CHAPTER X

EDWARD FITZGERALD AND THE RUBÁIYÁT

FITZGERALD was born in 1809, and studied at Cambridge. At Cambridge he made the friendship of Tennyson, and of many other distinguished literary personages. Inheriting considerable property, he was able to give all his life to literary and artistic pursuits, without adopting any profession at all. He lived in a pleasant home in the country, surrounded by books in many languages; and he very seldom showed himself in society. At first he published his literary work only for the benefit of his friends — not even putting his name upon the title page of his first publication. Though he lived to be a very old man, his success came only a little before his death. The beauty of his work could not at first be understood by the public. It is now so fully understood that he has become a great classic. Perhaps that is enough to tell you about him. But there is one more fact to mention about his work. It is not original —at least not original in the ordinary sense. It consists almost entirely of translations from the Spanish, the Persian, and the Greek. Therefore you might well wonder how mere translation could rise to the dignity of the very highest place in literature. The only possible answer is that Fitzgerald was probably the best translator that ever lived. He did not make literal translations; he translated only the spirit, the ghost of things. But for that reason he did what no man had ever succeeded in doing before him, and what no one is likely to do again for hundreds of years. He had not only great scholarship, but exquisite taste. In this respect he reminds us very much of the poet Gray; and his life was really like that of Gray in many respects.

I need only mention his translation of the Spanish dramatist Calderon. It is the best that exists. I need not mention at all his shorter pieces; they do not concern us here. His masterpiece was a translation of the quatrains of Omar Khayyām, a Persian poet who sang in the latter part of the eleventh century. Before we go any further into the subject of Fitzgerald's work, we must talk for a moment about Omar Khayyām. His story is very interesting and very strange. In the eleventh century, at a little school in the Persian City of Naishāpūr, there were three students studying Mohammedan law together, under a very famous teacher. These three students were strongly united in friendship, and one day they made this agreement between them,—that whichever of the three should first succeed in life, he would help the other two in any way that lay in his power. One of these students was the famous Nizām ul Mulk, who afterwards became Vizier to the great Sultan Alp Arslan; the second student was our poet Hakim Omar Khayyām; and the third, who afterwards made a most terrible name in the history of the world, was Hasan Ben Sabbāh. At that time the three were little more than boys, but they knew that successful students in that school usually obtained good positions, so they made that friendly agreement together. Several years passed, and one of the young men actually became Vizier — that is to say, Prime Minister. Then his old school friend, Hasan, came to him, and asked for a position under the government; and he got it. Then came Omar Khayyām, and said to the Vizier, "I do not want any honour or high position; but please give me a little pension, so that I can devote the whole of my time to poetry and study." The Vizier gave him a very good pension, and a small house to live in near the palace, and he lived in that house until he died. The Vizier had no reason to be sorry for his kindness to Omar. But it was very different in the case of Hasan. Hasan conspired against his benefactor and former friend, but was found out and banished from the country. He then passed into

Syria and founded the most terrible sect that ever existed,—the sect of the Ismailians or Assassins. You may remember reading of these people in the history of the East. Among them it was the law that if the chief told a man to go and kill a prince or a king, that man had to go. Many kings and princes were killed by this secret society; and you may remember that King Edward of England was stabbed by one of these men and saved only by the heroism of his wife, who sucked the poison from the wound, for the assassins used poisoned weapons. Their chief became known throughout the world as the Old Man of the Mountains; for he and his followers lived in an almost inaccessible mountain fastness. The sect continued to exist until the great Tartar invasion, when it was exterminated. But Hasan, long before that, sent a man to kill his former friend, the Vizier, and Nizam was murdered.

But Omar always kept the favour of the court, and remained in his little house writing poetry about life and love and wine and roses. Being not at all in sympathy with the religious zeal of his time, he was considered by many as a very profane and blasphemous poet; but he seems to have been well protected by friends in the court. I suppose you know that the Mohammedan religion strictly forbade the drinking of wine, and recommended sobriety in all things, and great simplicity of life. This teaching, in its early form, was good, and the first Khalifs strictly observed it. They understood that the great battles of Islam had been won by the self-denial and hardihood of the simple men who had come out of the desert, the Arab horsemen, contented with the plainest of food and one meal a day, but afterwards the doctrine was pushed to great extremes by fanatical sects. Then was to be seen, on one side, asceticism carried to most extraordinary lengths, and on the other hand unbridled luxury. But in the time of Omar the ascetic religious poetry was in the ascendency. Now this religious element was, in one way, strangely like a certain religious element in India; very possibly it may have been

