

The Arabian Nights

Translated by Richard Burton



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Introduction

Who told the stories first, or in what tongue, we cannot surely say. When, from 1704 to 1712, Antoine Galland rubbed his translator's magic lamp, and spilled out the gold of the *Mille et une Nuits* before the delighted eyes of Europe, he hazarded the opinion that the *Nights* had come to Arabia from India, by way of Persia; but a hundred years later scholars were still arguing the respective claims of those three countries to the stories, and even now, another hundred years later, the end is not yet. Some authorities follow Galland back to India; others, like Burton, would stop at Persia; still others insist that the majority of the tales are Arabian in substance as in form. And questions of date remain equally unsettled. When were the earliest of the stories written? When were the latest? And when did the whole collection, known to Arabian readers as *Kitab Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, and to English readers as *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, or, more briefly and commonly, *The Arabian Nights*, take on its present form? Should the compilation of immortal yarns spun by Shahrazad be assigned, as some would have it, to the thirteenth century, or, as others would have it, to the fifteenth? Is it, indeed, a compilation, or the work of a single author?

Important though these questions may be, there is no reason to give space here to the various and lengthy arguments they have evoked, but it is only fitting that Sir Richard Burton, in his privileged role of translator of the *Nights* now spread before us, should be allowed to have his say; and if his word is not the last word, it is one that has not yet been discredited. He writes, in the Terminal Essay with which he closes his great translation:

“To conclude: From the data above given I hold myself justified in drawing the following deductions: —

1. The framework of the book is purely Persian perfunctorily arabised; the arch-type being the Hazár Afsánah.
2. The oldest tales, such as Sindbad (the Seven Wazirs) and King Jil'ád, may date from the reign of Al-Mansur, eighth century A. D.
3. The thirteenth tales mentioned as the nucleus of the Repertory, together with 'Dalilah the Crafty,' may be placed in our tenth century.
4. The latest tales, notably Kamar al-Zaman the Second and Ma'aruf

the Cobbler, are as late as the sixteenth century.

5. The work assumed its present form in the thirteenth century.

6. The author is unknown for the best reason; there never was one: for information touching the editors and copyists we must await the fortunate discovery of some MSS. "

And with these conclusions, as well as with any others, we may be content. The stories are the thing, no matter whence they sprang nor when. They belong to the East and to a certain age, of course, but the wisdom which informs them is not the East's alone, and they seem animated by the experience of uncounted generations. Whatever their origin in time and space, the tales themselves promise to be timeless and free of all frontiers. For they form, let it be said boldly, the world's greatest single treasure house of fiction, and their riches are for all men. So long as there are ears to hear, Shahrazad will be heard.

Already she has been heard around the world; and when Galland taught her to speak early eighteenth century French she won her audience in an instant, as she had won King Shahryar on that fateful night when, as you will read, her father the Wazir laid his daughter's virginity and life at the feet of his insatiable ruler. I will tell you a tale, she said; and King Shahryar, listening, was ensorcelled. And she was not killed on the morrow, as more than a thousand of her predecessors had been. Nor did she die after the thousandth night, nor after the thousandth and first. Which things, again, you will read in due course. And so it was when, centuries later, she said in the easy French of Antoine Galland: I will tell you a tale. All France listened, was enchanted, and hoped that Shahrazad would never die; and after France, all Europe. So strong was the spell she wove, so boundless the appetite she excited, that readers could not get their fill of eastern tales, but demanded more and more. The translation of the stories with which Shahrazad had beguiled King Shahryar was followed in swift sequence by translations of Turkish Tales, Persian Tales, Chinese Tales, Mogul Tales, Tartar Tales, and ingenious imitations of all kinds; and the western world gorged for a time upon oriental fiction. But Shahrazad, peerless and alone, remained without rival or successor.

Since then she has caught men of every age, character, and condition within her cunning multi-colored web, for her tales are truly of that kind which hold children from play and old men from the chimney-corner; and if some are not fit for unripe youth, there are few that maturity out-grows. Leigh Hunt speaks for a host when, in his *Autobiography*, he tells of discovering the *Nights* in his schooldays; and he speaks for an equal host

when he writes, in middle age: "The books I like to have about me most are, Spenser, Chaucer, the minor poems of Milton, the *Arabian Nights*. ..." Beckford, whose "Vathek" came straight out of the East, is but one of a multitude whose youth has been made a dream-world by the same stories. And Cardinal Newman—who wrote in his *Apologia*, "I used to wish the Arabian Tales were true"—is only the most surprising victim of the magic brew from King Shahryar's harem.

