

The Mahdi Divan

a story by William Page

I owe my discovery of the Mahdi Divan to an odd book mistitled *The Real Omar Khayyam*. Instead of a biography of the astronomer/poet, this work, when I first saw it, was a clumsy and somewhat paranoid attempt to prove that Omar Khayyam did not write his famous *Rubaiyat*. It was published in London in 1865, when Edward Fitzgerald's translation was gathering its first praise. Rather than a literary critic, or even a writer, the author, E. T. Brown, described himself as a linguist and an amateur mathematician. In his preface he claims to have been a spy stationed in Tehran in the 1850s. He implies that he had an important role in the early stages of the 'great game,' though he gives no details of his activities. Since he traveled in the guise of a Persian scholar, he was compelled to meet with local literary people and appear to study the great Sufi poets. 'This for me,' he writes, 'was a great hardship, for I am one with no natural inclination toward poetry. Without remorse I would banish all poets from my ideal society.'

The basic contention of the book is that Khayyam could not have written the *Rubaiyat* because the quatrains express a philosophy diametrically opposed to the scientific life, and Khayyam, before anything else, was an adherent of the philosopher Avicenna. The book, at times, proceeds in a logical fashion, and Brown manages to introduce a few facts, but the prose is tedious and the argument tends to descend into prejudice and emotional ranting. Somehow he manages to read a sinister element into delightful verses like:

*Ah, fill the cup:—what boots it to repeat
How time is slipping underneath our feet:
Unborn tomorrow, and dead yesterday
Why fret about them if today be sweet!*

'There is iniquity in these four lines,' he writes. 'The [British] Empire will collapse around our ears if we allow such sentiments to influence our moral fiber.'

The book would have created no lasting impression if Brown hadn't translated excerpts from an ancient scroll he saw in Nishapur. The excerpts are included in a chapter called 'Who Wrote the Rubaiyat?' In this chapter Brown proposes that the *Rubaiyat* was written by a secret brotherhood called the Mahdi Divan and that they used Khayyam's name in order to discredit him. He writes that the Mahdi Divan has existed, in one guise or another, since the eleventh century, and that they have their own language, history, and mathematics. He also claims that they are not human—though they appear to be—that they have been known to live for over a thousand years, and that they need to sleep for thirty-five years out of each century. When they are not sleeping, they 'exert their influence over humanity.' He goes on to claim that Omar Khayyam found out about the Mahdi Divan, somehow infiltrated their ranks, and revealed certain mathematical equations that they had no intention of divulging to mankind, and that in order to counter man's inevitable progress because of these equations the Mahdi Divan released the *Rubaiyat* to the world, and that it was so successful in Persia, that now (in the 1860s) they

were re-releasing it, in English, in London, where it would be the most destructive for the British Empire. He does his best not to incriminate Edward Fitzgerald, though he contends that Fitzgerald was ‘an unwitting agent of the Mahdi Divan.’

I don’t want to concern myself too much with Brown’s shortcomings—you’ll see why later—my interest was in the Mahdi Divan, and in particular a twelfth-century scroll that Brown examined on his journey Nishapur. The scroll was a list of what he calls ‘the precepts of the Mahdi Divan.’ The document was shown to him on a visit to the tomb of Omar Khayyam. Its owner, a shepherd, was unwilling to sell the scroll because of a belief that it protected the town from outside danger. Brown describes the document as a well-preserved parchment kept in a clay pot. He claims there were one hundred and forty-four precepts listed on the scroll, but he only included six in his book. I’ll reproduce all six in order to give you some idea of their style and content. 1) Reality is layered, creation upon creation. 2) What is real at one layer is illusion at a deeper layer. 3) Common language means common illusions. 4) What eats must be eaten. 5) Death is the Creator’s greatest joke. 6) A lower world is blind to a higher world.

What first struck me about these precepts was their rugged objectiveness. They remain as true now as they would have nine hundred years ago, and they are as pertinent to an Arab as to an Italian. Culture and time don’t seem to touch them. I was also convinced that Brown could not have invented them. They didn’t seem to be within his scope. His writing demonstrated a kind of transparent English narrow mindedness that seems laughable to us now, a hundred and thirty years later. In short, I was satisfied that the scroll actually existed and that Brown had the amazing luck to see it. I hoped to have the same good fortune.

My copy of *The Real Omar Khayyam* came from the private collection of my friend Ronald Davie. Davie is noted Persian scholar and I visited at his house in 1994. One of the consequences of his enormous wealth was that he tended to buy any book relating to his specialty. At the time his personal library in Harvard housed the largest collection of books on Persian art, literature, and history in the western world. The books were in Persian, Arabic, English, Italian, Spanish, Greek, Latin, and German, all the languages Davie read. I discovered the book one rainy autumn afternoon. The title caught my attention. It is generally thought that we know little more about Omar Khayyam than the few details Fitzgerald provides in his famous preface. I expected, or half-hoped, to find a few unknown facts about the poet’s life or at least an intelligent discussion of the times that shaped him. Of course, Brown provided neither. I skimmed the book for maybe an hour and was ready give up when I discovered the story of the scroll.

Davie was helpful but less than excited by my find. He explained to me that *mahdi* is an Arabic word that means “the (divinely) guided one,” and that *divan* is an official assembly or a group of poems. He had never seen the two words put together before and was hardly encouraging. “A scroll,” he said, “that one man thinks he saw a hundred and thirty years ago. The chances of finding it are remote.”

I didn’t want to be discouraged. “Maybe someone has already found it. Someone who read Brown’s book.”

He took the edition from the table where I had set it, turned it over, and opened it. “The printer is Addison Hart,” he said. “I’ve never heard of them, which means they were small and probably went belly up after a few years. This was common in London at the time. It’s unlikely that the edition was more than a hundred books. Besides if a find of this magnitude had been unearthed, I would know about it.”

“But there must be other references.”

