THE BOOKSHELF.

(By DELTA.)

FitzGerald's Centenary.

ON March 31, 1909, England was celebrating the centenary of Edward FitzGerald, whose highest, and one might say sole, claim to the recognition of posterity lies in the fact of his being the translator of the "Rubaiyat" of Omar Khayyam. Of Edward FitzGerald it has been said that he became famous by accident. "If ever man was, he was homo unius libra." As was said of Gray, scarcely any writer has come down to posterity with so slender a book under his arm. "Each became famous for a small body of poetical work, slowly and leisurely distilled; each wrote letters full of point and humour and subtle charm, and penetrated with the indefinable flavour of personality; both took the same half-tender, half-regretful, wholly ineffectual view of life, regarding it as a thing aloof and apart, as something boisterous and rude, yet attractive withal, somewhat as a child might peer curiously into the windows of a tavern." But here the resemblance would seem to end. Gray was a serious student and a philosopher, while FitzGerald was essentially a dilettante, and a sentimentalist. Moreover, Gray's work was noted for its evenness, while FitzGerald's work, except for the "Rubaiyat," was notorious for its uneven quality. His translations of Greek drama are said by Mr. A. G. Benson to be "accomplished, sound, conscientious work, almost wholly uninteresting and uninspiring." The same authority declares that it is the custom to praise the elaborate little platonic dialogue, "Euphranor," but adds that with the exception of a few picturesque passages, and one beautiful cadence at the end of the volume, it is languid, desultory, inconclusive, and copied, not from life, but from Plato, and lacking the sparkle and the suggestiveness of the master. At this stage the reader will naturally ask: How can the "Rubaiyat" have secured so great a circle of admirers? To this question we must refer them to the history of the discovery, by Rossetti, of FitzGerald's translation of Omar's beautiful poem. In January, 1858, FitzGerald offered his first rendering of the "Rubaiyat" to "Frazer's Magazine." He waited a year, then, hearing nothing of it, wrote and asked that the MS. be returned; and in February, 1859, having made a few additions to it, he published the whole, as a five shilling book, at his own expense, but it had no sale. Omar had never been popular in Persia, and it looked as though his popularity was the one weakness in him that FitzGerald's wizardry could not amend. He gave away copies to his friends, and presently took the remainder, about two hundred, to Bernard Quaritch, dumped the parcel on his counter and told him he could have them as a gift. Quaritch reduced the price first to half-a-crown, then to a shilling, and finally, as there were no buyers, he put the book outside his shop "in the penny box." Then it began to sell. Happily Rossetti dipped into the penny box and carried a copy away with him. He read it, and was not satisfied till all the men of his circle were reading it also, and sharing his enthusiasm about it. There is a story of how Rossetti and Swinburne spent fourpence on four copies from the penny box, and of how, going again next day and finding that, in consequence of the sudden run on the book, the price had been raised to twopence, Rossetti gravely rebuked the shopman for his exorbitance.

But some other reason than that of Rossetti's advocacy, is needed to acount for the present immense popularity of FitzGerald's translation, and we offer Mr A. S. Benson's explanation. He declares:—"That the poem came at a moment when the old Religious Faiths were losing their first efficacy, and with it forfeiting, not so much their vitality, as the mechanical support which they had afforded to the minds and characters of persons mildly and ingenuously interested in abstract topics. The rich melancholy of "Omar," the sensuousness, wearing so decorous and refined a note of poetical rhetoric, the fatalism which was sentimental rather than pessimistic, the delicate and suggestive handling of those vast problems of destiny and suffering which are so mysteriously attractive as long as the spirit is not brought face to face with their practical issues—all that gives force and weight to the solemn appeal of FitzGerald's sonorous and majestic verse." Then, too, was the charm of the "distance that lends enchantment," and when it became known that the original poem was centuries old, the interest in, and the charm of it, grew by leaps and bounds. But the unique success is due, Mr Benson says, to the fact "that FitzGerald here found a subject exactly and precisely adapted to his own best faculties, and the very limitations of which were his own limitations. The poem is penetrated with the philosophy of the human spirit at bay, when its questionings are unanswered and all refuge has failed. Omar was a lover of beauty, both human and natural; and both Omar and FitzGerald alike, were deeply penetrated by the emotion which Tennyson called the 'Passion of the Past,' the pathos of all sweet things that have an end. All lives are in a certain sense a failure, but on that failure, if it is deliberately faced and not meanly and petulantly resented, is based the vital success of life. FitzGerald's life was one which was a sacrifice to temprament, and it was out of that very sacrifice that the poignancy, the appeal of his poem springs, and it is this that will secure for it—it is hard to believe otherwise—a peculiar and permanent place in the literature of the world." Nevertheless, it was nine years from the date of the first publication before a second edition appeared. There were four editions in all during FitzGerald's life, and he did not put his name to any of them; further, polishing, altering and touching up his verses, seemingly irrespective as to whether the alterations were improvements or otherwise. And this, indeed, must ever remain a matter of opinion. Professor Cowell is said to have turned FitzGerald's attention to the study of Persian. It was Cowell, again, who came upon an Ms. of the "Rubaiyat" of Omar Khayyam at the Bodleian library, and called FitzGerald's attention to it, and presently made a transcript of it for him. Thereafter, for some years, FitzGerald had leisurely busied about his translation. Persian literature is, as he said, amazingly garrulous; Persian verse has a fatal facility in "running on long after thought is winded." But Omar the Tentmaker had a mathematical faculty "which regulated his fancy and condensed his verse to a quality and quantity unknown in Persian, perhaps in Oriental poetry." FitzGerald, himself, had much of this same faculty; his aim was always to abridge, concentrate, distil, and in this, as in all his translations, he allowed himself a large license, was more concerned with the spirit that the mere letter of his original, and set himself to retain whatever was "fine and efficient" in it, and to "sink, reduce, alter and replace," whatever was not.

