

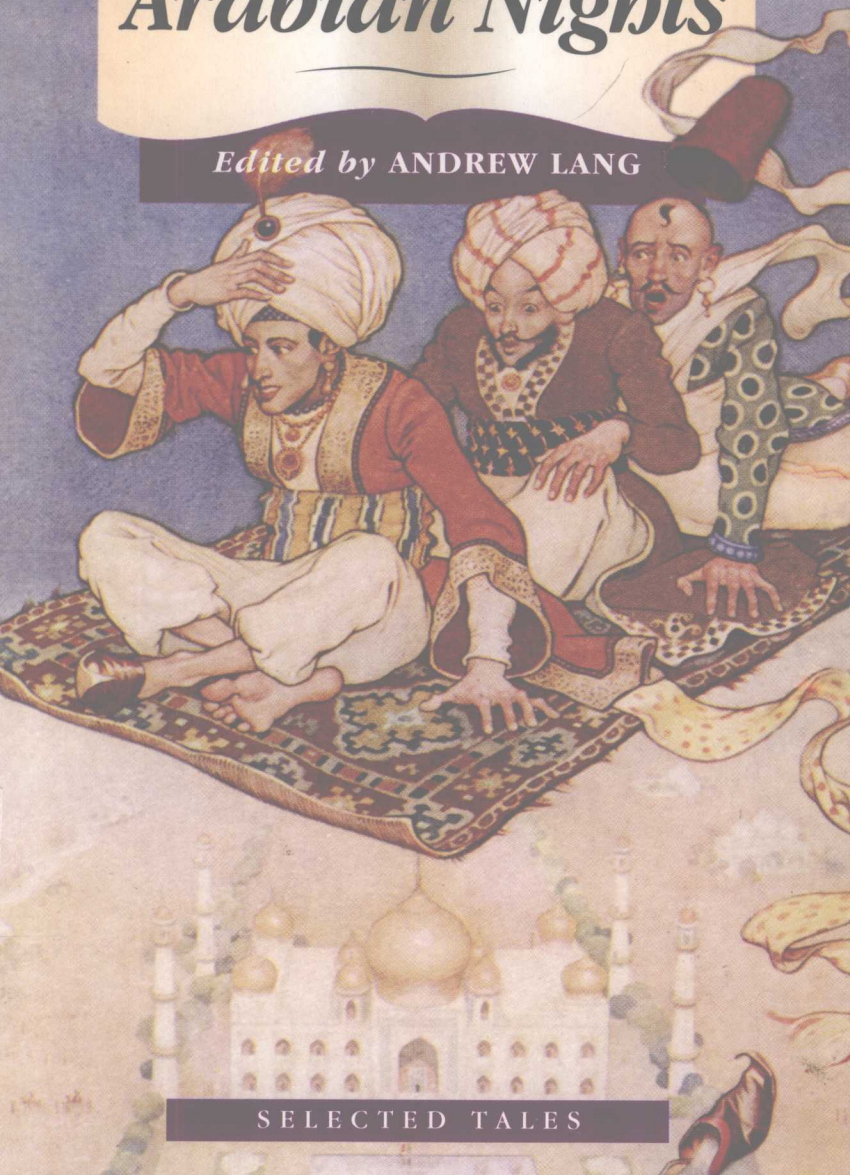
WORDSWORTH



CLASSICS

Tales from the Arabian Nights

Edited by ANDREW LANG



SELECTED TALES

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ANDREW LANG



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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TALES FROM THE ARABIAN NIGHTS



Scheherezade, Dinarzade and the Sultan



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Introduction

In the chronicles of the ancient dynasty of the Sassanidae, who reigned, for about four hundred years, from Persia to the borders of China, beyond the great river Ganges itself, we read the praises of one of the kings of the race, who was said to be the best monarch of his time. His subjects loved him, and his neighbours feared him, and when he died he left his kingdom in a more prosperous and powerful condition than any king had done before him.

The two sons who survived him loved each other tenderly, and it was a real grief to the elder, Schahriar, that the laws of the empire forbade him to share his dominions with his brother Schahzeman. Indeed, after ten years, during which this state of things had not ceased to trouble him, Schahriar cut off the country of Great Tartary from the Persian Empire and made his brother king.

