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CHAPTER I

THE RAID OF THE SARACENS

Harun al-Rashid, Commander of the Faithful and Caliph of Bagdad, remarked one day to his grand vizier, Yahia the Barmecide: "When the Prophet died, Father, there was peace and unity among the Arabs, to whom God had granted security after the perils they had endured and glory in proportion to the humiliations they had suffered. Islam was in the full strength of her youth and the Faith had just been born. You are aware of all that has come to pass since."

The Caliph reflected, not without melancholy perhaps, on those wonderful days to which he had just referred. Inspired by the ardent words of Muhammad which echoed in their ears, together with the natural inclination of the Bedouin to wander and loot, the Arab tribes had plunged into the most reckless raid that had ever been known. A century and a half of conquests raged throughout the Old World beginning from the year 632 when the Prophet of Allah had died.

It was not a migration of famishing hordes dragging heavy carts toward tillable lands nor an invasion by tribes envious of the prosperity of older empires, but a swift impetuous excursion, made with camels and horses, to carry on the divine word, to propagate and proclaim, wherever the sun shines and human beings breathe, the glory of Allah who alone is God, unrivalled and all-powerful.

From the peninsula where Islam had its birth the squadrons set out on a continually renewed charge. Leaping into the saddle the knights dug in their spurs and, standing erect in their stirrups, rushed blindly on like phantoms pursuing lightning among the clouds. Lances and javelins whirled over their heads amid the flags and standards flapping in the wind. The cries of warriors mingled with horses' neighs. One wave surged after another as the sea of the Faithful rolled

stormily towards the two extremities of the earth. It turned first to the northern and eastern countries where the people of the Bible lived, the old Semitic brothers who were already aware that there is only one God. Jerusalem, the City of the Temple, admitted the children of Ishmael. Leaping from the steaming rumps of their horses the knights prostrated themselves in the dust and made a solemn vow. "Here, O Lord, shall arise the domes and columns of Thy sanctuary." They made forty genuflections, facing toward that finger of light, the Holy City, Mecca itself, whither they expected to return some day in triumph.

Syrian Jerusalem lay still further off in Asia. The animals were scarcely allowed leisure to browse. The sweat had not dried on their flanks before the warriors were coaxing, exhorting, urging them on. They were servants, comrades, loves to these barbarians whose hearts were overflowing with poetry and whose souls were full of the glory of stars and nocturnal beauties; and, yielding to their masters' wishes, they plunged on once more. Like Borak, the winged mare who carried Muhammad up to the throne of God and back to his home in a single night, they seemed to fly through the air.

Ancient Asia resounded with the tumult of their passing. For centuries she had sent hordes out toward the West; it was now her turn to be invaded. Divine plagues had descended on Nineveh, Susa and Babylon. The regions where the Sassanids had ruled from their magnificent thrones had been seared with iron and fire. The empire of the Chosroes had collapsed at one stroke like huts torn away by a sand storm, and the satraps covered with jewels and hiding their heads in the folds of their robes were pursued beyond the Oxus and the Indus. They fled into China like wandering flocks driven by brush fires.

The raids towards the West were madder and more frenzied still. Egypt saw this human cloud pass by. The Sphinx smiled gravely, reminded of a former plague, the locusts of the Sudan. Faster and faster flowed the irresistible flood, stirring

up quicksands, raising dust on the steppes, trampling the variegated carpets of the high plains. Tightening their knees, the knights pushed on and on. There was only one God and Muhammad was his Prophet! Sidi Okba galloped ahead, restless, dissatisfied. There were too few municipalities, stadiums, Roman arches for him. The mirages of tablelands and lagoons ravaged by sun and salt spread beautiful chimeras before him towards the boundaries of the setting sun. "Why tarry among people who seek refuge in the mountains like rats? Allah or death!" he cried, and they all replied, "Allah!"

One morning they came upon fresh marvels. The shimmering beauty of smiling waves, the naked ocean immense, impassable. Then the conquerors, having penetrated to the most distant regions that man had been able to reach, rode their horses breast-high into the water, shouting with pride and joy and praising the omnipotence and glory of Him Who had guided them.

This, however, was only a temporary halt. The stinging, briny bath quickened the blood of beasts and men. En route, again, they turned to the North. The cavalcade had discovered that the world did not end here after all. There was another land on the opposite shore, its white summits towering proudly beyond an azure channel. This narrow strait rushed swiftly, a deep and stony torrent.

Tarik, in the lead, opened up Spain to the soldiers of God, and gave his name to the vast cliff on its southern coast, *Jebel-al-Tarik*—Gibraltar. Not a single backward glance was cast towards Africa, now quite forgotten. All Europe lay open to conquest. Why consider what lay behind?

"Warriors," shouted Tarik, standing in his stirrups, "the enemy lies before you, the sea behind; whither would you go? This land contains endless numbers of lovely girls dressed in sumptuous robes shining with pearls, gold and coral. May the Word of God be exalted in this glorious country! God has said: 'From East to West, the kingdoms of the world are spread

before My eyes. All that I see shall become the domain of My people!'"

The women of this land proved so alluring that the invaders put to flight with bow and sword the natural defenders of such ravishing beauty and exalted the Word so thoroughly that nothing could stop them; neither the king of the Goths, whose head was soon on its way to Damascus, nor the muds of the Guadalete, nor thirst in arid Castile, nor ice on the Pyrenees. Even the women did not tempt them to tarry long. When boots were pulled off at resting places, the warriors had their fill of these beauties, but the ones whom they dreamed of for the morrow, beautiful as fires on cold nights, were always more to be desired than those already possessed. Not all of these Christian girls had slit their noses like the saints in history! Squadrons of Saracens began to gallop over the meadows and under the flowering apple trees of the Gauls, on to the conquest of "the great land."

But this coveted world, which extended from the Pyrenees to the Black Sea, was destined to escape them. Their extraordinary onslaught was checked just in sight of its two goals. On the East a narrow channel, where Byzantium reared her cupolas, would not allow them to cross. Fires of destruction flaring on the water appeared to them like the flames of the Frankish inferno. At the other extremity, somewhere near Poitiers, Charles Martel led his men heavily armed with battle-axes and broadswords against the invaders, and his forces annihilated the envoys of Allah like an advancing wall of jagged iron.

The great invasion had come to an abrupt stop after a full century of triumphs. It had not succeeded in gaining world dominion for Islam or in making of the Mediterranean an interior lake of its domain. But it had created the greatest empire since Rome, extending from Spain to India.

And the Overlord of all this immense empire was the Caliph who reigned in Bagdad—Harun al-Rashid.

CHAPTER II

THE MIGHTY CALIPHATE

When Harun recalled to his vizier the peaceful early days of the Faith, it was undoubtedly by way of contrasting them with the dissensions which had broken out after the death of the Prophet and raged so intensely that they were woven into the history of the caliphate in such a way as to influence unpleasantly the events surrounding his own accession.

Caliph, Overlord, he still was, but he had every reason to reflect with melancholy upon the departed and already dimming succession of Islam's triumphs. The vast empire of the Faithful was no longer under the direct control of a single hand as in the days of his early predecessors. Distant branches were falling away from the mighty trunk. Spain had her own caliphate, and Morocco, Tunis, and Egypt were about to declare theirs.

The cross currents which had caused the storm and impaired the integrity of the caliphate must have swept through Harun's alert mind. After the death of Muhammad in 632 the question of his succession, both spiritual and earthly, had precipitated the most intense clash of human passions. Although the first four caliphs had been unanimously chosen and were widely respected, two of them had been assassinated, and a half century after the demise of the Prophet, Islam was torn with internal strife.

The fourth caliph, Ali, was a holy man, first cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, but lacking in decision, unfit to cope with the seething grudges and overweening ambitions about him, and hampered by the active and powerful antagonism which Ayesha, the widow of the prophet, bore toward all members of his family.

Against Ali and Persian Mesopotamia were arrayed the Arab faction and Syria, and the civil war which ensued was only terminated by the massacre of the Alids at Kerbela in 680. Mussulman unity perished at the same time. The doctrine of the Alids, "Shiism," regarded Ali as the first legitimate successor of the Prophet and his descendants as the only rightful caliphs; all others as no more than regents holding office until that miraculous clay when "the chosen of Allah" would come in person to claim his rightful place. The Sunnites, on the contrary, acknowledged the first three caliphs and now founded the first "orthodox" dynasty under the leadership of the Ommayyads. These moved the seat, of power from Medina to Damascus and reigned there some seventy years.

The followers of Ali took refuge in Persia and exploited there the bitterness of a dissatisfied race. They rallied to them all those whose patriotism was outraged by Arab domination, religious as well as temporal, together with groups of chronic malcontents and professional agitators.

It was easy for them to season their propaganda with tales of the turpitude of the reigning princes, to inflame the fanaticism of the Faithful with a description of the vices, impiety, and cruelty of the present Ommayyad caliph who, they claimed, had married his father's women, violated his own daughter, ridiculed the Faith, and dissipated the public treasure in orgies.

Khorassan and Persia finally answered the call of the Shiites, and the black flag of the Abbassids was unfurled in rebellion. The deposition of the Ommayyads was proclaimed at Merv with wild enthusiasm. Their last desperate stand was made near the Great Zab, an affluent of the Tigris. There they were crushingly defeated. Their leader, hunted like a rabbit from cover to cover, was destined to finish his days miserably in the wastes of Egypt.

"Lions in battle, the Ommayyads died like sheep," Harun al-Rashid was fond of saying when he was recalling how his grand-uncle Abul Abbas had installed the new dynasty of the Abbassid caliphs on the throne in 749. The fifth of his line, Harun carried the family name not only to the highest point in its history, but down through generation after generation in the never-ending glamour and glory of legend.

CHAPTER III

THE YOUTH OF HARUN, SON OF MAHDI

Son of Muhammad-el-Mandi, son of Abdallah, son of Muhammad, son of Ali, son of Abdallah, son of Abbas, Harun was born in Media on the 20th of March, 763 (or possibly the 15th of February, 766). Today his natal city of Rai (the celebrated Rhagae of the ancients) is a mass of ruins near the modern Teheran. His birthplace, near the Caspian Sea, removes all doubt as to Harun's heredity. He was an Arab. His father was then governor of Azerbaijan.

Harun's childhood was spent mostly in court at Mesopotamia. There he had the opportunity to know all the Abbassid caliphs excepting the first, his great-uncle Abbas, the Shedder of Blood (Saflah). He had learned, however, from an early age to respect the memory of this famous kinsman who had distinguished himself by his learning, austere piety, and tremendous energy in organizing the empire as well as by his efficient methods of accomplishing his purpose.

Harun had been taught according to the doctrine of the dynasty that Caliph Abbas had inaugurated his reign with a speech famous among Mussulmans. After addressing many fine compliments to the people of Kuf a, he said: "This is the era of God. Prepare yourselves, for I am the Lavish Shedder of Blood." Perhaps the small Harun dreamed then in his childish heart of shedding blood also, when he should reach man's estate.

If a strange ideal to us, second nature to one of his race. With the Arabs, he who sheds blood is not necessarily a murderer, but a generous host who in order to provide lavishly for his guests will go so far as to kill his most precious live stock; in other words, to bleed himself. In the case of Abbas, however, every implication of the name was deserved; for he

was a tyrant who ruthlessly massacred all of his enemies. His grand-nephew did not perhaps suspect that his own reputation would one day carry a similar red stain.

Harun's early days in the harem, where he was brought up under the care of the women, were enlivened by occasional visits from his grandfather, Mansur the Victorious, successor to the Shedder of Blood. It is reasonably safe to assume that the small Arab's attention was centred more on the magnificent boots and black turban of this tall gaunt old caliph than on his pious counsels. He was never very hopeful of receiving presents from this Oriental Croesus, whose bulging treasury had earned him the reputation of being a money-hoarder and who regaled the child with tales of the glories of his reign and the virtue of thrift instead of bringing him gifts.

Who, after all, could have foretold at that time the next ruler of the Arabs? Unlike the thrones of Europe, where the passing on of the crown according to seniority was a pledge of peace, the caliphate was not even hereditary. Fortunate, indeed, the princes who were sure of their future.

The problem of the succession was an ardent one with the Mussulmans, often leading to treachery, assassination, and civil war. Theoretically, the Lieutenant of God had to be elected by the Faithful. Even when the election was only a sham, skillfully manoeuvred by the followers of the reigning caliph in favor of one of his relatives, one could never actually predict the result. Even if a very natural paternal instinct influenced the ruler's mind to such an extent that he preferred to be succeeded by one of his sons, this did not necessarily imply that the eldest would be chosen. All the intrigues of palaces, influences of the *khojas*, pressure through the tender channels of the emotions, were employed to bring to the fore one claimant or another.

Maternal wire-pulling was the order of the day—and night—when so many mothers were arrayed against a single father! The four legitimate wives allowed by the Koran, combined with an unlimited number of concubines, provided

each sovereign with a swarm of children whose mothers were each prepared to fight to the death for the interests of her own brood. The besieged father must have been reminded of that Arab proverb: "He who has two wives passes his life in anxiety; he who has three is embittered all his life; but he who has four wives is like a dead man." The proverb does not touch upon his bevy of concubines.

The caliphate of the Abbassids was stained with one gory tragedy after another. Khaizuran, the mother of Harun, was extremely ambitious and stopped at nothing to satisfy her appetite for power. Her husband, the caliph Mandi, had freed her from slavery, but although he was most generous to her in every way she seemed never content.

Khaizuran had two sons, Hadi and Harun, but she had always preferred the latter and never ceased to intrigue until she saw him on the throne. In order to insure his succession she had a marriage ceremony performed between herself and Mandi just before he became caliph at the death of his father Mansur. The latter died as piously as he had lived, while on a pilgrimage to Mecca, and was buried in the Holy City, his face uncovered, and arrayed in the penitential cloak of a pilgrim.

Harun was six years old when his father began to reign. It was the age when a young Mussulman passes from the harem and the hands of women to school and into the hands of men. First came the surgical ceremony of circumcision. Harun, son of Mandi, must experience in common with all his fellow-followers of the Prophet, the cries, songs, and strident huzzas which always celebrated this occasion. To a good Mussulman, his son is as the apple of his eye, and Harun somewhat dazed by the hubbub was much impressed by his father's pride, but his heart was a mixture of happiness and pain and he scarcely knew whether to hold his head high or give way to tears.

After this initiation into manhood, Harun's education began. In the case of a caliph's son this was most carefully carried out. His father confided him to the excellent care of Yahia the Barmecide, a most distinguished Arab of high

degree, who was destined with his illustrious family to play an important part in the history of Harun's reign.

Yahia quickly acquired the absolute respect and confidence of his pupil, who called him Father to the end of his days. In a sense this appellation was justified. The friendship between the Caliph Mandi and Yahia, and their families, had been such that the Barmecide's wife had at times suckled the infant Harun, while Yahia's elder son Fadl had been nursed by Khaizuran. Yahia's influence over Harun was reinforced by Mandi's instructions that the boy should submit himself completely to the orders and advice of his tutor.

We have no reason to doubt that the instructions of this father and teacher were as wise as those of Gargantua; but, if the humane giant voluntarily abolished corporal punishments, we cannot say as much for the Oriental educators. Abu Muhammad says in his treatise on education: "It is not necessary for the instructor, should the occasion arise, to punish a child by giving him more than three blows." The young Harun probably drew his share of punishment. But there is no need to pity him on this score.

One of the most savory characteristics of a noble Arab's education was the practice of substituting the bodies of others for these punitive blows: sons of slaves, servants, perhaps officers or poets of the court. When the young Harun's taste, turning early toward the fine arts, led him to seek the company of the celebrated composer Mosuli, it was the latter who suffered for Harun's transgressions, became his whipping-boy, so to speak. This practice did not apply to royalty alone. If a singer at a court performance sang a false note, they punished her by striking the shoulders of another. One may be sure that her pride suffered a smarting wound! When a cheetah, who was being trained for the hunt, made a mistake, it was a dog that was whipped before his eyes. The cheetah is a noble animal and must have suffered from such a humiliation! After all, the education of the sons of Louis XIV was not very different. This extraordinary custom of effecting

the expiation of sins by passing them on from privileged beings to scapegoats goes back beyond Biblical times to the mystic customs of ancient tribes and clans.

One can imagine from these examples the conception that a young Arab might form of royal power, and the lessons for the future which he would draw from them. It does not seem strange then that Harun, as sovereign, ordered one day a hundred blows for a servant who spoke without sufficient deference of some king of an ancient dynasty. The Caliph gave this unanswerable excuse: "Power establishes a sort of union and family bond between kings. I am punishing this man in order to maintain respect to the throne and the consideration that kings owe each other."

Harun's training produced early results. While still a youth he was allowed to go out with the armies, but always attended by Yahia.

War was raging then between the Mussulmans and the Byzantines in Asia Minor. There the Greeks and the Asiatics defended themselves as they had to in Homeric times, as they had to do again in our days. In 779, the Caliph Mandi assembled his army on the plains of Baradan north of Bagdad and started forward at the beginning of the following spring. This was to be Harun's baptism of fire. They crossed Mesopotamia and Syria and penetrated Cilicia as far as the shores of the Pyramus river. It seemed necessary to send out an expeditionary force.

The young Saracen prince was a splendid sight as he rode at the side of his father under the coal-black standards of the Abbassids which an Andalusian poet once likened to beauty spots on the cheeks of royalty. His heart came near to bursting with pride when his father suddenly decided to put him in command of the expedition. This was a real school of war for the fifteen-year-old youth. It was really Yahia the Barmecide who bore the responsibility of the expedition, although to Harun went the credit and glory for capturing the fortress Samalu after a siege of thirty-eight days.

The Greek inhabitants had surrendered on condition that their lives should be spared and they not separated from one another. Harun magnanimously ordered them to be conducted to Bagdad, where they built several Nestorian monasteries and lived under the authority of the Greek Catholic patriarch of Bagdad. This example of tolerance should be written large on the records of all Mussulmans and of those of Harun al-Rashid in particular.

The Caliph was so pleased with his son's exploit that he immediately dispatched an order making Harun governor of the entire western part, of the empire including Azerbaijan and Armenia. A course in government was now to follow the schooling in war with the efficient Barmecide, of course, at the helm.

The victorious warriors rode triumphantly into Bagdad, that city so recently founded by the preceding caliph, yet already on its way to becoming not only the seat of the Abbasid power but the capital of civilization. Khaizuran embraced her cherished son with mingled emotions of fondness and chagrin. Her joy over his prowess was tempered by the fact that Hadi was even then on his way to the mosque of Bagdad expecting soon to be appointed successor to his father. History has not always analyzed the hearts of mothers. It is, however, a fact that this one did not love her elder son. Her caresses and favors had always been for Harun. Her mind was teeming with schemes to secure the throne for him by any means possible. It might take some time, but she would leave no stone unturned. She brought all the pressure in her power to bear on Mandi.

Before long, events took place which seemed to favor her plans. Less than two years after the capture of Samalu, war burst out again. Leo IV, at the head of the Byzantine empire, had recently died leaving the throne to Constantine VI. This prince being only ten years old, his mother, Irene, acted as regent, assuming the title of Augusta. By her orders Michael Lachanodrakon invaded Asia Minor with a strong army. The

first Arab troops to encounter them weakened, and retired. Caliph Mandi, irritated by this defection, decided to send Harun to save the situation.

The young prince started out with 100,000 men accompanied by the Caliph's chamberlain, Rabi, and the very excellent general, Yazid ben Mazyad. But on this occasion the command appears to have been left chiefly in the hands of Harun. Their orders were to carry the war to the very gates of Byzantium. The campaign was quickly over. Yazid put to flight the Patrician, Nicetas, Count of Opsikion; and Harun marched against Nicomedia, where he vanquished the commander-in-chief of the Greeks and pitched his camp on the shores of the Bosphorus. Once more the Saracen flood was rolling stormily toward this fragile rampart, once more Islam was knocking at the doors of Central Europe. Nevertheless, seven centuries were to elapse before this narrow strait, this embryo sea, would be crossed.



BYZANTIUM FROM ACROSS THE BOSPHORUS, AS VIEWED BY HARUN AL-RASHID DURING HIS FIRST CAMPAIGN AT THE AGE OF FOURTEEN.

For the moment they contented themselves with imposing rather strenuous conditions upon Irene: a truce of three years, an annual tribute of 90,000 dinars, and an agreement to supply the Mussulmans with guides and provisions for their return trip.

This brilliant success seconded Khaizuran's plans admirably. She had no difficulty in persuading Mandi to appoint Harun successor-designate after Mandi. It was on this occasion also that the Caliph, as an especial mark of affection, gave his son the surname of "Rashid," by which he has been known throughout history and fiction. "Heaven gave you virtue and excellent judgment, and in addition you were called `Rashid'," says a verse of Abul-Atahiya. "Rashid" means follower of the right cause, well-directed, strict and just in religion. We translate it by one word, colorless, perhaps, but clear, orthodox. "Guide us in the straight path," says the introductory prayer of the Koran. Aaron the Orthodox was soon to discover what causes he was destined to follow and what paths his feet would tread.

CHAPTER IV

AGRIPPINA ON THE TIGRIS

The power behind the throne was Khaizuran, who, aided by Yahia the Barmecide, was scheming to pass the succession on to her favorite son. The fact that he had been designated as heir-presumptive was not enough for her. She could not become reconciled to his playing second fiddle for the time being. Harun's golden hour seemed too remote to her. Hadi, the elder, given a few years to perpetuate his line, would be tempted to disregard his father's wishes. Who could be sure that he would not abrogate his brother's rights to succeed him?

Khaizuran was ambition without scruple. Though undoubtedly considering her Benjamin's happiness, she closed her eyes to his own inclination; for there is no evidence that Harun was eager to usurp the throne or to occupy it. It is obvious, therefore, that through Harun she hoped to maintain and increase her personal power. Hadi was stubborn by nature, while Harun, more easily influenced, and attracted by the pleasures of the court rather than the responsibilities of statecraft, would be more malleable in her hands. There was something of Nero's mother, Agrippina, about this woman.

She was certainly tenacious, working for years on her plans and using every arrow in the quiver of her wiles to pin the Caliph to her purpose. A slave at the time of Harun's birth, Khaizuran had been first freed by the Caliph and later married to him. No other woman had so much authority at court, not even the Dailamite Khiklah whom the Caliph had also freed when she had given him his son Ibrahim, whose golden voice later endeared him to all Mussulmans. The strongest proof of Khaizuran's sway over Mandi is that among his seven sons hers were the only two ever mentioned as candidates for his throne.

The Caliph granted practically all of her requests, her whims. Yet she was constantly drawing him to further indulgences by her chronic state of dissatisfaction. Being a woman who accepted all favors and services condescendingly and who saw in the liberality of others only her rightful due, she was accustomed to underestimate whatever was done for her.

On one occasion Mandi had made her a lavish gift of two thousand slaves, half of them men, half women. Of the thousand men each carried a silver purse containing a thousand dinars, while each female slave bore a golden purse of a thousand dirhems. The same evening that she received this munificent tribute of her royal spouse's affection and generosity she remarked calmly, perhaps even with a touch of sarcasm, "What benefits have I ever received from you!" Instead of remonstrating with her, the Caliph redoubled his favors.

It is quite true that this affectionate, affable man had a weakness for women and was easily swayed by them. He passed every evening among the favorites of his harem and was so devoted to one of his daughters that he did not scruple to take her into the country on hunting trips, letting her gallop at his side in the black costume of the Abbassids, a turban on her head and a sword at her side. It goes without saying that the people were completely scandalized by such unconventional proceedings.

Khaizuran left no stone unturned to keep the undeniable merits of young Harun before her husband's eyes, and Yahia abetted her in this. Even the slumbers of the Caliph seemed to favor their designs. There is an anecdote recounting that one night he dreamed of having given two branches of a tree to Hadi and Harun. The branch that Hadi received bore only a few leaves on its stem, while Harun's was covered with foliage from end to end. Their father had not failed to see in this a premonition that Hadi's reign would not endure long while Harun's would prove to be an era of prosperity.

The Mussulman faith, not unlike some others, is full of superstitions, and one can draw from its history many incidents like this one which would not stand the test of clear reason but perhaps had a strong influence on their victims. The hard-pressed Mandi finally decided to change his plans for the succession in favor of Harun. This was going to be difficult, however. Hadi had been regularly appointed and it would be necessary, for the sake of appearances, to obtain his consent, his voluntary renunciation, to release the Faithful from their oath of loyalty to Hadi and at the same time induce them to transfer their allegiance to Harun.

Hadi was at this time in the field warring against a group of rebels from Tabaristan. His father recalled him to Bagdad in order to discuss the matter with him. The heir to the throne became suspicious, however, and took good care not to obey. Thereupon the Caliph, urged on by his scheming wife, resolved to go in person and withdraw his pledge from this rebel son who apparently did not intend to be cast aside lightly. Accompanied by Harun, the irritated monarch set forth.

The hand of fate blocked Mandi's swift move, however, and prevented him from reaching his destination. Upon his arrival at Masabadhan, he died suddenly on the seventh of August, 785, while still in his forties.

History, particularly that of the Mussulmans, is too full of untoward accidents such as this for one to believe them always free from human agency. Oriental historians have long suspected that Mandi's death was not due to chance. Some attribute it to an accident met while hunting; others mention a misdirected arrow, a bucking horse. Still others tell a tale of poisoned sweetmeats made by a jealous slave girl, confections meant for one of her rivals and served to the Caliph by mistake. The more cynical have suspected the dark hand of political intrigue, a theory that will surely appeal to most critical minds, considering the importance of this event in the career of him against whose interests the Caliph was acting.

Mandi's death, however, did not distinguish him from other caliphs. Those who died from natural causes are conspicuously few. He was in his prime, but caliphs did not ordinarily live long. The young seemed ready enough to assist their elders into the grave. It was for this reason perhaps that the older generation lived so fast and furiously.

Poisoned sweetmeats, unruly horse, error of chief steward, no matter: the succession to the throne was open, and the prize was worth grasping. The reign of Mandi had been prosperous. He had strengthened the throne of the Abbassids, and the power of the Caliph of Bagdad was recognized in distant countries, even by the Emperor of China, the King of Thibet, and the Princes of India. His mistake had been to draw too heavily upon the public treasury for his sumptuous pilgrimages and pious almsgivings. But this situation could easily be adjusted.

If the succession to the throne was worth having, it was worth keeping, thought Hadi, well satisfied with the turn of events. Not so with his mother, Yahia the Barmecide and perhaps also Harun, whose plans had all been set awry by this catastrophe. Mandi had died without being able to rearrange the order of succession. There was no escaping this fact. Something had to be done about it.

The unfortunate Caliph was scarcely mourned, unless perhaps by Hassaneh, the most beautiful of his slaves, and others of his concubines whose comfortable days were now over. An Arab poet dedicated to the memory of Mandi this apt advice: "Since you must lament, it is your own destiny that you should bewail." Mandi might also have applied to himself the Oriental adage, "There is nothing like one's own nail to scratch one's skin."

As for Yahia and Harun, dazed by the turn of affairs, they consulted together feverishly. Should they risk a march against Hadi? That would be a bold stroke, for he had the law on his side. They were trying desperately to keep the death of the Caliph a secret, but it could be concealed only for a few

hours at the most, and they were apprehensive of a sudden uprising in the army. As a matter of fact, the secret was already seeping out and couriers were making their way, full speed, to bear the news to the legitimate heir. If the conspirators did nothing, it meant merely awaiting the possible vengeance of the new caliph. Yet, they reflected, they might wait for worse things. "Let us have a care," they said to each other. "The enmity of one's relatives is more dangerous than the sting of scorpions." In the face of this serious dilemma, Yahia the Barmecide flashed his political genius. He counseled feigning submission and loyalty. The important thing just then was to save their heads; the future could be attended to later.