But it is impossible and useless to list here the names of even the most famous who have hung upon the lips of Shahrazad. The spell of the *Nights* has possessed the imagination of mankind, and one need not read far in them to find the reason. The world which they describe is, like Cabell's world of Poictesme, one in which anything is more than likely to happen; in which almost everything does happen. The most delightful, most atrocious, most ludicrous things. It is a world of magic and reality, of sweet day-dreams and shivering awakenings, of delicate poetry and brutal horse-play. It is a world in which all the senses feast riotously, upon sights and sounds and perfumes; upon fruits and flowers and jewels; upon wines and stuffs and sweets; and upon yielding flesh, both male and female, whose beauty is incomparable. It is a world of heroic amorous encounters, in which men are as potent as that Indian prince of whom Theophrastus spoke, and women as generous as that Queen of Aragon whose amiable decision has been imperishably, if somewhat astonishingly, recorded by Montaigne. Romance lurks behind every shuttered window; every veiled glance begets an intrigue; and in every servant's hand nestles a scented note granting a speedy rendezvous. It is a world in which any bypath, and often the broad highway, leads straight to unexpected, unpredictable adventure; in which fate plays battledore-and-shuttlecock with men and women of high and low estate; in which no aspiration is so mad as to be unrealizable, and no day proof of what the next day may be. A world in which apes may rival men, and a butcher win the hand of a king's daughter; a world in which palaces are made of diamonds, and thrones cut from single rubies. It is a world in which all the distressingly ineluctable rules of daily living are gloriously suspended; from which individual responsibility is delightfully absent. It is the world of a legendary Damascus, a legendary Cairo, and a legendary Constantinople; the world in which a legendary Harun al-Rashid walks the streets of a legendary Baghdad. In short, it is the world of eternal fairy tale—and there is no resisting its enchantment.

Consider, for example, the tale of Ma'aruf the Cobbler, married to the

loathsome Fatimah, and of how destiny dealt more than handsomely with him. Is there a man who would not wish to follow in his footsteps? Or consider the case of Zeyn, the king who found himself down to his last dinar, and who went digging in his garden according to the instructions left by his father. What did he uncover, you ask? Well, nothing much more than a subterranean palace which contained, among other things, ten urns of porphyry and alabaster filled to overflowing with gold dust, and six lovely girls, each carved from a single diamond, standing upon pedestals of solid gold, surrounding a seventh pedestal that had been left vacant for an even more beautiful maiden of flesh and blood. What could be nicer than that? Obviously, nothing; just as nothing could be more heart-breaking, painful, humiliating, or disgusting than the experiences reserved for Shahrazad's less fortunate characters. But concerning the latter we need feel no qualms, for while we blissfully identify ourselves with Zeyn or the lucky cobbler, we may identify *them* with our worst enemies.

There is no need to dwell further upon the marvels of the *Nights* when they lie before us in Sir Richard Burton's translation; in the "full, complete, uncastrated" text that he planned with his friend Steinhäuser, at Aden, in the winter of 1852. Steinhäuser would do the prose and Burton the metrical sections, they decided. Not that an English version of the *Nights* was lacking. On the contrary, there had been several. The first English translator, working from the French, had trod on Galland's heels; other translations had followed, most notable among them Edward William Lane's, of 1840. But none was to Burton's satisfaction. Lane's predecessors had all abbreviated; Lane abbreviated too, and designed his work for "the drawing-room table." As Burton saw it, the real job remained to be done, and he and his friend could do it. So the plans were laid. But Steinhäuser died soon after, his papers were scattered, and Burton was left to carry on alone through many years of intermittent labor, in Africa and South America, at Damascus and Trieste. Meantime he published a dozen other books, but whenever he had a moment he turned to the *Nights*, as to "a talisman against ennui and despondency." Finally, in 1879, he began to prepare his copy for the press, only to learn before the work was done that John Payne, translator of Villon, was about to issue a new version of the stories over which he, Burton, had toiled so long. Yielding the field temporarily to Payne meant another delay, but Burton did the gracious thing, withholding his own translation until 1885-1886, when it appeared in ten volumes, followed in 1887-1888 by six supplementary volumes. The man who had made the pilgrimage to

