

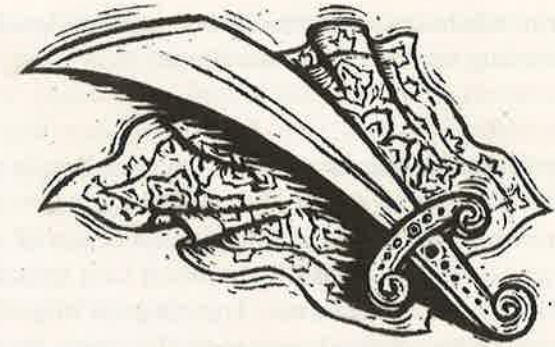
language of the animals? I would give up my place among the ladies of this palace just to hear one more story. Won't you tell me one last story, Shahrazad?

'No, little sister. It is time now. My dear husband the King has many things to do today; I must not keep him waiting. It is a pity, for tonight I would have told you the story of . . . No matter.'

King Shahryar overheard their words. He remembered in his heart how the black tent of night flapped around him when he was alone in the dark.

But he said: 'You have some of the wisdom of your father, Shahrazad. My days are busy. My courtiers are waiting. No worthless wife must delay court business, and surely every second that passes makes it likely that your life will outlast your love for me. Woman's love is as long as the hairs on a chicken's egg. You can do only one more thing to please me: give up your head. I can see the swordsman from this window. Hurry down to him, and I will watch from here.'

In the courtyard, the stones underfoot were already hot. Shahrazad bowed to the ground before the King's window and then she coiled up her hair and bowed low before the King's swordsman.



CHAPTER TWO

*The Voyage of
Sinbad the Sailor*

IN his heart, King Shahryar pictured the nights of his childhood when his mother told him tales from beyond the furthestmost borders of Araby.

'One word, Shahrazad,' he called from his window. 'What story were you going to tell to Duniyazad tonight?'

'The story of Sinbad the Sailor, dear husband,' said Shahrazad as the swordsman placed his foot on her back. 'An adventure drawn up from the liquid mountains of the sea where there are as many wonderful beasts and fabulous islands as there are trees in a forest.'

'Shahrazad, I have it in my heart to hear the story. But I have affairs of state to attend to. You will tell it to me tonight. Swordsman, come back tomorrow at the very same time.'

Just as the tent of night began to flap around King Shahryar's heart and set the candles in his eyes trembling

with fear, Shahrazad came to his bed and lay down beside him. Leaning on one elbow, she began:

A story is carried from Baghdad—though who can tell if it is true?—of a young man called Sinbad the Porter. Sinbad was known at all the local inns for his beautiful singing voice, and he would often sing in return for a coin or a bite to eat. He was summoned one day to a great house built of white and wine-coloured marble on the skirts of the city. An old man was sitting on the vine-covered terrace, and asked him to sing—which he willingly did:

*Oh I have carried golden treasure
Half across Arabia's sands,
And I have seen the cost of pleasure
Pouring out of rich men's hands.
But do not think of me as rich, sir,
Because I carry treasure chests,
For I count myself much richer
When I lay them down and rest.
I am just a poor young porter—
All my meat is caught from rivers,
All the wines I drink are water—
All I carry, I deliver.*

The song pleased the old man, and he took a great liking to the porter.

'The pleasure a good song gives can't be paid for with money alone,' said the old man. 'Let me give you something of mine. I shall give you the story of my life, which is moderately interesting. My name is Sinbad too. But I am Sinbad the Sailor.'

I was born the son of a rich father who died and left me a lot of money. Being a particularly clever boy, I made the sensible decision to invest the money. I invested it in drink and expensive food and stylish clothes and in buying myself a lot of friends at the local inn. Before long I found that my investment had left me with hardly a penny. To tell you the truth, I did not want to be poor in my old age.

So I sold everything I owned and bought instead a silk-sailed ship and cargo. I employed a captain, and we set sail for the rest of the world, turning a furrow through the sea as straight and certain as an arrow through a blue sky. I was confident of making my fortune as a merchant.

One day a solitary island came into view from the mast top—two or three trees and a smooth, grey beach the colour of the atolls in the great Western Ocean.

Some of the sailors were tired of the blood swilling in their veins with the motion of the ship, and we took it into our heads to draw alongside the island and walk about on dry land. The captain was sleeping below decks. We did not trouble to wake him: a friendly fire, a baked fish, a short walk, and we would be ready to set off again. Two of the men even brought a laundry barrel from the ship to do their washing in.

