

**WILLIAM
BECKFORD**

VATHEK; AN
ARABIAN
TALE

William Beckford
Vathek; An Arabian Tale

«Public Domain»

Beckford W.

Vathek; An Arabian Tale / W. Beckford — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| MEMOIR. | 5 |
| PREFACE | 9 |
| VATHEK | 10 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 21 |

Vathek; An Arabian Tale

MEMOIR. BY WILLIAM NORTH

William Beckford, the author of the following celebrated Eastern tale, was born in 1760, and died in the spring of 1844, at the advanced age of eighty-four years. It is to be regretted, that a man of so remarkable a character, did not leave the world some record of a life offering points of interest different from that of any of his contemporaries, from the peculiarly studious retirement and eccentric avocations in which it was chiefly passed. Such a memoir would have formed a curious contrast with that of the late M. de Chateaubriand, who, born nearly at the same period, outlived but by a few years, the strange Englishman, whose famous romance forms a brilliant ornament to French literature, which even *Atala* is unlikely to outlive in the memory of Chateaubriand's countrymen. All men of genius should write autobiographies. Such works are inestimable lessons to posterity. As it is, there are few men, of whom it is more difficult to compose an elaborate and detailed history than the author of "Vathek." From such scanty sources as are open to us, the reader must be content with a few striking facts and illustrations, which may serve to convey some idea of the idiosyncrasy of a man, whose whole life was a sort of mystery, even to his personal acquaintances.

His great-great-grandfather was lieutenant-governor and commander of the forces in Jamaica; and his grandfather president of the council in the same island. His father, though not a merchant, as has been represented, but a large landed proprietor, both in England and the West Indies, was lord mayor of London, and distinguished himself in presenting an address to the king, George the Third, – by a spirited retort to his majesty, – who had the ill-breeding to treat discourteously a deputation which the lord mayor headed. The portraits of Alderman Beckford, and his more celebrated son, were painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds. The former died in 1770, leaving the subject of this memoir the wealthiest commoner in England.

No pains were spared on the education of the young Croesus – the lords Chatham and Camden being consulted by his father on that subject. Besides Latin and Greek, he spoke five modern languages, and wrote three with facility and elegance. He read Persian and Arabic, designed with great skill, and studied the science of music under the great Mozart.

At the age of eighteen he visited Paris, and was introduced to Voltaire. "On taking leave of me," said Beckford, "he placed his hand on my head, saying, 'There, young Englishman, I give you the blessing of a very old man.' Voltaire was a mere skeleton – a bony anatomy. His countenance I shall never forget."

His first literary production, "Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters," was written at the early age of seventeen. It would appear, that the old housekeeper at Fonthill, was in the habit of edifying visitors to its picture gallery by a description of the paintings, mainly derived from her own fertile imagination. This suggested to our author, the humorous idea of composing a catalogue of supposititious painters with histories of each, equally fanciful and grotesque. Henceforward, the old housekeeper had a printed guide (or rather, mis-guider) to go by, and could discourse at large on the merits of Og of Bashan! Waterslouchy of Amsterdam! and Herr Sucrewasser of Vienna! their wives and styles! As for the country squires, etc., "they," Beckford tells us, "took all for gospel."

"Vathek," – the superb "Vathek," which Lord Byron so much admired, and on which he so frequently complimented the author, – "Vathek," the finest of Oriental romances, as "Lallah Rookh" is the first of Oriental poems, by the pen of a "Frank," was written and published before our author

had completed his twentieth year, it having been composed at a *single sitting*! Yes, for three days and two nights did the indefatigable author persevere in his task. He completed it, and a serious illness was the result. What other literary man ever equalled this feat of rapidity and genius?

“Vathek” was originally written in French, of which its style is a model. The translation which follows, is not by the author himself, though he expressed perfect satisfaction with it. It was originally published in 1786. For splendour of description, exquisite humour, and supernatural interest and grandeur, it stands without a rival in romance. In as thoroughly Oriental keeping, Hope’s “Anastasius, or Memoirs of a Modern Greek,” which Beckford himself highly admired, can alone be compared with it.

Much of the description of Vathek’s palace, and even the renowned “Hall of Eblis,” was afterwards visibly embodied in the real Fonthill Abbey, of which wonders, almost as fabulous, were at one time reported and believed.