public whose purse does not run to limited editions is provided with a representative selection of the *Nights* as they came from the frank lips of Shahrazad—who had never heard that it is a crime to call things by their right names—, and as, with equal frankness, they were put into English by Sir Richard Burton. Mr. Bennett Cerf, editor of The Modern Library, who has made this admirable selection, has been governed in his choice neither by considerations of decency nor indecency. He has sought simply to decide which are the most interesting and most representative tales, which—in the words of Burton—will best “show what ‘The Thousand Nights and a Night’ really is.” And, in consequence, the proportions of what are commonly known as decency and indecency are approximately the same in his selection as in the whole original. It may also be noted, in passing, that of the thirteen stories which Burton lists as “the nucleus of the Repertory,” Mr. Cerf has chosen to include nine.

It is impossible to watch this book go out into the world without wondering what Burton himself would have thought of it. Certainty is impossible, for only Allah knows all; but I do not think there is reason for much doubt. Burton may have issued his translation in a strictly limited edition, and adjured his subscribers to keep it under cover, but to translate and issue the work at all, under whatever restrictions, was a courageous act in an age which, even more than our own, “was saturated with cant and hypocrisy.” Before the limited audience which he chose to address he defended the obscenity, pornography, or *turpiloquium* of the *Nights*—call it what you will—with vigorous candor and wise argument. Had the time been ripe for him to come before a larger audience, he would have done so; but it was not. The battle against censorious pruriency has not yet been wholly won, but such brilliant victories as have been gained must be credited, at least in part, to the champions of yesterday who fought in chains; and among those champions Sir Richard Burton is a distinguished figure. Surely he would be the first to rejoice in the triumph of his own arms and his own principles; the first to say to the many, as he said to the few: — Here, if not God’s plenty, is Shahrazad’s. Take it, enjoy it, and grow in wisdom.

Ben Ray Redman.

May 1, 1932.
New York City.

Al-Medinah and Mecca had come to the end of a far longer road, and it is pleasant to know that, as good pilgrims should be, he was rewarded; and not only in immaterial praise. His mighty translation, issued in an edition limited to one thousand sets and distributed to subscribers only, brought him in the much needed sum of twelve thousand pounds.

Without examining here, in comparison with its rivals, the merits of a work that speaks eloquently for itself, it may not be impertinent to point out that whatever the virtues or faults of Burton's craggy, highly idiosyncratic style, he was temperamentally closer to the *Nights* themselves than any other of their western interpreters. Not only was he an Orientalist of wide and precise knowledge; he was almost an Oriental. So far as an Englishman could, he identified himself with the Moslem East and its people, lived their life, thought their thoughts, absorbed their racial past in his own alien consciousness. And there was another kinship. Burton's character and career were more than tinged by that quality of the fantastic which runs riot in the tales he so lovingly translated. His actions were remarkable enough—he blazed the way for Englishmen to Mecca, to the vast lakes of Central Africa, and into the land of the Somali spears, but the legends which grew up around his name were more remarkable still. He fostered them, to be sure, by tall tales that he told about himself with a rather perverse sense of humor, tales that made him guilty of every crime from theft to cannibalism; but, however much of truth or falsehood may lie behind those legends, they are inextricably associated with his memory, and it seems peculiarly fitting to read the tales of Shahrazad in the English of one whose very name conjures up an Arabian Nights adventure. However future scholarship may improve upon his rendering of those tales, his association with them will remain unique, his translation of them beyond substitution.

