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Chapter XVI. The Caliphs of Bagdad

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CALIPHS OF BAGDAD.

Bagdad in its Glory—A Picture of Barbaric Splendor—Sketch of the Caliphs of Bagdad—The early Successors of Mahomet—Abu-Beker—Omar, the Second Caliph—His Visit to Jerusalem—His frugality and Simplicity of Manners—Conquest of Syria and Persia—The Greek Emperor and the Caliph—Othman—Ali, the “Brave and the True”—Sects among the Moslems—Sonnites and Sheahs—Hassan, the Grandson of Mahomet—Moawiyah—Omniades, the “Caliphs of Damascus”—Rapid Advance of the Crescent—Charles Martel—The Abassides, “Caliphs of Bagdad”—Haroun-al-Raschid—The Mæcnas of the East—Royal Munificence—The Later Caliphs—Dissolution of the Empire of Mahomet—Bagdad Captured by the Moguls—Last of the Sacred Race—The Sultan now “Commander of the Faithful.”



O most people the very name of Bagdad is suggestive of Oriental magnificence. There is a *glamour* of romance about this city, that was once the glory and pride of Islam. The glowing descriptions in the Arabian Nights, of the splendors of the court of Haroun-al-Raschid and his beautiful queen, Zobeide, though doubtless exaggerated, and embellished by all the hyperbole of Eastern imagery, had a substantial foundation in historical facts. About the eighth century, under the reigns of the Caliphs, Bagdad attained its greatest splen-

dor, and here the wealth of the world at that time appears to have centered. Manufactures, commerce, science, and the arts all flourished under their fostering care. Colleges and schools were founded and liberally endowed, and the abstruse sciences were cultivated with enthusiasm and success. The artisans of Bagdad were famous for their ingenuity and skill ; and we read of a Clepsydra, or water-clock, originally devised in Greece, issuing from its work-shops and being deemed a present worthy of acceptance from one of the Caliphs to a king of France. At that time it was doubtless the most brilliant and wealthy city of the world.

The annals of an Arabian writer (Abulfeda) give an account of the magnificence at the reception by one of the Caliphs of an ambassador from Greece. "The army was drawn up to the number of one hundred and sixty thousand men. The Caliph himself, surrounded by his chief ministers and favorite slaves covered with gold and jewels, resembled a planet amid a galaxy of stars. Eunuchs, black and white, with inferior officers to the number of eight thousand, served as a foil to these gems. Silk and gold-embroidered tapestry, numbering thirty-eight thousand pieces, ornamented the palace walls, and on a curious tree of gold and silver were perched a variety of birds, whose movements and notes were regulated by machinery. Twenty-two thousand carpets covered the floors, and there floated on the broad stream of the Tigris, before the windows of the palace, thousands of vessels, each splendidly decorated ; while a hundred lions, in charge of their keepers, lent a contrast to the glittering scene."

Such are the brilliant pictures painted by the early chroniclers of the glories of this famous city. But the wealth and prosperity of its people, and its abundance of riches acquired by the strong arm and abstemious habits of its early Arab conquerors, led to luxury and effeminacy.

The last of its Caliphs passed away, and the succeeding dynasty quarreling among themselves, Bagdad became an easy prey to the Persians, the Tartars, and the Turks, each in succession capturing and sacking the city. In the time of its prosperity its population must have been immense. When captured by the Tartar Chief, *Halaku*, in the thirteenth century, it is said that three hundred thousand of its defenders were massacred in cold blood, and two hundred years later, when sacked by the conquering hordes of Tamerlane, he erected beyond the gates two pyramids, as the trophies of his prowess, constructed of the heads of ninety thousand of its most influential people. By some singular incongruity, in view of its bloody history, this city originally received and still retains the Arab name, signifying the "Abode of Peace."

But before I attempt to picture the Bagdad of to-day, it may not be out of place to devote one chapter to a historical sketch of the Caliphs, whose reign extended from the death of the founder of Islam down to the middle of the thirteenth century.

From the glowing pages of Gibbon later historians have drawn the stern but truthful pictures of the degeneracy of Christianity, at the period when the "False Prophet of Mecca" promulgated his new religion of the Unity of God, and his followers, raising the battle-cry of "victory or paradise," swept with resistless fury over the plains of Asia and Egypt.

