

# **The History of Caliph Vathek**

**By**

**William Beckford**

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## Introduction

William Beckford, born in 1759, the year before the accession of King George the Third, was the son of an Alderman who became twice Lord Mayor of London. His family, originally of Gloucestershire, had thriven by the plantations in Jamaica; and his father, sent to school in England, and forming a school friendship at Westminster with Lord Mansfield, began the world in this country as a merchant, with inheritance of an enormous West India fortune. William Beckford the elder became Magistrate, Member of Parliament, Alderman. Four years before the birth of William Beckford the younger he became one of the Sheriffs of London, and three years after his son's birth he was Lord Mayor. As Mayor he gave very sumptuous dinners that made epochs in the lives of feeding men. His son's famous "History of the Caliph Vathek" looks as if it had been planned for an Alderman's dream after a very heavy dinner at the Mansion House. There is devotion in it to the senses, emphasis on heavy dining. Vathek piqued himself on being the greatest eater alive; but when the Indian dined with him, though the tables were thirty times covered, there was still want of more food for the voracious guest. There is thirst: for at one part of the dream, when Vathek's mother, his wives, and some eunuchs "assiduously employed themselves in filling bowls of rock crystal, and emulously presented them to him, it frequently happened that his avidity exceeded their zeal, insomuch that he would prostrate himself upon the ground to lap up the water, of which he could never have enough." And the nightmare incidents of the Arabian tale all culminate in a most terrible heartburn. Could the conception of Vathek have first come to the son after a City dinner?

Though a magnificent host, the elder Beckford was no glutton. In the year of his first Mayoralty, 1763, Beckford, stood by the side of Alderman Wilkes, attacked for his No. 45 of The North Briton. As champion of the popular cause, when he had been again elected to the Mayoralty, Beckford, on the 23rd of May, 1770, went up to King George the Third at the head of the Aldermen and Livery with an address which the king snubbed with a short answer. Beckford asked leave to reply, and before His Majesty recovered breath from his astonishment, proceeded to reply in words that remain graven in gold upon his monument in Guildhall. Young Beckford, the author of "Vathek," was then a boy not quite eleven years old, an only son; and he was left three years afterwards, by his father's death, heir to an income of a hundred thousand a year, with a million of cash in hand.

During his minority young Beckford's mother, who was a granddaughter of the sixth Earl of Abercorn, placed him under a private tutor. He was taught music by Mozart; and the Earl of Chatham, who had been his father's friend, thought him so fanciful a boy--"all air and fire"--that he advised his mother to keep the Arabian Nights out of his way. Happily she could not, for Vathek adds the thousand and second to the thousand and one tales, with the difference that it joins to wild inventions in the spirit of the East touches of playful extravagance that could come only from an English humourist who sometimes laughed at his own tale, and did not mind turning its comic side to the reader. The

younger William Beckford had been born at his father's seat in Wiltshire, Fonthill Abbey; and at seventeen amused himself with a caricature "History of Extraordinary Painters," encouraging the house-keeper of Fonthill to show the pictures to visitors as works of Og of Basan and other worthies in her usual edifying manner.

Young Beckford's education was continued for a year and a half at Geneva. He then travelled in Italy and the Low Countries, and it was at this time that he amused himself by writing, at the age of about twenty-two, "Vathek" in French, at a single sitting; but he gave his mind to it and the sitting lasted three days and two nights. An English version of it was made by a stranger, and published without permission in 1784. Beckford himself published his tale at Paris and Lausanne in 1787, one year after the death of a wife to whom he had been three years married, and who left him with two daughters.

Beckford went to Portugal and Spain; returned to France, and was present at the storming of the Bastille. He was often abroad; he bought Gibbon's library at Lausanne, and shut himself up with it for a time, having a notion of reading it through. He was occasionally in Parliament, but did not care for that kind of amusement. He wrote pieces of less enduring interest than "Vathek," including two burlesques upon the sentimental novel of his time. In 1796 he settled down at Fonthill, and began to spend there abundantly on building and rebuilding. Perhaps he thought of Vathek's tower when he employed workmen day and night to build a tower for himself three hundred feet high, and set them to begin it again when it fell down. He is said to have spent upon Fonthill a quarter of a million, living there in much seclusion during the last twenty years of his life. He died in 1844.

