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Edward FitzGerald and Vegetarianism

By William E. A. Axon, LL.D., F.R.S.L.



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BY WILLIAM E. A. AXON, LL.D., F.R.S.L.

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ONE of the most interesting men of letters of the nineteenth century was Edward FitzGerald, a shy and recluse spirit who avoided the highways of life as pertinaciously as most men seek them. Surely no man conscious of having a message for the world was so careless concerning a hearing. Yet his "Omar Khayyám" has marched from the obscurity of the bookseller's rubbish box to the position of an English classic. He was born in 1809, and died in 1883. There was nothing startling in his life. Born, as he himself sometimes phrased it, with a "silver spoon," he had no hard struggle with fortune. He was an aristocrat by birth, and though the financial embarrassments of his father may have caused keen anxiety and annoyance, they did not involve the penalties of poverty or any severe struggles with adverse fortune. After his Cambridge career was ended, FitzGerald's life was that of an observer of life. He avoided the bustling crowd, literature and meditation filled up the measure of his days. Even his ill-starred marriage with Lucy Barton was but a transitory episode that had no continuing influence on his life as a scholar and thinker.

Edward FitzGerald began to study the vegetarian question about October, 1833. He made extracts from the works of Dr. George Cheyne, who in the 18th century made considerable impression as the advocate of what was often styled the milk diet. FitzGerald also inquired about "Dr. Lambe's book." This was entitled "Reports on the effects of a peculiar regimen on schirrhous tumours and cancerous ulcers" (London, 1809), and was followed by "Additional Reports" (London, 1815). In addition to a non-flesh diet, Lambe advised the use of distilled water in order to avoid the danger from lead in the construction of pumps. His writings attracted attention, and an edition of his writings appeared at New York so late as 1854. A brief but good life of him was written by Edward Hare, one of his medical disciples. FitzGerald writes to W. B. Donne, Oct. 25, 1833:—"I am still determined to give the diet I have proposed a good trial: a year's trial. I agree with you about vegetables and soup: but my diet is chiefly *bread*: which is only a little less nourishing than flesh: and, being compact, and baked and dry, has none of the washy, diluent effects of green vegetables. I scarcely ever touch the latter, but only peas, apples, etc. I have found no benefit yet, except, as I think, in more lightness of spirit: which is a great good." In another letter to Donne, Nov. 19, 1833, he writes:—"The book is a good one, I think, as any book is, that notes down facts alone, especially about health. I wish we had diaries of the lives of half the unknown men

that have lived. Like all other men who have got a theory into their heads, I can only see things in the light of that theory; and whatever is brought to me to convince me to the contrary, is only wrought and tortured to my view by the question. This lasts till a reaction is brought about by some of the usual means: as time and love of novelty, etc. I am still very obstinate, and persist in my practices. I do not think Stark is an instance of vegetable diet: consider how many things he tried grossly animal: lard, and butter, and fat: besides thwarting Nature in every way by eating when he wanted not to eat, and the contrary. Besides the editor says in the preface, that he thinks his death was brought about as much by vexation as by the course of his diet: but I suppose the truth is that vexation could not have had such strong hold except upon a weakened body. However, altogether I do not at all admit Stark to be any instance: to be set up like a scare-crow to frighten us from the corn, etc. Last night I went to hear a man lecture at Owen of Lanark's establishment (where I had never been before), and the subject happened to be about vegetable diet: but it was only the termination of a former lecture, so that I suppose all the good arguments (if there were any) were gone before. Do you know anything of a book by a Dr. Lamb upon this subject? I do not feel it to be disgusting to talk of myself upon this subject, because I think there is great interest in the subject itself. So I shall say that I am just now very well; in fine spirits. I have only eaten meat once for many weeks: and that was at a party where I did not like to be singled out. Neither have I tasted wine, except two or three times. If I fail at last I shall think it a very great bore: but assuredly the first cut of a leg of mutton will be some consolation for my wounded judgement: that first cut is a fine thing. So much for this"

