

The Voyage of Sinbad the Sailor

Retold by Geraldine McCaughrean

From early, pre-Islamic trading days to this period of conquest and rapid expansion, Arabian storytellers wove tales of imaginative adventures. Here is one of them.

This tale is from a collection of stories called One Thousand and One Arabian Nights. The storyteller is a queen who tells her husband a different story every night. As you read, think about her purpose. Does she want to teach, or just to entertain? What do you think her next story will be about?

A story is carried from Baghdad—though who can tell if it is true?—of a young man called Sinbad the Porter. Sinbad was known at all the local inns for his beautiful singing voice, and he would often sing in return for a coin or a bite to eat. He was summoned one day to a great house built of white and wine-coloured marble on the skirts of the city. An old man was sitting on the vine-covered terrace, and asked him to sing—which he willingly did:

*Oh I have carried golden treasure
Half across Arabia's sands,
And I have seen the cost of pleasure
Pouring out of rich men's hands.
But do not think of me as rich, sir,
Because I carry treasure chests,
For I count myself much richer
when I lay them down and rest.
I am just a poor young porter—
All my meat is caught from rivers,
All the wines I drink are water—
All I carry, I deliver.*

The song pleased the old man, and he took a great liking to the Porter.

"The pleasure a good song gives can't be paid for with money alone," said the old man. "Let me give you something of mine. I shall give you the story of my life, which is moderately interesting. My name is Sinbad too. But I am Sinbad the Sailor."

I was born the son of a rich father who died and left me a lot of money. Being a particularly clever boy, I made the sensible decision to invest the money. I invested it in drink and expensive food and stylish clothes and in buying myself a lot of friends at the local inn. Before long I found that my investment had left me with hardly a penny. To tell you the truth, I did not want to be poor in my old age.

So I sold everything I owned and bought instead a silk-sailed ship and cargo. I employed a captain, and we set sail for the rest of the world, turning a furrow through the sea as straight and certain as an arrow through a blue sky. I was confident of making my fortune as a merchant.

One day a solitary island came into view from the mast top—two or three trees and a smooth, grey beach the colour of the atolls in the great Western Ocean.

Some of the sailors were tired of the blood swelling in their veins with the motion of the ship, and we took it into our heads to draw alongside the island and walk about on dry land. The captain was sleeping below decks. We did not trouble to wake him: a friendly fire, a baked fish, a short walk, and we would be ready to set off again. Two of the men even brought a laundry barrel from the ship to do their washing in.

Ali lit a fire, and I made a tour of the island, but there was not a lot to recommend it. We were just deciding that no one could live there, without fresh water, when suddenly Abdul caught sight of a fountain—a geyser, rather—at a great distance from us. Its water gushed higher and higher, seemingly to the height of a castle tower, then dropped out of sight.

"I have been aboard ships for too long—the ground still seems to be moving," I said, embarrassed by losing my balance and falling over. Then the captain's voice drifted to us on the wind.

"Aboard! Aboard! Or you are all dead men!"

"The island is sinking!" someone cried.

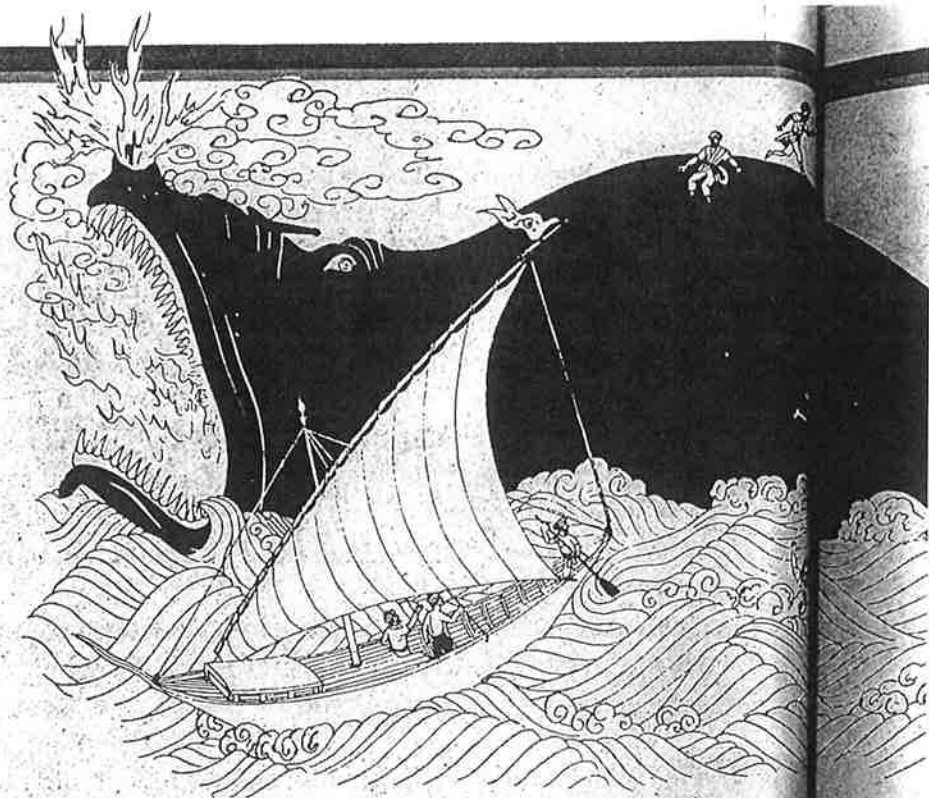
"The island is moving!" shouted another.

