On Valentine’s Day we honor Venus, the goddess of love. Of all the goddesses in ancient myth, not one was more beautiful or more elusive:

The West Wind had first seen her in the pearly light of dawn as she rose out of the sea on a cushion of foam. She floated lightly over the gentle waves and was so lovely to behold that the wind almost lost his breath. With soft puffs he blew her to the flowering island of Cythera, where the three Graces welcomed her ashore. The three Graces, goddesses of beauty, became her attendants. They dressed her in shimmering garments, bedecked her with sparkling jewels, and placed her in a golden chariot drawn by white doves. Then they led her to Olympus, where all the gods rejoiced in her beauty, seated her on a golden throne, and made her one of them.¹

Venus had a son named Cupid. The boy had a bow and a quiver filled with arrows of love, and he aimed these arrows at the hearts of his victims. His quiver held arrows of all colors and sizes, representing many types of love. The arrows with which we are concerned are the arrows of filial love. Excerpts from three letters in the Tudor Place Archive share this common bond.

Each letter was written by a career military man related by marriage to the family of Tudor Place. Two of these men married daughters of Thomas (1769-1834) and Martha Custis Peter (1777-1854) and were sons-in-law of the house; the third married the niece of Martha Custis Peter, daughter of her brother George Washington Parke Custis of Arlington House, near Alexandria, Virginia. Each man wore the cloak of military civility with grace and honor, but beneath this outward façade lay hearts smitten with love for their sons.

Commodore Beverley Kennon (1793-1844) was born in Mecklenburg County, Virginia, the son of Elizabeth Beverley Munford Kennon (1762-ca. 1825) and General Richard Kennon (1759-1805) of “Fine Wood.”² General Richard Kennon had served proudly with distinction in the Revolutionary War, where he was a member of General Washington’s staff. General Kennon was Brigadier General of State Troops, County Lieutenant of Mecklenburg County, Speaker of the Senate in 1801, and appointed the first governor of Louisiana by Thomas Jefferson.³

At an early age General Richard Kennon’s son Beverley inherited his father’s desire to serve his country, not on land but on the sea. When he was sixteen years old Beverley Kennon’s sister Sarah Skipworth Kennon (1790-1827) wrote to a friend:

Mama got a letter from Captain Sinclair by the last mail, in which he mentioned that he had solicited and obtained a Midshipman’s commission in the Navy for Beverley and although she is so dreadfully afraid of the water, she is so fully sensible of the advantage it will be to him, as to money matters; she has consented to his accepting it, so you will
soon see the handsome smart young Midshipman, for he has really grown quite handsome, and is almost as tall as George and vastly Genteel (sic).

Beverley Kennon had a distinguished naval career. As his sister had noted, he was appointed a Midshipman in May 1809. He accepted this appointment on August 5, 1809, and was ordered to serve on the U.S.S. Essex in 1810 and in 1811 on the U.S.S. Congress. He was promoted to Lieutenant in 1813. He was commissioned a Commander on April 24, 1826; from 1829-1830 he was on duty at the Naval Rendezvous, Norfolk Station, Virginia. In 1830-1831 he commanded the Sloop Vandalia in the squadron of Commodore Stephen Cassin on the Coast of Brazil; by 1833 he was back on duty in Norfolk at the Navy Yard. He was promoted to Captain on February 9, 1837 and in December 1838 ordered to the U.S. Frigate Macedonian, the Flagship of Commodore William B. Shubrick, in the Gulf of Mexico and West Indies. He served in this capacity until April 1840, when he was granted permission to return to his home in Virginia. On April 27, 1841 Captain Kennon was appointed to command the Navy Yard at Washington, D.C., and in 1843 was commissioned Chief of the Bureau of Construction, Equipment, and Repair. To his credit Commodore Kennon was described as possessing a “... high and delicate sense of honor as well as the most generous affection.”

Beverley Kennon first married Elizabeth Dandridge Claiborne (birth date unknown - 1833) of “Liberty Hall” in 1829. They had two sons: Beverley Kennon, Jr. (1830-1890) and William Dandridge Kennon (1833 - death date not known). Elizabeth Kennon died in 1833.

