



THE SINDBAD STORIES: THE OLD MAN OF THE SEA

Suitability warning: this story also contains an event that must be considered for suitability. At the end of this story Sindbad beats his persecutor to death with a rock. If you deem it not suitable then either omit the story or adapt it (see 'Adapting to match the register' on page 40). Better to adapt than to miss out a cracking story such as this one.

THE STORY

'The men who had rescued me were on their way to Baghdad but, on their way, they stopped at many islands looking for those to trade with. My journey, therefore, was going to take a great deal longer than I had hoped. One day, the men disembarked on an uninhabited island, and perhaps because of my stories, they were determined to explore it for the possibility of finding their fortune in some strangely fashioned valley or some such thing. I stayed aboard the ship, this time thinking that I would be safer if I did so.'

'When the men returned, they began telling of their explorations and of a discovery they claimed to have made. As I heard their story unfold, I heard something that was familiar, but which filled me with a deep unease. They told of how they had seen a dome-shaped building in the distance on the side of a mountain, and they told of how, when they reached it, they couldn't find any doors or windows leading into it.'

"What did you do?" I asked, already afraid of the answer they were to give.

"We broke it open with our sabres," they said, "and discovered that it contained a delicious golden food inside not unlike the yolk of an egg."

"That's because it is the yolk of an egg, you fools!" I told them. "And now you will need to flee this island as quickly as possible before the owner of the egg comes looking for you!"

'They did not listen to my pleas and, though they left the island, they were in no rush.'

'We had been sailing for a day and I had begun to think that we had escaped the wrath of the roc, whose egg it was.'

'I was sleeping below deck when I heard the shouts of the sailors. I came up on deck to see that the ship was cast in shadow, though there was a bright, cloudless sky above. Over us, I saw the gigantic bird that had transported me to the valley of the diamonds, carrying in its talons a huge boulder. At the moment I had looked to see this spectacle, its talons released their grip on the cargo. All we could do was watch as the boulder dropped, with perfect aim, towards the ship's deck. It seemed to me to take forever for the boulder to reach us, as I saw it fall with a slow, dreamlike inevitability.'

'The ship was sunk and all those aboard were scattered and lost. I could do nothing other than try to save myself. The Almighty had sent me a piece of flotsam that I hoped would save my life. I managed to haul myself onto it and was able to paddle with my arms. A day's paddling brought me to an island and I stumbled onto the beach wretched, cold and hungry. Once ashore I collapsed, unconscious.'

'I awoke and was met by solitude. A little exploring soon told me that I had reached another uninhabited island. "How many uninhabited islands can there be?" I thought. However, the island was far from a desert island; many fruits hung, ripe, from the trees. The fruit nourished me, and for a day and a night, I stayed by the beach doing nothing other than eat as much fruit as I could, but it was not long before I became thirsty; the water from the fruit not sufficient to quench my thirst. I decided to go in search of a freshwater stream or river.'

'After walking for an hour or so, I found one, but I also found something else; something very curious indeed. Up until then I had believed the island uninhabited but, sitting still, next to the river, I saw an old man wearing only clothes made of leaves. I tried to speak to him but either he could not, or would not, speak. Though apparently mute, he began to signal with his arms and hands. I worked out from his gesticulations that he was indicating to be carried across the river. The river was not too deep and I thought that if I performed this service for the old man, Allah might reward me and, perhaps, show me a way off the island. I turned around and allowed the old man to climb on to my back then I began to cross the river.'

Task Question 1: What do you think of Sindbad's reason for helping the old man across the river?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ Should we do good deeds for others in order to get rewards for ourselves?
- ✓ Is it right to do good deeds for others for no other reason than because it is a good deed?

'By the time we had reached the other side, however, a very strange thing had happened: as we had crossed the river his legs had begun to wind around my body like two snakes constricting around me, and when I had bent down for him to climb off he dug his leg-snakes into me causing me much pain. I cried out. He started banging me on my ears and yelling at me to go where he wanted to go. I had no choice but to do his bidding, if I was to avoid a great deal of pain and a beating. I cursed and said to myself that I would never do a good deed for another, as long as I lived!'

Task Question 2: What do you think of Sindbad's vow, 'I would never do a good deed for another, as long as I lived!'

Nested Questions:

- ✓ For what reasons should we do good deeds for others?
- ✓ For what reasons should we stop doing good deeds for others? • Should we do good deeds for others? Should we stop?
- ✓ What reasons are there not to do good deeds for others?
- ✓ Does it depend on what happens afterwards?

'The rest of the day, he made me go here and there fetching food and drink for him and travelling all over the island. By the end of the day I was exhausted. When he finally fell asleep I thought that that might be the end of it, but no. Though he slept, his leg-snakes kept their grip on me as if they were independent, living creatures, always awake.

'The next day, from the moment he awoke to when he slept, I was worked without pause. I realised that I was the old man's slave and that I could not escape and, worst of all, that this would not end. Each night, after he had fallen asleep, I had a short time to find some meagre meal for myself before sleep took me – berries and grass, usually. Each day that I grew weaker, the mean old man worked me harder. Every time I disobeyed him he would remind me of the pain he could administer.

