A PERSIAN POET.

SINCE the time of Sir William Jones, many excellent translations from the Sanscrit have been made; and if the Established Church has not converted the natives of India, it has at least directed the attention of scholars to the literary treasures of the Hindu races, and many of these have appeared in English dress at Bombay or Calcutta.

It is to be hoped that the cordial relations now existing between Persia and India may have similar results, for we are poor in translations from the language of Hafiz and Saadi. We have some reason for this hope that is within us, because a dainty little volume has recently appeared in London which contains all that one could wish to read of the Rubâiyât (Persian for verses) of Omar Khayyâm. This poet does not indeed belong to the classic period, if we may use this expression, since he flourished only eight hundred years ago; but his works have immortalized his name. His lines were cast in pleasant places, though in stirring times; for he lived in the century that immediately preceded the crusades, at the court of Alp Arslan, grandson of Toghrul Beg, the mighty founder of the Seljukian dynasty.* Omar Khayyâm, in fact, was one of those who enjoyed the title and emoluments of astronomer royal to that enlightened and munificent prince. The romantic story of his fortunes is told very simply in the preface of this little volume. Hakim Omar Khayyâm, it should seem, was sent when very young to study at the feet of a famous Mussulman teacher, the Dr. Arnold of that day. Here he contracted a close friendship with two of his fellow students. One was named Nisâm-ul-Mulk and the other was called Hassan.

Fame said that the learned imam's pupils were always the favorites of fortune; and the three friends were once gravely discussing this opinion, and wondering what might befall them in the years to come. Hassan, who had mooted the question, proposed that they should bind themselves by a promise. "Even," he said, "if we do not *all* attain to fortune, one of us surely will. Let us make a vow, then, that to whomsoever it fall, he shall share it equally with the other two!" This proposal was received with great favor, and the childish compact thus made was never forgotten. Years rolled on, and Nisâm-ul-Mulk rose to the position of Grand Vizier to the Sultan Alp Arslan. His school friends now came forward and claimed the fulfilment of his vow. The Vizier generously kept his word. He gave Hassan a government office which he desired; but he soon became discontented, and strove to supplant his benefactor. Nisâm spared his life, but dismissed him, and the wretched Hassan, in rage and despair, collected a band of fanatics around him, and became the famous, or infamous, Old Man of the Mountain—the chief of the Assassins, celebrated in the chronicles of the crusades. He finally caused the Vizier himself to be murdered. As the dagger of the assassin pierced his heart he is said to have exclaimed, in the words of his more faithful Omar:

"O God, I am passing away in the hand of the wind!"

To return to our poet. He also appeared before the Vizier to claim the fulfilment of the childish vow; but he desired neither honors nor office. "The greatest boon you can confer on me," he said, "is to let me live in a corner under the shadow of your for-

* Alp Arslan was the nephew of Toghrul Beg. He died in 1072, fifty years before the date given for Khayyâm's death. According to that date, the crusades began twenty-five years before his death, instead of in the century following.—ED. GALAXY.

tune, to spread wide the advantages of science and pray for your long life and prosperity."

Finding that this was really Omar's wish, the Vizier settled upon him a yearly income of twelve hundred pieces of gold, and he dwelt at Naishâpûr until his death, studying astronomy and writing from time to time the harmonious verses which have done more than the computation of the Jalali era to immortalize his name; though Gibbon says the latter "surpassed the Julian and approached the accuracy of the Gregorian style." He also drew up some astronomical tables and wrote a treatise on algebra. He died in 1123, and was buried, as he desired, in "a spot where the north wind might scatter roses on his tomb." This wish had been expressed to a pupil from Samarcand one day as they sat together in the garden; "and long years after," we read in the works of the Rhwajah Nizami, "when I chanced to revisit Naishâpûr, I went to his final resting-place, and lo! it was just outside the garden, and the trees, laden with fruit, stretched their boughs over the garden wall and dropped their flowers upon his tomb, so that the stone was hidden under them."

Such a resting-place does not seem, at first sight, to become the character of the author of the Rubaiyyat—verses that overflow with praises of love and wine—and very particularly of wine, we may add—as lavishly as the odes of Anacreon. He differs from the joyous Greek, however, in the sad undertone which is heard through all the music of the feast. Omar avows himself a skeptic, and, like Montaigne, scoffs at all forms of belief; but when all is done, his intellect and heart both rebel, and, contemplating the chaos of a world without God or faith, he is tempted, like Alfonso of Castile, to think that he could have ordered things better had he been called upon for advice when the world was created.

