

MASUDI

THE MEADOWS
OF GOLD

The Abbasids



Translated and edited by
Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone

The Meadows of Gold

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Mas'udi was born in Baghdad about 896 AD, during the Caliphate of Mu'tadid and died in Egypt some time around the year 956, eleven years after the Buwaihids, a Shi'a dynasty of Iranian origin, had occupied Baghdad and taken control of the Caliphate. His full name was Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn al-Husain ibn Ali ibn Abd Allah al-Mas'udi, which we have simplified to Mas'udi.

Almost everything known about this most readable of Muslim historians is gleaned from the pages of his two extant works, *The Meadows of Gold* (*Muruj al-Dhahab*) and the *Book of Notification* (*Kitab al-Tanbih*). Later entries in the Arabic biographical dictionaries are meagre, and add almost nothing to what Mas'udi himself tells us.

Aside from mentioning that he was born in Baghdad and therefore peculiarly fitted to write the history of the Abbasid dynasty, Mas'udi scarcely refers to his early life and education. We know more about his travels, which were extensive.

When he was nineteen, Mas'udi travelled widely in Persia, visiting the Zoroastrian fire temples of Nishapur and Istakhr and examining Pahlavi books still in possession of the Zoroastrian community. He went on to India, via Sind, getting as far as the Western Deccan and making first-hand observations of flora, fauna and religious beliefs and ceremonies – this last a subject that interested him very much. He returned to Iraq by sea in 917, after an absence of two years, stopping in Yemen and Oman on the way. During this first long trip out of his native land, Mas'udi met Abu Zaid al-Sirafi, a learned merchant from Siraf on the coast of the Persian Gulf, who gave him a long and interesting account of China and the way thither which he incorporated in his *Meadows of Gold*. The year of his return to Iraq was at least partly spent in Basra studying under Abu Khalifa al-Jumahi, a noted philologist of the day, whose name occurs occasionally in the pages that follow.

In 921 Mas'udi went to Syria, visiting the frontier towns between Islam and Byzantium. He talked to soldiers, merchants, priests and government officials. He met Leo of Tripoli, a Byzantine admiral who had converted to Islam, who was able to tell him a good deal about naval warfare, and Abu Umair, from Adana, who had taken part in a number of diplomatic missions to Constantinople. Much of the information about Byzantium in the *Meadows of Gold* was gathered

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during this trip. Mas'udi's interest in Islam's hereditary enemy was unusual; he is one of the few Muslim historians, whose work has survived, who deals with Byzantium in any detail.

Five years later, in 926, Mas'udi was in Palestine, spending some time in Tiberias in the company of the Jewish scholar Abu Kathir Yahya ibn Zakariya, an authority on the Torah which he was at the time engaged in translating. (Abu Kathir was not the only Jewish scholar consulted by Mas'udi; later in Egypt he befriended the famous Sa'adia Gaon.) In Palestine Mas'udi visited Jerusalem and Nazareth, examining the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the first and the house where Christ was born in the second. He also went out of his way to collect information about the Samaritans, whose scripture and beliefs he describes.

The next year found Mas'udi in Damascus, examining Hellenistic and early Islamic monuments, then in Palmyra, whose ruins he describes. He talked with members of the Jewish community of Raqqa; and in Harran, two day's march from Raqqa, in what is now Turkey, he was able to interview the elders of a community of pagan star-worshippers, the Sabians, still surviving in a sea of monotheism. This ancient town, said to be the birthplace of Abraham, still maintained a tradition of Greek scholarship and supplied Baghdad with a number of translators of Greek scientific works during the reign of Ma'mun. It is said that the last teachers from the medical school at Alexandria were transferred there by the Umayyad Caliph Umar II.

Mas'udi returned to Baghdad by sailing down the Euphrates, and was present at the siege of Hit by the Qarmatians. He profited from the occasion by gathering information about this militant equalitarian sect from the lips of its leaders.

Sometime in the 930s, Mas'udi travelled in the Caspian area, collecting information about the Caucasus and the peoples who lived beyond them – Khazars, Slavs and Bulgars. He made a number of original observations in these regions and was able to correct certain false geographical notions inherited from antiquity.

The last years of his life were spent in Egypt, with occasional visits to Syria. This exile – perhaps self-imposed – may have been the result of the political upheavals in Iraq that accompanied the coming to power of the Buwaihids. The first certain year of his stay in Egypt is 942. In 944 he visited Antioch in Syria and once again went to towns along the frontier with Byzantium, talking with men who had fought on both sides. Information gathered on this trip appears in the *Meadows of Gold*, the first version of which was completed shortly after his return to Egypt.

At the very beginning of the *Meadows of Gold*, Mas'udi makes the point that a man who stays at home and relies on information that happens to come his way cannot pretend to the same authority as the man who has travelled widely and seen things with his own eyes. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Mas'udi tried to visit the places and countries about which he wrote, and this points to the most original feature of the *Meadows of Gold* – the placing of historical events in a geographical context. This is most noticeable in the early chapters of the book,

which contain long excursuses on the geographical features of the known world, both within and without the borders of Islam.

This interest in the non-Islamic world is another characteristic that distinguishes Mas'udi from other Muslim historians. One of the major motives of his travels seems to have been to gather as much information as possible about the peoples who lived beyond the borders of Islam, in particular about their religious beliefs, which he recounts with a notable lack of distortion. He was curious, for example, about the history of the Franks, only vaguely known to his contemporaries, and he gives a list of their kings from Clovis to Louis IV, based on a Latin king-list drawn up by a bishop in Andalusia. He found a copy in Egypt in 947.

At the other end of the world, he gives a list of Chinese emperors and describes the Huang Ch'ao rebellion that brought down the T'ang dynasty. Here he is speaking not from first-hand knowledge, but from interviews with travellers, merchants and some written sources. Nevertheless, he was the first Muslim historian to treat the history of China at any length and it was not until the time of Rashid al-Din in the thirteenth century that another historian took up the subject.

His account of India is based on his own observations, however, and is precious for being written just before Mahmud of Ghazna's destructive invasion.

It is maddening not to know more about Mas'udi's background and motives. There is no evidence that he ever occupied a government post, either under the Abbasids in Baghdad or the Ikhshidids in Egypt. Although it is obvious, especially in the early portions of the *Meadows of Gold*, that Mas'udi was a Twelver Shi'a, there is no evidence that his travels had anything to do with spreading the tenets of that sect, as has been suggested. There seems to be no valid reason for supposing that he travelled for any other reason than to satisfy his curiosity and to collect first-hand information for his books. How he financed his travels is a mystery; perhaps, like other travellers of the time, by trading.

Besides the *Meadows of Gold* and the *Tanbih*, Mas'udi wrote some thirty-four works of varying length on a wide variety of subjects – jurisprudence, comparative religion, polemics, philosophy, political theory, astronomy, medicine and history. This range of interests was not untypical of the time; Mas'udi's contemporary, al-Farabi, wrote more than one hundred works on just as bewildering a number of subjects. All but the *Meadows of Gold* and the *Tanbih* have perished. The most regrettable losses are two of his previous historical works, the *Historical Annals* (*Akhbar al-Zaman*) and the *Intermediate History* (*Kitab al-Awsat*). Both are frequently referred to in the pages of the *Meadows of Gold*, often with the intention of titillating the reader's interest so that he will rush out and buy them.

The *Historical Annals* was Mas'udi's longest work, which may explain why it has not survived. It dealt with history and geography. From the many references to it in the *Meadows of Gold*, we know that it was divided into thirty chapters, many of them dealing with non-Islamic peoples. It contained detailed descriptions of peoples and places that in the *Meadows of Gold* are mentioned only in passing.

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The *Intermediate History* was shorter than the *Historical Annals* but longer than the *Meadows of Gold*. It contained material not found in either.