We spent the rest of the afternoon consulting book indexes, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and any title we thought might mention the Mahdi Divan. We found only two references. A German named Boll in a book called *A Dictionary of Middle Eastern Tribes and Cults* describes the Mahdi Divan as a ‘secret society of philosophers and mystics who gave themselves the task of correcting the mistakes of Christianity.’ But his mention is secondary; it is made in relation to his discussions of certain ascetic Christian cults that flourished in the 11th century in the area of the Caspian Sea. The book was published 1798, sixty years before Brown saw the scroll. The other reference was in *The Myths of the Middle East*, which was printed in London three years after *The Real Omar Khayyam* appeared. The passage is worth quoting in full: “The Mahdi Divan is a myth. Popular belief supposes that this legendary brotherhood keeps the material world in place with its thoughts. No one has ever claimed to belong to this society and no documents of its history or philosophy have been uncovered. To believe that this brotherhood actually exists is unaccountable and unscientific.”

It occurred to me that this last line was a poke at Brown. Why say unscientific? It makes no sense unless the writers wanted to demean the author of *The Real Omar Khayyam*, who cherished his science. Maybe Brown wasn’t ignored. Maybe he managed to create a controversy. I decided to find out what I could about his life.

The day I arrived in London it rained. I took a room at the Russell Hotel in Russell Square because of its proximity to the British Library. My Harvard credentials and a lie about a research project on the crosscurrents of Persian spiritual belief bought me a temporary pass. They had *The Real Omar Khayyam*. I spend the afternoon rereading the book and making notes, but they had no other books or information about Brown. It didn’t occur to me until the next day to ask for a cross-reference using the name Mahdi Divan. I didn’t expect anything, but I didn’t have any other leads, so I thought it worth a try. I thought my luck had changed when the librarian brought me a book called *The Mahdi Divan*, but this volume, like *The Real Omar Khayyam*, turned out to be something other than what I expected. Instead of a history of the brotherhood, *The Mahdi Divan* is a fantastic novel by a Frenchman named Pierre Chevalier. It was originally published in Paris in 1851 and then translated and published in London in 1856.

I spend the next three afternoons reading Chevalier’s novel and trying, without much success, to discern the embryonic kernels of reality in his tale. In Chevalier’s book Brown’s brotherhood is replaced by an imaginary city called Mahdi Divan. The plot is simple. With the help of a black magician, a beautiful princess is stolen from her mother by an evil king, the ruler of Mahdi Divan. The princess longs for true love and dreams every night of a prince who promises to rescue her. Most of the novel is taken up with the journey of the prince. The prince encounters the usual trials of the hero: monsters, strangers with riddles, witches that change shape, and talking serpents. In the end the prince kills the evil king and the city of Mahdi Divan disappears and he is left sitting in a garden with the princess.

The ending intrigued me—as it seemed to give some credence to the legend of a brotherhood that could hold the material world in place—but, still, it gave no real indication that the Mahdi Divan had actually existed and had written down their ideas.

The following day, after spending a restless morning napping in my hotel room, I took the Underground to Charring Cross and inquired at a number of antique bookshops for anything by Pierre Chevalier. Nobody had heard of him. But then in a shop that specialized in 19th-century scientific books, it occurred to me to ask about E. T. Brown.

The bookseller was a small, plump man with a round, bald head. He had a pince-nez tied to a ribbon that he wore around his neck. When I asked about Brown, he placed the pince-nez on his nose to have a better look at me.

“I suppose you mean Edward Tutor-Brown. The T. isn’t a middle name. In this case the mother was probably an aristocrat and so both parents’ surnames were retained, thus Tutor-Brown. It’s not uncommon here.”

“E. T. Brown is the only name I have. He wrote a book called *The Real Omar Khayyam*.”

“It’s the same man. He went a bit loopy in the end.”

“Do you have any of his books?”

“No. Last week I had four, two copies of two books actually, both published in 1860. A woman was in here on Friday. She bought all four volumes. She said he was writing a biography.”

“Of Tutor-Brown?”

“That’s what I understood. Until about two years ago Tutor-Brown was non-existent, but then a mathematician by the name of Pluck discovered that some of his equations were remarkably similar to recent discoveries in the study of irregular dynamic systems. He wrote a paper about it, and since then there’s been a resurgence of interest in Tutor-Brown.”

“Do you have the name of the biographer?”

“No. Sorry. She paid cash. A beautiful woman, though.”

“And she bought both copies of both books?”

“I thought it strange myself. She said the second copies were for a friend, a collector.”

“How did you come across the books?”

“That was a bit odd as well. About six months after the Pluck article, a woman called me and said she a distant relative of Tutor-Brown and that she had a box of unread volumes in her attic. She lugged the box down to me. Of the scientific books there were five of one and three of the other. I bought three of each. I think there were about half a dozen copies of the Khayyam book. It didn’t really interest me. I don’t recall the E. T. Brown. Could have been though. I don’t have much demand for books on poets.”

“Do you have the woman’s name?”

“And her telephone number.”

He thumbed through a box of index cards that he kept on his desk. Some of the cards were remarkably dirty. He didn’t have a computer for reference, which I thought, given his specialty, was not that irregular.

“Here it is,” he said looking at the card through his pince-nez. He didn’t take it out of the box. “Are you going to write it down?”

I found a pen and an old business card in my pocket.

“The name’s Eva Livingston. The number’s London 54 56 82 14. But you won’t find any of the scientific books. I telephoned on Monday to see if she had sold the last two copies. She had.”