A deep roaring beneath us was followed by a second eruption of water from the geyser. It spouted so high that the spray reached us on the wind and soaked us to the skin in a second.

Amidst the spray, I could just see the captain giving orders for the ship to pull away. The space of water opened between our landing party and the vessel. Some men ran to the water and leapt in. Others shouted at the captain, calling him names or begging him to pull ashore again. Only one or two of his words reached us across the opening gap.

"Whale! . . . Fire has woken the whale . . ."

Well may you hold your head in wonder, friend. We had indeed moored alongside a giant whale, and the fire we had lit on its back had disturbed it out of a sleep centuries long. The sandy



silt of the ocean had washed over the whale, and the winds had brought seeds and spores and planted its sparse vegetation. But as it rolled in pain, our fire beginning to burn through its hide (and making an awful stench), the shallow-rooted trees were washed away like toothpicks, and the sand swirled round our knees as we stumbled to and fro. The whale dived.

One sailor was thrown high out of the water by the massive tail—believe me, friend, those tail-flukes were larger than galleon sails—and the tail fell on us like the greatest tree in all the gum forests of Arabia.

To the end of my days I shall weary Allah with my thanks. The barrel full of my fellow sailors' washing rolled towards me across the water. I pulled myself across it and floated away, while my sailor friends swam down with the whale to the kingdom where only the fish can breathe. Friend, friend, it makes me sweat salt-water only to think about it.

The ship had long since gone. I was alone on the ocean with the smell of scorched whale in my nostrils. I began to paddle with my feet, and my lonely voyage, as you can imagine, was so long and tiring that I do not remember reaching land.

I woke up beside my barrel on a white beach to find, to my great surprise, that I was alive. I also found that the fish had eaten many holes in my feet, and only with pain and difficulty did I climb the beach and explore.

I saw no one, friend, and nothing. Under the trees the undergrowth was thick—a perfect home for wild animals. Why else did I climb that tree? But from the topmost branches I could see a long, long way.

I saw no one, friend, and nothing. In another direction, however, I glimpsed a shining white dome. Surely it was a fine



mosque at the heart of a splendid city. Its white curve seemed so massive that I was almost afraid to approach.

When I finally reached it, I walked around it five times before I gave up hope of finding a door. Its whiteness was dazzling in the sun. I tried to climb up it, but the white surface was so polished and smooth that I slithered down to the ground again every time. I exhausted myself in the mid-day heat, and that is why I was sitting on the ground in the shade of the white dome when the sun went dark.

I have seen tropical suns set like a single clap of hands. I have seen the moon forget its rightful place and push in front of the sun. But this was no eclipse or sunset.

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.

Further Reading

Casilda of the Rising Sun. Elizabeth B. deTrevino. Set in 11th-century Spain, this is a romantic story about the daughter of a Moorish king.

The Legend of the Cid. Robert Goldston. The Cid, Rodrigo de Vivar, fought both Moors and Christians in 11th-century Spain.

One Thousand and One Arabian Nights. Retold by Geraldine McCaughrean. More tales of adventure, including several about Sinbad.