Omar Khayyam, or Chiam, was born about the middle of the 11th Century, at Naishapur, Khorassan, and he died in that town about the year 1123.

Little is known as to the details of his life, and such facts as are available have been drawn principally from the 
_Wasiyat or _Testament of Mizam al Mulk (_Regulation of the Realm_), who was a fellow-pupil of Omar at the school
of the celebrated Imam Mowafek or Mowaffak. Reference to this is made in Mirkhond's _History of the Assassins_,
from which the following extract(A) is taken.

"One of the greatest of the wise men of Khorassan was the Iman Mowaffak of Naishapur, a man highly honoured and
reverenced,--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 Tus to Naishapur 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 Khayyam
and the ill-fated Ben Sabbah. Both were endowed with sharpness of wit and the highest natural powers; and we three
formed a close friendship together. When the Imam 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 Naishapur, while Hasan Ben Sabbah'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
Khayyam, "It is a universal belief that the pupils of the Imam 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 Khorassan 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 Arslan.'

"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 school-day vow. The Vizier was generous and kept his word. Hasan demanded a
place in the government, which the Sultan granted at the Vizier's request; but, discontented with a 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 Alamut, in the province of Rudbar, which lies in the
mountainous tract, south of the Caspian sea; and it was from this mountain home he obtained that evil celebrity among
the Crusaders, as the OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAINS, and spread terror through the Mohammedan world; and it is
yet disputed whether the word _Assassin_, which they have left in the language of modern Europe as their dark
memorial, is derived from the _hashish_, or opiate of hemp-leaves (the Indian _bhang_), with which they maddened
themselves to the sullen pitch of oriental desperation, or from the name of the founder of the dynasty, whom we have
seen in his quiet collegiate days, at Naishapur. One of the countless victims of the Assassin's dagger was Nizam al
Mulk himself, the old school-boy friend.

"Omar Khayyam also came to the Vizier to claim his share; but not to ask for title or office. 'The greatest boon you can
confer on me,' he said, 'is to let me live in a corner under the shadow of your fortune, to spread wide the advantages of
Science, and pray for your long life and prosperity.' The Vizier tells us, that when he found Omar was really sincere in
his refusal, he pressed him no further, but granted him a yearly pension of 1,200 _mithkals of gold from the treasury of
Naishapur.

"At Naishapur thus lived and died Omar Khayyam, 'busied,' adds the Vizier, 'in winning knowledge of every kind, and
especially in Astronomy, wherein he attained to a very high pre-eminence. Under the Sultanate of Malik Shah, he came
to Merv, and obtained great praise for his proficiency in science, and the Sultan showered favours upon him.'

"When Malik Shah determined to reform the calendar, Omar was one of the eight learned men employed to do it; the
result was the _Jalali era (so-called from _Jalal-ul-Din_, one of the king's names) --'a computation of time,' says
Gibbon, 'which surpasses the Julian, and approaches the accuracy of the Gregorian style.' He is also the author of some
astronomical tables, entitled 'Ziji-Malikshahi,' and the French have lately republished and translated an Arabic treatise
of his on Algebra.

"These severe Studies, and his verses, which, though happily fewer than any Persian Poet's, and, though perhaps
fugitively composed, the Result of no fugitive Emotion or Thought, are probably the Work and Event of his Life,
leaving little else to record. Perhaps he liked a little Farming too, so often as he speaks of the 'Edge of the Tilth' on
which he loved to rest with his Diwan of Verse, his Loaf--and his Wine.

"His Takhallus or poetical name (Khayyam) signifies a Tent-maker, and he is said to have at one time exercised that
trade, perhaps before Nizam al Mulk's generosity raised him to independence. Many Persian poets similarly derive
their names from their occupations: thus we have Attar 'a druggist,' Assar 'an oil presser,' etc. Omar himself alludes to
his name in the following whimsical lines:--

"'Khayyam, who stitched the tents of science,
Has fallen in grief's furnace and been suddenly burned;
The shears of Fate have cut the tent ropes of his life,
And the broker of Hope has sold him for nothing!'

"We have only one more anecdote to give of his Life, and that relates to the close; related in the anonymous preface
which is sometimes prefixed to his poems; it has been printed in the Persian in the appendix to Hyde's _Veterum
Persarum Religio_, p. 449; and D'Herbelot alludes to it in his Bibliotheque, under _Khiam_(B):--

"'It is written in the chronicles of the ancients that this King of the Wise, Omar Khayyam, died at Naishapur in the year
of the Hegira, 517 (A.D. 1123); in science he was unrivalled,--the very paragon of his age. Khwajah Nizami of
Samarcand, who was one of his pupils, relates the following story: 'I often used to hold conversation with my teacher,
Omar Khayyam, in a garden; and one day he said to me, 'My tomb shall be in a spot where the north wind may scatter
roses over it.' I wondered at the words he spake, but I knew that his were no idle words. Years after, when I chanced to
revisit Naishapur I went to his final resting place, and lo! it was just outside a garden, and trees laden with fruit
stretched their boughs over the garden wall, and dropped their flowers upon his tomb, so as the stone was hidden under
Much discussion has arisen in regard to the meaning of Omar's poetry. Some writers have insisted on a mystical interpretation and M. Nicholas goes so far as to state his opinion that Omar devoted himself "avec passion à l'étude de la philosophie des Soufis." On the other hand Von Hammer, the author of a _History of the Assassins_, refers to Omar as a Freethinker and a great opponent of Sufism.

Probably, in the absence of agreement amongst authorities, the soundest view is that expressed by FitzGerald's editor,(C) that the real Omar Khayyam was a Philosopher, of scientific insight and ability far beyond that of the Age and Country he lived in; of such moderate and worldly Ambition as becomes a Philosopher, and such moderate wants as rarely satisfy a Debauchee; that while the Wine Omar celebrates is simply the Juice of the Grape, he bragged more than he drank of it, in very defiance perhaps of that Spiritual Wine which left its Votaries sunk in Hypocrisy or Disgust.

FOOTNOTES:

(Footnote A: Quoted in the _Calcutta Review_, No. LIX.)

(Footnote B: "Philosophe Musulman qui a vecu en Odeur de Saintete, dans la religion vers la Fin du premier et la Commencement du second Siecle," no part of which, except the "Philosophe," can apply to _our_ Khayyam, who, however, may claim the Story as _his_, on the Score of Rubaiyat, 77 and 78 of the present Version. The Rashness of the Words, according to D'Herbelot, consisted in being so opposed to those in the Koran: "No Man knows where he shall die.")

(Footnote C: Mr. W. Aldis Wright, M.A.)

By Ralph Waldo Emerson