Mahomet's immediate successor had been one of his earliest and most devoted converts. Abu-Beker, on whom the mantle of the Prophet fell, despising the pompous epithets of royalty, adopted the simple and unpretentious titles of "Caliph," and "Commander of the Faithful." The term "Saracen" is probably derived from the Arabic word *Sharack*, meaning "Eastern People," which the Ma-

hometans were called in reference to the European nations. The short reign of Abu-Beker was followed by that of Omar, the second Caliph, whose generals led the fanatical hosts of Islam across the desert to Damascus, captured Jerusalem, overran all Syria, and extended the rule of the Saracens throughout Egypt and Persia. Historians record the visit made by the Caliph Omar to Jerusalem, where his victorious generals had compelled the imperial city of David and Solomon to surrender after a fierce and bloody defense.

On this occasion the Emperor of the Faithful, the conqueror of the East, courted no distinction in attire or retinue above the meanest of his followers. His dress was a coarse woolen garment, with a scimitar hung from one shoulder, and a bow from the other. He rode on a red camel, carrying in two sacks the provisions for his journey; before him was a leathern bottle of water, and behind was suspended a large wooden platter. When he halted on the way, the company was uniformly invited to share his homely fare, and the humblest of his retinue dipped their fingers in the same dish with the mighty successor of the Prophet. The spot where he reposed for the night was never abandoned in the morning without the regular performance of prayers.

The abstemiousness and frugality of Omar is in strong contrast with the extravagance and luxury of some of his successors, into whose coffers the wealth of the East was poured, and by whom it was spent in most lavish profusion.

By order of the Caliph, the ground on which stood the temple of Solomon was cleared of rubbish, and the foundations laid for the splendid mosque which still bears his name. For over twelve centuries the Holy City has remained in the possession of the Mahometans, except dur-

ing an interval of ninety years, when the valor of the crusaders restored it to Christian rule.

The conquest of Antioch, the seat of the Greek Emperors, soon followed, and Heraclius escaped with a few followers to the Mediterranean, where he embarked for Constantinople.

The attention of Omar was called, early in his reign, to the "golden soil of Chaldea," so famed for its fertility, the magnificence of its cities, the extent and variety of its manufactures, and the multitude of its flocks and herds. The hosts of Persia were as feeble as in the days of Darius; the power and resources of that empire melted away before the impetuous assaults of the Arabs, and the splendor of the conquest and spoliation of Mesopotamia and Persia filled the conquerors with surprise and delight. After ten years reign and a most brilliant career of conquest, Caliph Omar fell under the dagger of an assassin. His piety, justice, abstinence, and simplicity procured for his memory more reverence than any of his successors; and Arabic historians relate many stories illustrative of his virtues. A conversation is recorded between the Greek Emperor and some of his Moslem captives as to the person and dignity of their sovereign. "What sort of a palace," said Heraclius, "has your Caliph?" "Of mud." "And who are his attendants?" "Beggars and poor people." "What tapestry does he sit upon?" "Justice and uprightness." "And what is his throne?" "Abstinence and wisdom." "And what is his treasure?" "Trust in God." "And who are his guards?" "The bravest of the Unitarians."

Othman, the successor of Omar, extended the conquests of the Saracens far into Africa, and by the subjection of the tribes westward of Egypt, prepared the way for the future invasion of Europe across the Straits of Gibraltar.

The third Caliph, like his predecessor, perished by assassination.

Ali, the son-in-law of Mahomet, and one of his bravest and most devoted followers, succeeded to the Caliphate, twenty-four years after the death of the Prophet. On assuming the regal and sacerdotal duties, he retained the accustomed simplicity of his attire. On the day of his inauguration, he went to the mosque dressed in a thin cotton gown, tied around him with a girdle, a coarse turban on his head, his slippers in one hand and his bow in the other for a walking staff. This Prince was not only a brave soldier, but a poet and scholar, and his partisans are fulsome and extravagant in his praise. A volume of maxims and poems, ascribed by Arabic scholars to the Caliph Ali, still remains as a monument of his wisdom and learning.