I telephoned Eva Livingston, and she agreed to see me. She said was going to be away for a couple of days, so I arranged to meet when she returned. I spent the intervening days skimming Tutor-Brown’s two scientific books at the British Library. I didn’t know the titles so I simply asked for all book by Edward Tutor-Brown. I was given the two scientific books, both thin volumes, and *The Real Omar Khayyam*, which, strangely, was authored by E. Tutor-Brown, not

E. T. Brown. I assumed he did two printings and changed his mind about hiding or revealing his identity.

The first book I read, *Weather Patterns and Other Irregular Systems*, was on weather forecasting and had quite a bit of mathematics. They didn't have the Pluck article—I found out later it was published in an American scientific journal—but it was clear that the resurgence of interest in Tutor-Brown had been the result of this book. I'm not a mathematician, and so almost all the mathematics was over my head, but the basic premise of the book is that weather is not completely chaotic, that forecasting is a matter of right formulas and accurate measurement of wind, temperature, pressure, moisture, and terrain. He provides the formulas and then states that his equations are of no use in the practical world because the instruments (of his day) are not accurate enough and because the factor of terrain in the real world is too complex for prediction. He writes that the aim of his book is to 'give the professional and amateur a good theoretical overview of weather patterns and how they form and break-up.' This seemed very convenient—to state a theory and then explain that it can't be proved—but he goes on to reduce the terrain factor to zero; that is, a completely smooth globe, and offer some proofs, all mathematical.

I was more interested in the second book, *Dimensions*. In this book Tudor-Brown explains that every choice we make in our lives leads us along a particular line of time, which he associates with the fourth dimension. He goes on to suggest that the choices we reject also form legitimate lines of time, and even though consciousness doesn't normally follow these lines, they, nonetheless, exist. He says that the infinity of these rejected choices form a plane of time or the fifth dimension. He gives a very interesting description how an individual of a higher dimension would appear to an individual of a lower dimension.

Since we cannot conceive an individual of a higher plane, let us try to picture how an individual of lower plane would perceive us and see what we can learn. Let's imagine for a moment a city of two-dimensional beings that live on the surface of a lake. They cannot know the sky or the atmosphere above the lake or the depths beneath. Their whole existence is limited to the plane that extends from shore to shore. So now let's see how they would perceive us if we arrived at their lake to swim. Wadding into the pool, they would think we were beings of two circles—formed by a cross-section of our legs. Once we had waded in further we might appear as a large circle and two smaller circles—a section of our torso and arms. And what would they perceive if we swam? They would think we could change our shape and could appear in and disappear from their world without warning. In fact they would attribute to us the same qualities we attribute to gods or ghosts. They would probably, if they were thinking individuals, form many wrong ideas about us. In the same way it's inevitable that we have many illusions about individuals who have conquered the dimensions of time.

Both books surprised me; they seemed, for the day, intelligent and concise. They didn't seem to be written by the man who wrote *The Real Omar Khayyam*. Out of curiosity I opened the Khayyam book to reread certain passages. I discovered it was a different book. As I suggested earlier, I didn't think this odd at the time; I simply thought there were two printings and one was a revision of the other. I went to back to the librarian and asked for *The Real Omar Khayyam* by E. T. Brown to compare the different editions, but after looking at her files she said that there were no books listed by E. T. Brown.

"Can you check again?" I asked. "I'm sure there's a different edition; I looked at it the other day."

She looked, but without success. “According to our records,” she said, “you checked out *The Real Omar Khayyam* by E. Tutor-Brown.”

“Are you sure?”

“We have no listing at all for E. T. Brown.”

I didn’t know what to think. I returned to my table and sat reading the new Khayyam book until the library closed. I made notes and copied out whole passages. I didn’t want to give it back at closing time—I had the irrational fear that it would be replaced by the first book the next day—but books can’t be removed from the library, so I had to return it at closing time. The librarian must have noticed my resistance to giving up the book. She smiled at me and said, “You can come back tomorrow.”

The new book was a revelation. It proposes that Khayyam was a member of an esoteric group—the Mahdi Divan—and that his poetry and mathematics are a reflection of this group’s ideas. The author tells the same story about finding a parchment scroll in Nishapur while on a pilgrimage to the tomb of Khayyam. The shepherd who cared for the scroll, like in the first book, was unwilling to sell the scroll, but he allowed Tutor-Brown to make a copy of it. The author spent a month copying and translating all one hundred and forty-four sayings. He also tried to find what he could about the history of the document. The naïve belief that the scroll protects the village from harm (from the first book) is now replaced with a belief that the scroll is a list of the laws that form the foundation of the universe and that a man who studies these laws will know himself and the universe. This version includes the six precepts from the first book, as well as six more: 7) To create gold you must have gold. 8) Destiny is found on the road taken to avoid it. 9) Consciousness creates matter, not the other way around. 10) Life is a movement and a rest. 11) Any action has three forces. 12) The universe is an idea.

Later that night I telephoned Ronald Davie in America. I wanted to convince myself that I wasn’t going mad, that the first book actually existed, and that I had read it. I caught him in the evening, in his library. I asked him to find *The Real Omar Khayyam* and asked, “Is it by E. T. Brown, or E. Tutor-Brown?”

“E. Tutor-Brown,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, of course. I know Tutor-Brown. The book is famous, at least in some circles. It was reprinted in the sixties.”

“Do you remember that I read it while I was staying with you and that we talked about it?”

“Yes, of course, I remember.”

“Tell me what I wanted to know.”

“You wanted to know more about the Mahdi Divan.”

“And what did you tell me?”

“That the Mahdi Divan is generally thought to be an eastern offshoot of the Christian Gnostic tradition, though some scholars believe it’s much older and that the similarities between the ideas of the two groups are a coincidence.”

“And there’s real evidence of their existence?”

“There are fragments: An English archeologist discovered some scrolls in a tomb in Jordan near Al Jafr in the sixties. Then more recently a book was found near Az Zubayr. The book is a copy. It’s quite a mix of different sources. In it there’s a list of precepts that are supposed to originate from the Mahdi Divan. The manuscript is probably from 16th century.”

“How many precepts are in the book?”

“I think there are twenty-five.”

“When was the book discovered?”

“About two years ago. It was a big deal.”

“And the scroll in Tutor-Brown’s book?”

“Never been found.”

“What about his translations?”

“If he translated more than the twelve he published in the book, as he says, no one has ever found them.”

“And you told me all this a month ago?”

“Of course I did. You must have been sleeping.”