But until now Burton's brave work has been a sealed book to the general public. He himself urged his subscribers to keep it under lock and key, and begged his own niece, who was later one of his biographers, never to look upon it in its shameless nakedness. Since then rarity and high prices have done service for keys and locks, and the "uncastrated" *Nights* have found their way into the hands of the very few; while most readers have had to content themselves with only the more decorous tales, or with the less decorous in versions so emasculated that they might coyly stand the test of Lane's drawing-room table. Now for the first time, in this volume, the wide reading

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THE ARABIAN NIGHTS'
ENTERTAINMENTS
(*ALF LAYLAH WA LAYLAH.*)

In the Name of Allah,
The Compassionating, the Compassionate!

PRAISE BE TO ALLAH · THE BENEFICENT KING · THE CREATOR OF THE
UNIVERSE · LORD OF THE THREE WORLDS · WHO SET UP THE FIRMAMENT
WITHOUT PILLARS IN ITS STEAD · AND WHO STRETCHED OUT THE EARTH
EVEN AS A BED · AND GRACE, AND PRAYER—BLESSING BE UPON OUR LORD
MOHAMMED · LORD OF APOSTOLIC MEN : AND UPON HIS FAMILY AND
COMPANION-TRAIN · PRAYER AND BLESSINGS ENDURING AND GRACE WHICH
UNTO THE DAY OF DOOM SHALL REMAIN · AMEN! · O YOU OF THE THREE
WORLDS SOVEREIGN!

And Afterwards. Verily the works and words of those gone before us
have become instances and examples to men of our modern day, that
folk may view what admonishing chances befell other folk and may
therefrom take warning; and that they may peruse the annals of
antique peoples and all that has betided them, and be thereby ruled
and restrained:—Praise, therefore, be to Him who has made the
histories of the Past an admonition unto the Present! Now of such
instances are the tales called “A Thousand Nights and a Night,”
together with their far-famed legends and wonders. Therein it is
related (but Allah is All-knowing of His hidden things and All-ruling
and All-honoured and All-giving and All-gracious and All-merciful!)
that, in tide of yore and in time long gone before, there was a King of
the Kings of the Banu Sasan in the Islands of India and China, a Lord
of armies and guards and servants and dependents. He left only two
sons, one in the prime of manhood and the other yet a youth, while
both were Knights and Braves, albeit the elder was a doughtier
horseman than the younger. So he succeeded to the empire; when he
ruled the land and lorded it over his lieges with justice so exemplary
that he was beloved by all the peoples of his capital and of his
kingdom. His name was King Shahryar, and he made his younger
brother, Shah Zaman hight, King of Samarcand in Barbarian-land.

These two ceased not to abide in their several realms and the law was ever carried out in their dominions; and each ruled his own kingdom, with equity and fair-dealing to his subjects, in extreme solace and enjoyment; and this condition continually endured for a score of years. But at the end of the twentieth twelvemonth the elder King yearned for a sight of his younger brother and felt that he must look upon him once more. So he took counsel with his Wazir about visiting him, but the Minister, finding the project unadvisable, recommended that a letter be written and a present be sent under his charge to the younger brother with an invitation to visit the elder. Having accepted this advice the King forthwith bade prepare handsome gifts, such as horses with saddles of gem-encrusted gold; Mamelukes, or white slaves; beautiful handmaids, high-breasted virgins, and splendid stuffs and costly. He then wrote a letter to Shah Zaman expressing his warm love and great wish to see him, ending with these words, "We therefore hope of the favour and affection of the beloved brother that he will condescend to bestir himself and turn his face us-wards. Furthermore we have sent our Wazir to make all ordinance for the march, and our one and only desire is to see you before we die; but if you delay or disappoint us we shall not survive the blow. Wherewith peace be upon you!" Then King Shahryar, having sealed the missive and given it to the Wazir with the offerings aforementioned, commanded him to shorten his skirts and strain his strength and make all expedition in going and returning. "Harkening and obedience!" said the Minister, who fell to making ready without stay and packed up his loads and prepared all his requisites without delay. This occupied him three days, and on the dawn of the fourth he took leave of his King and marched right away, over desert and hill-way, stony waste and pleasant lea without halting by night or by day. But whenever he entered a realm whose ruler was subject to his Suzerain, where he was greeted with magnificent gifts of gold and silver and all manner of presents fair and rare, he would tarry there three days, the term of the guest-rite; and, when he left on the fourth, he would be honourably escorted for a whole day's march. As soon as the Wazir drew near Shah Zaman's court in Samarcand he despatched to report his arrival one of his high officials, who presented himself before the King; and, kissing ground between his hands, delivered his message. Hereupon the King commanded sundry of his Grandees and Lords of his realm to fare