Fonthill Abbey, which had been destroyed by fire, and re-built during the life-time of the elder Beckford, was on account of its bad site demolished, and again re-built under the superintendence of our author himself, assisted by James Wyatt, Esq., the architect, with a magnificence that excited the greatest attention and wonder at the time. The total outlay of building Fonthill, including furniture, articles of vertu, etc., must have been enormous, not much within the million, as estimated by the “Times.” A writer in the “Athenæum” mentions £400,000 as the sum. Beckford informed Mr. Cyrus Redding, that the exact cost of building Fonthill was £273,000.

The distinguishing architectural peculiarity of Fonthill Abbey, was a lofty tower, 280 feet in height. This tower was prominently shadowed forth in “Vathek,” and shows how strong a hold the idea had upon his mind. Such was his impatience to see Fonthill completed, that he had the works continued by torchlight, with relays of workmen. During the progress of the building, the tower caught fire, and was partly destroyed. The owner, however, was present, and enjoyed the magnificent burning spectacle. It was soon restored; but a radical fault in laying the foundation, caused it eventually to fall down, and leave Fonthill a ruin in the life-time of its founder.

Not so much his extravagant mode of life, which is the common notion, as the loss of two large estates in a law suit (the value of which may be inferred from the fact, that *fifteen hundred slaves* were upon them) induced our author to quit Fonthill, and offer it and its contents for public sale. There was a general desire to see the interior of the palace, in which its lord had lived in a luxurious seclusion, so little admired by the curious of the fashionable world. “He is fortunate,” says the “Times” of 1822, “who finds a vacant chair within twenty miles of Fonthill; the solitude of a private apartment is a luxury which few can hope for.”.. “Falstaff himself could not *take his ease* at this moment within a dozen leagues of Fonthill.”.. “The beds through the county are (literally) doing double duty – people who come in from a distance during the night must wait to go to bed until others get up in the morning.”.. “Not a farm-house, however humble, – not a cottage near Fonthill, but gives shelter to fashion, to beauty, and rank; ostrich plumes, which, by their very waving, we can trace back to Piccadilly, are seen nodding at a casement window over a depopulated poultry-yard.”

The costly treasures of art and vertu, as well as the furniture of the rich mansion, were scattered far and wide; and one of its tables served the writer of this memoir to scribble upon, when first stern necessity, or yet sterner ambition, urged him to add his mite to the Babel tower of literature. At that table I first read “Vathek.” I have read it often since, and every perusal has increased my admiration.

Nearly fifty years after the publication of “Vathek,” in 1835, Mr. Beckford published his “Recollections of an Excursion to the Monasteries of Alcobaca and Batalha,” which he had taken in 1795, together with an epistolary record of his observations in Italy, Spain and Portugal, between the years 1780 and 1794. These are marked, as he himself intimates, “with the bloom and heyday of youthful spirits and youthful confidence, at a period when the older order of things existed with all its picturesque pomps and absurdities; when Venice enjoyed her Piombi and sub-marine dungeons; Prance her Bastille; the Peninsula her Holy Inquisition.” With none of those subjects, however, are

the letters occupied – but with delineations of landscape, and the effects of natural phenomena. These literary efforts appear to have exhausted their author’s productive powers; in a word, he seems soon to have been “used-up,” and then to have discontinued his search after new sensations, or to have been content to live without them.

After the sale of Fonhill, our author lived a considerable time in Portugal, and hence Lord Byron, who was fond of casting the shadow of his own imagination over every object, penned the well-known lines at Cintra:

“There thou, too, Vathek, England’s wealthiest son,
Once formed thy paradise; as not aware
Where wanton wealth her mightiest deeds hath done,
Meek peace, voluptuous lures, was ever wont to shun.

Here didst thou dwell; here scenes of pleasure plan,
Beneath yon mountain’s ever beauteous brow;
But now, as if a thing unblest by man,
Thy fairy dwelling is as lone as thou!
Here giant weeds a passage scarce allow
To halls deserted; portals gaping wide
Fresh lessons to the thinking bosom; how
Vain are the pleasaunces on earth supplied,
Swept into wrecks anon by time’s ungentle tide.”

These sombre verses contrast strangely with Beckford’s saying to Mr. Cyrus Redding, in his seventy-sixth year, “that he had never felt a moments’ ennui in his life.”