Harun appears to have been completely under his tutor's thumb. At Yahia's direction he dispatched letters of condolence and felicitations to his brother, full of protestations of devotion. He addressed him as Caliph, sent him the insignia of power, the ring, baton, cloak of the Prophet and other attributes of the caliphate. He informed Hadi that he had recited as proxy for him several funeral prayers over the body of their father, that he had presided for him at the ceremony of the oath of office, and that he had made a point of bringing the army back to Bagdad. Nothing could have been done more astutely.

Meanwhile, Hadi abandoned his camp and advanced on the capital by forced marches. The new Caliph was not wrong to hasten. The news of Mandi's death had spread rapidly through Bagdad, and already there were rumors of a revolt. The brief periods between one reign and the next are perfect fields for agitators. The army summoned back so soon to the capital had profited little from its interrupted campaign. Pay was in arrears and the warriors employed their idle days as they pleased.

When the lion is away the hyenas will dance. The streets and marketplaces were overrun with soldiers. They invaded the prisons and, taking the inmates with them, burned

the doors of the chamberlain's palace, made a great uproar and held drunken orgies in public eating-places, taverns, and brothels. Crossing the bridges of the Tigris, they tore the corpses of victims from their gibbets and threw them into the river, where they drifted under the walls of the Palace of Eternity, on a stream more eternally tragic. At night by the glare of torches which disclosed the bloody waters of this Oriental Venice, they made lewd haunts of the alleys of the outlying quarter of Karkh. In the House of Singing Women, the doors had to be barricaded. The loyal Ansarian Guard, at the ramparts of the capital, locked the posterns and grilled gates. Now and then the thud of a body could be heard falling into the Canal of the Dogs.

Throughout this long night of horrors, Khaizuran was in a transport of joy. The world has seen other women of her stamp, furies who enjoyed watching Rome in flames, or who leaned from the balconies of the Louvre to gaze upon the massacre of alleged heretics. This was merely a temporary outbreak of disorganized troops, but it foreshadowed the coming of civil war when brother would be pitted against brother, each pursuing the other from door to door, intent on murder and destruction. The lurid spectacle consoled Khaizuran for her widowhood. Through this chaos she hoped to regain some of her waning power. There is reason to suspect that she may even have had a hand in stirring up the trouble as a last move in favor of Harun. If this was true, she was too late, for Hadi was about to arrive, and Yahia, more determined than ever on procrastination, had to reestablish order quickly.

This resourceful man had all sorts of irresistible arguments. In order to appease the warriors he gave them, forthwith, two years' pay. They were to feast if they liked, but on condition that the state did not suffer. The ambitious Queen Mother must possess her soul in patience. She should have her favored Caliph in good time, and with him plenty of power and glory; but meantime the lawful heir must find a city where

peace and order would assure him all the security necessary to his accession.

The fall of the Abbassids would mean the end of Harun—and of Khaizuran.

CHAPTER V

AN ARABIAN NIGHT OF KINGS

So it came about that Hadi, the Director, became the next Commander of the Faithful. Harun must needs content himself with the title of heir. His mother, who could not endure being in the background, accepted the situation less calmly. She was still hopeful of regaining her lost prestige and did not intend giving ground in the least. She grew still more ostentatious and her personal expenses were enormous. Her house was a rendezvous not only for guests of assured position but also for social climbers and throngs of the nobility whose pomp outshone that of the imperial palace. She would receive her guests, stretched out on silken cushions of her divan and surrounded by some of the most illustrious princesses of the race of Hashim. Each morning her admirers came to her bedchamber to salute her and lay gifts at her feet. She intrigued continually at court and even donned male clothing. It was a dangerous game.

Makers of epigrams warned her: "Softly, Khaizuran, slowly. Let your son govern." But the Agrippina of Bagdad paid not heed. She loved danger, and after all the Caliph was only her son. He might be tall as Hercules, with the hips of a camel and strong as a bull, yet he could not intimidate his mother. She had dominated Mandi and never dreamed that his son, this young sovereign of twenty-five, would ever venture to dispute her authority. Not so long ago he had been a big boy with a hanging lower lip which had brought him the nickname of "Musa-close-your-mouth." He had changed, and it was quite evident that he was on edge with annoyance. Yet at first he could not bring himself to take a stand against her. He began by treating her with great deference and granted all her requests.

Harun, meantime, conducted himself with discretion. The prudent Yahia was always at his elbow. "Patience and stratagem," he advised. The tutor restrained all evidence of eagerness on the part of his pupil. Let him learn to wait; the horoscope of the dead Caliph had predicted a short reign for Hadi. He counselled Harun to resign himself to worldly pleasures and the joys of family life, of the harem. He was to go on walks, play games, take part in the chase. Every one, the sovereign in particular, must be impressed with the heir's indifference regarding the succession to the throne. It was like Henry of Navarre's ruse at the court of France on the eve of Saint Bartholomew. The role demanded poise.

Hadi remembered that horoscope also, and its prediction haunted him. "My reign will be short," he told himself, sweating with anguish. "What dangerous plots might Harun not be hatching against me even now?" His brother's seeming devotion only partially hoodwinked him. At times his harassed nerves were too much for him. "You are dwelling on that dream too much, Harun," he said to him one day. "Take care, one must first pull the thorns from the tragacanth."

This was rather embarrassing for Harun, but he did not wink an eyelash. Even better, he smiled, joked, appeased his brother, patting him on the back and promising him no end of wonders. The big fellow was relieved and touched. Licking his short upper lip, he would fatuously thank this fond brother of his. More, he showered him with gifts and accorded him unaccustomed honors such as the privilege of riding his horse up to the very throne.

Unhappy rulers they, who can never think of the morrow without apprehension, who never cease to tremble for their lives, whose first thought on awakening is: "My father was assassinated, the father of my father was assassinated." Seeking to escape fear, they indulge sometimes in low pleasures or in cruelties. If their own lives are in jeopardy, they wish at least to perpetuate the dignity of their reign, to

bequeath their power to their sons and, chiefly, to destroy the vultures who are waiting for the death which they are plotting.

Hadi was no exception to this rule. He had a son, a mere infant. Suspicious and pressed for time, he resolved to deprive Harun of his right to the succession in favor of this boy. He held the trump cards—his entourage of ministers, lawyers, court officials—all but the ace, whose powerful support was essential—Yahia the Barmecide. He tried to buy him. The sum of twenty thousand dinars is mentioned in this connection. Yahia was not to be purchased or won over. Perhaps it was pride, perhaps guile.

The Barmecide was familiar with the men and kings. He knew it would do no good to change horses; he preferred to continue with the one on which he had staked all. He was clever, however, and did not give himself away. When he refused his support of Hadi, he gave the impression that it was in the interest of the sovereign and his plan. He was subtle and sounded plausible.

"Prince of the Faithful," he admonished the Caliph, "think of the precedent that you would create in thus breaking a vow which binds the people to your brother. Should the throne, God grant otherwise, happen to become vacant, how difficult it would be to have the election of a baby confirmed! Would it not be wiser to leave Rashid his title while entrusting the regency to him until the majority of your son? May God overwhelm him with benefits! You are well aware of your brother's devotion, fidelity and honor. He would not fail, may God be his witness, to yield the throne at the proper time to him who is the little apple of your eye, the splendor of day, the light of the Faith."

Yahia went on and on in this wise, but finally the Caliph could be duped no longer. This man reasoned too well, he thought, and became more suspicious than ever. It was now his turn to feign confidence while secretly calculating a method of arriving at his ends by fair means or foul.

In the first place, he had had enough of his mother, who arrogated all rights to herself. He was weary of her guardianship. He was the ruler, and he wanted to prove it to her. She must be shown her place, made to do the work of women. She must learn that he was master in the palace. He wished to humiliate her in such a way that she would lose her prestige forever.

The occasion for this was not long in coming. Khaizuran was always wanting something, favors for some protegee, sinecures for her favorites. One day she sought an audience with her son. He had been waiting for this moment and enjoyed in advance the spectacle he meant to make of her. Her object was to request an official post for one of her followers, and she had not the slightest doubt that her mission would be successful. To her utter amazement Hadi stood out steadfastly against her. He was so calm that she was misled and thought it only necessary to assume an authoritative tone.

"You absolutely must consent," she said. "I have promised this post to Abdallah and I wish you to give it to him at once."

This was going too far. Hadi, unable to contain himself any longer, burst out: "A plague on this son of a strumpet! I shall not grant him the post!"

Khairzuran played the wounded mother. "God knows, then, that I shall never ask anything of you again."

"God knows also that it will not worry me," replied her son in an insolent tone.

The mother paled. This lummock whom she despised thought himself stronger than she. Rage stifled her. She rose abruptly to go, her attendants flattening against the inscribed tiles behind them, and more silent.

"Wait!" cried this man who, since ruler of nations, intended also to rule his mother. "Wait, and attend carefully to what I have to say. Listen also, you who stand about us! I deny

my descent from the Prophet if I ever go back on what I am about to say. If any one among my generals, followers, or servants intercedes for this woman or aids her in any way, he shall lose his head, and all his belongings shall be confiscated. Now, let who will, disobey me and curse on him who opens his mouth! Go home, woman, and keep your hands busy with your spindle, study your Koran, and pray in your room—alone! Go!"

Thus war was declared openly. But Khaizuran was not a woman to let herself be defeated without a struggle. Her affection for Harun was now drowned in an all-absorbing hatred for Hadi who, on his side, was resolved to stop at nothing to put his parent in her place. He first attempted to force Harun's renunciation of his rights; then, failing in this, finally decided to free himself once and for all from those who stood in his way. He even tried to do away with his mother and ordered a certain dish of rice served to her. Fortunately for her, she happened to leave it untasted. Yahia, that minister of the soft speech and high sounding phrases, was thrown into prison. After some time had elapsed an order was given one evening that he be killed before dawn.

All would have been over for Khaizuran then and there had she not acted instantly. With her colleague Yahia out of the way, there was no hope for her and Harun. This indefatigable creature did not lose a moment. The royal family were all, at the time, at Isabad, near Mosul, in the House of Peace, built by Mandi. The perfumed summer night was warm and heady. The young Caliph was in his harem, surrounded by slave girls. They seemed unusually beautiful that evening as they danced about him, their henna-tipped fingers like red fruits and their mouths like the seal of Solomon. Their teeth were white as alabaster and their figures flexible as willow wands. They danced about him like fluttering doves. The perfumes of their scented bodies and the ambrosial fragrance of their breath made his senses reel. Drugged and wearied from so much voluptuousness, Hadi sank into a blissful doze.

Then the beautiful houris, carrying out Khaizuran's instructions, buried the Caliph's face under quantities of feather cushions and as his powerful lungs still continued to function, they sat on top of the soft pile until his heart stopped beating.

It was Thursday, the fifteenth of September, 786. Hadi had reigned but one year.

Further details of the plot developed during the night. A feverish haste animated the conspirators. A few of the Faithful hurried to Harun and placed the dead Caliph's ring upon his finger. Yahia was released from prison. The small son of Hadi was rudely wakened from his sleep, pulled from his bed and forced, before witnesses, to renounce his pretensions to the throne, swear allegiance to his uncle Harun and formally release from their obligations to him all of his father's followers. He was then carried off to prison.

Without further delay Harun was invested with the insignia of the caliphate and proclaimed Commander of the Faithful. Hurriedly he prepared the official prayers for his brother's funeral. Emissaries were sent to Bagdad and the provinces not only to announce his advent to the throne and to exact the homage due him, but to spread a plausible version of Hadi's death. Accidental, of course. Then he gave orders to have one of Hadi's closest friends, who had once humiliated him, put to death; a mere matter of routine for an incoming monarch.

Some one came running, at that moment, with the news of a son just born to the new Caliph. A happy climax to this glorious—this truly Arabian—night of kings: one Caliph dead, another ascending the throne and a third just coming into the world! So it was that Harun al-Rashid, the Well-directed, if not by God, at least by his mother, set out upon his immortal road of power and glory.

CHAPTER VI

HARUN ASCENDS THE THRONE

It was a gorgeous night when Harun al-Rashid was proclaimed Caliph, and a beautiful morning when he made his official entry next day into the city of Bagdad, preceded by his bodyguard and followed by the army. It was Friday, the day of rest and prayer. Throngs of people from outlying districts pressed towards the palace, joining the procession. Karkh and Harbiya were deserted and only cats prowled in the gardens of Baratha.

In order to satisfy the enormous demand for mounts, almost everything on four legs was pressed into service—mangy mules, bandy-legged colts, every breed of broken-down horseflesh. Children gaily clad, chains of them, scampered merrily to the fore. Jews, riding without stirrups, jostled the milling but good-natured pedestrians. The banks of the Tigris were thronged. Thousands upon thousands crowded the great bridge of boats which the Caliph would cross on his way to the citadel, swarmed about the Khorassan Gate through which he must pass. Still others were massed about the mosque, where he would lead in prayer; covered the parade grounds, over-flowing to the very portals of the palace. Fleets of barges full of spectators choked the river. Terraces were flowered with the bright garments of women, and the murmur of the populace swelled like a humming chant in honor of the monarch's approach.

When the cortege appeared at the entrance to the bridge its living freight burst forth in acclamations of the Commander of the Faithful. From the terrace rose more faintly the plaudits of the women, like the music of excited birds. With their cries mingled the rustling of standards and banners. The black cloaks, black turbans, black flags of the Abbassids stood out like splashes of kohl on the face of the sun-bleached

city, glistened like black onyx in the sun. Sabres and lances, trumpets and timbrels glittered even more brilliantly. The procession swept by slowly. One by one, passed the great chiefs, ministers and princes. Finally came the mighty Barmecides, Yahia and his sons. They were followed by a troop of guards with drawn swords, maces at their shoulders, bows ready for action. In their midst was a fine figure of a man, shrouded in a black cloak, and riding erect on a gorgeously caparisoned charger. It was Harun al-Rashid, revealed at last to the dazzled and admiring gaze of his subjects.

Thanks to God the Most High and to His Prophet, this His Lieutenant, Aaron the Orthodox, the Well-Directed, Commander of the Faithful, was now about to bestow upon the people that harmony and peace for which they had been waiting since the days of Abbas. The accession of Harun to the throne seemed a prelude to the Golden Age.

The Caliph advanced slowly as the people, suddenly silent, prostrated themselves before him. Boats floated almost motionless on the river; only the occasional stamping of a horse or the sharp cries of birds broke the stillness. All eyes were on this new leader who was to carry the renown of his power and pomp to the ends of the earth and whose glory was so fascinating to his contemporaries and to posterity that he became the dominating figure of extraordinary legends, for centuries and centuries the living hero of the Thousand and One Nights.

Adoring throngs gazed upon him. He was scarcely twenty-four, handsome, well-built, tall and of a noble countenance. Everyone was certain that he possessed rare virtues, was a model of piety and generosity. His culture and knowledge of science called forth admiration from all sides. They praised his skill as a musician and poet. The *Roi Soleil* himself boasted no more effulgent aureole than this young emperor when his fame in France, all Europe, was at its

height. Such was the morning star of glory which shone that gala morning before the eyes of the inhabitants of Bagdad.



BAGDAD, CAPITAL OF THE CALIPH'S VAST EMPIRE.

Khaizuran, at her window in the Palace of the Green Dome, wept with pride and joy. How distant seemed those days when her Harun had in his following only one troop of slaves led by a single lancer! Tears gave way to half-suppressed smiles of exultation as her women crowded about, murmuring the honeyed words of flattery. Her son would soon be secure on the throne and she would have her way again.

Suddenly at a sign from the Sovereign, the procession stopped. Harun al-Rashid was in the middle of the great bridge. From his horse's back he gazed at the flowing current with a strange, ironic expression. From that very spot he had once thrown a ring given him by his father the Caliph Mandi. It has been handed down from sovereign to sovereign since the days of the Chosroes, but Harun had refused to relinquish it to Hadi, in spite of requests and threats. He had preferred consigning it to the river rather than give in to his brother.

He was gazing at the place where he had thrown it, when an idea struck him and he murmured a brief order. Like a flock of water creatures, startled by a sudden noise, a hundred swimmers plunged into the depths of the water, making heavy waves which rolled up on the shores. One of

them, luckier than the rest, brought up the ring. The Caliph put it on his finger, lifting his hand toward Heaven that God might be a witness. A hum of admiration ran through the people like a fire in the brush. A miracle, probably encouraged by a clever stage manager, had taken place and the prestige of the new reign was palpably strengthened.

The procession started again, crossed the parade ground and escorted the Caliph to his Palace of Eternity. Inaugural ceremonies, vows and prayers took up the entire day. It is doubtful if Harun himself fully realized what had happened until nightfall gave him time to think. When he could finally be alone to enjoy the fragrance of his gardens, while the last songs of the oarsmen were dying in the distance and the women were decking themselves with jewels and feathers to receive their sovereign, then Harun al-Rashid realized that he had become master of the world. He seemed to smell incense coming toward him from all directions and to hear the golden-tongued adulation of poets:

Have you not seen the Sun linger
to shed its light on Harun, the Chosen,
on the blessed Confidant of God,
Harun the Magnificent?

Adulation, flattery, fear and a kind of mystic power made all heads incline before him and brought to the dust the foreheads of his subjects and slaves. He was Commander of the Faithful, Lieutenant of the Prophet of God on earth, almost divine himself.

At that time, the Caliph was no longer simply the leader of the Mussulmans, elected by the people as in the time of Muhammad's first successors; nor just a wise man to whom was entrusted the direction of prayers and spiritual destinies. He was no longer even a supreme sovereign like the Ommayyad caliphs, who loved luxury but did not feel it necessary that the dust under their feet should be laid by the kisses of the Faithful.

The influence of autocratic Persia, to which the Abbasids owed their accession, was at its height. It was not exercised now with tribes united in a kind of democratic federation. The governmental authority had ceased to be in the hands of wandering horsemen; it belonged to the men of letters, viziers and closet politicians. That nomad Caliph whose shoulder every one kissed familiarly was no more. In his place existed a ruler with tyrannical powers, hidden behind an impenetrable veil, upon a throne of gold and precious stones, in the heart of a palace built circle within circle, inaccessible!

The Commander of the Faithful had become an Asiatic despot, a reincarnation of the King of Kings, a Darius.

CHAPTER VII

WHEN A BARMECIDE FEAST SPELLED PLENTY

A head far steadier than Harun's might well have been turned by such worship had he been of our race. His character, as defined in history, not in legend, appears to have been molded to expect adulation as a commonplace. The nature of his authority, absolute and co-extensive with his dominions, he also took for granted, and exercised it more and more exactly through the twenty-three years of his reign.

It is altogether probable that, left to his own devices, he would not have been inclined to seek such heavy responsibilities and, without the urging of his mother and tutor, he would have remained an unpretentious prince of the blood. In choosing the docile Harun for their designs, in grooming him for the role of Caliph, they had thought to insure their own control, and saw in him no obstacle to their plans.

This reasoning undoubtedly had a sound basis. Harun was young. He had always been considerably under his mother's control and her position was stronger than ever since Hadi's death. And Harun's attitude toward Yahia is shown by the respectful "My Father" which he always used in addressing his tutor.

If at the outset this young sovereign inclined more toward the spectacular phases of life to which his supreme powers were an Open Sesame than in the direction of political and governmental problems, was this not natural? There were efficient ministers and officials to carry on the affairs of state, so why should he be irked with them? Was it not a caliph's duty to make his personality felt throughout the empire and to attract to his court men of valor and learning? Since time

immemorial ambitious kings had started out in the same way—Solomon, for example. To increase the prosperity of a nation, the glory of an epoch, until one should become its immortal symbol, was a splendid ideal which appealed vastly to the young Harun.

No one, apparently, expected anything else of him. Islam was at the height of its power. Everyone felt certain that the era of great conquests was over. The dominion of the Mussulmans must be maintained rather than extended. The western regions were already emancipating themselves. The last survivor of the Ommayyads had founded a caliphate at Cordova, and another Alid named Idris was creating a kingdom at Fez. The rest of Africa was breaking its ties. Keeping guard was the business of viziers. Victorious Islam needed now only a dependable government. A caliph could not be expected to concern himself with matters of routine such as an order regulating navigation on the Tigris, a new standard of weights and measures, methods of drainage to counteract excessive rainfalls, a searching investigation of the budget. Harun had no desire to be a copy-book king.

The Magnificent, he had been hailed. As such he wanted to dazzle the eyes of the world and the best way of accomplishing this was to use to the full his extraordinary opportunities. All this earth's pleasures were his for the beckoning: lovely women, music, poetry, games, sports, court fetes sensuous with dance and song and wine—festive occasions which often developed into orgies. A caliph is human after all. The people, however, knew nothing of this, and believed firmly in the sanctity of Harun the Orthodox, who knew so well how to preserve an exemplary attitude of faith and piety—in public.

As to the responsibilities attendant upon great power, they were most congenial to the capable Yahia. He was a good and wise administrator, a trained diplomat and finished politician with all the essentials of a great prime minister. On the first day of Harun's reign, the Caliph, partly from affection

and appreciation, but chiefly through necessity, had made the Barmecide his vizier and authorized him to accept in his name the vows of fealty to the throne.

"My dear Father," he said, "with the aid of Heaven and your own great influence and wise advice, you have guided me to this throne. In turn I grant you absolute power." He sealed the ceremony with a ring and gave Yahia the title of Imam with civil and judicial authority and precedence over the emirs of Persia and Turkestan. Yahia became the most important person in the kingdom. Nothing that concerned the government, from the safekeeping of the royal seals to the control of the harem, from finances to war, from education to religion, escaped his attention.

The vizier undoubtedly shared this authority with the royal mother at first and took no important steps without consulting her. That is to say, in matters which concerned her, such as the distribution of fiefs, honors to Khaizuran's proteges, the appointment of that same chief of police whom Hadi had called the son of a strumpet. These privileges were intensely gratifying to her. She was not to enjoy them for very long, however. Three years later, with much pomp and pious ceremony, her son escorted her to her last resting place. Yahia became then the undisputed ruler. He planned to share his powers with his two older sons, Fadl, the foster brother of the Caliph, and the handsome Jafar, who had become Harun's inseparable companion and closest friend.

These three Barmecides together with Khaizuran and Harun's wife, Zubaida, were the principal figures in his reign. For seventeen eventful years they ruled for him and he did nothing without consulting them. In the Orient, the name of Barmecide is linked forever with that of Harun al-Rashid and his reign, and to this day the Mussulmans commemorate their memories together. History, literature and Oriental traditions all shine with their glorious deeds, adventures and accomplishments.

It is surprising that the Occident knows so little concerning the family of which Yahia was the *piece de resistance*. England and America, true, use the expression "Barmecide feast"; but even they, in common with most readers west of Suez, remain Shakabaks though Asiatic lore is rich in morsels relating to the Barmecides.

In their own times, however, a certain haze of mystery obscured their early history. They were said to have descended from priests who had perpetuated the fire-worship of Zoroaster. In reality their Persian ancestors had been pontiffs of a Buddhist temple at Balkh, and had held high rank among the natives of Transoxiana long before the Mussulman conquest. Submitting to its yoke and converted to Islamism, through expediency, finally they reached the court of the caliphs at Damascus. This court was so cosmopolitan that by their wealth and accomplishments they were able to gain the confidence of the last Ommayyads. Far from sharing in the downfall of the latter, they grew still more powerful under the early Abbassids. During the reign of the Shedder of Blood, Khalid, Yahia's father, became grand vizier and retained this post under Mansur. It was through him that Mandi had been selected as heir to the throne. Khalid died in 782, Governor of Mosul, with the satisfaction of having seen his sons, grandsons, and many other relatives holding official positions.

Yahia in his turn did not hesitate, when the powers of the caliphate were entrusted to him, to share them with his own flesh and blood. His eldest son, Fadl, was a gifted man, born to command. He was proud, austere, serious in his tastes. Not at all given to the lighter pleasures of the court, he refused its pressing invitations firmly but courteously, making way for his handsome brother, Jafar. Though firm to blandishments, he was extremely kind-hearted and charitable to the point of being nicknamed the Paragon of the Generous. He became Governor of Khorassan and several other provinces, general of the armies, a Keeper of the Seal, and tutor of one of Harun's sons. He was a clear-sighted administrator; in fact, he excelled

in all of his various occupations. Too much so, indeed, for his own, popularity: he was one of those men whom others prefer to admire from a distance. Hence his appointment to the border states of the empire. Long before the coming of rails efficient rivals have been railroaded to Ultima Thule in this fashion.



HARUN AL-RASHID FEASTING WITH HIS FAVORITE, JAFAR, AND BOON COMPANIONS.

What distinction Fadl earned by actual accomplishment, the attractive Jafar won through his close

friendship with Harun. The Caliph preferred this younger brother to Fadl. He was even jealous for Jafar because of Fadl's successes and he saw to it that his favorite received just as many titles and honors. One could not count the provinces of which Jafar was governor, if in name only. He was also made a Keeper of the Seal and Commander of the Califal Guard; and he supervised the education of another of Harun's sons.

Yahia's two younger sons Musa and Muhammad also held important charges, and his brother filled the office of chamberlain for several years. The Barmecides had soon monopolized all the chief positions of authority. The imperial dignities, administrative offices, patronage in both military and bureaucratic fields, were entirely in the hands of the descendants of Barmak and their followers.

This was much more than a remarkable example of family solidarity and worldly success. The control of the Barmecides over the Arabian empire was an eloquent symbol of the renaissance of Persia. Harun's reign glowed throughout from that luminous revolution which set in motion again the destiny of the people of old Europe. The Aryan race was taking its revenge on the Semites; the triumphant Arabs were in process of defeat by their very conquest.

The words of Horace on Rome and Greece might have been applied to these Bedouins of the Yemen, who in exchange for the religion and language which they had brought to the Iranians were to receive in turn civilization and government, as Europe understands them. Surely by making Islam the connecting link between the Mediterranean of the ancients and the world of today, they have renewed the miracle that was Greece for Europe, that "final bourne of Asia."

CHAPTER VIII

A BIZARRE TRIANGLE

The young Caliph was so admirably served by the Barmecides, in whom he had entire confidence, that he was able to spend his days as he pleased from the very beginning of his reign. Yahia supervised the fortification of frontiers, Fadl toured the provinces, exacting oaths of loyalty and quieting down those excitable subjects in distant regions who were likely to become restive after sudden changes in government. In peaceful Bagdad one heard nothing more menacing than murmuring waters, rustling palms and the laughter of ceramic workers busied with their craft. Mesopotamia, that mother of ancient civilization, overflowing with wealth and plenty, waxed eloquent about the prosperous capital. "Bagdad, City of Peace, Gift of God, Paradise on Earth."

There was nothing to mar Harun's enjoyment of life. The Caliph's personal charm attracted to his court the most brilliant groups imaginable. It became a rendezvous for poets and artists as well as for prodigal princes. Harun's best-loved companion, the handsome Barmecide Jafar, was always there—the pearl of the Caliph's eye, the rarest rose in his garden. His presence was as welcome to his sovereign as the rainfall to pasturelands on parched plateaus.

In addition to Jafar's charm and good looks, he was generous and eloquent; a poet and musician and versed in astrology. He could trace exquisite characters, arabesques, which were greatly admired. A natural distinction, combined with originality and fastidiousness in dress, grace in carriage and gesture made him an arbiter of fashion. Courtiers copied his garments and his pronunciation. He started new styles and created novel fads. The *elite* adopted his mode of wearing a beret covered by an embroidered turban, and his handsome

belts caused a furor. Modish young Mussulmans tried to discover the secret of his coiffure, the hair falling over his forehead, blending with his eyebrows, circling the ears and curving in a dashing manner up towards the temples. His persiflage, his mannerisms were discussed everywhere. Harun adored this beautiful youth and tender friend. He felt toward him as Jemil toward his Botakia:

*My heart was clinging to yours before we were created,
our love has grown as we have grown,
and even death would not be able to break our vows.*

Perhaps, when Jafar was sleeping on soft cushions and rugs, Harun may have come to kiss his bare foot as Sultan Mahmud, sovereign of Ghazna, used to kiss the feet of his favorite, an incident illustrated by old miniatures in *The Conduct of Lovers*.

