

The loves of a poet

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The Loves of a Poet

The life of *Edward Fitzgerald* (1809—1883), author of the renowned paraphrase of the «Ruby'iyat of Omar Khayyam», was dominated by male friendships. Peter Polnay in a charming biography («Into an old Room», Secker & Warburg, 1956) says: «Friendship for him was akin to love. If love proved to be the greatest achievement of the human heart, then Fitzgerald's was a triumphant heart.» He retained his school-day and university friends — of whom the greatest was the «gay, glib, and facetious» Thackeray, the «Old Thack» who liked calling him «Yedward» and «Teddibus».

After two memorable holidays in the Paris of 1830, 'Yedward' wrote «O Willy be constant to me». Later he wrote «our letters have been so warm that we shall expect each minute to contain a sentence like that.» The future adapter of Omar Khayyam described in a «jingle» the day which turned all his sorrow to glee «when I first saw Willy, and Willy saw me.» Thackeray, «socially not much engaged», replied «Write me a letter soon for the warm weather is coming, and I am growing *romantic*.» To Mrs. Brookfield he acknowledged that he had cherished a «noble affection» for Fitzgerald during twenty years: «when we first became friends I had not learned to love a woman.» Fitzgerald never did, and, in 1852, he burnt most of Thackeray's letters lest they might fall into «unwise hands». Yet he added «as I grow older I don't grow colder» and, from his hermitage, followed the career of England's Poet Laureate to its untimely end.

De Polnay thinks that Fitzgerald was «a homosexual from the purely mental and emotional angle.» The emotions were «rampant in his mind; and all his loves were male». He was decidedly not a soulful effeminate... his pastimes were mainly robust, and so was his sense of humour.»

In 1831 he met William Kenworthy Brown, the second of his three great loves, described as «a charming average person of no intellectual inclinations», but dapper and handsome in his hunting-kit. Auburn-haired and spruce he was a foil to the untidy Fitzgerald. With his beauty and innocent warmth he brought great happiness to a lonely soul. Happily married he died of a hunting accident and, just before the end, murmured «old fellow Fitz».

Fitzgerald himself then married, but his union to «a portly plain-looking woman with masculine features» came to predictable disaster. Once more he sought friendship from a simple Sussex sailor «a man of the finest Saxon type with that complexion which Montaigne calls 'vif, male et flamboyant', blue eyes, and strictly auburn hair which any woman might long to possess.» Furthermore he was «a moving statue of strength and pliancy — like one of the Elgin Marbles in a Guernsey, which is a fine dress for a fine figure.» To these physical charms he added in Fitzgerald's estimation «a large simple soul and dignity of manner: much more the gentleman than gentlefolks — — — very much more ladylike than the ladies.»

Poor Joseph Fletcher, known affectionately as «Posh» could hardly live up to such an ideal. The too-uneven friendship came to grief, and Fitzgerald, finally severed from human ties which had fringed idolatry, prepared himself for death.

Casimir.

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