

Thousand and One Nights

The sprawling, untidy collection of stories known throughout the Arab-speaking world as the Thousand and One Nights (and in English long called The Arabian Nights) evolved over a long period of time, and it is impossible to say just when a particular story was written. Because the collection reached its more or less definitive form in the 16th century we have chosen to place this example here. Such tales of magic as "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp" and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" are actually quite unrepresentative of the bulk of the Nights. Most are decidedly adult tales of scandal and treachery, often involving faithless women. It is an irony that cultures which depict women as irrepressibly sexual (including European culture, with its Decameron and other story collections), simultaneously tend to portray them as highly intelligent; for in a repressive patriarchal society it takes a good deal of cleverness to break the rules successfully. This story stands out in depicting sympathetically a heroine who manages to cleverly make fools of her would-be lovers by developing her own unique defense against sexual harassment. In what sense can this adulterous woman be called faithful?

A woman of the merchant class was married to a man who was a great traveler. Once he set out for a far country and was absent so long that his wife, out of sheer boredom, fell in love with a handsome young man, and they loved each other exceedingly. One day, the youth quarreled with another man, who lodged a complaint against him with the Chief of Police, and he cast him into prison. When the news came to the merchant's wife, she nearly lost her mind. Then she arose and--putting on her richest clothes--went to the house of the Chief of Police. She Greeted him and presented him with a petition which read, "The man you have imprisoned is my brother So-and-So, who had a fight with someone; but those who testified against him lied. He has been wrongfully imprisoned, and I have no one else to live with or to support me; therefore I beg you graciously to release him."

When the Chief had read the petition, he looked at her and immediately fell in love with her; so he said to her, "Go into my house, till I bring him out; then I will send for you and you may take him away."

"O, my lord," she replied, "I have no one to protect me except almighty God. I cannot enter any strange man's home."

The Chief said, "I will not let him go unless you come to my home and let me do what I will with you."

She answered, "If it must be, you must come to my home and sleep through the afternoon and evening there."

"And where is your home?" he asked; and she answered, "At such-and-such a place," and arranged a time for him to come.

Then she left him, who had entirely fallen in love with her, and went to the Cadi of the city, to whom she said, "O, our lord the Cadi!"

He said, "Yes?" and she continued, "Examine my case and you will be rewarded God."

He said, "Who has wronged you?" and she replied, "O my lord, I have a brother, my only brother, and it is on his behalf that I come to you, because the Chief has imprisoned him as a criminal and men have borne false witness against him, claiming that he is an evil man, and I beg you to intercede for him with the Chief of Police."

When the Cadi gazed at her, he immediately fell in love with her and said, "Go into the house and rest awhile with the women in my harm while I send to the Chief to release your brother. If I knew how much his fine was, I would pay it myself out of my own purse so that I could enjoy you, for your sweet speech greatly pleases me.:

She said, "If you, O my lord, are to behave in this way, we would not be able to blame others."

Said he, "If you will not come in, go away."

Then she said, "If you insist, O our lord, it will be better and more private at my place than in yours, for here there are slave-girls and eunuchs and people coming and going; and indeed I am not this sort of woman, but I see that I must give in."

The Cadi asked, "And where is your house?" and she answered, "In such-and-such a place, and set for him the same day and time as the Chief of Police.

Then she went from him to the Vizier, to whom she offered her petition for the release from prison of her brother, who was absolutely necessary to her; but he also demanded she give herself to him, saying "Allow me to do what I will with you and I will set your brother free."

She said, "If you insist, let it be in my house, for there we shall both have more privacy. It is not far away, and you I will wash and dress myself properly for you.

He asked, "Where is your house."

"In such-and-such a place," she answered, and set the same time for as for the two others.

Then she left him to go to the King and told him her story and sought her brother's release. "Who imprisoned him?" he asked; and she replied, "It was the Chief of Police." When the King heard her speech, it pierced his heart with arrows of love, and he asked her to enter this private chamber with him so that he might send to the Cadi to have her brother released.

But she said, "O King, everything is easy for you, whether I agree or not; and if the King indeed wants me, I am fortunate; but if he will come to my house he will do me more honor by entering it, as the poet says: "O my friends, have you seen or have you heard of his visit whose virtues I hold so high?"