The happy thought of this William Beckford's life was "Vathek." It is a story that paints neither man nor outward nature as they are, but reproduces with happy vivacity the luxuriant imagery and wild incidents of an Arabian tale. There is a ghost of a moral in the story of a sensual Caliph going to the bad, as represented by his final introduction to the Halls of Eblis. But the enjoyment given by the book reflects the real enjoyment that the author had in writing it--enjoyment great enough to cause it to be written at a heat, in one long sitting, without flagging power. Young and lively, he delivered himself up to a free run of fancy, revelled in the piled-up enormities of the Wicked Mother, who had not brought up Vathek properly, and certainly wrote some parts of his nightmare tale as merrily as if he were designing matter for a pantomime.

Whoever, in reading "Vathek," takes it altogether seriously, does not read it as it was written. We must have an eye for the vein of caricature that now and then comes to the surface, and invites a laugh without disturbing the sense of Eastern extravagance bent seriously upon the elaboration of a tale crowded with incident and action. Taken altogether seriously, the book has faults of construction. But the faults turn into beauties when we catch the twinkle in the writer's eye.

H. M.

## The History Of The Caliph Vathek

Vathek, ninth Caliph of the race of the Abassides, was the son of Motassem, and the grandson of Haroun Al Raschid. From an early accession to the throne, and the talents he possessed to adorn it, his subjects were induced to expect that his reign would be long and happy. His figure was pleasing and majestic; but when he was angry one of his eyes became so terrible that no person could bear to behold it, and the wretch upon whom it was fixed instantly fell backward, and sometimes expired. For fear, however, of depopulating his dominions and making his palace desolate he but rarely gave way to his anger.

Being much addicted to women and the pleasures of the table, he sought by his affability to procure agreeable companions; and he succeeded the better as his generosity was unbounded, and his indulgences unrestrained, for he was by no means scrupulous, nor did he think with the Caliph Omar Ben Abdalaziz that it was necessary to make a hell of this world to enjoy Paradise in the next.

He surpassed in magnificence all his predecessors. The palace of Alkoremme, which his father Motassem had erected on the hill of Pied Horses, and which commanded the whole city of Samarah, was in his idea far too scanty; he added therefore five wings, or rather other palaces, which he destined for the particular gratification of each of his senses.

In the first of these were tables continually covered with the most exquisite dainties, which were supplied both by night and by day, according to their constant consumption, whilst the most delicious wines and the choicest cordials flowed forth from a hundred fountains that were never exhausted. This palace was called "The Eternal or Unsatiating Banquet."

The second was styled "The Temple of Melody, or the Nectar of the Soul." It was inhabited by the most skilful musicians and admired poets of the time, who not only displayed their talents within, but, dispersing in bands without, caused every surrounding scene to reverberate their songs, which were continually varied in the most delightful succession.

The palace named "The Delight of the Eyes, or the Support of Memory," was one entire enchantment. Rarities collected from every corner of the earth were there found in such profusion as to dazzle and confound, but for the order in which they were arranged. One gallery exhibited the pictures of the celebrated Mani, and statues that seemed to be alive. Here a well-managed perspective attracted the sight; there the magic of optics agreeably deceived it; whilst the naturalist on his part exhibited, in their several classes, the various gifts that Heaven had bestowed on our globe. In a word, Vathek omitted nothing in this palace that might gratify the curiosity of those who resorted to it, although he was not able to satisfy his own, for he was of all men the most curious.

"The Palace of Perfumes," which was termed likewise "The Incentive to Pleasure," consisted of various halls, where the different perfumes which the earth produces were kept perpetually burning in censers of gold. Flambeaux and aromatic lamps were here lighted in open day. But the too powerful effects of this agreeable delirium might be avoided by descending into an immense garden, where an assemblage of every fragrant flower diffused through the air the purest odours.

