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**MARC CHAGALL**

*Arabian Nights*



# Friends, as I told you yesterday,

I lived a most enjoyable life of unalloyed pleasure until it occurred to me one day to travel abroad, and I felt a longing for trading, seeing other countries and islands, and making profit. Having made my resolve, I took out a large sum of money and bought goods and travel gear, packed them up, and went down to the shore. There I found a fine new ship, with sails of good cloth, numerous crewmen, and abundant equipment. I loaded my bales on it, as did a group of other merchants, and we sailed in the same day. We sailed under fair weather and journeyed from sea to sea and from island to island, and wherever we landed, we met merchants, high officials, and sellers and buyers, and we sold, bought and bartered.

We continued in this fashion until fate brought us to a beautiful island abounding with trees, ripe fruits, fragrant flowers, singing birds, and clear streams, but there was not a single inhabitant nor a breathing soul around. The captain anchored the ship at the island, and the merchant and other passengers landed there, to divert themselves with the sight of the trees and birds and to glorify the One Omnipotent God and wonder at the power of the Almighty King. I landed with the rest and sat down by a spring of pure water among the trees. I had

with me some food, and I sat there eating what the Almighty God had allotted me. The breeze was cool, and the place was pleasant; so I dozed off and rested there until the sweetness of the breeze and fragrance of the flowers lulled me into a deep sleep.

When I awoke, I did not find a single soul around, neither man nor demon. The ship had sailed off with all the passengers and had left me behind, none of the merchants or the crew taking any notice of me. I searched right and left, but found no one but myself. I felt extremely unhappy and outraged, and my spleen was about to burn from the severity of my anxiety, grief, and fatigue, for I was all alone with nothing of worldly goods and without food or drink. I felt desolate and despaired of life, saying to myself, "Not every time is the jar saved in time. If I escaped safely the first time, by finding someone who took me with him from the shore of that island to the inhabited part, this time I'm very far from the prospect of finding someone who will deliver me out of here." Then I began to weep and wail for myself until I was completely overcome by grief, blaming myself for what I had done and for having embarked on the hardships of travel, after I had been reposing peacefully in my own house and in my own country, happily enjoying good food and good drink and good clothes, without need of money or goods. I regretted leaving Baghdad on this sea journey, especially after the hardships I had endured on the first journey and after my destruction, saying, "We are God's and to God we return." I felt like a madman.

At last, I arose and began to walk on the island, turning right and left, unable to sit still in any one place. When I climbed a tall tree and looked to the right and left but saw nothing but sky and water and trees and birds and islands and sands. Then I looked closely and saw a large, white object. I climbed down and walked in its direction until I reached it and found it to be a huge white dome of great height and circumference. I drew closer and walked around it but found that it had no door, and because of its extreme smoothness, I had neither the power nor the nimbleness to climb it. I marked the spot where I stood and went around the dome to measure its circumference and found it to be a good fifty paces. I stood, thinking of a way to get inside, as the day was about to end and the sun was about to set. Suddenly, the sun

disappeared, and it grew dark. I therefore thought that a cloud had come over the sun, but since it was summer, I wondered at that. I raised my head to look at the object and saw that it was a great bird, with a huge body and outspread wings, flying in the air and veiling the sun from the island. My wonder increased, and I recalled a story I heard from tourists and travellers that there is on certain islands an enormous bird, called the Rukh, which feeds its young on elephants, and I became certain that the dome I saw was one of the Rukh's eggs and wondered at the works of God the Almighty.