Harun could not live without Jafar. When his friend was absent, the Caliph's heart was heavy, his soul plunged deep in melancholy, and his nights were sleepless. He would be forced to send for Jafar to restore his serenity. Jafar suffered also from these separations and neither of the young men could endure being apart from the other. Harun expressed his emotions in eloquent words, assiduous attentions and countless honors. At the table he chose the tenderest morsels for Jafar, in affairs of state he continued to name him for prominent posts, even though these were merely nominal. Jafar's name appeared on the currency, his *protégés* always received careful attention, none of his caprices or whims remained ungratified.

Once, though Jafar went so far as to promise the hand of the Caliph's daughter to the son of a prince who had had the effrontery to enlist his help, Harun did not hesitate to sanction the marriage. The friends were like the two halves of a succulent fruit. They were so intimate that they willingly shared a single cloak.

But Harun loved his sister, Abbasa, as well—too well. He found her a delightful companion who composed very lovely poems and sang ravishingly. The Caliph was never so happy as when he had Abbasa and Jafar both near him, chatting together, languorous with perfumes and heady wines, verses and music. He was not content with the company of the one when the other was not there, but custom and the Koran forbade this tender relationship. "O Mussulmans, will you show the faces of your women?" Cruel injunction! Must a curtain always separate his dearest companions? Should Jafar never see Abbasa face to face? No, it could not be borne that anything should stand in the way of so exquisite a triangle.

Then it was that Harun conceived the plan of marrying Jafar and Abbasa, so that they could be together without breaking the laws of the Koran. This clever subterfuge enchanted him. It was an audacious thought, a king's caprice. The relationship of course must remain ingenuous and pure. Abbasa was of the blood royal; Jafar the descendant of freedmen. Besides, those concerned never would have dreamed of availing themselves of the customary marital privileges. Never would they destroy ties so spiritual. Who could suspect them of such a thing? Both promised, swore by the face of God to respect the pact, and one fine evening Harun married them by the light of flaring torches in the presence of Masrur, his trusted eunuch, and a few other favored ones.

Thereafter the three were free to go on with their bizarre association. They used to meet in an inner room where the Caliph would contemplate with solicitude his two darlings, the twin poles of his heart. Abbasa was modest before her nominal husband and Jafar lowered his eyes shyly before this beauty which was his legally, but not by the ties of the flesh, and which he was never to have the privilege of enjoying. Harun was ravished with the situation.

CHAPTER IX

THE HAREM AND THE HUNT

Though the joys of his harem were not to be despised, with its preserve of does, so to speak, game for any diversion, he seems to have regarded his visits to it as a sacrifice to the demands of nature and the normal laws by means of which one might make sure of descendants! Some hundreds of concubines were ready there at the drop of a handkerchief to come out from their baths of rose-water and fulfill their duties graciously. There were women of all races and colors. Some were plump and soft as ointment, but most of them were erect and firm as lances, their wits as keen as their bodies were beautiful, tongues as fluent as their eyes were deep.

The poet Abu-Nuwas has enumerated some of these creatures in verses depicting to Harun the pleasures of this world. There were outstanding favorites, Hamduna, Marida, Helen—a Greek; enough, certainly, to prevent monotony by the endless variety of their charms, and to preserve for his wives the prestige and the consideration due them; a privilege which they knew only too well how to use. An example of this was Zubaida, the granddaughter of Mansur the Victorious and a cousin of the Caliph. Harun had married her four or five years before he came to the throne and she was still quite young but already beginning to show signs of emulating Khaizuran's masterful ways. "Husbands are superior to their wives. God is powerful and wise," says the Koran. True, but wives are often more astute.

One can hardly blame Harun for leaving sometimes the formal quarters of the palace to wander in his pleasant gardens amid the murmurings of many little springs. There were blossom-rimmed pools, beds of carnations and roses, summer-houses gorgeous with tiles and inlaid furniture and carpets thick as the grassy turf of the meadows where girls and boys,

beautiful as angels, complied with the Caliph's least whim. It seemed only necessary to move one's lips in those gardens to make the very walls bow to one's will, to twinkle an eye in order to hear the warbling of invisible birds. Between the terraces flowed the main body of the river Tigris' on which he could float as far up as Mosul, lulled into delightful drowsiness by the songs of the boatmen. Here Harun sometimes whiled away the hours at chess. There was no fear of his being defeated, for he was the first Caliph to play this game and aroused a widespread interest in it by offering prizes and honors to good players.

The majestic Tigris seemed to make way voluntarily for His Majesty when the bridges drew back to clear a passage for his oarsmen. That Father of Rivers whose mighty waters have washed so many capitals of the world, that ancient stream older than the first man of Genesis—how he doted on it. He loved to stroll on its banks. Convents of Nestorian monks were scattered along it. Dogs of Christians they were, no doubt, these unkempt Babas, but generous hosts with veritable nectar in their amphoras. It was good to drink freely on warm days of the cool wine with these hospitable monks. After all, Jesus was a prophet too.

When one felt restive, there was was the hunt. The beaters would round up hyenas and gazelles. Falcons flying from the wrists of the huntsmen pounced on their confused prey. Harun was a splendid sight as he galloped ahead of his followers, his cloak flowing in the wind. The admiring courtiers were so dazzled by him that they scarcely knew if he were man or god. He recalled the legendary Bahram Gur who took the kingdom of Hira from Chosroes by snatching the crown from between two famished lions and with a single arrow fixing the hind hoof of a wild ass to the animal's forehead. The huntsmen really believed they saw the white falcons which had flown from their sovereign's wrist bring back in their claws fabulous beasts, a cross between serpent and fish, with feathers in place of fins!

Harun, like all of his race, loved horses. From time immemorial Arabs have sung their praises. They do not speak of them simply as the noblest conquests ever made by man, but extol them in poetry, exalting them to the plane of, perhaps even above, the most ardent mistress. The steed first, then the woman! Even now there are probably Arabian lyric poets who know how to kiss the nostrils of a stallion.

Horse racing was one of Harun's special hobbies. On racing days the large stables, on the right bank of the river not far from the palace, were in a fever of excitement. The favorites who were to carry the Caliph's colors at the hippodrome at Bagdad or Rakka were chosen with much ritual and expert attention. When they won, Harun's satisfaction knew no bounds. Poets were called upon to celebrate their victory, while the scholar Asmai, author of "The Book of Horses," was expected to go into eulogies. The royal stables usually won, for the competitors understood their position to the letter.

There were other diversions also at the esplanade. Prominent was the sport of javelin-throwing in which it was difficult to surpass the skill of the Abyssinians. At the archery contests the mark was a small golden sphere: struck, it would break and release a dove. The marksman kept the cote of gold! Then there were feats with the long bow, to be scored at a full gallop. Jousts with blunted weapons and hand-ball tournaments also had their vogue. Again, Harun was the first caliph to play polo and made it popular not only among his nobles but among the masses by offering prizes to those who took it up.

On the days devoted to sports, the imperial cortege, accompanied by attendants carrying mallets and rackets, wended its impressive way to the field. These were gala days and the Bagdadians turned out in full force to watch Harun al-Rashid and his mighty vassals gallop about, dealing furious blows to the small ball. Impassive guards policed the area

around the field. A mislaid polo ball or mallet might be the instrument for some unexpected crime, it seemed.



HARUN WAS THE FIRST CALIPH TO PLAY POLO.

Under their breath, some of the court wags called polo the "Sport of the Sceptre and the Ball." Unwittingly, the young Caliph's pastime did reflect his attitude toward power. The royal sceptre usually seen in the hands of solemn effigies, the sceptre which sways the sphere of the universe, was being reduced to the level of a sporting accessory by this king and his minions.

When one had been rushing about all day, it was pleasant to get back to the palace at dusk and spend the

evening with congenial companions. Unless, perhaps, one might prefer to go out and mingle incognito with one's subjects.

No historian, however sceptical, will ever succeed in proving that Harun al-Rashid did not actually make these adventurous promenades with Jafar and the eunuch Masrur. Legend is, after all, only the poetic sublimation of reality. The popular beliefs of a race are sometimes more valuable than facts certified on parchment, and popular traditions often prove to be the most authentic of records. It is true, besides, that the tales of *The Thousand and One Nights* are quite often founded on fact. At any rate they depict the same atmosphere at the court of Bagdad as the Book of Songs, which is a collection of anecdotes, not legends. One cannot help thinking of the words of Gobineau, who has never been accused of yielding to his imagination: "At each step into Asia one discovers more and more clearly that the most exact, complete and trustworthy accounts of the kingdoms in this part of the world are found in *The Thousand and One Nights* . . ."

It is easy to imagine the three companions, safely disguised, strolling at night through the streets of Bagdad. It is debatable whether they actually met that sot, Badur, waiting for the morning star to rise in a gutter, or encountered the amusing spectacle of a fisherman, stupid from opium, who, mistaking the reflection of the moon on paving stones for water, was earnestly angling for a dog attracted by the bait on his line. It is quite certain, though, that they frequented the populous quarters, the old-clothes shops and water-mills, that they visited everything between the Mound of the Ass and Quarter of the Lion, strolled in and out of bazaars, enjoying the display of gleaming cucumbers, of melons, black raisins, saffron, peppers and eggplant; that they went into eating-houses where legs of mutton were roasting on spits, talked with mule-drivers, gossiped with trinket-vendors, and questioned sailors about their voyages to distant countries.

They were looking for adventure, of course, but not begging for it any more than they were seeking to protect widows and orphans, unite yearning lovers, and investigate judges and the secret police. What Harun really craved was an atmosphere of liberty, the savor of simple healthy lives, free from pomp, and a chance to breathe the same air as ordinary folk; to relieve himself of that heavy melancholy which so often weighs down the hearts of those in high places.

Surrounded by pleasures too easy to command, Harun suffered greatly from ennui, for habit and satiety made distraction increasingly difficult. He wanted to laugh, but he had to have assistance. Jesters were not enough. Jafar could cheer him sometimes, but not always. Harun would summon him brusquely:

"Oh, Jafar," he would moan, "I have had you brought to drive away the sadness which overwhelms me. God has created human beings who can comfort the afflicted. Are you, perhaps, one of them?"

"Oh, Commander of the Faithful, let us go up on the terrace and gaze above us at the millions of gentle, expressive stars. Let us look at the moon which glows like the face of a lover!"

"No, not tonight."

"Then, have the windows opened which over-look the gardens and contemplate the beauty of the trees, breathe the sweet perfumes of flowers, incline your ear to the songs of birds, the murmurs of fountains which make the water give off sighs like those of a lover bereft of his mistress, and then, Commander of the Faithful, sleep until dawn."

"No, not tonight."

"Then have the windows opened which face the Tigris, and behold the ships, fishermen and sailors who sing as they work with nets and ropes."

"No, I do not wish to."

"Then, Commander of the Faithful, let us go to your stables and feast our eyes on your horses; chargers as black as the deepest night, and palfreys of all colors, gray, nut-brown, bay, piebald, white—enough to make the mind reel."

"No, not mine."

"Oh, Commander of the Faithful, since you have three hundred women to sing, dance and play for you, have them all brought before you and perhaps the sadness of your heart will go away."

"Ah! I do not want them."

"Then, have the head of your faithful slave Jafar struck off, since he cannot help his master!"

That constant refrain of royalty, "My heart is heavy . . . sleep escapes me. . . ."

We can readily see how the weary caliph could have enjoyed going out incognito among his subjects, simple folk whose daily lives differed so from his own. Similar tastes have been attributed to Nero, Peter of Castile, Sebastian the First and James the Fifth of Scotland. There must have been many others whom history, through lack of data, has been unable to list with them. One does not like to think them so lacking in imagination and romance that the little devil of wander-lust never took them by the hand.

CHAPTER X

LOVE FEASTS

Harun al-Rashid had excellent reasons, however, for not deserting every evening his palace at Rakka or the Palace of Eternity at Bagdad. The entertainments which he gave at both eclipsed the feasts of Petronius.

After piously observing the evening prayer, his guests arrived in their most handsome equipages. The festivities always began with a banquet, and heaven knows that the courtiers loved good food. Harun himself was indiscreet enough at table to require an occasional bloodletting. In the halls of the palace, lighted by tall torches and golden candlesticks, on floors of alabaster from Mosul, decorated rugs more beautiful than those of the Sassanids, beds of ebony and cushions of ostrich feathers were scattered about for the comfort of these nonchalant princes. It was pleasanter to be seated than to stand, and more comfortable to lie down than to sit.

At nightfall, the various heroes of war and sport and numbers of other courtiers gathered round the divan of the Caliph. Those were stimulating assemblies of clever minds where diplomats, generals, doctors, poets, magistrates, musicians, scholars and jesters were drawn together through love of pleasure, culture, or adulation for the sovereign. The men were dressed in fine silk robes of bright colors, red, green and yellow, the accepted fashion for festal occasions and a welcome relief from the somber black livery of the Abbassids, token of eternal mourning for the first ancestor of the dynasty.

The Barmecides attended, wreathed in basil and flowers. Many well-known poets were also to be found there: Abu-Nuwas, son of a laundress, always ready to forget his religion before an amphora of good wine bought from a Jew or

a Christian; Abul-Atahiya, the Intriguer, who was a potter by trade, and Ibn al-Ahnaf a very distinguished lord who excelled at the madrigal and whose company Harun always enjoyed either on pilgrimages or during wars. We have proof of his accomplishments in those delicate poems put to music by Musuli, poems which brought about a reconciliation between the Caliph and his beautiful concubine Marida. Among others were Marwan, so sordidly avaricious that he would scarcely have been admitted to court had he not been a most brilliant panegyrist of the dynasty; and Muslim, Victim of Beautiful Women, as Harun had named him, a delightful Bohemian who always slept under the stars—seldom alone.

There were also Abu-Yusuf, Grand Cadi of Bagdad; Al-Asmai, that versatile raconteur whose tales and bons mots they never wearied of hearing; Hussayn the Jester, who could tear apart a man's dignity for you; and a number of talented musicians like Barsuma the flute-player; Zalzal, proficient on the lute; the amiable Maskine of Medina who, though roughshod in the matter of rhythm, had a rare skill at improvisation; and Hakam al-Wadi, to whom one day in an excess of wild extravagance Harun gave a draft of three hundred thousand dirhems on the province of Damascus—through love of his art.

There were others, too, but the most illustrious was Ibrahim al-Musul, known as Musuli, a half-brother and great favorite of Harun's, whose death was to cause universal mourning in the Moslem world and whose fame as a singer has lasted throughout the ages.

The composers were the most important members of that cultured circle. "The art of music," as Masudi said a century later in his *Meadows of Gold*, "has its place among the most noble accomplishments. Music is nourishment, recreation and diversion to the soul, which is exalted and plunged into a sweet drunkenness by its cadences and harmonious chords."

Harun encouraged his musicians in various ways. Sometimes he would call for a certain air and have it executed in turn by each one of the more skilful. He who succeeded in satisfying the monarch by the excellence of his technique and songs received high praise and many royal presents. The Caliph would invite him to draw forward his cushion, a favor which was as highly esteemed in Bagdad as the stool which gave hysterics to the duchesses at Versailles! Such attentions naturally excited jealousies among the musicians and through their partisans plunged Bagdad into several famous disputes. Various groups had their innovators and classicists, their ancients and moderns, like our own partisans of Gluck and Puccini. Society was strongly divided and took sides, sometimes to the point of bloodshed. The Arab genius for algebra made musicians resort to the most abstruse and ridiculous subtleties: grace notes, lighter than a hair, invited the play of Arab scimitars.

It is a far cry, fortunately, for the uninitiated listener, from theory to practice. Aware of this, Harun al-Rashid's musicians gave charming concerts. They organized orchestras of harps, guitars, lutes, citharas and timbals which blended harmoniously with the voices of harem singers. The entrance of a newcomer was nearly always a signal to requisition his services as entertainer and incidentally to have sport at his expense.

On one occasion it was Ibrahim that every one maliciously urged to tell the story of a handsome young genius who had gotten into his house and out again in a rapid and extraordinary way. Ibrahim told the story quite innocently and said in conclusion that he could not understand why the handsome stranger had ever come in the first place. Stifled laughter shook his hearers at the composer's remark, and the spiteful whispered behind their hands, "Why does he not ask his women? They should know better than he!"

Another time it was a poet whose quickness of wit was put to the test.

"Welcome, Poet!" said Harun, as Ibn es-Sammak entered. "Look at this dove eating near me, and describe her quickly in a few words." The poet answered without hesitation. She seems to be looking through two rubies, she seems to peck at the grain with two pearls, she seems to walk on two carnelians.

Every one applauded but Harun. "That may be," he observed to the rhymester, "but another poet has said that a dove's two feet resemble the amaranth flower and that the claws are branches of coral. That is not bad either. What do you think?" And the Caliph casually fingered his necklace of precious stones.

Not all got off so lightly as Ibn es-Sammak. The court chuckled for many a day over a trick played on the celebrated poet Abu-Nuwas. Arriving late as is the habit of poets, he found the evening in full swing. To punish the tardy guest, Harun al-Rashid prepared an agreeable little game of forfeits quite typical of the times. The forfeit was a gentle beating, a mere nothing, twelve little blows . . .

"You are very late, Abu-Nuwas. Your engagement was here. Come, take your place in the game. Sit there on that cushion and do as we do. . ."

The Caliph began to cluck like a hen, then suddenly drew a handsome egg from his cushion.

Each of the guests in turn followed his example. A royal poultry yard! Abu-Nuwas was not amused. He broke into a cold sweat. Twelve blows of a wand! What to do?

"Your turn," Abul-Atahiya cried to him. "Keep quiet, vendor of jars!"

"Your turn," Marwan called out.

"Silence, eater of sheep's heads!"

"You are next," Harun was speaking.

Gleeful encouragement was coming to him from all directions. Suddenly the poet rose to his feet before all these hens and waving his arms up and down like wings began to crow like a rooster! In the hilarity aroused by his ingenuity there was, nevertheless, no little ridicule. To the ear, the rooster is not very far removed from the ass.

In spite of all these pranks, the gathering would become bored at times; but Ibrahim's arrival never failed to raise their flagging spirits. Though usually in his cups, he was invariably ready to add his talents to theirs.

A curious character, this Ibrahim of Mosul, son of Mandi, and half-brother of Harun. The Caliph loved the swarthy youth, whom they called the Dragon because of his complexion, and found his company delightful. Both gentle and cruel, sensitive and cynical, at times more greedy than Ahab, then again generous to the point of folly, infatuated with himself, despotic, a bon vivant and heavy drinker, fantastic in the extreme, Ibrahim had, nevertheless, what amounted to sheer genius for music. When he sang the poems of Abu-Nuwas with that exquisite voice of his, Harun went into ecstasies.

As for Jafar, he became distraught when Ibrahim, picking up a lute and tuning it, began on an air of Ibn Ayesha, or improvised one of his own to this poem of Darimi:

To describe her beauty
is to compare her to the pure gold
of Egypt's ancient coinage,
to the pearl in its case of mother-of-pearl
which is the despair of the fisherman.

Jafar, unable to contain himself, purred, hand on heart, "O Moon of delight, what grace, what talent!" He was not so different from some of the aesthetes of today. His long Asiatic robes fairly undulated with emotion:

*He forgets that it is a grave sin
to wear these trailing garments,*

*he forgets that punishment
pursues him in the folds of his robe . . .*

Nevertheless, great as was Harun's love of music, he did not altogether deem it a proper pastime for red-blooded Mussulmans. The Arabian musician, even though widely acclaimed, was not free from that same disapproval which surrounded the flute-players of antiquity. As if musicians smelled of brimstone. Is it not with strains of music that the sirens, loreleis, jinn, have shipwrecked sailors, violated virgins, and drawn souls down to hell? So much for old wives' tales.

Ibrahim was so well aware of this feeling that he attributed his own musical talent to a pact with Iblis, the sequel, no doubt, to as diabolical a dream as Tartini's. One day, seriously ill, he did not scruple to repent openly of his guilt and vowed to consign his works to the divine flames. He consoled himself by reflecting in secret that many people knew them already by heart. Almost as subtle, but less the true artist than Lully who, at the point of death, burned his manuscripts—after he had safely stored away several excellent copies.

Harun was jealous regarding the dignity of his family. Born king of kings, the breath of his kin was not for common mortals. In principle, therefore, he reserved his brother's singing for the circle of his intimates, his sisters and Jafar. The same restriction was put upon his own son Abu Isa, another distinguished vocalist, and one of his sisters, Uleyah. The latter sang so well, accompanying herself on a twelve-stringed guitar, that one day, inspired by the rhythm and beauty of the air she was playing, Harun could not help dancing as he listened to her, like David before the Ark.

When the company was more numerous, the Caliph would allow Ibrahim to sing only when concealed behind the royal curtain. No one was fooled, however, as Ibrahim's technique was unmistakable. But who could have dreamed that

this gay companion would become the Tyrtæus of Bagdad and stiffen the flagging courage of warriors with his heroic lays; that, shortly after the death of Harun, this minstrel would be the guiding spirit of a great political upheaval and actually ascend the throne of the caliphs, if only for an hour? A graceful note in the gamut of the imperial scale, but how discordant to rigid conceptions of its dignity!

*Arabs, the caliphate is doomed!
Look for the Apostle of the Prophet
among lutes and oboes!*

The satirical poets placed music and wine in somewhat the same category. Fermented drinks were prohibited, but no one paid any attention to the law. Wine was king, people drank incessantly, heads reeled from the fumes of famous brews from Bahr Nitas to Bahr Fares, from the red wine of Shiraz to white wine of Kirmith.

Harun was not often the last to drain his cup. A venerable historian, Ibn Khaldun, was at great pains to prove that the Orthodox was as sober as he was pious and that he drank only the unfermented wine of the date and hippocras, which was not a sin according to the book. This hippocras, a thick, smoky concoction, was strong enough to make the face peel. As for date-wine, the Lion of Allah, himself, holy uncle of the Prophet, used to beat his nephew's camels with the flat of his sabre after imbibing too many bumpers of his harmless tonic.

Hippocras? Stuff for milksops! Wine for men, was the view of Harun—wine, daughter of the grape, the blood of lions, the magic that made thousands of birds sing in one's head. Wine was worthy of a toast.

*A live draught with a piquant flavor
a golden draught that foams a bowl . . .
a draught that reaches the marrow of one's bones . . .
like the silent creeping of ants.*

Could wine have been good for the tribesmen in Muhammad's train and bad for the lords of Bagdad? Long live wine, was their sentiment. The followers of Muhammad were not afraid to drain bumpers to his health; they reconciled alcohol with sacred things. The time was coming when Omar Ibn Alfarai would write a mystic poem called: "In Praise of Wine," wherein he treated it as the symbol of the love of God.

Harlin al-Rashid's virtue clearly wavered at these love feasts. It is easy to believe that once well started he would follow his pleasure to the limit until moralists of all times, Arabian chroniclers and German scholars, have called him a debauchee. Unfriendly tongues even accuse him of having attempted to ease his conscience by deliberately corrupting the serious-minded and the very priests, by forcing paragons of abstinence and piety to drink with him at the point of a sabre. They were easily forced. As the poet says:

*They came together to drink
after the evening prayer ..
until the sinking of Scorpio.*

Ibrahim, waving his bowl, his "little pool," as he called it, always drained to the lees, remarking wittily as it was replenished:

*I empty one cup for my pleasure;
now another for penance!*

Inspired with emulation, Maskine would intone an air of Muharik:

*To how many thirsty companions
have I not quaffed
this brew of Babel,
delight of the earth-bound!*

To which Ibrahim would drink again . . . in approval, if the singing was as good as the wine.

Cups were passed about, borne by beautiful youths, straight and slender as swords of India. These the courtiers

admired unreservedly. What were the foolish females of the harem compared with these handsome boys? They, too, wore earrings, and their robes were drawn back at the waist to disclose the lines of their hips. They glided about with amphoras and varicolored crystal flasks, filling glasses with wine and pomegranate juice, the sirup of apples and sherbets of violet snow. They were sought out, caressed, fondled. When they tried to escape, they were cajoled; if they opposed blandishment with mockery, the guests laid hold of them or blocked their passage with a sprig of basil, a jasmin wreath. Their provocative treble was a delight to these jaded ears, softer than the guitars which accompanied the half-nude women singers. Their breath had the scent of honey. They offered the allurements of the forbidden.

As Lot cried out:

*I pray you my brothers, do not so wickedly,
O people given up to all excesses.*

But the princely voluptuaries seemed to take no heed of the future. Perhaps they hoped that on Judgment Day some small virtue of theirs would be taken into account, even if it weighed no more than a mustard seed. They seemed unable to resist the charm of these youths whose white faces shone like stars, infernos to the heart, paradise to the eyes. This exotic taste of the elite of Bagdad was quite typical of the times.

Ganymede might claim that eroticism of this color has flourished in a similar way at every brilliant epoch of civilization—under Pericles, during the Renaissance, at the court of Louis XIV, among the Chinese and the Mussulmans of the East and West. One sees how far this craze could go in the love songs, delirious hyperboles, sobs, supplications, which the poet Ibrahim ibn-Sahl wrote in the thirteenth century for a certain Musa who was turning the heads of all the Sevillians. But the imperturbable Ibn Khaldun, solicitous of royal reputations, would reply to Ganymede: "An infamous calumny against the ulemas or sacred college." A defense

comparable to the white-washing of every coterie of intellectuals.

But widespread as was this taste of the noble Bagdadians, it did not mean that women were entirely excluded from those pleasant evenings at court. Women had their place in dance and song, as entertainers at the drinking-bouts. The harems were full of this type. They were trained there from a tender age as in modern academies or subsidized theatres, and were sometimes recruited from the Darrabat, the House of Musicians, near the mill of Abul Kwazim. Some of them were famous for their talent, and more than one has left her name on the pages of history like the courtesans of Greece.

The women came accompanied by eunuchs. They wore red tunics, with tiaras on their foreheads, and carried fans to refresh the lords. From their shoulders hung scarves embroidered with verses, which could be read through their hanging locks of hair interwoven with hyacinths and jewels. The bizarre color with which their eyes were painted to the inside of the eyelids made them appear very alluring and languorous in the torchlight. As they moved about, one could see through their transparent robes the undulating outlines of their lovely forms, supple but plump, according to the fashion of the day. The Mussulman admired a full bosom, eyes of a gazelle and a mouth like the seal of Solomon.

Harun had no aversion to these peris. One can be quite sure of that, for his wife Zubaida was terribly jealous of them, especially the lovely Dananir. This beauty belonged to the prime minister. When Yahia brought her to the palace, every heart hung on her lips. When she appeared, men of letters, artists, poets, the Caliph himself, murmured the verses of the Mullakwat of Tarifa:

*The singer is dressed in a saffron robe .
her tunic discloses fruits most delectable
she begins her song in a slow and tender tone,
not squandering the treasures of her voice.
Little by little she draws on the riches of these . . .*

*varying them ever in a manner so moving
that one believes one hears the plaints of a mother
who laments the loss of her children. . . .*

Under the direction of skilled teachers, beautiful girls went through the measures of court ballets. Naphtha flames rising from small sockets sunk in the floor illumined them from head to foot. Amber bodies and silken draperies glowed green and gold in this weird bright light and threw the spectators into ecstasies of delight. The scarf dance and the dance of the sabres were followed by sham battles, the eternal mime of offer and demand, love which refuses and love which yields. There were novelties. For example, the lovely houris would suddenly appear, galloping on mock mounts to which their robes were harnessed in various amusing ways, much as we see them today in the front row of the chorus.

