

## *Oriental Tales*

From the *Japanese* of KIKUCHI JUN. From the  
*Chinese* of PU SUNG LING (17th Century). From  
the *Tibetan MSS.* called KAH-GYUR. From  
*Persian* sources. From the *Turkish* of AHMED  
IBN HEMDEM SHE KETK-HODA, called  
"Sohailee." From the *Arabian* BOOK OF A  
THOUSAND NIGHTS AND A NIGHT.  
From the *Sanskrit* of SOMADEVA  
(about 1070), as narrated in the  
"Katha Sarit Sagara," or "Ocean  
of Rivers of Stories."

## *A Web of World-Old Oriental Tales*

Introduction by Charles Johnston

*British India Civil Service: Royal Asiatic Society*

HUCKLEBERRY FINN insisted that Indiana is pink because it is so on the map. We have much the same view of Eastern lands. We think that Arabia is pink, that Egypt is green, that Persia is blue, that India is yellow. And we imagine them as ruled off from each other by sharply marked lines, which, whosoever crosses, promptly has his head cut off.

In reality, there are no such lines. The East is the East, and it is much the same in many things from Morocco to far Timor and the Spice Islands; the same gleam and glow, the same rainbow colors, the same stir and surge of bronzed men and veiled women. And that has been so for ages. Long before the days of Solomon, proud ships plowed the Eastern main, trading between the Red Sea coasts and distant India, bringing thence the gold and ivory, the apes and peacocks, and the algum trees which, even in the story of Solomon, bear Indian names. And wherever they went, the sailors of those sapphire seas carried with them the sailor's open-eyed curiosity, his love of adventure, his romance that blossomed in every port. And some dusk sweet-heart in the Camphor Isles, or by the pearl banks of Sulu, or in that miraculous land where dwell the paradise birds, told him old tales of love and death and witchcraft; and in the long night watches on the homeward way, he told them over again to his shipmates. So the tales went to and fro, weaving the many-colored garment of fantasy.

It was so in Solomon's time. It was so before they built the Pyramids. It was so through all the long centuries that have since slipped by and fallen into Time's treasury. It is so to-day. There is but one vast treasure-house of Eastern lore, and from its miraculous riches every

bard and rhymer, every recounter of things marvelous and glad and sad, has drawn to his heart's content since the days of Babylon—Babylon long ago. No one can say how old these stories are. They are primeval. Some of them are as old as man. Some of them go back to those days when kindly spirits walked the earth among mortals, wondering gently at the new creature, with his fancies and his whims, and now and then touching man's work to unravel some knot of fate or to bring an unexpected blessing to some simple, good person. Of these tales of fairyland and its ministering visitants there is a web all round the world, and every wise child should believe them until he grows old and hard and incredulous.

So with tales of mysteries and wonders, of crafty robbers, and quick-witted women who out-tricked them. No interest is more universal than that which listens wide-eyed to a tale of dark deeds and their subtle unraveling. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, that skilled knight who in quite recent years has enthralled the world with his tales of thrice-hidden mysteries, of invisible clews, of preternatural acumen, is but delving in a mine that was worked before they quarried for the Pyramids; he is but appealing once again to the world-old interest in the mystery tale that has held spellbound auditors through long centuries in every land lapped by the Seven Seas. The very word clew goes back to Ariadne, and that thread of hers that led Theseus safe through the Cretan labyrinth.

Take the story in this collection, "The Clever Thief" (page 169). As it stands here it comes from the Tibetan, from an ancient Buddhist book that goes back nearly a thousand years. But even then it was not new. Missionaries carried it thither from India in an odd corner of their bags, or in some chamber of the memory not filled with the riddles of being. Where did they get it? Who can say? It was old when Herodotus wandered through sunlit Egypt twenty-four centuries ago, gleaning tales from the priests of Amen and of Ptah. He tells it, point for point, as did those Buddhist missionaries, but lays it in the days of