Beckford was in person scarcely above the middle height, slender, and well formed, with features indicating great intellectual power. He was exactly one year younger than Pitt, the companion of his minority. His political principles were popular, though it is recorded, that at a court ball on the Queen’s birth-day, in 1782, he, with Miss North, led up a country dance. He sat in parliament, in his early years, both for Wells and Hendon, but retired on account of bad health. This, however, he overcame by careful diet and exercise, as testified by his great bodily activity almost to the last. He was a man of most extensive reading, and cultivated taste.

The last years of his life were passed at Bath – where he united two houses in Lansdown Crescent, by an arch thrown across the street, and containing his library, which was well selected, and very extensive. Not far off, he again erected a tower, 180 feet high, of which the following description was given at the time of his decease, by a correspondent of the *Athenæum*: —

“Mr. Beckford, at an early period of his residence there, erected a lofty tower, in the apartments of which were placed many of his choicest paintings and articles of virtu. Asiatic in its style, with gilded lattices and blinds, or curtains, of crimson cloth, its striped ceilings, its minaret, and other accessories, conveyed the idea that the being who designed the place and endeavoured to carry out the plan, was deeply imbued with the spirit of that lonely grandeur and strict solitariness which obtains through all countries and among all people of the East. The building was surrounded by a high wall, and entrance afforded to the garden in which the tower stood, by a door of small dimensions. The garden itself was Eastern in its character. Though comparatively circumscribed in its size, nevertheless were to be found within it, solitary walks and deep retiring shades, such as could be supposed Vathek, the mournful and the magnificent, loved, and from the bowers of which might be expected would suddenly fall upon the ear, sounds of the cymbal and the dulcimer. The building contained several apartments crowded with the finest paintings. At the time I made my inspection the walls were crowded with the choicest productions of the easel. The memory falls back upon ineffaceable

impressions of Old Franks, Breughel, Cuyp, Titian, (a Holy Family), Hondekooter, Polemberg, and a host of other painters whose works have immortalized Art. Ornaments of the most exquisite gold fillagree, carvings in ivory and wood, Raphaelesque china, goblets formed of gems, others fashioned by the miraculous hands of Benvenuto Cellini, filled the many cabinets and *recherché* receptacles created for such things. The doors of the rooms were of finely polished wood – the windows of single sweeps of plate glass – the cornices of gilded silver; every part, both within and without, bespeaking the wealth, the magnificence, and the taste of him who had built this temple in dedication to grandeur, solitariness, and the arts.”

From the summit of this tower, Mr. Beckford, and he alone without a telescope, – could behold that other tower of his youthful magnificence, Fonhill; on which he loved to gaze, with feelings which it would be difficult to describe. His eyesight was wonderful; he could gaze upon the sun like an eagle; and on the day that the great tower at Fonhill fell he missed it in the landscape long before the news of the catastrophe reached Bath.

In conclusion, we have only to add, that our author, in his life-time, had all that wealth can give, and in his grave his memory will retain that which no wealth can purchase. Whatever may have been his errors, they have died with him. His genius yet lives, and “Vathek,” now for the first time presented to the public in a popular form, will, whilst English literature lasts, never want readers, and, while good taste flourishes, admirers.

PREFACE

The original of the following story, with some others of a similar kind, collected in the east by a man of letters, was communicated to the editor above three years ago. The pleasure he received from the perusal of it induced him at that time to transcribe, and since to translate it. How far the copy may be a just representation it becomes not him to determine. He presumes however to hope that if the difficulty of accommodating our English idioms to the Arabic, preserving the correspondent tones of a diversified narration, and discriminating the nicer touches of character through the shades of foreign manners be duly considered, a failure in some points will not preclude him from all claim to indulgence; especially if those images, sentiments, and passions, which being independent of local peculiarities, may be expressed in every language, shall be found to retain their native energy in our own.

VATHEK

Vathek, ninth Caliph ¹ 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 ² 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, ³ 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 Alkoremmi, which his father Motassem had erected on the hill of Pied Horses, and which commanded the whole city of Samarah, ⁴ 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 particular 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. Flambeaus and aromatic lamps were here lighted in open day; but the too powerful

¹ *Caliph*. This title amongst the Mahometans comprehends the concrete character of prophet, priest, and king; and is used to signify the *Vicar of God on earth*. – Habesci’s State of the Ottoman Empire, p. 9. Herbelot, p. 985.

² *One of his eyes became so terrible*. The author of Nighiaristan hath preserved a fact that supports this account; and there is no history of Vathek, in which his *terrible eye* is not mentioned.

