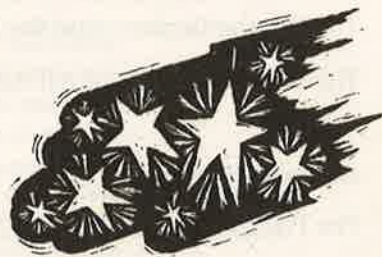


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CHAPTER ONE

The Marriage of Shahrazad

Stories are carried from the desert kingdoms of India and Persia and Arabia—but who can tell if they are true?—of the twin kingdoms of Sasan and Samarkand al-Ajam. Their rulers were brothers: the tall and glorious King Shahryar and his smaller brother King Shahzaman. The foundations of their cities and palaces were not moved by the shifting ocean of Arabian sand. Their domes and minarets on a horizon were as beautiful in the eyes of desert travellers as foaming water or banked rain clouds.

Just as his cities were wonderful to the eyes, so the young Shahryar was wonderful in the eyes of his people, for he ruled wisely and generously. The heart of Shahryar was lovely, for he took pleasure in the life that Allah gave him. Above all, Shahryar took pleasure in his wife—a lady as lovely as the moon reflected in lily pools. Only the queen of King Shahzaman, his brother, equalled her in beauty.

One morning King Shahryar took it into his heart to visit his brother in the kingdom of Samarkand al-Ajam

and called for camels to be mustered and loaded with presents. Bales of damask cloth, flasks of attar of roses, and panniers filled with oriental spices were heaped across the camels until their legs bent like an archer's bow. In the inner chamber of his palace, King Shahryar kissed his lovely wife goodbye and, of course, veiled her face so that no other man but the King should accidentally glimpse her beauty.

The streets of the royal city of Sasan were filled with fragrance as the caravan wound its way from the palace to the eastern gates. Just as they were leaving the city, King Shahryar remembered the small personal gift of red sulphur he had laid ready in his bedroom, intending to carry it to King Shahzaman. He hurried back to his palace alone and climbed the stairs, his calf-skin shoes making no sound on the stone staircase. As he opened the bedroom door, his heart jumped inside him like a startled hare. In one moment it leapt with delight at the sight of his wife's face, and in the next it leapt with anger that her veil was gone. A servant from the palace stables was sitting beside the queen. In one hand he held the crumpled veil and in the other he held the queen's hand.

When King Shahryar rejoined his caravan of camels, he wore his unhappiness like a black woollen cloak: he stooped under its weight. No word passed his lips until he reached the royal city of Samarkand al-Ajam, the home of King Shahzaman, his brother. The distant city walls trembled like a mirage, for his eyes were still full of tears.

An old man, richly dressed, came out of the gates towards them, making small and weary gestures of welcome—as though his strength was not equal to his message. But as they drew closer to one another, King Shahryar recognized his

own young brother, wearing his grief like old age. His body was like a tent smothered by a sandstorm as it bowed under the weight of his unhappiness.

'Put faith in no one but Allah,' said Shahzaman, pressing his forehead against his brother's shoulder. 'There is such wickedness in the world.'

They walked away from the whispering of camel drivers and grunting of the camels to share their secret in the shadow of the city wall.

'Who can I tell but you, brother?' whispered Shahzaman, looking around him for fear of being overheard. 'My wife has taken my love and emptied it into a pool of mud. She has uncovered her face in front of the palace cook and shined on him with her eyes and waited on him with her hands. Oh, Shahryar, you cannot know what good fortune you have in your lovely, loving wife.'

At the sound of his brother's words, King Shahryar, King of all Sasan (let it not be spoken twice) wept salt tears. 'Oh, Shahzaman! I wish I had married a camel on my wedding day! My wife has uncovered her face in front of a stable-boy and shined on him with her eyes and waited on him with her hands—and I killed them both this morning with my own sword.'

Shahzaman held his head and cried aloud. 'My wife and the palace cook were put to death this morning. What shall we do, brother? It is true what the poet says:

Women are worthless,

Women are liars:

They seem to be roses,

But grow into briars.

All women are fickle!

So night fell in the hearts of King Shahzaman of Samarkand al-Ajam and King Shahryar of Sasan. When Shahryar returned to his city, a pall of sadness settled over all the people of Sasan for three long years.

Sadness crept like a spy into the rib-cage of young King Shahryar. It snuffed out all his candles of joy and left his heart to blunder about in utter darkness. Unhappiness crept to the back-door of his heart and unlocked it, letting in the enemies of Allah: doubt and harshness and . . . fear. Yes, let it not be spoken twice—the tall, valiant, and courteous King of all Sasan was afraid. At night, when his courtiers were in bed and his maidservants were sleeping, the candles in his chamber trembled with loneliness, and the black tent of night flapped around his heart. The creases of the empty pillow beside his head made faces at him, and the faces reminded him of his wife. Then, hitting the pillow with his fist, he vowed to hide the pillow's creases under a new head.