While I was in this state, the bird alighted on the egg and brooded over it with its wing and, stretching its legs behind on the ground, went to sleep. Glory be to Him who never sleeps! I unwound my turban, twisted it with a rope and, girding my waist with it, tied it fast to the bird's feet, saying to myself, "Perhaps, this bird will carry me to a land where there are cities and people. That will be better than staying on this island." I spent that night without sleep, fearing that the bird might fly with me while I was unaware. When dawn broke and it was light, the bird rose from its egg, uttered a loud cry, and flew with me up into the sky. It soared higher and higher until I thought that it had reached the pinnacle of heaven. Then it began to descend gradually until it alighted with me on the ground, resting on a high place. As soon as I reached the ground, I hastened to unbind myself, and, loosening my turban from its feet, while shaking with fear, although it was unaware and took no notice of me, I walked away. Then it picked up something with its talons from the ground and flew high into the sky. When I looked at it carefully, I saw that it was an enormous serpent, which the bird had taken and flown with toward the sea. And I wondered at that.

Then I walked about the place and found myself on a crest overlooking a large, wide, and deep valley, at the foot of a huge and lofty mountain which was so high that no one could see the top nor climb to it, so I blamed myself for what I had done, saying, "I wish that I had stayed on the island, which is better than this desolate place, for there I might at least have eaten of its various fruits and drunk from its streams, whereas this place has neither trees nor fruits nor streams. There is no power and no

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strength save in God the Almighty, the Magnificent. Every time I escape from a calamity, I fall into one that is greater and more perilous." Then I arose and, gathering my strength, walked in that valley and saw that its ground was composed of diamonds, with which they perforate minerals and jewels, as well as porcelain and onyx, which is such a hard and dense stone that neither stone nor steel has any effect on it and which nobody can cut or break except with the leadstone. Moreover the valley was full of serpents and snakes, each as big as a palm tree, indeed so huge that it could swallow an elephant. These serpents came out at night and hid themselves during the day, fearing that the Rukh or eagles might carry them away and cut them into pieces, for a reason of which I was unaware. I stood there, regretting what I had done and saying to myself, "My God, I have hastened my own destruction."

As the day was waning, I walked in that valley and began looking for a place to spend the night, being afraid of the serpents, forgetting my food and drink and subsistence, and thinking only of saving my life. Soon I saw a cave nearby. It had a narrow entrance, and when I went in I saw a big stone lying by that entrance. I pushed the stone and closed the entrance from the inside, saying to myself, "I am safe here now, and as soon as it is day, I will go out and see what fate will bring."

But when I took a look inside, I saw a huge snake brooding over its eggs. My hair stood on end, and I raised my head, committing myself to fate and divine decree. I spent the entire night without sleep, and as soon as it was dawn, I removed the stone with which I had closed the entrance of the cave and went out, like a drunken man, feeling dizzy from excessive hunger, sleeplessness, and fear.

I walked in the valley in this condition, when suddenly a big slaughtered sheep fell before me. When I saw no one else around, I was amazed, and I recalled a story I used to hear a long time ago from some merchants, tourists, and travellers that the mountains of the diamonds are so perilous that no one can gain access to them, but that the merchants who deal in diamonds employ a device to get them. They take a sheep, slaughter it, skin it, cut up the meat, and throw it from the top of the mountain into the

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valley. When the meat falls, still fresh, the diamonds stick to it. Then they leave it there till midday, when the eagles and vultures swoop down on it, picking it up with their talons, and fly with it to the top of the mountain. The merchants then rush, shouting at them, and scare them away from the meat. Then the merchants come to the meat, take the diamonds sticking to it, and carry them back to their country. No one can obtain diamonds except by this device.

When I saw the slaughtered sheep and recalled that story, I approached the carcass and began to pick a great number of diamonds and put them in my pockets and the folds of my clothes, and I continued to fill my pockets, my clothes, my belt and my turban. While I was thus engaged, another carcass suddenly fell before me. I bound myself to it with my turban and, lying on my back, placed it on my chest and held on to it. Thus it was raised above the ground. Suddenly, an eagle stooped down on it, caught it with his talons, and flew up into the air with it and with me clinging onto it. The eagle continued to soar until it reached the top of the mountain and, alighting there, was about to tear off a piece of meat, when suddenly a loud cry and the sound of clattering with a piece of wood came from behind the eagle, which took fright and fled away.