Several years later Commodore Kennon met Britannia Wellington Peter (1815-1911) at a reception at the Octagon in Washington, D.C., in honor of the marriage of Miss Ann Ogle Tayloe and Henry H. Lewis, U.S.N., in 1841. A year later the Commodore and Britannia Peter were married in the Drawing Room at Tudor Place, the home of Britannia Peter’s family, on December 8, 1842. The couple resided at the Washington Navy Yard, where Kennon was Chief of the Bureau of Construction. Commodore Kennon held the rank of Post Captain, the highest rank in the Navy at the time, but by military courtesy was entitled to be called Commodore. Their daughter, Martha Custis Kennon, was born in 1843.

On August 25, 1843, Commodore Kennon wrote a letter to his son Beverley Kennon, Jr., in response to a request from the boy. This letter was addressed: “Master Beverley Kennon/ not yet of the Navy/ but to be I hope/ of the Navy”:

My dear Son
I have just recd. your letter of this date – and assure you it gives me pride to find my Son who is only thirteen years old can write so sensible a letter – and express himself in it so clearly & so well every way –
I have no doubt when you go in the Navy you will do all you promise - & behave well - & be obedient to your Superiors and respectful to all above you & below you as well as kind & agreeable to your companions & brother middys (sic) – and avoid quarrelling and all that – As for drinking – that is so great a vice You will never I am sure fall so low as to be a drunkard – it would kill me to see You a drunkard – or Dan – Yes, I should die of a broken heart –
You beg me to let you enter the Navy at Fifteen – on that point my boy let me judge for You – I am the best judge of what You ought to do - & I will do that which will be best for You – leave the time to me – Sixteen is soon enough – I entered the Navy at Sixteen years of age - & I was a Lieutenant at Twenty!- It is bad & injurious to enter the Navy too young –

You have indeed my darling Bev studied well - & tried hard & done Yourself credit in your school – for this your Father thanks you & is proud – Continue to do so my Son – I will love You more & more – and be made happier & happier by your good behaviour (sic) –

May God bless You my noble boy - & make you an honour (sic) to the Navy - & to me - & to your country

Sincerely prays
Your devoted Father
B. Kennon

In February 1844, Beverley Kennon, Jr., received a gift from his father: The Book of the Navy; Comprising A General History of The American Marine; and Particular Accounts of All the Most Celebrated Naval Battles. The book is inscribed: “For my Son Beverley Kennon/from his/ affectionate Mother & Father/ Feb. 15th 1844.” Beverly Kennon, Jr., noted, “This was the last gift to me/ from father as he died two/ weeks after.” The Commodore was killed when a large gun [cannon] exploded aboard the U.S.S. Princeton in the Potomac River. Secretary of State Abel P. Upshur (1790-1844), Secretary of the Navy Thomas W. Gilmore (1802-1844), previous Secretary of the Navy David Henshaw (1791-1852), ex-senator of New York David Gardiner (1784-1844), and the former United States Minister to the Netherlands Virgil Maxcy (1784-1844), were also killed at the explosion. A Georgetown resident observed, “Never . . . since we were a nation, has death in the same space of time been so busy in high places . . .”

After her husband’s death Britannia Peter Kennon and her daughter returned to Tudor Place to live, where Britannia continued to shepherd the lives of Beverley, Jr., and William Dandridge Kennon. According to his father’s wishes, Beverley Kennon, Jr., was appointed a Midshipman in the U.S. Navy on August 22, 1846, and passed Midshipman June 8, 1852. He was commissioned Master in 1855 and promptly promoted to Lieutenant that same year. As a Virginian, his sympathy lay with the Confederate States of America, and he resigned from the United States Navy on April 23, 1861.