'Wazir!' he shouted. 'Fetch my Wazir!'

The King's Wazir, his sole adviser, ran to King Shahryar's chamber bleary with sleep, and kissed the hem of the bedspread.

'I will not spend another night alone in this bed,' shouted the King.

The Wazir clapped his hands with joy. 'Oh, you wish to marry again, most courteous and mighty king! All Sasan will delight in the news.'

'How can I marry again,' Shahryar stormed, 'when all women are faithless, and none of them will love a man for more than a day?'

'No one could love the magnificence of your lordship for less than a thousand years,' said the Wazir, shaking with fright.

'I know that women are fickle. If anyone dares to dispute it, I'll have him fed to the palace dogs in pieces for a week—and then put him to death myself!'

'All women are fickle,' said the Wazir, who had a certain store of wisdom.

'It is perfectly obvious what I must do,' said King Shahryar, recovering his just and even temper, renowned throughout Sasan. 'Fetch me a pretty, talented girl at once and I will marry her this morning.'

'I will, sir, with all my heart, sir . . . ' said the Wazir, anxious only to be gone. But with one word the glorious young King stopped his Wazir at the door.

'Worthy old man,' he said. 'Invite the executioner to the wedding and furnish a room for him inside the palace. I shall behead my new bride tomorrow morning before she can stop loving me. Fetch another young woman to me after the execution, and I shall marry again. While the executioner's sword is sharp, I need never be alone at night. Have I not more wisdom than my own Wazir in solving this problem?'

'With such wisdom what need have you of me, your miserable Wazir?' agreed the Wazir, and he crept backwards out of the King's presence. In the corridor outside he was obliged to stop and lean his head against the wall: his heart had turned into a lead anchor which stopped all movement but for the seasick rocking of his soul.

And so for three years, the golden ruler of all Sasan married every day: a thousand brides, a thousand executions, a thousand spaces in the crowded streets of the bazaar, two thousand empty sandals, a hundred thousand pricks of conscience in the heart of the King's Wazir.

So the stories say—but who can tell if they are true?

The stories also say that the Wazir had two daughters,

Dunyazad and Shahrazad, and that during those three dark years in the history of Sasan, Shahrazad, daughter of the King's Wazir, crossed the river that separates childhood from womanhood.

One morning at breakfast, the King's Wazir took his beard in both hands and wept salt tears into his pewter dishes.

'Dearest father, why are you crying?' his daughters asked. The Wazir looked at Dunyazad and her elder sister, Shahrazad—and he covered his face with his hands.

'Tell us, father,' said Shahrazad. 'Is the dear King ill? Nothing else could make you so unhappy.'

He shook his head. 'I cannot truthfully say that the dear King is ill . . . O sweet Shahrazad, you know that there is no king more glorious in all the realms of India and Persia and Arabia than King Shahryar. And there is no man more fortunate than I am to be his Wazir and to advise him. But there is a matter about which he will not take my advice. My words fall like blown sand on a sleeping traveller: he rises the next morning and brushes my advice away with a wave of his hand.'

And the Wazir recounted the sorrows of the last three years. 'The dear King has taken the notion into his heart that no woman can be trusted. A woman, he says, will love a man one day and hate him the next. She will marry a man one day and fall in love with his servant the next morning. I cannot convince him that there were many good women among his brides.'

'Many? Brides? Has the King married many times?'

'He marries every day, Shahrazad. His bride keeps him company during the hours of darkness . . . (Let it not be spoken twice, but the valiant King is a little afraid of being alone at night.) But the morning after his

wedding, the dear, good King has his new wife's head cut off so that she cannot fall in love with anyone else. And it is my task to find him another bride . . . and another . . . and another . . .'

'Poor father,' said Shahrazad. 'Now I understand why the halls and corridors of the palace are so empty. I understand why I see no noblewomen in the market place and so few silken sandals outside the marble mosques. Now I understand why you are weeping.'

'The city is as empty of young women as the sea is empty of drinking water,' said the Wazir. 'The dear King has cut off all their heads. But that is not why I was weeping. I must send both of you away today—at once. If the dear King should find out that I have a beautiful daughter of marriageable age, you would have to become his latest wife. And he would not leave you your life the morning after the wedding.'

Dunyazad began to cry. But Shahrazad covered her face with her veil so that her expression could not be seen.

'But that is not why I was weeping, either, my beloved daughters. There are no more noblewomen in the city, and I will not empty the kingdom of Sasan of all its young women. When I cannot or will not carry out the orders of the dear King, he will certainly, in his graciousness and wisdom, see fit to put me to death.'

Dunyazad cried all the more, but Shahrazad's face was hidden by her veil and she was silent. Finally she said: 'Dearest father. If you believe that we shall never meet again after today, you cannot refuse me one favour.'

'I would not refuse you a favour even if you were not going away,' said the Wazir. 'You have never asked me for anything. What would I refuse you?'

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.