

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.



CHAPTER THREE

*Sinbad the Sailor:
The Valley of Diamonds*

On the next night Shahrazad reclined on one elbow, rested her head in her hand and continued the story of Sinbad the Sailor.

From the well of my memory I drew up the strange and wonderful tales I had heard at Baghdad harbour. I recalled travellers' descriptions of the Giant Rukh—a bird whose wing-span half covered the sky. Undoubtedly, I was squatting in the shadow of just such a bird, and my only hope of life lay in staying hidden under the egg.

A vast, stinking warmth enveloped me as the rukh settled over her egg, and I found myself somewhere between the clawed feet, a pouch of bird-down pressing on my head with all the weight of a feather bed. It pushed off my turban which unwound at my feet. That was when I formed my plan of escape. Lying down alongside one

horny talon—as thick and rough as a log—I tied myself securely to the rukh's claw, using the cloth of my turban. Then I went to sleep to escape the pains of fear in my heart and the pains of hunger in my stomach.

I woke up in time only to wish that I had stayed asleep. The rukh had risen off its egg and was climbing a furlong with every beat of its wings. The egg below soon looked no bigger than a white bean; the whole island soon looked no bigger than a pea.

I wished to commend my life's good deeds to Allah so that He might be merciful to me, but I could remember lamentably few. So I vowed to behave much better if Allah, in His mercy, would grant me the opportunity. Still the bird soared higher until I thought it must roost among the beams of the sun. The air was so thin that my lungs shrivelled to the size of walnuts and the blood abandoned my head. I regained consciousness just as the rukh swooped down below the rim of a black canyon and glided down into a valley.

'Oh, Allah is truly merciful!' I cried. 'He saved me from the gulf of the ocean and from the vault of the sky and has set my feet on solid ground again.' Fumbling at the knots of cloth, I rolled away from under the rukh and bundled together my turban.

'Oh, Allah is full of subtlety,' I shrieked. 'Was a drowning too good for Sinbad or starvation too merciful? Was it not bad enough to be eaten by the rukh? Was Fate preserving me for this miserable pit?'

For everywhere I looked were bare black rocks, and the sides of the canyon were sheer. Between every rock and strangling every boulder, huge black serpents coiled and writhed about. The rukh which had brought me to this pit of despair stretched out its grotesque head and

snatched up a serpent as though it were a wriggling worm. Then with a scrabbling of gravel it ran forwards and took off, spiralling up to the narrow blue slit of sky a mile above me. It scarcely interested me, but indeed it was not gravel which the rukh scuffed up. Everywhere, but everywhere, the ground was sprinkled with precious stones—diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, and rubies—more treasure than even the greed of a young Sinbad had ever imagined. And shall I tell you, friend, my only thoughts at seeing this undreamt-of wealth? I wept because the diamonds hurt my feet to tread on.

Those hideous land serpents rippled as hugely and shined as blackly and were as many as the swelling waves on a night sea. The roots of my soul shrivelled, and I fell on my face waiting to be swallowed, strangled, or poisoned by their licking fangs.

Just then—I tell no lies, but believe me if you can—a slab of raw meat fell on my head.

'A serpent is crawling over me,' I thought, praying for a quick death. But as the juices trickled through my hair I decided I was in fact wearing a side of mutton. Perhaps it was a hint from Allah that I should eat hearty before I was eaten, so I crawled out from under the meat only to be narrowly missed by another side of mutton, bouncing down the canyon wall.

Have you heard the rumour, friend, of a place called the Valley of Diamonds? Well, I can vouch that the place exists. There are indeed merchants who grow rich on the diamonds, but they do not—they dare not—climb down among the snakes. Instead, they pitch slabs of raw meat into the ravine. The diamonds and so forth became embedded in the meat, then the giant rukhs, hunting for food, fly down and carry the mutton

out of the ravine. Let my story tell you what happens next.

When I realized what was happening, I gathered up as many jewels as my pocket would hold, crawled back under the slab of mutton and clung on to it as mortal man clings to life.

A rukh came hunting for food to feed its chick.