³ *Omar Ben Abdalaziz*. This Caliph was eminent above all others for temperance and self-denial; insomuch, that he is believed to have been raised to Mahomet’s bosom, as a reward for his abstinence in an age of corruption. Herbelot, p. 690.

⁴ *Samarah*. A city of the Babylonian Irak, supposed to have stood on the site where Nimrod erected his tower. Khondemir relates, in his life of Motassem, that this prince, to terminate the disputes which were perpetually happening between the inhabitants of Bagdat and his Turkish slaves, withdrew from thence; and, having fixed on a situation in the plain of Catoul, there founded Samarah. He is said to have had in the stables of this city a hundred and thirty thousand pied horses; each of which carried, by his order, a sack of earth to a place he had chosen. By this accumulation, an elevation was formed that commanded a view of all Samarah, and served for the foundation of his magnificent palace. Herbelot, p. 752, 808, 985. Anecdotes Arabes, p. 413.

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, ⁵ 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 life-time 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, ⁶ 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 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 upwards, 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 the 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

⁵ *Houris*. The Virgins of Paradise, called, from their large black eyes, *Hur al oyun*. An intercourse with these, according to the institution of Mahomet, is to constitute the principal felicity of the faithful. Not formed of clay, like mortal women, they are deemed in the highest degree beautiful, and exempt from every inconvenience incident to the sex. Al Koran; *passim*.

⁶ *Genii*. Genn or Ginn, in the Arabic, signifies a Genius or Demon – a being of a higher order, and formed of more subtle matter than man. According to Oriental mythology, the Genii governed the world long before the creation of Adam. The Mahometans regarded them as an intermediate race between angels and men, and capable of salvation: whence Mahomet pretended a commission to convert them. Consonant to this, we read that, “When the servant of God stood up to invoke him, it wanted little but that the Genii had pressed on him in crowds, to hear him rehearse the Koran.” Herbelot, p. 357. Al Koran ch. 72.

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 his 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 their splendour, had besides, their several virtues described on a parchment fastened to each. There were slippers which enabled the feet to walk; knives that cut 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 enquiries, 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 then again," 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."

This 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 prayed 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 viziers 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 was soon resounded through the streets of Samarah, at length reached 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 mean time 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 vizier, 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 sabres hold another language to-day, from that they yesterday held.”

“How say you?” returned Vathek. “But it matters not! tell me, if you can, what they mean.”

“It is this, my lord,” rejoined the old man: “Woe to the rash mortal who seeks to know that of which he should remain ignorant and to undertake that which surpasseth his power!”

“And woe to thee!” cried the Caliph, in a burst of indignation: “to-day thou art void of understanding: begone from my presence, they shall burn but the half of thy beard, because thou wert yesterday fortunate in guessing. My gifts I never resume.”

The old man, wise enough to perceive he had luckily escaped, considering the folly of disclosing so disgusting a truth, immediately withdrew, and appeared not again.

But it was not long before Vathek discovered abundant reason to regret his precipitation; for though he could not decipher the characters himself, yet, by constantly poring upon them, he plainly perceived that they every day changed; and unfortunately no other candidate offered to explain them. This perplexing occupation inflamed his blood, dazzled his sight, and brought on a giddiness and debility that he could not support. He failed not, however, though in so reduced a condition, to be often carried to his tower, as he flattered himself that he might there read in the stars, which he went to consult, something more congruous to his wishes. But in this his hopes were deluded; for his eyes,

dimmed by the vapours of his head, began to subserve his curiosity so ill, that he beheld nothing but a thick dun cloud, which he took for the most direful of omens.

Agitated with so much anxiety, Vathek entirely lost all firmness; a fever seized him and his appetite failed. Instead of being one of the greatest eaters, he became as distinguished for drinking. So insatiable was the thirst which tormented him, that his mouth, like a funnel, was always open to receive the various liquors that might be poured into it and especially cold water, which calmed him more than every other.

This unhappy prince being thus incapacitated for the enjoyment of any pleasure, commanded the palaces of the five senses to be shut up; forebore to appear in public, either to display his magnificence or administer justice; and retired to the inmost apartment of his harem. As he had ever been an indulgent husband, his wives, overwhelmed with grief at his deplorable situation, incessantly offered their prayers for his health, and unremittingly supplied him with water.

