’t.”

It was clear the conversation was going nowhere. “You’re very annoying sometimes, Mother,” said Florrie with a growing sense of frustration.



Florrie and Amelia walked home in irritated silence as Dr Jones went into an adjoining room occupied by his grey-haired senior partner, Dr Brownlow.

“Do you have a moment, sir?” enquired Dr Jones of his colleague who was busy sorting files at his desk.

“Certainly, Timothy,” replied Dr Brownlow, pointing to a plain wooden chair beside his desk.

“I’ve just seen the Cox girl, Florrie, and her mother,” Dr Jones explained.

“Oh yes, I was at Florence’s birth, but haven’t seen her for ages.”

“I’ve just given her a medical examination before she sets out for Bengal to marry that missionary chap Paice.”

“Was there a problem?”

“I’m not entirely sure. She was okay with the usual things – you know, lungs, heart etc – but it doesn’t look as though she has ever menstruated.”

“Never?”

“Never! I think it would be impossible,” declared Dr Jones. “She didn’t seem to know what I was talking about, and her mother became agitated when I gently raised the subject.”

“There can be all sorts of reasons why women don’t have periods,” replied Dr Brownlow with a shrug. “Maybe putting her on a tonic could fix it.”

Dr Jones hesitated before continuing. “Um, there’s more. She doesn’t have any pubic or under arm hair, and apart from her smallish breasts, she looks like a pre-pubescent girl. I couldn’t give her a full internal examination, of course, but I did discover that she had a blockage across the opening to her vagina, not like a normal hymen.”

Dr Brownlow frowned: “Did you really need to go that far, Timothy? It’s a bit intrusive. I’m not sure I approve.”

“Well, I was curious why any woman could get to her age without body hair and without knowing about menstruation. It was also interesting that her mother became so agitated. *Gray’s Anatomy* doesn’t tell me anything useful, but I think we should recommend that Florrie sees a gynaecologist before she leaves for India.”

Now it was Dr Brownlow’s turn to become agitated: “For Heaven’s sake! What purpose would that serve? All hell would break loose if something were found to cause the wedding to be postponed or abandoned.”

“Well, I was just thinking about...”

“Forget it, Timothy. Forget it. If she can’t have babies, so be it. Lots of women can’t have babies. They adopt a child, or just go without.”

“Well, I still think...”

“Forget it, Timothy,” Dr Brownlow insisted as he went back to sorting his files, the discussion at an end.