THE CLASSICAL ARABIC DETECTIVE*

BY

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DETECTIVE fiction, which has long entertained readers, has also spawned a rapidly growing critical literature of its own. The questions addressed include the paternity of the detective genre, the nature of the characters exploited in detective fiction, and the implications of that literature, social or otherwise. This study will address itself to the detective figure in medieval Arabic literature, specifically as he appears in that branch of prose texts referred to as *adab* texts, texts composed predominantly of anecdotes and whose dual aim was to entertain and to educate. As part of our investigation, we shall examine the nature of the character of the detective, and its implications. The investigation will lead us to compare the figure of the detective in the East with that of his counterpart in the West.

*Al-Mu'tadid, Detective.*

Nowhere are the qualities of the detective more clearly present than in the character of the ninth-century caliph, al-Mu'tadid bil-Lāh. The first case we shall outline is one I should like to call «The Case of the Painted Hand.»

One of the servants of this celebrated caliph came to him one day and told him that he had been standing on the banks of the Tigris River, when he saw a fisherman cast his net. When the fisherman felt something in the net, he pulled it in and took it out of the water, and, lo and behold, it contained a leather bag. So the servant gave the fisherman money for his catch and took the bag, opened it, and discovered that it held some bricks and between the bricks was a human hand, dyed with henna. These objects he brought to al-Mu'tadid, who was horrified. He told the servant to go and tell the

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fisherman to cast his net once again «above, below, and around the same area.» This the fisherman did and he brought out another leather bag in which was a foot. The operation was repeated but nothing else emerged. Al-Mu'tadid was grieved by this and he exclaimed: «There is someone in this country who, without my knowledge, kills a person, cuts off his limbs, and scatters them? That is not sovereignty!» He did not eat for the entire day and on the morrow, he called one of his trustworthy agents, gave him the empty leather bag, and told him to go around to the bag makers in Baghdad, and if one of them recognized this bag, to ask him to whom he had sold it. Then he was to go to the buyer and to see, in turn, who had bought it from him. The man was to follow these directions without telling anyone.

After three days, the agent returned and explained what he had done. He had asked the tanners and the bag makers until he found out the manufacturer and then had asked about him. The manufacturer said that he had sold the bag to a perfumer in such and such a market. Al-Mu'tadid's agent then went to the perfumer and showed him the leather bag. The perfumer wondered how that particular item had fallen into the hands of the caliph's agent. The agent asked him if he knew the item, to which the perfumer revealed that, indeed, a certain Hashemite, three days earlier, had had ten of these bags purchased for him, the perfumer ignoring why he had bought them. The agent then asked who this Hashemite was, to which he was told that he was a descendant of 'Ali ibn Rayta, that he was a huge man, and that he had a reputation for being the most evil and unjust of men, as well as being the most immoral vis-à-vis women. No one had informed al-Mu'tadid about him for fear of his evil doings. And the perfumer continued relating unfavorable stories about this man to al-Mu'tadid's agent until he finally mentioned that this evil character had several years ago become enamored of a certain singing slave girl. Her beauty was extraordinary, as was her singing. So he bargained with her owner over her but she would have nothing to do with him. But a few days ago, the Hashemite heard that the slave's owner wanted to sell her to a buyer, who had offered thousands of dinars for her. So the Hashemite went to the owner and told her that the least she could do was to send the slave girl to him to say her farewells. So after the Hashemite paid to rent the slave girl for three days, the owner left her in his custody. After the three days had passed, the