He laid other Persian poets under contribution for some of the imagery and some of the exquisite fancies that are now credited to Omar; he brought his own vision, his own philosophy of life, to the work, and gave to each stanza as he reminted it the impress of his individuality. Mr. John Payne, the notable scholar, is probably justified in his strong protest that FitzGerald's translation is not a translation at all, but a paraphrase. An assertion that leaves us unmoved, except by a wish that every translator of poetry could be guilty of the same splendid faults."

EDWARD FITZGERALD, THE TRANSLATOR OF OMAR KHAYYAM.

A peep into FitzGerald's private life would show him to possess few of the virtues that pertain to the hero. By Mr. Benson we are told that he had no resolution, no sense of responsibility, and but little dignity. Born in a station of life in which no thought of the morrow was entailed, he allowed himself to drift into great and overpowering affections for incongruous and inexplicable people. His well-known devotion for Posh, with whom at one time he was in partnership as a "herring merchant," shows him to be sounder in heart than in judgment. James Blyth's little book published by John Long tells the story of FitzGerald's infatuation for Posh. Criticising this book, which is entitled "Edward FitzGerald and Posh, Herring Merchants," the Right Hon. Sir W. Brampton Gurdon, K.C.M.G., says the book is chiefly interesting as illustrating FitzGerald's kindness of heart and unworldly simplicity. As a further illustration of his simplicity, we are told that on his being left, at the age of 50, as guardian of the daughter of Bernard Barton, poet-banker, he married her, conceiving it to be his duty. It was not long before each discovered the mistake that had been made, and six months from the date of marriage each had gone his separate way, and though they parted in all kindness, "they scarcely so much as saw each other again."

But if FitzGerald showed little wisdom in the selection of his acquaintances and dependants, he had a genius for making friends, and numbered Thackeray, Monckton Milnes, James Spedding, and, later, Tennyson and Carlyle and other giants of his generation amongst his most intimate friends.

A number of editions, variously edited, have appeared since FitzGerald's death, and new editions are also in preparation; indeed, there seems to be no limit to the cry for any additional crumb of information that will throw any further light upon the late Edward FitzGerald, who lies in a quiet Suffolk churchyard (Boulge) in a grave on which bloom roses that have been raised from seed brought by a pilgrim from Omar's tomb in Naishapur, Persia. And though doubts as to the why and wherefore of life may have assailed him in this life, they are now dispelled by He whom FitzGerald perceived and wrote of in the 70th and 88th stanza of the "Rubaiyat."

"He's a Good Fellow, and 'twill all be well,"

Because

"He knows about it all—He knows—He knows."

REVIEWS.

The Story of Virginia Perfect: Peggy Webling. (London: Methuen's Colonial Library.)

This is a most exhaustively written narrative of the birth and growth of a woman's soul. The principal scenes of the book are laid firstly in Southend, and afterwards on the Bordighera and at Clerkenwell, E.C., where Virginia Perfect lived with her very imperfect husband, Reginald Perfect, a working jeweller. Virginia Perfect, like many young girls, had fallen in love with Love, and had fancied her own particular ideal of that god to be embodied in Reginald Perfect, who, though attractive enough to outward seeming, and fond enough of Virginia, in an animal sort of way, had no more conception of the requirements, the limitations, and the possibilities that lay in the woman he had taken to wife than a Hottentot might be expected to conceive of the heights to which civilisation could reach. In the most delicate manner possible—which, nevertheless, loses none of its telling power—we are told of Virginia Perfect's marriage, her speedy disillusion, temporary despair, the awakening of her soul, and her rehabilitation as a soul made humanly perfect. The awakener of Virginia's soul was one Wilfrid Keble, an artist and an idealist, whose character is very finely drawn by Mrs. Webling.

There was never a time, we think, when so many authors chose for their theme the monstrous iniquity of ill-considered marriage. The eligibility, the advisability, the conventionality, and the expediency of marriage are all taken into minute consideration, but too seldom its suitability, either in temperament, aim, belief, or physique, and the result, as demonstrated daily and hourly in our asylums, hospitals, courts, and morgues is disastrous.

We congratulate Mrs. Webling on a work that shows not only keen sympathetic insight, delicacy of thought, and expression, but a faculty for locating the blight which is destroying all that is best and most sacred in the institution of marriage. Every woman—and, indeed, every man—should read this book, as apart from the interest of its theme, it gives most interesting pictures and details of life—social, domestic, and artistic—in the world's metropolis. Our copy has reached us through the courtesy of Wildman and Arey.

No Wonder.

Mr. Frederick Dey, the creator of Nick Carter, the most famous cheap novel detective in America, is suffering from a nervous breakdown. A Nick Carter novel of 30,000 words is published every week, selling for 2½d. The author creates the plots and writes the stories himself. To allow himself holidays and to keep far enough in advance of publication dates to avoid accidents, he frequently writes three novels a week—an average of nearly 15,000 words a day.