The fifth palace, denominated "The Retreat of Joy, or the Dangerous," was frequented by troops of young females beautiful as the houris, and not less seducing, who never failed to receive with caresses all whom the Caliph allowed to approach them; for he was by no means disposed to be jealous, as his own women were secluded within the palace he inhabited himself.

Notwithstanding the sensuality in which Vathek indulged, he experienced no abatement in the love of his people, who thought that a sovereign immersed in pleasure was not less tolerable to his subjects than one that employed himself in creating them foes. But the unquiet and impetuous disposition of the Caliph would not allow him to rest there; he had studied so much for his amusement in the lifetime of his father as to acquire a great deal of knowledge, though not a sufficiency to satisfy himself; for he wished to know everything, even sciences that did not exist. He was fond of engaging in disputes with the learned, but liked them not to push their opposition with warmth; he stopped the mouths of those with presents whose mouths could be stopped, whilst others, whom his liberality was unable to subdue, he sent to prison to cool their blood: a remedy that often succeeded.

Vathek discovered also a predilection for theological controversy, but it was not with the orthodox that he usually held. By this means he induced the zealots to oppose him, and then persecuted them in return; for he resolved at any rate to have reason on his side.

The great prophet Mahomet, whose vicars the caliphs are, beheld with indignation from his abode in the seventh heaven the irreligious conduct of such a vicegerent. "Let us leave him to himself," said he to the genii, who are always ready to receive his commands; "let us see to what lengths his folly and impiety will carry him; if he run into excess we shall know how to chastise him. Assist him, therefore, to complete the tower which, in imitation of Nimrod, he hath begun, not, like that great warrior, to escape being drowned, but from the insolent curiosity of penetrating the secrets of Heaven; he will not divine the fate that awaits him."

The genii obeyed, and when the workmen had raised their structure a cubit in the day-time, two cubits more were added in the night. The expedition with which the fabric arose was not a little flattering to the vanity of Vathek. He fancied that even insensible matter showed a forwardness to subserve his designs, not considering that the successes of the foolish and wicked form the first rod of their chastisement.

His pride arrived at its height when, having ascended for the first time the eleven thousand stairs of his tower, he cast his eyes below, and beheld men not larger than

pismires, mountains than shells, and cities than bee-hives. The idea which such an elevation inspired of his own grandeur completely bewildered him; he was almost ready to adore himself, till, lifting his eyes upward, he saw the stars as high above him as they appeared when he stood on the surface of the earth. He consoled himself, however, for this transient perception of his littleness with the thought of being great in the eyes of others, and flattered himself that the light of his mind would extend beyond the reach of his sight, and transfer to the stars the decrees of his destiny.

With this view the inquisitive prince passed most of his nights on the summit of his tower, till he became an adept in the mysteries of astrology, and imagined that the planets had disclosed to him the most marvellous adventures, which were to be accomplished by an extraordinary personage from a country altogether unknown. Prompted by motives of curiosity, he had always been courteous to strangers, but from this instant he redoubled his attention, and ordered it to be announced by sound of trumpet, through all the streets of Samarah, that no one of his subjects, on peril of displeasure, should either lodge or detain a traveller, but forthwith bring him to the palace.

Not long after this proclamation there arrived in his metropolis a man so hideous that the very guards who arrested him were forced to shut their eyes as they led him along. The Caliph himself appeared startled at so horrible a visage, but joy succeeded to this emotion of terror when the stranger displayed to his view such rarities as he had never before seen, and of which he had no conception. In reality, nothing was ever so extraordinary as the merchandise this stranger produced; most of his curiosities, which were not less admirable for their workmanship than splendour, had, besides, their several virtues described on a parchment fastened to each. There were slippers which enabled the feet to walk; knives that out without the motion of a hand; sabres which dealt the blow at the person they were wished to strike; and the whole enriched with gems that were hitherto unknown.