The book to which FitzGerald alludes is "The Works of the late William Stark, M.D.," revised and published from his original MSS., by James Carmichael Smyth, M.D., F.R.S. (London, 1788, 4to). Stark's father was Irish, his mother Scotch, and he was born in Birmingham, and graduated at Leyden. His dietetic experiments began in 1769. He was not a vegetarian, for in his experiments he included fowl, beef, veal, bacon, and when he did exclude flesh-meat, his diet of bread and water, of flour, butter, water and salt was not of a character that any modern food reformer would advise. He died Feb. 23, 1769, at the age of 29. Dr. Stark was not a vegetarian, but he knew of those who lived on a non-flesh diet. Thus he writes:—"Dr. B. Franklin, of Philadelphia, informed me that he himself, when a journeyman printer, lived a fortnight on bread and water, at the rate of 10 lb. of bread per week, and that he found himself stout and hearty with this diet. He likewise told me that he knew a gentleman, who, having been taken by the Barbary corsairs, was employed to work in the quarries, and that the only food allowed him was barley, a certain quantity of which was put into his pockets every morning; water he found at the place of labour; his practice was to eat a little now and then while at work, and having remained many years in slavery, he had acquired so far the habit of



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eating frequently and little at a time, that when he returned home his only food was ginger-bread nuts, which he carried in his pocket, and of which he eat from time to time." Prof. J. E. B. Mayor reminds me of the statement that Dr. John Barwick owed his recovery from consumption to his spare diet in prison. (See the English edition of the life of his brother, Peter Barwick, pp. 126—131.)

"I learned from Dr. Mackenzie that many of the poor people near Inverness, never took any kind of animal food, not even eggs, cheese, butter or milk."

"Mr. Slingsby has lived many many years on bread, milk, and vegetables, without animal food or wine; he has excellent spirits, is very vigorous and has been free from the gout ever since he began this regimen."

"Dr. Knight has lived also many years on a diet strictly vegetable, excepting eggs in puddings, milk with his tea and chocolate, and butter. He finds wine necessary to him. Since he lived in this manner he has been free from gout."

In Wright's "Life of FitzGerald" there is a facsimile of one of the poet's memoranda, relating to the literature of vegetarianism—and its opposite. It reads:—

Doctor Mosset [should be Moffet]. "Health's Improvement," 1746.

Dr. Cheyne's Essay on Health.
Falconer.

Tryon. Miscellanea and Guide to Health.
Arbuthnot's Essays.

Philosoph: Mag: Aug: 1799. About ye inducements to eating human flesh.

Annual Reg: for 1777. Account of Cannibalism at ye Chester Assizes.

Mackenzie's History of Health.

Life of Pythagoras.

Account of La Trappe.

Mitard's Account of a Savage Man.

Gent's Mag: Aug: 1787. A Pythagorean.

Man of Ross.

Mandeville's Fables of ye Bees.

Ritson's Life.

Page's Travels thro' ye World.

Oswald.

FitzGerald's letters contain references to some of these books. He objected to the variable doctrine of Cheyne, who sometimes allowed animal food on alternate days, but he did not himself attain to perfect consistency. He made a year's experiment and was satisfied that the reformed diet was the best, but it is recorded that he took flesh-meat at a party because he "did not like to be singled out." He does not seem to have considered the ethical side at all. "Life through," says Mr.

Thomas Wright, "though never a strict vegetarian, his diet was mainly bread and fruit."*

It would take too long to notice all these references, but some may be named. Loureiro, whose observations on cannibalism were translated for the *Philosophical Journal* (iv. 265), was a Portuguese naturalist of distinction. The "inducements" he classifies as "extreme hunger," as in the case of famine. Some of those who thus became cannibals retain a passion for human flesh. A maid servant of his in India was rescued from a woman who had first tasted a human corpse during a famine. This appetite he classes as the second; the third is that named by Herodotus, where the dead were eaten to do honour to them. The fourth is hatred and revenge. In Cochin China when a rebel was executed the loyal subjects, and especially the king's officials, were expected to cut off and devour a small piece of the traitor. Of these he gives some curious particulars.

The reference to the *Annual Register* will guide to a shocking murder case. A fuller account of this gruesome tragedy appeared in the "*Manchester Guardian Local Notes and Queries*" for May 18, 1875. Sam Thorley, a half-witted man who earned his living by grave-digging and odd jobs at the Congleton slaughter-house, murdered Ann Smith, a ballad-singer, 22 years old, and mutilated her body, November 20, 1776, and took home what was described as "an apron-full of pork." This he had boiled and eat some of it. These remains were identified on medical examination as human flesh. Thorley, who was probably not responsible for his actions, was hung and gibbeted at Boughton, near Chester.

The Pythagorean who is commemorated in the "*Gentleman's Magazine*" (vol. lvii., pt 2, p. 674) was John Williamson of Moffatt, who discovered the chalybeate spring at that place, and who died in 1768 or 1769, aged upwards of 90. He was a vegetarian on humanitarian grounds, and when over 80 is described as "still a tall, robust and rather corpulent man." Like FitzGerald, he had a taste for music; disliked Kirk psalms, and composed philosophical hymns to such tunes as "The Flowers of the Forest," and "Lochaber no more."

