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UMAR KHAYAM

by

Bulchand Dayaram

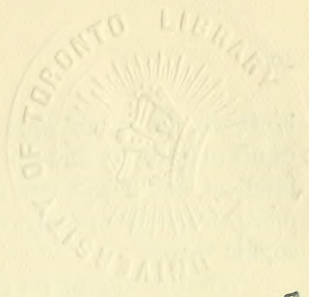


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From East to West, March 1905

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UMAR KHAYAM.

UMAR KHAYAM, or to call him by his proper name, Ghiasal-din Abdul Fattah Omar bin Ibrahim, is one of the most remarkable and distinguished of the Persian poets. His name has been rendered immortal by Edward Fitzgerald, the close and life-long friend of Tennyson. Of all the Persian poets next perhaps to Hafiz and Sadi, he commands the largest number of admirers in Europe and America. Besides Fitzgerald, Whinfield, Justin M'Carthy, John Payne, Mrs. Cadell and others have rendered his poetry into English verse, and many of his quatrains have been translated into French by Nicolas. The "tent-maker" poet, or Khayam, is a name quite familiar to European ears. Whatever is therefore said or written about him is likely to prove of some interest to a large circle of cultured and literary men, not only in Asia, but in the more highly intellectual and scientific regions of the West.

Undoubtedly Fitzgerald's "Omar," "that large infidel," has been a name to conjure with and exercises a potent spell on Asiatic and European imagination. In London, in Paris, in New York, in Chicago, and other advanced centres of thought and literary pursuit, Umar has found warm and devoted students of his poetry and enthusiastic and charmed followers of his creed. The Umar Khayam clubs and coteries in aristocratic London alone are a singular proof of the influence exercised by this eastern poet and philosopher.

It was Fitzgerald who first revealed the subtle and delicate charm of his poetry in the middle of the last century to the European gaze. His edition of Umar Khayam's quatrains is a real masterpiece which, to quote Lord Tennyson, "drew full-handed plaudits from our best in modern letters" and was a "planet equal to the sun which cast it." Since then the interest in Umar Khayam's poetry has remained unabated among western readers, and the influence of his teaching continues steadily to increase. In Asia, the home of eastern poetry, Umar Khayam counts his readers and admirers by the thousand. Fitzgerald,

however, failed to appreciate the winsome eclecticism and splendour of his philosophy and the breadth and magnificence of his cultivated intellect, and it was left to Nicolas, Cowell and other later writers to more properly appreciate and expound Umar's religious and philosophic views.

What is the secret of the influence and what has been the history and life-work of this oriental writer who has so captivated even occidental imagination, it may be worth while to state briefly here. Umar bin Ibrahim was an inhabitant of Nishapur in Khorasan, the nursery of so many Central Asian poets, and was born in the beginning of the eleventh century according to the Christian era, or the end of the fifth century according to the Mahomedan or Hejira era. He lived up to a good old age and died in the beginning of the twelfth century A. D. or about the year 1225. The exact year of his birth and death cannot be ascertained, as is often the case regarding oriental writers and kings and heroes, the couplets on their tombstones in which they love to enshrine these dates mystifying rather than enlightening the antiquarian. His early life was a most uneventful one and he did not rise to any high rank or position in life. His tutor was Iman Muwafik, a famous teacher of Nishapur, nay, even of the whole of Khorasan. His fellow students were Hussan-bin-Sabah and Abu-ul-Kasim, both of whom subsequently attained a very high rank at an oriental court, the latter becoming the Grand Vizier of Sultan Alp-Arslan, and the former reaching a somewhat lower but still a high position at the same court, though subsequently his career became a most unfortunate one and he acquired an unenviable notoriety as the head or founder of the sect of Ismailis or Assassins, and was known as the terrible "Man of the Mountain." Umar Khayam eschewed worldly pomp and power and preferred to lead a retired and secluded life—a life of ease with dignity, and his former friend Abu-ul-Kasim, known as the Nizam-ul-Mulk, helped him to his heart's wish, by conferring on him a pension or annuity of twelve hundred gold coins or "mishkals." He lived and died at Nishapur, studying mathematics and science, and writing those little Persian gems in hundreds—his "rubayats," which are the wonder and admiration of the east and the west. Though thus living a life of leisured comfort, he was by no means idle or resting his mind in slothful ease. He worked and warred, in his own line, as much as men who work and struggle in the more active and combative spheres of life, warred with his own soul and warred with all the powers of evil in the world, its forms and shadows, the lying and deceit, the cant and cruelty,

