

# ALI BABA AND THE FORTY THIEVES

from the Thousand and One Nights

Illustrated by Vladimir Tamari



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**I**n a certain town in Persia there was once a poor woodcutter named Ali Baba. Every day he would chop firewood in the hills, load it onto his donkey and bring it back into town to sell.

One afternoon Ali Baba was hard at work felling a tree on a new hill, when he heard a large number of horses approaching at full gallop. They seemed to be coming straight towards him.



Hurriedly he shinned up a tall tree to see what it was. Surrounded by a cloud of dust was a troop of sturdy men. Their faces were burned black by the sun, their eyes glittered like bright copper coins, and they each had a beard shaped like a falcon swooping on its prey. Certainly they were no ordinary travelers.

"They must be a band of desert marauders!" Ali Baba tried to hide himself amongst the leaves and fretted that his donkey would bray. At the foot of his hill the riders all dismounted, slung very heavy-looking sacks over their shoulders, and walked up to an immense rock. The one in front, who seemed to be their leader, glared fiercely over them all. Then he turned to face the rock, drew himself up and yelled in a loud, gruff voice:

"Open, Sesame!"

And what do you suppose happened? Right in front of him the sheer face of the rock began to smoothly and silently divide into two until there was an opening a person could pass through. Into this the robbers disappeared one by one, but soon they re-emerged empty-handed. They'd left their loot inside!

Once again the leader turned and gravely commanded: "Close, Sesame!" As if waiting for the sound, the rock entrance began to close up until no sign of it remained. "I wonder if I've been dreaming? ... or perhaps it was all a mirage?"

Ali Baba sat there for a long while gathering his wits. Then, making sure that the robbers had all ridden away, he climbed gingerly down from his tree and round to the rock. In a timid, quavering voice he called:

"Open, Sesame!"

These were indeed magical words. Effortlessly the rock reopened and Ali Baba saw inside a large cavern with a high vaulted roof. Chests of all sizes crammed with gold coins

were piled high, intricately worked gold and silver ornaments littered the floor, and the sparkle of many jewels seemed to light up the darkness.



Ali Baba sank to his knees, raised his arms and prayed:

"I give Thee thanks, O Creator of heaven and earth, for bestowing on Thy servant this treasure the robbers have built up over many years."

Afterwards he took just a small part of the hoard, five or six bags of gold, and loaded them onto his donkey. He concealed them amongst the firewood and cautiously went back home.

Now Ali Baba's wife was herself the daughter of a woodcutter, and she didn't know what color gold was or what, if anything, it smelled like. But when Ali Baba took out a handful to show her, she began to howl like a wild animal.

"Thief! Villain! Whatever have you done? Haven't you always said it was better for us to starve than to steal from others? They'll hang you now, that's for sure!"