In the mean time, the Princess Carathis, whose affliction no words can describe, instead of restraining herself to sobbing and tears, was closeted daily with the Vizier Morakanabad, to find out some cure or mitigation of the Caliph's disease. Under the persuasion that it was caused by enchantment, they turned over together leaf by leaf, all the books of magic that might point out a remedy; and caused the horrible stranger, whom they accused as the enchanter, to be everywhere sought for with the strictest diligence.

At the distance of a few miles from Samarah stood a high mountain, whose sides were swarded with wild thyme and basil, and its summit overspread with so delightful a plain that it might be taken for the Paradise destined for the faithful. Upon it grew a hundred thickets of eglantine and other fragrant shrubs; a hundred arbours of roses, jessamine, and honeysuckle; as many clumps of orange trees, cedar, and citron; whose branches, interwoven with the palm, the pomegranate, and the vine, presented every luxury that could regale the eye or the taste. The ground was strewn with violets, harebells, and pansies; in the midst of which sprung forth tufts of jonquils, hyacinths, and carnations, with every other perfume that impregnates the air. Four fountains, not less clear than deep, and so abundant as to slake the thirst of ten armies, seemed purposely placed here to make the scene more resemble the garden of Eden, which was watered by the four sacred rivers. Here the nightingale sang the birth of the rose, her well-beloved, and at the same time lamented its short-lived beauty; whilst the turtle deplored the loss of more substantial pleasures and the wakeful lark hailed the rising light that reanimates the whole creation. Here, more than anywhere, the mingled melodies of birds expressed the various passions they inspired; as if the exquisite fruits, which they pecked at pleasure, had given them a double energy.

To this mountain Vathek was sometimes brought, for the sake of breathing a purer air; and especially, to drink at will of the four fountains, which were reputed in the highest degree salubrious, and sacred to himself. His attendants were his mother, his wives, and some eunuchs, who assiduously employed themselves in filling capacious bowls of rock crystal, and emulously presenting them to him. But 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.

One day when this unhappy prince had been long lying in so debasing a posture, a voice, hoarse but strong, thus addressed him:

“Why assumest thou the function of a dog, oh Caliph, so proud of thy dignity and power?”

At this apostrophe he raised up his head and beheld the stranger that had caused him so much affliction. Inflamed with anger at the sight, he exclaimed:

“Accursed Giaour! ⁷ what comest thou hither to do? is it not enough to have transformed a prince, remarkable for his agility, into one of those leather barrels which the Bedouin Arabs carry

⁷ *Accursed Giaour*. Dives of this kind are frequently mentioned by Eastern writers. Consult their tales in general, and especially those of “The Fisherman,” “Aladdin,” and “The Princess of China.”

on their camels when they traverse the deserts? Perceivest thou not that I may perish by drinking to excess, no less than by a total abstinence?”

“Drink then this draught,” said the stranger, as he presented to him a phial of a red and yellow mixture; “and to satiate the thirst of thy soul as well as of thy body, know that I am an Indian, but from a region of India which is wholly unknown.”

The Caliph, delighted to see his desires accomplished in part, and flattering himself with the hope of obtaining their entire fulfilment, without a moment’s hesitation swallowed the potion, and instantaneously found his health restored, his thirst appeased, and his limbs as agile as ever.

In the transports of his joy, Vathek leaped upon the neck of the frightful Indian, and kissed his horrid mouth and hollow cheeks, as though they had been the coral lips, and the lilies and roses of his most beautiful wives; whilst they, less terrified than jealous at the sight, dropped their veils to hide the blush of mortification that suffused their foreheads.

Nor would the scene have closed here, had not Carathis, with all the art of insinuation, a little repressed the raptures of her son. Having prevailed upon him to return to Samarah, she caused a herald to precede him, whom she commanded to proclaim as loudly as possible:

“The wonderful stranger hath appeared again; he hath healed the Caliph; he hath spoken! he hath spoken!”

Forthwith all the inhabitants of this vast city quitted their habitations, and ran together in crowds to see the procession of Vathek and the Indian, whom they now blessed as much as they had before execrated, incessantly shouting,

“He hath healed our sovereign; he hath spoken! he hath spoken!”

Nor were these words forgotten in the public festivals, which were celebrated the same evening to testify the general joy, for the poets applied them as a chorus to all the songs they composed.

