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**EDWARD FITZGERALD**

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1855

## OMAR KHAYYÁM

### THE ASTRONOMER-POET OF PERSIA

OMAR KHAYYÁM was born at Naishápúr in Khorassán in the latter half of our eleventh, and died within the first quarter of our twelfth century. The slender story of his life is curiously twined about that of two others, very considerable figures in their time and country; one of them, Hasan al Sabbáh, whose very name has lengthened down to us as a terrible synonym for murder; and the other (who tells the story of all three), Nizám al Mulk, Vizyr to Alp the Lion and Malik Shah, son and grandson of Toghrol Beg the Tartar, who had wrested Persia from the feeble successor of Mahmúd the Great, and founded that Seljukian Dynasty which finally roused Europe into the Crusades. This Nizám al Mulk, in his *Wasýat* or *Testament*—which he wrote and left as a memorial for future statesmen—relates the following, as quoted in the *Calcutta Review*, No. 59, from Mirkhond's *History of the Assassins* -

"One of the greatest of the wise men of Khorassán was the Imám Mowaffak of Naishápur, a man highly honoured and revered,—may God rejoice his soul; his illustrious years exceeded eighty-five, and it was the universal belief that every boy who read the Koran or studied the traditions in his presence, would assuredly attain to honour and happiness. For this cause did my father send me from Tús to Naishápur with Abd-u-samad, the doctor of law, that I might employ myself in study and learning under the guidance of that illustrious teacher. Towards me he ever turned an eye of favour and kindness, and as his pupil I felt for him extreme affection and devotion, so that I passed four years in his service. When I first came there,

I found two other pupils of mine own age newly arrived, Hakim Omar Khayyám and the ill-fated Ben Sabbáh. Both were endowed with sharpness of wit and the highest natural powers; and we three formed a close friendship together. When the Imám rose from his lectures, they used to join me, and we repeated to each other the lessons we had heard. Now Omar was a native of Naishápur, while Hasan Ben Sabbáh's father was one Ali, a man of austere life and practice, but heretical in his creed and doctrine. One day Hasan said to me and to Khayyám, 'It is the universal belief that the pupils of the Imám Mowaffak will attain to fortune. Now, if we *all* do not attain thereto without doubt one of us will; what then shall be our mutual pledge and bond?' We answered, 'Be it what you please.' 'Well,' he said, 'let us make a vow, that to whomsoever this fortune falls, he shall share it equally with the rest, and reserve no pre-eminence for himself.' 'Be it so,' we both replied; and on those terms we mutually pledged our words. Years rolled on, and I went from Khorassán to Transoxiana, and wandered to Ghazni and Cabul; and when I returned, I was invested with office and rose to be administrator of affairs during the Sultanate of Sultan Alp Arslán."

"He goes on to state that years passed by, and both his old school friends found him out, and came and claimed a share in his good fortune, according to the schoolday vow. The Vizier was generous and kept his word. Hasán demanded a place in the government, which the Sultan granted at the Vizier's request; but discontented with the gradual rise, he plunged into the maze of intrigue of an oriental court, and, failing in a base attempt to supplant his benefactor, he was disgraced and fell. After many mishaps and wanderings, Hasan became the head of the Persian sect of the *Ismailians*—a party of fanatics who had long murmured in obscurity, but rose to an evil eminence under the guidance of his strong and evil will. In A.D. 1090, he seized the castle of Alamút, in the province of Rúdbar, which lies in the mountainous tract south of the Caspian Sea; and it was from its mountain home he obtained that evil celebrity among the Crusaders as the