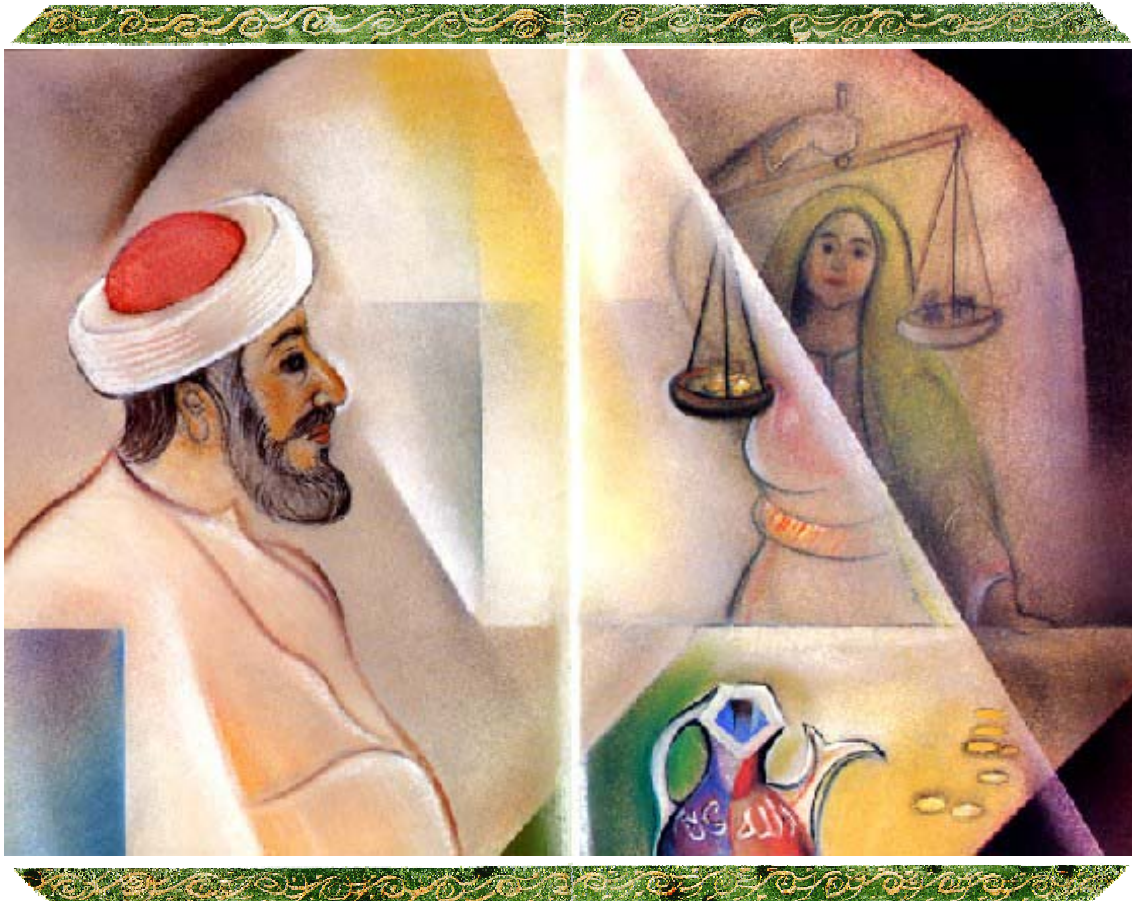
"Calm down, woman!" Ali Baba said, and told her all that had happened that day. Then, although his wife was still upset, he sent her to his brother Kasim's house nearby to borrow some scales.

This Kasim was a real tightwad, and he listened suspiciously when his wife told him of his sister-in-law's request.

"What, lend him my scales? . . . when he can barely afford feed for his donkey day by day."

"She says it's just to weigh beans, but I know what we can do," and Kasim's wife secretly smeared grease on the bottom of the pans before she took them out to Ali Baba's wife. In this way they hoped some of whatever had been weighed would be stuck there when the scales were returned.





When the pair examined them after they had been brought back, imagine their surprise. Instead of beans, what did they find but a gold piece! Kasim immediately hurried off to his brother's house and began bellowing.

"You miserable thief! Where did you steal this from? If you don't tell me right away, I'll drag you before the magistrates myself."

"Quiet down, Kasim. I've discovered some magic words that open up a cache of treasure. Here, take half these gold coins!"

"They'll do for now! But where's the rest hidden? And what are the magic words?"

Kasim couldn't wait, but set out for the robbers' cave at dawn with a string of donkeys.

"Open, Sesame! . . . wow, look at the gold! And the silks and brocades! But wait! While I'm busy here, somebody might come along and see me. Close, Sesame! . . . good, it's shut again."

Wildly Kasim ran around poking into everything, and gathering together more than he could possibly take away with him. But when he was ready to leave, suddenly the magic words wouldn't come to him.

"Open, Wheat! . . . no, that's wrong. Open, Barley! . . . that's not it either. Open, Millet! . . . damn! Open, Peas! Open, Rice!"

He tried other words one after the other as they occurred to him, but the rock wouldn't budge. He had become really frantic when unexpectedly it opened and the band of robbers burst in.