His reign was disastrous in insurrections and political convulsions. For the first time, the arms of the Moslems were turned against each other, and stained with civil blood. They now became divided into two bitter and irreconcilable sects, the *Sonnites* and the *Sheahs*, which remain to this day. At first the difference was rather one of political parties than of religious tenets. The *Sonnites* which still prevail throughout Arabia and Egypt call themselves Orthodox, and profess a belief in the "traditions" which are not directly embodied in the Koran, but have come down mostly through the authority of the first Caliph. The latter sect, or *Sheahs*, claim that Ali, himself the cousin, and his wife the daughter, of Mahomet, should have been, by divine right, his immediate successor; and maintain that the first three Caliphs and all their descendants who afterwards occupied the throne, were usurpers. The Persians, and the Mahometans of India and other more Eastern lands, are *Sheahs*, and the hostility

between these rival sects is still very bitter. During the *Ramidan*, or holy month, great numbers of both *Sonnites* and *Sheahs* from the furthest limits of the Mahometan world meet at Mecca, but unlike the rival sects of Christian pilgrims in Jerusalem, they never openly come to blows while visiting the sacred places of their religion.

The virtues and accomplishments of Ali could not save him from a violent death, and his son Hassan, though inheriting his father's piety, was deficient in the courage and energy necessary to rule a turbulent people. He soon resigned the Caliphate, and retired to Medina, devoting his life to deeds of charity and benevolence.

His successor, Moawiyah, the sixth Caliph, was the first of the dynasty of the Ommiades, who are generally styled the "Caliphs of Syria," their capital being at Damascus. During the period that this dynasty remained in power—scarcely one hundred years—sixteen Caliphs in succession ascended the throne, of whom seven perished by the hands of assassins. In the meantime Akbah, the conqueror of Egypt, had crossed the great desert and the Atlas range of mountains, and traversed the wilderness in which the Moslems afterwards erected the splendid capitals of Fez and Morocco. His career, though not his zeal, was checked by the prospect of a boundless ocean. Spurring his horse into the waves, and raising his eyes to heaven, he exclaimed: "Great God! if my course were not stopped by this sea, I would still go on to the unknown regions of the West, preaching the unity of thy holy name, and putting to the sword the rebellious nations who worship any other gods but thee!" Before the close of the reign of the Ommiades the Mahometan empire had extended from the Indus to the Pillars of Hercules. Nor did the banner of the Crescent stop here. The Moors from Africa had overrun the most fertile provinces of the Spanish Peninsula,

and laid the foundations of a State which was to make the name of Grenada famous in history. Their victorious generals had already formed the bold design of making themselves masters of all Europe. With a vast armament, by sea and land, they were preparing to invade Europe, to cross the Pyrenees, and subvert the Kingdom of the Franks in Gaul then distracted by the wars of two contending dynasties; to extinguish the power of the Lombards in Italy, and place an Arabian *Imaum* in the chair of St. Peter.

Hence, after subduing the barbarous hordes of Germany, they proposed to follow the course of the Danube, from its source to the Euxine Sea, where they would have joined their countrymen under the wall of Constantinople.*

From these impending calamities was Christendom delivered by the genius and fortune of one man, Charles Martel. His huge mace, which he wielded with resistless force, gave him the epithet of Martel, or the Hammer.

At the head of his troops he stayed the advance of the victorious Saracens, and rolled back the tide of battle. For the first time in Europe the Crescent met with a serious repulse. The Arabs turned their arms towards the East, pressing the siege of Constantinople, and hoping to strike Europe over the ruins of the Byzantine Empire.

The dynasty that succeeded the Ommiades, about the middle of the eighth century, was that of Abbas, the uncle of Mahomet. The Abbassides, as they are called, are known in history as the "Caliphs of Bagdad," the city to which they transferred their court. For more than five hundred years, from the eighth to the thirteenth century, they ruled the Eastern world with various degrees of authority. During this period, thirty-two Caliphs ascended the throne. In the height of their power, these Ma-

* Crichton's History of Arabia.

hometan Princes were the most powerful and absolute rulers on earth. They united in one person all regal and sacerdotal authority, and though the Koran was nominally their rule of action, they claimed to be the infallible judges and interpreters of that book most sacred to Mahometans.