Thomas Tryon was a quaint writer of the seventeenth century, Bernard Mandeville a speculative thinker, Ritson a laborious antiquary, and John Oswald, a revolutionary spirit of the eighteenth century. There are notices of them in Mr. Howard Williams's "Ethics of Diet," a scholarly work to be recommended to all who, like FitzGerald, are seeking for information as to the best diet for mankind.

FitzGerald was satisfied that abstinence from flesh was the best course. To his friend, John Allen, he writes (Aug. 29, 1842):—"I occasionally read sentences about the virtues out of this collection of Stobaeus, and look into 'Sartor Resartus,' which has fine things in it: and a little Dante, and a little Shakspeare. But the great secret of all is

*Life i. 115-116

the not eating meat. To that the world must come, I am sure. Only it makes one grasshopper foolish." He makes an occasional jocular reference, as when he observes to Frederic Tennyson, Oct. 10, 1844:—"I say, we shall see you over in England before long: for I rather think you want an Englishman to quarrel with sometimes. I mean quarrel in the sense of a good strenuous difference of opinion, supported on either side by occasional outbursts of spleen. Come and let us try. You used to irritate my vegetable blood sometimes."

Mr. A. C. Benson, his latest biographer, says:—"In the early days of FitzGerald's eremitical life he made experiments in diet, and gradually settled down into vegetarianism. He felt at first a loss of physical power, and he believed he gained in lightness of spirit. He lived practically on bread and fruit, mostly apples and pears—even a turnip—with sometimes cheese or butter, and milk puddings. But he was not a bigoted vegetarian. To avoid an appearance of singularity he would eat [flesh] meat at other houses, and provided it in plenty for his guests. But the only social meal he cared to join in was 'tea, pure and simple, with bread and butter.' He was abstemious, but not a teetotaller; and was a moderate smoker, using clean, clay pipes, which he broke in pieces when he had smoked them once. Like all solitary men, he got more and more attached to his own habits, and it became every year more difficult for him to conform to any other mode of life."*

FitzGerald was not a man of missionary spirit, and, unlike Shelley and Tolstoy, made no contribution to vegetarian literature.

FitzGerald had a talent, perhaps a genius, for friendship, which in the case of the fisherman, Posh, was pushed beyond the limits of wisdom. He was a true friend in the dismal days that saw the wreck of Thackeray's happy married life, "and shared his troubles with a liberal heart." His friendships with William Bodham Donne, with E. B. Cowell, with William Aldis Wright, with Thomas Carlyle are historic. Pleasant glimpses of his friends shine through his letters. Thus he tells us that he and Tennyson were once looking at figures of Dante and Goethe, in a shop in Regent Street. "What is there in old Dante's face that is missing in Goethe's?" asked FitzGerald. Tennyson's answer was: "The Divine." And FitzGerald notes that in his profile, Tennyson had then a remarkable resemblance to the great Florentine. His friendships did not warp the individuality of his judgments, and his affection for Tennyson did not hinder him from thinking and saying that all the poet's verses after 1842, had been better unwritten and unsung. Some of FitzGerald's literary tastes were certainly capricious. It might have been expected that Peacock's novels, with their scholarly flavour and good-tempered mockery, would have suited him, but he could not relish them, nor Gil Blas, nor La Fontaine, nor Manon Lescaut. He found Thackeray too melancholy and saturnine, but he delighted in Scott and Dickens.

* Edward FitzGerald. By A. C. Benson, London: Macmillan, 1905, page 168.

Tennyson has left us a pleasant picture of "Old Fitz":—

Whom yet I see as there you sit
Beneath your sheltering garden-tree,
And while your doves around you flit,
And plant on shoulder, hand and knee,
Or on your head their rosy feet,
As if they knew your diet spares
Whatever moved in that full sheet,
Set down to Peter at his prayers.

This may remind some of the mediæval "Legend of good St. Guthlac."* Tennyson, incited by FitzGerald's example, tried the "table of Pythagoras" for "ten long weeks," and then relinquished vegetarianism. Perhaps we may find an explanation of his failure in the remarkable bill of fare, "milk and meal and grass" set forth in the poem already quoted. "Milk and meal and—grass!" Even poetic license and the exigencies of rhyme will not justify this as a description of vegetarian diet, either of ancient or modern days.

