

**HAROUN  
ALRASCHID,  
CALIPH OF BAGDAD**

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Haroun Alraschid, caliph of Bagdad by E. H. Palmer

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**E. H. PALMER**

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## EDITORS' PREFACE.

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THE name of the Caliph Haroun Alraschid is inseparably associated with the most charming collection of stories ever invented for the solace and delight of mankind. Whether there ever was any "Aaron the Just" in the flesh—whether he is not as legendary as King Arthur—it seldom occurs to the ordinary reader to inquire. The stories belong to all time and to no time. The king no doubt still wanders incognito in the streets of Bagdad; one-eyed Calendars still tell their tales; fishermen continue to delude the stupid genie; Aladdin goes on rubbing his lamp. The great Caliph has nothing to do with reality; his Bagdad is a city which may be on the Euphrates or on any other river, provided it be a stately city by a stately river; he, his empire, his crown, his city, his palace, his people, his officers, his harem, belong all alike to Fableland, where everybody has been hitherto content to leave them.

When Professor Palmer, therefore, being consulted as to a worthy representative of Islam for this series of illustrious men of all time, proposed the good Haroun Alraschid, one experienced at once that

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curiosity which attaches to a thing entirely new, and yet strangely familiar. The Caliphate, the successors of the Prophet, the great Empire of the East, the man himself, all became at once endowed with life and reality. The Professor went on to explain that not only was the subject full of interest, but that there were boundless stores of Arabic histories from which to draw, and that his chief difficulty would be to compress within our modest limits a historical account of the Empire and the King, with selections from the stories which surround his name.

The following pages are the result of his labours. The introductory chapter is an account of the rise and growth of the Empire; the Caliph of real history follows, an Eastern autocrat, capricious, cruel, and vindictive, yet of a *bon naturel*. In the "Caliph of legend," the Author shows how not only stories have gathered round his name more thickly than round that of the great Carl, or Frederick Redbeard, but also how the memory of the man is preserved in anecdotes which bear upon themselves the stamp of truth. It is therefore with great satisfaction that we present the readers of the "New Plutarch" with a restoration to life, so to speak, of one who has too long been little better than a dweller in the realms of fiction. For the first time, the great Caliph of legend is "done into English" as a Caliph of history and reality.

W. J. B.

W. B.

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## INTRODUCTION.

### THE RISE OF THE CALIPHATE.

THE ancient Empire of Persia was tottering to its fall, the great and holy Roman Empire had well-nigh run its course, when Mohammed, with true prophetic inspiration—or, what is more, with true political instinct—foretold to the Arabians that they should inherit the glories of the dying empires, and should themselves, for the same faults, ultimately share their fate.

“Do they not see how many a generation we have destroyed before them, whom we had settled on the earth as we have not settled for you, and sent the rain of heaven on them in copious showers, and made the waters flow beneath them? Then we destroyed them for their sins, and raised up other generations after them.”—*Koran*, vi. 6.

I propose, in the following pages, to show what the Mohammedan empire was at the culminating point of its greatness, by sketching the career of the most illustrious of its sovereigns, and the one most familiar to European readers—to describe, in short,

——— the golden prime  
Of good Haroun Alraschid.

It will, however, be necessary first to learn, as briefly as possible, in what manner and through what means the Mohammedan power had its rise and origin.

The Arabs, in and before Mohammed's time, were a brave and vigorous race, preserving almost un-

changed the habits and mode of life of the patriarchal age. Living in the pure and invigorating air of the desert, far from the turmoil of men and cities; unacquainted with luxury, and possessing in his camels, sheep, and tents all that he absolutely required for his subsistence, the Arab was, and still is, a free, simple, vigorous child of nature. Like all peoples who live in constant communion with nature, poetry was a passion as well as an innate talent with him, and by furnishing him with an easy vehicle for the recording of thoughts and events, by giving him in fact a literature, although an unwritten one, redeemed him from many of the faults of unlettered savagery. "The Arabs' registers are the verses of their bards," says their own proverb, and the number of these which have been preserved afford invaluable materials for the study of their history and character. Their poetry was the natural outcome of their mode of existence, and the very metres and rhythms which they employ breathe the desert air. Just as the Scandinavian poet, in his daily life amidst brawling torrents and dashing cascades, threw his thoughts insensibly into language that flowed in harmony with these voices of nature around him; so the Arab, in the stillness of the desert, thought aloud as he journeyed on, while his thoughts insensibly fell into language whose rhythm was guided by the pace of his camel or himself.

So passionately fond of liberty is the Arab, that he will not brook the trammels of government or even of society. The individual Bedawi bows to no authority but his own will; and if a tribe acknowledge a Sheikh or elder as its head, it promises no allegiance to him as ruler or lord, but only cedes to him the right of representing it in its dealings with strangers, and gives him the somewhat equivocal privilege of occupying the most exposed part of the

camp, and of entertaining all comers at his own expense. A certain strong feeling of clanship among the members of individual tribes, an irrepressible love of plunder and freebooting, leading to constant petty wars and prolonged vendettas, and a superstitious belief in a debased form of Sabæanism, were the chief characteristics of the people in the midst of whom Mohammed was born.

The requirements of commerce necessitated some general gatherings of the tribes, and the territory of Mecca, where was situated the most honoured shrine of Sabæan worship, was naturally the locality in which they would occur. Accordingly, an annual fair was held at Ocah, where literary contests also took place; and these, like the Olympic games amongst the Greeks, served to keep alive a certain feeling of national unity among the different tribes. Two results followed from this state of things, which have an important bearing on the success of Mohammed's mission. In the first place, the tribe of the Koreish, from which he sprung, were located on the site of the Ka'abeh, the chief temple of national worship just referred to, and they therefore became the natural guardians of the sacred edifice, and so acquired a kind of prescriptive superiority over other tribes. Secondly, as all the tribes met in the territory of the Koreish to try their respective skill in poetry and oratory, the language of this particular tribe became necessarily the standard dialect, and absorbed into itself many of the idioms and locutions of the rest. Thus we see that local, tribal, and social circumstances were all in favour of the development of any great idea originating with the Koreish.

So far, the picture of the Arab is a bright and favourable one; but there is, unfortunately, a dark side to it. Morally and intellectually, they were in a