influenced by Indian philosophy. There was a Mohammedan mysticism, a pantheism extraordinarily like the Indian pantheism, but kept within conformity to the theology of the Korân. The mystics believed that by certain austere practices supernatural knowledge might be obtained. They believed in the unity of man with the divine nature. They believed in a great many strange things as well, and established many different schools and systems, which were constantly arguing with each other. It was probably in contempt for all this that Omar Khayyâm wrote his famous verses. He boldly took the ground that we do not know and cannot know anything about a future life, or a supernatural world. He declared that all that we do know belongs to this world of sense, and that the best thing for man to do is to take as much pleasure out of this life as he honestly can, without giving himself any trouble about the mystery of the universe. Of course this is a very simple way of putting the case; and if Omar had had nothing else to say, he would not have been worth reading. But the great, the immortal charm of his composition happens to be in the way that he treats this very problem of the universe which he advises us not to worry about. The impermanency of existence, the riddle of death, the fading of youth, the folly of philosophy in trying to explain the unexplainable—these are the topics which Omar Khayyâm has considered in the most winning and beautiful verse with a strange mixture of melancholy and of ironical humour.

The English translator has correctly imitated the Oriental measure in these quatrains,—which contain four lines all rhyming together except the third. The third line has no rhyme; the other three rhyme. Occasionally you may find the whole four rhyming together; but that is an exception to the general rule of the verse. The imitation of this Oriental measure may thus be said to have given to English literature an entirely new form of verse.

Now let us turn to the composition itself, beginning with some quotations which express Omar's views regarding

the impermanency of life. What is this existence, he asks. It is not more than a momentary resting place during the course of an infinite journey. His thought here is much like that expressed in a Buddhist proverb which likens life to a short time passed at a wayside inn. The imagery is Oriental.

'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.*

"Ferrâsh" is the chamberlain, the man who prepares the tent for the traveller each night, and strikes it (that is, removes and folds it up) in the morning. Again he compares life to the halt of a caravan for one moment at a desert well:

A Moment's Halt—a momentary taste
Of BEING from the Well amid the Waste—
And Lo!—the phantom Caravan has reacht
The NOTHING it set out from—Oh, make haste!

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 toTHE MASTER too;

Whose secret Presence, through Creation's veins
Running Quicksilver-like eludes your pains;
Taking all shapes from Māh to Māhi;† and
They change and perish all—but He remains.‡

Life is, he says, only like the waiting of travellers for one moment at an oasis in the desert to drink a little water. The desert is the unknown Infinite; the Well of Being at

* XLV. † *Mah* means fish, *Māhi* the moon. ‡ XLVIII—LI.

which we halt, is the present world into which we came out of mystery, out of nothingness. And we drink and pass on, and vanish back into the nothingness out of which we came. In the immeasurable darkness of mystery each life is but a tiny sparkle — the light upon a spangle; therefore what is the use of trying to find out the secret of things? The secret is infinite, while we are of a moment only; why waste that moment in trying to find out what we cannot find out? You say that we should try to discover truth; but who knows what is truth? Very possibly the difference between the true and false may be no wider than the thickness of a hair, or the difference of a single letter; if you could just find out that one little difference (but you never can find it out) then you might find yourself at once in heaven, or in the presence of the Supreme Being who made all secrets. But of Him you shall never in this life learn anything. Everywhere He is; everything is full of Him; but you can no more find Him than you can pick up a drop of quicksilver between your fingers. One thing only is sure; that He is all forms, all things from fish to moon; and that all these forms perish and disappear — though He himself remains eternally unchanged.

It is curious to observe how very closely the thought in this last verse resembles the teaching of Indian philosophy, but we have still more striking resemblances. An old Sanskrit poet compared the visible universe to a game of chess which God was playing with Himself, just for amusement. Omar expresses almost exactly the counterpart of this idea. The Deity, he tells us, is never seen—only guessed:

> 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.*

This is a simile of a puppet-show—also an Indian simile; the following lines are more imposing—

* LII.