The sabres, whose blades emitted a dazzling radiance, fixed more than all the Caliph's attention, who promised himself to decipher at his leisure the uncouth characters engraven on their sides. Without, therefore, demanding their price, he ordered all the coined gold to be brought from his treasury, and commanded the merchant to take what he pleased; the stranger complied with modesty and silence.

Vathek, imagining that the merchant's taciturnity was occasioned by the awe which his presence inspired, encouraged him to advance, and asked him, with an air of condescension, "Who he was? whence he came? and where he obtained such beautiful commodities?" The man, or rather monster, instead of making a reply, thrice rubbed his forehead, which, as well as his body, was blacker than ebony, four times clapped his paunch, the projection of which was enormous, opened wide his huge eyes, which glowed like firebrands, began to laugh with a hideous noise, and discovered his long amber-coloured teeth bestreaked with green.

The Caliph, though a little startled, renewed his inquiries, but without being able to procure a reply; at which, beginning to be ruffled, he exclaimed: "Knowest thou, varlet,

who I am? and at whom thou art aiming thy gibes?" Then, addressing his guards, "Have ye heard him speak? is he dumb?"

"He hath spoken," they replied, "though but little."

"Let him speak again, then," said Vathek, "and tell me who he is, from whence he came, and where he procured these singular curiosities, or I swear by the ass of Balaam that I will make him rue his pertinacity."

The menace was accompanied by the Caliph with one of his angry and perilous glances, which the stranger sustained without the slightest emotion, although his eyes were fixed on the terrible eye of the prince.

No words can describe the amazement of the courtiers when they beheld this rude merchant withstand the encounter unshocked. They all fell prostrate with their faces on the ground to avoid the risk of their lives, and continued in the same abject posture till the Caliph exclaimed in a furious tone, "Up, cowards! seize the miscreant! see that he be committed to prison and guarded by the best of my soldiers! Let him, however, retain the money I gave him; it is not my intent to take from him his property; I only want him to speak."

No sooner had he uttered these words than the stranger was surrounded, pinioned with strong fetters, and hurried away to the prison of the great tower, which was encompassed by seven empalements of iron bars, and armed with spikes in every direction longer and sharper than spits.

The Caliph, nevertheless, remained in the most violent agitation; he sat down indeed to eat, but of the three hundred covers that were daily placed before him could taste of no more than thirty- two. A diet to which he had been so little accustomed was sufficient of itself to prevent him from sleeping; what then must be its effect when joined to the anxiety that preyed upon his spirits? At the first glimpse of dawn he hastened to the prison, again to importune this intractable stranger; but the rage of Vathek exceeded all bounds on finding the prison empty, the gates burst asunder, and his guards lying lifeless around him. In the paroxysm of his passion he fell furiously on the poor carcasses, and kicked them till evening without intermission. His courtiers and vizirs exerted their efforts to soothe his extravagance, but finding every expedient ineffectual, they all united in one vociferation: "The Caliph is gone mad! the Caliph is out of his senses!"

This outcry, which soon resounded through the streets of Samarah, at length reaching the ears of Carathis, his mother, she flew in the utmost consternation to try her ascendancy on the mind of her son. Her tears and caresses called off his attention, and he was prevailed upon by her entreaties to be brought back to the palace.

Carathis, apprehensive of leaving Vathek to himself, caused him to be put to bed, and seating herself by him, endeavoured by her conversation to heal and compose him. Nor could any one have attempted it with better success, for the Caliph not only loved her as a



mother, but respected her as a person of superior genius; it was she who had induced him, being a Greek herself, to adopt all the sciences and systems of her country, which good Mussulmans hold in such thorough abhorrence. Judicial astrology was one of those systems in which Carathis was a perfect adept; she began, therefore, with reminding her son of the promise which the stars had made him, and intimated an intention of consulting them again.

"Alas!" sighed the Caliph, as soon as he could speak, "what a fool have I been! not for the kicks bestowed on my guards who so tamely submitted to death, but for never considering that this extraordinary man was the same the planets had foretold, whom, instead of ill-treating, I should have conciliated by all the arts of persuasion."