Now the Sultan Schahriar had a wife whom he loved more than all the world, and his greatest happiness was to surround her with splendour, and to give her the finest dresses and the most beautiful jewels. It was therefore with the deepest shame and sorrow that he accidentally discovered, after several years, that she had deceived him completely, and her whole conduct turned out to have been so bad, that he felt himself obliged to carry out the law of the land, and order the grand-vizir to put her to death. The blow was so heavy that his mind almost gave way, and he declared that he was quite sure that at bottom all women were as wicked as the sultana, if you could only find

them out, and that the fewer the world contained the better. So every evening he married a fresh wife and had her strangled the following morning before the grand-vizir, whose duty it was to provide these unhappy brides for the sultan. The poor man fulfilled his task with reluctance, but there was no escape, and every day saw a girl married and a wife dead.

This behaviour caused the greatest horror in the town, where nothing was heard but cries and lamentations. In one house was a father weeping for the loss of his daughter, in another perhaps a mother trembling for the fate of her child; and instead of the blessings that had formerly been heaped on the sultan's head, the air was now full of curses.

The grand-vizir himself was the father of two daughters, of whom the elder was called Scheherazade and the younger Dinarzade. Dinarzade had no particular gifts to distinguish her from other girls, but her sister was clever and courageous in the highest degree. Her father had given her the best masters in philosophy, medicine, history and the fine arts, and besides all this, her beauty excelled that of any girl in the kingdom of Persia.

One day, when the grand-vizir was talking to his eldest daughter, who was his delight and pride, Scheherazade said to him, 'Father, I have a favour to ask of you. Will you grant it to me?'

'I can refuse you nothing,' replied he, 'that is just and reasonable.'

'Then listen,' said Scheherazade. 'I am determined to stop this barbarous practice of the sultan's, and to deliver the girls and mothers from the awful fate that hangs over them.'

'It would be an excellent thing to do,' returned the grand-vizir, 'but how do you propose to accomplish it?'

'My father,' answered Scheherazade, 'it is you who have to provide the sultan daily with a fresh wife, and I implore you, by all the affection you bear me, to allow the honour to fall upon me.'

'Have you lost your senses?' cried the grand-vizir, starting back in horror. 'What has put such a thing into your head? You ought to know by this time what it means to be the sultan's bride!'

'Yes, my father, I know it well,' replied she, 'and I am not

afraid to think of it. If I fail, my death will be a glorious one, and if I succeed I shall have done a great service to my country.'

'It is of no use,' said the grand-vizir, 'I shall never consent. If the sultan was to order me to plunge a dagger in your heart, I should have to obey. What a task for a father! Ah, if you do not fear death, fear at any rate the anguish you would cause me.'

'Once again, my father,' said Scheherazade, 'will you grant me what I ask?'

'What, are you still so obstinate?' exclaimed the grand-vizir. 'Why are you so resolved upon your own ruin?'

But the maiden absolutely refused to attend to her father's words, and at length, in despair, the grand-vizir was obliged to give way, and went sadly to the palace to tell the sultan that the following evening he would bring him Scheherazade.

The sultan received this news with the greatest astonishment.

'How have you made up your mind,' he asked, 'to sacrifice your own daughter to me?'

'Sire,' answered the grand-vizir, 'it is her own wish. Even the sad fate that awaits her could not hold her back.'

'Let there be no mistake, vizir,' said the sultan. 'Remember you will have to take her life yourself. If you refuse, I swear that your head shall pay forfeit.'

'Sire,' returned the vizir. 'Whatever the cost, I will obey you. Though a father, I am also your subject.' So the sultan told the grand-vizir he might bring his daughter as soon as he liked.

The vizir took back this news to Scheherazade, who received it as if it had been the most pleasant thing in the world. She thanked her father warmly for yielding to her wishes, and, seeing him still bowed down with grief, told him that she hoped he would never repent having allowed her to marry the sultan. Then she went to prepare herself for the marriage, and begged that her sister Dinarzade should be sent for to speak to her.