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

But helpless Pieces of the Game He plays
Upon this Chequer-board of Nights and Days:
  Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.*

I think the first of the above two stanzas is the grandest of all the quatrains. The sun is compared only to the light within a magic lantern, making visible the shadows of the universe that pass before our eyes; we ourselves also being of the shadows. But beyond and above and beneath all is midnight, the infinite darkness of infinite mystery. God is like the holder of the lantern; we know of his presence only as, in the dark room where a magic lantern exhibition is being given, we know the presence of the showman by the motion of the lights and shadows. But the other comparison is also extremely beautiful, with its suggestion of Time as a great chess board on which the black squares represent the nights, and the white squares the days.

Holding thus that we are but the figures with which the unknown Deity plays his game, the poet naturally asks, why trouble yourself about what is going to become of you? Can you prevent your fate? Certainly not. Then what is the use of fretting about it? You are only like a ball; the ball does not ask the player why he strikes it, why he throws it in one direction rather than in another.

The Ball no question makes of Ayes and Noes,
But Here or There as strikes the Player goes;
  And He that toss'd you down into the Field,
He knows about it all—HE knows—HE knows!†

Here the field means, of course, the field of life, in which you are only the ball that God is playing with. You cannot help your fate; praying is of no use.

* LXVIII—LXIX. † LXX.

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.*

The Oriental sense of destiny as divine has never been more grandly expressed than in the above lines. But what about religious revelation, about heaven and hell, about future reward and punishment? On these subjects the poet openly expresses his utter disbelief. A future life? whoever came back from the dead? who knows anything about it? what are all the books that have been written about such things but utter nonsense—lies, the poet calls them.

Oh 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.

Strange, is it not? that of the myriads who
Before us pass'd the door of Darkness through,
  Not one returns to tell us of the Road,
Which to discover we must travel 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 comrades and to sleep return'd.

I sent my Soul through the Invisible,
Some letter of that After-life to spell:
  And by and by my Soul return'd to me,
And answer'd "I myself am Heav'n and Hell:"

Heav'n but the Vision of fulfill'd Desire,
And Hell the Shadow from a Soul on fire
  Cast on the Darkness into which Ourselves,
So late emerg'd from, shall so soon expire.†

I think you will be struck by the resemblance of this old Persian poem to a proverb of your own, which declares

* LXXI. † LXIII—LXVII.

that heaven and hell exist in the mind. Elsewhere Omar gives us the history of his own researches after truth; he speaks with open mockery — to him all philosophies are humbug, all dogmas absolute nonsense.

> 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.
>
> 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 Wisdom did I sow,
> And with mine own hand wrought to make it grow;
> And this was all the Harvest that I reap'd—
> "I came like Water, and like Wind I go."
>
> 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.*

When Nizām ul Mulk, the Prime Minister, was dying from the wounds received at the hand of an assassin, he repeated the lines of this last verse. All the problems of the universe are stated in it. An agnostic position, certainly; but not one irreconcilable with trust in the Infinite Power, as we shall see later on. The teaching is that no human mind ever can answer those three questions of the *Why*, the *Whence*, and the *Whither;* and that all study of the mystery is in vain. He himself had studied very hard, but all that he found out was that he came into the world like water, and that he must pass away from it like wind. And he tells us something more about his studies, for he does not want us to suppose that his disbelief is a disbelief of ignorance. He had read the philosophy of all the schools and the sciences of all the times,—astrology and medicine; he

* XXVI–XXIX.

had studied the book of nature as well as the books of religion. But he had found nothing; the perpetual mystery remained.

> Up from Earth's Center through the Seventh Gate
> I rose, and on the Throne of Saturn sate,
> And many a Knot unra el'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!"*

Strange as these ideas at first seem to the ordinary English reader, I imagine they must be familiar enough to you as students of Oriental philosophy. Omar means to tell us the course of his studies in a few words. The talk of "Me and Thee" means the discussion of the question of the soul; is there in each of us a personality distinguished from the Infinite, or is there not? Some told him there was both Objective and Subjective existence, others told him, with equal force of argument, that there was not. Some declared that there was personality; others told him that there was no such a thing as personality, that there was One Infinite Being in all life. He would have thought no more of this Infinite within himself, when suddenly he seems to hear a voice crying to him, "The I that is within thee cannot see." Does not this come very close to the Buddhist teaching that the divine element in each of us cannot see, cannot know, until we have passed beyond the present imperfect state of existence? But it must also remind the western reader of a strangely powerful comparison made by Schopenhauer.

* XXXI—XXXIV.