Like Commodore Beverley Kennon, Robert Edward Lee (1807-1870) was a Virginian of a distinguished military family. He was born at Stratford Hall, Westmoreland County, Virginia, on January 19, 1807. He was the son of Henry [Light Horse Harry] Lee (1756-1818), who had served with great honor in the Revolutionary War as Captain of the Virginia Dragoons in 1776; in 1778 he was promoted to the rank of major Commandant, and his battalion was designated Lee’s Partisan Corps. Henry Lee received the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in 1780, and served to the close of the war. It has been said, “‘Light Horse Harry’ Lee passed on to his youngest son his fine physique, his aptitude for military affairs, his great intelligence, his daring, his sense of public duty, and the charm of manner that made him so readily a captain.”
Robert Edward Lee entered the United States Military Academy in July 1825, and graduated in 1829 second in his class, where he was breveted Second Lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers. He served as Assistant Engineer in the construction of Forts Monroe and Calhoun for the defense of Hampton Roads, Virginia, 1829-1834, and as Assistant to the Chief Engineer at Washington, D.C., 1834-1837. He was Assistant Astronomer for establishing the boundary between Ohio and Michigan in 1835, and Superintending Engineer of the improvement of St. Louis, Missouri, Harbor and of the Missouri and Upper and Lower Mississippi Rivers and general charge of the improvement of the Ohio River below Louisville, Kentucky, 1837-1841. He was named Captain of Engineers on July 7, 1838. He oversaw the construction and repairs of the defenses at the Narrows, the entrance to New York Harbor 1841-1846.

Lee was a member of the Board of Visitors to the Military Academy in 1844. He then served as Assistant to the Chief Engineer at Washington, D.C., and as a member of the Board of Engineers for Atlantic Coast Defenses from September 1845 to March 1848. He participated in the Mexican War with great distinction, being engaged as Chief Engineer of the column commanded by Brigadier-General John Ellis Wool, and was present at the Siege of Vera Cruz, and the battles of Cerro Gordo, Contreras, Coyoacan, Molino del Rey, the storming of Chapultepec, and the capture of Mexico City. He was breveted Colonel on September 13, 1847 for gallant and meritorious conduct in the battle of Chapultepec. In 1848 he returned to the Engineer Bureau at Washington, D.C., and from 1848 to 1852 was Superintending Engineer of the construction of Fort Carroll, Patapsco River, Maryland.17

In 1831 he married Mary Anna Randolph Custis (1808–1873), the daughter of George Washington Parke Custis (1781-1857) of Arlington House, near Alexandria, Virginia, and Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis (1788-1853). George Washington Parke Custis was the grandson of Martha Custis Washington (1731-1802) and brother of Martha Parke Custis Peter (1777-1854) of Tudor Place. Martha and Thomas Peter’s daughter Britannia was a bridesmaid at Lee’s wedding.18 While Lee served his country, his growing family resided at Arlington under the aegis of his father-in-law. When Lee was assigned the construction of a fort later named Fort Carroll at Sollers’ Point Flats, located below Baltimore in the Patapsco River, his wife and family joined him there.19

In 1850 Lee’s oldest son George Washington Custis Lee (1832-1913) received an at-large appointment from President Zachery Taylor to the United States Military Academy; he had decided to follow his father’s footsteps. Lee had intended to escort his son to enter West Point with his friend Dr. Woods, but an indisposition of the Doctor’s son made this impossible, so Lee and his son Custis made the journey north unaccompanied. Lee described his trip and his painful separation from his son to his mother-in-law Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis (1788–1853) in a letter dated June 22, 1850, upon his return to Baltimore:

... After waiting ten days & having been disappd. (sic) on Several occasions appointed by the Dr. to go on, I one morn. (sic) while dressing determined to accompany him myself, & at 9 A.M. we were in the Cars on our way. I took great pleasure in going on with him, as it seemed to be a great Comfort to him to have me along, & lightened Considerably the pain of leaving home. That night we reached New York & next morn. (sic) after an early breakfast went up to the Point. I had offered to Spend a day in N.Y. if
Custis desired it, which would have enabled him to have visited the Narrows, but he preferred going on, & on reaching the Point I proposed to him not to report for duty till the afternoon, that he might walk about & look on, but he said he would rather go & have it over at once. After installing him however, I got permission for him to return to the Hotel at 1 P.M. & remain with me till 5 o’clock which he did. The next morn. (sic) I went over to the Barrack to take leave of him. He had just returned from his first lesson in Squad drill. Said he had Slept (sic) well during the night etc., but when I bid him adieu, he seemed for the first time to realize the full force of his Separation from all of us, & the Convulsion of his Countenance indicated the grief at his heart. I returned to N-Y & arrived here the next day.20

