



THE SULTAN WHO LOVED THE STORYTELLER

The kingdom let out a sigh of relief yesterday as the Sultan finally lifted the death sentence on all his brides.

His reason? He has fallen in love.

This could not be more different from his feelings three years ago, when he stunned the international community by ordering his first wife killed because she had been unfaithful to him.

The once kind and popular ruler then shocked the subjects of this tiny Arabian kingdom by marrying a string of women after her and executing each one after the wedding night.

He reportedly told his ministers: "All women are wicked."

The deaths sparked criticism from the United Nations as well as human rights groups, which have called on other countries to stop trading with the oil-rich state.

But the Sultan ignored all warnings, saying the executions were his way of protecting himself from being betrayed again.

Every evening for a few months, he married a new woman and had her strangled the next morning in front of his Chief Minister, whose job it was to find these unlucky women.

Every family with daughters feared for their lives.

The Chief Minister himself had two girls, Shahrazad and Dinarzade.

Shahrazad told him: "Don't worry, Dad. I have a way to stop this butchery."

She asked if she could be the Sultan's next bride. The Chief Minister was horrified by this idea, but she pleaded till he gave in, say palace insiders.

After she married the Sultan, she asked if her sister Dinarzade could sleep in their room — "to keep me company", she said.

It was all part of her plan. An hour before dawn on the day she was to be executed, she told Dinarzade to wake up and ask for a story.

Shahrazad, a gifted storyteller, would then weave one of her charming tales while her sister and the Sultan both listened.

But cleverly, she ended her story with a cliffhanger just as the sun came up. The Sultan wanted to know how the yarn ended, so he let her live another day.

Every morning after that, Shahrazad cunningly ended the previous night's tale and started a new one in such a way as to leave the Sultan enraptured, so she would not be executed.

This continued for a thousand and one nights. During that time, she bore the Sultan three sons and convinced him of her faithfulness and love.

Yesterday, the palace released a statement saying the death sentence had been lifted.

But the Sultan's critics aren't satisfied.

A spokesman for Amnesty International, the human rights group, said: "He hasn't even apologized properly. He should be tried for murder at the International Criminal Court."

The controversy has not hurt Queen Shahrazad's new career, however. She is in talks to publish some of her stories, which include Ali Baba And The Forty Thieves, Sindbad The Sailor and Aladdin.

BACKGROUND

The stories that Shahrazad (also spelt "Scheherazade") told the Sultan to avoid being executed make up a collection of tales known as The Arabian Nights, or The Book Of One Thousand And One Nights.

It is believed that they originated in Baghdad during the reign of Caliph Harun Al-Rashid during the 8th century.

At that time, Baghdad was an important cosmopolitan city, very much like New York is today. Merchants from all over the world went there to trade and do business. As they gathered, they shared the myths and folklore from their hometowns.

Eventually, an Arabian storyteller, Abu Abd-Allah Muhammed El-Gahshigar, gathered all these stories into a book, which was then translated by Sir Richard Burton in 1885 into the English version we know today.

FAB VOCAB

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The world

CRITICISM

Negative remarks about something

INSIDERS

People who have special knowledge due to their position

HORRIFIED

Shocked

CLIFFHANGER

An incomplete ending that makes the audience wonder what happens next

YARN

A long story

CUNNINGLY

Showing cleverness, especially in deceiving others

ENRAPTURED

Very attentive, concentrating fully on something

RELEASED A STATEMENT

Made an announcement, usually in writing, about a subject that concerns several people

PUBLISH

To turn into a book or article

IF YOU ENJOYED THIS, READ

The Arabian Nights (Penguin Popular Classics)

By Richard Francis Burton

The Flag Of Childhood: Poems From The Middle East

By Naomi Shihab Nye

Aladdin And Other Tales From The Arabian Nights

By W. Heath Robinson