Eva Livingston lived in a three-story Victorian house in Chalk Farm. She arranged to meet me at teatime, and so we had tea and biscuits in her parlor, which was messy in a sentimental way. She had a lot of photographs of family and friends, and some undistinguished paintings, watercolors mainly, which I guessed to be gifts. None of the furniture matched: the main pieces in her parlor were a couple of wicker chairs, an oak coffee table, a blue couch, two overstuffed chairs—one was upholstered in a yellow and red floral design, the other was covered in a green cloth. Against one wall there was an enormous mahogany bookcase, filled with yellowed paperbacks.

I guessed Eva Livingston to be about forty. She was a divorcee with two teenage children—she showed me pictures of her children, a girl and a boy, and of her ex-husband, who she referred to as ‘the children’s father.’ She had a small frame, light brown hair, fair skin, and a nature that seemed passive and accommodating.

The tea-things were already on the table, but she left me alone while she went to the kitchen to fill the pot from the kettle. The books in the case were mostly novels and biographies of writers. She seemed to be fond of D. H. Lawrence and John Fowles. After she returned and poured the tea, she said, “I don’t know what I can tell you. Edward Tutor-Brown was my mother’s great uncle.”

“How is it that you ended up with his books?”

“This was his house. He died here.”

“How did he die?”

“I don’t know. He wasn’t young. I think he was past sixty. I don’t know much about him.”

“Do you know anything about his translation of the precepts of the Mahdi Divan?”

“Only what’s in his book on Omar Khayyam. Maybe the people at the Eldritch Society would know more.”

“The Eldritch Society?”

“He was one of the founding members. They investigate mystical phenomenon: capturing ghosts with photography, séances, automatic writing, that sort of thing. It was all the rage of London in Victorian times. There must have been hundreds of such societies in the last half of the nineteenth century.”

“And this one still exists?”

“I was surprised about that myself. I only met Ms. Leflore two weeks ago. She’s the London director. They have groups in London, Paris, and New York.”

“Is Ms. Leflore writing a biography of Tutor-Brown?”

“Have you met her?”

“The book dealer in Charring Cross told me about her. I would very much like to meet her.”

“More tea?”

“Yes,” I said, passing her my cup. “It’s very good.”

She took my cup and filled it from the pot. “It’s Formosa Oolong. Are you thinking of joining the society?”

“I would very much like to talk to Ms. Leflore about it. Are you a member?”

“No. It’s not my thing. I have two children.”

I wondered if the society was against childbearing. “Where are they located in London?”

“Ms. Leflore, Katherine, gave me a card. I have it here. She called on me yesterday morning. She wanted to see the house. I tried to answer her questions about Tutor-Brown, but really I don’t know much. I told her you were coming. She said that if you want to talk to her, you can visit her at the society.”

She produced a business card from the pocket of the jacket she was wearing over her blouse and skirt and handed it to me. The address was for the Eldritch Society, and Katherine Leflore was listed as the London director. It was downtown, on Long Acre, not far from my hotel. There was no phone number.

I thought it was probably too late to go that day, but I didn’t have anything else to do, so I took the Underground to Charring Cross. Long Acre begins near Charring Cross and runs toward Holborn. The address on the card was 846, and so I had a bit of a walk. It was getting dark by this time, and I was having a hard time finding the street numbers. The whole area seemed to be in the middle of a period of urban renewal. About a quarter of the buildings were being renovated and a few were being torn down. And then I had a few very confusing moments. After walking up to the 900 block and back again, I realized that I was on the wrong side of the street. I was looking for 846 among the odd numbers. To make matters more confusing, when I was crossing the street, a taxi appeared from nowhere, honked, and screeched to a stop. I bolted to the curb on the other side and then turned to have a look at the driver. He shook his fist at me and drove on. I stood on the sidewalk feeling unnerved. I couldn’t understand why I have stopped in the middle of the road.

I walked on feeling odd and confused. There were no other pedestrians. London seemed to be suddenly abandoned. A part of me wanted to go back to my hotel, but then it occurred to me that since I had come this far, I might as well find the building. 844 was a law office, and next to it, which I supposed was 846, there was a vacant lot. It was surrounded by a wire fence. A construction company, Wright Engineering, had posted its sign, and two piles of bricks had been moved into the yard. I assumed that a new building was to go up, but nothing had been started.

I didn’t know what to do. I felt tricked. After a time I started up the street looking for someone ask about the building. In the 900 block I found an open bookstore, so I went in. A young woman was at a counter in front, but she was talking on her cell phone, so I walked around waiting for her to finish her call. I was the only customer. The shop, besides selling used books, displayed recent releases for various publishers. I decide to look at the display of new books. At some point I noticed that one of the publishers was Addison Hart. It took me a moment to realize why that particular name was familiar to me. I stood staring at the rack until it hit me that Addison Hart had published *The Real Omar Khayyam* in 1865. Davie had told me that he had never heard of them and that they probably went bankrupt a hundred and forty years ago,

and yet, on the rack in front of me, there were fifteen new titles published that year. Even forgetting Davie for the moment, I should have known something about them. Five titles were on the occult, which was a kind of hobby of mine, and besides I have a better than average knowledge of book collecting. To test myself I checked to see if I knew about the other publishers that had displays. There were nineteen other houses represented, and I knew all but two: one published horror novels, which I never read, and the other was a recent start-up.

For some reason I found this discovery more disconcerting than the card that led me to a vacant lot. The card could have been a trick—though I could think of no reason why Eva Livingston would play such an elaborate joke on me—but this latest discovery made me consider the possibility that I was losing my mind or least my memory.

I was so wrap up in my thoughts that I didn't notice when the girl at the counter finished her phone call. She was suddenly standing next to me. She asked, "Can I help you find something?"

"Do you know anything about the publisher Addison Hart?"

"What did you want to know?"

"Are they new?"

"Hardly. Are you interested in a particular title?"

"Yes. *The Real Omar Khayyam* by E. Tutor-Brown."

"Let me check their list."

She went back to the counter and keyed in the title at her computer. "It's not listed," she said. "It must be out of print. Let me try a used book search. What's author's name?"