In 1852 Robert E. Lee wrote to his son: “You must press forward in your studies. . . You must be No. 1. It is a fine number. Easily found and remembered. Simple and unique. Jump to it fellow . . .”21 According to his father’s wishes and guidance, George Washington Custis Lee graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1854 first in his class with no demerits on his record. Like his father before him, Custis Lee was breveted a Second Lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers. He served as Assistant Engineer in the construction of Fort Clinch, Amelia Island, Florida, and in building Forts Pulaski and Jackson in Georgia in 1856. He received the rank of Second Lieutenant in 1855, and was assigned the improvement of the Savannah River in 1856. From 1856-1857 he assisted in building the defenses of Fort Point, San Francisco, and then was Assistant in the Engineer Bureau at Washington, D.C. He was promoted to First Lieutenant in 1859, and acted as Superintending Engineer of Fort Washington on the Potomac River, Maryland. Custis Lee’s sympathy lay with his home state of Virginia, and he resigned his commission in the United States Army on May 2, 1861.22

Unlike Beverley Kennon and Robert E. Lee, William George Williams (1801-1846) was not connected to a distinguished military family in Virginia. He was born in Philadelphia to William Williams (1771-1845), an Englishman, and Sarah Jane Wingfield (birth date unknown-ca. 1801) of Georgia. Through his own efforts and perseverance, Williams was appointed to the United States Military Academy as a cadet from South Carolina in 1820. Under unusual circumstances he was permitted to study abroad to administer to his father’s business activities in France and England. He graduated from the Military Academy with the Class of 1824 as Second Lieutenant in the 7th Infantry. He served on Topographical Duty in Washington, D.C., where he worked under the tutelage of Colonel Isaac Roberdeau from July 24, 1824 to January 28, 1834. He participated in the survey of a site for Pea Patch Island in the Delaware River in 1834 and surveyed for a ship canal around the Falls of Niagara, New York, from 1835-1836 and on Lake Champlain, New York, in 1835. He surveyed for a projected railroad between Charleston, South Carolina, and Cincinnati, Ohio. From 1837-1838 he ran a military reconnaissance of the Cherokee Country [Trail of Tears]. Williams was breveted Captain of the Topographical Engineers in 1834 and promoted to Captain in 1838. He was placed in charge of the construction of harbor works on Lake Erie from 1838-1843, and then served as Superintendent of the Survey of Northwestern Lakes from 1841-1846 and established the boundary between the states of Michigan and Wisconsin. Upon request in 1846 he was Chief Topographical Engineer of the army commanded by Major-General Zachery Taylor in the Mexican War.23
Early in his career while on Topographical duty in Washington, D.C., he met and befriended George Washington Peter (1801-1877), the son of Thomas and Martha Custis Peter of Tudor Place in Georgetown, The Federal City. Peter’s family hosted La Fayette at a dinner at their home during La Fayette’s grand tour of the United States in October 1824. There Williams met and fell in love with America Pinckney Peter (1803-1842), a younger sister of George Washington Peter. They married in 1826. His growing family joined him in Buffalo, but his wife died there in 1842. His eldest son, Laurence [Lo] Abert Williams (1832-1879), remained with him to attend school, but his three daughters and youngest son William [Bunny] Orton Williams (1842-1863) were sent to Tudor Place to be raised by his wife’s mother and sister. The following is an excerpt from a letter he wrote to his daughters at Tudor Place on September 5, 1846, in which he gave them news of the army that would not cause them alarm nor disclose his dangerous position. As if he had had a premonition of what lay before him, he began a litany of requests as his bright mood failed him:

. . . . the morning star (Venus) is about twenty degrees above the horizon . . . I think I must say a word . . . The mules are packing, the wagons loading, and I shall have to strike my tent so that I can not (sic) write you a longer letter . . . I wish you would make my most affectionate remembrances to your Aunt [Mary] Custis & Uncle [George Washington Parke] Custis and also remember me when you write to yr. friends in the country - & kind remembrances to Mrs. [Margaret] Dick. What shall I say to Master Bun [William Orton Williams]. Tell him that I have got two horses one a Bay the other a Roan. One of them is a Spanish horse and he is named *Las Medias* – which means in the vernacular *stockings* because all four legs are white just as far as the knee. The other is a tall fellow with a long tail and there is room behind for my own darling Bun. God bless his dear little heart-

Remember me most affectionately to Lo [Laurence Abert Williams] and say how much I rejoice at his success in the mathematics. I hope the dear boy will improve in everything & be a subject of pride to his family. . . . The Reveille is beating so that I must go . . . God bless you my own dear children ever affect. yr. father WGW²⁴

Captain Williams was mortally wounded on September 21, 1846 at the storming of Monterrey, Mexico, and died two days later.

