

ANCIENT PERSIAN POEM.*

The "Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam" has created quite a literary, or almost religious, cult of its own. It has led to the formation of clubs and societies, and called for edition after edition of his writings. Few authors have had so many translators or such enthusiastic students. The marvel of it is that Omar, the tent-maker—for such was his designation—who lived at Khorasan, in Persia, two hundred years before Dante, wrote only a few hundred lines, fewer even than the poet Gray. Such were Omar's mathematical abilities that he was one of the astronomers employed to reform the Persian calendar. He also wrote a treatise of algebra.

His first European translator was Dr. Thomas Hyde, who, early in the seventeenth century, wrote a Latin version of the Rubaiyat. Other translators in English, French and German followed. It was Edward Fitzgerald, the friend of Tennyson, who has inscribed to him the fine dedication of his *Tiresias*, that first made the Rubaiyat popular in English. He wrote two or three translations of these Oriental poems. But so flat did his first version fall that his publishers sold nearly the whole at a penny each. Two years ago a single copy of this meagre little pamphlet sold for £6 6s. The famous illustrations of the Rubaiyat, by Elihu Vedder, did much to popularize his writings. The volume under review is the most complete and carefully edited edition which has appeared.

The tone of the Rubaiyat reminds one sometimes of the light irony of Horace, sometimes of the sadder strain of Lucretius, and sometimes of the deeper questionings of the Book of Job, or sombre moralizing of Ecclesiastes. The great themes of his poems are wine, the rose, the nightingale—the shortness and the emptiness of life and the nothingness of death. Specimens of the melancholy

pensiveness of his style may be seen in the following examples.

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

For I remember stopping by the way
To watch a potter thumping his wet clay :
And with its all-obliterated tongue
It murmur'd—"Gently, brother, gently,
Pray !"

The Oriental fatalism of the poet is expressed in the following :

And that inverted bowl we call the sky,
Whereunder crawling, creep'd we live and die,

Lift not your hands to it for help—for it
As impotently rolls as you or I.

Shall He that of His own free fancy made
The vessel, in an after-rage destroy ?

Professor Cowell, one of the ablest critics of the Rubaiyat, writes thus : "This little volume of tetrastichs occupies its own niche in Persian literature. For terseness of expression and vigour of thought we know of no epigrams like them, even in the Greek anthology ; while for passionate earnestness and concentrated sadness there is nothing equal to them, except Lucretius. The Epicurean views which pervade them but add a deeper gloom to the melancholy ; we know that the gaiety is unreal, and the poet's smile is but a *risus sardonius* of despair.

"All things whisper in his ear of change and decay. The sad refrain rings ever in his hearing ; everywhere in the world he reads the record of the inscription which Solomon, in Eastern story, gave for a signet ring, when one asked him for a motto which would suit alike prosperity and adversity,—'This also shall pass away !'"

* "Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam." English, French and German Translations Comparatively Arranged in Accordance with the Text of Edward Fitzgerald's Version ; with Further Selections, Notes, Bibliography and other Material, Collected and Edited by Nathan Haskin Dole. Boston : Joseph Knight Company. Toronto : Wm. Briggs. 2 vols. Pp. 777. Price, cloth, \$3.50. Half Levant, \$7.00.

The preparation of this edition has evidently been a labour of love to the author. He gives Fitzgerald's two editions with comparative versions in English, French and German, by seven other writers, with copious explanatory notes. Fine etchings of Fitzgerald and Von Bodenstedt, a German translator, are given. The title page in colours is very quaint.