

OMAR KHAYYAM AND THE TRANSIENCY OF LIFE.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam in Edward Fitzgerald's translation made a deep impression upon the literary circles of all English-speaking nations, and no wonder, for they present a great truth which is not so much an expression of agnosticism as a description of the transiency of life. The same truth has been stated in various forms again and again by thinkers of almost all periods and nations of the world. The difference in the statements, however, is not due to a disagreement as to the nature of facts, but to the difference in attitude of different people.

The greatest contrast seems to be not between the Rubaiyat and the attitude of Christian thought but between Omar Khayyam and Buddhist teachings. These agree perfectly as to the doctrine of the transiency of all bodily existence, for the truth is stated in Buddhist philosophy with great emphasis that all compounds which have originated will be dissolved again. But the conclusions drawn therefrom are different. Buddha insists that because everything earthly is transient, man should think of what has not originated. It is not a compound of parts, it is not born, and so will not be a prey of death. Thus man should seek his refuge in the truth that is revealed in the words of the Buddha of which it is stated that they will never pass away; and the method of gaining this state of the uncreate, the eternal, the non-transient, is to actualize it in deeds, for while the moments of life pass away, while the combination of man's personality will be dissolved again, his deeds will remain. This Buddha advises as a conclusion which he derives from the truth of the transiency of life. We read in *Dhammapada*, 151:

"The king's mighty chariots of iron will rust,
And also our bodies resolve into dust;

But deeds, 'tis sure,
For aye endure."

and again in the *Samyutta Nikâya*, III, 2, 10:

"Naught follows him who leaves this life;
For all things must be left behind:
Wife, daughters, sons, one's kin, and friends,
Gold, grain and wealth of every kind.
But every deed a man performs,
With body, or with voice, or mind,
'Tis this that he can call his own.
This will he never leave behind.

"Deeds like a shadow ne'er depart:
Bad deeds can never be concealed;
Good deeds cannot be lost, and will
In all their glory be revealed.
Let all then noble deeds perform
As seeds sown in life's fertile field;
For merit gained this life within,
Rich blessings in the next will yield."

The position of natural man is best represented by Goethe, who in his poem on "Vanity" portrays to us an old soldier who puts his trust in nothing. Far from condemning this attitude we point out that the courage which he displays in abandoning all hope of finding permanency and boldly taking the stand of living in the moment, is in itself not immoral. It is a kind of liberation from the anxiety of a hankering after the unattainable. I refer to the well-known poem which begins:

"My trust in nothing now is placed,
Hurrah!
So in the world true joy I taste,
Hurrah!
Then he who would be a comrade of mine
Must clink his glass, and in chorus combine
And drink his cup of wine."

We know Goethe too well to think that he would advise us to use the moment in carousing and wine bibbing, and we would have to supplement this poem on vanity by other expressions of his sentiment, such as his poem on "Prometheus," who in proud self-reliance boldly builds up his life in spite of the tyrant Zeus, saying:

"Zeus, cover thou thy heaven
With cloudy mist,
And like a boy
That chops off thistles.

Exercise thy strength
 On oaks and mountain peaks.
 Yet must thou leave me
 The earth where standeth
 My hut, which was not built by thee. . . .
 Shall I yet honor thee? For what?
 Didst thou ever assuage the pangs
 Of the sorrow-laden?
 Has not my manhood been wrought in the forge
 Of omnipotent Time
 And of Fate,
 My masters and thine?"

In this number we publish an article by the Rev. Walter C. Green, who presents a contrast between the Rubaiyat and Christian hymns, thus pointing out the difference between Christian thought and the lesson Omar Khayyam preaches including his attitude toward the transiency of life. The Christian view is in many respects identical with the Buddhist view,¹ if we bear in mind that sometimes the former goes too far in its reliance on transitory expressions of the truth. Whittier's call "to works of love and duty as our being's end" and Bonar's exhortation which begins, "He liveth long who liveth well" are certainly sentiments which might appear in any religious poetry, even in the Buddhist canon, but when Arthur Cleveland Coxe compares the transient kingdoms of the world with the holy church of God he ought to mark the difference between the ideal church and the real churches. The one might be realized with any aspiring congregation that lives for the truth, while the several embodiments of church institutions are not eternal but change; they rise into existence and will pass away, whereas Mr. Coxe says, "Unshaken as the eternal hills unmovable she stands."

Mr. Green has included some hymns which we would have preferred to omit, but we do not intend to criticize either his literary taste or his preference in religious sentiment, which is determined by individual disposition, and naturally differs according to the denomination of a writer and his philosophical standpoint. Nevertheless it seems to us that considering the popularity of the Rubaiyat it is well worth while to ponder on the problem of transiency, and to heed well the truth of this doctrine as well as the choice of the proper attitude which man ought to take in the face of this truth.

¹ For a consideration of the contrast between Buddhism and Omar Khayyam, see the writer's book *Buddhism and Its Christian Critics*, pages 118-119, also the chapter on "Goethe a Buddhist."