

The *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam

[DIED A.D. 1122?]

TRANSLATED BY EDWARD FITZGERALD [1809-1883]

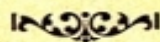


It is doubtful whether any original English poem of real merit has had as wide a circulation as Edward Fitzgerald's translation of some quatrains by the Persian poet-scientist Omar Khayyam. In its less than one-hundred-year history it has achieved a greater fame for Khayyam than his original verses were able to do in over eight hundred years.

This has, of course, tended to confuse product with by-product. The *Rubaiyat* vogue of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was largely the work of Fitzgerald fans, who appreciated the skill with which an English author had made an old Persian poet express their *fin de siècle* mood. Thus were begot the Omar Khayyam Clubs of England and America. Thus, too, the thousand and one editions—fine, illustrated, limited, large, small, good, bad and worse—of the several Fitzgerald versions. One of these, illustrated by the American artist Elihu Vedder, weighed fifteen pounds; another, 1/4 by 3/16 inches in dimensions, is the smallest published book in the world. Still another, elaborately bound and jewelled—valued at £1000—went down with the Titanic in 1912. As an afterglow of this Omar cult, the 1920's in America found in the Old Reprobate a worthy challenger of the Volstead prohibition act and a staunch defender of the deterministic philosophy being preached by Clarence Darrow and Theodore Dreiser.

Meanwhile, the fad of the translation had given impetus to the scholarly study of the poet who inspired it. Countless versions of the quatrains appeared in almost every language of the world, including Esperanto. Some of these were translations of Fitzgerald's English version; some direct from the Persian. New manuscript discoveries, especially in very recent years, have enabled scholars to come closer to the true Omar. His world reputation might now be said to be on a par with that of his most famous English translator, and he is read widely even in his native land.

The English reader would form a better idea of the poetry of Omar if he scrambled the quatrains translated by Fitzgerald. For whether in the first edition (reproduced here) or in the more commonly reprinted fourth, Fitzgerald took the liberty of arranging the quatrains in an order that would depict a full day's cycle, from dawn to moon-rise. This plan is foreign to the original, in which the quatrains are arranged alphabetically by the last letter of the rhyming word. That is to say, each quatrain of Omar's is an individual poem and not merely a stanza, as it is in Fitzgerald. On the other hand, the common notion that this is not a faithful translation is unfounded in fact. It may not always be accurate, and it certainly did not attempt to be literal; but faithful it is in the same sense that the King James version of the Bible is. And like that other great translation into the English language, it demonstrates—in the words of an Omarian—that "the human cry has no nationality."



I

Awake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight:
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light.

II

Dreaming when Dawn's Left Hand was in the Sky
I heard a Voice within the Tavern cry,
"Awake, my Little ones, and fill the Cup
Before Life's Liquor in ist Cup be dry."

III

And, as the Cock crew, those who stood before
The Tavern shouted--"Open then the Door!
You know how little while we have to stay,
And, once departed, may return no more."

IV

Now the New Year reviving old Desires,
The thoughtful Soul to Solitude retires,
Where the WHITE HAND OF MOSES on the Bough
Puts out, and Jesus from the Ground suspires.

V

Iram indeed is gone with all its Rose,
And Jamshyd's Sev'n-ring'd Cup where no one knows;
But still the Vine her ancient Ruby yields,
And still a Garden by the Water blows.

VI

And David's Lips are lock't; but in divine
High piping Péhlevi, with "Wine! Wine! Wine!
Red Wine!" -- the Nightingale cries to the Rose
That yellow cheek of hers to incarnadine.

VII

Come, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring
The Winter Garment of Repentance fling:
The Bird of Time has but a little way
To fly -- and Lo! the Bird is on the Wing.

VIII

And look - a thousand Blossoms with the Day
Woke - and a thousand scatter'd into Clay:
And this first Summer Month that brings the Rose
Shall take Jamshyd and Kaikobád away.

IX

But come with old Khayyám, and leave the Lot
Of Kaikobád and Kaikhosrú forgot!
Let Rustum lay about him as he will,
Or Hátim Tai cry Supper - heed them not.

X

With me along some Strip of Herbage strown
That just divides the desert from the sown,
Where name of Slave and Sultán scarce is known,
And pity Sultán Máhmúd on his Throne.

XI

Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse - and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness -
And Wilderness is paradise enow.

XII

"How sweet is mortal Sovranty!" -- think some:
Others--"How blest the Paradise to come!"
Ah, take the Cash in hand and waive the Rest;

XIII

Look to the Rose that blows about us--"Lo,
Laughing," she says, "into the world I blow,
At once the silken tassel of my Purse
Tear, and its Treasure on the Garden throw."

XIV

The Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon
Turns Ashes--or it prospers; and anon,
Like Snow upon the Desert's dusty Face,
Lighting a little hour or two--is gone.

XV

And those who husbanded the Golden Grain,
And those who flung it to the Winds like Rain,
Alike to no such aureate Earth are turn'd
As, buried once, Men want dug up again.