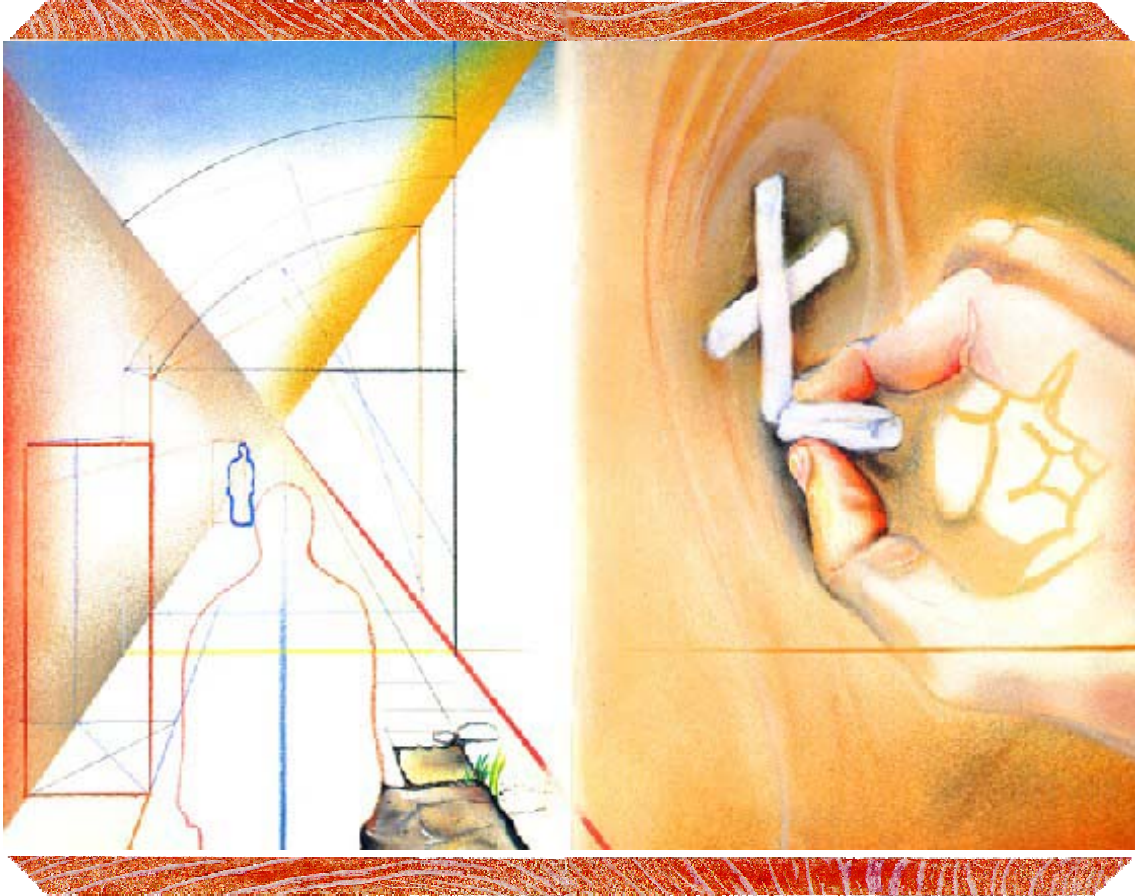
"K-k-kasim's my name. I'm not here to steal any of your hard-won treasure, you know. It's just that I was asked to ..."

"Who asked you?"

"My brother, Ali Baba. That's how I know the magic words."

"That's all we need to hear," and on the spot they hacked him to pieces.

The robber chief then sent two of his men off to town to locate the house of the man Ali Baba. But as it happened, Ali Baba had moved into a new house that very day, so the pair had to wander about a lot before at last finding it. One of them put a chalk mark on the door, and then they returned to report.



Now in Ali Baba's household there was a young girl named Morgiana who helped in the kitchen. When she was a small child she had been orphaned, and Ali Baba and his wife had taken her in and adopted her. Not only was she known for her kind-heartedness, but also her keen wit was reflected in her deep and sparkling jet-black eyes. This Morgiana was the one to notice the white mark when she got back from the market.