Strange the recreations needed to offset the tedium of excessive power. According to the admirable Beckford, who wrote a fanciful life of Vathek, grandson of Harun, the latter used to soar away on the wings of the roc, into the midst of jinn and their enchantments. He would come back to earth soon, however, for in order to laugh heartily one must have serious things to amuse one. Harun's guests never hesitated to relate in front of him anecdotes which aimed at holy personages, to make jokes and puns with verses from the Koran. It was considered not a blasphemous, but an amusing pastime!

The music was interrupted sometimes to allow a prisoner to be put on the rack and tortured before these befuddled revelers. Once it was a monk of the desert whom they tormented with all sorts of temptations of the flesh.

Anything for a change. The Caliph handed over commissions and positions of authority even for clever ideas, for an epigram. When the virtuous and dignified Ishmael let himself be coerced into singing a ditty in a ridiculously cracked voice, nothing more was needed for Harun's delight.

He attached the banner of Egypt to a lance, handed it to the singer, and a new provincial governor was created.

On occasion the Caliph would order that a belated passer-by be brought in from the street. The terrified actions of the poor wretch never failed to amuse the assemblage. Then again the interlude would be an execution. Masrur would bring a sabre and a leather cushion for the condemned, and one more head would fall under the sinister blade. At such times, drunkenness was a relief.

Until the sinking of Scorpio . . .

As the dawn broke little by little, a pensive voice, accompanied by a few melancholy arpeggios, would be heard singing:

*O my friends, empty a few more cups with me before we separate!
Cup-bearer, pour me more of this pure and limpid wine!
Already the dawning day
is violating the shadows and tearing to shreds the, night . . .*

Satiety was eating into their hearts; wan faces were haggard and sad; the wine was turning bitter. Maudlin, they were ready for verses on man's misery and life's brevity. The feast was not yet finished, though, and citharas, flutes and oboes struck up again: "Sing once more, Abul-Atahiya! Sing, and give this royal night a new lease of life." Then The poet would chant to timbals and lutes:

*O Caliph! live long to the bent of your caprices
in the cool shadow of your lofty palaces.*

"More, more!" they would chorus.

*From morning until evening may everything about you
press forward eagerly to satisfy your desires*

"More, more!"

But the poet's voice was dying out. The timbals beat time dully, and the exhausted guests, overcome by

drunkenness, nausea and vertigo, became silent. Then once more the voice of Abul-Atahiya would be heard:

*At the hour when the death-rattle shall
come to shake your throat,
alas, you will realize that your pleasures
were only chimeras and vanities!*

Then Harun al-Rashid would burst into sobs.

"Leave off," he would cry, "leave off! You have shown us our blindness."

Day at last. Man-made music ceased and that of the priests of God began to be heard. The Muezzins were calling the Faithful together for the morning prayer.

CHAPTER XI

THE TRIUMPHS OF THE BLACK FLAGS

In spite of the distractions and the revelry of the court of Bagdad, the Caliph never lost sight of the fact that he had an empire to govern. The first years of Harun al-Rashid's reign were comparatively peaceful, but trouble was not far away. The temporary harmony that had lifted the Abbassids on to the throne no longer existed. Ali's descendants, who had hoped for eventual control, soon learned that they had been duped. The Alids had drawn all the chestnuts from the fire for the Abbassids alone. They knew it only too well now, and the new dynasty found them bitterly irreconcilable. The controlling powers thought it wise to rid themselves of these sectarians whose cooperation was no longer useful and might even appear scandalous to orthodox Mussulmans. They undertook the task with an efficient and shameless cynicism that betrays the quality of their political skill and ethics. Harun had learned his methods from his predecessors, notably from Mansur who had callously sacrificed the Alid general Abu Muslim, to whom he was greatly indebted for some important victories, and had rigorously persecuted his followers.

Ridding himself of these troublesome pretenders became Harun's principal object. They themselves furnished the excuse in fomenting a revolt in the northern provinces of the kingdom. It had been promptly repressed, but there was a strong feeling that this internal enemy was not permanently subdued and that worse outbreaks were to come. Meanwhile, secret police watched them closely and recorded all births and deaths in the family of the Prophet's descendant, thus noting every possible pretender, present or to come.

That ailment, dismemberment, which gnaws at every upstart empire, had been active in Islam for several years. Harun al-Rashid's entire reign was marked by numerous

uprisings of provinces, revolts of parties or sects, and separatist movements by distant viceroys.

Then too, besides these internal enemies, there was an external one, that traditional foe against whom every sovereign must make campaigns, favorable and disastrous in turn. In this instance it was the Byzantine Greeks. Mandi had conquered the regent, Empress Irene, decisively enough to relieve his empire of much fear of future trouble from her. It was the part of wisdom, however, to protect those provinces most exposed to the mercy of Byzantine arms: Upper Syria, Armenia and the Taurus.

On the advice of Yahia the Barmecide, Harun gave the necessary orders. A protective cordon was stretched along these frontiers; ancient fortresses were restored, new ones were built. Faraj, the Turk, was their Vauban. After fortifying Adana, he was ordered to set up defensive positions outside the city of Tarsus, which lies on the borders of the Mediterranean above the gulf of Antioch. All the strongholds of Mesopotamia were established on a single march to the north-west and called "The Defense," with Mambij (Hierapolis) as a capital. The Mussulmans could organize each year in the shelter of these ramparts and make successful cavalry raids, which were not only good exercise for them but also forceful reminders to the Byzantines of their recent defeats and to the Empress Irene of her obligations to pay tribute promptly. This was not breaking the armistice, but merely emphasizing the necessity for it and giving it value and savor.

Thanks to these wise and efficacious arrangements, the empire of Bagdad remained for five or six years in a fairly peaceful state, and Harun could leave his capital freely at any time for pilgrimages to distant Mecca.

Few Mussulman sovereigns have performed their religious duties as faithfully as Harun al-Rashid. His seal bore the device "Harun leans on God," and he demonstrated more often than any other caliph the belief that "a pilgrimage is one

of the five columns that support the Faith." During his reign he conducted in person eight pilgrimages, five of these within nine years, which is quite remarkable when one considers the difficulties and fatigue of the long journey. When he did not go in person, he was represented by numerous deputies, richly equipped in every way. Even the holy wars, which yielded considerable material compensation, did not divert him from these pious expeditions.

The Caliph Rashid was widely known as Aaron the Orthodox. The liberties which he took with certain laws of the Koran in the night life of his court did not prevent him from observing publicly, during the daytime, sufficient religious duties to give him an extensive reputation for piety. He was undoubtedly inconsistent, but there are similar cases in every era. All religions have their indulgences; all civilizations, their hypocrisies. Yahia explained this very well one day in a letter to his son Jafar. The vizier deplored the relationship between his son and the caliph, and the orgies in which they both indulged. His remonstrances being in vein, he urged Jafar at least to observe the conventions outwardly.

"Pass your days in seeking honors," he wrote, and endure with patience separations from him whom you love. But when darkness comes to conceal our vices, spend the night as you wish. Night is the daytime of clever men. Many of the supposedly devout indulge themselves during the night in strange pleasures. Concealed by veils of darkness they pass their hours lightly until the break of day. He is a fool who exhibits his diversions in public. Enemies are always on the alert to spread scandal."

This was fruitful advice. With the Caliph's sanction, Jafar had a palace built for himself in a lonely section on the left bank of the Tigris where he could entertain with discretion.

Harun himself practised so thoroughly the respectable Yahia's princely ethics that Oriental historians never weary of dwelling on his religious zeal and emotional reactions to the

exhortations of the learned men with whom he surrounded himself, his insistence upon having prayers said at exact canonical hours, the hundred supererogatory genuflections which he made daily, the fervor with which he made on foot the various prescribed walks around the Kaaba at Mecca, his religious endowments, and his generosity toward the sanctuaries of Islam and the family of Muhammad.

There is no doubt not only that this faith was sincere but that it increased with the years to a point at which Harun became fanatical and inquisitorial. The important thing about it is its political significance. The Abbassids had gained their power during a reaction against the irreligion and immorality of the Ommayyads. They had to maintain their reputation for orthodoxy against the attacks of malcontents and to preserve orthodoxy itself among populations only half converted and under the influence of all sorts of heretic sects, sacerdotal or pantheistic. And this at a time when all beliefs were criss-crossed by diverse currents, ranging from zendik communism to the mysticism of the first sufis. Even in the spheres of pure religion a rare theological effervescence was present which had survived a feud of free-thinking carried on amid terrific disputes between the adherents of determinism and those of free will, between rationalists and atheists, and discussions as to the divine origin of the Koran. Harun al-Rashid was a contemporary of those four celebrated imams who founded the great schools of Mussulman doctrine, and during his reign the four orthodox rites which still divide contemporary Islam came into being. His own piety, at least the external manifestation of it, was a powerful characteristic of his reign.

During the long absences of their sovereign; the viziers, who were not permitted to make pilgrimages while in office, administered the affairs of state. The councils of the caliphate, as in the lesser departments, functioned from the power of their own momentum. Yahia the Barmecide presided over this complex machinery, which was even then complicated by red tape.

When Rashid, several times a *hadj* (i.e., having made the pilgrimage to Mecca), would return to his capital—or to Rakka, which he loved better—he would find no unwelcome changes in Bagdad, nothing between the Tigris and the Euphrates to worry him. This condition could scarcely be expected to last, however.

Upon his return in 792, he learned that the Alids and their followers the Shiites had again rebelled, this time in earnest. Their seat of insurrection was Dailem, on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea, and their leader, who was an authentic descendant of the son-in-law of the Prophet, was keenly active, and had been proclaimed legitimate caliph. The able Barmecide, .Fadl, then governor of Khorassan, was sent to cope with the situation. He started out with fifty thousand men, but once actually within sight of the Alids' camp, decided not to give battle. It may have been a natural reluctance to take up arms against one of Muhammad's descendants, but it seems more likely that he lacked confidence in his own troops. There were many Persians in his army, and one might fear anything from the religious exaltation and fanaticism which a rebellion was likely to arouse in these people. Fadl preferred to negotiate. It seemed easy. "There is no better emissary than money," according to an Arab proverb. By means of a reasonable settlement, Fadl induced the Alid to capitulate on condition that he receive an autographed safe-conduct from the Caliph, countersigned by the principal governmental authorities.

Harun al-Rashid considered this a splendid solution. He dispatched the requested paper, full of promises, salutations and conventions, and covered with signatures, a choice document hand-written by himself. He even sent presents. Everything went smoothly. The Alid leader, provided with this talisman, presented himself at once in Bagdad, where he was first received with elaborate festivities, and then thrown into prison with his safe-conduct for company.

Harun's mind being now at rest, he reflected that it might be just as well to give some semblance of legality to this drastic proceeding. He called together a council to determine whether the paper written and signed by him had not perhaps in some way lost its value. A few honest souls expressed their opinion to the effect that it was a bonafide document, but the majority cried aloud in unison that of course it was only a scrap of paper. This independent and spontaneous decision reassured the Caliph. Fortunately it coincided exactly with his own opinion.

This was certainly not a pleasant coup, especially since the poor Alid did not molder in his prison but was soon removed forever from the contemplation of his safe-conduct by the contents of a little phial. It must be admitted that "the good Harun al-Rashid," as Tennyson, with Victorian poetic license, so politely called him, did not stop at this. The list of his victims is long, and the methods employed in disposing of them, ingenious and cruel.

Harun, however, should not be looked upon as a monster. He was no worse than others of his race; rather better, in fact, when one considers the atrocities committed not only by the Ommayyad caliphs, but by Harun's great-uncle Abbas, who once had the head of a decapitated enemy brought to him and the tongue given to a cat. Descriptions of even the milder forms of torture in Asiatic kingdoms are enough to make one shiver; so it is not surprising to learn that Harun was capable of doing away with a victim by having him enclosed in a sack of quicklime.

Sometimes a dignified attitude or turn of speech on the part of a prisoner would be enough to disarm the Caliph, and his anger would turn into a mood of infinite clemency. It is a pity that not all of his victims were quick-witted, although some of them escaped for other less obvious reasons. Harun happened one day to be feeling solicitous about his ancestral honor and remarked of a prisoner condemned to death: "I have looked more than once at this man's throat, which I could slit

with one stroke of my sabre, but a disinclination to establish such a precedent in my family has deterred me!"

Human life counted for very little in those distant days when the bloody tolls of national wars had not as yet demonstrated its value. Diplomacy, as a substitute for bloodshed, had not yet been invented, and the security of the State had to be assured. Assassination as an auxiliary to government was practised in all climates, all latitudes, among all peoples, with a disquieting persistence. One might almost say that it still has serious partisans.

At any rate, Harun al-Rashid, the Well-Directed, certainly saw nothing unreasonable in drastic measures, for some years later he subjected another follower of Ali to a similar fate. This was the famous Musa who had been active in Medina. The Caliph was informed that he was a dangerous pretender to the throne. Harun took advantage of his entrance into the Holy City after a pilgrimage and had him set upon by stalwart retainers, carried in a closed litter with drawn curtains to Bagdad and confined in a secure place. Then the Caliph went back to his splendid palace at Rakka.

A short time afterward it was rumored about that poor Musa had died a natural death. It seemed probable. The prefect of police, at whose home the poor wretch had been staying, was able to show a perfectly good parchment to prove it, a certificate drawn up by doctors and lawyers. Arabian history is not alone in its long lists of these "natural deaths." These are acts of providence which can occur far away from their beneficiary.

"There were other operations, too, carried on at long distance. For instance, during Hadi's short reign, the rebellious Alids of Arabia had suffered disastrous defeat. Corpses left unburied on the battlefield had been devoured by beasts and birds of prey. One Alid alone, named Idris, had succeeded in escaping the massacre. Aided by a high Egyptian functionary, Wadiq, he was able to get as far as Morocco. There he intended to found an independent kingdom. This was not

pleasant for the eastern caliphate. The new usurper must not be allowed to play the same tricks as that audacious Ommayyad who had founded the caliphate at Cordova.

Harun persuaded himself that this evil should be torn out instantly by the roots. He could not, however, be expected to undertake such a distant and costly expedition; besides, Morocco itself worried him very little; he could have seen it perish without a qualm. But this was a matter of principle. Acting upon Yahia's advice, Shamaq, a freed slave, was sent to the court of Idris, and managed to get into the good graces of the king. One beautiful summer day (July sixteenth, 793) he induced Idris to inhale the aroma from a small bottle. The flask was innocent in appearance; Idris only became drowsy from it, but he never woke up again. There again, the conventions, if one may put it so, were preserved! The phial contained essence of roses. Nothing could have been more subtle.

Shamaq, who escaped with some serious wounds including the loss of a hand, felt that he deserved the Egyptian posts. These he was given as successor to the traitor Wadiq. The assassination of Idris did not accomplish much after all. A posthumous son took up his father's work and succeeded in founding the city and independent kingdom of Fez, that cradle of the future Sharifian empire of Morocco.

These pleasant proceedings, however, brought criticism from a few moralists. The excellent Ibn Khaldun, notwithstanding his admiration of Harun, could not refrain from using the word "treachery" in speaking of the death of Idris, and a poet of the tenth century, Abu Firas, in evoking the Alid's memory cried:

*O you who would draw a veil
over the crimes of the children of Abbas,
could even you succeed in masking the perfidy
of al-Rashid toward the Alid?*

However efficacious the method of assassination, it could not always be adopted, and moreover was sometimes impracticable. In the early years of Harun's reign there were other evils to overcome. Syria was a prey to anarchy. An obscure civil war, relic of old animosities, was being waged between two groups of Arabs, the Modharites of the North and the Yemenites of the South. Apparently it had started from a quarrel between two Bedouins from the plains of Damascus over a stolen watermelon. It is such things that go to make up Arab history. The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem has often stirred up such feuds.

As a matter of fact, the general discontent began when one of the Caliph's officers killed the brother of Hatim, chief of the Modharites, who had started the insurrection. Troops were sent to Syria to establish order. Jafar was in charge of them, but his heart suffered too much at leaving his beloved Caliph, and he returned to Bagdad, appointing his generals as deputies to conquer in his name. This was done, though with some difficulty. Hatim was a brave man and a poet besides. Like the ancient Bedouins he valiantly strove to inspire his warriors by his verses, but one of his own brothers was cleverly bribed, and that, in addition to a little well-plotted treachery, finally sealed his fate.

These police operations were not completed when graver troubles burst out in Egypt. It was no longer simply a question of clashes between tribes who might conceivably kill each other off in time; it was the actual sovereign power of the Caliph that was at stake. A governor was conspiring against the Caliph and rebellion had broken out. Harun sent him an order to resign his office and hand it over to an ugly little man who was to become provisional governor in his place.

This Omar came to Cairo dressed most simply, with one servant behind him in the saddle. He did not leave until he had reestablished the situation equitably, imposed a fair system of taxation, balanced the budget, and satisfied the rebellious Egyptians, who could scarcely believe their eyes.

His successor, however, by excessively strict exactions, soon brought them back to earth again. They rebelled once more and this time could only be subdued by the army of General Harthama.

Fire extinguished in one place breaks out in another. One fine day the Khazars, those heterodox Puritans in Mesopotamia, revolted under the leadership of Walid, son of Tarif. Two of the Caliph's armies had been defeated when Harun finally sent out General Yazid. This was an unfortunate choice, for Yazid was a tributary of the rebel. He waged war casually and temporized as much as possible. The Barmecides, who were on bad terms with him, had no trouble in convincing Harun that this over mild warrior was not the man for the situation.

Harun sent him the following eloquent epistle: "Any adjutant at all would have done better in your place. It is only too clear that we can expect nothing from you—that you are guarding only your own interests. But I swear by Allah that, if you do not hurry up and punish him, I shall send some one to bring me your head." Whether it was a question of forcing an unwilling artist to sing, or demanding victories from army chiefs, this death threat was always on the tip of Harun's tongue: ". . . by cutting off the head and neck."

It must be admitted that it was a sovereign method of galvanizing the indecision into action. Yazid did not need a second letter. He caught up with the rebel by forced marches. When his troops arrived they were no longer fresh and were in no condition to attack. The commander grasped the situation perfectly. "Hold!" he said to them, "You have to do with undisciplined hordes. If you withstand their first attack, they will disband." And that is just what happened. It was a wonderful battle, full of heroic deeds, inspiring words and spectacles. Yazid's son threw himself in front of a sabre to emulate his father whose forehead was slashed. Walid was pursued and beheaded. The dead man's sister entered into the battle to avenge him. Yazid threw himself in front of her,

crying: "Go home! You are dishonoring the tribe!" The Amazon, touched by her pride of clan and ashamed of her temerity, withdrew into her tent where, being a poetess, she wrote an elegy on the misfortunes of her brother.

After Morocco, Egypt, Syria, and the Khazars, came Mosul, that lovely city where one went in boats to breathe the odor of jasmin. This was too much for the Caliph. Harun felt his military qualities stirring again after ten years. He had had enough of the soft pleasures of peace and his heart yearned for the thrill of battle. It was one way of regaining his fading youth. Back to the battlefield he went once more, and from then until the end of his days he never failed to gallop off with his troops.

He attended in person to the punishment of Al-Attaf, who was having a good time running Mosul for his own profit. Harun came, saw, conquered, and punished the city by having its ramparts torn down. His anger was so unbridled that he could scarcely be restrained from razing it to the ground, but he finally cooled down and gave over to Fadl the responsibility of restoring its former loyalty.

Revolts and counter-revolts were continually going on. North Africa, with its populations of Berbers, so turbulent that the eastern Arabs looked upon them as savages, had always been a theatre of bloody quarrels and intrigues. Kairwan was the pivotal point shaken by the activities of heretics who sought refuge there. The caliphs of Bagdad were little concerned with the fate of these provinces as long as they remained as heretofore nominally faithful to the empire. The local authority was in the hands of governors appointed by Bagdad and prayers were made in the name of the Caliph. Matters, however, had become complicated. The actual tribal chiefs, assuming the roles of feudal lords, were giving so much trouble to the governors, who in turn were steadily losing control and hence must be abolished, that the power of the Caliph was no longer even nominal.

Harun resolved to act energetically. He sent the undefeated general Harthama, skilful adjuster of desperate cases, to stage one of his triumphant campaigns. Preceded by ambassadors, whose efforts failed utterly, Harthama and his armed forces were soon able to obtain the results which had eluded the diplomatic togas. He entered Kairwan a conqueror. But Harthama was purely a military man: to be installed in a proconsulate and govern over continual agitators did not appeal to him at all. A complete military victory had been enough for him and he asked to be recalled.

Disorders began again immediately. Harun, realizing that he could not hold Africa without tremendous sacrifices, decided to try a new policy: self-government throughout his empire, Africa for the Africans. He accepted the proposal made by an African amir, prefect of Zab, Ibrahim son of Arlab, who announced himself ready to govern the country more or less independently, but in the Caliph's name, and to relinquish the subsidies which the empire had conceded to his predecessors. Still better, he volunteered to turn over to the Caliph an annual revenue of forty thousand dinars. Harun, in doubt as to the wisdom of accepting these conditions, submitted the case to a council. Harthama was called to give expert advice on the situation. During his stay at Kairwan, the brave general had been overwhelmed with attentions from Ibrahim and had found him sympathetic and intelligent. He therefore spoke in favor of the Aghlabid's proposal. The arrangement seemed attractive politically as well as financially, and Harun adopted it. It did not, however, work out well in practice.

Ibrahim, in asking to be appointed Amir of Africa, had specified that the title should be hereditary: a good arrangement from his point of view, giving him independence and making a kingdom out of a fief and a dynasty out of a family. For a time it seemed to work. The Arlabids governed theoretically for the Caliph and continued to make the Friday prayer in his name. The official black uniform of the

Abassids was worn, and the customary feudal tributes of captives, rugs and poems were sent regularly. But the bonds soon began to relax and eastern Barbary became practically independent of Bagdad. Thus, by falling in with the plans of the first Arlabids, Harun had lopped off peacefully, legally and constitutionally. This was in the year 800.

But Bagdad was the centre of an Oriental empire and Harun al-Rashid, with his Persian following, was turning his thoughts almost entirely toward Asia, that great dream of conquerors where the memory of Alexander was still fresh. There lay, he thought, the future of Islam and the glory of his reign—a singular piece of clairvoyance which future events were to justify. From Mesopotamia to the Indies, to the heart of the islands of Malaysia and as far as China and Japan, millions of people scattered over vast territories were waiting for the religion of the Prophet!

As for western Europe, it had to be approached from another angle. The road through Africa and Spain was barred. These provinces were already dead branches of Islam. The reconquest of Spain by the Catholic kings threatened to cut off this point of the Crescent. Europe must be taken by way of that great, ancient route of invasions—the Bosphorus, the Danube and the plains of Hungary. Here again history was to realize Harun's glimpse into the future, Islam extending to Vienna, Byzantium in the hands of the Turks, Stambul holding the Dardanelles!

It is easy to see why Harun, unable to be everywhere at once and supervise in person the success of every operation, elected to undertake the Greek campaign. The Eastern Roman Empire was a foe worthy of him, and Constantinople had been coveted for centuries! A victorious army would bring back from these countries the finest booty imaginable in riches and slaves. Harun had already had a taste of combat with the Greeks and was eager for more. A Byzantine war was exactly to his liking. The peace that had existed at the beginning of his reign was gone now.

Not in vain had the Arabian warriors made periodic raids into the heart of Asia Minor. They reached Angora, which is today the capital of the Turkish republic, and Ephesus, and pressed on to the south of Smyrna and into those provinces conquered by Constantine VI, who had succeeded his mother, the regent Irene. It was a particularly harsh winter; the Mussulmans, demoralized by the cold, suffered a severe repulse. The situation, was serious. Harun, as in the days of his gallant youth, set forth at the head of his army to pluck fresh military laurels. Where Haroun, son of Mandi, had once invaded this very region, Harun al-Rashid, Commander of the Faithful, was now leading his army, with all the prestige of a mighty conqueror.

He crossed Asia Minor, routed Constantine's troops, and razed the city of Safsaf, while his lieutenant Abd-al-Malik was advancing on Angora. His fleet took possession of Cyprus, capturing the Admiral Theophilus, who chose to be executed rather than embrace the Mussulman faith.

At about this time a revolution broke out in the enemy's ranks. Irene and her party deposed her son Constantine, had his sight destroyed with a white-hot mirror, and regained control. The moment was ripe for Harun to consolidate his advantage and push on to the Bosphorus. It seemed at first, that nothing could stop him, but his advance was halted, nevertheless; Armenia was overrun with Turkoman hordes. The Khazars, as they were called, were encamped in the neighborhood of the Caspian Sea. It had already been necessary, to repulse them several times, urged on as they were by the Byzantine government to which they were united by intermarriage and treaties. The Barmecide, Fadl, had made a diplomatic effort to secure their neutrality by marrying a daughter to their king, the Kha Khan. Unhappily the plan had not turned out well: the princess died a short time after leaving her father and he, either convinced that she had been assassinated or pretending to think so as an excuse for creating a favorable diversion for the Byzantines, had thrown

his nomads upon Armenia. They ravaged the district, and the defenceless Mussulmans and Christians of the country were led away into captivity.



A BATTLE BETWEEN THE FORCES OF HARUN AL-RASHID AND CONSTANTINE VI.

It was necessary to adjust this situation at once. Harun retraced his steps. The generals Khuzaima and Yazid marched against the invaders and drove them out of Armenia. But it was then too late to take the road again for Byzantium, and Harun had to content himself with listening to the proposals of the Empress Irene. She sent him fine presents and begged for peace, throwing all the blame for the trouble on her son, and pointing out the mischief she had done to Constantine as proof of her kindly intentions toward the Caliph. Harun consented to a four-year truce and accepted Irene's conciliatory proposal, but on condition that she pay an annual tribute even heavier than that which Mandi had once imposed. It was a victory for Bagdad after all.

Thus, by the year 800, Harun had succeeded in reducing the descendants of Alexander and the Caesars to the status of tributaries. In spite of many insurrections which were,

after all, only episodes in the life of a caliph, and in which he was always victorious—notwithstanding his losses on the coast of Africa, which seemed very unimportant, then, compared with his eastern interests—Harun al-Rashid, the master of a huge Islamic empire, was undoubtedly a great conqueror and a mighty sovereign in the eyes of the entire world.

CHAPTER XII

HARUN AND CHARLEMAGNE

Byzantium was ever at heart Oriental, and along with Bagdad was at odds with Rome. Facing these two empires was that of Charlemagne, upon whose head Pope Leo III had just placed a crown. The emperor with the flowing beard, that epic hero who scoured Europe, sword in hand, for the greater glory of God—and the handsome Caliph of Bagdad, looming large in the enchanting pages of *The Thousand and One Nights!* It was almost inevitable that these famous contemporaries should find much in common with each other, and thus they have always been coupled in European minds.

Their friendship was curious, and the tales about it gave rise subsequently to a long altercation that has only lately been composed. It has been said that the two emperors did not even know each other, and that the famous stories of their exchange of embassies, courtesies, and gifts are entirely fictitious, as untrue as the adventures of that valiant Huon of Bordeaux, sent by the emperor of the Franks to cut off the beard of the amir of Babylon!

Harun al-Rashid may not have had a clear idea of Charlemagne's personality; and on the other hand, perhaps this Caliph of "Baldach" was thought of by Europeans only as "Miramolín," the pillar of Mahoum, and a rather detestable pagan divinity. Still, the East and the West have always communicated and always will. The sea, great assembler of civilizations, has many functions. The Jews and the Marseillais are always connecting links. Marine traffic and commerce in foreign commodities have never been interfered with either through religion or war. Everyone seems to agree that in the time of Harun al-Rashid there were continuously friendly relations between Europe and the Levant which even Arab invasions had not interfered with materially.