The *Tanbih* (*Book of Notification*) is different again. It is a concise historical handbook about a fifth of the length of the *Meadows of Gold* and carefully organized. Digressions are kept to a minimum and although the result is drier the material is presented more fully and logically in many cases – for example in the treatment of the Byzantines – than in the *Meadows of Gold*. The *Tanbih* contains information not found in Mas‘udi’s previous works and corrects previous errors, showing that Mas‘udi was continually revising.

This constant revision of his previous works is relevant to the *Meadows of Gold*. All the surviving manuscripts of the text are of a first, unrevised version completed in 947, nine years before the completion of the final version of the *Tanbih*, which also went through a number of revisions. We know from the *Tanbih* that Mas‘udi subsequently revised this first version of the *Meadows of Gold*, added much new material and increased the number of chapters from 132 to 365. This final revised version has not survived. Readers must bear in mind that the book before them is a draft, and that many of its faults in organization were probably corrected in the final edition.

At the beginning of the *Meadows of Gold* Mas‘udi gives a list of eighty-five books which he consulted. The list is only partial, for in the course of the book he directly or indirectly refers to many more. He lived at a time when books were readily available and relatively cheap. Aside from large public libraries in major towns like Baghdad, many individuals, like Mas‘udi’s friend al-Suli, had private libraries, often containing thousands of volumes. The prevalence of books and their low price was the result of the introduction of paper to the Islamic world by Chinese papermakers captured at the Battle of Talas in 751. Very soon afterwards there were papermills in most large towns and cities. The introduction of paper coincided with the coming to power of the Abbasid dynasty, and there is no doubt that the availability of cheap writing material contributed to the growth of the Abbasid bureaucracy, postal system and lively intellectual life. Mas‘udi’s constant exhortations to his readers to consult his other works presumes a world where these were available, in libraries if not in bookshops. Ibn al-Nadim, who wrote an annotated bibliography of all the books that passed through his hands, which he ‘published’ in 987, lists thousands of titles. Amusingly, all the information he supplies about Mas‘udi and his works is wrong.

One has only to think of a European contemporary of Mas‘udi – say the compiler of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – to gauge the immense advantages the Muslim historian enjoyed. Not only did he have access to books by previous writers – even Greek and Persian in translation – but he was able to travel freely and even at times gain access to official archives. It was not until the Renaissance that European historians were able to work under the sort of conditions Mas‘udi took for granted.

He also had the advantage of working within a recognized tradition that already enjoyed a wide audience. The sophisticated reading public of Baghdad

and Cairo could appreciate Mas'udi's lively blend of dynastic history, anecdote, and general encyclopedia. Although the Golden Age of Abbasid literature was over, the spirit of Jahiz and the scholars associated with the translation of Greek science into Arabic lives on in Mas'udi. He is intellectually part of that world; the pages of the *Meadows of Gold* are pervaded with the tolerance, humour and intellectual curiosity of early Abbasid times. At the same time, in this volume, Mas'udi chronicles the slow decline of the dynasty under which Baghdad had become the intellectual capital of the world. The Caliphs become increasingly shadowy, pawns in the hand of ambitious viziers and the Turkish guard and finally, with the coming of the Buwaihids, they lose whatever fragments of personal power they had. It is a sad and moving tale, but the decline in the political power of the Abbasids did not as yet coincide with a decline in cultural life. It rather led to a shift away from Iraq towards Syria, Egypt, North Africa and Spain, where other dynasties attracted ambitious scholars and writers.

Historical writing among the Arabs had reached a high level in the generation just before Mas'udi's own. The traditional form of Arabic historical writing had grown out of a concern to record the sayings and doings of the Prophet and his companions. The technique employed was to transcribe, usually without comment, a number of varying traditions (*hadith*) about the same event, giving a careful list of the transmitters of the tradition as a guarantee of its accuracy: A told me that he heard from B that he heard from C that one day the Prophet, may blessings and peace be upon him, said . . . Criticism was confined to the names in the chain of authorities. Could B really have heard C recite this tradition? Was he old enough to remember it accurately? Was his memory good, bad or indifferent? The most famous exponent of this type of history is Tabari, who died in 923, when Mas'udi was twenty-seven years old. Tabari's history, published last century, fills fifteen large volumes and extends from the pre-Islamic period down to the year 910. Variant versions of the same event follow one another and allow the reader to form his own judgement, with little or no guidance from the author. It is in a sense a collection of source material, rather than a conventional history. Although a mine of information, the total effect is stupefying and Tabari can scarcely be read for pleasure.

Mas'udi expresses great admiration for Tabari and makes liberal use of his work, but chooses to follow the 'modernist' rather than the traditional school of historiography. Two men, both of whom died at just about the time Mas'udi was born, exemplify this school. They were Dinawari and Ya'qubi, both of whom, probably influenced by Persian models, chose but one version of an event from the often bewildering number of variants, arranged the events in chronological order and produced narrative histories. They made little attempt to stick to the original wording of the sources they used (the reproduction of the exact words of the *hadith* was of paramount importance for the traditionalists) and aimed at succinct readability. Dinawari's *Extended Histories* (*Akhbar al-Tiwal*), despite its title, fills only a single volume although it covers almost as long a period as Tabari. Dinawari's choice of what version of an event to follow is primarily

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literary rather than historical; he chooses the most dramatic or affecting. Like Mas'udi, he uses non-Islamic sources, in his case principally Persian, and is influenced by Greek ideas.

Ya'qubi, who died in 897 when Mas'udi was one year old, was a geographer as well as an historian and heavily indebted to Hellenistic thought, of which he provides a summary in the first volume of his two-volume history. But unlike Mas'udi, Ya'qubi made no effort to combine history and geography in a single work, but treated them separately. His history however is narrative, like that of Dinawari, and also includes the history of some non-Islamic peoples.

Mas'udi was more ambitious than his predecessors. He combines a number of previously independent genres of Arabic literature – chronicle, biography, geographical handbook, literary anthology, encyclopedia – into a single work. He is writing for the same audience addressed by Dinawari and Ya'qubi – the educated urban reading public – rather than the narrow audience of scholars addressed by Tabari. He had learned from Jahiz that this sort of reader quickly wearied of a dry recital of events, and so breaks up his narrative with all sorts of digressions, anecdotes, jokes and poems. Serious historians have often regarded these as intrusions in the text, and Charles Pellat, in his revision of Barbier de Meynard's nineteenth-century edition, goes so far in both the French and the Arabic editions as to set these 'digressions' apart from the purely historical narrative by printing them in a smaller typeface. But they are an integral part of the work. They almost always reveal something interesting about the people in the historical narrative – their character, taste, sense of humour or even the way they dressed. They give something of the social and material background against which these men and women lived their lives. The digressions form a kind of counterpoint to the main text. The cumulative effect is a clear and remarkably detailed picture of Abbasid court society, often illuminated by glimpses of the lives of ordinary people – the black cook with a passion for music who hides Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi, the woodcutter whose donkey is helped out of a ditch by Mu'tasim. Without Mas'udi's digressions, how would we know that one of the amusements of Abbasid Caliphs was holding cooking contests?

These digressions should therefore not be looked upon as intrusions into the text but as an integral part of it; they are what give the book much of its flavour. They have also been chosen with considerable art. Mas'udi's gifts as a story-teller will be immediately apparent to the reader. The events that led the Abbasid dynasty to power and the feelings of the supporters of the old regime are brilliantly alluded to in the opening pages of the book, where Mansur himself recounts his meeting with the blind poet who had served the Umayyads. The misdeeds of the Umayyads, rather than being merely listed, are put in the mouth of the King of Nubia, reproaching a survivor of the dynasty. This technique is extremely effective and even when Mas'udi has lifted his anecdote from a predecessor he almost invariably improves it in the telling. Anyone familiar with the vast ocean of similar anecdotes in Arabic literature can only admire Mas'udi's sure eye for the dramatic and the effects he obtains by juxtaposition. He is

particularly effective in his account of the civil war between Amin and Ma‘mun, where the long confused series of *hadith* in Tabari are pruned to an unforgettably tragic tale, with the blind poet of Baghdad’s comments on the action and how it affects ordinary people as fateful as anything in Greek tragedy.

