

## Omar Khayyam

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[Page 18] MENTION has been made, in the preceding paper, of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*; and it has been thought that a sketch — necessarily very brief, of course — of the Astronomer-Poet's life, together with one or two further quotations from *The Rubáiyát* may prove not uninteresting, and serve as an appropriate *pendant* to the stanzas already cited.

To the genius of Fitzgerald it is that we owe the masterly rendering into English verse of these jewels of Eastern mystic thought. With regard to their original form, he tells us in the preface to his translation of *The Rubáiyát* (from which I glean the information which follows), that they are independent stanzas, consisting each of four lines of equal, though varied, prosody; sometimes *all* rhyming, but oftener the third line a blank. This, it will be noticed, is the method adhered to by Fitzgerald in the translation, with such singularly graceful effect.

Omar Khayyám, then, was born in the latter half of our eleventh, and died within the first quarter of our twelfth century. An old school friend, one Nizám-ul-Mulk — who rose to considerable eminence as Vizyr to Alp Arslan the son, and Malik Shah the grandson, of Toghrul Beg the Tartar — greatly assisted Omar, in their after lives, by granting him a yearly pension of 1,200 mithkáls of gold from the treasury of Naishápur, where he lived; and where he died, in the year A.D. 1123.

Under the Sultan Malik Shah, Omar obtained great praise for his proficiency in science, and was loaded with kingly favours; and when Malik Shah determined to reform the calendar, Omar was one of the eight learned men employed upon the work. The result was the Jaláli era (so called from Jalal-u-din, one of the king's names) so highly commended by Gibbon the historian, who says of it, that "this computation of time surpasses the Julian, and approaches the accuracy of the Gregorian style".

Omar is, moreover, the author of some astronomical tables (entitled *Ziji-Maliksháhi*); and curiously enough, the French only lately have republished and translated an Arabic treatise of his on algebra.

Omar's poetical name — Khayyám — signifies a tent-maker, and he [Page 19] is said to have at one time exercised that trade; perhaps before the generosity of his friend, Nizám-ul-Mulk, raised him to independence. For some reason, says Fitzgerald, Omar was never popular in his own country, and has therefore been but scantily translated abroad; certain it is that although the Sultan "shower'd favours upon him". His Epicurean audacity of thought and speech caused him to be regarded askance in his own time and country.

The whole of the *Rubáiyát* breathes forth a spirit of subtle, almost nineteenth-century pessimism; the poem — which consists of a hundred and one stanzas — might almost indeed be a product of our own times, instead of dating back to the eleventh century. Omar's wealth of oriental imagery, however, and especially the symbolism which he uses, and the mystic allusions he makes, mark him as a genuine Oriental, and Mystic poet. Take, for instance, the following, which will be recognized by students of Theosophy as containing allusions of a most Occult character:

"Up from Earth's Centre through the Seventh Gate  
I rose, and on the Throne of Saturn sate,  
And many a knot unravel'd by the Road;  
But not the Master-knot of Human Fate.

"There was the Door to which I found no Key;  
There was the Veil through which I might not see:  
Some little talk awhile of ME and THEE  
There was — and then no more of THEE and ME.

"Then of the THEE IN ME who works behind  
The Veil, I lifted up my hands to find  
A Lamp amid the Darkness; and I heard,  
As from Without — 'THE ME WITHIN THEE BLIND!' "

Again, the frequent comparison of the body to a temple, a tent, *etc.*, which Omar makes, strikes a distinctly mystic note; as in the following lines, where he is speaking of the body, which he terms "Dust", and a "clay carcass":—

“ ‘Tis but a Tent where takes his one day's rest  
A Sultán, to the realm of Death addrest;  
The Sultán rises, and the dark Ferrásh  
Strikes, and prepares it for another Guest.

"Would you that spangle of Existence spend  
About THE SECRET — quick about it, Friend!  
A Hair perhaps divides the False and True —  
And upon what, prithee, does life depend ?

"A Hair perhaps divides the False and True;  
Yes; and a single Alif were the clue —  
Could you but find it — to the Treasure-house,  
And peradventure to THE MASTER too;

"Whose secret Presence, through Creation's veins

Running Quicksilver-like eludes your pains;  
 Taking all shapes from Máh to Máhi; and  
 They change and perish all — but He remains;

"A moment guess'd — then back behind the Fold  
 Immerst of Darkness round the Drama roll'd  
 Which, for the Pastime of Eternity,  
 He doth Himself contrive, enact, behold."

[Page 20] How forcibly these last lines recall the words of Krishna to Arjuna: — "I establish this whole universe with a single portion of myself and remain separate". "Even though myself unborn, of changeless essence, and the lord of all existence, yet in presiding over nature — which is mine — I am born but through my own *maya*" (illusion). [*Bhagavad Gitâ*. W. Q. Judge's translator]

Following immediately upon the stanzas which I quote in the paper on *Heaven and Hell*, come these most remarkable and significant verses: —

"We are no other than a moving row  
 Of magic Shadow-shapes that come and go  
 Round with the Sun-illumin'd Lantern held  
 In Midnight by the Master of the Show;

.....  
 "The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,  
 Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit  
 Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,  
 Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

.....  
 "With Earth's first Clay They did the Last Man knead,  
 And there of the Last Harvest sow'd the Seed:  
 And the first morning of Creation wrote  
 What the Last Dawn of Reckoning shall read."

Here we have distinct allusions both to Karmic law, and to the non-reality of Time, — which of course exists only in our consciousness — nay, indeed, to the *Mayavic* character of the entire manifested universe, which (as Omar puts it of man) is naught but a series of "magic Shadow-shapes", thrown onto the screen of time — verily Occultism pure and simple.

Much more of this wonderful *Rubáiyát* might be cited did but space permit, but enough has been given to prove that pearls of mystic wisdom are to be found therein, pearls which it would well repay the student to find for himself.