Following in his father’s footsteps, Captain William’s oldest son Laurence Abert Williams graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1852, and was appointed Brevet Second Lieutenant in the 7th Infantry. He served in garrison at Newport Barracks, Kentucky, in 1852, and on frontier duty at Fort Gibson, Oklahoma, in 1853-1854 and at Fort Steilacoom in Washington in 1855. He was in garrison at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, and then on Recruiting Service 1855-1856. He was promoted to Second Lieutenant 10th Infantry in 1855 and to First Lieutenant 10th Infantry in 1856. He served frontier duty at Fort Ridgely, Minnesota, and on the Utah Expedition 1857-1860. He was Aide to Bvt. General A.S. Johnston 1858-1860 and Acting Assistant Aide to the General to the Department of Utah February 29-August 21, 1860.
He was promoted to Captain of the 10th Infantry in July 1861. Although his family’s roots were southern, Laurence Williams fought with the Union as Aide-de-Camp to General George B. McClellan in 1861, and was designated Major in the 6th Cavalry on September 7, 1861.25

William Orton Williams, the Captain’s second son, wished to enter the United States Military Academy at West Point and pursue a military career as his father and brother had done, but was denied entrance as the school’s policy was to admit only one son of each graduate. Thereafter Orton Williams attended various schools in Alexandria, Virginia, including Episcopal High School and Benjamin Hallowell’s Alexandria Boarding School. Orton Williams applied for a position in the United States Coast Survey in 1858 without success; he then joined a survey to Minnesota to map the Great Lakes under the auspices of Captain George Meade of the Topographical Engineers, who had served under Orton Williams’ father in the Mexican War. After this experience Orton Williams served briefly in the Coast Survey. In March 1861 he finally achieved his original objective and was appointed a second Lieutenant in Robert E. Lee’s regiment, assigned as an aide to General Winfield Scott. He was promoted to first Lieutenant in April 1861, but resigned his commission in the United States Army in June of that year to take up the Confederate cause in the war that divided many families.26

On this day we rescue these letters from the stream of time. We hold them momentarily up to the sunlight, and learn that life long ago was different yet the same. Our journey is not always a happy one, for we stumble over words that no longer exist, customs that are no longer kept, and names of people no longer known. And yet we persist in doing so because time past is always a happy one, for we stumble over words that no longer exist, customs that are no longer kept, and names of people no longer known. As we read these letters we become time travelers caught in the vortex of what was and what was to be. We follow sand paths to a shifting sea, for have we not all written, or wished that we had written, one letter of love by the light of Venus, the Morning Star?

3 Ibid.
7 Slaughter, 185.
8 Tudor Place Historic House and Garden Archive, Papers of Armistead Peter, Jr., MS 14, Box 69, F 25, Britannia’s Reminiscences. See Wesley E. Pippinger, District of Columbia Marriage Licenses Register 1, 1811-1858 (Westminster, Maryland: Willow Bend Books, 2000, third edition), 332, 580: Pippinger records November 30, 1841,
as the date on which Henry Howell Lewis (1817-1893) and Anne Ogle Tayloe (1814-1876) obtained their marriage license.

9 *Britannia’s Reminiscences.*

10 Tudor Place Historic House & Garden Archive, Papers of Commodore Beverley Kennon, MS 9, Box 1, F 1, Commodore Kennon, Navy Dept., to Beverley Kennon, August 25, 1843.

