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Opening extract from

The Thousand Nights and One Night

Written by

Jan Pienkowski

Retold by

David Walser

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"Welcome" is a word the traveller hears constantly in Islamic countries – welcome to my shop, my restaurant, my home. *The Thousand Nights and One Night* provides the reader with a welcome too, this time to a more ancient Islamic world where magic is commonplace, animals talk and Genies rub shoulders with men. Here wicked sorcerers wreak havoc before getting their just desserts; treasure is lost and found, as is love. There are endless adventures to be had but also many lessons to be learned.

What is so unusual about *The Thousand Nights and One Night* is that it is a collection of stories within one story – that of the vengeful King Shahryar. Deceived by his first wife, he decides to take a new bride each evening and have her beheaded the following dawn. Enter Shahrazade, a clever, resourceful young woman, well-versed in the art of storytelling. She puts off her own death for a thousand and one nights by entrancing the King with gripping tales, stopping at a moment of suspense as dawn approaches. The King wants to hear more, so he stays her execution till the next day and the next . . . After three years of delay, he has fallen in love with her for her courage, wit and wisdom. He abandons his wicked resolve and all is well.

This clever use of a "framing" story enabled unconnected tales to be woven together over a period of some five hundred years. They were translated by an unknown Arab scholar and added to until they took their final form, probably in the 14th century. The earliest tales came from Persia and may date back to the 7th or 8th century. The later stories came from all over the Oriental world. In *Aladdin*, the Genie of the Lamp transports the Princess's palace from Cathay to Morocco – and back again. Sinbad the Sailor lived in Baghdad and set off on his voyages from Basra. *The Tale of the Fisherman and the Genie*, in which Muslims, Christians, Magi and Jews live in harmony, is thought to have come from Egypt. Happily for the Western world, the stories were collected and translated by a Frenchman, Antoine Galland, in 1704.

These retellings are from the translations of the Victorian explorer and linguist, Sir Richard Burton, some of whose own adventures rivalled those of Sinbad the Sailor for life-endangering perils and derring-do. They are, of course, for a modern audience, but they have lost nothing of their power to enchant.



These stories were read to me as a small boy in Poland. In my childish mind, they became merged with stories of the Turks and the Tartars invading the country over the centuries and, if my features are anything to go by, leaving some of their genes in me. Ever since then I have wanted to know more about this mysterious eastern world – and it had to be at first hand.

Thanks to talking to people – be it my lifelong friend Dilip from Bombay, my Sikh computer merchant, Narindar, who has offered to teach me to tie a turban, my Chinese printer, Patrick, from Singapore, my Turkish tailor, Habibe, or Algerian barber, Hamid, from Hammersmith – more and more of the glittering pieces of the mosaic started to fall into place.

The tales seem to have pursued me down the years until I summoned up the courage to have a stab at doing them in pictures – at last an excuse for a grand tour of the fabled cities. They surpassed anything I'd imagined, as did the people. The Beiruti taxi driver who took us to Damascus turned out to have a wife to visit at each end of the rather long journey. Our Tartar guide got bitten by a dog in Samarkand and stoically concealed the wound until we arrived in Bukhara. Then there was the fleet of fearless smugglers in their tiny outboard-motored craft, setting off from Oman across the Persian Gulf with their cargoes of synthetic cloth and light bulbs, to return with boatloads of goats. In Luxor, Paul, our hotel porter, invited us to his domed dwelling for tea and sticky cakes, to the laughter of girls peeping out from behind the pillars. And in Marrakesh, Abdullah, the jovial maître d'hôtel, offered us lodgings in a grand house with a fountain in the courtyard where the staff left at night and locked us in.

This has been my dream job. As I travelled through these wonderful places I filled a score of sketchbooks with a thousand and one scribbles to jog my memory. As for the dappled, latticed light and shade, the brilliant splendour of the colours of the East, these are imprinted on my mind. I hope I have conveyed hints of them to you.

Jan Pieńkowski

The Teller of Tales

SHAHRAZADE

The First Night