The King said, "I do not disagree." So she set for him the same time as the three others and told him where her house was.

Then she left him and sought out a carpenter, and told him "I want you to make me a cabinet with four compartments, one above the other, each with a door that can be locked. Let me know how much it will cost and I will pay it."

He replied, "My price is four dinars; but, sweet lady, if you will grant me your favors, I will charge you nothing."

She answered, "If it is absolutely necessary, I will agree; but in that case make five compartments with their padlocks," and she told him to bring it exactly on the day required.

He said, "This is well; sit down, O my lady, and I will make it for you immediately, and then will come with you." So she sat down by him while he began working on the cabinet; and when he had finished it she asked to have it carried home at once and set up in her sitting-room. Then she took four gowns and carried them to the dyer, who dyed each of them a different color; after which she prepared meat and drink, fruits, flowers, and perfumes.

Now when the appointed day came, she put on her costliest dress and adorned herself and scented herself, then spread the sitting-room with various kinds of rich carpets and sat down to await who should come.

The Cadi was the first to appear; and when she saw him, she rose to her feet and kissed the ground before him. Then, taking him by the hand, made him sit down by her on the couch and lay with him and fell to joking and toying with him. Soon he wanted to fulfill his desires with her, but she said, "O my lord, take off your clothes and turban and **put on this yellow robe and bonnet(1)**, while I bring you food and drink, and then you shall do what you will." So saying, she took his clothes and turban and dressed him in the robe and bonnet; but hardly had she done this when there was a knocking at the door.

He asked, "Who is that knocking at the door?" and she answered, "My husband!"

"What shall I do? Where shall I go?" the Cadi said.

"Have no fear," she replied; "I will hide you in this cabinet;" and he answered, "Do whatever you think necessary." So she took him by the hand, and pushing him into the lowest compartment, locked the door on him. Then she went to the door of the house, where she found the Chief; so she kissed the ground before him, and taking his hand, brought him into the sitting-room and said to him, "O my lord, make this house your own, this place your place, and I will be your servant. You shall spend all days with me; so take off your clothes and put on this red sleeping gown." So she took away his clothes and made him put on the red gown and set on his head an old patched rag she happened to have; after which she sat by him on the divan and they toyed with each other until he reached to touch her intimately, whereupon she said to him, "O our lord, this is your day, and no one will share it with us; but first, if you will be so kind and generous, write me an order for my brother's release from jail so that my heart can rest easy."

He said, "I hear and obey, by my head and eyes!" and wrote a letter to his treasurer saying, "As soon as this communication reaches you, set So-and-so free, without delay. Do not even wait to give the messenger an answer." Then he sealed it and she took it from him, after which she began to toy with him on the divan again when someone suddenly knocked at the door.

"Who is that?" he asked; and she answered, "My husband." "What shall I do?" he asked, and she replied, "Enter this cabinet, till I send him away and return to you."

So she set him up in the second compartment from the bottom and padlocked the door; and meanwhile the Cadi heard everything they said. Then she went to the house door and opened it, and in entered the Vizier. She kissed the ground before him and received him with all honor, saying "O my lord, you flatter us by coming to our house; may God never deprive us of the light of your countenance!"

Then she seated him on the divan and said to him, "O my lord, take off your heavy clothes and turban and put on these lighter garments." So he took off his clothes and turban and she dressed him in a blue shirt and a tall red bonnet, and said to him, "Those were your official robes; so leave them be for their own time and put on this light gown which is more suitable for carousing and making merry and sleep." Then they began to play with each other, and he was just about to take her when she put him off by saying, "We will get to that."

As they were talking there came a knock at the door, and the Vizier asked her, "Who is that?" to which she replied, "My husband." "What is to be done?" he said; and she answered, "Hide in this cabinet until I can get rid of him and come back to you; don't be afraid." So she put him in the third compartment and locked the door on him, after which she went out and opened the house door, and in came the King.

As soon as she saw him she kissed the ground before him, and taking him by the hand, led him into the sitting-room and seated him on the divan at the far end. Then she said to him, "Truly, O King, you honor us highly, and whatever we might give you of all the world contains would not be worth a single one of your steps toward us." And when he had sat down on the divan she said, "Permit me to say one thing."