Most Arabic historical writing is impersonal. It is impossible to get any sense of Tabari the man – aside from a sense of his enormous industry – from reading his history. Mas‘udi’s use of the first person is unusual and as one reads one gradually forms an idea of the sort of man he was – curious, warm-hearted, tolerant, vain, a man who disliked lawyers. He writes fluent, unmannered Arabic and uses a wide vocabulary. Although he was interested in the sciences of his day, he was no pedant. Much has been made of his credulity – he was criticized for this by no less than Ibn Khaldun. It is true that Mas‘udi liked a tall tale but naive to suppose that he himself believed everything he related.

The Arabic text of Mas‘udi’s *Meadows of Gold* was first published in full, together with a French translation, by Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille. This edition was published in nine volumes by the Société Asiatique in Paris between 1861 and 1877. The French translation is printed below the Arabic on each page, which allows the reader to compare the translation with the original. This edition and its accompanying translation have been the standard text for almost a hundred years. In our translation, the Roman numeral at the bottom of the page stands for the volume number of this edition; the Arabic numeral for the page. Between 1966 and 1974 the French Arabist Charles Pellat revised the Arabic text of Barbier de Meynard’s edition, in the light of the scholarship of the past hundred years, and this was published in Beirut by the Université Libanaise in five volumes. In this edition, the text is divided into 3,661 numbered paragraphs for ease of reference. These are the numbers following the paragraph sign (§) at the bottom of the pages. Thus readers who have one or the other edition can quickly find the Arabic original. It should be noted that both Barbier de Meynard’s edition and the revision of it by Pellat are not easily found outside the major libraries. Beginning in 1967, Pellat began the publication of his revision of Barbier de Meynard’s French translation. So far three volumes of this have appeared, published by the Société Asiatique, covering the period up to the end of the Umayyad dynasty. This, like his edition of the Arabic text, follows the division of the text into numbered paragraphs. It should be noted that Pellat’s revision is not based on a fresh examination of the manuscripts, of which a large number survive. On the other hand, it seems that variants in these manuscripts are few.

Barbier de Meynard’s translation is superb. The French is elegant, readable and generally accurate, given the state of Arabic studies at the time it was done. Pellat’s corrections are overwhelmingly to personal and geographical names, which are often distorted or just plain wrong in Barbier de Meynard. In our translation we have followed Pellat’s readings, so when the names in our text conflict with those in Barbier de Meynard, readers may assume that those in Barbier de Meynard are incorrect.

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As a supplement to his edition of the Arabic text, Pellat also published two volumes of comprehensive indices. These contain a wealth of biographical and historical information, and in them even the minor figures in Mas'udi's text are identified and bibliographical references given. Unfortunately these two invaluable volumes exist so far only in Arabic.

The volume before the reader contains the history of the Abbasids, from Mansur, the second Abbasid Caliph, to Mut'i. It thus covers the classical period of the Islamic state, and many of the names will be familiar to readers of *The 1,001 Nights*. After much thought we decided to begin with the Abbasids, and to deal with the pre-Islamic period and the Umayyads in two subsequent volumes. This is not as eccentric as it sounds. Pellat has not yet published his revision of Barbier de Meynard's translation of this portion; only the revised Arabic text has yet appeared. We thought readers interested in the classical period of Islamic civilization who do not know Arabic should have this volume first, rather than continuing to rely on Barbier de Meynard's French translation which contains so many incorrect personal and place names. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to translate the entire text. Our selection represents about three-quarters the original. The reader may form some idea of the omitted portions from the summaries at the end of each chapter. The selection has been guided entirely by our own taste: we have translated the bits that interested us, although the choice was often difficult. The interminable quarrels of the Turkish guard have thus received rather short shrift; on the other hand we have tried to include something from each reign, although of course Mas'udi's treatment of the Caliphs ranges from almost a hundred pages down to only a few. We hope we have not distorted his intentions.

We have simplified the spelling of Arabic names in order not to disfigure the page with diacritical points. We have not been entirely consistent in this, however. The definite article *al-* has been omitted from the throne names of Caliphs (thus Mutawakkil, not al-Mutawakkil) and from some other names that occur frequently. Initial *hamza* and *'ain* have been omitted, although retained in the middle of a word, and *'ain* at the end (al-Rabi', not al-Rabi). We hope that those who know Arabic will forgive these liberties, and after their initial revulsion, find the loss of accuracy compensated by the gain in aesthetic pleasure.

We have taken another small liberty with the text. Where possible we have chosen a single version of a name and tried to stick to it, unless the point of a story or its effect turns on the use of a nickname. It is customary in Arabic to use a variety of names when addressing someone, depending on occasion, relative status and so on. People from Caliph to peasant are typically known as the father or mother of their eldest son, or sometimes their favourite child, but may also be called by a nickname, or by an adjective deriving from their place of origin – quite apart from their 'real' names. Thus the Caliph Mansur was called Abu Ja'far – Father of Ja'far – although his given name was Abd Allah. We have tried to spare the reader the exasperation that can result from suddenly realizing that when he thought he was reading about three different people he was in fact reading about one.

Introduction

When referring to himself in the *Meadows of Gold*, Mas'udi uses the editorial 'we'. This we have rendered as 'I' in almost all cases.

Although we have had to leave out some of Mas'udi's text we have only once, by omitting a description of a particularly disgusting torture, made any abridgements in the episodes we have chosen. We hope Mas'udi, who ritually curses any who curtail his text, would have forgiven us in return for reaching an audience he could never have imagined.

An asterisk (*) within the text refers to the editors' notes, pp. 439–50.

ABU JA'FAR MANSUR

Abu Ja'far Abd Allah ibn Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Abd Allah ibn al-Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib, known as Mansur, was proclaimed Caliph while he was on the way to Mecca. His uncle, Isa ibn Ali, received the oath of allegiance first in the name of Mansur and then in the name of Isa ibn Musa, who was to be his successor, on Sunday*, 12 Dhu al-Hijja, 136 AH/754 AD. Mansur was then forty-one years old, since he was born in the month of Dhu al-Hijja in 95 AH/713 AD. His mother was a Berber slave girl called Sallama. He died on Saturday, 6 Dhu al-Hijja, 158 AH/775 AD, having ruled twenty-two years less nine days. He was on the pilgrimage and had nearly reached Mecca, when death surprised him at a place called 'The Garden of the Bani Amir', on the high road to Iraq. He was then sixty-three years old. They buried him at Mecca, his face uncovered because he was wearing the *ihram*.

According to another version, however, he died at al-Batha', near the Well of Maimun, in which case he would have been buried at al-Hajun, in the sixty-fifth year of his age.

They say that his mother Sallama said:

'When I was pregnant with Mansur, I saw in my dreams a lion which emerged from my side and crouched, roaring, his tail beating the ground, while from all around lions appeared and, gathering about him, bowed their heads to the ground.'

According to Mada'ini, Mansur himself told the following story:

'On my way to Syria, I had as travelling companion a blind man* who was going to offer Marwan ibn Muhammad a poem he had composed in his honour. I expressed a wish to hear it, and he recited:

Would that I knew where the scent of musk had gone!
The happiness we knew at al-Khaif has vanished
Since the passing of the Banu Umayya
And the chiefs of the Abd Shams.
They preached from the *minbars* like champions,
Never were their voices stilled.
Their words were beyond criticism;
They went straight to the heart,

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Without ambiguity. They were full
Of forbearance, and even when
Restraint was despised, their
Faces shone like freshly minted gold.

‘This poet,’ continued Mansur, ‘had hardly finished when, by God, I felt as if someone had struck me. Nevertheless his conversation was pleasant and he was an experienced travelling companion.