"E. Tutor-Brown."

She typed and then read the screen. "Yes, here it is. *The Real Omar Khayyam*, E. Tutor-Brown. Reprinted in 1968, but not since. We don't have it. There's a shop in Edinburgh that has a copy. Twenty-five pounds. Do you want their telephone number?"

"No, that's all right. I'm visiting."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. I was looking for the Eldritch Society. They're supposed to be on Long Acre. You don't know where they are, do you?"

"No. But I'm new. I don't know this area very well."

"Thanks."

Outside the bookshop I hailed a taxi. It was looking like it might rain. At the hotel I decided to call Davie, but for some reason I couldn't find his number in my address book. Finally I called information in Boston and had them dial the number for me. It must have been about eight in the morning, his time, when I finally reached him. He seemed perplexed by the call.

"Who is this?"

I told him my name again.

"And I know you from where?"

"I was at your house a month ago. We talked about a book, *The Real Omar Khayyam*."

"I know the book."

"You told me that the publisher, Addison Hart, probably went belly up in the 1860s."

"Is this a joke? Addison Hart going belly up. I ordered a book from them last month. Are you sure you have the right person?"

"Ronald Davie. You're a Persian scholar and you live and teach at Harvard."

"Are you one of my students?"

“We met at a book fair nine years ago.”

“Yes, well, of course, that was a long time ago. I might have forgotten. And why exactly did you call?”

I said, “Never mind,” and hung up.

Later I had a number of drinks at the hotel bar.

I slept well that night. I put my head on the pillow and the next thing I remembered was waking up eight hours later. I felt good and rested. I told myself that I wouldn't get upset by anything that happened to me that day, but immediately, after getting out of bed, I noticed an unfamiliar book among my papers on the desk next to the bed. Without thinking I picked it up. It was a 1968 edition of *The Real Omar Khayyam*, and inside, on the endpaper, was one of my bookplates. I panicked for a moment, but then I thought: just because there's no logical explanation for this book appearing in my hotel room, doesn't mean that I have to be afraid. Besides, I thought, someone just saved me the bother of walking to the British Library. I called and asked room service to bring tea and toast up to my room. Then I dressed.

The book deviated from the one I read two days earlier at the British Library in only a couple respects. The main difference—the one we're interested in here—is that was a chapter toward the middle of the book entitled ‘What is the Mahdi Divan?’ There was no such chapter in the ‘other’ books. I sat down to read it.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the Mahdi Divan in their time was feared and hated, which is to say that they were misunderstood. They began as a group of Christian Gnostics. Unlike other Christian groups they didn't emphasize good works or poverty; they wanted to see the future. Christ predicted his own death, Peter's denial, and the destruction of Jerusalem, and the original members of the Mahdi Divan were convinced that the salvation of the soul could be measured by this capacity. This belief led them to a series of rudimentary experiments that were really no more than games of chance played with a simple deck of cards. Some say the Tarot deck grew out of their experiments, but the first cards were unadorned. The backs of the cards were blank, and the faces had a number from one to ten on them. One monk would shuffle the ten cards, and a second monk had to predict which card was to going to be turned up. At first the cards were turned over in the order of the shuffle, but later the first monk was allowed to pull a card from anywhere in the deck, and then later drawings of nobility (the forerunner of the jacks, queens, and kings of modern playing cards) were added to the mix. They weren't interested in probability, but in order to judge their results, they had to understand probability, which was the beginning of their mathematics.

An investigation of the idea of choice was a natural conclusion to their games. They formulated it like this: if the future can be predicted, it means that it already exists, and therefore cannot be changed, which means man has no choice. This doctrine led them into a moral quandary. If Peter had no choice about his denial in the garden, why was it necessary for him to feel remorse? Or to put it broader terms: if man's life is preordained, how is it possible for him to earn salvation? By this time their understanding of mathematics was becoming more sophisticated, and they began to formulate a man's life in geometric constructions. The first and most ignorant abstraction is that man's life can be compared to a line. This oversimplification affirms the naïve conclusion that only selected choices form reality, and that all rejected choices are non-existent. They quickly moved beyond this half-truth. They saw that the idea of sin presupposes, at least mathematically, the idea of deviations from the line, and once you accept

that man has a choice, you conclude that his rejected choices must exist somewhere, that they must form another dimension, or a plane, in time. They knew that the rejected choices must exist somewhere outside man's awareness and that no line was straight. And when they attempted to graph the possibilities of all lives, they were forced to admit that the universe of choices, because they are infinite, would form a solid. It didn't take them long to see that they had formulated a mathematical description of God.

What the monks began to realize was that foretelling the future was not a matter of guessing what was going to happen, but rather a matter of navigating toward the possible future they had predicted. They wondered whether it was possible for consciousness, once it had made a wrong choice to jump from the present line of reality to a rejected line of reality. Mathematically they formulated that circumstances would have to be favorable. In some cases lines of reality would cross. At these moments, they believed a jump was possible. But individual lifelines were seen to be extremely variable. When a choice takes a life in a completely different direction, a jump is very unlikely. Jumping for these people was impossible. People with no strong interests were also as unlikely jumpers. They drift. Never returning to rejected lines.

It seems unlikely that the Mahdi Divan could have come to their theory of dimensional jumps by using abstract thought alone. Their mathematics only proved that lines of reality cross, it didn't tell them if it was possible for an individual to make a jump. It seems more likely that the theory was after the fact, that it was based on the experience of one or more monks, who had accidentally made a jump. Once they knew it could happen by chance, they must have endeavored to see if they could make it happen by calculation and by an effort of will.

