

THE SINDBAD STORIES: THE VALLEY OF THE DIAMONDS

THE STORY

'What happened?' asked Sindbad the porter, 'How did you come to be sitting here telling me this tale?'

Sindbad the sailor said:

'Well, fate gave once more. I was eventually picked up by a ship. Shortly after, I was shipwrecked alone on a desolate island with nothing but berries to sustain me. I was found by another merchant ship that passed by my island (for, seeing as no one else shared it with me, I had come to think of the island as my own). On the island I could create my own laws and I needed only do what pleased me. In a way, without the laws of society instructing me what to do, I was happy there. I was free of the demands that others make on us.

'But, as I said, eventually I was found and rescued – if "rescued" is the right word! And, by chance, the ship I had been rescued by had picked up my belongings. Although, it was only due to the goodwill of the captain that I was able to reclaim them, as he believed me when I told him that they were mine. To him I was eternally grateful. Or would have been, if fate had not taken away my wealth once more.

'But before that happened I was returned to Baghdad with my riches and I lived a life of pleasure and happiness as I had before. However, it was as if I had learned nothing from my first voyage, as I continued down the route of intemperance and profligacy. But before long, I got an itch I could not scratch. I longed to be at sea again, even though my first attempt had gone so disastrously wrong.

'But the hankering to travel would not leave me, so I borrowed some more money and bought some more goods for another voyage that I hoped would bring me yet more wealth, solving my financial problems. Maybe it was the longing for adventure that picked up my legs again, or maybe it was just greed, but adventure is what I got, though only through my own foolishness.'

TX solitude: Suppose you were entirely alone and lived without having any other people to have to consider.

Task Question: If you were entirely alone, like Sindbad when on 'his' island (or in TX Solitude) would you need to follow any laws?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ If not laws, would there be any kind of moral code that you would have to follow or stick to?
- ✓ Or could you, like Sindbad supposes, do whatever you wanted?
- ✓ Is Sindbad right to suppose that with no one around he is free to do what pleases him?
- ✓ To what extent do laws and moral codes depend upon other people?
- ✓ Can you think of anything it would be wrong to do even if there were no other people to worry about?
- ✓ What about animals? Are there any moral codes regarding animals that we may have to consider?
- ✓ What about the environment? Are there any moral codes regarding the environment that we may have to consider?
- ✓ What are laws?
- ✓ What are laws for?
- ✓ What is a moral code?
- ✓ What is a moral code for?

'We had moored on another island and a landing party had been sent onto it. A paradise it was, a turtle it was not; not this time. I found my way to a lovely murmuring stream, next to which I sat down and ate some of the food I had taken with me. The stream – perhaps also the wine and the food – lulled me to sleep before long. When I awoke I was horrified to discover that the ship had left without me! I had been completely forgotten. I cursed myself for having been so foolish. Not a week ago I had been enjoying the comforts of my pleasurable life in Baghdad and I had left it all for this. I wept and wailed for my lot, like a child. But being alone, no one saw me.

'When I had pulled myself together I climbed up to a high point from where I was able to survey the island. I thought the island uninhabited but could see a large, curious dome-shaped object in the distance on the side of a mountain. Assuming that nothing like it is made naturally, I concluded that it must be a man-made construct and that if I ventured towards it I might well find civilised assistance. But when I reached the strange object there were no doors or windows into it, its sides perfectly smooth.

'My questions were soon answered as it suddenly went dark as if the sun had been put out. I looked up to see that the sun had been blotted out by a huge bird. I recalled that I had heard tales of these birds – known as a roc – by sailors but I had never thought the tales true. The great bird came to rest on top of the dome, which I now knew to be its egg. After the terror had passed, it dawned on me that this huge bird could be my ticket away from the island, as it was quite unaware of me. I unwound my turban and tied myself to the leg of the roc.

'Sure enough, when the morning came, it took off, taking me with it. The roc did indeed fly away from the island and over the sea for many leagues but I had no idea where it was taking me. All I could do was to pray that it would take me to a civilised land. Eventually it came to rest on the side of a steep mountain. I didn't have much time to act so quickly untied the turban and dropped onto the ground. It was good that I did because no sooner was I on the ground than the bird was off again.

'It swooped and landed on what I thought was a fallen tree trunk a little further down into the valley, but from the struggle that followed I saw that the roc had landed on a giant snake. The bird then took off once more but this time taking the snake with it, disappearing over the mountain ridge, no doubt to return to its island again. Wherever I was, I had been marooned there.

