

EXTRACT FROM  
*INFAMOUS ESSEX WOMEN*  
BY DEE GORDON

CHAPTER 32

EDITH THOMPSON 1893 – 1923

Edith was a Christmas day baby, born in Dalston to a working class couple who soon moved to traffic free Manor Park to accommodate the growing family. As an artistic, attractive teenager with impressive auburn locks, she turned quite a few heads, but was pursued most ardently by Percy Thompson – it seems they met around 1909 during their regular commute to their London jobs. The fact that Edith resisted Percy's marriage proposals for some six years (until she was twenty-one) perhaps indicates that she was not entirely sure that she had found the love of her life, although there was no doubt they had become lovers during this long courtship.

Even her wedding day in 1916, overshadowed by the war and Percy's imminent conscription, saw her in doubt as to whether she would actually go through with the wedding, but what she did enjoy was the whole drama of the occasion. Their honeymoon at Southend on Sea seems to have been a success, and Edith was immensely cheered by the fact that Percy was, soon after, honourably discharged as unfit for active service because of a heart condition: – she wouldn't be a war widow. It does seem that the hypochondriac Percy 'suffered' from little other than surplus weight allied to a heavy smoking habit ... and it is also quite likely that he deliberately fooled the army's medical officers.

Even so, after a year living with Edith's parents, the couple moved to the healthier air of Westcliff on Sea. They rented a furnished flat at 25 Retreat Road, near the station, allowing them to commute to jobs in London, where the air raids continued until 1918. Once the end of the war had been announced, they realised how much they missed the social side of London life,

and stayed with Percy's relatives while house-hunting in Ilford. Edith was earning more than Percy as a skilled book-keeper and buyer for a London fashion house, and they could afford to buy their first house – at 41 Kensington Gardens, christened The Retreat after their Westcliff home.

Her meeting with Freddy Bywaters was early in January 1920. He was a self-assured young – just seventeen years old – seaman, acquainted with her brothers. Percy foolishly assumed that Freddy was interested in Edith's sister, Avis, and, even more foolishly, invited him on holiday with the three of them during the hot summer of 1921. This trip to the Isle of Wight almost certainly sewed the seeds of the illicit relationship between Edith and Freddy.

Freddy was invited by Percy to join the Thompsons in their Ilford home as a paying guest, joining tenants already installed. At this point, Freddy became deliberately land-locked. This enabled him to spend more time with Edith, and, finally, Percy became suspicious and the arguments started, eventually driving Freddy from the house.

This did not, of course, resolve the situation. The lovers went on meeting, and Percy became more aggressive in his manner towards his wife. He could not stop her writing letters to Freddy, however, most of which Freddy seemed to have kept, and which proved so significant at their trials.

While Freddy was back at sea, he sent his letters to Edith's work place. She was not always happy with their content, finding them less affectionate than she would have liked, and, perhaps as a direct result, the Thompsons do seem to have resumed a marital sex life. She aborted Percy's child in January 1922, apparently without his knowledge, shortly after Freddy's return from overseas.

Edith and Freddy snatched what time they could while Freddy was on shore leave, but the letters continued even before he had to leave yet again. At her suggestion, Freddy had provided

Edith with quinine and she wrote to him of an attempt to poison Percy by putting the quinine in his tea, telling him that, as this failed, she would try crushing glass in his food instead. Such claims would be dismissed as fantasies in due course, but are undoubtedly incriminating.

Freddy Bywaters' last sailing was in June 1922 when he set off for a fifteen week trip to Australia, much longer than his earlier separations from Edith. During this trip, Edith is alleged to have aborted for a second time, this baby likely to have been Freddy's. The lovers used a Post Office address for their continuing correspondence, Edith being 'Miss Fisher', because Percy had realised that Edith was receiving letters at her work address.

The tenor of the correspondence would suggest, however, that Freddy is cooling, and it could well be that his thoughts were turning back in the direction of her less complicated sister, Avis. Not that he had ever claimed to be totally faithful to Edith, and she had also had her admirers, although it is less likely that she had sexual relationships with them. Even Percy, in defeat, was rumoured to have started looking elsewhere for female companionship.