The history of the next period of Mahdi Divan is marred by superstition and unfounded accusations. It is commonly thought that the monks in order to carry on their experiments immersed themselves in the study of magic, and, if their enemies are right, devil worship. Some rumors seem more likely than others; for instance, they almost certainly passed through a period of great wealth, which was in opposition to their original beliefs. They also became isolationists, some say elitists. They no longer shared their knowledge with the outside. A record of jumps was supposed to exist, but, at best, this record would be haphazard. They must have known that a record of jumps in one line would inevitably be left unfinished. They had the figures. They knew that, since there was an infinite number of possible lines, the chances of any jumper returning to the original line—where he began—were astronomical. What is more likely is that once they began to learn to jump, they scattered records in as many different lines as possible. They knew there could be no authoritative record in any one line because a record could only contain cases that were collected in that reality. But as time went on, it would become possible for a talented jumper to collect not only his experiences but also material deposited by other jumpers, thus filling out the records.

Although no authentic record of jumps has been uncovered in our line of reality, fragments and hints exist. One of the more curious is a pamphlet that was discovered in Paris in 1783. The Mahdi Divan is not mentioned by name, though the publisher, a defrocked priest who later became an active instigator in the French Revolution, states that the source of his stories was a 'renegade brotherhood.' The title of the pamphlet is 'Two Versions of History.' The first story recounts how an evil priest condemns his enemies by 'traveling to the past' and leaving a trail of incriminating evidence. This story has the feel of something invented by the pamphleteer, who clearly blamed someone, unnamed in the document, for his fall from grace. The second story tells of a remarkable version of reality, where Christ is never crucified. Instead he is murdered secretly—with no apparent involvement from the High Priests—in a Roman prison a

year or so after what we think of his crucifixion date. (He appears to his followers after this death in this version as well.) So instead of Christianity separating itself from Judaism in the first century after Christ's death, Christ's teaching changes Judaism from the inside. Instead of an early Church of Rome, a unified Jewish people wage a third and then a fourth Jewish revolt, in which the Jews push the Romans out of Jerusalem and then out of portions of Asia Minor. After forcing Rome to negotiate a peace, a Jewish Empire was formed and prospered for nearly two hundred years. But then in 396 (their calendar) the history of Europe, strangely, begins to veer back into something resembling our line of reality. This shift happens because a Jewish cult separates itself from the orthodox culture. The spark that ignited the break was an official decision by the High Jewish Assembly to not recognize Jesus as the Christ. The question had never been settled and was forced into debate by a rebel rabbi, who wanted to do away with much of Jewish law. The rabbi was later called Joseph the Divider. This Joseph first coins the name Christian in order to distinguish himself and his followers from Orthodox Judaism; he also revises the calendar, which seems to be a year or two earlier than ours. He centers his teaching in Hippo, but travels widely—like Paul in our line—setting up congregations in cities in the Jewish and Roman empires. The Romans, who were in decline, quickly took to this new religion because of its opposition to the Jewish Empire. By the end of Joseph's life the early Christian Church, with its hierarchy of bishops and priests, is already formed. Ironically Joseph, despite being a rabbi, resists becoming a priest because of a desire to live a scholarly life. He writes the first gospel that demonizes the Jews in 404 at the age of forty. Later in his life he dismisses the Old Testament altogether and embraces Plato and the Greek philosophers. Finally, in 422 he agrees to be ordained as a priest—within a year he travels to Rome and is made a bishop—thus cementing the foundation that would become something very close to the Roman Catholic Church in our line.

What is interesting about this example is how the line turns away from our reality and then veers back toward it. If there had been no later common ground, a jump to our line would have been impossible.

This is about two-thirds of the chapter; the rest deals with some probable datelines and influences. Tudor-Brown guesses that Mahdi Divan was started somewhere between 1020 and 1050, though it's possible that they existed in secret from a much earlier date. He says that they were influenced by the Christian Gnostics, Saint Augustine, Avicenna, and Plato. No direct influences are known. In fact Tudor-Brown conjectures that groups researching their ideas existed all over the world in his time (the latter part of the nineteenth century) though he adds, 'in many cases these groups may be unaware of the source of the ideas they study.'

After I finished reading this chapter, I realized that I was using the Eldritch Society business card as a bookmark. I wondered how it had gotten from my coat pocket to the book. Written on the back of the card, in my handwriting was: Tuesday, 11:00 am. Apparently I had made an appointment. I was so disoriented that had to call the hotel desk to find out the day of the week. It was Tuesday.

I left the hotel at around ten-thirty and walked toward the Strand. The sky was clear and the air was unusually fresh for London. I entered Long Acre on the 900 block and passed by the bookshop I had visited the evening before. For some reason I was surprised to see the shop. I half expected that it wouldn't be there or would be different than I remembered it. I looked in the window; the same girl sat at the counter looking at a computer screen.

846 was a gray Victorian building. Two pillars flanked the front door. Nothing was posted outside as to the nature of the business inside, but in the lobby there was a list of businesses and room numbers. The Eldritch Society was on the second floor, room 209. The elevator didn't seem to be working, so I took the stairs. The door to 209 was open.

I was expecting an office or maybe a receptionist, but there was only one large room. On one side there were four groups of overstuffed chairs; the other side was set up a lecture hall, with a podium and maybe thirty folding chairs. The wall opposite the door had a large built-in bookcase, which were full. A woman was standing in front on the bookcase with her back to me. When she heard me come in, she turned. She was an attractive woman dressed in a simple tweed skirt and white blouse. She was tall, even for an Englishwoman, and had dark, shoulder-length hair. For a moment we just stared at each other, finally I was able to ask, "Are you Katherine Leflore?"

"Yes."

"I think we have an appointment."

"I was expecting you."

I took a step closer to her. For some reason I wanted to touch her. There was a fairly long pause, and then it occurred to me to ask, "Did you send me the book?"

She seemed confused. "No. Did we meet before?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you want to sit?"

With her hand she indicated the group of overstuffed chairs. After I sat, she chose the chair facing me. Looking at her, my mind drew a blank. Since I didn't make the appointment, I didn't know why we were meeting. She broke the silence. "Which book?"

"*The Real Omar Khayyam*. Someone sent a copy to my hotel."

She seemed surprised. "Not the 1865 edition?"

"No. The reprint from the sixties."

"The 1865 is extremely rare. So what did you want to talk about?"