'I looked around to take in my situation. It was clear that I could not go up as the mountainside was virtually sheer and the cliff face ran all the way around, completely enclosing me in this strange valley. I could also see two things, one of which filled me with curiosity and the other, horror: the ground all about this valley glistened as if there were a carpet of glass. But the ground also moved. It was alive with snakes! There were snakes of all sizes: some tiny but many the size of the one I'd seen taken by the roc. And I was trapped!

'The base of the cliff face was dotted with caves all around but I was unable to find shelter there as they were full of snakes, particularly in the day, for many of them hid from the birds of prey that circled the air above the valley. The snakes were active by night. My only refuge was a singular tree that I was able to climb each night in order to sleep – if I managed to sleep at all. When I did manage to catch a wink or two, I dreamt of snakes.

'I had also discovered that the glass carpet I had seen was in fact diamonds that had evidently been formed in the rocks of this valley and had somehow been deposited in and on the ground. They were everywhere. I had never seen such wealth, and though I was probably the richest man in the world, the diamonds were of no use at all to me. I would have given them all for some bread and cheese, a rope and a boat.'

Task Question: In the valley of the diamonds is Sindbad rich?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ What makes something valuable?
- ✓ What is value?
- ✓ TX (see page 7) Health or wealth: suppose you had to choose between:

A: great wealth but poor health, or

B: very good health but no wealth.

If you had to choose, which would you opt for and why?

- ✓ What is more important: health or wealth?
- ✓ Why are diamonds valuable when Sindbad is in society, but of no value when he is trapped in the valley of the diamonds?
- ✓ Is bread, cheese, rope and a boat really more valuable than an endless supply of diamonds?
- ✓ TX Making money: suppose you were stranded with a group of others on a desert island. After establishing a rudimentary society between you, how would you go about creating money? What would you need to do?
- ✓ How does money work?
- ✓ How do you think money began?
- ✓ What makes money valuable?
- ✓ If Sindbad had entered 'the valley of the dollar bills or pound notes', instead of diamonds, would he be rich then?

'On the second night, my sleep was disturbed even more as one of the larger snakes I had seen came hissing around my tree. On the third night, it came up the tree a little and, on the fourth, it ventured even further up. I realised that I could either simply wait until the snake reached me then let it end my wretchedness, or I could act. I have to confess, and though I am not proud to admit it, I did seriously consider letting the snake take me, such was my despair. But, in the end, I decided to endeavour to survive.

'I was able, with the few resources at my disposal, to construct a rudimentary cage that was just big enough to encase me. That very night, the snake came all the way up the tree, coiled itself around my cage and then constricted. My cage was only just able to withhold itself against the snake's constrictions but I was relieved to discover that I had built an adequate protection.'

Teacher's note: if you decide that this discussion is appropriate with your class (depending on age, maturity etc.) then approach it carefully and with sensitivity. It could be used, for instance, to segue into a discussion of the issues surrounding euthanasia, again, if this is appropriate for your class.

Task Question: Was Sindbad right to consider allowing the snake to take him?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ Why did Sindbad say that he was not proud to admit it? • Could it ever be right to die instead of live?
- ✓ What is hope?
- ✓ When is there hopelessness?
- ✓ What do we live for?
- ✓ What is life?
- ✓ Why is living valuable?

'On the morning of exactly one week since I had been abandoned by the roc, I was awoken by the sound of what I thought was an avalanche. Looking up, I saw something hurtling down the mountainside at great speed. When it finally reached the bottom, it was not too far from me, so I made my way towards the strange object. When I reached it, I discovered that it was a skinned animal; a cow I believe. I followed, with my eye, the trajectory the carcass had made and, at the top of the mountain ridge, I saw some men. The bloody, sticky carcass was coated in diamonds. I realised what it was the men were attempting to do. If I was right, then the best course of action was not a pleasant one.

'After stuffing my pockets and the inside of my shirt with diamonds I quickly lifted the dead animal and climbed underneath, despite the protestations from my nose: the smell was disgusting. I tied myself to it using my turban again and waited. It wasn't long before one of the giant birds that regularly patrolled the sky above the valley spotted the fresh meat, and I was up in the air again.

'Once the bird had begun to fly over the men, they harried it with stones that they fired from a catapult-like device until the bird dropped its quarry. I fell with it, but luckily, not too far. The men ran over to the carcass – I guessed – to collect the diamonds that had stuck to the skinned carcass, but when I stood up they nearly jumped out of their own skin. However, when I told them of my adventures and, especially, when I shared with them the diamonds I had collected, they were more than happy to assist me. They took me back to their ship and promised to return me to Basra.

'Fate had played with me, taking me from the very edge of despair and then, capriciously, making me rich again. How strange are fate and fortune!'