forth and meet his brother's Wazir at the distance of a full day's journey; which they did, greeting him respectfully and wishing him all prosperity and forming an escort and a procession. When he entered the city he proceeded straightway to the palace, where he presented himself in the royal presence; and, after kissing ground and praying for the King's health and happiness and for victory over all his enemies, he informed him that his brother was yearning to see him, and prayed for the pleasure of a visit. He then delivered the letter which Shah Zaman took from his hand and read: it contained sundry hints and allusions which required thought; but, when the King had fully comprehended its import, he said, "I hear and I obey the commands of the beloved brother!" adding to the Wazir, "But we will not march till after the third day's hospitality." He appointed for the Minister fitting quarters of the palace; and, pitching tents for the troops, rationed them with whatever they might require of meat and drink and other necessities. On the fourth day he made ready for wayfare and got together sumptuous presents befitting his elder brother's majesty, and established his chief Wazir viceroy of the land during his absence. Then he caused his tents and camels and mules to be brought forth and encamped, with their bales and loads, attendants and guards, within sight of the city, in readiness to set out next morning for his brother's capital. But when the night was half spent he bethought him that he had forgotten in his palace somewhat which he should have brought with him, so he returned privily and entered his apartments, where he found the Queen, his wife, asleep on his own carpet-bed, embracing with both arms a black cook of loathsome aspect and foul with kitchen grease and grime. When he saw this the world waxed black before his sight and he said, "If such case happen while I am yet within sight of the city what will be the doings of this damned whore during my long absence at my brother's court?" So he drew his scimitar and, cutting the two in four pieces with a single blow, left them on the carpet and returned presently to his camp without letting anyone know of what had happened. Then he gave orders for immediate departure and set out at once and began his travel; but he could not help thinking over his wife's treason and he kept ever saying to himself, "How could she do this deed by me? How could she work her own death?" till excessive grief seized him, his colour changed to yellow, his body waxed weak and he was threatened with a dangerous

malady, such a one as brings men to die. So the Wazir shortened his stages and tarried long at the watering-stations and did his best to solace the King. Now when Shah Zaman drew near the capital of his brother he despatched vaunt-couriers and messengers of glad tidings to announce his arrival, and Shahryar came forth to meet him with his Wazirs and Emirs and Lords and Grandees of his realm; and saluted him and joyed with exceeding joy and caused the city to be decorated in his honour. When, however, the brothers met, the elder could not but see the change of complexion in the younger and questioned him of his case whereto he replied, "It is caused by the travails of wayfare and my case needs care, for I have suffered from the change of water and air! but Allah be praised for reuniting me with a brother so dear and so rare!" On this wise he dissembled and kept his secret, adding, "O King of the time and Caliph of the tide, only toil and moil have tinged my face yellow with bile and has made my eyes sink deep in my head." Then the two entered the capital in all honour; and the elder brother lodged the younger in a palace overhanging the pleasure garden; and, after a time, seeing his condition still unchanged, he attributed it to his separation from his country and kingdom. So he let him wend his own ways and asked no questions of him till one day when he again said, "O my brother, I see you are grown weaker of body and yellower of colour." "O my brother," replied Shah Zaman, "I have an internal wound; " still he would not tell him what he had witnessed in his wife. Thereupon Shahryar summoned doctors and surgeons and bade them treat his brother according to the rules of art, which they did for a whole month; but their sherbets and potions naught availed, for he would dwell upon the deed of his wife, and despondency, instead of diminishing, prevailed, and leach-craft treatment utterly failed. One day his elder brother said to him, "I am going forth to hunt and course and to take my pleasure and pastime; maybe this would lighten your heart." Shah Zaman, however, refused, saying, "O my brother, my soul yearns for naught of this sort and I entreat your favour to suffer me tarry quietly in this place, being wholly taken up with my malady." So King Shah Zaman passed his night in the palace and, next morning, when his brother had fared forth, he removed from his room and sat him down at one of the lattice-windows overlooking the pleasure grounds; and there he abode thinking with saddest thought over his wife's betrayal and burning sighs issued from his tortured breast. And