"Whatever you wish," he answered; and she said, "O my lord, relax and take off your robe and turban." His clothes were worth a thousand dinars; but when he took them off she dressed him in a patched gown worth ten dirhams at the very most, and began talking and joking with him. All this time the men in the cabinet heard everything that went on but did not dare to say a word. Soon the King placed his hand on her breast and sought to fulfill his desire for her; but she said "We will do this soon, but first I promised myself that I would entertain you properly in this room, and I have something to please you."

As they were speaking, someone knocked at the door and he asked her, "Who is that?" "My husband," she answered; and he said, "Make him go away voluntarily, or I will go out and force him to go away."

She replied, "No, O my lord, be patient while I send him away using my cleverness." "And what shall I do?" asked the King; whereupon she took him by the hand and, making him enter the fourth compartment of the cabinet, locked it upon him.

Then she went out and opened the house door to the carpenter, who entered and greeted her. She said, "What kind of a cabinet is this you've made me?" "What's wrong with it, O my lady?" he asked; and she answered, "The top compartment is too narrow." He replied, "No it isn't," and she answered, "Get in yourself and see; you cannot fit in it."

He answered, "it is wise enough for four," and entered the fifth compartment, whereupon she locked the door on him.

Then she took the letter of the Chief of Police and carried it to the treasurer who, having read and understood it, kissed it and delivered her lover to her. She told him all she had done and he said, "But what shall we do now?" She answered, "We will move away to another city, for after all this we cannot remain here." So the two of them packed up what possessions they had and, loading them on camels, set out immediately for another city.

Meanwhile, the five men remained each in his compartment of the cabinet without eating or drinking for three whole days, during which time they held their water, until at last the carpenter couldn't hold back any longer, so he pissed on the King's head, and the King pissed on the Vizier's head, and the Vizier pissed on the Chief, and the Chief pissed on the Cadi, whereupon the Cadi shouted, "What filth is this? Isn't it bad enough that we are trapped like this that you have to piss all over us?"

The Chief of Police recognized the Cadi's voice and answered, "May God reward you, O Cadi!" And when the Cadi heard him, he knew it was the Chief. Then the Chief shouted, "What's the meaning of this filth?" and the Vizier replied, "May God reward you, O Chief!" so that he recognized him as the Vizier. Then the Vizier shouted "What is this nastiness?" But when the King heard his Vizier's voice he recognized it, so he kept silent to conceal his plight.

Then the vizier said, "May God curse this woman for the way she has dealt with us. She has brought together here all the chief officials of the state, except the King. Said the King, "Silence! For I was the first one to be entrapped by this shameless whore."

At this the carpenter cried out, "And what have I done? I made her a cabinet for four gold pieces, and when I came to get my pay, she tricked me into entering this compartment and locked the door on me." And they began talking with each other, diverting the King and reducing his shame.

Soon, however, the neighbors came by the house and noticed it was deserted. They said to one another, "Only yesterday, our neighbor the wife of So-and-so was home; but no we cannot hear or see anyone. Let's break down the doors and see what is the matter; or news of the case may come to the Chief of the King, and we will be thrown into prison to regret that we had not taken action earlier."

So they broke down the doors and entered the sitting room, where they saw a large wooden cabinet and heard the men in it groaning with hunger and thirst. Then one of them said, "Is there a **Genie** (2) in this cabinet?" and another said, "Let's pile fuel around it and burn it up."

When the Cadi heard this, he cried out, "Don't!" and they said to each other, "The Genies pretend they are mortals and speak with the voices of men." Thereupon the Cadi recited a passage from the Blessed Qur'an, and said to the neighbors, "Come closer to the cabinet."

So they came closer, and he told him, "I am So-and-so the Cadi, and you are so and so, and here we are all together." The neighbors said, "Who put you in here?" And he told them the whole story from beginning to end. They brought a carpenter to open the five doors and let out the Cadi, the Vizier, the Chief, the King and the carpenter in their bizarre robes; and each one, when he saw how the others were dressed, began laughing at them. She had taken away all their clothes; so all of them sent to their homes for fresh clothing and put it on and went out, shielding themselves from people's eyes.