"Eva Livingston told me that you were writing a biography of Tutor-Brown."

"I'm still collecting information, but that is my intention. Are you interested in Tutor-Brown?"

"I'm more interested in the Mahdi Divan."

"Really?"

"In his book Tutor-Brown says that he translated all 144 precepts, but he only published twelve. Ms. Livingston thought the Eldritch Society might have his original manuscript."

She seemed surprised by my statement. She stood, walked to the bookcase, and searched for a volume. When she returned to her chair, she was holding the 1968 edition of *The Real Omar Khayyam*.

"This is the book you read?"

"It looks like it."

"You haven't finished it, have you?" She opened the book, paged through it until she came to a section toward the end, and then handed it to me. There was an appendix with all 144 precepts.

I felt silly. I didn't know what to say. Then I figured that I might as well tell her the truth. I was trying to decide where to begin, but then I opened my mouth and said, "I think I've been jumping between different lines of reality."

She looked surprised again, raised her eyebrows, and said, "Really?"

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m wrong.”

“You didn’t do anything to jump, did you? I mean you didn’t want to jump? It just happened.”

“That’s right.”

“That’s incredible.”

“You think it’s possible?”

“I don’t know. Tutor-Brown thought it possible. He had a theory that some people have a predisposition for it, in the same way some people have a predisposition for schizophrenia or epilepsy. He believed that most people wouldn’t know about it; they would lie to themselves or believe they were crazy. He went through a bout of madness himself.”

“Paranoia?”

“How did you know?”

“In one line of reality he didn’t recover. He wrote *The Real Omar Khayyam*, only it was a very different book.”

“Did he still form the Eldritch Society?”

“No.”

“Amazing. I wonder what I do. Originally the Eldritch Society was created to find jumpers. Of course, it wasn’t advertised that way, and only a handful of members knew about it. A kind of inner circle. For a long time we investigated strange photographs. You’ve probably heard about the phenomenon. A young man goes off to war and is killed and five years later he appears like a ghost in a family photograph. Tutor-Brown believed that the camera, in some cases, was able to capture two lines of reality, and, in this example, the boy survived in the second line. He thought there were places, like crosscurrents, where different realities meet. We also investigated fortune-telling. We thought foresight and jumping were sister talents. All and all in his lifetime Tutor-Brown discovered two other jumpers—a nearly illiterate gardener and a Spanish woman who was telling fortunes in Soho. Since his death we’ve discovered none. You’re the first case that I know about in the last hundred and twenty years.”

“And the society has existed all this time?”

“We’ve gone on to other things. The majority of our members know nothing about jumping or Tutor-Brown’s theories. I’m the London director. I know our history. I’m also an amateur mathematician. Tutor-Brown’s real genius was for mathematics. He had no formal training at all. He read a few books and taught himself. Are you a mathematician?”

“No.”

“Too bad.”

“So the equations he used in his mathematics came from the Mahdi Divan?”

“Nobody knows that for certain. I think his weather forecasting equations are based on some formulas he saw in Nishapur. He had a near-photographic memory when it came to numbers.” She stopped speaking and glanced at her watch. “I’m sorry. I have to go now, but I want to see you again. I have so much to tell you. Can you come back this afternoon?”

“Yes.”

She rose. “I’ll go out with you.”

She locked the door with a key from the outside and then we walked to the stairs. I didn’t want to leave her; I imagined I would return and find an empty lot again. In the lobby I asked, “Can you tell me how it works? I mean this has never happened to me before, and now less than two weeks I’ve jumped at least four times.”

“According to Tudor-Brown you’ll go through periods where you jump a number of times, and then you’ll rest in one line of reality for a while. He wrote about it. I have his notes, but they’re at my flat. After my appointment, I’ll go home and collect them. Can we meet back here at three?”

“Yes.”

She opened the door for me, and we started toward the street. Long Acre was crowded with pedestrians. I felt anxious. Something was bothering me, but for a moment I could formulate it in mind. Then it hit me. I grabbed Katherine Leflore’s arm. “What if I jump before three?”

She seemed affected by my fear. She said, “I didn’t think of that.”

“In my original line Tutor-Brown was a crank called E. T. Brown, and in another line this building is torn down.”

She smiled. “I don’t think we can do anything about that. Even if we stayed together, the effect would be the same. I will still see you; so we can only hope that you’re going to rest here for a while. I’m sorry, but I really have to go now. But I want to see you again. I have so much to tell you and to ask you about.”

She started to go, but then she turned, put her hand on my shoulder, and said, “Don’t worry, fate brought us together. I don’t think it will take you away before we can get to know each other.” Then she turned and quickly picked her way through the crowd and disappeared.

I stood looking at the street in front of me. Pedestrians hurried in every direction. They seemed to be mostly businessmen and secretaries on lunch break. Across the street a line was forming outside a restaurant. It occurred to me that the food must be good, so I walked across the street and stood at the end of the queue. I sat at the window and ate lunch staring across the street at number 846. When the lunch crowd left, I ordered coffee and prepared to wait until three. It was after my second cup of coffee, that I had the sensation of waking up. It was as if I had blacked out for a moment and then come to. I looked around and then at my watch. It was just past two. I was where I was supposed to be. Across the street people came and went at 846, and the pedestrian traffic was busy, though less so than it had been at noon. For a moment I thought nothing of my momentary blackout, but then I knew I had jumped again. I left some money for my bill and rushed out of the restaurant. From the outside the building at 846 looked exactly the same. I ran into the lobby. The first thing I noticed was that the elevator worked. There was the sound of a ding and the doors opened and an elderly couple got off and walked passed me. I didn’t take the elevator. I ran up the stairs to the second floor and down the hall to room 209. It was vacant. There was a To Let sign on the door and the number of an estate agent. I didn’t know what to do. I drifted back toward the stairs and down into the lobby. Then I remembered the bookstore I had been in the other day. I crossed the street and walked there. The store was there, but the young woman I had seen that morning and the day before was replaced by an elderly man. I checked to see if the publisher Addison Hart had a selection of books on display. They didn’t, so I asked the man about it.

