

**THE RUBAIYAT; DONE INTO ENGLISH
FROM THE FRENCH OF J. B. NICOLAS BY
FREDERICK BARON CORVO TOGETHER
WITH A REPRINT OF THE FRENCH TEXT;
WITH AN INTRODUCTION OF NATHAN
HASKELL DOLE**

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN it is taken into consideration that the universal Christian Church, in all its denominations, has read an esoteric meaning into the sensual drama called the "Song of Solomon," it can be no matter of surprise that a Frenchman, who had spent the best years of his life in Persia, and thus knowing the language of the country and falling under the influence of the Sufis, should signalize the first complete translation of 'Umar Khayyam into any modern language by discovering in every reference to wine a symbolical and wholly spiritual significance.

Readers of Edward FitzGerald's remarkable paraphrase of a part of the quatrains attributed to the Astronomer-Poet, have become so accustomed to think of "Old Omar" as a cosmopolitan, freed from the dictates of Time and Place, that they forget his real personality, which must have been conditioned by his age and his environment. He was an Oriental, and it is sadly difficult for a Westerner to interpret what an Oriental says. His words may have a specious sound, familiar to the ear, but may hide a meaning which he would not care for the uninitiated to understand.

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We are at liberty to take 'Umar's scoffing, flippant, ribald, irreverent, gay, and anacreontic measures as indicative of his feelings and character. His favourite recreation may have been actually what he boasts, in several of his heretical poems, that it was. It is possible that he drank deeply not only during Ramazan but also on each Friday of Ramazan. The cup-bearer, — his Saki, tulip-cheeked and slender as the cypress, may have been his companion, as Oydiades was to Meleagros of Gadaza. His character may have been as depraved as his enemies declared that it was; and it is undoubtedly true that the heresies and schisms that he advocated, and his rebellious, daring, and blasphemous utterances, have made him in Persia the least esteemed of the national poets among the Orthodox; and to be least esteemed is to be least known.

It is plain, therefore, that one is at liberty to choose between the literal and the allegorical reading of 'Umar's graceful and often epigrammatic lines.

In 1863 the *Revue de l'Orient, de l'Algerie et des Colonies*, the bulletin of the Oriental Society of France, edited by M. Victor Langlois, published an article entitled "Quatrains de Quayan." It consisted of a preface signed N. and a translation of fifty of the Rubaiyat. Apparently the promise to continue the article into a series was not carried out, but the promise

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was more than fulfilled in the volume printed four years later with various emendations of spelling and with perfect completeness.

Nicolas not only allowed his translation of the poems to be tinged by a "Soufrique" undertone, often gratuitously adding interpretary phrases not in the original; but in his multifarious notes he is every little while calling attention to what he thinks his poet means. Thus in the eleventh rubai, speaking of the *jam*, or cup, with its symbolical legend engraved around its rim:

"This cup," he says, "is only a figure: the poet by it means God. The intoxication whereof he speaks in the larger number of his quatrains is not that produced by wine, but is the result of the divine love, of which the first is but the image. God, he insists, permeating all his works, may be worshipped in all created things. Now it is more agreeable to me to contemplate him in an orange than in a potato, in a cup of good wine than in a glass of water, in the crimson-mantled face of a lovely Fair than one foul and disfigured and consequently disagreeable (*et par conséquent d'un aspect dés-agréable*)."

Of the forty-fifth rubai, where it runs: "Eh bien! j'ai trouvé que la lune pâlit devant l'éclat de ton visage, que le cyprès est difforme à côté de ta taille élancée," M. Nicolas remarks with beautiful naïveté: "This quatrain is re-

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garded as mystical, and its compliments, which seem more suitable to a mistress than to the Divinity, are ascribed to the Omnipotent."

One more example will perhaps suffice to show how ingenious is *Pancien secrétaire interprète du Schah des Perses* in extracting the sufi honey from the flowers of Oriental verse. 'Umar declares that on this earth no one has held in his arms a rose-cheeked girl without Time first thrusting a thorn into his heart; and then he compares the lover to the comb, which, before it attains to the felicity of caressing the perfumed tresses of the lovely Fair, has to be tortured into unnumbered teeth. This quaint and thoroughly Oriental conceit is thus rendered by Mr. John Payne, who endeavours to communicate to it something of the rhythm of the original:—

No man in this our world a rose-cheeked fair attaineth
to,
For, by Fate's spite, his heart a thorn of care attaineth
to.

Consider but the comb; an hundred teeth 'tis cut in,
Or e'er its hand a tress of loveling's hair attaineth to.

Commenting thereon, M. Nicolas says: "This is in allusion to the manifold disappointments to which the Sufis voluntarily allow themselves to be exposed in order, by thought and by ceaseless ecstatic contemplation, to reach the perfect knowledge of the essence of the Divinity, the object of their exclusive love. The end proposed is not reached without suf-

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fering. Has not the comb — *figure bizarre et tout orientale qu'emploie là notre poète* — inanimate though it is, undergone a painful operation before it attains its place in the toilette of Beauty?"

Except in as far as the rendering of 'Umar's poems may be openly or insidiously altered, it makes very little difference whether we believe with Nicolas that he was a Sufi, or with Mr. Payne that he was a stalwart opponent of sufism. It did, to a large extent, prejudice Nicolas's conception of poems, the construction of which and the phraseology of which lend themselves easily to various interpretations.

It must be remembered to his credit, that he was the first to translate the whole body, or nearly the whole body, of verse attributed to 'Umar the Tent-maker. His first attempt at giving his countrymen some idea of this poetry was published only four years after FitzGerald's anonymous quarto with its seventy-five Rubaiyat had fallen apparently still-born from the press. It is barely possible (but not very probable) that he may have seen Professor Cowell's precedent article in *The Calcutta Review*. His superbly printed octavo with its proud boast, "Imprimé par ordre de l'Empereur à l'Imprimerie impériale," bears the date MDCCCLVII.

The version faces the original Persian, but it seems not to have brought its author much

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fame; for one seeks in vain in any encyclopedia, either French, English, or German, for mention of his name; and in the year-book of the French Consular service for 1860 he appears simply as M. Nicolas, "*Secrétaire-interprète*," and from that time on, until 1875, when he disappears from the annals of Persia, he is styled "Premier Drogman," "consul honoraire," and "chancelier de l'agence" at Resht. In the manual of the Librairie Française it is stated that he was "chancelier gérant le consulat général de France à Bagdad," and that in 1867 he published a volume of French and Persian Dialogues which two years subsequently went into a second edition.

In the "Annuaire diplomatique de la République Française pour les Années 1875-1876" is found the following brief obituary, which supplies the information that M. Nicolas died on the twentieth of October, 1875.

"M. Nicolas (Louis-Jean-Baptiste) né à Hyères (Var) en Mars, 1814, étudia de bonne heure les langues de l'Orient et entra dans la carrière du drogmanat le 25 Octobre, 1846. En 1852 le Ministre des affaires étrangères le nomma drogman à l'Ambassade de France à Constantinople. Deux ans après il fut envoyé comme drogman chancelier au consulat de Bagdad. Le 1er Novembre, 1855, il fut promu Secrétaire-interprète à la Légation de France en Perse et se rendit à Téhéran (où il avait