XVI

Think, in this batter'd Caravanserai
Whose Doorways are alternate Night and Day,
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp
Abode his Hour or two, and went his way.

XVII

They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep:
And Bahram, that great Hunter -- the Wild Ass
Stamps o'er his Head, and he lies fast asleep.

XVIII

I sometimes think that never blows so red
The Rose as where some buried Caesar bled;
That every Hyacinth the Garden wears
Dropt in its Lap from some once lovely Head.

XIX

And this delightful Herb whose tender Green
Fledges the River's Lip on which we lean--
Ah, lean upon it lightly! for who knows
From what once lovely Lip it springs unseen!

XX

Ah, my Belovéd, fill the Cup that clears
To-day of past Regrets and future Fears
To-morrow? -- Why, To-morrow I may be
Myself with Yesterday's Sev'n Thousand Years.

XXI

Lo! some we loved, the loveliest and the best
That Time and Fate of all their Vintage prest,
Have drunk their Cup a Round or two before,
And one by one crept silently to Rest.

XXII

And we, that now make merry in the Room
They left, and Summer dresses in new Bloom,
Ourselves must we beneath the Couch of Earth
Descend, ourselves to make a Couch - for whom?

XXIII

Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,
Before we too into the Dust Descend;
Dust into Dust, and under Dust, to lie,
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer and--sans End!

XXIV

Alike for those who for TO-DAY prepare,
And those that after a TO-MORROW stare,
A Muezzin from the Tower of Darkness cries
"Fools! your Reward is neither Here nor There."

XXV

Why, all the Saints and Sages who discuss'd
Of the Two Worlds so learnedly, are thrust
Like foolish Prophets forth; their Words to Scorn
Are scatter'd and their Mouths are stopt with Dust.

XXVI

Oh, come with old Khayyám, and leave the Wise
To talk; one thing is certain, that Life flies;
One thing is certain, and the Rest is Lies;
The Flower that once has blown forever dies.

XXVII

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same Door as in I went.

XXVIII

With them the Seed of Wisdom did I sow,
And with my own Hand labour'd it to grow:
And this was all the Harvest that I reap'd -
"I came like Water, and like Wind I go."

XXIX

Into this Universe, and Why not knowing
Nor Whence, like Water willy-nilly flowing;
And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,
I know not Whither, willy-nilly blowing.

XXX

What, without asking, hither hurried *whence?*
Nor, without asking, *whither* hurried hence!
Another and another Cup to drown
The Memory of this Impertinence!

XXXI

Up from Earth's Centre through the seventh Gate
I rose, and on the Throne of Saturn sate,
And many Knots unravel'd by the Road;
But not the Knot of Human Death and Fate.

XXXII

There was a Door to which I found no Key:
There was a Veil past which I could not see:
Some little Talk awhile of ME and THEE
There seemed--and then no more of THEE and ME

XXXIII

Then to the rolling Heav'n itself I cried,
Asking, "What Lamp had Destiny to guide
Her little Children stumbling in the Dark?"
And--"A blind understanding!" Heav'n replied.

XXXIV

Then to this earthen Bowl did I adjourn
My Lip the secret Well of Life to learn:
And Lip to Lip it murmur'd--"While you live,
Drink!--for once dead you never shall return."

XXXV

I think the Vessel, that with fugitive
Articulation answer'd, once did live,
And merry-make; and the cold Lip I kiss'd
How many Kisses might it take -- and give.

XXXVI

For in the Market-place, one Dusk of Day,
I wathced the Potter thumping his wet Clay:
And with its all obliterated Tongue
It murmur'd - "Gently, Brother, gently, pray!"

XXXVII

Ah, fill the Cup: - what boots it to repeat
How Time is slipping underneath our Feet:
Unborn TO-MORROW, and dead YESTERDAY,
Why fret about them if TO-DAY be sweet!

XXXVIII

One Moment in Annihilation's Waste,
One moment, of the Well of Life to taste--
The Stars are setting, and the Caravan
Starts for the dawn of Nothing--Oh, make haste!

XXXIX

How long, how long, in infinite Pursuit
Of This and That endeavour and dispute?
Better be merry with the fruitful Grape
Than sadden after none, or bitter, Fruit.

XL

You know, my Friends, how long since in my House
For a new Marriage I did make Carouse:
Divorced old barren Reason from my Bed,
And took the Daughter of the Vine to Spouse.

XLI

For "IS" and "IS-NOT" though with Rule and Line,
And, "UP-AND-DOWN" without, I could define,
I yet in all I only cared to know,
Was never deep in anything but--Wine.

XLII

And lately, by the Tavern Door agape,
Came stealing through the Dusk an Angel Shape,
Bearing a vessel on his Shoulder; and
He bid me taste of it; and 'twas - the Grape!

XLIII

The Grape that can with Logic absolute
The Two-and-Seventy jarring Sects confute:
The sovereign Alchemist that in a trice
Life's leaden metal into Gold transmute;

XLIV

The mighty Mahmud, the victorious Lord,
That all the misbelieving and black Horde
Of Fears and Sorrows that infest the Soul
Scatters and slays with his enchanted Sword.