"Somehow this seems a bad omen. It's probably the work of some evil-doer that wishes us harm," she murmured to herself, and set about making exactly the same mark on every other door in the street.

That night the whole band of forty robbers swept into the street like a tempest. But since they couldn't find the right house, they swirled around like a black whirlwind before raging back to camp. There the furious chief pitilessly slew with his broad scimitar the pair who had misled them.

This time he himself went to locate Ali Baba's house. Then carefully he made his plans. First he had thirty-eight large earthen jars bought and one of them filled with olive oil. Next he had his men hide themselves one by one in the other thirty-seven and all of the jars covered with sacking. This was so there would be no danger of their suffocating. Finally the jars were loaded two at a time onto horses, and with himself posing as an oil merchant, the robber chief set out on foot leading the train. As they arrived at the house the sun was setting, and the chief addressed Ali Baba coming from his prayers.



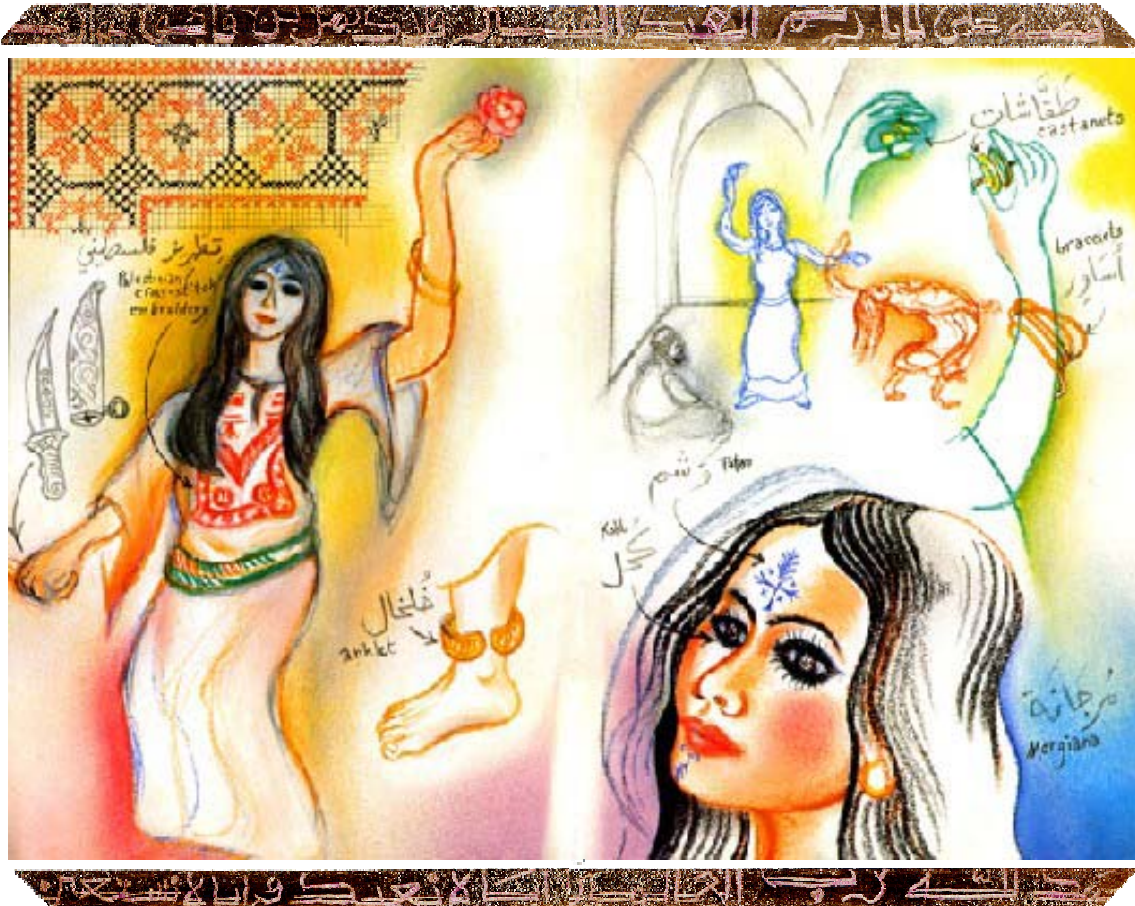
"Master, I am a stranger in your town with nowhere to stay. I beg lodging of you for the night". Good-heartedly Ali Baba replied: "Welcome in the name of Allah! Come, lead your horses into the yard, then eat and drink your fill before resting yourself from your journey." When he had been shown in, the long, long Arabian-style feast began. Morgiana meanwhile was busy preparing the food and washing dishes in the kitchen. All at once her lamp started to flicker as the oil in it got low.