When they were alone, Scheherazade addressed her thus: 'My dear sister; I want your help in a very important affair. My father is going to take me to the palace, to celebrate my marriage with the sultan. When his highness receives me, I shall beg him, as a last favour, to let you sleep in our chamber, so that I may have

your company during the last night I am alive. If, as I hope, he grants me my wish, be sure that you wake me an hour before the dawn, and speak to me in these words: "My sister, if you are not asleep, I beg you, before the sun rises, to tell me one of your charming stories." Then I shall begin, and I hope by this means to deliver the people from the terror that reigns over them.' Dinarzade replied that she would do with pleasure what her sister wished.

When the usual hour arrived the grand-vizir conducted Scheherazade to the palace, and left her alone with the sultan, who bade her raise her veil and was amazed at her beauty. But seeing her eyes full of tears, he asked what was the matter. 'Sire,' replied Scheherazade, 'I have a sister who loves me as tenderly as I love her. Grant me the favour of allowing her to sleep this night in the same room, as it is the last we shall be together.' Schahriar consented to Scheherazade's petition, and Dinarzade was sent for.

An hour before daybreak Dinarzade awoke, and exclaimed, as she had promised, 'My dear sister, if you are not asleep, tell me I pray you, before the sun rises, one of your charming stories. It is the last time that I shall have the pleasure of hearing you.'

Scheherazade did not answer her sister, but turned to the sultan. 'Will your highness permit me to do as my sister asks?' said she.

'Willingly,' he answered. So Scheherazade began.





The Story of the Merchant and the Genius

Sire, there was once upon a time a merchant who possessed great wealth, in land and merchandise, as well as in ready money. He was obliged from time to time to take journeys to arrange his affairs. One day, having to go a long way from home, he mounted his horse, taking with him a small wallet in which he had put a few biscuits and dates, because he had to pass through a desert where no food was to be got. He arrived without any mishap, and, having finished his business, set out on his return. On the fourth day of his journey, the heat of the sun being very great, he turned out of his road to rest under some trees. He found at the foot of a large walnut tree a fountain of clear and running water. He dismounted, fastened his horse to a branch of the tree, and sat down by the fountain, after having taken from his wallet some of his dates and biscuits. Whilst eating the dates he threw the stones right and left. When he had finished this frugal meal he washed his face and hands in the fountain.

Whilst he was thus employed he saw enormous genius, white with rage, coming towards him, with a scimitar in his hand.

'Arise,' he cried in a terrible voice, 'and let me kill you as you have killed my son!'

As he uttered these words he gave a frightful yell. The merchant, quite as much terrified at the hideous face of the monster as at his words, answered him tremblingly, 'Alas, good sir, what can I have done to you to deserve death?'

'I shall kill you,' repeated the genius, 'as you have killed my son.'

‘But,’ said the merchant, ‘how can I have killed your son? I do not know him, and I have never even seen him.’

‘When you arrived here did not you sit down on the ground?’ asked the genius, ‘and did you not take some dates from your wallet, and whilst eating them did not you throw the stones about?’

‘Yes,’ said the merchant, ‘I certainly did so.’

‘Then,’ said the genius, ‘I tell you you have killed my son for whilst you were throwing about the stones, my son passed by, and one of them struck him in the eye and killed him. So I shall kill you.’

‘Ah, sir, forgive me!’ cried the merchant.

‘I will have no mercy on you,’ answered the genius.

‘But I killed your son quite unintentionally, so I implore you to spare my life.’

‘No,’ said the genius, ‘I shall kill you as you killed my son,’ and so saying he seized the merchant by the arm, threw him on the ground, and lifted his sabre to cut off his head.

The merchant, protesting his innocence, bewailed his wife and children, and tried pitifully to avert his fate. The genius, with his raised scimitar, waited till he had finished, but was not in the least touched.

Scheherazade, at this point, seeing that it was day, and knowing that the sultan always rose very early to attend the council, stopped speaking.

‘Indeed, sister,’ said Dinarzade, ‘this is a wonderful story.’

‘The rest is still more wonderful,’ replied Scheherazade, ‘and you would say so, if the sultan would allow me to live another day, and would give me leave to tell it you the next night.’

Schahriar, who had been listening to Scheherazade with pleasure, said to himself, ‘I will wait till tomorrow; I can always have her killed when I have heard the end of her story.’

All this time the grand-vizir was in a terrible state of anxiety. But he was much delighted when he saw the sultan enter the council-chamber without giving the terrible command that he was expecting.

The next morning, before the day broke, Dinarzade said to