The secret of FitzGerald's style is that of condensation and concentration. His quatrains are a selection and still more a quintessence of Omar Khayyám. If those long years of recluse meditation on the here and hereafter, on the mysteries of life and death, on the meanness and glory of humanity, had not brought a solution of the problems, it had brought at least a frank acceptance of that which is and of that which is to be. The passion for condensation, for the rejection of the redundant, and for the perfection of the essential is seen in many passages of FitzGerald's life and work. "It seems to me strange," FitzGerald writes to Prof. Norton, "that —, —, and — should go on pouring out Poem after Poem, as if such haste could prosper with any but First-rate men: and I suppose they hardly reckon themselves with the very First. I feel sure that Gray's 'Elegy,' pieced and patched together so laboriously, by a Man of almost as little Genius as abundant Taste, will outlive all these hasty Abortions." But his critical sense was not quite satisfied even with the carven beauty of Gray's verse, for he adds, "And yet there are plenty of faults in that 'Elegy,' too, resulting from the very Elaboration which yet makes it live. So I think." FitzGerald's vegetarianism saved him in the most famous passage of the "Rubáiyát" from the grotesqueness of the original:—

If a loaf of wheaten bread be forthcoming,
A gourd of wine and a thigh-bone of mutton,
And then if thou and I be sitting in the wilderness,—
That were a joy not within the power of any Sultan.†

* In the Anglo-Saxon version of Felix of Crowland's life of St. Guthlac, there is record of the visit to him of Wilfrith, and of the friendly companionship of the swallows. See also the present writer's "Ancoats Skylark," page 18.

† See "Edward FitzGerald's Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám, with their original Persian sources, by Edward Heron-Allen (London, 1899), pages 23-24. How far FitzGerald's version is to be taken as a correct presentation of the spirit of Omar Khayyám has been a matter of controversy. The late Dr. William Hastie's criticism may be read in the introduction to his translation of the "Festival of Spring" of Jeláleddin (Glasgow: Maclehose, 1903). Mr. A. Rogers contributed an interesting paper to the "Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature," (1906) in which he gives certain of FitzGerald's quatrains that do not, he thinks, represent the real Omar. The biography of FitzGerald, by Thomas Wright, the fullest that has appeared, is now to be had from the author at Olney. But FitzGerald is his own best interpreter, and his writings, as edited by his friend, Mr. W. Aldis Wright, are the revelation of a fascinating personality. Col. W. F. Prideaux's *Notes for a Bibliography of Edward FitzGerald* (London, 1901), is a mine of valuable information.

How perfect is the artistic effect secured by the casting away of this mutton-bone :—

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread, and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

In 1883 he writes from Woodbridge to his old friend, Samuel Laurence :—“ Here I live still, reading, and being read to, part of my time ; walking abroad three or four times a day, or night, in spite of wakening of Bronchitis, which has lodged like the household “Brownie” within ; pottering about my Garden (as I have been doing) and snipping off dead Roses like Miss Tox ; and now and then a visit to the neighbouring Seaside, and a splash to the Sea on one of the Boats. I never see a new Picture, or hear a note of Music except when I drum out some old Tune in Winter on an Organ, which might almost be carried about the Streets, with a handle to turn, and a Monkey on the top of it. So I go on, living a life far too comfortable, as compared with that of better and wiser men : but ever expecting a reverse in health such as my seventy-five years are subject to.”

This was in what is believed to be the last letter he wrote, and it contained also what in Madame de Sevigné’s phrase he called his respectful protestation to Providence, concerning the tragedies of life which pressed, perhaps, with increasing intensity on the eyes that for more than three score years and ten had looked upon the suffering world. He died June 14, 1883, and on his grave-stone are inscribed the words :—“ It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves.” This expresses more than the endurance of the Stoic ; it is the resignation of the clay in the hands of the Potter. To take with a thankful heart the gifts of the Present, and to trust the Giver of all for what the Future may bring forth—this may not be heroic philosophy, but it served both for Omar Khayyám and for Edward FitzGerald. And those energetic spirits who are disturbed by the long *dolce far niente* years of FitzGerald, may be asked to remember that, although his life was not filled with bustle, his quiet leisurely days added to the great literature of England that which will never pass into silence.

And now that Edward FitzGerald has taken his place among the immortals, vegetarians may repeat with ever increasing satisfaction his emphatic testimony :—

“ *But the great secret of all is the not eating [flesh] meat. To that the world must come, I am sure.*”