Schopenhauer remarked that the human consciousness cannot see itself,—much for the same reason, that the point at which the nerve of sight enters the eye is blind.

Since all human effort to read the riddle of the universe is utterly vain, the poet says, "Let us at least be sensible enough to take the world as it is, to accept the beauty and the love and the pleasure Nature offers us, without troubling our minds concerning that which never can be known."

> Perplext no more with Human or Divine,
> To-morrow's tangle to the winds resign,
> And lose your fingers in the tresses of
> The Cypress-slender Minister of Wine.*

By "to-morrow's tangle" the poet means the enigma of the future; and he must not be taken too literally when he speaks of wine. Wine, rigidly forbidden by Mohammedan law, represents in these verses not merely the juice of the grape, but all the pleasures of sense,—the pleasures of this world. Among the Persians it is still very common to compare a graceful girl to a cypress tree, because of the tall and slender character of the tree; and girls, usually slaves, used to serve the guests with wine at Persian feasts. You will find many descriptions of such feasts in "The Arabian Nights." The girls often wore their hair loose-flowing. We may paraphrase the verse thus: "No longer perplext by the subject of what is human or what is divine, stop thinking about the mystery of the future life; feast, drink wine, and do not be afraid to stroke the hair of the beautiful girl that serves you."

> And if the Wine you drink, the Lip you press,
> End in what All begins and ends in—Yes;
> Think then you are To-day what Yesterday
> You were—To-morrow you shall not be less.†

It is quite true that beauty is fleeting, that nothing is permanent, that pleasure quickly fades. So does Life. When

* XLI. † XLII.

somebody tells you that life begins and ends in nothing, then answer him that since this be so, you are now only what you have been before in the past, and that you cannot be anything less than that in the future. There is a cynical bit of logic here. If everything be only illusion, then what difference does it make whether we like the illusion or dislike it, whether we accept it with joy, or shun it with horror, whether we are very virtuous, or very much the reverse, — what does it matter in the Eternal order of things? To refuse pleasure in this life merely because you are in doubt about the future life—what could be more foolish! No, think of life itself as of the cup of wine offered you to drink; life is given you for gladness, for joy, not for tears and fears and doubts. Drink it as you would drink wine at a banquet; by enjoying life you will better be able, when the time comes, to face death cheerfully. Trust in the certainty that you never can have been anything less than you are now, and that in the future you cannot be less than you were in the past.

> So when the Angel of the darker Drink
> At last shall find you by the river-brink,
> And, offering his Cup, invite your Soul
> Forth to your Lips to quaff—you shall not shrink.*

"The Angel of the Darker Drink" means the angel of death—Azräel; and the river-brink means the extreme verge of the river of life. A little further on there is a mocking but very grand comparison of the lives of men to bubbles or foam upon the surface of wine — shall we say the Wine of the Universal Life?

> And fear not lest Existence closing your
> Account, and mine, should know the like no more;
> The Eternal Sākī from that Bowl has pour'd
> Millions of Bubbles like us, and will pour.†

By the word "Sākī" understand the wine bearer, the girl

* XLIII. † XLVI.

or boy who serves the wine at banquets. This is a very daring comparison, but it is certainly a very fine one—God pouring out the wine of life, whose bubbles are the souls of men. While the wine lasts there will always be bubbles; while the substance of Being lasts, there will always be joy and pain. Death and birth are not really very important, nor perhaps even very different; there is nothing to be frightened about. We should be generous to ourselves and to others in this world, even as the rose is.

> Look to the blowing Rose 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."*

That is, the rose says, "Look at me, see how generous I am! I come into the world smiling, and at once I open my purse, and scatter my treasure upon the ground." The reference, of course, is to the quick fading and falling of the perfumed petals. As for the ascetic or the libertine, the end is very much the same. A man may be foolish in either direction, too self-repressed or too self-indulgent. Either extreme is folly; life is a precious gift, a gift of joy which we should use.

> 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.†

Paraphrase thus: the men who carefully stored up, like misers, the treasure of life instead of spending it, and the men who wasted it as spendthrifts spend their patrimony,—what has become of them? Both of them have been turned back into clay, into earth; and there is no difference between the dust of the one, and that of the other. Enough to say that the clay is not gold, and that nobody would like to see it dug up again.

* XIV. † XV.