the fraud and violence of earthly priests and preachers. There was a strong thread of militancy and combativeness in the warp of his soul in spite of his retiring disposition, and there was a certain amount of robustness and toughness in his nature. He looked at things straight and full in the face and called a spade a spade. Much of his writing, therefore, is, according to a writer, "a breviary of a radical free-thinker who protests in the most forcible manner both against the narrowness, bigotry and uncompromising austerity of the ulema, and the eccentricity, hypocrisy and wild ravings of advanced Sufis whom he successfully combats with their own weapons." He is not inaptly called the Voltaire of the East, so trenchant and incisive is his scorn and power of denunciation of the evils inflicted by priestcraft and by the wrong decrees of fate, and so bold, free and original is he in his views. He is said to have been by nature exceedingly sensitive, tender and imaginative, and so all unfairness or injustice, deceit or untruthfulness, provoked uncompromising hatred and withering satire from him. In this respect he resembled somewhat the poet Shelley and that English poetic free-lance, Lord Byron, the "father" of Childe-Harold. To the orthodox priests of his day, who were intolerant hypocrites, "venerated over with sanctimonious piety," he says :

You concern yourself with formulæ, hypocrisy and dissembling
We remain happy ever with our wine and beloved.

Again in another place he says :—

Oh city priest, you go more astray
Than I do though to wine I give way ;
I drink the blood of grapes, you that of men,
Which of us is the more bloodthirsty, pray ?

Umar did not only war with the world outside him but wrestled with equal vigour with his own soul. Dissatisfied with the apparent contradictions and palpable oppositions of the world, and with human life and the universe, he was at one time ready to rise in revolt against God and his Universal Scheme. His mind rebelled against what it regarded as the manifest injustice and iniquity of fate in exalting the ignoble and in degrading the divine-souled, and against the vagaries of Fortune which frowned where it should smile and smiled where it should frown, and a vehement cry of protest rose on his lips. He sighed at this and sang :—

Ah! seasoned wine oft falls to rawest fools,
 And clumsiest workmen own the finest tools,
 And Turki maids, fit to delight men's hearts,
 Lavish their smiles on beardless boys in schools,

and could not reconcile the apparent inconsistencies of God's work.

He would not, like Tennyson's friend Arthur, the beloved son of Henry Hallam, "make his judgment blind," and so ran full tilt at the existing condition of things and "touched a jarring lyre at first." He drifted into rank pessimism and scepticism which developed into a kind of atheism. But as he was a strenuous thinker and ardent seeker of truth

He fought his doubts and gathered strength. . .
 He faced the spectres of the mind
 And laid them ; Thus he came at length
 To find a stronger faith his own ;
 And power was with him in the night,
 Which makes the darkness and the light,
 And dwells not in the light alone,
 But in the darkness and the cloud,
 As over Sinai's peak of old
 While Israel made their gods of gold,
 Altho' the trumpet blew so loud.

He discovered that by powers higher than those of reason, the eternal verities of existence could be realised, and that by restraining human senses and human desires by avoiding pain and injury, by following the old world-worn triple tenet of good speech, good thought, good deed, without thought of self in this world or the next, or with "fruitless" action, as the Gita puts it pithily, Man attains true salvation and understands the "real nature" of his being, and the justice, ordered purpose and economy of the Universal Scheme. In fact, he discovered independently and for himself the basic principles of those transcendental truths which prophetic souls in all ages and climes have discovered and revealed to others. He discovered that

The soul of Things is sweet,
 The Heart of Being is celestial rest ;
 Stronger than woe is will ; that which was good
 Doth pass to Better—Best

It was a touch of inspiration that disclosed them to him. What wonder, therefore, if all kindred ardent spirits both in the east and the west continue to be drawn to Umar Khayam's teaching and come in increasing numbers within the radius of his direct influence. This teaching again is clothed in one of the most charming attires that human language can assume. Simplicity, grace, melody, strength and stateliness are its leading characteristics, and it is regarded as one of the best and fittest instruments for conveying the most vigorous, energetic and concentrated philosophic and religious thought. There are few writings to compare with Umar Khayam's in purity of diction, fine wit, crushing satire and general sympathy with human suffering. His rhapsodies of love of wine and earthly joys, his fervent effusions of the heart full of the most tender feelings and affections, and his passionate denunciation of a malevolent fate which dooms to decay and oblivion all that is great and good and beautiful in the world, are unsurpassed in Persian poetry. To this must be added his deep religious and philosophic insight into the truths of life and nature and the inspiration left behind by him. This makes his claim to the enduring and reverent devotion and enthusiastic praise of his admiring readers both in Asia and Europe as intelligible as it is strong.