"The past," said Carathis, "cannot be recalled, but it behoves us to think of the future; perhaps you may again see the object you so much regret; it is possible the inscriptions on the sabres will afford information. Eat, therefore, and take thy repose, my dear son; we will consider to-morrow in what manner to act."

Vathek yielded to her counsel as well as he could, and arose in the morning with a mind more at ease. The sabres he commanded to be instantly brought, and poring upon them through a green glass, that their glittering might not dazzle, he set himself in earnest to decipher the inscriptions; but his reiterated attempts were all of them nugatory; in vain did he beat his head and bite his nails, not a letter of the whole was he able to ascertain. So unlucky a disappointment would have undone him again had not Carathis by good fortune entered the apartment.

"Have patience, son!" said she; "you certainly are possessed of every important science, but the knowledge of languages is a trifle at best, and the accomplishment of none but a pedant. Issue forth a proclamation that you will confer such rewards as become your greatness upon any one that shall interpret what you do not understand, and what it is beneath you to learn; you will soon find your curiosity gratified."

"That may be," said the Caliph; "but in the meantime I shall be horribly disgusted by a crowd of smatterers, who will come to the trial as much for the pleasure of retailing their jargon as from the hope of gaining the reward. To avoid this evil it will be proper to add that I will put every candidate to death who shall fail to give satisfaction; for, thank Heaven! I have skill enough to distinguish between one that translates and one that invents."

"Of that I have no doubt," replied Carathis; "but to put the ignorant to death is somewhat severe, and may be productive of dangerous effects; content yourself with commanding their beards to be burnt--beards in a state are not quite so essential as men."

The Caliph submitted to the reasons of his mother, and sending for Morakanabad, his prime vizir, said: "Let the common criers proclaim, not only in Samarah, but throughout every city in my empire, that whosoever will repair hither, and decipher certain characters which appear to be inexplicable, shall experience the liberality for which I am

renowned; but that all who fail upon trial shall have their beards burnt off to the last hair. Let them add also that I will bestow fifty beautiful slaves, and as many jars of apricots from the Isle of Kirmith, upon any man that shall bring me intelligence of the stranger."

The subjects of the Caliph, like their Sovereign, being great admirers of women and apricots from Kirmith, felt their mouths water at these promises, but were totally unable to gratify their hankering, for no one knew which way the stranger had gone.

As to the Caliph's other requisition, the result was different. The learned, the half-learned, and those who were neither, but fancied themselves equal to both, came boldly to hazard their beards, and all shamefully lost them.

The exaction of these forfeitures, which found sufficient employment for the eunuchs, gave them such a smell of singed hair as greatly to disgust the ladies of the seraglio, and make it necessary that this new occupation of their guardians should be transferred into other hands.

At length, however, an old man presented himself whose beard was a cubit and a half longer than any that had appeared before him. The officers of the palace whispered to each other, as they ushered him in, "What a pity such a beard should be burnt!" Even the Caliph, when he saw it, concurred with them in opinion, but his concern was entirely needless. This venerable personage read the characters with facility, and explained them verbatim as follows: "We were made where everything good is made; we are the least of the wonders of a place where all is wonderful, and deserving the sight of the first potentate on earth."

"You translate admirably!" cried Vathek; "I know to what these marvellous characters allude. Let him receive as many robes of honour and thousands of sequins of gold as he hath spoken words. I am in some measure relieved from the perplexity that embarrassed me!"

Vathek invited the old man to dine, and even to remain some days in the palace. Unluckily for him, he accepted the offer; for the Caliph, having ordered him next morning to be called, said: "Read again to me what you have read already; I cannot hear too often the promise that is made me, the completion of which I languish to obtain."

The old man forthwith put on his green spectacles, but they instantly dropped from his nose on perceiving that the characters he had read the day preceding had given place to others of different import.

"What ails you?" asked the Caliph; "and why these symptoms of wonder?"

"Sovereign of the world," replied the old man, "these spectacles hold another language to-day from that they yesterday held."

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