as he continued in this case lo! a postern of the palace, which was carefully kept private, swung open and out of it came twenty slave girls surrounding his brother's wife who was wondrous fair, a model of beauty and comeliness and symmetry and perfect loveliness and who paced with the grace of a gazelle which pants for the cooling stream. Thereupon Shah Zaman drew back from the window, but he kept the bevy in sight espying them from a place whence he could not be espied. They walked under the very lattice and advanced a little way into the garden till they came to a jetting fountain middlemost a great basin of water; then they stripped off their clothes and behold, ten of them were women, concubines of the King, and the other ten were white slaves. Then they all paired off, each with each; but the Queen, who was left alone, presently cried out in a loud voice, "Here to me, O my lord Saeed!" and then sprang with a drop-leap from one of the trees a big slobbering blackamoor with rolling eyes which showed the whites, a truly hideous sight. He walked boldly up to her and threw his arms round her neck while she embraced him as warmly; then he bussed her and winding his legs round hers, as a button-loop clasps a button, he threw her and enjoyed her. On like wise did the other slaves with the girls till all had satisfied their passions, and they ceased not from kissing and clipping, coupling and carousing till day began to wane; when the Mamelukes rose from the damsels' bosoms and the blackamoor slave dismounted from the Queen's breast; the men resumed their disguises and all, except the negro who swarmed up the tree, entered the palace and closed the postern-door as before. Now, when Shah Zaman saw this conduct of his sister-in-law he said to himself, "By Allah, my calamity is lighter than this! My brother is a greater King among the kings than I am, yet this infamy goes on in his very palace, and his wife is in love with that filthiest of filthy slaves. But this only shows that they all do it and that there is no woman but who cuckolds her husband; then the curse of Allah upon one and all and upon the fools who lean against them for support or who place the reins of conduct in their hands." So he put away his melancholy and despondency, regret and repine, and allayed his sorrow by constantly repeating those words, adding, "It is my conviction that no man in this world is safe from their malice!" When supper-time came they brought him the trays and he ate with voracious appetite, for he had long refrained from meat, feeling unable to touch any dish

however dainty. Then he returned grateful thanks to Almighty Allah, praising Him and blessing Him, and he spent a most restful night, it having been long since he had savoured the sweet food of sleep. Next day he broke his fast heartily and began to recover health and strength, and presently regained excellent condition. His brother came back from the chase ten days after, when he rode out to meet him and they saluted each other; and when King Shahryar looked at King Shah Zaman he saw how the hue of health had returned to him, how his face had waxed ruddy and how he ate with an appetite after his late scanty diet. He wondered much and said, "O my brother, I was so anxious that you would join me in hunting and chasing, and would take your pleasure and pastime in my dominion!" He thanked him and excused himself; then the two took horse and rode into the city and, when they were seated at their ease in the palace, the food-trays were set before them and they ate their sufficiency. After the meats were removed and they had washed their hands, King Shahryar turned to his brother and said, "My mind is overcome with wonderment at your condition. I was desirous to carry you with me to the chase but I saw you changed in hue, pale and wan to view, and in sore trouble of mind too. But now Alhamdulillah—glory be to God! —I see your natural colour has returned to your face and that you are again in the best of case. It was my belief that your sickness came of severance from your family and friends, and absence from capital and country, so I refrained from troubling you with further questions. But now I beseech you to expound to me the cause of your complaint and your change of colour, and to explain the reason of your recovery and the return to the ruddy hue of health which I am wont to view. So speak out and hide naught!" When Shah Zaman heard this he bowed groundwards awhile his head, then raised it and said, "I will tell you what caused my complaint and my loss of colour; but excuse my acquainting you with the cause of its return to me and the reason of my complete recovery: indeed I pray you not to press me for a reply." Said Shahryar, who was much surprised by these words, "Let me hear first what produced your pallor and your poor condition." "Know, then, O my brother," rejoined Shah Zaman, "that when you sent your Wazir with the invitation to place myself between your hands, I made ready and marched out of my city; but presently I minded me having left behind me in the palace a string of jewels intended as a gift to you."