"What'll I do? That's all we had left." Then she remembered that their visitor that night was an oil merchant."Ah, that's right. I'll just borrow a bit from one of his jars and return it tomorrow morning." Morgiana took the empty oil jug to the courtyard and was about to uncover one of the large vessels standing there, when to her amazement a man spoke from inside it."Chief, is it time now?" The young girl was terrified, but quick-wittedly answered in a deep voice: "No, not yet!"

Fortunately there was only a thin crescent moon that night. Where the jars stood beside an earthen wall it was pitch-black. Stealthily Morgiana went around to each jar and discovered that only one contained any oil - all the others had men hidden inside! After going back to the kitchen and lighting the lamp, she racked her brains thinking what to do."If I make a fuss, that assassin pretending to be a merchant will escape. Ah, I've got it!" Silently she carried all the oil into the kitchen, and heated it in a huge cauldron till it boiled. Next she put some into a bucket, carried it outside, and then one after the other poured the boiling oil into each of the big jars. The thieves were all scalded to death before they could even cry out. Midnight came around, and at an opportune time the bandit chief left the room and threw some stones out into the yard from a corridor window. But even though he heard them hit against the jars time after time, not one of his men emerged. Thinking it odd he went out to investigate, and was amazed to find all thirty-seven of his men dead! Though he was staggered, he decided there was nothing left now but to take revenge on Ali Baba's family



himself, so calmly he went back to the feast. Ali Baba, of course, knew none of all this and continued to shower his guest with hospitality.



Presently, a girl dressed in a glittering dancer's costume gracefully made her appearance. She bowed to the guest of honor, and began to dance to the beat of a servant's drum. With her body erect and her chest out, slowly and rhythmically she advanced to the centre of the room. Across her forehead was a band of gold coins, round her neck a necklace of amber, about her waist a sash of brightest scarlet, and the tiny bells fastened to her slender wrists and ankles tinkled continuously.

Yes, it was Morgiana!

Even Ali Baba held his breath as he watched her beautiful, gazelle-like movements. Gradually the throb of the drum picked up speed, as Morgiana danced to left and right, flitting like a butterfly then gliding like a bird. After a while she paused momentarily, and lightly unsheathed the dagger in her sash. Now she began a sword dance, at times swaying gracefully to and fro with it, and at others brandishing it in a frenzy. Her eloquence was such as the princes of Ethiopia and the nobles of Greece have never seen.

All watched entranced as she danced up to the guest. The drum was beaten even more wildly, and at the height of its fury Morgiana fixed her pearly-black eyes piercingly on the merchant. Then, in a flash, she plunged her dagger up to the hilt into the brigand's sturdy chest.

"Morgiana, what have you done?"

"Look, Father!" She ripped off the oil merchant's disguise unmasking the robber, and revealed the cutlass hidden in his clothing. Ali Baba took her hands in his and fell to praising her cleverness and courage. "From this day on we will think of you as our guardian angel. All the riches in the cave are yours. Although your youth will gradually fade, your wisdom should grow. Use these things well and you'll be the glory of Persia and respected everywhere."

Then they all sat down again to their own feast of celebrating and rejoicing.