I and my meat were lifted off the ground in the grip of its giant claws, and soon the serpents in the valley looked no bigger than bloodworms in a barrel. The bird carried its food to a nest in the crook of a mountain ledge. It immediately began tearing at the meat with its gruesome beak and pushing pieces into the pink gullet of its chick—a creature as big as a cow.

One peck slashed open my chest, the next would certainly rip out my heart.

'Oh Allah!' I cried. 'Did my mother's care and my father's money make me fit for nothing but to be breakfast to a baby rukh?'

Just at that moment, an avalanche of rocks tumbled past the ledge, and a great din of shouts and hoots up above frightened the rukh off its nest. One solitary merchant lowered himself on a rope to the ledge and began prodding the meat.

'There are no jewels there, my good fellow,' I said.

At the sound of my voice, the merchant leapt backwards. At the sight of me crawling from under the meat, he fell on his knees and began praying. I suppose I was *not* as clean as on the day my mother bore me—caked in sea salt and bird-lime, and red from head to foot with meat juices and blood.

'Forgive me, friend,' I said, 'for I know that cleanliness is close to Allah's heart. But if you would be so

good as to help me off this unpleasant ledge, I would willingly share with you the treasure whose weight so discourteously prevents me getting to my feet.' So saying, I fainted, quite overcome with hunger, weariness, and pain.

I received from the merchant the most precious of Allah's gifts—hospitality. He fed and cared for me, and only grudgingly accepted half my immense riches. He found me buyers for my diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, and rubies. And, when I was fully recovered, he directed me to a coastal harbour where my new-found wealth bought not just one ship but a whole fleet.

Unfortunately, not one captain among those who sailed in and out of the harbour had heard tell of Baghdad. Imagine it, friend! that some of the islands of the world have drifted on the winds and tides so far from the world's centre that the inhabitants have never heard of Baghdad!

I sent the fleet in all directions, one following the Dog Star, one the Pole Star, one the Pleiades, and one the Red Planet, with instructions to trade at every port until they found knowledge of Baghdad. I myself boarded the ship with the richest cargo, opened the sails fully, and ran before any and every wind. For who sends the wind but Allah?

'Who sends the wind but Allah?' I crowed, sighting an island one morning.

But the captain said, 'Some devil sent this one,' and he bent his head on to the wheel and wrung his hands. He ordered the sails to be reefed in, and the ship turned to put the island behind us, but no sooner had we turned than a pirate ship rushed down on us. We lay between the ship and shore with not an inch of sail blowing.

The captain recognized both the island and the approaching ship, and he cursed his fate for bringing him to those waters. I begged him to tell us why he was lying full length, beating the deck with his fists. I begged him to tell us what to expect. But he only moaned pitifully and said, 'Expect death, young man. Expect to die!'

'But what am I thinking of,' said Shahrazad, breaking off suddenly. 'I have told you the story of the First Voyage of Sinbad and now I presume on your patience to tell you the awful events of the Second Voyage.'

'Don't interrupt the story with your chattering,' said King Shahryar. 'Go on, go on.'

'But your courtiers are knocking on the door, my most eminent and conscientious lord, and I still owe you your rightful wedding present—my little head in a silver dish.'

'Worthless woman!' said Shahryar, stamping to the chamber door. Opening it he shouted at his startled Chancellor, 'Do you know the story of the Second Voyage of Sinbad the Sailor?'

The Chancellor fell on his face in the doorway and kissed the carpet between the King's bare feet. 'Forgive me, my most powerful and intellectual lord, but I cannot truthfully say that I do.'

'You see!' said King Shahryar, turning on his wife. 'Are you suggesting that I go without the Second Voyage of Sinbad rather than keep my own headsman waiting? I forbid you to leave this room until I have come back tonight and heard the story.'

'O patient and even-tempered husband,' said Shahrazad. 'Forgive my lack of judgement, for I am only young and foolish. To hear you is to obey.'

King Shahryar dusted his hands together with satisfaction and strode downstairs to his audience chamber while, outside in the courtyard, the old Wazir walked fretfully up and down and the Royal Swordsman sharpened his sword.