The Caliph, in the mean while caused the palaces of the senses to be again set open, and as he found himself prompted to visit that of taste, in preference to the rest, immediately ordered a splendid entertainment, to which his great officers and favourite courtiers were all invited. The Indian, who was placed near the prince, seemed to think that as a proper acknowledgment of so distinguished a privilege, he could neither eat, drink, nor talk too much. The various dainties were no sooner served up than they vanished, to the great mortification of Vathek, who piqued himself on being the greatest eater alive, and at this time in particular had an excellent appetite.

The rest of the company looked round at each other in amazement, but the Indian without appearing to observe it, quaffed large bumpers to the health of each of them: sung in a style altogether extravagant; related stories at which he laughed immoderately; and poured forth extemporaneous verses which would not have been thought bad, but for the strange grimaces with which they were uttered. In a word, his loquacity was equal to that of a hundred astrologers; he ate as much as a hundred porters, and caroused in proportion.

The Caliph, notwithstanding the table had been thirty times covered, found himself incommoded by the voraciousness of his guest, who was now considerably declined in the prince’s esteem. Vathek, however, being unwilling to betray the chagrin he could hardly disguise, said in a whisper to Bababalouk,⁸ the chief of his eunuchs:

“You see how enormous his performances in every way are; what would be the consequence should he get at my wives? Go! redouble your vigilance, and be sure look well to my Circassians, who would be more to his taste than all of the rest.”

The bird of the morning had thrice renewed his song, when the hour of the divan⁹ sounded. Vathek, in gratitude to his subjects, having promised to attend, immediately arose from table and

⁸ *Bababalouk, the Chief of his Eunuchs.* As it was the employment of the black eunuchs to wait upon, and guard the sultanas, to the general superintendence of the Harem was particularly committed to their chief. Habesci’s State of the Ottoman Empire, p. 155–6.

⁹ *The Divan.* This was both the supreme council, and court of justice, at which the Caliphs of the race of the Abassides assisted in person to redress the injuries of every appellat. Herbelot, p. 298.

repaired thither leaning upon his vizier, who could scarcely support him, so disordered was the poor prince by the wine he had drank, and still more by the extravagant vagaries of his boisterous guest.

The viziers, the officers of the crown, and of the law, arranged themselves in a semi-circle about their sovereign, and preserved a respectful silence, whilst the Indian, who looked as cool as if come from a fast, sat down without ceremony on a step of the throne, laughing in his sleeve at the indignation with which his temerity had filled the spectators.

The Caliph, however, whose ideas were confused and his head embarrassed, went on administering justice at hap-hazard, till at length the prime vizier¹⁰ perceiving his situation, hit upon a sudden expedient to interrupt the audience, and rescue the honour of his master, to whom he said in a whisper:

“My lord, the princess Carathis, who hath passed the night in consulting the planets, informs you that they portend you evil; and the danger is urgent. Beware, lest this stranger whom you have so lavishly recompensed for his magical gewgaws, should make some attempt on your life: his liquor, which at first had the appearance of effecting your cure, may be no more than a poison of a sudden operation. Slight not this surmise; ask him, at least, of what it was compounded; whence he procured it; and mention the sabres, which you seem to have forgotten.”

Vathek, to whom the insolent airs of the stranger became every moment less supportable, intimated to his vizier by a wink of acquiescence, that he would adopt his advice, and at once turning towards the Indian, said:

“Get up and declare in full divan of what drugs the liquor was compounded you enjoined me to take, for it is suspected to be poison; add also the explanation I have so earnestly desired concerning the sabres you sold me, and thus show your gratitude for the favours heaped on you.”

Having pronounced these words in as moderate a tone as a Caliph well could, he waited in silent expectation for an answer; but the Indian, still keeping his seat, began to renew his loud shouts of laughter, and exhibit the same horrid grimaces he had shown them before, without vouchsafing a word in reply. Vathek, no longer able to brook such insolence, immediately kicked him from the steps, instantly descending repeated his blow, and persisted with such assiduity, as incited all who were present to follow his example. Every foot was aimed at the Indian, and no sooner had any one given him a kick than he felt himself constrained to reiterate the stroke.

The stranger afforded them no small entertainment; for being both short and plump, he collected himself into a ball and rolled round on all sides at the blows of his assailants, who pressed after him wherever he turned, with an eagerness beyond conception, whilst their numbers were every moment increasing. The ball, indeed, in passing from one apartment to another, drew every person after it that came in its way, insomuch that the whole palace was thrown into confusion, and resounded with a tremendous clamour. The women of the harem, amazed at the uproar, flew to their blinds to discover the cause, but no sooner did they catch a glimpse of the ball than feeling themselves unable to refrain, they broke from the clutches of their eunuchs, who to stop their flight pinched them till they bled, but in vain; whilst themselves, though trembling with terror at the escape of their charge, were as incapable of resisting the attraction.

