

## ONE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS, 1100-1200 CE

*Also known as Arabian Nights, the multiauthored, massive work One Thousand and One Nights brings together centuries of tales and legends from Persian, Arabic, Indian, and Mesopotamian traditions. The first Arabic version dates to twelfth-century Cairo, Egypt. This composite work is held together by the story of Scheherazade, a Persian queen who stays at the moment of her execution by engaging Shahryar, a king who beheaded each virginal wife the day after their marriage, in in-triguing cliffhanger stories. The most famous selections from this work are the tales of Aladdin and Sinbad; this selection reveals a comical, irreverent side of Scheherazade's voice and hints at mutual views of contemporary Muslims, Jews, and Christians sharing a common public space.*

"This tale, however, is not more wonderful than the story of what happened in the case of the tailor, the hunchback, the Jew, the inspector and the Christian." "What was that?" asked the king, AND SHAHRAZAD EXPLAINED:

I have heard, O fortunate king, that once upon a time, in the old days, in the city of China there lived a tailor, an open-handed man with a liking for pleasure and entertainment. He used to go out with his wife from time to time to see the sights. One afternoon, the two of them went early and came back home towards the evening. On their way home, they found a hunch-back whose strange appearance would raise a laugh even from a man who had been cheated in a bargain and which would dispel the grief of the sad. The tailor and his wife went over to look at him, and they invited him to come home with them to keep them company that night. He agreed and accompanied them.

Night had now fallen, and the tailor went off to the market, where he bought a fried fish, together with bread, lemons, and a milky dessert. On return-ing, he set the fish before the hunchback, and they ate. His wife then took a large bit of fish and crammed it into her guest's mouth, which she covered with her hand, telling him that he had to swallow it in one gulp. "And I shall not allow you to chew it." The hunchback did swallow it, but it contained a solid bone that stuck in his throat, and, his allotted span having come to an end, he died.

The morning had now dawned, and Shahrazad broke off from what she had been allowed to say. Then, when it was the twenty-fifth night, SHE CONTINUED:

I have heard, O auspicious king, that when the tailor's wife gave the hunchback a mouthful of fish to eat, as his allotted span had ended, he died instantly. "There is no might and no power except with God," exclaimed the tailor. "Poor man, that he should die like this at our hands!" "Why are you wasting time?" said his wife. "Haven't you heard what the poet says:

Why do I try to console myself with the impossible  
When I have never met a friend who bears my sorrows?  
How can one sit on a fire before it is put out?  
To sit on fire brings harm."

"What am I to do?" asked her husband. "Get up," she said. "Carry the man in your arms and spread a silk covering over him. We must do this tonight, and I shall go in front, with you following behind. You are to say: 'This is my son and this is his mother, and we are taking him to see the doctor.'" On hearing this, the tailor got up and carried the hunchback in his arms, while his wife kept saying: "My son, may you recover; what is painning you and where are the symptoms of small-pox showing?" Everyone who saw them said: "These people have a child with smallpox." They continued on their way, asking for the doctor's house, until they were directed to the house of a Jewish physician. They knocked on the door

and down came a black slave girl, who opened it. When she saw a man carrying a child and accompanied by a woman, she asked: "What's the matter?" The tailor's wife replied: "We have a child with us and we would like the doctor to have a look at him. Take this quarter dinar, give it to your master, and let him come down to see my sick son." The girl went up and the tailor's wife came through the door and said to her husband: "Leave the hunchback here and then let's make our escape." The tailor agreed, and propping the hunchback against the wall, he and his wife made off.

The slave girl went to the Jew and told him: "There is someone at the door with a sick person. His wife is with him, and he has handed me a quarter dinar for you to go down to look at him and to prescribe something suitable." The Jew, delighted to see the money, got up quickly and went off in the dark, but as soon as he put his foot down, he stumbled over the corpse. "O Ezra!" he cried. "O Moses and the Ten Commandments! O Aaron and Joshua, son of Nun! I seem to have stumbled over this sick man, and he has fallen down the stairs and died. How can I get the corpse out of my house? He carried it inside and told his wife what had happened. She said: "Why are you sitting there? If you wait until daybreak, then both you and I will lose our lives. We have to take him up to the roof and drop him onto the house of our neighbor, the Muslim. As he is an inspector in charge of the king's kitchens, if he is left there overnight, the dogs will come down from the roofs and drag it off, for they do a great deal of damage to all the stuff that he brings home."

So the Jew and his wife went up to their roof, carrying the hunchback, and they lowered him to the ground by his arms and legs, leaving him by the wall, before going off. No sooner had they done this than the inspector came home, opened the door, and went up, carrying a lighted candle. He noticed a man standing in the corner under the ventilation shaft. "By God!" he exclaimed. "This is a fine thing! It must have been a man who has been stealing my stores!" Turning to the corpse, he said: "It was you who has been stealing the meat and the fat when I thought it was the cats and dogs of the neighborhood. I have put myself in the wrong by killing them when all the time it was you, coming down from the roof." He took up a large hammer and, brandishing it, he went up to the corpse and struck it on the breast. When he found that the man was dead, he was moved with grief, and, fearing for his own life, he exclaimed: "There is no might and no power except with God Almighty! May God curse the fat and the sheep's tail!" He then added: "How was it that I brought this man's life to an end with my own hand?" The inspector looked at his victim and found that he was a hunchback. "Wasn't it enough for you to be a hunchback," he asked, "that you had to become a thief and steal meat and fat? O God, the Shelterer, cloak me with Your gracious covering." He then hoisted the corpse on to his shoulders as the night was ending and took it out of his house. He continued to carry it until he reached the edge of the market, where he propped it up at the side of a shop at the head of an alley. He then left the corpse and made off.