The Holy Sepulchre has always attracted Occidentals. Priests and monks of the Middle Ages have handed down the records of their pilgrimages. They were not the only ones. There were all those humble believers who went to Jerusalem, journeying over the earth for the love of God and the good of their souls. There were also vendors of relics who brought back little pieces of wood, thorns and nails from the True Cross. Most important of all were the Provençal ship-owners who sent their vessels out among the Levantine ports in search of valuable cargoes, with the same daring and instinct for business as the Phoenicians when they sought the counting houses of the Gauls. Stored on the docks of Arles and Marseilles—doors to the East then as now—were Syrian oils, Egyptian papyrus, Arabian incense, the pearls and gems, ivory and spices of India, wine from Gaza, and beautiful fabrics from farthest Asia. The Mediterranean thalassocracies have always been drawn together by this sea.

There was nothing to prevent Harun and Charlemagne from knowing each other, nor is there any evidence to prove that they were not acquainted. Moreover, French biographies of the bearded emperor give glowing details of their friendship. The Arab chroniclers, on the other hand, never even hinted at it. Their silence has perturbed many scholarly minds because they cannot find a logical reason for it.

It was, of course, difficult to obtain accounts of events taking place so far away. The Arabian writers may have been reluctant to admit friendly relations with a famous destroyer of Saracens; yet Mussulman history is full of instances of such alliances, which have never been concealed; even a few unions with idolaters, which is worse! Harun al-Rashid, Commander of the Faithful, would have been no less ready to associate with Charlemagne than was Francis the First, a very Christian king, to make friends with the Grand Turk. Charlemagne would have been called Karleh, as Charles Martel was called by the Arabs in Spain, or his name changed entirely, perhaps, as in the case of the Byzantine Nicephorus, who became

Nigpur. As for the Europeans, they got their "Miramolín" from Amir-al-Muslímín.

The only reasonable excuse for this neglect of Charlemagne on the part of the Arabs is that the French were wrong, perhaps, regarding the extent of the friendship between the two sovereigns and their kingdoms. Those relations appeared important to the French as indicative of the worldwide glory and prestige of Charlemagne, a matter of little or no importance to Orientals. Charlemagne would naturally have taken the initiative. He needed the Caliph's assistance to enable him to protect pilgrims to the Holy Sepulchre, to aid the Christian communities of Syria, restore churches in Jerusalem, and thus establish a French protectorate in the Holy Land, which was to endure as a traditional policy of his country.

Harun al-Rashid knew Charlemagne only slightly, but he had no reason to dislike him. The Jew Isaac who was, according to the *Vita Karoli*, a prime factor in the royal negotiations, undoubtedly described Charlemagne to the Caliph of Bagdad. He would have talked to him, perhaps, in this strain: "Karleh is a respectable king, you know, with a beautiful country and a large army. He admires you very much, for, as far as the region of the setting sun, every one knows that you are a great king, a very great king, the greatest of kings. . . ." A Jewish ambassador knows how to be humble and diplomatic by turns as needed. Isaac might have added that Karleh detested the Caliph's enemies, the Byzantines, for example, and those low Ommayyads of Cordova, who had felt the weight of his arms.

That would have made Harun's face brighten. "In short," the Caliph would have reflected, "this Karleh does not interest me overmuch, but I have no unkindly feelings toward him"—and would straightway have sent Charlemagne some presents. Gifts meant very little to one surrounded by Oriental splendor. An elephant and rich cloths were only trifles. It is conceivable that such details were not handed down to the

Arab historians who began to write a century later. But they caused great excitement in a Europe less accustomed to Eastern splendor, where they seemed like the fabulous treasures of Golconda.

To Harun, Charlemagne appeared a kind of savage. Perhaps he was not far wrong. The Caliph regarded the French king as Europeans look upon those negro sultans to whom they send gifts of umbrellas and calicoes. The negroes glow with excitement over their gifts, while we never give the matter a second thought. In a similar situation Harun might have emulated the example of Louis XIV with the famous Moroccan Sultan, Mulai Ishmael, who had requested nothing less than the hand of Mademoiselle de Conti. The king of France responded disdainfully with the gift of a splendid carriage. Our writers do not mention the coach, but they go into ecstasies over some Siamese ambassadors who came to prostrate themselves before the Sun King!

It is a fact that Arabian historians have been absolutely silent concerning their Caliph and Charlemagne, but it is going too far to assume that Harun and his contemporaries did not even know who Charlemagne and the Franks were. There must have been some victims of Charles Martel in the hospitals of Bagdad, some heroes of the Path of Martyrs, some wounded veterans from the Battle of Poitiers. After all, when it comes to a question of text, one does not hesitate between an Oriental chronicler with his tales and stories and the parchments of monasteries, the capitularies of the abbeys and the Chronicle of St. Denis.

The supposition that Isaac may have been an impostor and prevaricator is provocative of another interesting discussion. One might easily imagine the excellent Jew tarrying with the Arabs to establish an alibi for his long absence from France, buying perfumes in Oriental bazaars and an elephant at a hostelry, then pretending to Charlemagne that it was Miramolín who had given them to him.

Modern authors have advanced some very substantial arguments favoring the disputed friendship between these two monarchs. If historical records are not final enough there are still sentimental arguments which have their value. It would never do to cast doubt on those gifts of water-clock and elephant! God forbid! One might as well call Roland a traitor! Several centuries of faith are worth more than all the Oriental historians put together. We have believed in our heroes too implicitly and too long to be disillusioned now!

About the year 800, Harun al-Rashid was informed that the envoys of a Christian king called Charles, who ruled over countries even farther away than Byzantium and Moorish Spain, were demanding an interview in their master's name. This mission was said to be in charge of two officers with uncouth names, Counts Lantfried and Sigismund, accompanied by a Jew named Isaac who was to serve as interpreter. Harun's informant needed to say no more. The Caliph was not interested in this information and in no haste to receive the ambassadors. He subjected them to a long delay which even outlasted customary governmental red tape.

They camped out for about a month before being received. Curious passersby stared at them as if they were trained bears, exclaiming and pointing at their blonde moustaches and queer weapons. The homesick envoys meantime were thinking sadly of their beautiful France and wondering whether they should ever see her again. They had left home in 797 on a mission to the Patriarch of Jerusalem; and now, after a long, hard voyage, they were beginning to wonder why they had come. Emperor Charles had his reasons, of course: the Christians in Syria had appealed to him to protect them. For more than a century, Mussulman tolerance, particularly lenient towards Christians who, in spite of their failings, were people of the Bible, had permitted them to practise their religion in peace. But conditions had changed and were now becoming intolerable. The former lenience had given way to persecution. Repeated disorders in Syria and

Palestine destroyed all sense of security. In 795 a Christian had been martyred at Damascus; in 796, the monastery of Saint Saba, near Jerusalem, had undergone a disastrous attack from a party of Bedouins. To be sure, the community had gained twenty martyrs, which was agreeable to God and diffused an odor of sanctity, but the monastery had been pillaged and burned to the ground. Churches, monasteries and the glorious and revered city of Jerusalem, the Holy City, were submerged in sorrow and oppression. Charlemagne's heart was deeply afflicted.

He had sent the two counts and Isaac to the pagan Caliph seeking protection for these Christians. The ambassadors wondered how best to approach this delicate question. Their ostensible object was not exactly calculated to facilitate their real task. They were to ask the monarch for an elephant. Charlemagne adored these huge beasts. Anticipating the city of Hamburg by several centuries, he had organized a zoo at Aix-la-Chapelle where one could see the lions and Numidian bears described so pleasingly in the poem of Engelbert. Counts Lantfried and Sigismund wondered whether they would not be laughed at.

Harun al-Rashid finally condescended to see them, but without any ceremony. They were too bedraggled and pathetic in appearance to merit the honors reserved for great ambassadors welcomed within the curved enclosures of Bagdad. There were for them no golden belts scintillating with precious stones, no processions of eunuchs and guards, no gayly adorned boats and gondolas on the Tigris, no thick rugs, nor lions, nor the gold and silver tree with singing birds made of rare and precious metals which Abul Fida describes in telling of a reception to a Byzantine embassy. Harun was gracious, however, and found his guests unexpectedly interesting. He was delighted to learn that their master considered him a great monarch and that they had many mutual enemies. Far from ridiculing the request of the envoys, he was pleased by it, and ordered a beautiful elephant, which

bore the honorable name of Abbas, to be brought at once from his menageries and given to the Frenchmen. It was a very small favor indeed, in that country of the thousand white elephants of Chosroes!

Between exchanges of salaams and congratulations, Isaac, who had thus far kept himself in the background, timidly broached the subject of those Syrian Christians. The Caliph, however, saw nothing out of the way in this, and agreed to protect them provided they rendered homage to him. The visitors left at last with excellent safe-conducts and escorted by a few Mussulman attaches as a return courtesy to the French king.

The fears of the French counts that they should never see their land again proved only too well founded, for they died on the way home. Isaac, whose mission was not yet completed, got his elephant and himself as far as the coast of Carthage to beg relics of Saint Cyprian from the Arlabid amirs. The remaining members of the French company continued on their way together with the Mussulmans.

On the thirtieth of November in the year 800, Charlemagne, summoned to Rome by Pope Leo III, received a delegation of Christian pilgrims from Syria who had, thanks to Harun's leniency, made the long journey safely. Among them was the priest Zacharius, on his way back from the Orient, accompanied by two monks, one from the Mount of Olives and the other from Saint Saba. The Patriarch of Jerusalem had sent them to give Charlemagne, as a token of benediction, the keys to the Sepulchre of Our Lord and of Calvary, together with those of the City and the Mount. In thus allowing them an unmolested passage, Harun al-Rashid had granted Charlemagne a right of way through the holy places of Christianity.

The French king was very anxious for news of his elephant and his envoys. He could scarcely wait. In the springtime the company of Frenchmen and Arabs disembarked at Pisa and reached the king's headquarters by way of Italy and

Provence. Meeting them midway between Ivree and Verceil, Charlemagne was greatly distressed to learn that Counts Lantfried and Sigismund had died on the way. After prayers had been said for their souls, the king asked news of Isaac. He was told that the Jew had made a detour towards the land of the Berbers and that, by the grace of God, he would be back before long.

The grace of God was apparently granted him, for Isaac, laden with relics of Saint Cyprian and accompanied by his elephant, came safely through storms and winds to Port Vendres in the month of October, 801. Great excitement and confusion attended his landing. The naval inspectors were forced to hide in their offices, and the dock men scratched their heads in bewilderment. The captain of the port had to decide whether free passage should be accorded a vessel which carried such a singular passenger. There were no provisions in the bills of lading and port charters for this kind of freight. Everything was adjusted at last, however, and Isaac could lead his noble Abul Abbas on to dry land while the little Catalonians danced about. That was the beginning of a triumphant and doubtless remunerative journey through France. One can imagine that the huge, strange creature with his fascinating trunk earned an excellent living for Isaac throughout the trip. On the nineteenth of July, 802, the Jew reached Aix-la-Chapelle and, caressing his companion's trunk for the last time, presented Abul Abbas to the delighted Charlemagne.

The friendship between Harun al-Rashid and Charlemagne, thanks to the mediation of a little Jew and a big pachyderm, had begun too auspiciously not to continue. That same year the French monarch sent a second embassy to the Caliph bearing some flags of frieze which were very expensive and rare in the Orient.

The envoys came back four years later, having settled the various diplomatic questions raised by the administration of French control over Christian communities in the East. In

exchange for this protective right, Charlemagne accorded to Arabian ship-owners rights of entry into the Christian Mediterranean ports for maritime traffic in general and importation of exotic luxuries in particular. Not to be outdone, Harun al-Rashid decided, the following year, to send a special commission to the Christian sovereign whose first envoys had so thoroughly demonstrated the importance of such embassies.

Harun put one of his officers, Abdallah, in charge of this group which included two representatives of Thomas, Patriarch of Jerusalem, and a monk, Felix. They carried with them for Karleh, King of France, some fine examples of Bagdadian industries and Oriental workmanship: a pavilion and some tents of varicolored linen, silk coats, aromatics, ornaments and perfumes, gazelle musk (which is indeed a royal gift), gilded candelabra, sets of chessmen, drinking glasses, ornaments of ivory, and a clock of copper with an ingenious mechanism worked by water-power.

Harun's envoys took the water route to Europe. The Mussulmans were admirably equipped for their journey and their passing aroused more than the ordinary native curiosity. They seemed to exhale the perfumes of Arabia, vapors from incense that stupefied the common people. When they went along the countryside of Provence, old shepherds, motionless as Algerians, thought they were seeing a procession of Wise Men, and little peasants, playing the tambourine and galoubet, began to sing:

*In the early morning,
I saw the passage of
three mighty Kings . . .*

When they reached Aix-la-Chapelle, fetes were given in their honor. They scored a great success. There should have been a Labruyere or a Saint-Simon to describe the people's enthusiasm. Eginhard was not capable of adequately depicting the sensation caused by Abdallah and his companions. The joy of the populace knew no bounds:

*Come, one and all, to see
the Mussulman ambassador!
From Arabia he brings
rare and costly gifts.*

The women quite lost their heads as they were to do later when the Siamese ambassadors came to the court of Versailles. Ogling the handsome, smooth-skinned Arabs, they put their hands to their hearts, murmuring very low:

*I am faithful to my husband,
yet I tremble for my honor;
night and day I think of nothing
but the three trains of the ambassador.*

The nobles were no less impressed. Abdallah set the great water-clock going for them and they heard the twelve midday strokes, as twelve brass bells fell tinkling into a metallic basin, and twelve warriors on horseback issued forth from as many doors. Of course they understood nothing of it at all, but they shouted with enthusiasm, and celebrated in the best of faith the pomp and glory of Harun al-Rashid, the great Miramolin.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DAYS OF HYMEN

If Charlemagne's biographers, in describing his relations with the Eastern princes, thought to emphasize his glory and increase his world prestige by making him out a sort of crusader, they calculated badly. Instead, it is Harun al-Rashid's name that they have magnified in the eyes of posterity, his name that has come to epitomize the entire Bagdad caliphate. He was widely known elsewhere, too. He exchanged envoys with the Emperor of China and the kings of India. He ranked as King of Kings, ruling over an immense domain which extended, at least nominally, from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean to the steppes of Chinese Turkestan, and from the Black Sea to India, which at this time had reached the height of its strength and prosperity. At the center of his empire, admirably located geographically by the farseeing early Abbassids, was Bagdad with its eight hundred thousand inhabitants, palaces, mosques, schools and hostleries, a great metropolis of civilization. Enemies outside and beyond the frontiers feared the Caliph's well-disciplined army. Order reigned throughout. In state affairs a strong administrative and bureaucratic organization assured the authority of a firmly centralized government. The provincial powers were the objects of a system of continuous surveillance in which the local chiefs played the roles of true "missi dominici."

The treasury was regularly refilled without the need of armed force to insure the prompt payment of taxes. Each year some seven thousand five hundred-weight of gold coinage went into it besides revenues in kind: balsam from Khorassan, sugar from Khuzistan, pomegranate jam, white honey, rosewater, dates, caraway seeds, silks, rugs and falcons.

Industry and commerce flourished. Mesopotamia was more than ever a thoroughfare for the great traffic routes of the

Orient, a market-place where wares and produce were interchanged on caravan trails, where cargoes from Indian seas passed one another. Agriculture flourished abundantly on one of the richest plains in the world, continually irrigated by an intricate network of canals. The construction of great public works, wells, cisterns, fortifications, bridges, palaces, mosques and hospitals kept the workers busy. Relay posts functioned regularly. There had never before been such stability, order, wealth and security.

Contemporaries, or at least their immediate successors, were able to judge Harun al-Rashid's period in proper perspective and in the light of an already perceptible decadence. Oriental writers call his reign "The Days of Hymen" and they mean the phrase in its highest sense—of fruitfulness. We less romantic moderns would make it "The Age of Harun al-Rashid."

To the East this period is as well known as those of Pericles, Augustus and Louis XIV are to European culture. It was of course not that Golden Age which has been dreamed of by all rulers since time immemorial, and which Abbas the Shedder of Blood had imprudently announced to his people. Nevertheless, it is true that from the time of Mansur, on past Harun's successors, Oriental Islam experienced more than seventy years of a splendor which practically crystallized around Harun and was analogous to that of the Western Renaissance. Yet it were as foolish to assert that this brilliant period was entirely the work of him who symbolized it as to disparage Harun's immortal fame by attributing it to reflected glory.

Harun al-Rashid was not only the man of the hour in a mighty epoch, but he understood his task thoroughly. His personal influence on culture has never been disputed. An artist and man of letters, he encouraged a taste for knowledge and culture in all things and a development of intellectual and artistic life by the brilliant court atmosphere that he created around him. Thinking always in sensuous terms of poetry and

music, opulence and luxury, he treated scholars with great respect and admiration, frequenting their courses like a student and following their instructions with the charming intellectual humility of Mussulmans, who never tire of going to school even when gray-headed and bald.

One day he solemnly washed the hands of an eminent professor to express his veneration for science, having in mind that wise precept of the Koran: "He who is busy with inkwells and pens will go directly to Paradise when his time comes." Competition for this journey may not have been so great in Harun's time, but Paradise would certainly be fearfully swamped nowadays if so simple a qualification as this were the only one required!

Harun al-Rashid was at all events an omnipotent Maecenas who loved adulation and the constantly rising fumes of incense. He paid well for the extravagant hyperboles which were showered upon him but, as one of his predecessors said, "if presents fade, the eulogies remain," and meantime their authors were enabled to exist and to leave disinterested works behind them!

Certainly no one is fooled by the panegyrics and admiring cries of the writers of Harun's time. Experience has taught us how much to accept when they begin enumerating and singing the virtues of the Caliph. Nor can these judges be believed who knew so well how to swing the scales in the sovereign's favor. There is no limit to the depths of servility and bribery to which the Orientals, with rare exceptions, can sink. On occasions they were capable of doing anything for a favor, a pension. Some of the poets were very like jugglers of the Middle Ages. Their calling was not free from danger. A dithyramb paid well, but despotic power is likely to invite satires that pay well in a different coin. One might be thrashed by the servants of a noble, like Voltaire, or whipped by order of the Caliph, or worse still, have one's tongue torn out. However, there were compensations: the ease of living that these talented poets enjoyed thanks to an enlightened monarch,

tyrant though he was, permitted them to consecrate their time to their art and to leave enduring works.

Harun thoroughly enjoyed the brilliant minds of scholars and artists, and opened up many avenues of expansion and self-expression to them. He had palaces built and decorated by great artists. He was always wanting new music, and composers never lacked orders, while his poets were encouraged to originate their own themes. Sometimes the Caliph forced them to action even while overwhelming them with generosity. Like Fra Lippo Lippi, who was put under lock and key by the Medicis, one poet was confined to his room until he had completed a long-awaited sonnet.

Harun drew around him philosophers and theologians and held his own with them. Thirsting for knowledge he sent to the Indies for wise doctors and ordered an inquiry to discover the mysterious origin of the gray amber found on the coast of the Sea of Oman. His clerks were set to translating Greek manuscripts. He dreamed of all sorts of great undertakings like piercing the Isthmus of Suez, or uniting the canals of the Nile and the Red Sea so as to establish communication between the two. This vast project was only discarded at the remonstrances of his ministers, and from a fear that the Holy Cities might be menaced some day by Christian fleets. Harun wanted to rebuild Antioch, but gave up the idea for reasons which might well arouse the admiration of modern hygienists. It was reported to him that rust was attacking the weapons at Antioch and perfumes were decaying there, that the water engendered parasites in the human stomach and produced cold and black gases accompanied by intense colic. No matter what questions arose, Harun seemed always at the helm of the astonishing activities of his time.

All forms of literature were brilliantly represented during his reign, and there were many celebrated poets. Lyric, bacchic, erotic, and satirical verse reached a new level in a lighter vein, containing none of the roughness of those Bedouin chants which extolled horses, camels, wars, and

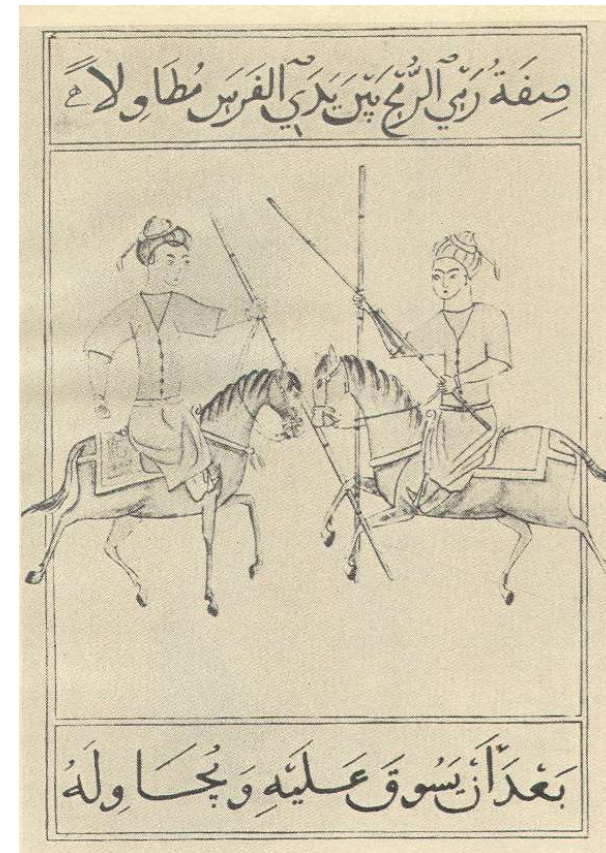
wanton campfire loves. It became a mental diversion rather than a sentimental wail; less sincere, perhaps, but more scholarly and excellently suited to madrigals. In becoming a poetry of court and salon, it had lost in vigor and naivete, but it had gained in distinction, art, and sometimes profundity, as in the verse of Abul-Atahiya, dealing with death and the vanity of this world:

*In my foolish meanderings, I was forgetting death,
as if I had never seen its handiwork.
Is not death the climax of everything?
Why not renounce from now on
that which must eventually elude us?
Silent, mysterious, and sympathetic,
misfortune appears suddenly to give you warning,
speaking of bones, which will crumble into dust:
in the midst of tombs, you see your own
and keep on living as if you never had to die!*

Grammar, wherein the Arab spirit lost itself in arduous subtleties, was at its flower, its heroic age. It was cultivated with so much fervor that ferocious arguments ensued. Two scholars tore each other's hair so violently one day over a question of the nominative and accusative cases that one (surnamed "Odor of the Apple," which was not bad for a grammarian, and at least better than "Bundle of Science Tied up in a Skin," as the dirty Abu Ubayda was called) had to be exiled from Bagdad. "Can one indeed love grammar too well?" asked Quintilian, and after him, Don Leopold Auguste de Claudel: "Adorable grammar, beautiful grammar, delicious grammar, daughter, wife, mother, mistress!"

Philology and the interpretation of the Koran developed because the people, conquered by the Arabs and thrown together in Islamic communities, had adopted the language of the conquerors. In studying it, they opened up new areas to the Arabs themselves. In Harun's reign two great schools came into existence. One of these was at Basra under the eye of Khalil, author of the first work on lexicography.

This volume, The Book of the Letter A, was illustrated by that good friend of the Caliph, al-Asmai, so celebrated for his erudition that the famous Romance of Antar was attributed to him although it was really of much later date. The other school, at Kufa, was founded by al-Kisai, to whom Harun entrusted the education of two of his sons.



JOUSTS WITH BLUNTED WEAPONS HAD THEIR VOGUE AT THE COURT OF BAGDAD.

History had its representatives also, but their works are for the most part lost. Theology and jurisprudence, maintained by the need of expounding the sacred text, and of clearing up the obscurities due to ellipsis and aggravated by religious

ferment—these were at their height contemporaneously with the lives of the founders of the four orthodox rites of Islamism: Abu Hanifa, Melik, Ash Shafi, and Ibn Hanbal. Of the four rites, Shafiism was the official choice of the Abbassids.

Science had no reason to be jealous of literature. Harun al-Rashid inaugurated the translation movement which was to expand under his son Mamun and restore the spiritual treasures of antiquity to the West. Syria had preserved the Hellenic writings. Monks in Syrian cloisters had never ceased translating Greek works of philosophy and science. The Arabs borrowed from these Syrian translations and from the traditions surviving from the Sassanid academies founded in Susa. Aristotle, Euclid and Ptolemy came to life again. Mathematics was extremely popular. Medicine had famous practitioners such as the family of Bakhtishwa to which Gabriel belonged, special physician and friend of the Caliph. Harun was deeply interested in this science and had some medical treatises translated by a doctor of Susa, Yuhanna Ibn Masawayhi.

Alchemists, concentrating upon their mystical experiences with a fervor which survived the sarcasms with which they were attacked, and astrologers, too, should perhaps be classed with the poets since they also divine their secrets from the skies. The tall minarets of the Abbassids with spiral ramps that rise around their axes, as in the ziggurat of Chaldea (true image of the Tower of Babel), bear witness, amid the dusty solitudes of the Oriental desert, to a fervent desire to ascend the Throne of God, to reach the Infinite Mystery by an actual road. The idea has never since been better represented, not even in the ages of Cathedral, metal pylon, or concrete structure.

What are commonly called the fine arts had little real expression during Harun's reign. At every stage the development of plastic arts found itself limited by the old Semitic disapproval of images. Although the Mussulmans made light of this prohibition of the Koran, and the traditional

taste of the Persians for painting was deeply marked, the human form did not occur in decorative works until much later. There is scarcely an example of it before the tenth century, which explains why we have no portrait of Harun. Sculpture was entirely confined to architectural ornamentation of stone and stucco in arabesques and interlacings. Mural paintings and ceramics did not appear in the palaces of the Caliph, but bronze objects kept alive the tradition of fantastic creatures like the griffin which was passed on from the Sassanids to the Mussulmans, who in turn transmitted it to the stone-cutters of Christian lands, who carved it on Roman capitals.

The art of carving in wood and ivory and that of inlaying copper reached a high degree of development at this period. Paper was already being made, and hand-written letters of gold stood out from its yellow background. There were celebrated ateliers for the making of ceramics and glossy faiences at Rakka, where Harun so loved to stay, and at Rai where he was born. The manufacture of beautiful silk and cotton stuffs was also flourishing in Bagdad. The products exported at this epoch were appreciated so much in the West that merchants called them by their original names, such as those that by our time have become moire and baldachin.

There is no record of Arabian music because of a rather negligent system of musical notation. The Orientals, thanks to their astonishing memories, relied entirely on oral tradition. There are, however, records of historians and treatises of theorists, the Yahias of Mecca, the Musuli, the Ishaks and the Ibrahims, scholarly specialists who explain how the musical science of the Greeks was taken and utilized by the Arabs. The soirees of Bagdad give a clear idea of the esteem in which music was held at Harun al-Rashid's court: "Music is the food of the soul." It was probably here that organs first originated.

Architecture was a royal luxury then, an affirmation of power. Harun al-Rashid had monuments built in proportion to

his glory, his pride, and his needs. Here again we must trust entirely to writers of this period. The Mussulmans destroyed as much as they built. Each dynasty wanted its capital, each reign its monuments. It was quite a universal habit for the sovereigns of Islam to tear down palaces built by their predecessors in order to replace them—more gorgeously, if possible—by their own. That would complicate the labors of an archaeologist under ordinary conditions, but what about a kingdom like this at Bagdad, of which the Mongol invasion left only ruins? Even the ruins have perished. Some crumbling walls, a few vestiges here and there in the middle of abandoned spaces are all that remain, yet they give an idea of Abbassid architecture. The ruins bring back memories of Seleucis, Firuzabad, Ctesiphon of the Chosroes, with its vaults filled with cells and stalactites, ovoid cupolas covered with enamelled faiences, enormous arcades, portals and bays where the ogive and the three-lobed arches already appear, considerably in advance of our Gothic. The colossal edifices of these Abbassids renewed and preserved the most ancient of Mesopotamian traditions.