Umar's achievements in the realms of science and mathematics too were by no means insignificant, and he affords a rare instance of an oriental poet of a very imaginative order applying himself to the dry and crabbed problems of scientific investigation, and what is more, elucidating and expounding them. He brought out a standard work on Algebra in Arabic, wrote a treatise on the extraction of the cube-root, and on the explanations of the difficult definitions in Euclid. He issued a revised edition of "Zij," which contained astronomical tables, and reformed the Mahomedan calendar, and made a computation of time which, says Gibbon, "surpasses the Julian and approaches the accuracy of the Gregorian style."

Thus did this remarkable astronomer, mathematician and poet, at one time, perhaps, the sewer of tents or born of a family that made and mended them, irradiate the world with the many-coloured light of his genius. Humorously alluding to his name and family occupation he wrote.—

Khayam who stitched the tents of science
Has fallen in grief's furnace and been suddenly burnt.
The shears of Fate have cut the tent ropes of his life
And the broker of Hope has sold him for nothing !

The shears of Fate cut the tent ropes of his life, according to one computation, in the Hejira year 517, and removed from this mundane sphere one who was unrivalled in science in Khorasan and Persia in his days and was the paragon of his age, at first obscure and unknown to fame, but now a star of the highest magnitude in the oriental firmament of poesy. I shall conclude this short panegyric of Umar Khayam by a few quotations from his writings shewing the beauty of his poetic compositions and the sublimity of his philosophy. Some of these extracts, which are translations by Whinfield, are taken from a very able and learned essay written by a friend of mine on Umar Khayam some years ago, in which he gave a skilful, esoteric, and what I regard as a true exposition of Umar's doctrines and a synthesis of his philosophy.

I give first the two oft-quoted and most quotable quatrains of Omar Khayam, which have become well-worn and hackneyed almost like some lines of Shakespeare or Tennyson. They are now "current coin" in the English language.

- (1) Before the phantom of False morning died,
Methought a Voice within the tavern cried,
 " When all the Temple is prepared within
 Why nods the drowsy Worshipper outside ?"
- (2) The Moving Finger writes ; and having writ,
Moves on : nor all your Piety and Wit
 Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your tears wash out a Word of it.

Now as to his philosophy and religious creed. Says Umar :—

Now in thick clouds Thy face Thou dost immerse
And now display it in this universe ;
 Thou the Spectator, Thou the Spectacle,
Sole to Thyself Thy glories Thou dost rehearse.

The above touches one of the highest notes of *Advait* and mystic philosophy and reminds one of the beautiful lines in the Lord's song, the Bhagvat Gita.

I the oblation ; I the sacrifice ; I the ancestral offering ;
I the fire giving herb ; the mantrain I ; I also the butter ;
I the fire ; the burnt offering I ;
And I am indeed the enjoyer of all sacrifices.

In another place we find the following which is in a similar strain.

I compassed the world to find Jamshed's world-reflecting
 bowl,
 I sat not a day, rested not a night ;
 When I heard from a sage a description of it,
 I knew I was myself it.
 This being is not I, it is of Him ;
 Of myself what, where, whence was I ;
 The light in the little eye of the ant is from thee ;
 The strength in the puny foot of the gnat is from thee ;
 Thy self is well worthy of suzerainty ;
 All base, unbecoming qualities are far from thee.

Umar's intrinsic piety, genuine devotion and heart-felt humility are manifest from the following, in spite of his outward scorn of piety and religiousness and profession of epicureanism and convivial jollity and "abandon."

- (1) Oh Lord ! from self-conceit deliver me,
 Sever me from self and occupy with thee !
 This self is captive to earth's good and ill,
 Make me beside myself and set me free.

