

Literary Department.

The World's Greatest Poems.

III. THE RUBAIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYAM.

Chronologically, Omar the Tentmaker, belongs to the twelfth century of our era, for he was born at Nishápúr, in Khorasan, in the year 1123. In all else, he is a true son of the unchanging East, of those "whom time stands still withal," though not quite in the sense applied thereto by the melancholy Jacques.

Concerning his philosophy there have been many opinions. He has been compared with Lucretius and Epicurus among the ancients, with Byron, Swinburne, and Schopenhauer, even with Voltaire, among the moderns. For myself, I admit that what follows is, simply, an attempt to give expression to the impressions derived from a study of Omar himself, not to formulate any theory of my own; at best to summarize what others have said.

A writer in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, signing himself H. E. who proves to be Herman Ethé, seems on the whole, the most trustworthy guide amid a multitude of counsellors, in whom there is not safety, but rather, confusion worse confounded. "Although", he writes, "some of his quatrains are purely mystic and pantheistic, most of them bear quite another stamp: they are the breviary of a radical freethinker, who protests, in the most forcible manner, both against the narrowness, bigotry, and uncompromising austerity of the orthodox ulema, or Mohammedan priesthood."

That, surely, has always been the attitude, I had almost said, the pose, of the freethinker, as he calls himself, in respect of orthodoxy, whether Mohammedan or Catholic. "Narrowness, bigotry, uncompromising austerity," are his favourite opprobrious epithets, to be flung freely and at random, against all who prefer the old way to his newly found primrose path, on the principle, presumably, that, if you only throw enough mud, some of it must stick. In which case, the more malodorous the mud, the better for your purpose, and the more unpleasant for your victim.

Omar, according to the same writer, aimed the shaft of his abuse against others as well as against priests. He seems to have