The Indian, after having traversed the halls, galleries, chambers, kitchens, gardens, and stables of the palace, at last took his course through the courts, whilst the Caliph, pursuing him closer than the rest, bestowed as many kicks as he possibly could, yet not without receiving now and then one, which his competitors, in their eagerness, designed for the ball.

Carathis, Morakanabad, and two or three old viziers whose wisdom had hitherto withstood the attraction, wishing to prevent Vathek from exposing himself in the presence of his subjects, fell down in his way to impede the pursuit, but he, regardless of their obstruction, leaped over their heads, and

¹⁰ *The Prime Vizier.* Vazir, Vezir, or as we express it, Vizier, literally signifies a porter; and by metaphor, the minister who bears the principal burden of the state.

went on as before. They then ordered the muezzins to call the people to prayers, both for the sake of getting them out of the way, and of endeavouring by their petitions to avert the calamity; but neither of these expedients was a whit more successful. The sight of this fatal ball was alone sufficient to draw after it every beholder. The muezzins themselves, though they saw it but at a distance, hastened down from their minarets and mixed with the crowd, which continued to increase in so surprising a manner, that scarce an inhabitant was left in Samarah, except the aged, the sick confined to their beds, and infants at the breast, whose nurses could run more nimbly without them. Even Carathis, Morakanabad, and the rest, were all become of the party.

The shrill screams of the females who had broken from their apartments, and were unable to extricate themselves from the pressure of the crowd, together with those of the eunuchs jostling after them, terrified lest their charge should escape from their sight, increased by the execrations of husbands urging forward and menacing both, kicks given and received, stumblings and overthrows at every step, in a word, the confusion that universally prevailed, rendered Samarah like a city taken by storm, and devoted to absolute plunder.

At last the cursed Indian, who still preserved his rotundity of figure, after passing through all the streets and public places, and leaving them empty, rolled onwards to the plain of Catoul, and traversed the valley at the foot of the mountain of the four fountains.

As a continual fall of water had excavated an immense gulph in the valley, whose opposite side was closed in by a steep acclivity, the Caliph and his attendants were apprehensive lest the ball should bound into the chasm, and to prevent it, redoubled their efforts, but in vain. The Indian persevered in his onward direction, and as had been apprehended, glancing from the precipice with the rapidity of lightning, was lost in the gulph below.

Vathek would have followed the perfidious Giaour, had not an invisible agency arrested his progress. The multitude that pressed after him were at once checked in the same manner, and a calm instantaneously ensued. They all gazed at each other with an air of astonishment; and notwithstanding that the loss of veils and turbans, together with torn habits, and dust blended with sweat, presented a most laughable spectacle, there was not one smile to be seen; on the contrary, all with looks of confusion and sadness returned in silence to Samarah, and retired to their inmost apartments, without ever reflecting that they had been impelled by an invisible power into the extravagance for which they reproached themselves: for it is but just, that men who so often arrogate to their own merit the good of which they are but instruments, should attribute to themselves the absurdities which they could not prevent.

The Caliph was the only person that refused to leave the valley. He commanded his tents to be pitched there, and stationed himself on the very edge of the precipice, in spite of the representations of Carathis and Morakanabad, who pointed out the hazard of its brink giving way, and the vicinity to the magician that had so severely tormented him. Vathek derided all their remonstrances; and having ordered a thousand flambeaus to be lighted, and directed his attendants to proceed in lighting more, lay down on the slippery margin, and attempted, by the help of this artificial splendour, to look through that gloom which all the fires of the empyrean had been insufficient to pervade. One while he fancied to himself voices arising from the depth of the gulph, at another he seemed to distinguish the accents of the Indian, but all was no more than the hollow murmur of waters, and the din of the cataracts that rushed from steep to steep, down the sides of the mountain.

Having passed the night in this cruel perturbation, the Caliph at day-break retired to his tent, where, without taking the least sustenance, he continued to doze till the dusk of evening began to come on; he then resumed his vigils as before, and persevered in observing them for many nights together. At length, fatigued with so successful an employment, he sought relief from change. To this end he sometimes paced with hasty strides across the plain; and as he wildly gazed at the stars, reproached them with having deceived him; but lo! on a sudden the clear blue sky appeared streaked over with streams of blood, which reached from the valley even to the city of Samarah. As this awful

phenomenon seemed to touch his tower, Vathek at first thought of repairing thither to view it more distinctly, but feeling himself unable to advance, and being overcome with apprehension, he muffled up his face in his robe.