Everywhere the prestige of the monarch left its impression. His entourage contributed substantially to this widespread development in pleasures of the mind and senses. His favorite wife, the celebrated Zubaida, was famed for her many endowments and her munificence. The splendid palace of Karar, The Pond, was built for Zubaida, and she lived there surrounded by many slaves in the midst of rare fabrics and vessels of gold and silver enriched with precious stones. Her bodyguard was composed of eunuchs who galloped beside her palanquin of silver, ebony, and sandal-wood, encrusted with gold and silver and upholstered with sables and with red, yellow, and blue brocades. She introduced the fashion of dressing servants as pages, wearing laced boots adorned with pearls, and also that of using amber candles. She had her favorite poets, artists, and proteges. With a lavish generosity worthy of the most ostentatious prince, she built and endowed hostelries, cisterns, and wells along the routes to the holy

places. She constructed khans for travellers on the frontier, and founded the city of Kashan, which then began to establish its reputation for rugs woven with gold, brocades, velours, and taffetas.

As for the Barmecides, they had been busy organizing the State and leading it on to brilliant prosperity. Their role was extremely important in the development of civilization. Each of the three was a patron of the sciences and had his coterie of fine minds and brilliant groups of artists and scholars. To Yahia goes the credit for having had translated from the Greek the *Almagest* of Ptolemy and *Hermes Trismegistus*. To encourage literature and the arts, Yahia had the historian Al-Waqidi appointed a *cadi* at Bagdad. Poets were especially welcome at these soirees and were made much of in every way. The Barmecides were also responsible for many examples of architecture. Jafar had a palace at Al-Achik which conceded nothing to those of the Caliph. The Barmecide fiefs were covered with handsome habitations. Medicine interested them keenly. The Bakhtishwa owe their success to this family, and it was Yahia who appointed Gabriel as court physician to Harun at the very beginning of his reign. Jafar was a close friend of Gabriel. Having a passion for music and poetry, this Barmecide was patron also to a number of artists and writers like the blind poet Abu Bashshar, who was not willing to outlive him.

The Barmecide fetes rivalled closely the soirees at Harun's court. Guests met at their houses to discuss all sorts of lofty subjects. Yahia, especially, was very cultivated, and a liberal partisan of free speech. He used to gather together celebrated doctors and theologians for debates—endless discussions of "the hidden" and "the apparent," pre-existence and creation, endurance and weariness, motion and rest, the unity and the divisibility of the divine substance; topics dear to all Mussulman philosophers. And the debaters usually ended on the eternal subject of love.

One day Yahia proposed that each guest describe and define love. An historical account of this seance rather amusingly presents the long palaver of each of the orators, the most renowned of their time. We ourselves may find not uninteresting this simple definition found in a verse by an Arab poet: "There are three kinds of love: one is a bond, the second a caress, the third, death." Leisure hours might, after all, be filled in less profitable ways!

The Barmecides were Persians with a Persian type of mind, and they had a strong influence on the civilization of their time. The restoration of Persia was the great moral and historical fact of that epoch. The Barmecides under Harun al-Rashid put it into the spotlight so well that they themselves fell back into the shadow. The government of the State had passed into the hands of Persians, without any violent reaction on the part of the Arabs. Weary of conquest, these nomads turned sedentary; these erstwhile warriors were on a vacation and busied themselves very little with affairs of state. The office positions were held by elderly Persians. The *divan*, pronounced *diwan*—original with them, and inherited in Europe as *douane*—is a form of administration which they applied with the *vizierate* system. This term comes from them also, the *vizier* being the deputy or proxy who carries the burden of power and puts the caliph in his pocket into the bargain. The regime of relays and posts was theirs, and also the financial year, the solar years of the Persians, which commence at the spring equinox.

In brief, this was a not unusual spectacle in history: the success of a doctrine insured by another people than that which first introduced it. Rome first, then the Germans, imposed Christianity upon the world; the Buddhism of India came into its own, thanks to China; and Islam's triumph was due to Persia. There is so little doubt of this that such a trustworthy Arab historian as Ibn Khaldun, the only one with truly critical acumen, openly declares that Islam owed its glory to the Persians. They were not remarkably creative. Gobineau,

to whom one always returns in dealing with this subject, says that the Persians never created anything new in art, but he adds that "they possessed in the highest degree the spirit of understanding, the gift of comparison, and a sort of discrimination that permitted them to combine successfully elements entirely foreign to one another." Geographically, Persia was an ideal spot for the interchange of thought. Situated at the crossroads of three great empires—Byzantium, India and China—she was "a focus where ideas and inventions from distant countries came to mingle with each other."

The name and era of Harun al-Rashid have benefited from this crystallization of splendors around the caliphate of the Orient. When the ninth century was two years old, no one could have dreamed that this resplendent empire was soon to disintegrate and smash; it was still solidly held together by the symbolic figure of its magnificent sovereign and his cultivated viziers.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SCORPIONS OF CALUMNY

At its very apogee, the caliphate of Bagdad was to see its halcyon days of Hymen rudely disrupted by a startling divorce. Harun al-Rashid and the Barmecides were coming to a parting of the ways. Oriental history has preserved with vivid detail the story of this shocking drama. Descending without warning, and in origin, the brutal tragedy brought consequences of great historical interest in its train. The court of Bagdad, which had so joyously and completely abandoned itself to pleasures, was threatened by a mighty tempest that in a short time was to throw all Mussulman society of the eastern caliphate into disorder, leaving behind it a bloody trail of death. The most notable reverses in European history hold nothing more striking than the disgrace and downfall of the Barmecides, and none has left to posterity a more instructive example of the vanity of worldly things, of the dangerous frailty of human relations.

The Barmecides had aspired too high, and it was inevitable that their glory should crumble. The incalculable influence and controlling power which they had succeeded in arrogating to themselves, together with their generosity and wide-spread patronage, had won them a large and devoted following. But there were naturally enemies also in that court honeycombed with intrigues where no one was ever sure of the morrow. Among so many ambitious courtiers, inclined to any perfidy or treachery, many were slowly coming to realize the situation, and here and there sly attempts were being made to undermine the Caliph's confidence in the Barmecides. Ibn Khaldun says: "Envy and jealousy lifted their masks and the scorpions of calumny came to sting the Barmecides even on the couch that they had erected in the very shadow of the throne."

Many were jealous of their credit, their power, their wealth. Harun was susceptible, suspicious, and full of pride. The schemers knew his weak spots. What they dared not say was put into libelous writing and sent to him. It is the way of malcontents in autocratic governments to vent their spleen in an endless stream of satire. The reigns of the Roman Caesars and the despotic monarchy of Versailles were soiled by anonymous belchings, those inevitable protests against excess of power; an unsavory, yet time-honored expression of the spirit of liberty. Paradoxically enough, the pamphleteers were reproaching this tyrannical sovereign with not being masterful enough, or rather, with not being the sole master. Through their ballad-writers the Roman plebeians accused the Emperor Claudius of dozing in his palace. The satirists of Bagdad exclaimed:

*Heaven grant that destiny fulfil her promises
and cures our afflicted hearts!
Let her take command!
this other has lost the power to lead.*

Rumors of this sort continually came to Harun's ears, arousing his pride and his slumbering imperial instinct. "By God, yes!" he said. "Very lacking in force is he who relegates his power to others. It is the weak alone who are not free." He found notes among his papers which ran this way:

"Say to the earthly Lieutenant of God, to him who has power to ruin or to save, that the Barmecides are kings as much as he. There is no longer any difference. Yes, there is, after all, one distinction: they ignore your orders while seeing to it that their own are obeyed." Harun comforted himself after reading these disquieting words by writing some verse in this sententious strain:

When the ant spreads her wings to fly, her end is near. . .

He felt a heavy anger surging in him against these ministers into whose hands he had voluntarily resigned his powers. "Govern as you like," he had once said to Yahia:

careless instructions lightly given by a young prince, too full of the joy of living to welcome the cares and responsibilities of actual administration. His words appeared in a new light to this mature king already wearying of pleasure. The time had come when he wished to reign himself. Like William with his Bismarck, Harun found himself completely dominated by his prime minister.

At first he did not have the courage to free himself. He went about, complaining to others and telling his friend and physician Gabriel, while laughing sarcastically: "God bless Yahia! He has relieved me of all my cares and leaves me endless leisure to enjoy myself." But when Yahia appeared before him the bitterness all disappeared. The old vizier understood how to regain his prestige and his young master's confidence by wise advice. If he thought it necessary, he would artfully threaten to resign. With an innocent air he would say: "I am getting old. I need rest. I should like to consecrate my life now to pious duties." Harun, suddenly alarmed at this prospect, would beg him not to withdraw his services and overwhelm him with fresh honors.

The scorpions of calumny did not lie low very long. They knew how to find the sensitive spots under the Caliph's skin. These Barmecides, not content with having usurped the authority, must now have all the wealth! Could the prince not see that most of the revenues from the empire were pouring into the treasury of his ministers? That they held innumerable fiefs, and that all Schammasiya belonged to them? That more and more provinces were coming under their control? People were wondering whether the Caliph did not have to beg for his pocket money. And such arrogant pomp! It was not proper that Rashid's retinue should be eclipsed by that of Jafar!

*When you are dead, he will reign in your place.
One must be a slave to be guilty of such temerity!*

Handsome Jafar has built himself a palace whose floor is strewn with rubies and pearls; nothing in Persia or India can be found to equal it.

Harun loved Jafar deeply, but his love faltered before such insinuations. Jafar did have, in truth, a brilliant following, and lines of equipages stood in front of his door. He had built a splendid home on the left river bank. The Barmecides were rich, very rich, much too rich. The scorpions were leaving their mark. Harun's jealousy flared up.

"My uncle," he said to the honorable Ishmael, "I am enriching the Barmecides at the expense of my own children. . . . Look from this window. Do you see yonder the crowd that throngs Jafar's door? Where do I stand now?"

"You are the Commander of the Faithful," replied wise Ishmael, "and Jafar is your slave. All his belongings are in reality yours."

These were comforting words to a heart which only sought reassurance. Jafar, also, knew how to calm his august companion. He suddenly decided not to keep for himself that palace which he had built at great expense. It should belong to Mamun, the Caliph's son. Harun recognized his beloved friend in this generous gesture. He accepted the palace for his heir, but insisted that Jafar should have the use of it during his lifetime. So for the time being, Jafar retained the palace and the Caliph's confidence, and Harun's jealousy and rancor were temporarily lulled! He bestowed the liveliest tokens of appreciation and undiminished affection upon the gentle, suave Jafar. When he was alone, however, he became once more the prey of the venomous scorpions. They had designs on his very heart!

The Barmecides were soon accused of everything. Their loyalty was a sham. Let the Caliph visit the prisons—he would look in vain there for certain culprits! The Barmecides had secretly released them for reasons of their own. That Alid now, once thrown into jail at Harun's command and supposedly dead; might Jafar not have released him? Perhaps he was plotting trouble somewhere with the approval of those foreigners, those Persians, traitors to the law of the One and Only God and his Lieutenant on earth! Traitors to God also!

Who could be sure after all that the Barmecides were not still loyal to the religion of the Magi and followers of Zoroaster? When the Caliph had wished to have the ruins of the palaces of the Chosroes demolished, Yahia had objected. Perhaps the cult of the Magi was to blame for this! Their devotion to the Faith as preached by the Prophet might be mere pretense. They had been known to laugh quite cheerfully when some black sheep used impious and blasphemous words before them. They were zendiks, freethinkers—anything at all but Mussulmans!

*Prince of the Faithful, what will you answer
on the Judgment Day when you must account
to God the All-Powerful for having subjected
Mussulmans and their kingdom
to these disloyal ones, these atheists?*

Aaron the Orthodox felt it no longer righteous to endure this wrong against the true religion. If he could only be sure. . . . There was really nothing that he detested like heresy, but there were as yet no proofs of that sin. One could not accuse them of impiety because their ancestors had been idolatrous before the affirmation. In order to preserve some ruins at Ctesiphon, Yahia had given reasons which really redounded to the glory of Harun. The ministers attended to business faithfully, of course, but what ministers did not? No, these were only anonymous rumors, veiled slanders, low libels.

Again Harun made excuses to himself, but the evil tongues and pens persisted. The Caliph could not escape them, even in his most intimate circle. There was that son of Rabi who gained his confidence and became chamberlain. Yahia had done his best to prevent this and Rabi's son never forgave the Barmecides. He detested them, dreamed of ruining them and of getting their following for himself. He knew how to injure them with the Caliph by indirect means, making use of skilful ruses such as trying to replace Jafar in the Caliph's good graces with his own henchman, the elegant Zaraza:

The does of the harem also knew how to use their volatile poisons, once the Caliph's head was on a pillow. Zubaida led the rest. She disliked the Barmecides intensely. Her mania for power had suffered too often from the insidious practical jokes of Yahia, whom Harun had put in control of the harem. She was exceedingly jealous of Jafar, who enjoyed the Caliph's confidence entirely too fully to suit her and who, as tutor to young Mamun, was working against her own son Amin, whom she wished to see the sole heir to the throne. Harun's beautiful sister Abbasa, who shared the Caliph's company with Jafar, was another source of bitter jealousy to Zubaida. She felt it necessary to get these two out of the way and she was in a strategic position to harm them. Zubaida was not a slave. She was of royal blood, a pure Hashimite, granddaughter of Mansur the Victorious and a cousin of Harun al-Rashid. Endowed with a certain prestige and unusual efficiency, she had many followers to do her bidding and usually could gain her ends. Zubaida continually represented the Barmecides in an unfavorable light to her royal spouse, repeating foolish little tales which meant nothing to him at first but began, little by little, to make an impression. Jafar, the loyal friend—Abbasa, the virtuous sister—every one knew about their marriage, their promise to the Caliph, and every one was laughing. . . . On the coast of Medina there was a wet nurse who could say much if she wished, and there was a child whose features could not be mistaken! Alas for the pride of a race, the honor of a house!

Pursued to the borderland of sleep and perhaps even beyond, Harun still held firm. They must stop talking about the Barmecides! He was master and knew his business best. For more than sixteen years he had trusted them and now, in spite of every one, he would continue to do so. It would have taken a clairvoyant to read his heart and guess its real thoughts when, one day, as a fresh token of his royal favor, Harun al-Rashid led his viziers forth on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

CHAPTER XV

THE MOMENTOUS PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA

Toward the end of the year 802, Harun al-Rashid conducted a pilgrimage to Mecca. He was accompanied by many important persons: his two sons, Amin and Mamun, the designated heirs; his half-brother Ibrahim; and the Barmecide chiefs, notably Yahia and Jafar, who, though busy with their functions as viziers, were directed to join the pilgrimage.

Thousands of the faithful were assembled at Bagdad, gathered together from distant regions of Persia and India. They had completed the various rites of atonement and crossed the thresholds of their dwellings right foot first. The courtyards of the inns were thronged with turbulent crowds of people, stamping steeds, baggage, retainers, petty merchants, jugglers, snake-charmers, minstrels, fortune-tellers, money-lenders, and thieves. Nervous mares pawed the ground violently and broke their thongs; tethered camels uttered their doleful cries, and famished dogs prowled about among the beggars. Relatives and friends were giving their blessing to the pilgrims, jostling one another to see this mob pass by, to salute the passing of the sovereign's litter, and behold the sumptuous carpet which he was taking to be consecrated at the temple of the Kaaba.

The caravan got into motion at last. It swayed on towards the South over a rough road that traversed arid plateaus, stony valleys and sandy deserts before it finally reached the holy places. No one considered the hardships of the journey. Faces were illumined by the light of the Faith, a hope of reaching, some day, the house of Allah, foreseen dimly in distant mirages of torrid suns. Spirits rose high at the thought of kissing the Black Stone and going home eventually adorned with the noble title of had ji, to be welcomed amid great enthusiasm and popular rejoicings. Yet many an over-

zealous graybeard who hoped for a rebirth of vigor would perish pathetically on the way, stretched out, shivering with fever, in the gruding shade of a pistachio tree or huddled against a milestone.

The caravan headed steadily towards the South, entering the barren regions of Arabia. Sunken eyes in hard, thin faces fixed themselves more and more desperately on the goal toward which they were bound. Harun was grave. No one could have read his thoughts as with head bent low he stroked his beard in silence. His companions would not have noticed his abstraction anyway. The close hot air was wearing down their spirits. The jars of snow that they had brought along for drinking were all dried up and thirst had bound their tongues with a bitter silence. They could think of nothing now but finding wells for their halting-places, deep pools of the brackish water which must be located to avoid leaving a grisly pastureland for vultures. In the salons of Bagdad they had often joked about the fat Bedouins of Arabia, those lizard-eaters! They felt now that they might have been better employed in planning repairs to water holes, and mapping the oases in this country. This was a moment for making vows and donating new wells, cisterns and refuges for pilgrims. Harun and Ibrahim were very assiduous in these promises to God, especially after Ibrahim had gone through a painful ordeal of thirst.

One evening, when the caravan was about to make camp, it was discovered that Ibrahim was missing. Harun was very anxious and agitated. He could not easily spare this rare companion who was the life of his company. "O Allah," he murmured, "do not let him get lost without water in this barren waste!" Camp fires were already flaming brightly and the cool of the evening was spreading rapidly over the scorched earth. The pilgrims were gathered close to reassure one another against the perils of the night, to await dawn and the morning sun glorified by the Prophet. Ibrahim did not appear. Harun

sent horsemen and couriers on camels in all directions to explore the shadows.

But Ibrahim, unnoticed by his companions, had fallen asleep by the roadside in the noonday warmth, and when he awoke the caravan had disappeared. He was lost. At once he started to hunt the trail. He thought he remembered it and walked his horse a hundred steps to the left. Nothing there but undisturbed sand. He traced the hundred steps towards the right. Again, nothing. Now he could not even identify his napping place, nor the footprints of his horse. The animal lifted its head and sniffed the air, quivering. Ibrahim was warm and thirsty. He prayed to Allah for help, then went on to meet his fate whatever it might be. . . . Suddenly the tent of a nomad appeared before him, near a little cupola that sheltered a well. Was it only a mirage? His mouth watered. "Allah, spare Thy creature!" Ibrahim urged his horse forward and approached the well timidly, but it did not recede. Praise to Him, the Most High!

A man was sleeping near the tent. Ibrahim hailed him.

"Hola! get up, fellow!"

The man awoke and got up. He was a huge negro with great red eyes like two cups filled with blood. Ibrahim, thinking this fantastic apparition must surely be a phantom, dared not believe his eyes at first, but he finally summoned up his courage and cried:

"Come, black man! draw me some water from that well!"

The negro did not move, but replied lazily: "If you are thirsty, why do you not get down and drink?"

Ibrahim, however, did not dare to get off his horse. The animal was restless and if left alone might disappear. Then he would be deserted and helpless, abandoned in the desert with a phantom of human being and near a stream which might, after all, be completely dry. Suddenly the artist in him had a divine

inspiration. Ibrahim the singer began to intone in a shaking voice:

*If I die, O my friends,
leave my body in some soft meadowland,
that I may drink there from a spring:
near Ajaj is an April camping ground,
near Kuba is an August pastureland:
during winter the water is as warm
as it is cool in summer,
gleaming always
like a gracious full moon.*

This voice, rising in the desert, had an extraordinary effect. The black slave was fascinated by it. Trembling like one under a spell, he filled a gourd, poured the water into a vase and held it up to the singer. Ibrahim took long, deep draughts, while the slave beat his head and breast crying:

"Oh, how my bosom burns! Oh, how my heart flames! Master, master, sing again and I will pour forever!"

Ibrahim drank again.

"Master, you are a long way from the trail. You could never find it alone. You will be thirsty. See, I will fill my gourd and carry it before you!"

They set out. The black, gourd on shoulder, skipped along ahead while Ibrahim on his horse, scanning the road, sang the song of the desert.

By nightfall they had caught up with the caravan of the pilgrims and were received with shouts of joy. Harun embraced his brother closely and generously recompensed the negro who had brought him back. Around the crackling fires they listened long to Ibrahim telling his story. It was more thrilling than a legend, a real adventure touching on the marvelous. Harun encouraged Ibrahim to talk on and on. It had been days and days since any one had seen the Caliph smile.

"*Labbeika, ya rabbi, labbeika!*" At last the caravan had reached the outskirts of sacred territory, it had passed the sacramental stations, and was entering the Holy City of Mecca, the city of God. The pilgrims seemed to feel their souls dissolve within them as they shouted in the direction of the Temple: "*Labbeika, ya rabbi, labbeika!* here I am, all Thine, O my Master, all Thine!"



HOLY MECCA AND THE SACRED BLACK KAABA ON WHICH WAS HUNG THE DOCUMENT NAMING THE CALIPH'S SUCCESSORS.

For ten days and nights the ceremonies continued according to custom. Harun, as chief of the pilgrims, had donned a penitential cloak and leather sandals like Abraham, the father of Islam. The pilgrims prayed, kissed the stone blackened by the sins of man, and walked seven times round the Kaaba, draped in its new covering of silk and gold, the offering of the Caliph. They drank water from the well of Zemzen which had long ago quenched the thirst of Hagar and her son after they were driven out by Abraham. They went from the Mina to the Arafat, threw pebbles to drive away demons, and made sacrifices.

Harun al-Rashid acquitted himself punctiliously of all his pious devotions, but his soul was a prey to heavy anguish. He sank to the ground before the Kaaba and prayed from the very depths of his heart:

"O Thou, that hearest our troubles, that goest before us in all things, Thou that clothest our bodies and bringest back the dead, I pray Thee by Thy greatest title, the most sublime, hidden and mysterious ever known. Beneficent Allah, whose patience is inexhaustible, most gracious God, whose favors are as eternal as they are plentiful, come to the help of Thy servant!"

Not far from Harun, Yahia was also praying. A vague anxiety weighed on him and fears which he could not formulate. But he murmured to the All-Highest:

"O Allah, if Thy plan be to remove from me the temporal prosperity granted to me in this life, if it be Thy will to take away my material possessions and my family, take them, O Allah! But spare to me my well-loved son Fadl!" Then he prostrated himself in the dust and began to murmur again:

"O Lord, unfortunate is he, indeed, who like myself dares to hold back anything from Thee! O Allah, if it must be, take Fadl also from me!"

To relieve his torment Yahia multiplied his alms and gifts. When he rode, he carried at his saddle several purses filled with money which he distributed here and there, greatly exciting the Meccans. They went about proclaiming the glory of their benefactors. Local poets sang ardent dithyrambs:

*When the Barmecides honor the valleys of Mecca
with their presence, a new sun rises over this city:
Bagdad is then wrapped in darkness,
for Night, embracing the Holy City,
dissolves in the brilliance of borrowed stars,
capable of eclipsing the lustre of three full moons!*

From all directions flattering words surrounded them. Some said that they were to their period like a white spot on the forehead of a horse. Others likened them to oceans, to irresistible torrents, to benevolent breezes which bring down clouds to water the earth. Reports of these compliments reached Harun and made him sullen. Even here the pomp and popularity of his ministers persisted in annoying him.

Jafar did not share his father's anxious forebodings. While acquitting himself most correctly of his religious obligations, his mind was dwelling all the while on the pleasant soirees awaiting him in Bagdad. He disliked these Meccan profiteers, the miserable herd of pilgrims, and wanted to leave as soon as possible this insupportably hot country of thirst and weariness, to enjoy again his gorgeous gardens and palaces.

It remained only to settle this affair of the succession to the throne which was on the program of the trip. This eternal problem was then confronting Harun as it had, at one time or another, confronted all of the sovereigns of Islam. It was rather a painful subject to him but he discussed it with his intimates. Some praised Amin highly. When Mamun was mentioned, they said that he was "a pleasant pastureland" but not such likely material as "the thorn of iron." Others, on the contrary, strongly favored Mamun. 'Some crafty ones like al-Asmai got out of it by cryptic replies or noncommittal persiflage. The

Caliph remained perplexed, convinced in any case that the wisest decision would, after all, come from Yahia: "Master of men," he had said, to Harun, "any blunder may be retrieved except a blunder touching the succession to the throne."

After much hesitation, Harun had at first chosen al-Amin, son of Zubaida. He was a pure Hashimite and had, like her, the support of the orthodox Arabian following; moreover, unlike all the other Abbassid sovereigns, he could boast of not being born of a slave. But Yahia wisely advised a careful consideration of internal politics and the necessity of granting some pledge to the Persian factions. He was strongly backed up by Jafar who was tutor to Mamun, the son of a Persian slave, and they finally persuaded the Caliph to designate this other son for second place. Harun then added a third eventual successor, the young al-Qasim. Were the three brothers to succeed each other in this order on the death of their father? The Caliph knew better than any one else how such a triple succession might work out, so at all costs he determined to give inviolable authority to his arrangements by putting them under the protection of religion and the holy places. Papers were drawn up which settled not only the order of the succession but even its procedure. At Harun's death the caliphate was first to pass to Amin: he would have all the spiritual authority and a nominal supreme power. Meanwhile, the empire was to be divided into two parts. Amin, at Bagdad, would reign directly over Arabia, Syria, Egypt and North Africa, which were Arabian countries; while Mamun, at Merv, would be sovereign of the Oriental Persian provinces. In case of the death of one or the other, the entire empire was to be united under the authority of the survivor who, at his own death, would leave the power to al-Qasim.

This arrangement was clever and well-intentioned but, aimed at pleasing every one, it ended by pleasing no one. In abstract theory it was a wise plan, but it was full of menace in actual practice. The Roman Empire had been destroyed by the

Chimera of Partition, and that of Charlemagne was even now going the same way.

One can see why the Caliph judged it wise to invoke the power and authority of the Holy Places, but it is amazing to find him so ingenuous as to trust that no one would ever dare break faith with a path solemnly sworn to! Documents were therefore drawn up to consummate this agreement. They were countersigned by high court dignitaries and, the pilgrimage over, were to be formally hung up on the wall of the Kaaba beside the famous poetry of Antar and the ante-Islamic poets.

In the temple itself, before the nobles and the people, the two brothers, Muhammad al-Amin (which means "The Sure") and Abdallah al-Mamun ("He-in-whom-one-has-confidence") bound themselves by solemn vows to obey the will of their father and always respect each other's rights religiously.

As they came out of the Temple, Jafar, who, had little confidence in his pupil's rival, could not refrain from shouting at Amin the Sure: "May Allah curse you if you ever betray your father!" This remark naturally increased the ill-will of Zubaida and that of the followers of her offspring, who already hated Jafar. It was the sort of hate that burns steadily, but for the moment both factions knew enough to control themselves.

It now remained to end the ceremony by hanging the documents on the Kaaba wall. A man took them up in trembling hands, and was about to attach the parchments when they slipped from his hands and fell to the feet of the onlookers. A subdued murmur arose, followed by heavy silence, as the papers were hastily rescued and finally adjusted. The crowd was dumbfounded and somewhat frightened. They talked of the mishap to one another, and the rumor of it spread through the land like wildfire.

A Bedouin of the tribe of Hudhayl, who was starting home to his city of tents, went away murmuring: "Promises

will be broken, fire is about to break out. . . ." His companion of the road seized his hand. "Unhappy one!" he cried. "What are you saying?"

"I am saying that sabres are coming out of the scabbards. I see a camel, standing still, and two crows wallowing in blood! As God is my witness, it will end with wars and devastation!"

There was no need of more mystic signs to draw the gravest inferences. Doubtless that was what Harun and his company were thinking when, once more, they took the road to Bagdad.

CHAPTER XVI

A NIGHT OF MUHARRAM

Early in the year 803 while the caravan was returning from its pilgrimage, the travelers reached the valley of the Euphrates at Hira. Harun al-Rashid and his courtiers, leaving the others, embarked in boats and went up the river as far as Anbar. The Caliph was very fond of this place, where he had a comfortable palace. Here the hadjis would rest from the fatigue of their long peregrination and enjoy again some worldly pleasures, celebrating the New Year. They installed themselves for a prolonged sojourn, Harun in his own palace and his two older sons in their dwellings where they were entertaining the Barmecides. Fadl was with Amin, and Jafar with Mamun in the monastery district. Yahia, the conscientious vizier, was not tempted by pleasant leisure hours at Anbar. He had gone back to his post at Bagdad and Fadl, who disliked idleness also, was eager to rejoin him.