Bagdad was founded by the Caliph Almansor, in the 145th year of the Hegira (A. D. 763). On the long roll of his successors there are but few names familiar even to the student of history. But so long as the fascination of that wonderful book, "*The Tales of the Arabian Nights*," shall endure, the name of the fifth Caliph of Bagdad, Haroun-al-Raschid, will remain a household word in both Christian and heathen lands. During his reign of nineteen years, Bagdad reached the height of its glory. Beautifully situated on the banks of the Tigris, a splendid metropolis, the seat of imperial power and luxury, it seemed to merit the titles of the "*City of the Enchantress*"—the "*Abode of Peace*."

This Caliph, whose name Eastern romance has made so familiar to us, was eminently a liberal and humane ruler. He excelled as a warrior, a statesman, and a scholar. He conversed familiarly with all classes of his subjects, and from his personal adventures in wandering through the streets of his capital, many anecdotes have been derived, which historians have been careful to preserve. To the attractions of these adventures there is added the romance associated with the name of his beautiful and virtuous Queen Zobeide. The author of the *Arabian Nights* may never be surely known, but I remember with what feelings of reverence I looked upon the marble tomb of the Persian poet Chusero, near Delhi, in Northern India, from which I brought away a few rose leaves as mementoes of one who is the reputed author of the "*Thousand and One Stories*." And now, as I wander through the streets of Bagdad, and

see reproduced many of the identical scenes that so delighted my youthful imagination, the most marvelous of these stories assume an air of probability.



BAGDAD IN ITS GLORY.

Almamoun, the son and successor of Haroun-al-Raschid, (or "Aaron, the Just,") is generally regarded as the most profuse and generous of all the Caliphs of Bagdad. At his nuptials a thousand pearls of the largest size were showered on the head of the bride, gifts in lands and houses were scattered in lottery tickets among the populace, and before drawing his foot from the stirrup, he gave away 2,400,000 gold *dinars* (\$5,000,000), being three-fourths of the income of a province.

He was called the *Mæcenas* of the East, and learned men from all parts of the world were invited to visit Bagdad, where they were treated with great honor. In return for such marks of imperial favor, these happy scholars

were expected, of course, to extol, in prose and verse, the glory of their generous patron.

The history of the Caliphs, from the time of their greatest prosperity down to the capture of Bagdad by the Tartar hordes in 1258, is a succession of pictures showing the increasing corruption and degeneracy of the people, and the effeminacy and weakness of the rulers. During the later reigns, insurrections broke out in almost every province. Usurpers arose, who succeeded in making themselves independent sovereigns. Corruption and venality crept into every department of the State. Bitter religious feuds broke out, and rival sects hated each other worse than infidels. Vice and licentiousness everywhere prevailed. Like other great nations of antiquity, the policy of the Saracens seemed better adapted for the acquisition of an empire than for its preservation.

The wild tribes of Tartary poured down over the fertile plains of Mesopotamia, and with the capture of Bagdad, the history of the Saracens, both as a military and political nation, may be said to have expired. The second dynasty of the Caliphs of the House of Abbas, held a nominal supremacy in matters of religion for two hundred and fifty years after. But Bagdad was no longer the seat of a mighty empire, and gradually sunk to be the capital of a province. The Sultans of Turkey who acquired supremacy over Arabia in the sixteenth century did not, like the Caliphs, style themselves the descendants and successors of the Apostle of God.

A stray scion of the race of the Caliphs, whose ancestor had fled from Bagdad to Cairo when that city was sacked by the Moguls, was yet living in Egypt. The Sultan Selim invited this last remnant of a sacred race to Constantinople, where he was treated with every mark of honor and respect. Before his death he made to the Sultan a formal

renunciation and transfer of the Caliphate. By this empty title the Turkish Sovereigns have secured a distinction of great service to them in maintaining authority over the Arab tribes, as well as pious Musselmen throughout the world. The Sultan of Turkey is now saluted as "Commander of the Faithful."