“Addison Hart? No, I don’t know them.”

“Can you do a search on your computer?”

He bent over the computer screen. “Any book in particular.”

“Just the publisher: Addison Hart.”

He typed. “You’re right. There are eleven used books listed, but only six different titles. They were all published between 1861 and 1865. They must have gone out of business.”

“Anything by E. T. Brown or E. Tutor-Brown?”

He scanned the screen. “No. I’m sorry.”

I left the store and walked back to 846. I stood in the lobby hoping that somehow Katherine Leflore would appear at three. Of course she didn’t. At three-fifteen I walked up the stairs to 209. It was still vacant. I could see through the window in the door that the room was empty of bookcases and chairs. I walked back down to the lobby, wondering what Katherine Leflore was thinking right now, as she waited for me to arrive. But then it hit me. She wasn’t waiting at all. In her set of possibilities I would show up. She had said it himself: *I will still see you, so we can only hope that you’re going to rest here for a while*. I wasn’t in that set of possibilities anymore, but another me, a possible me, was still there.

I walked outside and stood between the pillars of 846 Long Acre, looking out toward the street. Somewhere down the street a horn blew and a car came to a screeching halt. People turned, looking toward the sound. A moment later a taxi stopped in front of the building, a woman got out and hurried past me. The scene was so alive, but I couldn’t believe it. For me it was a mirage, an illusion that could melt, disappear, and be replaced by another London at any moment.

If you are reading this now, it means that you are part of the line of history that I finally settled in. It’s been more than a decade now, and I haven’t jumped since that moment in the restaurant. Since that day I’ve done a considerable amount of research. In this particular line of history E. T. Brown died in an asylum at the age of forty-one. He never formed the Eldritch Society, and he wrote no books. The Mahdi Divan, if they ever existed—I think they did—were careful not to leave any records.

Eva Livingston doesn’t remember our meeting. I wasn’t able to discern any particular difference in her life. She still lives in a three-story Victorian in Chalk Farm and has two children. Ronald Davie is again an acquaintance of mine, remembers my weekend visit, but has no recollection of ever speaking to me about the Mahdi Divan.

Historically I can’t say anything about the four or five lines of possibilities that I jumped into during that short period when I first came to London, but I can compare my original line with this one, the one you take as a final reality. This may seem strange to you, but in my original line, the one I grew up in, John Kennedy was not assassinated in Dallas on November 22nd in 1963, but was instead shot and killed eight days later at a press conference on December 1st in Washington D.C. Lee Harvey Oswald was not the assassin; another man by the name of Harold Buckner was accused of the crime, convicted, and was sent to the electric chair in a Virginia prison in February of 1964. In this line Harold Buckner was committed to an insane asylum in 1965 and died there in 1973. Strangely there were just as many conspiracy theories—including those that implicated the military—in my original line. And this is just one difference; really the history that I was taught in school is very different than what you know. I won’t go into details—that’s not why I’m writing this—but in order to get some idea of my confusion, just try to imagine what it means that there were eight extra days of the Kennedy administration. Those eight days made quite an impact. For instance, on November 29th in my original line, Kennedy gave a speech to congress, coming out against the escalation of the Vietnam War. It was a very famous speech; schoolchildren had to memorize it. I don’t have actual figures, but in my childhood, Johnson was much more conflicted about sending more troops to Vietnam. He didn’t end the war, but he didn’t escalate it either. He vacillated, which hurt his image as much as his escalation of the war hurt him in this line. In 1968 the Democratic Party still lost the presidential campaign, after losing Robert Kennedy in the L. A. shooting, but Nixon ran on a

platform of 'winning the war' instead of 'peace with honor.' Nixon escalated the war, which meant that the primary focus of the anti-war movement came later, which affected everything from popular music to the actual death toll of the war.

Strangely, by 1996, the year of my period of jumping, my history had begun to more and more resemble the history that you think of as true. I have wondered about this, especially since the same phenomenon was described in the story that Tutor-Brown related in the chapter he called 'What is the Mahdi Divan?' In that story history also veers back toward a familiar line. In other words, I don't think I could have jumped to your line if my original line hadn't veered back toward the history you think as true.

In my more paranoid moments I think that my jumping was the result of my investigation of the Mahdi Divan. It just seems suspicious to me that I only started to jump after I began to inquire about this strange brotherhood. But, in my more lucid moments, I understand that, at least theoretically, it shouldn't matter to them. Since all lines have to exist, why would it matter to them which line of possibilities my consciousness followed? It even occurred to me that I can spread certain ideas in this line because I have jumped into this reality at midstream. The problem is that these ideas, if I speak openly of them, will undermine my credibility. How can I speak of a secret group if there is no historical evidence that they existed. And how can I compare my experiences with those of Tutor-Brown if he left no record in this history?

There are days when I don't trust my own sanity. My life up until 1996 is like a shadow. We depend on shared memories; they make us feel that we are a part of a society or of a generation, and my memories, at least up until 1996, are different. Since my last jump, I've become guarded. I have to be careful about what I say. I tell myself that all this happened, but, in truth, every day I have to summon all my strength to keep my mind from slipping from reserve and calculation to paranoia. I don't want you to think I'm insane. I want to be believed; I want my story to get out and to be read by many people. In particular I want it to be read by someone who has undergone what I have. I hope to be able to spare him (or her) the doubts that have haunted me.

I guess I shouldn't complain. I have had some great joy in this line. For one thing, I searched and found Katherine Leflore. In this line she's a homeopathic doctor with a thriving practice in north-east London. I introduced myself by becoming one of her patients. Of course, she had no recollection of our meeting at the Eldritch Society. Later, after I settled in London and we were married, I found out that she has an amateur interest in the phenomenon of 'ghost photographs' from the nineteenth century. And because of my encouragement and support, she decided to write a book on the subject. Who knows? If I cannot continue Tutor-Brown's work, perhaps I can start a new line of inquiry that will investigate the ideas that were important to him.