

The Adventures of the Caliph Haroun Alraschid

II.

Of the Caliph Haroun's justice and judgment. Of the Punishment of the Butcher and of the Baker.

Then the caliph Haroun sat on his throne and executed judgment and justice, and listened to the causes of them that made their complaints and brought their petitions.

And it came to pass that a man was brought before him charged with making and selling meat-pies of the flesh of dogs and of the flesh of cats, and passing them off for good and wholesome. Then the caliph commanded that his ear should be nailed to his door-post, and his stock cast outside the city walls, and his shop rased to the ground. And the people lift up their voices and said, "Wonderful is the caliph for wisdom and judgment!" And they hurried away the cat's-meat man with execrations, to fulfil his punishment.

Then a baker was brought before the caliph, charged with selling bread light of weight, and mixing his flour with lime. Then the caliph said, "O man! is it so? and dost thou fill my people with lime for food? Where is the bread? Hath it been tested?"

Then a loaf of bread, neither very bad nor very good, was brought before the caliph; and he said, "Where are the scales?" And the Loaf was weighed, and found one pennyweight short of weight. Then Gaifar whispered to the caliph, "Bread wastes in the oven, for the moisture thereof evaporates." The caliph answered and said, "The bakers should allow for the waste; my people shall not be mulcted of their bread. Let it be tested." Then the bread was tested by Isa the chemist; and a certain substance, that might or might not be lime, but of a certainty was not flour, was found therein; as much as an infant of seven days might cover with its hand. Then the caliph said, "Bread is a man's life: this bread is neither pure, nor of full weight. Let the baker's shop be rased to the earth, and his flour cast into the river, and let the baker be baked in his own oven." Then the people without the palace, when they heard the judgment of the caliph, cried, "One weight and one measure throughout Bagdad! Happy the people that live under Haroun the Just!"

But the tongue of the vizier Gaifar clove to the roof of his mouth.

And when Gaifar went home to his dinner, his slaves said unto him, "Why is thy countenance fallen, O my lord? and why eatest thou no bread?" And he said, "My heart is contracted to-day; I can not eat bread." And tears that he would not let fall gathered under his eyelashes. Then they said softly, one to another, "It is because of the matter of the baker."

Meantime the caliph rode forth to see certain troops, newly trained, draw the bow and hurl the dart; and everywhere the people hailed him as Al Raschid, the Just. Wherefore his heart dilated: and he is called Alraschid to this day.

As he returned towards his palace, he looked and beheld written with the fingers of a hand on the moist ground, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

Then he drew his rein, and demanded who had written those words. His servants answered, "We know not, O Prince of the Faithful!" He said, "Go, inquire, and let investigation be made." Al Fadl said, "My lord, some wanton wretch hath written them, intending to molest thee . . . it were better to let the matter drop." The caliph said, "These are not written by a wanton wretch. I will know."

Then his servants brought before him an old woman they had found by the way-side covered with her veil, and with her head on her knees. They said, "O caliph, the words were written by this ill-omened old woman."

Then said the caliph, "O old woman! why didst thou write these words? And who art thou?"

She said, "O caliph, I am a Christian, my name is Mary, I am the mother of the baker whom thou didst cast into the oven; he was my only son, and I am ready to go mad." The caliph's servants then said unto him, "O Prince of the Faithful! shall we smite her over the mouth?" But he said, "Give her a hundred pieces of gold, and let her go." Nevertheless she would not take the money, but fled with a wild shriek towards the tombs. Then the caliph rode slowly home, and his face was darkened, and he mused on the words, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

Then he sent for Gaifar; and Gaifar came unto him. Then said the caliph, "O Gaifar! where are these words to be found? Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Gaifar replied, "O caliph! they are certainly not in the Koran!" Said the caliph, "They are good words nevertheless: let them be written in a book, in letters of gold. What thinkest thou, O Gaifar? Did I well in the matter of the baker?" Gaifar answered, "In the name of Allah, oh my lord! ask me not that question! I would rather not think at all about it."

Said the caliph, "But what, then, is to be done? My people must not be cheated in their bread." Gaifar replied, "My lord, you are right, they should not be: however, in the matter of the baker, I think you were too severe. He should have been punished, but not so horribly. Why should we crush a moth with a sledge-hammer? for it liveth, O caliph, but a day."

Then said the caliph, “ Go to; in executing justice, I may have been too unmindful of mercy. But yet the abuses of the city must be remedied. Frame me, therefore, O Gaifar! a system of police that shall comprehend all classes, and when we shall have established it a little, you and I will go forth in the evening, disguised as merchants, and see how it works.”

Gaifar said, “I hear and obey.” And he went forth less heavy in heart, and repaired to his palace, and mused in his mind concerning the new police.

Afterwards he went to visit his mother. And she said, “Blessed art thou, O my son Gaifar! to be in such esteem with the caliph, for he knows how to prize virtue and recompense merit; he is not such an one as the caliph his brother. Thou art dear and delightful in his eyes.”

Gaifar answered his mother and said, “O my mother, I am grateful for the caliph’s esteem, and I trust that I shall not abuse it; but it behoves me to walk as if I were crossing the bridge of a single hair, for he is like a young lion that may, any moment, turn on me and rend me.”

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