‘Later, in the year 141 AH/758 AD, I was performing the pilgrimage. In fulfilment of a vow, I had dismounted at al-Hamara, between the two hills of Zarud, and was walking on foot across the sands when once again I came across my blind man. I signed to my escort to stay behind, went up to him, took his hand and greeted him.

“Who are you?” he asked. “And may God take my life in place of yours! I am not quite sure I know you.”

“It is I,” I said, “your companion on the road to Syria in the days of the Umayyads, when you were on your way to Marwan.”

‘At once he greeted me and, sighing, recited the following lines:

The women of the House of Umayya lament,
For their daughters are orphaned.
Their good fortune slept, their stars set,
For fortune does sleep and stars do set.
Their high *minbars* are vacant;
May peace be upon them until I die.

“How much did Marwan give you?” I asked the poet.

“He made me rich. Having entreated him, I will never have to entreat another.”

“But how much?” I insisted.

“Four thousand dinars, a gala robe and two riding camels.”

“Where was this?” I asked.

“At Basra,” he answered.

“Do you recognize me now?” I asked.

“As my travelling companion, yes, but by my life, I know nothing of your family.”

“I am Abu Ja‘far Mansur, the Commander of the Faithful.”

“O Commander of the Faithful,” he replied, trembling, “forgive me, for your cousin Muhammad, may the prayers and peace of God be upon him, has said: ‘Hearts are steeped in love for those who do them good, in hate for those who bring them ill.’”

Abu Ja‘far Mansur ended his story as follows:

‘My first thought was to punish him and then I thought of the fact that he was sacrosanct because of his status as pilgrim and travelling companion. I ordered

Musayyab to free him and it was done. Later, in the evening, I wanted to enjoy his conversation and had him sought. But the desert had swallowed him up.'

A CONVERSATION WITH THE KING OF NUBIA

Fadl ibn al-Rabi' tells us:

At a gathering before Mansur, at which Isa ibn Ali, Isa ibn Musa ibn Muhammad ibn Ali, Salih ibn Ali, Qutham ibn al-Abbas, Muhammad ibn Ja'far and Muhammad ibn Ibrahim were present, the conversation turned to the Umayyad Caliphs, their conduct, the policies they followed and the reason their power was stripped from them. Mansur said:

'Abd al-Malik was an arrogant tyrant who did not care what he did. Sulaiman's only ambition lay in his belly and his balls. Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was like a one-eyed man among the blind. The only great man of the dynasty was Hisham. As long as their standards remained high and their conduct not base, the Umayyads held the government which had been given to them with a firm hand, protecting, preserving and guarding the gift granted them by God. But then their power passed to their effeminate sons, whose only ambition was the satisfaction of their desires and who chased after pleasures forbidden by Almighty God. They knew not that God works slowly and believed themselves safe from His snares, although they had renounced their right to the Caliphate and had made light of God's truths and the duties of good government. Then God stripped them of their power, covered them with shame and deprived them of their worldly goods.'

Salih ibn Ali then said:

'O Commander of the Faithful, when Abd Allah, the son of Marwan fled to the land of the Nubians with a small number of followers, the king of that country asked them about their position and state, and what had befallen them, and how they had comported themselves. When he had collected this information, he rode to see Abd Allah, and questioned him on various events involving him and his family, including the causes of their disgrace. He said things which I can no longer remember, after which he expelled him from his country. The Commander of the Faithful could summon Abd Allah and have him tell his adventures himself.'

As a result of this, Mansur had Abd Allah brought from prison and when he stood before him, he said:

'Abd Allah, tell me your story and the story of the King of Nubia.'

Abd Allah replied as follows:

'O Commander of the Faithful, I had been in Nubia three days when the king

A Conversation with the King of Nubia

came to see me. Although I had had a valuable carpet spread out for him, he sat on the ground. I asked him why he refused to sit on our carpet and he replied:

‘Because I am a king and the duty of a king is to humble himself before the power of God, who has made him great.’

Then he said to me:

‘Why do you drink wine when your Book forbids it?’

I answered.

‘Our slaves and our followers have the audacity to do so.’

‘Why,’ he went on, ‘do you allow your cavalry to trample the fields when your Book has forbidden you destruction?’

‘These are again our slaves and our followers, who have behaved thus in their ignorance.’

‘Why,’ proceeded the king, ‘do you wear brocade and silk and gold, in spite of the prohibitions of your Book and your religion?’

I retorted:

‘As power fled from us, we called upon the support of alien races who have entered our faith and we have adopted these clothes from them.’

The King bowed his head in silence, sometimes fidgeting, at others scratching in the sand, while he murmured:

‘Our slaves . . . our followers . . . foreigners who have embraced our faith!’

Then he lifted his head and said:

‘It is not the way you tell it! No! Your people permitted themselves what God forbade. You broke God’s commandments and oppressed those you ruled. Then God stripped you of your power and dressed you in the ignominy of your crimes. The limit of God’s vengeance cannot be known. I fear that his punishment may fall upon you while you are in my country, and strike me along with you. The rights of the guest last for three days. Take the provisions you need and ride out of my country.’

I obeyed his order.

This story made a great impression on Mansur. He reflected a while in silence and took pity on his prisoner and decided to free him, but Isa ibn Ali reminded him that the man had already received the oath of allegiance as Marwan’s heir and he had him led back to prison.

LOYALTY TO HISHAM

In the tenth year of the Caliphate of Mansur, 148 AH/765 AD, Abu Abd Allah Ja'far ibn Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Husain ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib died. He was buried at the cemetery of al-Baqi', with his father and grandfather. He was sixty-five years old and it is said that he was poisoned. Their tomb in the cemetery of al-Baqi' is sealed by a slab bearing this inscription:

'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Glory be to God who shall raise up the nations and make dry bones live! Here is the tomb of Fatima, the daughter of the Messenger of God, may the prayers and peace of God be upon him, the Queen of all the women of the world; the tomb of Hasan ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib; the tomb of Ali ibn al-Husain ibn Ali; the tomb of Muhammad ibn Ali, and that of Ja'far ibn Muhammad, may God be content with them all!'

After having first employed Ibn Atiyya al-Bahili as vizier, the Caliph Abu Ja'far Mansur gave these duties to Abu Ayyub al-Muriyani, who came from Khuzistan. He had decided in Abu Ayyub's favour for several reasons, among them that he had served as secretary to Sulaiman ibn Habib ibn al-Muhallab, who had condemned Mansur to be whipped. He wanted to flog Mansur to pieces, but his secretary, Abu Ayyub, managed to rescue him. This was the origin of the close relationship between the two. Nevertheless, after appointing him vizier, Mansur suspected him of various crimes, above all extortion and treachery. For a long time he meditated his ruin. Every time the vizier entered the Caliph's presence, he thought his time had come, yet every time he withdrew safe and sound. It was this which led people to say that he carried with him a magic ointment with which he took care to anoint his eyebrows before appearing before Mansur – and hence the popular expression, 'the ointment of Abu Ayyub'. Nevertheless, he perished in the end, and Aban ibn Sadaqa acted as secretary to the Caliph until he died.

The military tactics employed by Hisham in one of the campaigns which he had waged were mentioned in the presence of Mansur, who thereupon sent for a certain person living in the town of Rusafa, founded by Hisham, in order to question him about them. When the man was brought before him, the Caliph asked:

'You were one of Hisham's officers?'

'Yes, O Commander of the Faithful,' the man replied.

'Well then,' continued Mansur, 'explain to me his manoeuvres, undertaken in the war of such-and-such a year.'

The officer replied:

‘He did such and such, may God be pleased with him! He manoeuvred in such and such a way, may God have mercy upon him!’

These phrases of blessing angered Mansur.

‘Get out!’ he cried, ‘And may God’s wrath fall upon you! You tread my carpets with your feet and yet you dare call down blessings on the memory of my enemy!’

The old man rose, muttering:

‘Your enemy fastened about my neck a necklace of gratitude which will be torn away only by him who washes my corpse.’

Mansur ordered him back and asked:

‘What did you say?’