Ah, Love! could you and I with him conspire
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
Would we not shatter it to bits, and then
Remould it nearer to the heart's desire!

It is perhaps the dissatisfaction so frankly expressed with his own philosophy, the craving for something higher and better, subtly conveyed to us through the melody of his verses, which appeal most strongly to the sympathy of those who in the nineteenth century can feel themselves akin to this Persian singer of the eleventh. Our sage, however, is not always moralizing. Far from it. Here is a Bacchanalian song, for instance, which sounds as if it might have been written at the court of Polycrates:

Ah, with the grape my fading life provide,
And wash the body whence the life has died,
And lay me stranded in the living leaf
By some not unfrequented gardenside;

That even my buried ashes such a snare
Of vintage shall fling up into the air,
As not a true believer passing by
But shall be overtaken unaware.

Indeed, the idols I have loved so long
Have done my credit in men's eye much wrong,
Have drowned my glory in a shallow cup
And sold my reputation for a song.

Indeed, indeed, repentance oft before
I swore—but was I sober when I swore?
And then? and then came spring and Rose-in-hand
My threadbare penitence apieces tore.

And much as wine has played the infidel,
And robbed me of my robe of honor—well,
I wonder often what the vintners buy
One half as precious as the stuff they sell!

This last verse, with its tipsy logic, ought to be enough to convince any one that Omar Khayyâm was not disinclined to indulge in the luxury forbidden to the true believer, as some—notably a French scholar and writer, M. Nicolas—would have us think. Omar Khayyâm, according to these commentators, is a Mahometan mystic who never tasted the juice of the grape prohibited by the Prophet; and under this symbol of wine he praises the attributes of Allah and a heavenly love. We cannot agree with these learned critics, however, particularly after reading the above.

Sometimes Omar is more philosophic—more reasonable; and in one of his love songs he avers:

A book of verses underneath the bough,
A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou
Beside me singing in the wilderness—
The wilderness were Paradise enow!

He is insolently content even:

Some for the glories of this world, and some
Sigh for the Prophet's Paradise to come.
Ah! take the cash and let the credit go,
Heed not the rumble of a distant drum!

It affects him, however, and his joy is soon clouded:

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!

Think in this battered caravanserai,
Whose portals are alternate night and day,
How sultan after sultan with his pomp
Abode his destined hour and went his way.

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, but cannot break his sleep.

I sometimes think that never blows so red
The rose as where some buried Cæsar bled;
That every hyacinth the garden wears
Dropt in her lap from some once lovely head!

Anon he confides to us his despairing doubts:

Alike for those who for to-day prepare,
And those that after some to-morrow stare,
A muezzin from the Tower of Darkness cries,
Fools! your reward is neither here nor there!

Why, all the saints and sages who discussed
Of the two worlds so learnedly are thrust
Like foolish prophets forth; their words to scorn
Are scattered, and their mouths are stopt with dust.

On this rather weak argument our poet does not dwell long, but proceeds to give us his personal experience:

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 where in I went.

With them the seed of knowledge did I sew,
And with my own hand wrought to make it grow,
And this was all the harvest that I reaped:
"I came like water and like wind I go"

Into the 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!

From this summary we might infer that the wise imam Mowaffak of Naishapúr was not a very profound metaphysician or theologian. Not unfrequently his gifted pupil takes refuge in Pantheism; for he will not be satisfied with answers that are insults to his restless mind—he must find an adequate Cause to worship:

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Why, if the soul can fling the dust aside
And naked on the air of Heaven ride,
Were't not a shame—were't not a shame for him
In this clay carcass crippled to abide?

'Tis but a tent where takes his one day's rest,
A sultan to the realm of Death addrest;
The sultan rises, and the dark Ferrásh
Strikes and prepares it for another guest.

And fear not lest existence, closing your
Account and mine, should know the like no more.
The Eternal Saki from that bowl has pour'd
Millions of bubbles like us, and will pour

When you and I behind the veil are past!
Oh! but the long, long while the world shall last,
Which of our coming and departure heeds
As the sev'n seas should heed a pebble cast.

A moment's halt—a momentary taste
Of being from the well amid the waste—
And lo! the phantom caravan has reached
The *nothing* it set out from! Oh! make haste!