XLV

But leave the Wise to wrangle, and with me
The Quarrel of the Universe let be:
And, in some corner of the Hubbub coucht,
Make Game of that which makes as much of Thee.

XLVI

For in and out, above, about, below,
'Tis nothing but a Magic Shadow-show,
Play'd in a Box whose Candle is the Sun,
Round which we Phantom Figures come and go.

XLVII

And if the Wine you drink, the Lip you press,
End in the Nothing all Things end in--Yes-
Then fancy while Thou art, Thou art but what
Thou shalt be - - Nothing -- Thou shalt not be less.

XLVIII

While the Rose blows along the River Brink,
With old Khayyam the Ruby Vintage drink:
And when the Angel with his darker Draught
Draws up to thee--take that, and do not shrink.

XLIX

'Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays:
Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.

L

The Ball no Question makes of Ayes and Noes,
But Right or Left as strikes the Player goes;
And He that toss'd Thee down into the Field,
He knows about it all--HE knows--HE knows!

LI

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.

LII

And that inverted Bowl we call The Sky,
Whereunder crawling coop't we live and die,
Lift not thy hands to IT for help--for It
Rolls impotently on as Thou or I.

LIII

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

LIV

I tell Thee this -- When, starting from the Goal,
Over the shoulders of the flaming Foal
Of Heav'n Parwin and Mushtari they flung,
In my predestin'd Plot of Dust and Soul

LXV

The Vine had struck a Fibre; which about
If clings my Being - let the Súfi flout;
Of my Base Metal may be filed a Key,
That shall unlock the Door he howls without.

LVI

And this I know: whether the one True Light,
Kindle to Love, or Wrath consume me quite,
One Glimpse of It within the Tavern caught
Better than in the Temple lost outright.

LVII

Oh Thou who didst with Pitfall and with Gin
Beset the Road I was to wander in,
Thou wilt not with Predestination round
Enmesh me, and impute my Fall to Sin?

LVIII

Oh Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,
And who with Eden didst devise the Snake;
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give--and take!

LIX

Listen again. One Evening at the Close
Of Ramazan, ere the better Moon arose,
In that old Potter's Shop I stood alone
With the clay Population round in Rows.

LX

And strange to tell, among that Earthen Lot
Some could articulate, while others not:
And suddenly one more impatient cried--
"Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?"

LXI

Then said another - "Surely not in vain
My Substance from the common Earth was ta'en,
That He who subtly wrought me into Shape
Should stamp me back to common Earth again."

LXII

Another said--"Why, ne'er a peevish Boy
Would break the Bowl from which he drank in Joy;
Shall He that made the Vessel in pure Love
And Fanny, in an after Rage destroy!"

LXIII

None answer'd this; but after Silence spake
A Vessel of a more ungainly Make:
"They sneer at me for leaning all awry;
What? did the Hand then of the Potter shake?"

LXIV

Said one--"Folks of a surly Tapster tell,
"And daub his Visage with the Smoke of Hell;
They talk of some strict Testing of us--Pish!
He's a Good Fellow, and 'twill all be well.

LXV

Then said another with a long-drawn Sigh,
"My Clay with long oblivion is gone dry:
But fill me with the old familiar Juice,
Methinks I might recover by-and-by!"

LXVI

So while the Vessels one by one were speaking,
One spied the littls Crescent all were seeking:
And then they jogg'd each other, "Brother! Brother!
Hark to the Potter's Schoulder-knot a-creaking!"

LXVII

Ah, with the Grape my fading Life provide,
And wash my Body whence the life has died,
And in a Windingsheet of Vine-leaf wrapt,
So bury me by some sweet Garden-side.

LXVIII

That ev'n my buried Ashes such a Snare
Of Perfume shall fling up into the Air,
As not a True Believer passing by
But shall be overtaken unaware.

LXIX

Indeed, the idols I have loved so long
Have done my Credit in Men's Eye much Wrong:
Have drown'd my Honour in a shallow Cup,
And sold my Reputation for a Song.

LXX

Indeed, indeed, Repentance oft before
I swore - but was I sober when I swore?
And then and then came Spring, and Rose-in-hand
May thread-bare Penitence apieces tore.

LXXI

And much as Wine has play'd the Infidel,
And robb'd me of my Robe of Honour-well,
I often wonder what the Vintners buy
One half so precious as the Goods they sell.

LXXII

Alas, that Spring should vanish with the Rose!
That Youth's sweet-scented Manuscript should close!
The Nightingale that in the Branches sang,
Ah, whence, and whither flown again, who knows!

LXXIII

Ah, Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire!
Would not we shatter it to bits-and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!

LXXIV

Ah, Moon of my Delight who know'st no wane,
The Moon of Heav'n is rising once again:
How oft hereafter rising shall she look
Through this same Garden after me - in vain!

LXXV

And when Thyself with shining Foot shall pass
Among the Guests Star-scatter'd on The Grass,
And in thy joyous Errand reach the Spot
Where I made one - turn down an empty Glass!