‘Hisham’, answered the old man, ‘gave me a place secure from want and saved my face from the shame of beggary. Since I first saw him, I have needed to knock at no door, whether of Arab or Persian. Is it not, then, my duty to bless his name and perpetuate his memory?’

‘It is well!’ cried the Caliph. ‘Blessed be the mother who bore you! I bear witness that you are born of one who was never a slave and are the descendant of a noble house!’

And after having listened to his account, he ordered him to be given a sum payable at the treasury.

‘Commander of the Faithful,’ said the old officer, ‘I accept, not from need but because your gifts honour and your generosity sheds lustre upon the recipient.’

He therefore accepted the gift and Mansur said to him:

‘Man beloved by God, die when you like; you belong to God, and if your people had none but you, you would be the cause of their lasting renown.’

And turning to his courtiers after the man had gone, he added:

‘It is towards such men that generosity is beautiful and gifts well given and liberality praiseworthy. Would that I had men like him in my army!’

IN THE AUDIENCE HALL

One day Ma'n ibn Za'ida entered the presence of Mansur, who, when he saw him, said:

'Well, Ma'n, so it was you who gave one hundred thousand dirhams to Marwan ibn Abi Hafsa for this line:

Ma'n ibn Za'ida! Through him the Bani Shaiban
Heaps nobility upon nobility!

'Not at all, O Commander of the Faithful,' retorted Ma'n, 'the verses I rewarded were these:

At the battle of Al-Hashimiya*
You stood forth boldly with your sword
Before the vicar of the Merciful One.
You protected him and defended his life
Against the attack of lances
And sharp-bladed swords.'

'You did well, Ma'n,' said the Caliph.

It should be explained that Ma'n had been one of the companions of Yazid ibn Umar ibn Hubaira and he remained hidden until the insurrection of the Hashimiya, when a number of the people of Khurasan rioted. Ma'n, turbaned and with his face concealed, appeared at the scene of the uprising. When he saw that the crowd was about to attack Mansur, he threw himself, sword in hand, between them and the Caliph and when he had driven them off and put them to flight, Mansur said: 'Who are you?'

He uncovered his face and said:

'I am he for whom you were searching – Ma'n ibn Za'ida!'

Mansur did not let him leave until he had granted him an amnesty, a reward, and dressed him in robes of honour and conferred upon him a rank.

This same Ma'n went one day to Mansur, who said to him:

'How quick people are to envy your House!'

To which he replied:

'O Commander of the Faithful:

Small birds envy the crane;
Who envies the low-born man?'

According to Ibn Ayyash, known as al-Mantuf, 'He Who Plucks His Beard', Mansur was sitting one day looking out over the Tigris from the audience hall above the Khurasan Gate in the new town which he had just built and which bore his name: Madinat al-Mansur, The City of Mansur – in other words, Baghdad. Each of the gates, above the vault, had an audience hall with a view over the surrounding countryside. These gates, four in number, opened onto the principal streets, which were also vaulted and arched. They remain to our day, which is 332 AH/944 AD.

The first, the Khurasan Gate, was called 'The Dynasty Gate', because the dynasty of the Abbasids had its origins in Khurasan. Next came the Damascus Gate, facing Damascus, the Kufa Gate and the Basra Gate, so called because they led to those towns. I have described elsewhere the circumstances under which Mansur built this city and why he chose this site which lies between the Tigris and the Euphrates, and the Dujail and the Sarat – two canals branching off from the Euphrates. I have told the story of the founding of Baghdad, and why it was called by his name, and what people have said about it, described the Green Dome and its collapse in my own time, and given the legend of that other green dome built by Hajjaj in the city of Wasit, where it can still be seen in this year of 332 AH-944 AD. For all this information, see my *Intermediate History*, which this volume is only intended to supplement.

Mansur was sitting, then, in the audience hall over the Khurasan Gate when an arrow shot from who knows where landed at his feet. Mansur was terrified. Then he picked it up and began to twist it around in his hands. Between two of the vanes he read these lines:

Do you expect to live till Judgement Day?
Do you imagine there will be no Final Reckoning?
You will be asked to answer for your sins –
And then questioned on the state of the Believers.

Beside one of the vanes, Mansur read these lines:

When the days are fine, you are perfectly carefree
And do not fear the evil fate will bring;
Nights reassure you, but you are deluded;
For a clear night often brings grief.

And by the other vane:

Destiny takes its course, so be patient,
For nothing lasts. One day Fortune lifts

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A poor wretch to the skies;
The next, the mighty fall.

Finally, one of the arrow's sides bore the words: 'Hamadan – a man from this town is held unjustly in your prisons.'

Without a moment's delay, Mansur sent a number of his officers to search the prisons and dungeons of the town. In one of the cells of the gaol they found an old man near whom burned a lamp. A length of cloth was hung as a kind of curtain over the entrance to his cell. He was loaded with chains and facing Mecca and repeating this verse: 'Those who oppress will learn what misfortune has been prepared for them.' (Koran 26:227)

They asked him where he was from and when he said 'Hamadan', they took him at once to the Caliph. Questioned by Mansur, he answered that he came from Hamadan and that he was one of the leading men of the city.

'Your governor,' he added, 'on arriving in our country, learned that I owned a domain worth a million dirhams. He wanted to take it from me and when I would not let him, he clapped me in irons and sent me here to you on a charge of rebellion. It is for that reason that I was thrown into a dungeon.'

'How long have you been there?' asked Mansur.

'The past four years.'

The Caliph immediately had his chains struck off and ordered him to be treated with respect. He was given his liberty and allotted the best quarters. Then Mansur called him back and said:

'O Shaikh, I return your estate to you exempt of taxes for the whole of your lifetime and as long as I shall live. Furthermore, I appoint you governor of Hamadan, your homeland, and I deliver the man that was governor into your hands – he is at your mercy and I authorize you to treat him as you will.'

After thanking the Caliph and offering prayers for his long reign, the old man said:

'O Commander of the Faithful, I accept the estate, but I am not fit for the position of governor which you have offered me. As for the governor, I forgive him.'

Mansur gave him another large sum of money and splendid presents, and, when he took his leave, had him escorted to his country with due honour, after dismissing the governor and punishing him for having set aside the canons of justice and for having stepped off the high road of truth. In addition, he invited the old man to correspond with him and inform him of his state and that of his country and to shed light on the behaviour of his agents, especially as regards matters of war and taxes.

It was on this occasion that he recited these lines:

A man cannot trust Fate for a day,
For fate is both sweet and bitter;

However long their good luck lasts,
All creatures are at the end cut down.

VI:168-175
§§ 2380-2386

(Omitted: VI:176-220; §§ 2387-2430. The revolt and assassination of Abu Muslim and its aftermath; Heretics; Alid revolts and their consequences; Mansur preaches; Amr ibn Ubaid; The death of Abd Allah ibn Ali with his slave girl; Of tyrants.)

THE DEATH OF MANSUR

Mansur was born in the same year that Hajjaj ibn Yusuf died, that is, 95 AH/713 AD. He often used to say:

'I was born in the month of Dhu al-Hijja, I was circumcized in that month and in that month I succeeded to the Caliphate; I believe that in that month I shall die.'

It came to pass just as he predicted.

Fadl ibn al-Rabi' tells the following story:

'I was with Mansur on the journey on which he died. When he reached one of the halting-places along the way, he sent for me. I found him sitting in a domed chamber, his face turned to the wall. He said:

"Didn't I tell you not to let the common people come into these rooms and write ill-omened things?"

"What is it, O Commander of the Faithful?" I asked.

"Don't you see what is written on the wall?:

Abu Ja'far, you are about to die, your years are up;
God's commandment has been revealed.
Abu Ja'far, can a soothsayer or astrologer put off
God's judgement? Or are you steeped in ignorance?"

"By God," I replied, "I see nothing written on the wall. Its surface is clean and white."

"Swear by God!," he said.

"I swear!"

