

# **THE HISTORY OF THE CALIPH VATHEK**

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The History of the Caliph Vathek by William Beckford

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**WILLIAM BECKFORD**

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BY  
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## INTRODUCTION.

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WILLIAM BECKFORD, born in 1759, the year before the accession of King George the Third, was the son of an Alderman who became twice Lord Mayor of London. His family, originally of Gloucestershire, had thriven by the plantations in Jamaica; and his father, sent to school in England, and forming a school friendship at Westminster with Lord Mansfield, began the world in this country as a merchant, with inheritance of an enormous West India fortune. William Beckford the elder became Magistrate, Member of Parliament, Alderman. Four years before the birth of William Beckford the younger he became one of the Sheriffs of London, and three years after his son's birth he was Lord Mayor.

As Mayor he gave very sumptuous dinners that made epochs in the lives of feeding men. His son's famous "History of the Caliph Vathek" looks as if it had been planned for an Alderman's dream after a very heavy dinner at the Mansion House. There is devotion in it to the senses, emphasis on heavy dining. Vathek piqued himself on being the greatest eater alive; but when the Indian dined with him, though the tables were thirty times covered, there was still want of more food for the voracious guest. There is thirst: for at one part of the dream, when Vathek's mother, his wives, and some eunuchs "assiduously employed themselves in filling bowls of rock crystal, and emulously presented them to him, it frequently happened that his avidity exceeded their zeal, insomuch that he would prostrate himself upon the ground to lap up the water, of which he could never have enough." And the nightmare incidents of the Arabian tale



all culminate in a most terrible heartburn. Could the conception of *Vathek* have first come to the son after a City dinner ?

Though a magnificent host, the elder Beckford was no glutton. In the year of his first Mayoralty, 1763, Beckford stood by the side of Alderman Wilkes, attacked for his No. 45 of *The North Briton*. As champion of the popular cause, when he had been again elected to the Mayoralty, Beckford, on the 23rd of May, 1770, went up to King George the Third at the head of the Aldermen and Livery with an address which the king snubbed with a short answer. Beckford asked leave to reply, and before His Majesty recovered breath from his astonishment, proceeded to reply in words that remain graven in gold upon his monument in Guildhall. Young Beckford, the author of "*Vathek*," was then a boy not quite eleven years old, an only son ; and he was left three years afterwards, by his father's death, heir to an income of

a hundred thousand a year, with a million of cash in hand.

During his minority young Beckford's mother, who was a grand-daughter of the sixth Earl of Abercorn, placed him under a private tutor. He was taught music by Mozart; and the Earl of Chatham, who had been his father's friend, thought him so fanciful a boy—"all air and fire"—that he advised his mother to keep the *Arabian Nights* out of his way. Happily she could not, for *Vathek* adds the thousand and second to the thousand and one tales, with the difference that it joins to wild inventions in the spirit of the East touches of playful extravagance that could come only from an English humourist who sometimes laughed at his own tale, and did not mind turning its comic side to the reader. The younger William Beckford had been born at his father's seat in Wiltshire, Fonthill Abbey; and at seventeen amused himself with a caricature "History of

Extraordinary Painters," encouraging the house-keeper of Fonthill to show the pictures to visitors as works of Og of Basan and other worthies in her usual edifying manner.

Young Beckford's education was continued for a year and a half at Geneva. He then travelled in Italy and the Low Countries, and it was at this time that he amused himself by writing, at the age of about twenty-two, "Vathek" in French, at a single sitting; but he gave his mind to it, and the sitting lasted three days and two nights. An English version of it was made by a stranger, and published without permission in 1784. Beckford himself published his tale at Paris and Lausanne in 1787, one year after the death of a wife to whom he had been three years married, and who left him with two daughters.

Beckford went to Portugal and Spain; returned to France, and was present at the storming of the Bastille. He was often abroad; he bought Gibbon's