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—was gone.*

That is to say, whether ambitions succeed or fail, whether we are fortunate or unfortunate to-day, the end is the same for all; everything is like snow that sometimes falls in the desert, only to vanish at once under the heat of the sun. Yet this is not a real consolation; we cannot help regretting the impermanency of things—

Yet Ah, 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!†

There is a reference here to the Oriental custom of perfuming beautiful manuscripts with musk. Youth is compared to such a manuscript — too quickly fastened up with regret; the poet says, "We would not have things so, if we and the Deity could have the chance of making the universe over again.

Ah Love! could you and I with Him 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!‡

Even the sight of the moon above the garden makes the poet sad; and he expresses his emotion somewhat as more than one Japanese poet has done in the past.

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!§

This is the regret of the old man who knows that he cannot live very long. But he is at least consoled in heart

*XVI. †XCVI. ‡XCIX. §C.

by the consciousness that he has enjoyed his life, and has drunk all the wine that he could. This is his last recommendation or prayer to the wine-server, that cypress-slender maiden elsewhere mentioned.

> And when like her, oh Sâkî, you shall pass
> Among the Guests Star-scatter'd on the Grass,
> And in your joyous errand reach the spot
> Where I made One—turn down an empty Glass!*

Persian poets often compare a beautiful woman to the moon — especially to a new moon. The meaning, paraphrased, is: "Fair maid, when you, at some future time after I am dead, pass among the guests seated in the garden, even as the moon passes among the ranks of the stars, then, when you come to the place where I used always to sit, remember me, and turn a cup down upon this spot in memory of me."

The extracts which I have given represent the greater proportion of the famous quatrains in the book. There are altogether one hundred and one. Some of these, being only logical or argumentative, I have not quoted; others are so full of Oriental allusions that the beauty of them would require a great deal of explanation. But I think you will now see the general idea of these poems, and the general purpose of the poet. The question remains, what is the value of his philosophy?—or can we call it really a philosophy? That it must have some value is evident from the fact that Omar has been admired for eight or nine hundred years in the Orient, and that even to-day in England he has begun to captivate the public in quite a strange and startling way. Every year new editions of Fitzgerald's translation are published, and these editions have been produced in shapes ranging in value from about one yen to two hundred. A variorum edition of the poems has just been published this year, and the religious folk have been somewhat angry at this sudden popularity of Omar Khayyâm, — the

* CI.

"large infidel," as Tennyson called him. Certainly the infidelity, from a Christian point of view, is quite large. But as a matter of fact, Omar Khayyām must not be taken too seriously. We must regard him as an exquisite poet who attempted to express only one view of life in strong opposition to the fanaticism and hypocrisy of the age in which he lived. He preached a kind of Epicureanism and a kind of Pantheism—both of which we may consider to be perfectly true so far as they go. But no one system contains the whole truth. There is a beautiful story to illustrate this, which I will now tell you.

I suppose you know something about a scientific experiment, by which the relations of colour to light are made manifest. A large or small disk of cardboard or other material is painted with the different colours of the spectrum —red, yellow, green, blue, violet. When this disk is turned round slowly, you see all the colours. But when it is turned very quickly, the colours become invisible, and the disk appears to be perfectly white. Having reminded you of this experiment, let me now relate the story.

It is told by Anatole France, the greatest living French man of letters, in a charming book called "Le Puits de Sainte Claire." A holy monk asked the spirit of Evil one day what he thought of Truth. The Devil answered, "Truth is white." Then the holy monk was greatly delighted because the Devil had said that truth was white. But presently the Devil laughed, and continued: "I said that Truth is white; but I did not mean that Truth is pure and spotless. You think that white means pure, stainless, perfect. But now I am going to show you that it does not mean anything of the kind."

Then the Devil made to appear before the eyes of the monk an immense disk, or wheel, upon which thousands and thousands of images were painted, in all possible colours. And each of these images represented a religion, or a philosophy; and each figure carried a little flag, bearing an inscription. One inscription read, "There is only

one God." Another read, "There are many millions of Gods." Another inscription declared, "Man is immortal." And yet another declared, "Only the gods are immortal." And all these thousands of inscription contradicted one another, in the most extraordinary way. Then, while the monk was wondering at the spectacle, the Spirit suddenly set the wheel turning—swiftly and still more swiftly, until the sound of it became like a roar of thunder. Forthwith, all the colours vanished, and the disk was white, like the face of the moon; and the Spirit said laughing. "That is Truth—you see that it is white."