"By God," he continued, "then my soul is warned that she may prepare for her near departure. Let us make haste to reach the sacred places of my Lord and His protection, fleeing my excesses and my sins."

We went on our way, which was very painful for the Caliph. When we reached the Well of Maimun, I said to him: "This is the Well of Maimun. You have entered consecrated ground." He uttered these words:

"God be praised!"

And he died that very day!

THE CHARACTER OF MANSUR

Mansur's prudence, the rectitude of his judgement and the excellence of his policies are beyond all description. He did not avoid the most extravagant generosity when there was something to be had in exchange, but he would refuse the smallest favour if granting it entailed loss. Like Ziyad, he might have said:

'If I had 1,000 camels and one became leprous, I would care for it as if I had only that one alone.'

He left 600,000,000 dirhams and 14,000,000 dinars. This great fortune did not prevent him from being miserly, nor did it prevent him from going into details which even a commoner ignores. Thus, he contracted with his cook that the latter should keep the heads, feet and skins, in exchange for providing the firewood and seasonings.

VI:221-222

§ 2431

(Omitted: VI: 222-223; §§ 2432-2434. Mansur's family; His wives and children enumerated. 'The more interesting anecdotes on Mansur and . . . other figures, together with his conversation and speeches, his life and the actions of his government are told at length with all their most interesting details in our Historical Annals and Intermediate History. Here we give only an outline, while calling the reader's attention to our earlier works. All help comes from God!')

THE CALIPHATE OF MAHDI

Next, allegiance was sworn to Mahdi. His name was Muhammad ibn Abd Allah ibn Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Abd Allah ibn Abbas and he was known as Abu Abd Allah. His mother, Umm Musa, was the daughter of al-Mansur ibn Abd Allah ibn Dhi Sahn ibn Abi Sarh, a descendant of Dhu Ru'ain, one of the kings of Himyar.

The oath of allegiance was given at Mecca, at the instigation of Rabi', his freedman, on Saturday, the 6th of the month of Dhu al-Hijja, 158 AH/775 AD. Another of his freedmen, named Minara, came to tell him of the death of his father and of his accession to the caliphate. Mahdi did not appear for two days after Minara's arrival, then he went up into the *minbar* to announce the death of his father and ask the people for the oath of allegiance.

Mahdi was born in 127 AH/745 AD. In the year 169 AH/785 AD he left Baghdad, the City of Peace, to go to Qarmasin (Kermanshah) in the province of Dinawar, but having heard the climate of Masabadhan in the Sirawan and Jurjan* region praised, he headed for a place called Arzan wa l-Ran* and died in the village of Raddain* on Thursday, the seventh day before the end of Muharram, 169 AH/785 AD, after a reign of ten years, one month and fifteen days. He was forty-three years old – but there is no absolute agreement on that point. The funeral prayers were recited by his son Harun al-Rashid, in the absence of Musa al-Hadi, who was in Jurjan. According to one version of the story, which may be read in our *Intermediate History*, Mahdi died of poison while eating fritters. The young slave Hasana, and other women of his retinue, put on hair cloth and veils of black in token of mourning. It is to this occasion that the following verses of Abu al-Atahiya refer:

Yesterday they walked in silk brocade,
This morning they are clothed in sack-cloth!
Every ram, no matter how long he lives
One day meets the hour of broken horns.
One day you will die, even if you have lived
As long as Noah. So if you must lament
Let it be for your own soul that your tears fall.

VI:224-226

§ 2435

MAHDI AND THE QADI

Fadl ibn al-Rabi' said:

'One day, the qadi Sharik entered the presence of Mahdi, who said to him:

"You must accept one of my three proposals."

"What are they, O Commander of the Faithful?" asked Sharik.

"You must carry out the duties of qadi, or teach the Traditions to my sons and direct their studies, or share my meal."

Sharik considered a little and said:

"The meal is the easiest of the three."

The Caliph detained him and sent orders to the cook to prepare dishes of bone-marrow preserved with rose-flavoured sugar candy, honey and other flavourings. When the meal was over, the superintendent of the kitchen said:

"O Commander of the Faithful, now that he has tasted this dish, the Shaikh will never be happy again."

'And indeed,' went on Fadl ibn al-Rabi', 'from that day, by God, Sharik taught the children of the Caliphs the Traditions and undertook their education, as well as acting as qadi.

The Caliph having given him a draft on the court paymaster, Sharik made difficulties over the amount.

"Oh come on," said the paymaster, "you aren't haggling over a piece of cloth!"

"By God," replied Sharik, "what I have sold for this sum is more precious than cloth; I have sold my faith." *

MAHDI AND THE PEASANT

According to Fadl ibn al-Rabi', the Caliph Mahdi went out hunting one day with his freedman Umar ibn Bazi', who was also a poet. In the course of the hunt, he became separated from his guards and escort. Feeling very hungry, he said to Umar:

'Find me someone who can give us something to eat.'

Umar began looking around and found a peasant who had a vegetable patch beside his little hut. He went in and asked him:

'Do you have anything to eat?'

'Yes,' replied the peasant, 'loaves of barley bread, some sardines, these vegetables you see here and a few leeks.'

'If you had a little oil to go with it,' said Mahdi, 'it would be perfect.'

'I do have just a little left,' the peasant answered.

He served them what he had and they ate with hearty appetites. Indeed, Mahdi enjoyed the food so much that he ate up every scrap. Then he said to Umar:

'Compose some verses for the occasion,' and the poet improvised the following:

'He who serves us sardines with oil
And barley bread with leeks
Deserves a cuff for his bad manners
Or two – or even three!'

'By God, what an unpleasant thing to say!' cried Mahdi. 'Better to have made it:

Deserves a purse for his good manners
Or two – or even three!'

At that very moment the Caliph's guards, baggage train, eunuchs and money arrived and he had three purses of dirhams given to the owner of the vegetable patch.

MAHDI AND THE BEDOUIN

Another time, when Mahdi was out hunting, his horse strayed and he found himself, very hungry, near the tent of a Bedouin.

‘O Bedouin,’ he said, ‘can you offer me a meal? I rely on your hospitality.’

The Bedouin replied:

‘You seem to me to be of goodly appearance, well fed and sturdy – however, if you can make do with what there is, we will give it to you.’

‘Bring what you have,’ answered Mahdi.

First, the Bedouin brought him bread cooked in the ashes. The Caliph ate it and said: ‘It’s good; bring the next course!’

His host brought in a skin full of sour milk, which he gave him to drink.

‘Delicious!’ said Mahdi. Bring the next course!’

The man brought out a little wine in a leather bag. After taking a drink, he passed it to Mahdi, who drank in his turn and said:

‘Do you know who I am?’

‘No, by God,’ replied the Bedouin.

‘I am one of the court eunuchs.’

‘May God bless your employment and prolong your days, whoever you may be!’

Then he drank another bowl of wine and offered one to his guest, who drank a second time and said:

‘Do you know who I am?’

‘Yes,’ answered the Bedouin, ‘you have just mentioned that you are one of the court eunuchs.’

‘Well, that’s not true,’ pursued Mahdi.

‘So, who are you?’ enquired the Bedouin.

‘I am one of Mahdi’s generals.’

The Bedouin congratulated him, saying:

‘May your halls be spacious and your resting place fragrant!’

Then the Bedouin drank another bowl and passed one to his guest, who drank a third time and said:

‘O Bedouin, do you know who I am?’

‘Yes, I do know,’ answered the Bedouin, ‘you claim to be one of Mahdi’s generals.’

‘No,’ came the reply, ‘I am the Commander of the Faithful himself!’

At these words, the Bedouin took up his wine skin and tied it shut.

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‘Pour me another drink!’ said Mahdi.

‘No, by God,’ cried the Bedouin, ‘you are not going to drink one more mouthful!’

‘But why?’ asked Mahdi.