However, the physical intensity of their re-union in September after such a long spell apart, followed by a visit to Wanstead Park for a passionate sexual coupling, diminished any mutual doubts they may have had. Their letters after this reunion were some of the lengthiest they had yet produced, full of declarations of love.

Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1922 – the fateful day arrived. Around midnight, Edith and Percy were walking home from Ilford station after an evening at the theatre. Freddy was following them, unacknowledged by Edith, perhaps even without her knowledge, until, close to home, Freddy rushed out, knife in hand, pushing Edith aside. After a scuffle, Percy was stabbed a number of times in the body and neck. As Edith ran to his aid, Freddy bolted, undoubtedly recognised by Edith by this point. Neighbours who had heard Edith's screams appeared, and a local Doctor and then an ambulance were called out to what was now a dead body. Edith at this

junction seems to have been incoherent, suggesting that her husband had had some kind of seizure, and making no reference to an assailant.

It was a simple job for the police to recognise that this was a murder they were handling. By lunchtime next day Edith was helping the police with their enquiries at Ilford police station. A few hours later, Freddy, too, was in custody, by which time he would have seen the national newspapers and the story of the ‘murdered shipping clerk’ at Ilford – so he would have known that Percy was dead and not just badly injured. He seemed to come over as insolent in protesting his innocence, but it was again simple for the police to find plenty of evidence against him – his bloodied clothes (at his mother’s home in Upper Norwood) and the scores of letters he had kept there from Edith for a start.

While their initial statements denied all knowledge of murder, Edith, having glimpsed Freddy at the station and assumed he was there to confess, changed her statement to admitting that she saw Freddy attack her husband. Freddy, shown her admission, then changed his statement, too, denying Edith’s involvement in his attack on Percy, and claiming his intent to injure rather than kill.

The press had a field day. Edith was decried as a wicked and debauched adulteress, an abortionist, the “Messalina of Ilford”, corrupting a mere boy and mistreating her inoffensive husband. At the trial, the solicitor-general made a number of references to passages in Edith’s letters which could be interpreted as conspiracy to murder. Edith had also sent Freddy clippings cut from newspapers of cases of poisoning, and there were references to her having tried putting ground glass in her husband’s tea, foiled when Percy had complained of its bitterness. Fantasy? Perhaps. Circumstantial evidence? Certainly. But, for a jury, convincing.

Freddy and Edith, when giving evidence, pointed out Percy’s mistreatment of Edith, and Freddy also stated that Percy had threatened to shoot him. Such a belated plea of self-defence, offset by the tone and content of Edith’s letters, did not wash with the Old Bailey jury who took

just two hours to find them both guilty. It is not difficult to see why, given just one line in what was perhaps her last letter: “You are jealous of him, but I want you to be... be jealous so that you will do something desperate.” In 1922, the death sentence was not unexpected.

Predictably, both appealed. A letter was published from Freddy’s mother, broken-hearted at the prospect of losing her son, following the death of her husband during the Great War, having given “his life for you and yours”. This led to the largest petition ever signed in Great Britain, Freddy seemingly having attracted more sympathy than Edith ... but to no avail. Edith spent her last Christmas – and birthday – in Holloway Prison.

In January 1923, the lovers were separated for ever. Freddy’s hanging at Pentonville was less traumatic than Edith’s at Holloway. She had to be sedated, her hands and ankles tied, and she had to be carried to the site. The hanging of Edith is recorded elsewhere in grim, repugnant detail, leading to the eventual suicide of the executioner, and the retirement of the prison governor and chaplain. Her last words? “I am not guilty.” So, if she knew nothing about Freddy’s attack on Percy, which he maintained to the end was an impulsive action undertaken when he was drunk, was she in fact hung for the immoral life she was perceived to have led?

P.S. a wax reproduction of Edith and Freddy was a popular attraction for some years at Madame Tussaud’s. Her actual remains, along with several others, were removed from Holloway Prison when it was being re-developed in 1971 and she was re-buried in Brookwood Cemetery, Surrey.