On the banks of the Euphrates, the rest were leading a gay life with fetes, promenades, hunting parties, and sports. But a cloud seemed to hover over these recreations. Every one was conscious of the Caliph's deep preoccupation and absent-mindedness. He ate little and drank nothing. No one knew the cause of this brooding, unless perhaps the future of his children and the bad omen at Mecca might cause his melancholy. As in the happier days of the fetes at Bagdad, Jafar exerted himself tirelessly to take his royal friend out of this unhappy mood, but all in vain. Harun listened to him unsmiling, but showed him much affection and overwhelmed him with kindness. Jafar could make nothing of it. One day, however, he had a shock.

One of his secretaries had just been put to death, brusquely and without any trial, by an order of the Caliph. Jafar rushed at once to the palace. Harun received him

cordially, but seemed calm and quite detached from all human affairs. Jafar trembled a little as he asked: "Master, is it true that Anas has been executed?"

Harun nodded. "It is quite true," he said, and in a tone that was almost frivolous he improvised some verses:

*The sword was overcome by a desire to strike Anas,
the sword had been secretly looking on;
the fates so dictated . . .*

The irony of this made Jafar shiver still more, but he persisted:

"O Master, what had he done?"

"He was an atheist," replied Harun, „or at least, so it was said."

"O Commander of the Faithful, he was my friend! Have I then lost all favor in the eyes of him for whom I exist?"

Harun exclaimed indignantly at that. How could Jafar, his beloved Jafar, draw such conclusions from so trifling a matter? Atheists were miserable creatures, but Jafar was Jafar, and their friendship was far from extinguished. He and his entire family were an ornament to the reign. Harun emphasized the words with substantial signs of his favor. He sent for robes and collars of honor and ordered that they be sent at once to Fadl and Jafar. The latter's fears and that vague anguish which had attacked him. upon learning of the death of Anas were lulled. Harun was his tender confidant and steadfast friend, after all. He went back home with an easy heart, but Harun sat on his throne with a bowed head and a deeply thoughtful expression.

The day after was the last Saturday of Muharram in the year of the Hegira—January twenty-seventh, 803, by our calendar. The weather was mild, the sky limpid, and the Euphrates was flowing smoothly between bordering palms whose fronds stirred in the breeze. The royal party was hunting. All day Harun and Jafar had galloped together. The

game came out from under cover, the fields were feathery with yellow sprouts, flocks of white heron rose before the horses, and life was wonderful.

When the courtiers returned at evening, weary from their exertions, each went to his own house. Jafar wished to stay with the Caliph, but Harun, walking to his horse with him, dismissed him gently.

"No," he said, "no. I wish to be with my wives. Go, Jafar, and spend a pleasant evening. Be gay, enjoy life with a light heart, have a good time! Your friend will not forget you."

Jafar left, not loath to follow such advice. Friends came to his house; Gabriel the physician, Ibn Abi Sheik his secretary, and the blind poet Abu-Bashshar. They revelled and drank heartily and then gave themselves over to the melodious delights of music and poetry. Abu-Bashshar sang delightfully and was an expert with the kettle-drum. Female slaves, hidden behind curtains, accompanied the blind man's melodies with voices and instruments. Now and then a servant came and presented the head of the house with gifts from the Commander of the Faithful. These consisted of sweets, dried fruits and perfumes. Charming attentions to prove that Harun was not forgetting his friend! Jafar was content. The odor of gardens mingled with that of the incense-burners. Life was truly wonderful.

No, the Commander of the Faithful had not forgotten his friend, but he was not with his women. He was sitting alone in his palace, sunk in a mood of deep depression. Walking up and down, he would suddenly stop short, appearing to make up his mind about something, hesitate, then resume his walk again. He meditated like this for some time, listening through an arched window to the mysterious voices of the night; chords of a guitar, a distant murmur of song and dance. Harun gazed at the scintillating stars and tried to fathom their secrets. At times he delved into old almanacs in which soothsayers had set down their mysterious science, and

then again, he prayed. The night wore on. The moon rose and its beams shone on bright mosaics.

Suddenly Harun shuddered and pulled himself together. He called for that loyal eunuch, useful and efficient in all sorts of missions of love or death, Masrur, who neither saw nor heard, was blind or deaf as his master willed. The Caliph spoke:

"Masrur, are you capable of carrying out something that I want done?"

"Prince of the Faithful, if you should order me to run my sabre through my own body in your presence, I should obey."

"Good. You know Jafar, son of Yahia" "Whom should I know, my Lord, if not Jafar?"

"Go to his house at once, and no matter how you find him bring me his head. Go!"

Not a muscle of the eunuch's face twitched, but he remained rooted to the ground in a stupor. A froth of madness rose to the Caliph's lips. Had this dog not understood? He who is faint-hearted before the will of a master shall perish in torment! "Jafar's head, yes, Jafar's head, at once!" he cried.

Masrur bowed. What the master wanted, his slave would do. He went away without a word.

The soiree was nearly over at Jafar's house, the musicians were playing their last melodies. The blind poet sang a lament:

*Oh, do not go far away;
for there is none
who, some night or morning,
is not visited by death!*

Jafar was not listening. Masrur had just come in to tell him that the Caliph must see him at once on urgent business. He made his excuses to his guests. The Caliph's wishes were

orders, and his favors, gifts from God. Followed by Masrur, Jafar had scarcely got outside when he was set upon by several men who overpowered him and bound him tightly with a mule shackle. Protesting earnestly, he gave his name to them, but it was labor wasted for they seemed deaf and dumb. Unable to take in the situation, Jafar plied Masrur with questions. Then the eunuch told him of the Caliph's orders. Jafar shuddered—could not believe it. It must be a game, a joke! The Caliph had always been his friend, he loved him still . . .

"Speak, Masrur, speak! The Prince of the Faithful is jesting with me. Is it not a trick he is playing on me? Speak!"

"As Allah is my witness," replied the slave, "I have never seen him more serious."

Then he was drunk!"

"No, truly not, he had all his senses. For days he has not drunk, but he has prayed almost constantly."

"It is not true, Masrur! It is not true!"

Jafar staggered, but now all hope had left him. He allowed himself to be led away, unresisting. Tears came to his eyes. He groaned and pleaded:

"Masrur, I have always been good and generous to you . . .

"Allah be praised, that is true."

"Masrur, my brother, will you grant me one request?"

"If I can help you without disobeying my master, yes."

"Take me to him. If he sees me, he will forgive me."

"You know that I cannot do so."

"Very well," Jafar said, "go back to the Caliph. Tell him that you have carried out his orders. You shall see, he will refuse to believe you. He loves me, Masrur—he cannot wish my ruin. I shall owe my life to you and you can always count on me. I call on Allah and the angels as witnesses."

"And if the Caliph persists in his order?" Jafar hesitated, then murmured in a strangled voice:

"Then, do your duty."

Both fell silent. It was a ghastly walk without torches, through the dark. Only the rustling of foliage broke the silence. When they reached the Caliph's palace, Jafar was confined in a tent. He silently implored Masrur with one last agonized look. The eunuch went out without a word. Harun was waiting impatiently. All he wanted now was to see his favorite dead. If he were to gaze once more upon the living Jafar he would never be able to carry out his death plan, and no one knew this better than Harun himself. Seeing the eunuch enter empty-handed, he cried without waiting for Masrur to speak:

"Jafar's head! Traitor, where is it?"

Masrur replied quietly:

"It is in the palace."

But it was not enough, that Jafar was dead, that his head was in the palace! Harun must have that severed head before him, must contemplate the wan face, the glassy eyes, the gushing blood! A rising fury, frightful to behold, seized the Caliph, the rage of a murderer, a sadistic frenzy towards one whom he had loved so deeply.

"I want Jafar's head here, do you understand? Immediately! in front of me, the head of Jafar, or your head shall fall at once!"

Masrur returned to the prisoner. Jafar was praying now, and listened with resignation to the words of his unwilling executioner. Faced by death, he had found comfort and courage in his God. He made a genuflection, spoke the name of the All-Highest, then bound his eyes with a scarf, offered his neck, and said in a firm voice:

Go on with your duty."

Masrur returned to the Caliph carrying the bleeding head by its beard. He placed it on a leather shield and presented it to Harun, who gave a raucous cry of joy and despair. Then he rose and throwing himself on the eunuch, struck him and drove him away.

"Go, flee, murderer! You fill me with horror!"

Harun al-Rashid was alone with the gory head of his former friend. He gazed at it for a long time. Then, weeping and sobbing violently, he began to disfigure it, striking it with his cane. Here was all that remained of his closest friend, his childhood companion, his confidant on all occasions. He hated him as much as he had loved him, and yet, he loved him still . . . But this dreadful trophy must be removed and taken to the gibbets of Bagdad. So deciding, Harun sank exhausted on his throne, to await the purifying dawn.

Before the day appeared, however, the Caliph's vengeance was felt in other quarters. Everything had been planned with the greatest secrecy. Seventeen years before, there had been a night of kings; this time it was a night of ministers. Jafar's turn had come first, and now for the others. All of the Barmecides must feel the weight of the Caliph's wrath.

At the very moment when Jafar's head was falling, couriers were hurrying in all directions, to Bagdad, Rakka and the provinces, wherever there were tenants, dwellings and holdings of the Barmecides. The orders were to arrest everybody and confiscate all property.

Just before this coup d'etat burst out, Sindi, the prefect of police, was peacefully sleeping in Bagdad. He was suddenly awakened by the cries of sentinels and the stamping of horses, and hastily got to his feet. Some one was knocking, entering. It was Sulam, a slave, sent by the Caliph. Sindi shivered, believing that his last hour had come. The eunuch handed him a paper. The Caliph had written:

"Sindi! this letter is written in my hand, sealed with the ring which I wear on my finger: it will be handed to you by Sulam al-Ibrach. As soon as you have read it, and before the alarm can be given, hurry with your men to the house of Yahia the Barmecide. May Allah turn His face away from him! Seize him, bind him with heavy chains and confine him in the prison for atheists. At the same time have your Lieutenant Badhan go to the house of Fadl, son of Yahia. He is to be treated like the father and taken to the same place. As soon as you have finished with them, spread your men throughout the city and arrest every Barmecide."

These orders were thoroughly carried out. Police roved the streets, burning all the houses of Barmecides, their allies, freedmen and followers. Yahia and Fadl were the first ones dragged to prison but none escaped the net, not even the foster mother of Harun nor Dananir, the beautiful singer. They were not killed, but securely confined in prisons.

During that lurid night, Sindi ran into Harthama, the famous old general, leading a mule on whose back were bound the severed head and trunk of Jafar. Harthama had been ordered to expose the remains publicly.

When the morning sun rose over Bagdad the people learned what had happened to the Barmecides and consternation filled every heart. The brutal catastrophe was a dreadful shock to every one. Grave-faced Bagdadians wended their silent way towards the river and on to the three bridges. Jafar's corpse hung there for every eye to see, a ghoulish symbol of the instability of human fortunes. Part of his body hung on the upper bridge, another on the westerly one, while the head was suspended from the great central bridge. Every mind turned toward thoughts of that terrible tribunal when the human race should be called together on the Day of Judgment. Attracted by the odor of human flesh, birds of prey were beginning to wheel above the gibbets.

CHAPTER XVII

"ONLY GOD KNOWS THE TRUTH"

Harun al-Rashid's sudden attack upon the Barmecides was incomprehensible to his contemporaries. The unexpected and absolute disgrace of this illustrious family mystified every one. It was vain to try to figure out reasons for the catastrophe. Indeed it is still a moot question, having kept historians occupied off and on ever since the time of the early Arabian chroniclers who began arguing about it before a century had gone by. The meteoric catastrophe was such a resounding coup d'etat, so striking a reversal of fortunes, that it challenged every one's attention.

There are no lack of motives assigned for it. It is rather a question of finding the right one among them all. One is swamped with suggested reasons for Harun's anger. The scorpions of calumny, as Ibn Khaldun said, have insinuated that the chief causes were the excessive power in the hands of the Barmecides, the insolence of their wealth and pomp, which had become annoying to the Caliph's self-love, and his fear of seeing them favor a movement for Persian nationalism or a return to the religion of Zoroaster just when Arabian orthodoxy was planning a reaction against its heretical and rationalist doctrines. For centuries historians have been enumerating all these motives without knowing which to choose. Sometimes they regard all of them as valid, which is not illogical and quite as likely to be correct. Others have decided not to search for useless complications and assert that the cause of the downfall of the Barmecides as the sudden emancipation of a king who was tired of having his authority in the hands of over-powerful ministers and who relieved himself of them at one stroke after the expeditious manner of his race, country and epoch.

This does not explain, however, why Jafar, who held little political power and was Harun's closest friend, was the only Barmecide to be slain. Why the amiable and beloved companion, rather than the head of the family, Yahia, that powerful vizier, or at least, Fadl, whom Harun did not like and who could be dangerous politically?

This is the crux of the question, and here imaginations run riot. The Arabian historians, led by the serious Tabari, thought they had found a solution in the story of Abbasa. That romance offers an alluring field. An entire page would be required to list the volumes inspired by the forbidden love between Jafar and Abbasa! A sham marriage had been consummated between these two (as mentioned in an earlier chapter) because Harun al-Rashid could not see his friend and his sister, the two beings whom he loved most in the world, separated by Mussulman conventions; and Jafar had given his word to observe the conditions of this ceremony of convenience. La Harpe says: "Barmecide [speaking of Jafar] had not yet seen his destined wife [Abbasa]. When he met her his heart recoiled against the agreement he had made. He found it unjust and cruel, and love and nature became more sacred to him than his promise. Unfortunately, he could not hide the result of an intrigue all the more delightful, perhaps, because it was secret and forbidden!" The result referred to was, as one may guess, a beautiful little child, one, two, or three, according to the liberality of the chroniclers!

But not all historians find the amorous demands of Jafar's nature sufficient basis for such a piquant story. They prefer to interest themselves in Abbasa's nature; a scene making her out another Potiphar's wife pursuing her Joseph. Then again comedy would be turned into vaudeville: an amorous lady persecutes a young man, too scrupulous of his word; she peppers him with provocations and poetry. She coerces the mother of the unfeeling male, overwhelming her with presents in return for which the bribed parent coaxes her son to behave more gallantly. Prayers being of no avail, the

two conspirators are reduced to stratagem. The mother announces to her son that she has just bought him a delicious slave and, one evening when he comes home quite drunk, unable to tell a bladder from a lantern, she presents the new concubine. It turns out to be his wife, veiled, who slips into his bed, neither seen or recognized, but nine months later . . .

Zubaida, jealous of her sister-in-law and Jafar, may have been the one to discover the pot of roses and warn Harun. She would have unearthed that secret refuge at Medina and the living evidence of disloyalty to the Caliph. On that pilgrimage of 802, Harun may have convinced himself of his friend's treachery, the offense committed against his rank and race. Dark thoughts would race furiously through his brain and so—the pilgrimage completed—Jafar was murdered, and the whole family carried down to disgrace with him. The picture, however, is not yet vigorous enough. Other writers carry it on, and accentuate its values in touching it up. Avid for bloodshed, they show us Harun presiding at the death of his sister: slaves burying her alive in her room, the executioners then executed, the vault triple-locked, and the key thrown into the depths of the Tigris. Even this is not enough. The guilty child or children must be massacred. Harun orders them to be roasted on a bright little fire, the innocents meanwhile clinging to his trousers, caressing his beard, calling him "grandfather," begging for mercy. But the Caliph, helpless before these clear evidences of his dishonor, is forced to persist in their destruction, sometimes holding them close, his face bathed in tears, sometimes dry-eyed and striking them. Fire rather than shame! Their ashes are scattered to the winds. After comedy and vaudeville, this morbid Spanish drama!

However romantic these tales may be (and the presumption is that their authors did nothing but embroider an old folklore theme), however scholarly historians may object to them, one would not altogether discredit them if they had been brought down to more reasonable proportions. Ibn Khaldun did not believe them, but his reasons are not very

conclusive. They sum up somewhat like this: "Abbasa to have committed such a fault? To have misbehaved thus? Impossible for one so distinguished!"

The various tales have at least this advantage, that they locate the drama where it belongs, between Harun and Jafar. It is a crime of passion as well as a political drama. The coup d'etat was really only a by-product. Harun had wanted, perhaps for a long time, to rid himself of the Barmecides, but he could probably never have done it without a strong motivating impulse such as his rage towards Jafar. Weary and envious though he might be of their prestige and power, it did not really concern him deeply until he made up his mind to do away with Jafar in whose hands lay the fate of all the Barmecides. Jafar, once sentenced, unwittingly sentenced them all. No one really knows why. The Caliph may have been the victim of a special type of jealousy that would explain both the strength of the sentimental bonds that united him to his victim, and the regrets that he expressed later. Then the tragedy dissolves itself into a kind of pathological crisis in a man who, becoming increasingly alarmed and suspicious, suddenly gets angry and massacres the object of his love.

Masudi prudently sums it up: "As to the inner causes, they remain unknown. Various explanations have been given, but only God knows the truth!" The Koran says: "The Wise, the All-knowing is God." Who are we to dispute its wisdom?

The repercussion of the tragedy at the time was tremendous. The Barmecides had enjoyed a boundless authority, they were thought impregnable in their high position, they had acquired great sympathy on account of their generosity, and their epoch was considered to be at its apogee. Then, between one day and the next, everything crumbled. Those who had loved, admired, served the Barmecides, went away, sorrowing, repeating the poet's words: "The earth was your wife, now she is your widow." Harun had wished to efface this family from the earth and the minds of men, but everywhere people were vowing to perpetuate its memory

until the Judgment Day. The sovereign had now to contend with those who were establishing the Barmecide cult. He had forbidden the name to be spoken in public or to be celebrated in poems. The police scattered the people who gathered around the ruined dwellings of the Barmecides, and arrested those who evoked them aloud. Footmen insulted and chased from the court a poet who was celebrating them, and the Caliph had him sent away to die in misery, no one knew where. Harun had a noble killed, before his eyes, who dared to praise Jafar.

But all this vengeance was in vain. Every one spoke of the martyrs. Panegyrists sprang up over night. Poets seized on a topic that offered so admirable a theme; the splendor and misery of man, his grandeur and decadence. Pointing to the Barmecides, they advised men to guard themselves against the pitfalls of fortune and, when it seemed to smile on them, to consider that pitiable corpse which hung on the gibbets of Bagdad. So have the misfortunes of the Barmecides come down to us. The Thousand and One Nights weaves them into its mystic tissue and when their period is mentioned, one pictures, as Zamakhshari did, "all that was perfect in the highest degree of abundance and happiness."

Harun had succeeded in destroying only their race. Their memory was safe. The few that were left women, children, and old men—finished their days in beggary and want. Jafar's mother, who had once been surrounded by hundreds of slaves, held out her hand for a sheepskin which was henceforth to be her cloak and bed. Yahia and Fadl died in prison after years of tortures inflicted by those who were vainly trying to wrest from them the secret of their supposed treasures. A few survived for a time and carried on a famous name that was soon only a name.

A dead race, but a fine legend and a glorious name, which may be found even now in a perfume, compounded—somewhat like their fate—of sugar, hollyhocks and aromatics.

CHAPTER XVIII

SUPREME—AND LONELY

Following the disgrace of the Barmecides, Harun al-Rashid's first act was to confer the office of vizier upon that son of Rabi who had plotted so successfully against them. This man was, however, intelligent and cultured, and he had some background. His father had been chamberlain under Mahdi, and he himself had held this office for several years. There is evidence of his merits, but his name hardly stands out in the long succession of chamberlains. Harun gave him no opportunity to exercise unlimited authority; not for nothing had he rid himself of over-powerful administrators. He decided to hold the reins himself, and henceforth to rule alone. Rabi's son should be a high official, nothing more.

Installing his new vizier in Bagdad, Harun left the capital. It was anything but very pleasant for him there. From his palace he could see the Great Bridge where Jafar's head hung at the mercy of birds of prey. During the night the cries of screech-owls circling around the gibbets haunted his uneasy slumber. So he left Bagdad, and possibly his thoughts resembled those in the verses written later by Turai:

*Why prolong my stay in Bagdad?
There is nothing to hold me now:
No camels, male or female.*

The Caliph, however, was moved not by sentimental reasons alone. He knew that the people were not all silently accepting his recent outburst, and he was no more sure of the army. Since Bagdad had long since ceased to attract him, he left it without regrets, remarking that he thought a sovereign should be near the seat of war. Katul, the site of the future Samara, was his next stop. He settled finally, however, at Rakka.

Then he began to realize the tragic extent of the solitude which he had brought upon himself. He had wanted to reign alone; he was lonely, now, beyond all expectations. Zubaida was his only companion, and she had become so grasping, through the success of her plots, that she gave him no peace. Like his mother, Kaizuran, who had once exasperated him with her jealousies and demands, his wife was now nagging the Caliph incessantly, for all kinds of favors for herself and her son, Amin. The wise physician, Fuydayl, once said to Harun: "O you, who are handsome of feature, who hold in your hands the government of this people, you bear a heavy burden." Harun realized it only too well. The days of Hymen were disappearing like that illustrious family which had directed the empire so felicitously.

Harun was penitent now. He missed the Barmecides at every turn, and felt quite inadequate to fill their places. He began to dread a general decay of the prosperous empire and could not rid himself of a certainty that everything was going wrong. Like Charlemagne, he pictured a dismemberment of his domains; barbarians searing their way with fire and sword into the realms of his descendants. Owing to that fatal rage, Jafar was no longer at hand to cheer his royal friend. When one of Harun's sisters, trying to comfort him, asked why Jafar had been sacrificed, the Caliph answered, weeping: "If I knew, I would tear the shirt from my body!"

His days were joyless, his moods black and taciturn. Harun was scarcely forty years old and in his prime, but he seemed to have aged prematurely, with graying temples and stern, drawn features. His piety was becoming fanatical. He persecuted mercilessly all forms of heresy, heterodoxy, and free thought, pushing his zeal to the point of inquisitions. Even his Christian and Jewish subjects were not exempt from this meddling. He enforced an old statute obliging them to distinguish themselves from the Mussulmans by certain quite humiliating badges. At the same time his cruelty increased and he had faith in no one. Despite the care with which his sons

had been reared, notwithstanding the wise advice that he had given them, and the papers hanging on the wall of the Kaaba, not to mention many fervent prayers to Allah, he felt sure that some day they would end by tearing each other to pieces. Alone and solitary, he feared everything. Like the King of Persia in the *Legend of The Centuries*, his palace, his gardens

were full of armed men, for fear of his family.

His seal bore the device: "Harun leans on God," it should have been, "O Harun, be on your guard!"

Harun al-Rashid, alone in his palace at Rakka, dreaming of days gone for ever and trembling for the future, might, like Musa the Orator, have cried to God, "Lord, you have made me supreme—and lonely."

CHAPTER XIX

ISLAM AGAINST BYZANTIUM

Fortunately for Harun al-Rashid's nerves, war broke out suddenly and shook him from his brooding melancholy. There is no better tonic for a desolate and remorseful heart than an unexpected and insistent challenge that must be answered. He threw himself heart and soul into the situation with the feverish energy of a man who has no more interest in life and hopes to lose himself entirely in the fiery absorption of war.

At Byzantium, Irene had been dethroned by a fresh revolution in the palace. Nothing seemed more important to her successor, Nicephorus I, than to renounce the severe treaty which the Caliph of Bagdad had forced Irene to accept. Nicephorus was fuming with indignation and refused to be treated as the Empress had been. His was a choleric nature, eager for attentions, power and conquest. Was he not known as The Victor? Snatching his pen he began to voice his grievances to his enemy. The note was direct and expressive but in a vein scarcely usual among chancellories.

Nicephorus, King of the Greeks

To Harun, King of the Arabs:

The Empress who preceded me considered you a rook and herself a pawn. She agreed to pay a tribute that was twice what you yourself should have been paying to her. So much for a woman's weakness and stupidity! Now, as soon as you have read my letter refund to us all that you have received from Irene, and in addition send as much more as possible, as a ransom. For if you do not, the sword shall divide us!

Harun's face was a study when he received this ultimatum. Flying into one of his characteristic rages, he foamed with fury. Every one kept away from him at first, dreading to see or address him until he should calm down. Then he called for writing materials and wrote on the back of the letter:

In the Name of the most merciful God—

Harun al-Rashid, Commander of the Faithful, to Nicephorus, Roman dog:

I have read your letter, O son of an unbelieving mother. You behold my answer, before you hear it.

Firm, clear, and precise!

Truer to his word than his adversary, Harun followed up his threat by beginning the campaign immediately. It was pious work, starting out against the Greeks, following in the path of God, as the Koran admonishes the Faithful to do. A holy war was more helpful than a pilgrimage in admitting one to the supreme throne of God. Losing one's life in this cause meant mounting straight to the Paradise of Allah. To arms, Faithful! The Caliph brandished Dhul-Figar, the sword of the Prophet. Those arrogant successors of Alexander the Great must be punished. The Angels would surely be on the righteous side, as witnesses for God, that Great Judge, Who would see to it that justice was meted out where it was due. At the proper time the Ababil birds, as in former days, would drop on the skulls of the Christians deadly pebbles, chickenpox, and panic. The Lord was on the side of his Faithful. Their enemies were to be trampled on as beasts crush grain. Forward!

The Caliph's army swarmed into Taurus and the territories of Asia Minor conquered by Byzantium, and took Heraclea. For nearly two years the Mussulman troops plundered and destroyed cities and crops along the line of march until the once belligerent Nicephorus was forced to sue for peace.



COMBAT BETWEEN MUSSULMANS AND BYZANTIUMS UNDER THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM.

As a conqueror, however, Harun proved less severe than he had at first appeared. His vanity appeased, and victory in his hands, he generously waived all conditions except the disputed tribute of which Nicephorus had thought to rid himself by a stroke of the pen. The tax was now to be paid twice a year instead of once, as the former arrangement had provided. It is interesting to note that the warlike Arabs cared little about pushing any advantages gained through their victories. They seemed to get more satisfaction from the mere waging of war, fighting for the love of the struggle itself, and seeking rather to conquer individual sovereigns, than in reigning over their conquests. On twenty different occasions, if they had wished to, they could have anticipated the year 1453, the capture of Constantinople.

They seem to have deliberately encouraged the possibilities of war by their curious custom of ransoming prisoners. The truce with Nicephorus was scarcely concluded when one of these transactions took place at Taurus, on the borders of the Mediterranean, about thirty-five miles from Tarsus. After the even exchange had been completed, the surplus captives were ransomed. Three or four thousand Mussulmans of both sexes who had been held by the Greeks were redeemed in this way. That same Turk, Faraj, who had

rebuilt and fortified Tarsus, directed the operations assisted by a freed Berber, Salem al-Barallusi, and treaties were signed by Qasim, third son and heir of the Caliph, who had empowered him to do so. During this time, Harun al-Rashid was camping at Marj-Dabi, in the province of Aleppo.

In the little port choked with ships, the Greeks were landing at docks piled high with merchandise, and embarking again as rapidly as the exchange of prisoners could be effected. The Arabian negotiators were surrounded by about thirty thousand troops, besides an immense and excited crowd of spectators, traders, all kinds of merchants, freighters, brokers, recruiters for ships, money-changers, weighers and appraisers. Soldiers and sailors were bumping into one another violently in taverns and guarded districts, according to the most ancient traditions. This swarming market lasted for forty days while nations and ranks mingled together happily for the transaction of business and the interchange of ideas. It is easy to realize the influence that such assemblages had on the evolution of human relations and national arts. Afterwards, of course, when each side had reorganized its forces, nothing prevented their going to war again.