A Christian, the king's broker, was the next to appear on the scene. He was drunk and had come out to go to the baths, realizing in his drunkenness, that it was nearly time for matins. He went on, staggering as he walked, until, when he was near the corpse, he squatted down to urinate. Then, casting a sideways glance, he saw someone standing there. As it happened, at the beginning of that night, his turban had been stolen, and when he saw the hunchback leaning against the wall, he imagined the man meant to steal the one that he now had on. So he balled his fist and struck the hunchback on the neck, falling him to the ground. He called to the market watchman, and then, in excess of his drunkenness, he

set about belaboring the corpse and trying to strangle it. The watchman came up and found the Christian kneeling on the Muslim and hitting him. "What has he done?" he asked. The Christian said: "He wanted to steal my turban." "Get away from him," ordered the watchman, and when the Christian had got up, he went to the hunchback and found him dead. "By God," he said, "this is a fine thing Christian kill-ing a Muslim," and after having tied the Christian's hands, he took him to the house of the wali. All the while, the Christian was saying to himself: "O Mes-siah, O Holy Virgin, how could I have killed this man and how quickly he died from a single blow!" Drunkenness vanished to be replaced by care, and the Christian, together with the hunchback, spent the rest of the night until morning in the wali's house.

In the morning, the wali sentenced "the killer" to be hanged. The executioner was ordered to pro-claim his crime; a gallows was set up under which the Christian was made to stand, and the execu-tioner came and put a rope around his neck. He was on the point of hanging him when the inspec-tor made his way through the crowd. When he saw the Christian about to be hanged, he cleared a way for himself and then said: "Don't do it; it was I who killed him." "Why did you do that?" asked the wali. "I came home last night," he said, "and found that he had come down through the ventilation shaft and had stolen my goods, so I struck him on the chest with a hammer, and he died. I carried him off to the market and propped him up in a lane nearby." He added: "It is not enough for me to have killed a Muslim that I should kill a Christian as well? I am the one to be hanged." On hearing this, the wali freed the Christian and told the executioner to hang the inspector on his own confession. The executioner took the rope from the neck of the king's broker and put it around that of the inspector, who was made to stand under the gallows.

He was about to be hanged when, all of a sudden, the Jewish doctor came through the crowd, shouting to them and to the executioner: "Don't do it! It was I and I alone who killed him. I was at home last night when a man and a woman knocked at my door, bringing with them this hunchback who was sick. They gave my servant girl a quarter of a dinar. She told me about them and handed me the money, but it turned out that the pair had brought the hunchback into the house, left him on the stairs, and gone off. I came down to look at him, but in the darkness, I tripped over him, and he fell down to the bottom of the stairs, killing himself on the spot. My wife and I carried him up to the roof and lowered him into the ventilation shaft of this inspector who lives next door to us. The man was dead, but when the inspector came and found him in his house, he took him for a thief and struck him with a hammer so that he fell to the ground, leav-ing the inspector to think he had killed him. Isn't it enough for me to have unknowingly killed one Muslim that I should knowingly be responsible for the death of another?" When the wali heard this, he told the executioner to release the inspector and to hang the Jew. The execu-tioner took him and put the rope around his neck, but at that, the tailor came through the crowd and told him to stop: "It was I and I alone who killed the man. Yesterday I went out to see the sights, and in the evening, I met this hunchback, drunk and singing at the top of his voice to his tambourine. I invited him home and bought a fish, which we sat down to eat. My wife took a piece of it and made it into a mouthful; she crammed it into his gullet, where a bit of it stuck, killing him instantly. Then, my wife and I took him to the Jew's house. The servant girl came down and opened the door for us, and I told her to tell her master that a woman and a man were at the door with a sick person and to ask him to come and look at him. I gave her a quarter of a dinar, and while she went up to her master, I

carried the hunchback to the head of the stairs and propped him up there, after which my wife and I went away. The Jew came down and tripped over the hunchback and thought that he had killed him. Is that right?" he asked the Jew. "Yes," said the Jew, at which the tailor turned to the wali and said: "Release the Jew and hang me."

When the wali heard what he had to say, he was astonished by the whole affair, which he said should be recorded in books. Then he told the executioner to release the Jew and to hang the tailor on his own confession. "I'm tired of this," complained the executioner. "I bring one man forward and put another one back and no one gets hanged." Then he put the rope round the tailor's neck.

So much for these people, but as for the hunchback, the story goes that he was the king's fool and that the king could not bear to be parted from him. After getting drunk, he had left the king and had been away all night. As he was still not back by midday the next day, the king asked some of his courtiers about him, and they replied: "Master, his dead body was brought to the wali, who ordered his killer to be hanged. Then a second and third person arrived, each of them claiming to have killed him and each telling the wali the reason for it." When the king heard this, he called to his chamberlain, telling him to go to the wali and to fetch him all those concerned.

When the chamberlain went there, he found the executioner about to hang the tailor. "Don't do it!" he shouted, and he told the wali what the king had said. He then brought everyone, the wali, the tailor, the Jew, the Christian, and the inspector, and had the corpse of the hunchback carried along with them. When the wali stood before the king, he kissed the ground and told him what had happened to each of them and that there was nothing to be gained from repetition. The king himself was filled with amazement and delight at the story and gave orders that it should be recorded in letters of gold. He then asked those present whether they had ever heard anything more astonishing than the story of that hunchback.

At that, the Christian came forward and said: "Your majesty, if you give me leave, I will tell you of something that happened to me which was more remarkable, stranger, and more entertaining than the story of the hunchback." When the king told him to produce his story, HE SAID: ...

### **Document Questions:**

1. How does the story particularly satirize Jews and Christians living among Muslims?
2. How does the story suggest that it is human nature to cover up one's mistakes and come to erroneous conclusions?