11 John Frost, *The Book of the Navy; Comprising A General History of The American Marine; and Particular Accounts of All The Most Celebrated Naval Battles* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1842). Years later this book was presented by Beverley Kennon, Jr.’s, half-sister, Martha Custis Kennon, to her son named for her half-brother, Beverley Kennon Peter (1872-1922). Beverley Kennon, Jr., and his half-sister Martha Custis Kennon evidently had a close relationship; a book in the collection is inscribed, “To dear little Martha/ from her devoted brother/Bev/Sept 6th/51. See, [No author listed] The Book of Birds; Intended for the Amusement and Instruction of Young People (Philadelphia and New York: George S. Appleton & Co., 1850).

12 Slaughter, 185.

13 For a description of this event, see Crawford Family Papers, Box 1, F 53, Georgetown University Library Special Collections Research Center, Washington, D.C. Eliza Crawford Davidson to My dear Joseph, *Everymay,* March 3, 1844. Eliza Crawford Davidson (dates unknown) was the wife of Lewis Grant Davidson (1779-1832), who became the second owner of *Everymay* in Georgetown, when he inherited the property from his uncle Samuel Davidson. Eliza Crawford Davidson may have been a daughter of Richard R. Crawford, mayor of Georgetown 1857-1861. Joseph, the recipient of the letter, has not been identified.


18 Freeman, I, 105. Freeman notes, “The other bridesmaid was Mary’s cousin, Britannia Peter, of Georgetown across the Potomac . . . her gallant was Thomas Turner, cousin of the groom’s on his mother’s side.” See Mary L. Mackall, Stevan F. Meserve, and Anne Mackall Sasscer, Eds., *In the Shadow of the Enemy: The Civil War Journal of Ida Powell Dulany.* Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 2009, 2010), xviii-xix, fn 11. Macall, Meserve, and Sasscer identify Thomas Turner (1807-1881) as one of Lee’s closest childhood companions. He entered the navy and eventually supported the Union cause. He was retired at the end of the Civil War as a Rear Admiral. For more information on Thomas Turner, see: William B. Cogar, *Dictionary of Admirals of the U.S. Navy.* Volume I, 1862-1900 (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1989), 198.

19 Freeman, I, 308-309. Freeman states that Fort Carroll was named in honor of Charles Carroll, last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence, who died at the age of ninety-five in his native state of Maryland.

20 Tudor Place Historic House & Garden Archive, Papers of Custis-Lee Family, MS 5, Box 1, F 32, Captain Robert Edward Lee, Baltimore, to Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis, Arlington, near/Alexandria/Virginia/June 22, 1850.

21 Freeman, I, 312.

22 Cullum, II, 572; Heitman, 624.

23 Cullum, I, 330-331; Heitman, 1043.

24 Tudor Place Historic House & Garden Archive, Papers of Martha Custis Williams, MS 6, Box 2, F 21, Captain William George Williams to Martha Custis Williams, September 5, [1846].

25 Cullum, II, 506; Heitman, 1041.

Bibliography


Archives and Special Collections
Georgetown University Library Special Collections Research Center, Washington, District of Columbia

Naval History and Heritage Command’s Archives, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, District of Columbia

Tudor Place Historic House & Garden Archive, Washington, District of Columbia
She is in love with Jack Worthing, whose name she believes to be Ernest. Although she moves in the same conventional snobbish social world as her mother, her outlook is whimsical and rebellious. Determined to marry the man of her choice, she is pleased to discover that Worthing, once his parentage is revealed, can offer her not only the right name and devotion but also family connections and wealth. 

Ask a Question. Related Questions and Answers for Characters in The Importance of Being Earnest. What is the meaning of the title The Importance of Being Earnest? The title of Oscar Wilde's most successful play The Importance of Being Earnest features a salient pun in the form of the word "earnest", which means "honest", and "truthful" and the name "Ernest". Forgiveness is an ingredient of love as well. Both women forgive the men for their earlier deceptions when they discover the good intentions behind their crimes. It seems that the definition of love in this play is not so much an unconditional and self-sacrificing love, but a general attitude of good intentions, admiration, and honest affection. Questions About Love. How do each of our four main characters define love? The concept of love in Earnest is never challenged; each of the four main characters complacently adores his or her lover purely for their looks or their name and never questions their character. The integrity of each character’s love in Earnest is challenged both by the standards of high society and by the characters’ own dishonesty and all of them pass the test. BACK.