Ali lit a fire, and I made a tour of the island, but there was not a lot to recommend it. We were just deciding that no one could live there, without fresh water, when suddenly Abdul caught sight of a fountain—a geyser, rather—at a great distance from us. Its water gushed higher and higher, seemingly to the height of a castle tower, then dropped out of sight.

'I have been aboard ship for too long—the ground still seems to be moving,' I said, embarrassed by losing my

balance and falling over. Then the captain's voice drifted to us on the wind.

'Aboard! Aboard! Or you are all dead men!'

'The island is sinking!' someone cried.

'The island is moving!' shouted another.

A deep roaring beneath us was followed by a second eruption of water from the geyser. It spouted so high that the spray reached us on the wind and soaked us to the skin in a second.

Amidst the spray, I could just see the captain giving orders for the ship to pull away. The space of water opened between our landing-party and the vessel. Some men ran to the water and leapt in. Others shouted at the captain, calling him names or begging him to pull ashore again. Only one or two of his words reached us across the opening gap.

'Whale! . . . Fire has woken the whale . . .'

Well may you hold your head in wonder, friend. We had indeed moored alongside a giant whale, and the fire we had lit on its back had disturbed it out of a sleep centuries long. The sandy silt of the ocean had washed over the whale, and the winds had brought seeds and spores and planted its sparse vegetation. But as it rolled in pain, our fire beginning to burn through its hide (and making an awful stench), the shallow-rooted trees were washed away like toothpicks, and the sand swirled round our knees as we stumbled to and fro. The whale dived.

One sailor was thrown high out of the water by the massive tail—believe me, friend, those tail-flukes were larger than galleon sails—and the tail fell on us like the greatest tree in all the gum forests of Arabia.

To the end of my days I shall weary Allah with my thanks. The barrel full of my fellow sailors' washing rolled

towards me across the water. I pulled myself across it and floated away, while my sailor friends swam down with the whale to the kingdom where only the fish can breathe. Friend, friend, it makes me sweat salt-water only to think about it.

The ship had long since gone. I was alone on the ocean with the smell of scorched whale in my nostrils. I began to paddle with my feet, and my lonely voyage, as you can imagine, was so long and tiring that I do not remember reaching land.

I woke up beside my barrel on a white beach to find, to my great surprise, that I was alive. I also found that the fish had eaten many holes in my feet, and only with pain and difficulty did I climb the beach and explore.

I saw no one, friend, and nothing. Under the trees the undergrowth was thick—a perfect home for wild animals. Why else did I climb that tree? But from the topmost branches I could see a long, long way.

I saw no one, friend, and nothing. In another direction, however, I glimpsed a shining white dome. Surely it was a fine mosque at the heart of a splendid city. Its white curve seemed so massive that I was almost afraid to approach.

When I finally reached it, I walked around it five times before I gave up hope of finding a door. Its whiteness was dazzling in the sun. I tried to climb up it, but the white surface was so polished and smooth that I slithered down to the ground again every time. I exhausted myself in the mid-day heat, and that is why I was sitting on the ground in the shade of the white dome when the sun went dark.

I have seen tropical suns set like a single clap of hands. I have seen the moon forget its rightful place and push in front of the sun. But this was no eclipse or sunset.

Looking up, I saw that the sun had been blotted out by the shape of a gigantic bird. Its claws were as large as the tusks of elephants, one toe the thickness of a tree-trunk. Its wings were as huge as my terror, and its feathers as black as my miserable fate. For now I realized that the white dome I was sitting under was nothing other than the bird's unhatched egg. And as slowly and certainly as a ship on a whirlpool is sucked circling down, the huge bird was wheeling down towards me.

'Why have you stopped?' said King Shahryar.

'Oh, my dear husband,' Shahrazad replied, 'I am surely the most worthless of wives, for I have wearied you all night with my story-telling, and already it is dawn. Your swordsman is waiting for me in the courtyard. I can hear him sharpening his sword.'

'But what became of Sinbad the Sailor?' Shahryar demanded. 'How did he escape being eaten by the bird?'

'Ah, dear husband, the things that happened to Sinbad are so strange and so many that I could spend another night in telling you his story . . .'

So King Shahryar rose and went to the window and leaned out.

'Come back tomorrow, swordsman, at the very same time. And you, Shahrazad,' he said, turning to his wife, 'you must return this evening to finish the story.'

'To hear you is to obey,' Shahrazad replied.