‘Because at the first cupful you announced that you were a court eunuch. I let that go. At the second, you gave yourself out to be one of the Caliph’s generals. I put up with that, too. But now, at the third drink, you claim to be the Commander of the Faithful. By God, if I pour you a fourth, I am afraid you will say, “I am the Messenger of God!”’

Mahdi was still laughing at this outburst when his retinue rode up to the tent. At the sight of all these great men and sons of kings dismounting before his guest, the Bedouin’s heart failed and he thought only of saving himself. He made off, but they brought him back to the Caliph who reassured him and had him given a large sum of money, clothes, weapons and all sorts of goods. The Bedouin then said to him:

‘Now I swear that you are a truthful man. If at the fourth and fifth drinks you had made other preposterous claims*, you would probably have found some way of wriggling out of them too!’

When the Bedouin mentioned a fourth and fifth drink, Mahdi laughed so much he almost fell off his horse. He enrolled the Bedouin in his personal service and gave him a stipend.

VI:229-231
§§ 2438-2439

(Omitted: VI:231-232; § 2440. Mahdi’s vizier, Abu Ubaid Allah Mu‘awiya.)

MAHDI AND THE TREASURER

Mahdi won the love of both the upper classes and the people by the acts with which he began his reign. He himself righted wrongs, spared lives and granted amnesties to those who feared punishment. Lastly, he dealt out justice to the oppressed and opened his hands wide in giving gifts of money. In this way, he spent the inheritance that had come to him from Mansur and which amounted to 600 million dirhams and 14 million dinars, not counting the taxes he levied during his own reign. When the treasury was exhausted, Abu Haritha al-Nahdi, the chief treasurer of the state, came and threw the keys of the treasury down in front of him, crying:

‘What good are keys when the chests are empty?’

The Caliph sent out twenty eunuchs to press for immediate payment of taxes. After a few days, money began to flow into the treasury. Abu Haritha, completely taken up with his receipts and auditing, did not appear before the Caliph for three entire days. When he again appeared before him, Mahdi asked him:

‘What delayed you?’

‘Work; counting the money,’ replied the treasurer.

‘You are nothing but a stupid Bedouin!’ the Caliph told him. ‘Did you really think that money wouldn’t come to us if we needed it?’

Abu Haritha answered:

‘Something unexpected could come up so suddenly that you had time neither to levy the taxes nor to collect them.’

They say that, in ten days, Mahdi distributed 10 million dirhams out of his capital. After this act of generosity, Shabba ibn Iqal, in an address delivered before the Caliph, spoke thus:

‘Mahdi can be compared to many things, among them the shining moon, the full flower of spring, the prowling lion and the raging sea. The shining moon resembles him in its beauty and lustre; the nascent spring in its sweetness and scent; the prowling lion by its mettle and fire and the echoing sea with its waves remind us of his generosity and bounty.’

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

Khaizuran, the mother of Hadi and Rashid, was sitting one day in her palace – today known as the palace of Ashnas – among the mothers of the Caliph’s children and the young women of the House of Hashim. Khaizuran reclined on an Armenian carpet and the princesses on Armenian cushions. In the place of honour sat Zainab, the daughter of Sulaiman ibn Ali. An eunuch entered and said:

‘At the door there is a woman of great beauty, but dressed in a tattered garment. She refuses to give her name to any but you and demands to be admitted.’

Mahdi had recommended to Khaizuran that she should be much in the company of Zainab:

‘Take advantage,’ he said, ‘of the lessons instilled by her manners and morals, for she is a venerable matron of our House and she knew the founders of our dynasty.’

Khaizuran told the eunuch:

‘Show her in!’

A woman appeared, stately and beautiful, but dressed in a torn robe. When she spoke, her turns of phrase were most graceful.

‘Who are you?’ the women asked.

‘I am Muzna, the wife of Marwan ibn Muhammad. See to what a sad condition I have been brought by fate. By God, even this tattered robe I wear is little better than nakedness. Now that you are in power, and power has abandoned us, I am afraid that living among the common people in this wretched state I may be subjected to violence in some dishonouring form. I have therefore come to put myself under your protection in order to live somehow until the day when He who summons all creatures shall summon me.’

Khaizuran’s eyes filled with tears, but Zainab turned to the stranger and said:

‘Muzna, may God never relieve your misery! Do you remember the day that I stood before you at Harran? You were sitting on this very carpet, with the women of your family all about you, there, on those same cushions. I had come to beg you for the body of the Imam Ibrahim and you refused me and had me turned out, saying:

“It is not for women to meddle in the affairs of men!”

Indeed, Marwan was more considerate than you, for when I saw him he swore that he was not the murderer of Ibrahim. He was lying, of course, but neverthe-

less he offered either to give me back the body or to arrange for its burial and I accepted the first of his proposals. He even offered me money, which I refused.'

Muzna answered her:

'In truth, I think fortune has placed me where I stand today solely to requite the wrong I did you then. But one would say that you approved, since you are inciting her Highness to behave like me. Rather, it should be your duty to persuade the Queen to perform a virtuous deed and turn her from cruel retaliation, for it is thus that you will ensure her happiness and strengthen her piety.'

And then she added, addressing Zainab:

'What do you think, my dear cousin, of the punishment inflicted by God for my harshness? And yet you refuse to help me in my need!'

Then she went away, weeping.

Khaizuran did not want to contradict Zainab openly and so she signed to one of her slave girls to take the stranger to some secluded room in her apartments. Unknown to Zainab, this was done and the Queen had new clothes given to Muzna and heaped kindnesses upon her.

When Mahdi arrived, after Zainab's departure – for it was his custom to join the favourites of his harem each evening – Khaizuran told him the whole story and explained how she had ordered care to be taken of the stranger. The Caliph called the slave girl who had been entrusted with conducting Muzna to her quarters and asked:

'When you took her to her room, did you hear what she said?'

'My lord,' answered the girl, 'I caught up with her in such-and-such a corridor. She was in tears and in despair at having been sent away and she was reciting this verse from the Koran: "God offers you the parable of the village which was living in peace and security, with ample food from all sides. But it did not recognize God's mercies and God has clothed it in the robes of fear and famine as a punishment for what its people did." (Koran 16:112)

The Caliph turned to Khaizuran and said to her:

'By God! If you had not acted as you did, I would never have spoken to you again in all my life!'

And he wept many tears, adding:

'Lord, preserve us from the loss of Your grace!'

He disapproved of Zainab's behaviour and said:

'If she were not the oldest of our line, I swear that I would never speak to her again.'

Then he sent a slave to the apartments which had been allotted to the widow of Marwan and gave the following instructions:

'Greet her and say from me: "My cousin, your sisters are all with me – if I were not afraid of distressing you, I would come to you myself."'

When Muzna received this message, she understood Mahdi's intention. Zainab had just arrived. Muzna appeared, trailing her robes like a queen. Mahdi greeted her kindly, invited her to sit by him and gave her a place above that of Zainab.

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Conversation fell on men and matters of the past times and on political changes of fortune and Muzna let no one have the last word. Indeed, Mahdi ended by saying:

‘My cousin, truly, if I were not so loath to associate the family to which you belong in any way with our affairs, I would marry you. As it is, your best safeguard is to remain here under my protection and to live in my palace among your sisters. All they have shall be yours, until that day when the sentence of He who commands all nature shall be executed.’

Consequently, he gave her a settlement, like his other women and assigned her a pension and privileges and servants just like theirs.

Muzna lived in the palace until the death of Mahdi, during the reign of Hadi and until the beginning of the reign of Harun al-Rashid. She died in the time of this Caliph, who made no distinction between her and the Hashimite women, nor any of his favourites, slave or free. At her death, Rashid and all the harem mourned.

VI:234-240
§§ 2443-2446

(Omitted: VI:240; § 2447. Abd Allah ibn Amr ibn Utba consoles Mahdi on the death of Mansur.)