'One day, I found some dry gourds (a fleshy, typically large fruit with a hard skin; when dried it can be used as a container) and this gave me an idea. That evening, when the old man slept, I returned to the gourds I had found earlier and cut the tops off of them, then I hollowed them out. Inside, I placed grapes and then replaced the tops. I left the gourds for a few days for the grapes to ferment to make a crude wine.

'When I returned and tasted the wine I found that it was very potent. At the end of each day I would drink some of this concoction to help combat the exhaustion and the despair. It would also help me fall asleep more quickly and deeply. I began to look forward to this time at the end of each day – the feeling the wine afforded being the only thing resembling pleasure in my wretched days.

'One evening, I had been too eager to drink from the gourds and had gone to them too soon – before the old man had fallen asleep. When he saw the effect the wine had on me he said, "What's that you're drinking? Give it to me!" and then he started to beat me around the ears. I gave the gourd to him, crestfallen that even this little pleasure would be denied me from now on. He drank the wine and as it began to affect him he started singing, if singing it be called. He drank more. Then I noticed that, perhaps because of the wine, the vine-like grip his legs had held me in for the past week or so had loosened. Now was my chance! I quickly untangled myself from the old man, who was by now quite drunk, and I flung him to the ground.

'Wasting no time I picked up a rock from the ground and beat him to death. There was no pity to be found in me for the mean old man who had unceasingly treated me as his slave for the last two weeks. I looked at myself: I was only half the man I used to be, so thin and weak had I become. I was incredibly hungry, so I dragged myself to the beach again and feasted as much as I could on the fruit from the trees.

'Eventually, I was picked up by a passing ship that I had been able to signal to, by making a fire and using grass to create smoke. When onboard the ship, I told the crew what had befallen me. They said to me, "Do you know who it was you met? That was the legendary Old Man of The Sea. He is said to entrap lost sailors like yourself and enslave them. It is said that he then works his slave to death before feeding on their dead body. You were lucky to survive, and every sailor will be indebted to you for ridding the world of such an evil parasite." I was rewarded by the sailors with copious amounts of food and drink, but I drank only water.'

This would be an appropriate story to use the Concept Box technique with (see 'The Concept Box' on page 77). However, below are some Task Questions around the main themes.

Task Question 3: The old man of the sea made Sindbad do things he didn't want to do. Can you think of any examples when you do things you don't want to do?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ Do we only do what we want?
- ✓ If you can think of some examples, are those examples in any way like the old man of the sea?

Examples:

- ✓ When you are angry?
- ✓ When teachers or parents tell you to do things?
- ✓ If you are addicted to something? (Such as sugar, caffeine, alcohol or nicotine.)
- ✓ If you act out of duty, such as stopping yourself doing something you shouldn't because you know it is wrong?
- ✓ When you act for the best, such as when you don't eat lots of sweets because you want to enjoy your favourite dinner in the evening?

There was a philosopher called Plato who thought that the human mind has three parts:

1. The thinking part (like the head)
2. The emotional part (like the chest)
3. The wanting part (like the stomach).

Task Question 4: Do you think there are different parts of the mind that want us to do different things?

Task Question 5a: Do we always do what we want to do?

Task Question 5b: Do we always do what we think is best for us?

The philosopher Socrates thought that we only do what we think is best for us (see Plato's Protagoras, Fourth Century BCE) whereas Plato disagreed; he thought that sometimes we are pulled in different directions (see Plato's Republic, Fourth Century BCE). Can you think of an example where you have felt pulled in different directions leaving you both wanting to do something and not wanting to do it?

Task Question 6: Who, if any of these philosophers, do you agree with most?

As with this part of the story, use your judgement about the appropriateness of this discussion (TQ7 below) with your class.

Task Question 7: Was Sindbad justified when he killed The Old Man of The Sea?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ When, if ever, is it permissible to kill someone?
- ✓ If not justifiable, was it at least understandable, that Sindbad killed the old man?
- ✓ What is the difference between justifiable and understandable?
- ✓ Should Sindbad have taken pity on the old man? Why did he feel none?
- ✓ What is pity?
- ✓ Is revenge ever justified?

This is not a complete account of The Voyages of Sindbad. To find out the other adventures that befell him see The Arabian Nights (Lyons, Malcolm and Ursula, 2010) for the full account. If you feel so inspired, you could turn some of the other voyages of Sindbad into thinking stories; there are plenty of opportunities to do so as I left many of these stories out for reasons of space as much as anything else. The Further Voyages of Sindbad include (with which night the story is told and possible thinking themes in brackets): 'The Black Giant' / Night 546, 'The Magians' / Night 551 (cannibalism), 'The City of The Apes' / Night 558 (imperialism and racism), 'Cinnamon, Pepper and Pearls' / Night 559 (trade), 'The Musk Valley' / Night 560, 'The Underground Stream' / Night 561 (choices / into the unknown), 'The King of Serendib' / Night 562, 'The Region of The Kings' / Night 563 ('there's always a bigger fish!'), 'The Sandalwood Raft' / Night 564, 'The Insect People' / Night 565 and 'The Elephant Graveyard' / Night 566 (ethics of slavery / environmental ethics / animal rights).