

abdul and the caliph.

POnce upon a time there lived in Baghdad a poor man called Abdul who eked out a meagre subsistence begging in the streets. He was a particularly persistent and pesky beggar; people threw coins at him not out of charity but simply to get rid of him.

Through the long years he managed to scrape up a few shekels with which he hoped one day to be able to purchase the favors of a high priced harlot. The hope of that one heavenly night as he imagined it was all he had and each evening he revelled in anticipation of the delights to come as he counted his growing hoard.

One day, on returning to his hovel, Abdul saw a man leaving it stealthily with a bag in his hand. "Stop thief!" Abdul shrieked, and took after the man. Fortunately for him, the crime had been witnessed by another beggar who jumped out in the thief's path. In the scuffle that ensued, the two beggars overwhelmed the thief just as a guard attracted by the commotion appeared. Seeing two beggars about to snatch a bag from a man on the ground the guard quickly summoned help and took all three before the Caliph to the accompaniment of Abdul's outraged protestations.

"O great Caliph," cried Abdul in great agitation as soon as the Caliph entered the courtroom, "This is a most abominable abuse of the law! This man stole my money and I am dragged here as if I were the thief. I demand a lawful trial!"

"Very well," said the Caliph, "let the process of law take its course. Who can testify that this money is truly yours?"

"I can," said the other beggar, "I saw this man take it from his house."

"How can I be certain that you did not steal that money yourself?" the Caliph asked, "You have no lawful employment, Abdul, no legal means for acquiring such a sum."

"I beg in the streets, O Caliph," Abdul explained exasperated, "and by putting a little away each day I have accumulated this money over a long time."

"As you surely know, Abdul," the Caliph said coldly, "begging is unlawful in Baghdad. I believe the sum in question here will about cover the fine

prescribed by law for begging."

"O great Caliph!" Abdul cried in horror, "Surely such law is unjust! Great just Caliph, I pray you, consider my plight: I could not find work! I must starve or starve. Is it justice, Caliph, to condemn a man to starve because no one will employ him? The law is blind to human suffering. O great Caliph, I pray for justice."

"Let justice be done, then," said the Caliph. "Tell me, Abdul, why has no one seen fit to employ you? Is it not because you are lazy, irresponsible, and undependable?"

"Great Caliph, this is a harsh judgement," Abdul mumbled in great consternation and fear, "surely it is not entirely my fault..."

"You are a useless parasite, Abdul," the Caliph said sternly, "You have given nothing to others and you deserve nothing in return. This money, accordingly, will be justly taken away from you and given to someone more deserving."

"Mercy!" Abdul cried in desperation throwing himself at the feet of the Caliph. "It's true that I am nothing, but I still have feelings and desires. O merciful Caliph, take pity on this poor man who has lost everything he ever had. Temper your justice with mercy!"

"It will be as you wish. I shall be merciful," said the Caliph patiently. Then he asked, "Abdul, have you eaten today?"

"Yes, but..." Abdul stammered, taken aback by the unexpected question.

"In fact," said the Caliph, "since you have even been able to put away a little money each day you must be obviously making enough to feed yourself every day. But this man who stole your money has not eaten in two days and he has a wife and three children who are also sick and dying of starvation. The plight of this desperate man touches my hearts, Abdul, and in my mercy I am going to permit him to keep the bag of money he stole from you. This is my final and merciful judgement." With this the Caliph got up and left the courtroom and all present, except for miserable Abdul, marvelled at the legality, justice, and mercy of this judgement.

SWPW