UNREQUITED LOVE

Some historians and story-tellers say that when the poet Abu al-Atahiya fell violently in love with Utba, one of Khaizuran's slaves, the girl complained to her mistress of the unwelcome notoriety his love was causing, which she felt was bringing her into dishonour. Mahdi found her in tears at her mistress's side, questioned her and learned the cause of her grief. He summoned Abu al-Atahiya, who was brought to him. Mahdi, addressing the poet, who was standing before him, said:

'You are the author of these lines on Utba:

May God judge between me and my mistress,
Since she shows me nothing but rejection and contempt.

Did Utba ever grant you her favours and so give you the right to complain of her rejection?'

'My Lord,' answered Abu al-Atahiya, 'I didn't say that. Here are the verses I wrote:

O camel, carry me swiftly!*

Do not flag, or be tempted to rest.
Carry me to a king to whom
God has granted the gift of miracles.
When the wind rises, the king says:
"Wind, have you had your share
Of my gifts?" His head
Bears a double crown:
A crown of beauty
And a crown of humility.'

Mahdi sat for some time looking at the ground, which he kept scratching with the staff which he was holding in his hand. Then he lifted his head and continued:

'You also said:

What does my mistress think
When she flirts? Does she know
How hard it is to bear

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Her coquettishness?
Among the slaves of kings
Is a young girl who hides
Beauty itself under her chemise.

And how do you know what she has got under her dress?' asked the Caliph.
Abu al-Atahiya then made the Commander of the Faithful himself the subject of his verse, seeking to change the subject:

'The caliphate came to him,
Submissive, trailing her
Skirts majestically.
She was fit only for him,
And he was made for her!'

But as the Caliph went on with the interrogation, Abu al-Atahiya's answers became less ready and in the end he was ordered to atone for his boldness by being beaten. He had just suffered this penalty* and was in a most pitiable state when Utba met him. The poet reproached her as follows:

'Bravo! Excellent! For your sake the Caliph has shed the blood of a dying man!'
Tears began to well up in Utba's eyes. Sobbing and crying she ran to Khaizuran, her mistress, and there met the Caliph. He asked:

'Why is Utba crying?'

She told him that she had just seen the poet whipped. The Caliph made comforting noises and then had 50,000 dirhams sent to the poet. Abu al-Atahiya immediately distributed them to everyone he met at the door of the palace. Mahdi, told of this act of generosity, sent him a message, saying:

'What led you to give away the money I gave you?'

The poet replied:

'I would not have wanted to profit from my love.'

Mahdi sent him another 50,000 dirhams, but made him swear that he would not scatter them around as largess, too. The poet took them and withdrew.

According to Mubarrad, Abu al-Atahiya gave Mahdi, either at the New Year or at Mihrijan, the festival of the autumn equinox, a jar which contained a length of cloth scented with musk. On it were written these lines:

My soul craves one of the good things of the world;
The fulfilment of its longing depends on God,
And Mahdi, God's vicar on earth.
I despair of obtaining my desire,
But the disdain in which you hold the world
And all that it contains
Gives me some reason to hope.

The Caliph was thinking of giving him Utba when the girl said:

‘O Commander of the Faithful, would you, in spite of my wishes and in contempt of my rights and the good service I have given you, hand me over to a pot vendor, a man who writes verses for money?’

Mahdi sent word to the poet:

‘As to Utba, there is no way you can have her, but I have filled the jar you sent with money.’

Utba happened to pass by and she saw her poet arguing with the secretaries, saying:

‘The money should be paid in dinars!’

They replied:

‘No. Dirhams.’

‘If you really loved Utba,’ she said to him, ‘you would not be thinking of the difference between gold and silver!’

VI:240-245
§§ 2448-2451

(Omitted: VI:246-249; §§2452-2457. More anecdotes about Abu al-Atahiya and Utba; Several poems by Abu al-Atahiya.)

AN AMUSING STORY ABOUT THE KING OF HIRA

Abu al-Qasim Ja'far ibn Muhammad ibn Hamdan al-Mawsili, the jurisconsult, tells the following anecdote, related by Ibn Ayyash and Ibn Da'b.

'When Mansur left his son Mahdi at Rayy as governor, he set at his side Sharqi ibn al-Qutami to teach him of the "Days" – or Battles – "of the Arabs", their fine traits of character, their history and their poems. One evening, Mahdi said:

"Sharqi, entertain me with some amusing story."

"I obey, O prince, may God protect you!" replied Sharqi. "They say that a certain king of Hira had two courtiers whom he loved as he loved himself. They never left him, whether at his pleasures, sleeping or waking, in his palace or on his travels. He never made a decision without consulting them. They lived thus for a long time, but, one evening, the king, while drinking and enjoying himself, yielded to the effects of the wine, which had clouded his reason, called for his sword, drew it from its sheath and, hurling himself on his two friends, killed them. Then, overcome with drowsiness, he fell asleep.

The following morning, when he asked after them, he was told what he had done. He threw himself face down on the earth, biting it in his grief, and weeping for his friends and lamenting their loss. He would eat nothing and swore that for the rest of his life he would refrain from the drink which had robbed him of his reason. Then he had them buried and erected two pillars over the two tombs, which he called *al-Gharyan* – The Two Fair Effigies. He ordered, furthermore, that no one should pass before this monument without prostrating himself.

Now, every custom established by a king of this country was handed down and kept alive in the memory of his subjects and could not be abolished, but became an invariable law and a rule rigorously obeyed and taught by fathers to their children. This king's will was long respected. None of his subjects, no matter what their condition, would ever pass before the two pillars without prostrating themselves and this usage became for them like a religious rite which they observed most strictly. The king had in any case ordained that whosoever should refuse to conform would be punished by death, after having made two wishes, which would be granted him, whatever they were.

One day, a fuller went by carrying on his back a packet of cloth and his mallet. The guardians of the tombs cried out:

'Kneel!'

He refused.

An Amusing Story about the King of Hira

‘You will be put to death if you don’t!’ they said.

The fuller kept on refusing, so they took him before the king and told him the whole story.

‘Why did you refuse to prostrate yourself?’ asked the king.

‘I did prostrate myself,’ said the fuller, ‘but your guardians have lied to you.’

‘It is you who are lying,’ replied the king. ‘Make your two wishes. They will be granted and then you will die.’

‘Then nothing can save me from being put to death on the say-so of these people?’ enquired the fuller.

‘Nothing.’

‘Well,’ said the fuller, ‘here is my wish – I want to strike a great blow with this mallet on the king’s neck.’

‘Imbecile!’ said the king, ‘you would do much better to entrust me with enriching those whom you leave behind.’

‘No,’ said the fuller, ‘the only thing I want is to hit the king on the nape of the neck.’

The king addressed his ministers:

‘What do you think of this idiot’s wish?’ he asked.

‘It was you who instituted this custom,’ they answered, ‘and you know better than anyone that the breaking of a custom brings shame and perdition; it is a sin which leads to damnation. In any case, after violating one law, you will break a second, then a third; your successors will do as much and all our laws will be invalidated.’

The king proceeded:

‘Beseech this man to ask for whatever he likes as long as he spares me. I am willing to fulfill his every wish, even if he should go so far as to demand half my kingdom.’

In vain they beseeched the fuller to change his mind, but he declared:

‘I want nothing but to hit the king on the neck.’

The king, seeing that this resolution could not be shaken, held a public audience. The fuller was brought. He took his mallet and hit the king on the neck so hard that he knocked him from his throne and felled him to the ground, where he lay unconscious. For six months the king was so desperately ill that he could only drink water a drop at a time. At last he recovered, could speak again and eat and drink. He asked for news of the fuller and was told that he was still in prison. He had him brought before him and said:

‘You still have a wish. Decide, so that I can order your death at once, as the law requires.’

‘Since I absolutely have to die,’ said the fuller, ‘I ask to hit you again, on the other side of the neck.’

At these words the king fell on his face from fear, crying out:

‘Then I am a dead man!’

At last he said to the fuller:

‘Wretch, give over demanding something which can do you no good. What did