Terrifying as these prodigies were, this impression upon him was no more than momentary, and served only to stimulate his love of the marvellous. Instead, therefore, of returning to his palace, he persisted in the resolution of abiding where the Indian vanished from his view. One night, however, while he was walking as usual on the plain, the moon and the stars at once were eclipsed, and a total darkness ensued. The earth trembled beneath him, and a voice came forth, the voice of the Giaour, who in accents more sonorous than thunder, thus addressed him:

“Would’st thou devote thyself to me? adore then the terrestrial influences, and abjure Mahomet. On these conditions I will bring thee to the palace of subterranean fire: there shalt thou behold, in immense depositories, the treasures which the stars have promised thee, and which will be conferred by those intelligences whom thou shalt thus render propitious. It was from thence I brought my sabres; and it is there that Soliman Ben Daoud reposes, surrounded by the talismans that control the world.”

The astonished Caliph trembled as he answered, yet in a style that showed him to be no novice in preternatural adventures:

“Where art thou? Be present to my eyes; dissipate the gloom that perplexes me, and of which I deem thee the cause. After the many flambeaus I have burnt to discover thee, thou mayest at least grant a glimpse of thy horrible visage.”

“Abjure then Mahomet,” replied the Indian, “and promise me full proofs of thy sincerity; otherwise thou shalt never behold me again.”

The unhappy Caliph, instigated by insatiable curiosity, lavished his promises in the utmost profusion. The sky immediately brightened; and by the light of the planets, which seemed almost to blaze, Vathek beheld the earth open, and at the extremity of a vast black chasm a portal of ebony, before which stood the Indian, still blacker, holding in his hand a golden key, that caused the lock to resound.

“How,” cried Vathek, “can I descend to thee, without the certainty of breaking my neck? Come take me, and instantly open the portal.”

“Not so fast,” replied the Indian, “impatient Caliph! Know that I am parched with thirst, and cannot open this door till my thirst be thoroughly appeased. I require the blood of fifty of the most beautiful sons of thy viziers and great men, or neither can my thirst nor thy curiosity be satisfied. Return to Samarah; procure for me this necessary libation; come back hither; throw it thyself into this chasm; and then shalt thou see!”

Having thus spoken, the Indian turned his back on the Caliph, who, incited by the suggestion of demons, resolved on the direful sacrifice. He now pretended to have regained his tranquillity, and set out for Samarah amidst the acclamations of a people who still loved him, and forbore not to rejoice when they believed him to have recovered his reason. So successfully did he conceal the emotion of his heart, that even Carathis and Morakanabad were equally deceived with the rest. Nothing was heard of but festivals and rejoicings. The ball, which no tongue had hitherto ventured to mention, was again brought on the tapis. A general laugh went round; though many, still smarting under the hands of the surgeon, from the hurts received in that memorable adventure, had no great reason for mirth.

The prevalence of this gay humour was not a little grateful to Vathek, as perceiving how much it conduced to his project. He put on the appearance of affability to every one; but especially to his viziers, and the grandees of his court, whom he failed not to regale with a sumptuous banquet, during which he insensibly inclined the conversation to the children of his guests. Having asked, with a good-natured air, who of them were blessed with the handsomest boys, every father at once asserted the pretensions of his own; and the contest imperceptibly grew so warm, that nothing could have withholden them from coming to blows but their profound reverence for the person of the Caliph. Under

the pretence, therefore, of reconciling the disputants, Vathek took upon him to decide; and with this view commanded the boys to be brought.

It was not long before a troop of these poor children made their appearance, all equipped by their fond mothers with such ornaments as might give the greatest relief to their beauty, or most advantageously display the graces of their age. But whilst this brilliant assemblage attracted the eyes and hearts of every one besides, the Caliph scrutinized each in his turn with a malignant avidity that passed for attention, and selected from their number the fifty whom he judged the Giaour would prefer.

With an equal show of kindness as before, he proposed to celebrate a festival on the plain, for the entertainment of his young favourites, who he said ought to rejoice still more than all at the restoration of his health, on account of the favours he intended for them.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.