Rameses, nigh four thousand years ago. Everything is there—the cutting off of the head to elude detection, the tricks by which the relatives mourn over the headless trunk, the snare set for the thief and his outwitting it. And that same tale, like good merchandise, was carried both east and west. It found its way to India, over the vast Himalayas, to the gray roof of the world. It came with equal charm to the Mediterranean isles, up the Adriatic coasts, and as far as Venice, bride of the sea. There Ser Giovanni told it, transmogrifying Pharaoh of the Nile into a worshipful Doge, as he had already been made over into a Buddhist magnate, but in no way altering the motive, the suspense, the artfulness of the tale. What is this story then? Is it Venetian? Is it Pharaonic? Is it Greek? Is it Tibetan? It is all these, and perhaps something more, vastly older than them all. Its craft, mayhap, goes back to that primal serpent who, more subtle than all the beasts of the field, has ever inspired darkling feints and strategies. Stories whose motive is a subtly discerned clew are not less primordial. Take that tale of the treasure stolen from the foot of the medicinal nāgabala tree, where the thief was recognized because he used the roots of the tree to cure his headaches. The tale is here (page 178) taken from the Sanskrit, from that wonderful book of books called the "Ocean of the Rivers of Stories." And it was written in that book some eight centuries ago. Are we to say, then, that the tale is Indian? But there is a Persian tale with exactly the same motive; but there the tree is a jujube tree, and its root is used as a cure for asthma. And almost the same story is told in Italian by Sacchetti, who was born a few years after Dante died.

The most vivid of these tales of deduction are, perhaps, those which come to us through the Arabs, in their treasure store, "The Thousand and One Nights." The Arabs gleaned them from every land in southern Asia, and from most ancient Egypt, in those days when Moslem power overshadowed half the world. And then they retold them with a charm, a vivid freshness, a roguishness, and a dash

of golden light through it all that make them the finest story tellers in the world. So in this volume we have taken many stories from the Arabs, to get that fine touch of genius in the telling which gives them their perfection.

Can we fix the dates of these Arabian stories? Only in a very general way. Some of them came from Cairo, some from Syria, some from the Euphrates and Tigris valleys, some from Persia and India and China; and they were gathered together, it would appear, in the century before Shakespeare was born, by some big-hearted, humorous fellow, among the great anonymous benefactors of mankind. But he made no claim of inventing them. If he had he would have been laughed at for his pains. For old men had heard them from their grandfathers, generation after generation, and the gray grandsires always began to tell them, saying: "So 'twas told to me when I was such a tiny child as thou art."

Many of these Arabic tales take us back to the golden time of good Harun al Raschid, who used to disguise himself of an evening and go forth in Bagdad's streets with his Wazir Ja'afar, descendant of the Barmecide fire worshippers, and Ishak the cupbearer and Masrur the Eunuch, the Sworder of his vengeance, going out by the postern gate and taking boat on the river Tigris. That was eleven hundred years ago and more, before the eventful Christmas day when Charlemagne was crowned emperor. A man of vigor and valor, of an alert and subtle spirit, worker of justice and protector of the weak was that same caliph; he has won the hearts of all story tellers and story hearers through a thousand years.

So these tales have surged to and fro, under many moons, in ceaseless tide since the world was young. Flying on the wings of night from one to another of those Eastern lands where the sun bronzes all faces that are not veiled, they have rested now in some Himalayan fastness, now in some pillared temple by the Ganges, now in a lane in Bagdad, now under the shadow of Turkish minarets. They are of no one land, but are part of the common riches of mankind.

## *Oriental Mystery Stories*

### *The Power of Eloquence*

*From the Japanese of Kikuchi Jun*

UWOZUMI SEZAEMON, a rich inhabitant of the province of Etchigo, had a daughter of sixteen summers, by name Yuki-no, "the field of snow." Her marvelous beauty equaled her sparkling wit. She was a skillful musician, sang most charmingly, and excelled in making verses. The hearts of her parents exulted when they saw her perfections, and many were the suitors who demanded her hand in marriage. But Sezaemon, who deemed no youth a match for his fair girl, would not come to a decision, and ever put off the moment of separation, so that folks began to liken her to beautiful Komatchi, pledged to maidenhood.

Alas! how fickle is fortune! A grave sickness overtook the maiden; for many moons she lay pining on her couch, till at last she faded and sank to sleep, at the very moment when she should have burst forth in all the brightness of her beauty, like a sweet flower whose petals are strewn by the tempest. Her parents were in despair, and would not be comforted.

Yet needs must that they busy themselves about their daughter's burial. They brought her body in state to the monastery of Gokuraku, where the tombs of her ancestors were.

Some three months after the sad ceremony there was a knocking, long after midnight, at the monastery door. The porter peered through the wicket, and beheld a young man in rich vestments, whose twin swords with richly carved hilts of ivory declared him to be of noble birth. The porter hastened to open the door to him, and asked what he desired. The young man, announcing his titles