 Though I had sinned the sins of all mankind,
 I know thou wouldst to mercy be inclined.
 Thou sayest, " I will help in time of need,"
 One needier than me where wilt thou find ?
- (2) To Thee, whose essence baffles human thought,
 Our sins and righteous deeds alike seem naught.
 May Thy grace sober me though drunk with sins,
 And pardon all the ills that I have wrought.
- (3) Sure of thy grace for sins, why need I fear ?
 How can the pilgrim faint while Thou art near ?
 On the last day Thy grace will wash me white
 And make my " black record " to disappear.
- (4) Oh heart ! When on the Loved One's " sweets " you feed
 You lose yourself, yet find yourself indeed ;

To-day to heights of rapture have I soared,
 Yea and with drunken maghs pure wine adored :
 I am become myself, and rest on
 In that pure temple " Am I not your Lord? "

- (5) My body's life and strength are from Thee !
 My soul within and spirit are of Thee !
 My being is of Thee and Thou art Mine,
 And I am Thine since I am lost in Thine.
 Like to the intertisted melody
 Of harp and lute shall our wedding be,
 And such a marriage of fair music make
 That none shall separate the Thee from Me.

Is not the above reminiscent of the highest adoration and self-surrender of a Hindu Bhakt like Dhruva, Kabir, Namdev or Chainlanya, and does not the poet's love for God soar into the empyrean heights of perfect union with the Divine Self? Has the highest Hindu " Bhakt Marag " pointed a higher path?

The ethics of Umar too are quite rational and intelligible. Listen to him where he says so pithily :—

Acts of goodness towards friend and foes alike are good,
 How can persons of good heart and habit do evil ?
 When I survey the world I see no good
 But goodness, all beside is nothing worth.

To find a remedy put up with pain,
 Chafe not at woe, be ever of a thankful mind,
 'Tis the sure method of riches to obtain.

My queen (long may she live to vex her slave)
 To-day a token of affection gave
 Darting a kind glance from her eyes she passed,
 And said " Do good and cast it on the wave."

The above quatrain sums up the highest philosophy of practical benevolence which was exhibited by that world-renowned philanthropist Hatim of Tai, of Persian and Arabic legend and song, whose motto was, " Do good and cast it on the wave," the refrain of which yet rings round the world and is echoed by Umar Khayam.

Fitzgerald took a very poor measure of the extent and depth of Umar Khayam's philosophy and religious inspiration, mistaking the outward symbols for the intrinsic thing, the gross material for the ethereal object for which it stood. He charged Umar Kayam with a love of epicureanism and self-gratification, or a glorification in verse of the delights and pleasures of the senses, and persisted in believing in it even after its hollowness was pointed out by Cowell and others. The charge was made on such slender grounds that it is rather surprising how, a man of Fitzgerald's breadth and fineness of mind could make it. Wine and the wine-cup, which are the most palpable symbols among the poets of the Sufi cult for "bhakti," and "gnyan," the intoxication with the love of the divine or the inner light that is reflected, were interpreted by him to be the material objects connoted by their names. On this point Umar himself is the best guide to follow, being an expounder of his own terminology. This is how he regards the wine and the wine-cup :—

Man is a cup, his soul the wine therein,
Flesh is a pipe, spirit the voice within.

The truth, they say, tastes bitter in the mouth
This is a token that the " Truth " is wine.

In drinking thus it is not my design
To riot, to transgress the law divine,

No ! to attain unconsciousness of self
Is the sole cause I drink me drunk with wine.

That the basis of Umar's poetry and beliefs and doctrines are solely ethical, is proved by quatrain after quatrain of his poetry. Their moral tendency is manifest to the most unreflecting. He preaches selflessness, contentment, kindness and love of fellow-creatures, and humility, and himself exhibits a genuinely meek and prayerful soul. Some of his verses on these subjects contain thoughts which rival the most sublime or the most beautiful in Tennyson's " In Memoriam." I shall give a few of these quatrains below.

We rest our hopes on Thy free grace alone
Nor seek by merits for our sins to atone ;
Mercy drops where it lists, and estimates
Ill deeds as undone, good undone as done.

Compare with this the following from Tennyson :—

Forgive what seemed my sin in me ;
 What seemed my worth since I began ;
 For merit lives from man to man
 And not from man, O Lord ! to Thee.

In another Umar says,

O Lord ! to Thee all creatures worship pay,
 To Thee both small and great for ever pray,
 Thou takest woe away and givest weal,
 Give then, or if it please Thee, take away !