I unbound myself from the carcass with my clothes stained with its blood, and stood by its side. Suddenly, the merchant, who had shouted at the eagle, approached the carcass and saw me standing there, but he did not utter a word, for he was frightened of me. Then he came closer to the carcass, and when he turned it over and found nothing on it, he uttered a loud cry and said, "What a disappointment! There is no power and no strength, save in God the Almighty, the Magnificent. May God save us from Satan the accursed," and he kept expressing regret, wringing his hands and saying "What a pity! How did this happen?" I went to him, and he said to me, "Who are you, and what brings you to this place?" I said to him, "don't be afraid, for I am a human being, and one of the best of men. I was a merchant, and I have a strange and extraordinary tale to tell, and the reason for my coming to this valley and this mountain is marvellous to relate. Don't worry, for you will receive from me what will please you. I





have with me a great deal of diamonds, each one better than what you should have gotten, and I will give you a portion that will satisfy you. Don't fear and don't worry." When he heard this, he thanked me and invoked a blessing on me, and we began to converse.

When the other merchants, each of whom had thrown down a slaughtered sheep, heard me conversing with their companion, they came to meet me. They saluted me, congratulated me on my safety, and took me with them. I told them my whole story, relating to them what I had suffered on this voyage and the cause of my coming to this valley. Then I gave the merchant, to whose slaughtered sheep I had attached myself, a large portion of diamonds, and that made him happy, and he thanked me and invoked a blessing on me, and the merchants said to me, "By God, you have been granted a new life, for no one has come to this place before and escaped from it, but God be praised for your safety." They spent the night in a pleasant and safe place, and I spent the night with them, extremely happy for my safe escape from the Valley of Serpents and my arrival in an inhabited place.

When it was morning, we arose and journeyed along the ridge of the high mountain, seeing many snakes in the valley below, and we continued talking until we came to a large and pleasant island with a grove of camphor-trees, each of which might provide a hundred men with shade. When someone wishes to obtain some camphor, he makes a perforation in the upper part of the tree, with a piercing rod and catches what descends from it. The liquid camphor, which is the juice of that tree, flows and later hardens, like gum. Afterwards the tree dries and becomes firewood. We also saw in that island, besides cattle, a kind of beast called the rhinoceros, which pastures as cows and buffalos do in our country, and feeds on the leaves of trees, but the body of that beast is bigger than that of a camel. It is a huge beast, with a single horn in the middle of its head, thick and twenty feet long and resembling the figure of a man. Travellers and tourists on land and in the mountains report that this beast called the rhinoceros carries a huge elephant on its horn and grazes with it in the island and on the shores, without feeling its weight, and when the elephant dies on the horn, its fat melts under the heat

of the sun and flows on the head of the rhinoceros and, entering his eyes, blinds it. Then it lies down by the shore, and the Rukh picks it up with its talons and carries it together with the elephant to feed them to its young. I also saw on that island a great number of a certain kind of buffalo, the like of which is not seen among us.

The merchants exchanged goods and provisions with me and paid me money for some of the diamonds I had carried in my pockets from the valley. They carried my goods for me, and I journeyed with them, from town to town and from valley to valley, buying and selling and viewing foreign countries and what God has created until we reached Basra, where I stayed for a few days, then headed for Baghdad. When I reached my quarter and entered my home, with a great quantity of diamonds and a considerable amount of goods and provisions, I met with my family and other relatives and gave them gifts and distributed presents to all my relatives and friends. Then I began to eat and drink well and wear handsome clothes, associating with friends and companions and forgetting all I had suffered, and I continued to lead a happy, merry, and care-free life of sport and merriment. And all who heard of my return came to me and inquired about my voyage and the countries I saw, and I told them, relating to them what I had seen and what I had suffered, and they were amazed at the extent of my hardships and congratulated me on my safety. That was the end of the second voyage. Tomorrow, the Almighty God willing, I will tell you the story of my third voyage.

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