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VATHEK

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Vathek by William Beckford.

First published in 1786. This edition was first published in 1849.

This ebook edition was created and published by Global Grey on 20th January 2021,
and updated on the 10th March 2023.

The artwork used for the cover is '*Orientalec*'
painted by Ivana Kobilca.

This book can be found on the site here:

globalgreybooks.com/vathek-an-arabian-tale-ebook.html

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Vathek

Vathek, ninth Caliph¹ of the race of the Abassides, was the son of Motassem, and the grandson of Haroun Al Raschid. From an early accession to the throne, and the talents he possessed to adorn it, his subjects were induced to expect that his reign would be long and happy. His figure was pleasing and majestic; but when he was angry, one of his eyes became so terrible² that no person could bear to behold it; and the wretch upon whom it was fixed instantly fell backward, and sometimes expired. For fear, however, of depopulating his dominions, and making his palace desolate, he but rarely gave way to his anger.

Being much addicted to women, and the pleasures of the table, he sought by his affability to procure agreeable companions; and he succeeded the better, as his generosity was unbounded and his indulgences unrestrained; for he was by no means scrupulous: nor did he think, with the Caliph Omar Ben Abdalaziz,³ that it was necessary to make a hell of this world to enjoy Paradise in the next.

He surpassed in magnificence all his predecessors. The palace of Alkoremmi, which his father Motassem had erected on the hill of Pied Horses, and which commanded the whole city of Samarah,⁴ was in his idea far too scanty: he added, therefore, five wings, or rather other palaces, which he destined for the particular gratification of each of his senses.

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

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

The palace named “The Delight of the Eyes, or the Support of Memory,” was one entire enchantment. Rarities collected from every corner of the earth were there found in such profusion as to dazzle and confound, but for the order in which they were arranged. One gallery exhibited the pictures of the celebrated Mani; and statues that seemed to be alive. Here a well-managed perspective attracted the sight; there, the magic of optics agreeably deceived it; whilst the naturalist, on his part, exhibited in their several classes the

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

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

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

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