Compare Tennyson's lines :—

Thine are these orbs of light and shade ;
 Thou madest life in man and brute ;
 Thou madest Death ; and lo ! thy foot
 Is on the skull which Thou hast made.

Umar's spirit of kindness and love, or *ahinsa*, is shown by the following:—

Oh thou who for thy pleasure dost impart
 A pang of sorrow to thy fellow's heart,
 Go ! mourn thy perished wit, and peace of mind,
 Thyself hast slain them ; like the fool thou art.

Better to make one soul rejoice with glee
 Than plant a desert with a colony ;
 Rather one free man bind with chains of love
 Than set a thousand prisoned captives free.

In the following he strikes some of the highest notes of his philosophy, reminding one of Tennyson's poems on the " Higher Pantheism " and " Crossing the Bar"—

The drop wept for his severance from the sea,
 But the sea smiled, for " I am all," said he.
 The truth is all, nothing exists beside,
 That one point circling apes plurality.

You ask what this life is, so frail, so vain,
 'Tis long to tell, yet will I make it plain ;
 'Tis but a breath blown from the vasty deeps,
 And then blown back to those same deeps again.

This tells us exactly what Tennyson has told us that "from the Great Deep we come and to the Great Deep we go," and "that which drew from the boundless Deep turns again home." Umar's theory of the Deity and his cosmogony are comprised in the following :—

This world a body is, and God its Soul,
And angels are its Senses, who control
Its limbs—the creatures, elements and spheres ;
The *One* is the whole basis of the whole.

His theory of cosmogony, which bears a close parallel to Aristotle's as given in his "De Anima" is as follows :—

Ten Powers, and nine spheres, eight heavens made He,
And planets seven, of six sides, as we see,
Five senses, and four elements, three souls,
Two worlds, but only one, O man ! like thee.

Umar's large faith in the ultimate triumphs of good and the certainty of conquest over death is heard in resonant tones which cheer the heart and nerve the soul like the assurance of a trusted and well-beloved friend. According to him,

Death's terrors spring from baseless phantasy,
Death yields the tree of immortality ;
Since Isa breathed new life into my soul,
Eternal death has washed its hands of me !

And now I shall close with the quatrains that shew how eclectic, how truly catholic, was Umar's nature, a nature that in gentleness and in the possession of a true feeling of universal brotherhood had its counterpart in the God-gifted twin scholar ministers of the great Akbar, Faizi and Abu Fazul. In a temple of Kashmir Abu Fazul inscribed these beautiful lines which Tennyson has quoted in his preface to his Akbar's Dream, and which will bear repetition here.

"Oh God, in every temple I see people that see Thee and in every language I hear spoken people praise Thee. Polytheism and Islam *feel* after thee. If it be a mosque, people murmur the holy prayer, and if it be a Christian church, people ring the bell from love to Thee. Heresy to the heretic and religion to the orthodox, but the dust of the rose-petal belongs to the heart of the perfume-seller." So said Umar Khayam:—

Pagodas, just as mosques, are homes of prayer,
 'Tis prayer that church-bells chime unto the air,
 Yea, Church and Ka'ba, Rosary and Cross
 Are all but divers tongues of world-wide prayer.

So said and sung and lived the astronomer-poet, aloof from the world's
 vanities and sorrows, urging all to

Sooner with half a loaf contented be,
 And water from a broken crock, like me,
 Than lord it over one poor fellow-man,
 Or to another bow the vassal knee.

Like Byron he wished that the desert were his dwelling-place with
 one lone spirit, and like Keats he sighed for a draught of vintage, for a
 beaker full of the Warm South—and for

a mossy couch,
 Some wine, a Houri (if Houris there be)
 A green bank by a stream with minstrelsy.

Writing thus and living thus, no wonder he was very little appreciated
 at first in that age of bigotry and rampant orthodoxy which he
 attacked so fiercely, and with a sad heart he mourned in the
 following strain:—

Soon shall I go, by time and fate deplored,
 Of all my precious pearls not one is bored ;
 Alas ! there die with me a thousand truths
 To which these fools fit audience ne'er accord.

But soon the tide set in his favour. His transcendental thought and
 beautiful expression came to be valued more correctly and admired, as
 they deserved, till now Umar exercises a fascination on the eastern mind,
 and also to some extent on the western, which is almost magical.

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