That is exactly what happened. Taking advantage of Harun's absence on a pilgrimage, and his subsequent tours through the eastern provinces, Nicephorus did not hesitate to repudiate his word. His treachery was not altogether a surprise. Harun had sent a discreet legate to the court of Byzantium to keep him informed of what was going on.

The Greeks, swarming over the frontiers, invaded the provinces. They had already reached Anazarba, in the border districts, when the news of their successes reached Harun's camp. At first no one cared to tell him, partly on account of his temper, and partly because the generals dreaded the freezing cold of a winter in the mountains of the Taurus. War was all very well in good weather; then it was a pleasure, not a drudgery. It remained for a poet to incorporate the news in a subtle poem which was, nevertheless, quite clear to the Caliph.

The bard assigned to this task recited a long stanza which began this way:

*Nicephorus has broken what you gave him,
and already death is soaring over his head . . .*

and ended thus:

It is our sacred duty to warn the Imam.

Harun cried: "Ah! so it is like this! That dog of a Nicephorus has done such a thing, and no one here has told me!" His officials were degraded in rank, and ministers lost their portfolios. Then, en route to the frontier!

Harun set out at the head of one hundred and thirty-five thousand regulars, and entered the barren regions of Asia Minor in the heart of winter. The excessive cold caused great suffering among the army but he was nevertheless determined on a bold stroke. He wanted to start a siege near Heraclea but hesitated before the importance of the step. Gathering his generals together in a council of war, he asked their advice. Some advised taking the place at once, believing that the fall of such a strategic position would presage a general victory; others urged the serious risk of meeting a fatal setback at the outset of the war, and advised advancing farther into the territories of Byzantium.

The first opinion carried the day and the city was besieged. At the end of a fortnight, however, grave troubles were brewing. The losses were high, and a scarcity of food and forage was painfully evident, but no one dreamed of giving up the siege. Even those who had advised differently in the beginning were now determined to persevere. Al-Fizari, a governor of the Syrian frontiers, and a skilful general, proposed that they construct, opposite Heraclea, not a simple camp, but a real city to emphasize the intention of the assailants to remain until they should be victorious. It was the old Roman tradition that the Arabs were now about to imitate. The imposing ruins of several cities like Mansura, near Tlemcen in Algeria, testify to the extent of the sieges which

first brought these cities into existence. To carry out the strategic idea of this plan it was also necessary to throw confusion into the ranks of the besieged. A simple ruse would suffice for this, according to the general, provided it was kept an absolute secret even from the Caliph's army. "All war," he said, invoking the words of the Prophet, "is trickery, especially this one, which is a battle of stratagem rather than sabres," a very interesting interpretation of the art of winning battles.

This advice was followed. A proclamation informed the warriors that they were to settle down for a while, and that the Amir of the Faithful would remain before the walls of this city until God should open its gates to the Mussulmans. Great activities began at once. Stones were brought, and trees felled, for building purposes. The soldiers busily carved, hewed, sawed and dug . . . The besieged knew very well that things were going badly for them, but they tried to make the best of it and put on a bold front. One day through the hail of stones, fire and arrows raining down on the city, a young man of extraordinary beauty dressed in magnificent armor rode out, crying in a reverberating voice:

"O Arabs, we have been facing each other now for a long time. Let one, ten, twenty among you come forward to match himself against me!"

This proud challenge and its consequences, as they are historically set down, sound a heroic note reminiscent of *The Iliad*. In Masudi's tale of the duel between the warring champions of these two races, almost we seem to be listening to Homer. Here is the tale as written by the author of *Meadows of Gold*:

A simple volunteer, by the name of Ibn al-Jurzi, was appointed to return the challenge of the Greeks.

"Are you ready to fight?" the Caliph asked.

"Yes, Prince," he replied, "and I pray that God may come to my assistance." Rashid wanted to order a horse, lance and shield given to him, but he replied:

"Prince of the Faithful, I have confidence in my own horse and lance, but the sabre and shield I gladly accept."

When he had donned his armor, Harun al-Rashid had him come forward, bade him good-bye, and promised him his prayers. The horseman went forth escorted by twenty volunteers and descended into the vale. Counting them slowly, the Greek cried:

"We agreed on twenty men and you have added one more—but no matter!" They told him, however, that only one man was to advance against him. As Ibn al-Jurzi rode ahead of his escort, the Barbarian, as Masudi called him, gazed intently at his antagonist while the Greeks, from their ramparts, had only eyes for their compatriot.

"Will you answer a question truthfully?" asked the Barbarian.

"Certainly," replied the Mussulman.

"I ask you, in the name of Allah, are you not Ibn al-Jurzi?"

"None other, by Heaven! I am your man." "A soldier like myself," returned the other, "is able to take your measure."

They fell upon each other, lances at rest. The fierce encounter lasted until their horses almost dropped under them, but neither champion had received a scratch.

Finally they stuck their lances in the ground, one placing his beside his escort, the other alongside the ramparts, and drew their sabres. The horses were blown from exhaustion and the intense heat. Ibn al-Jurzi thrust at his adversary, with what he hoped would be a decisive blow, but the other parried the blow thanks to his iron shield, which resounded with a terrific clamor. The Greek reposted and his sword pierced the shield of Ibn al-Jurzi. The shield was made of Tibetan leather, and the Barbarian feared that his blade might be blunted by it.

Just as each was despairing of conquering his adversary, to the great dismay of Rashid and the Mussulmans Ibn al-Jurzi took to flight. The Greeks began to shout victory, but it proved to be only a feint. While his adversary was pursuing him with raised sabre, the Mussulman struck the Greek with such violence that he was thrown from his horse, but before he hit the dust Ibn al-Jurzi pounced upon him and severed his head from his body.

The consternation in the Greek ranks was only exceeded by the wild enthusiasm among the Mussulmans, as their Horatius returned triumphant to his comrades. They offered him gold, decorations, and an advance in rank, but with the typical dignity of the ancients he begged that they permit him to remain as he was.

The siege was soon over, for the Greeks were fast becoming demoralized by the Caliph's elaborate preparations. Some of the besieged were discovered trying to escape during the night by descending the walls by means of ropes. The ballistas redoubled their attack and the city was pelted with stones and fire. Soon the ramparts were pierced, and the Mussulmans forced a passage through, sword in hand, took the city by storm, and destroyed it utterly.

*Harun al-Rashid's flags, at the scene of victory
seemed to float in the air like clouds,*

as Abul-Atahiya put it.

The conquest of arms was followed by a conquest of hearts; the epic poem by a love lyric. After the surrender, Harun is said to have discovered a strikingly beautiful girl at a slave auction. She was a patrician daughter of Heraclea. Far from bemoaning her fate, she soon captivated the Caliph, who fell very much in love and built a beautiful pleasure-house for her on the Euphrates.

The capture of Heraclea was a great victory and made Harun al-Rashid's triumph complete. Leading separate commands, his generals took one Byzantine stronghold after

the other. Sixty thousand men marched on Ancyra. Admiral Homaïd sailed his fleet, to revolting Cyprus, landed on the island, took possession of it, and led seventeen thousand prisoners back into Syria.

Nicephorus "the Victor" had suffered defeat after defeat, lost forty thousand men and many ships, and was completely beaten. Once more, Harun al-Rashid stopped in his tracks. So many battles and a lasting conquest not assured; so many victories—and the morrow still not safe! He ceded peace to the Emperor of the East but under particularly harsh conditions: Nicephorus was to pay a much higher tribute, and he and his family were to be subjected to individual assessments. He was not to rebuild Heraclea, and was required to send to the Caliph, at regular intervals, some water from a spring celebrated for its sparkling purity.

Harun forgot only one thing: to compel Nicephorus to keep his word.

CHAPTER XX

"THE RUMBLE OF THE DISTANT DRUM"

Covered with honors and glory, but overwhelmed with cares, Harun was now passing his prime. He was destined to pass his remaining days in scouring the country, at the head of his men-at-arms, through an empire torn by revolts. His sons were his only concern now. He felt a growing need of their affection, and a desire to pass the message of Abbas on to them as a sort of spiritual legacy: their duty to bring into existence that age of gold which had been promised to the Mussulmans so long ago. But the hope of realizing his dreams was fast slipping from his grasp.

He was very fond of his seventeen children and left nothing undone to improve their minds. The best scholars of the period had been engaged to instruct them, and he himself had supervised their schooling with a care and wisdom that showed much discrimination. There are traces of the Humanist strain in a letter that he wrote to Khalil ibn-Ahmad who instructed Amin.

"Ahmad," he told him, "the Prince of the Faithful confides his most precious blood, the fruit of his heart to your care. He gives you full authority over his son and instructs him to obey you implicitly. Try to be worthy of this task which the Caliph has given you. Bring your pupil up to read the Koran, teach him our sacred traditions, fill his memory with classic poetry, instruct him in our holy customs. Let him be cautious in what he says and learn to speak to the point. Regulate the hours for his pastimes, and let him laugh only at the proper times. Teach him to treat the elders of the family of Hashim with great respect and to honor military chiefs. Let not a single hour pass without finding an opportunity to instruct him. Do not over-discipline him, for too much severity quenches the activity of the spirit; but, on the other hand, be not too

indulgent, lest he incline toward idleness. Correct him when necessary, but gently and with forbearance. If he ignores your remonstrances, you may then use stern measures."

Harun thought sadly of the days when his two older sons were children. He had been very proud of them and had taken a naive joy in hearing them praised. He probably blushed when he said to the writer Kisai: "Ali, would you like to see my two sons?" and could scarcely contain his pride when the boys entered slowly, "like two stars in the sky," with lowered eyes, and the gentle, grave charm characteristic of small Arabs. He delighted in their replies to Kisai's remarks and the finished way in which they recited poetry. Triumphantly he cried:

"Ali, what have you to say about them?"

And Kisai, a flatterer, albeit a sincere one, replied:

"Oh my Prince, I say as the poet did:

*I see two glorious stars,
two branches of light springing from the caliphate,
embellished with a noble perfume!"*

The Caliph, with tears in his eyes, embraced his offspring tenderly and dismissed them with a fervent Amen. . . . His emotion, however, arose from a clairvoyant suspicion that these "stars of glory" were not what they appeared. He began to lament:

"I see my children at the moment of their destiny when fate descends upon them out of the sky and the span of days allotted them by the Holy Book is run. Their friendship will be at an end, brothers will be enemies, and disintegration of the empire will cause rivers of blood to flow. Death will spread its ravages everywhere, the honor of women will be trampled underfoot, and all survivors will long for death!"

His melancholy condition of mind seemed to have endowed him with a kind of second sight. He saw in dreams Amin's dreadful plight as, surrounded by minions and pursued

by his brother Mamun into a pillaged Bagdad, he tried to escape at night in a bark and was arrested, his severed head first exposed on the Iron Door, then impaled on a pole in the palace courtyard for the soldiery to gape at as they filed past, reviling it. He realized too late that he should have designated the other son. From an early age Amin had led the life of an ascetic, working like a serf at the most menial tasks. When Harun told him one day, "You are dishonoring me among kings," the youth replied to his father, "You are dishonoring me among the saints."

Harun wondered later why he had given second place to this more worthy son. Remorse gripped him as he looked back on his own sins and cruelty; his brother Hadi, the head of Jafar . . . He was continually haunted and pursued by the memory of the Barmecides in their dungeon. They were bearing their persecutions with proud and courageous hearts, voicing their woes in a grave and humble vein:

*We have left the world, yet we still inhabit it,
neither among the living nor among dead,
when the jailer appears at the door of our cell
we gaze at him stupidly, saying:
This man comes from the world of real people.*

In this "world of real people," Harun al-Rashid was leading a joyless, drab existence, probably unhappier on his throne than was Yahia in his prison. The Barmecide, resigning himself to his fate, could say: "I bow to the will of God and am grateful for His benefits. Praise be to Allah!" Yahia, at least, had the consolation of his faithful son Fadl, who at the point of death still asked him from time to time: "Father, are you satisfied with me?" To which he could answer affectionately: "Yes, my child. And may Allah be as content with you!"

Harun was forced to admit that the Barmecides were even greater in defeat than in prosperity.

About this time the old Yahia succumbed, in his dungeon, at the age of seventy-four. Sewed into the folds of

his clothing was a note which proved extremely disquieting to his persecutor, to whom it was addressed. Opening it apprehensively, Harun read: "The plaintiff will be the first to stand before the tribunal of that incorruptible Judge Who makes no mistakes and Who has no need of proof. The defendant will soon follow him. You sleep now, O Tyrant, but death is lurking wakefully near you."

The Caliph wept as he read these words. Each day, as his heart grew heavier, his health became worse. The supreme menace was hanging over him. Like that later emperor, the Tsar of the Russias, he sensed the Angel of Death approaching in a cloud of wings, and murmured: "The heavy hand of the Judge from on High lies on my wicked soul."

CHAPTER XXI

THE LAST CALL TO THE SADDLE

Harun al-Rashid had no choice now but to plunge into extensive warfare. He must ride with his men over his vast domains in pursuit of enemies and of rebels. He sensed correctly that both these were increasing on every side. The bronze knight who kept his lookout from the green cupola of the Palace of the Golden Door was facing in many directions. Swung this way and that by gusts of wind, his lance pointed often towards Khorassan. Harun had come from there, and now he was going back again.

The rebellion was an uprising against Ali-ibn-Isa, governor of Khorassan, by a man called Rafi. The son of Isa had made himself unpopular by his extortions. He had been enriching himself at the expense of his subordinates by cruel and despotic methods, having carried to an extreme the Oriental tradition of bakshish and tribute. That incurable plague of governments, by which titles and position are distributed, taxes levied, and quotas raised through graft, had become a stench in the nostrils of men. It was an evil all the more acute in Mussulman states where one can not be sure that its victims really preferred clean methods, and where the guilty subordinates involved their chief, and further paralyzed his sense of justice, by craftily handing over a part of their loot to him.

This same governor of Khorassan had been suspected some year earlier. He had gone to court planning to justify his conduct and silence criticisms. He had taken along some irresistible arguments in the form of costly gifts which were displayed on the parade grounds at Rai. These presents were magnificent enough to stupefy any one's imagination; young slaves, boys and girls, horses, clothing of gold and silver, bladders of musk and amber, exotic fruits, and skins of ermine

and martin. Harun enjoyed this imposing array immensely, and received the tributes without any apparent suspicions regarding their original source, or any idea of restoring the treasures to their rightful owners. What had once been taken was taken, and it was pleasant to keep gorgeous gifts. The theory of restitution is, after all, a modern and democratic idea! Yahia the Barmecide had tried when he was in power to have the governor's guilt exposed. He had remarked wisely: "If this man had not kept just as much for himself he could not have given so lavishly to the Prince of the Faithful. When Khorassan has been drained dry and its people reduced to the last extremities, it will be too late to act." Excellent advice but expounded in vain.

Later, in the midst of war against Byzantium, Harun was forced to hurry to Rai in order to control the administration of this son of Isa and adjust the acute grievances of his people. Crossing the bridge to Bagdad, he came upon a fearful reminder of an unforgettable tragedy. After two years, Jafar's remains were almost entirely decomposed. Harun could not endure the sight. "Have all that destroyed by fire," he said, pointing to the gibbets. The guards hastened to obey. The bureaucrats took note of this proceeding, and the accountants of the Treasury were very thoughtful that evening when they entered in their ledgers, which already showed many such items as collar of honor for Jafar the Barmecide . . . one hundred thousand dinars, a new item: oakum and brushwood for burning the remains of Jafar . . . ten obols.

Harun continued on his way. Once in the provinces, however, and anxious to continue his war against the Greeks, he had let himself be imposed upon once more. Now the time had come when evidence of guilt could no longer be denied. The governor's abuses had started a revolt among the Persians of the Northeast whose hatred of Arabian power had been increased by the fall of the Barmecides. Rafi, who led the rebels, was an outlaw of the most picturesque type. Well built

and handsome, loving wine and women, this dashing officer of the garrison at Samarkand had stolen the wife of a noble a short time before and made her his own in an ingenious if unorthodox fashion. She was first excommunicated, which automatically annulled her first marriage, and then converted anew to Islamism, which permitted Rafi to marry her. When word of this proceeding came to Harun's ears he decided that both of the newly married must be punished. The bridegroom was to be flogged, and his spouse led through the streets on a mule after her face had been thoroughly blackened!

Love, however, will find out the way. Rafi took to the woods, so to speak, but appeared shortly afterward as chief of a band of outlaws and reconquered his wife at the point of the sword in a manner worthy of high romance. The dissatisfied Persians hastened to enroll in his army, which succeeded in defeating the governor's regular troops. It was a conquest by popularity as well as the sword. Revolt spread rapidly. Rafi became master of Samarkand and the people of Balkh massacred their own garrison and joined his forces, while even Merv began to seethe with discontent.

Harun realized that the only way to suppress the insurrection was to get at its original source, the governor of Khorassan. This was not easy. This official could not be summarily dismissed, for he was still in possession of sufficient troops and followers to defend his position. As usual, trickery seemed the proper method. Harun sent for the chevroned general, old Harthama, and gave him instructions.

"Harthama, I am about to entrust you with a mission which must remain secret until the last moment. If your own shirt appears to suspect what it is, tear up the shirt! I am going to appoint you Governor of Khorassan, but Ali-ibn-Isa must not know it or he will take up arms at once against us. Let your soldiers think that you are going to the assistance of the governor but, when you reach Merv, have him arrested and force him to surrender."

After writing out Harthama's appointment, Harun prepared three letters. The first was a cordial invitation to the troops of Khorassan to join the forces of the new governor. The second promised justice to the insurgent population, and asked a renewal of their allegiance. The last letter was for the son of Isa himself and addressed him in a manner befitting the child of a prostitute, reproaching him bitterly for having alienated a people from their sovereign.

Harthama started out with twenty thousand men. At Merv, the governor, believing that the Caliph's troops were arriving as reinforcements, received them with the customary honors. When they were almost through eating, Harthama handed the Caliph's letter to the host. Isa's son had scarcely time to recover from his surprise when he found himself in chains. For several days following, he was taken into the great mosque to answer for his exactions before the people whom he had so long oppressed. Then he was sent to Bagdad, fettered to the back of a dromedary. It took several hundred of these noble beasts to carry away the treasures which the governor had unlawfully filched. One might think that it would have been much simpler to restore them to their rightful owners.

All this time the revolt continued to spread. Rafi was now master of all Transoxiana and had installed himself at Bokhara. An expedition into this distant country promised many dangers. Harthama's own army refused to cross the Oxus until reinforcements arrived. It was then that Harun al-Rashid, in spite of poor health, determined to direct operations in person. He set forth at once, and those iron gates, said to have been built by Solomon, closed behind him forever.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TRUMPET OF ISRAFIL

The hour has come to meditate on the admonitions of the Holy Book:

*I swear by those who come to take away our souls
on that day when the trumpet sounds its awful note,
when earth and mountain dissolve into space
crushed at a single stroke,
(that) hearts shall be overcome by terror . . .*

It was a long way to Khorassan. Harun al-Rashid rode forth like a black phantom in the uniform of the Abbassids. As the days went by he grew increasingly weary, and his mind was filled with melancholy forebodings. Through some strange freak of fate, the Caliph was on his way to the city of his birth when he received the news of Fadl's death in the cell at Bagdad. Harun's heart contracted at the realization that death was taking his old friends, one by one. He felt his own turn drawing near and murmured tragically: "I am doomed to go next."

The campaign was going very badly. Rafi had stirred up more provinces, his forces were well armed and strong in numbers, and the outcome of the Caliph's offensive was problematical. The Greeks had avenged themselves by defeating several generals and were now in a most defiant mood. The triumphs of Heraclea seemed very far away.

Harun was far from well but he dared not complain because he feared those about him. He could see one consuming thought plainly written on all their faces, with perhaps a secret element of hope in it also. Everyone was speculating on his approaching end.

The Caliph was well aware that his two sons were eager for a chance to rule and only awaited a propitious moment to throw themselves at his throne like famished dogs. Masur was watching Harun closely on Mamun's account, while Gabriel, the Caliph's physician, appeared to be counting his respiration merely in order to warn Amin as soon as possible. Harun feared and mistrusted them all. His mind was full of thoughts of treachery and crime, he dared not eat lest he be poisoned, he saw only death in the sparkling liquor which his slaves poured for him.

When they reached Tus, he could go no further, and was forced to call a halt. They took him into the gardens of a house in Sanabad. Still he would not give in and insisted upon appearing in the saddle before his army. Antar had died on his horse, and Harun, Commander of the Faithful, was still capable of putting his foot in the stirrup! In spite of his efforts, however, he staggered and fell back, letting the animal sheer off.

"Carry me away," he cried, "carry me away!" And they took him into the house.

Once in his bedroom, however, he could not rest. Sleep was out of the question; he was tormented by fearful nightmares. In the dim light he gazed at the gleaming ruby in his father's ring. Why had he disregarded the legend and had his own name carved thereon? Since the time of the Chosroes every caliph whose name had been inscribed on this fatal ring had died by the hand of an assassin. Harun wondered whether his turn were near. Faces rose out of the glowing centre of the stone. An outstretched hand over his bed pointed at some red soil, and a voice cried: "This is the earth in which you shall be buried!"

He recognized it now: that red clay of Tus and the gardens of Sanabad. Other faces came to people his delirium. In a white room sadly lit by pale moonlight, his father Mandi was kneeling, and praying for his family. Harun tried in vain to pray. The sadas, those uneasy ghosts of assassinated men,

brought back dead voices that re-echoed in his ears, crying out for vengeance: his brother's ghost, and the head of Jafar! Harun writhed before these visions and phantoms, crying: "O Lord of men, King of men, God of men, I seek refuge from genii and men in You alone!" Sweating in agony he waited for the dawn, for it is written:

*Since dawn I have been seeking shelter close to God
from the loneliness of the melancholy night,
from the spite of witches
who add knots to the skein of one's destiny.*

The agonized spirit still clung to life, and Harun now wished nothing left undone that might save him. A king of India was asked to send his physician, whose fame was a byword. The empiric, Manka, came in great haste. His first prescriptions relieved Harun and revived his hope, so that he fell to cursing his own physician Gabriel and accusing him of trying to destroy his sovereign. Gabriel was a perfidious traitor whose scientific knowledge was all a sham and he must lose his life! Summoned to the Caliph and told of his impending fate, the physician gazed fixedly at the dying man and, noting the unmistakable signs of his condition, replied fearlessly:

"Master, I have often cared for you and cured you. Have you no longer confidence in me? This Indian's drugs have not yet taken full effect and I should like to observe the final results. I ask a reprieve of only one day. If I am proved to have been wrong, you are to do with your slave as you will. Only one day. . . ."

Harun, thinking to humiliate the physician, agreed, and Gabriel went away saying to himself: "I am saved. There is nothing that even I can do to help him now."

The next day, the twenty-third of March, 809, when Harun was still weaker, he learned that a brother of the rebel Rafi had been captured and brought to Tus. The Caliph felt new life surging in him with the rage into which this news

threw him, and insisted that the prisoner be brought before him. When he caught sight of him, he burst out furiously:

"Dogs," he cried, "you and your brother! Dogs, see what you have done, forcing me into this expedition in spite of my ill-health! May Allah curse you! If I had only breath for two words I should say: kill him! May God bear me witness when I vow that you shall perish suffering as no one ever has before!"

Within an hour the execution took place. The Caliph ordered that not an official executioner but a butcher be brought to perform this function in his presence. The unfortunate young man was torn to pieces alive, his body cut apart and its members boned as one prepares a chicken. Harun al-Rashid, watched haggard-eyed, clinging to his couch and uttering horrible cries of pleasure mingled with the groans of his own physical suffering. He now felt satisfactorily revenged upon the dead man, and the attack of sadism had prolonged his life an hour. But suddenly, at the end of his strength, he fainted away.

When he came to, he realized that his end had come and henceforth he had only to await the trumpet of Israfil, the Angel of the Judgment Day. His strength was failing him fast but a deep serenity pervaded his last deeds and words, giving them dignity and wisdom. At his request, shrouds were brought and spread before him, and after gazing at them for some time he selected one.

He had himself carried on a litter into the gardens where a grave was dug under his very eyes. The readers of the Koran drew near to hallow the excavation by reciting sacred verses.

Harun began to weep softly. He was reminded of those lines which Abul-Atahiya used to repeat so often:

*Where are the kings who have preceded you?
They have gone where you are going.
Pluck all the pleasures that you can,*

for death is always waiting at the last.

The poet had written these words for Harun, and the Koran, too, seemed to have him in mind now: "Of what use are my riches? My royalty has vanished."

The dying Caliph joined his lament to the monotone of the readers:

*"O God, I do not weep for the wealth of this world.
O God, I appear before You and submit to Your judgment.
O God, the hour has come to cross that bridge,
thin as a thread and sharp as a sabre.
May the Angels keep me from falling!"*

Then he rallied himself to address the Hashimite nobles standing about his couch and dictated his last wishes to them:

"Everything that is young must grow old, everything living must perish. You see what fate has done to me. I leave you three counsels: fulfill your promises religiously, keep faith with your imams and with one another, and watch over my two sons Amin and Mamun. If one of them rebels against his brother, do not hesitate to stifle his insubordination and punish his perfidy. Take care that the birds of prey do not pounce down upon this country!"

[His sons were watching eagerly for his last breath, their followers eying one another, each treacherous mind busily scheming.]

"We are here for the purpose of waging war. Lead the army into the heart of Khorassan and take whatever measures are necessary to suppress the rebellion in that region. Think no more of me. None of my ancestors died in a peaceful bed. Leave me, as they were left, at the side of the road, on the path which leads to God . . ."

Toward evening Harun fell into a coma. During the night he was heard to murmur:

"Harun is Prince of the Faithful. Those of his race know how to die. . . ." And his eyes closed forever.

Harun's favorite slaves, Masrur and Hussayn, buried him in the grave that had been made ready in the garden. Under the red soil of Tus lay the sovereign who had ruled over a great part of the ancient world. A magnificent tomb was erected under the beautiful trees of Sanabad. In time there came to cluster round it a mass of popular legend, transitory rumors, judgments pronounced by the ignorant that yet have lived through the ages: expressions of admiration and loathing, eulogies and curses. To some he was always Harun the Magnificent, resplendent with infinite glory. Others, like Dabil, that dreaded satirist, cried out in this wise:

*Every one has two tombs:
in one is the most noble of creatures,
in the other the most infamous of beings.*

As the voices of his contemporaries died away gradually, only the songs of birds, the whisperings of the plane trees, and the murmured secrets of the springs disturbed the deep sleep of the Caliph and of his illustrious companions, Firdousi the poet and Ghazali the philosopher, who joined him in this garden of the dead.

The tombs themselves finally were swallowed by oblivion, but Harun needed no sepulchre for his immortality, nor even the bright halo of the Days of Hymen, that shining period which kindled the fires of a great disaster. Four centuries after his death the ravaging armies of Hulagu the Mongol, grandson of Genghis Khan, hurled themselves upon the Arab empire. Nisapur, Rai, Tus, Bagdad—all crumbled under the invasion. The authentic monuments that bore witness to Abbassid culture were destroyed, and the imagination of posterity was left to extract from the mouldering ruins whatever poetic hyperboles it might choose. Hulagu's horsemen are said to have crossed the Tigris with dry feet, over a bridge formed by innumerable parchments stolen from libraries in Bagdad and stuffed into sacks. The sacred

ashes of the Prophet's mantle, which Harun had worn on several occasions, were dumped into the river and carried away by the tide.

At that point history stopped, but from the vanished tomb has risen a new Harun al-Rashid, more splendid still, who has thrown wide the enchanted doors of legend and passed into the immortal splendors of those wonderful gardens of the Thousand and One Nights.