Our poet is disturbed sometimes, too, and it requires an effort of the will to embrace the materialistic views he has decided upon adopting. There is something artistic in the succession of lines like these:

O threats of Hell, and hopes of Paradise!
One thing, at least, is certain. *This* life flies;
One thing is certain, and the rest is lies:
The flower that once has blown for ever dies!

The cry of sacred horror, the gradual return to the thought he would make habitual, is very skilfully rendered. Then, the panic over, and the dark warriors once more rallied around the standard, he grows bold and defiant:

Strange, is it not? that of the myriads who
Before us passed the door of darkness through,
Not one returns to tell us of the road,
Which to discover we must trável too.

The revelations of devout and learn'd
Who rose before us, and as prophets burn'd,
Are all but stories which, awoke from sleep,
They told their fellows, and to sleep returned.

The next verses, apart from their context, might be claimed by Mr. Emerson:

I sent my soul through the Invisible
Some letter of that after-life to spell;
And by and by my soul returned to me
And answered, "I myself am Heaven and Hell."

Heaven but the vision of fulfilled desire,
And Hell the shadow of a soul on fire,
Cast on the darkness into which ourselves,
So late emerged from, shall so soon expire.

It is with some secret pleasure evidently, if not with profound conviction, that Omar concludes:

We are no other than a moving row
Of magic shadow shapes, that come and go
Round with this sun-illumined lantern, held
In midnight by the master of the show.

With this quaint conceit we are tempted to close our quotations from the Rubâiyât. The structure of these quotations has probably struck the reader as peculiar. It is imitated from the original, and though novel is not displeasing to the ear. Three lines, at least, rhyme; the fourth, usually the third line of the stanza, may be a blank, or it may rhyme with the other three; and much freedom is allowed in the metre.

This collection closes with a drinking song, of which we have already given one or two stanzas. The closing lines are too thoroughly characteristic of the Tentmaker—for such is the signification of Omar's surname—to be omitted here:

Yon rising moon that looks for us again,
How oft hereafter will she wax and wane;
How oft hereafter rising look for us
Through this same garden—and for *one* in vain!

And when like her, O Saki, you shall pass
Among the guests star-scattered on the grass,
And in your blissful errand reach the spot
Where I made one, turn down an empty glass!

We have compared Omar Khayyâm to Anacreon, with whom indeed he has more than one taste in common; but the joyous, childlike spirit of the Greek differs widely from that of the Persian poet, who tries—and tries in vain—to banish the consciousness of a higher self; a grave, collected, sorrowful, and intellectual Ego indeed, that sits, wrapped in flowing robes, like a cadi on the judgment seat, even in the blooming garden where the lower nature of the poet would crown the cup with roses, and sing like the happy Hellene all through the summer day.

If there be anything of the Greek muse in the verses of Omar Khayyâm, it is the saddened echo of the voice of an august shade, sighing for annihilation, as in Swinburne's very perfect "Garden of Persephone." In either case, however, it is a morbid craving—the divine, the inevitable punishment inflicted by an unerring law on those who refuse to resign the forbidden fruit of sensuous indulgence in enervating pleasure.

SOUVENIRS OF A MAN OF LETTERS.

ACCIDENTALLY stumbling lately upon an old copy of "The Four Georges," I was reminded that, in these drafts upon memory, I had hitherto omitted all reference to William Makepeace Thackeray, than whom no man left more symmetrical footprints in the United States, or bore with him to England more agreeable impressions of his visit to this part of the world.

Thackeray was a native of India and a member of a family distinguished by its talent. One of his uncles, whom I well knew, was a Calcutta barrister of rare ability, which ability he managed to render profitless at the bar by his earnest devotion to Bacchus. As a keen, incisive critic, Charles Thackeray, the *bon vivant* (misapplied term!), was without a rival. I had for two years an opportunity of finding employment for his pen, and the manner of his engagement was in this wise: He was to come to my office every morning at ten o'clock, *quite sober*. A few sheets of foolscap, with pen and ink, were to be placed upon a table in a small parlor, and in juxtaposition with these materials for a slashing "leader" there should stand a *bottle of claret*. In less than two hours four pages, more or less, were covered with a rough eloquence, biting sarcasm, and familiar or classic illustration, and—the bottle was empty! The cashier then handed ten rupees (a five-dollar bill) to my friend, and he staggered out of the office. Ultimately the agreement was broken by his coming one morning in a state which interfered with his ambulatory rectitude, and haranguing my printers on the various branches of "aristocracy"—of rank and wealth and talent there-