



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Abdullah The Fisherman And Abdullah The Merman

Hanna Diyab

There was once a fisherman named Abdallah, who had a wife and nine children and was very poor, owning nothing but his net. Every day he used to go to the sea to fish, and if he caught little, he sold it and spent the price on his children, after the measure of that which God vouchsafed him of provision; but, if he caught much, he would cook a good mess of meat and buy fruit and spend without stint till nothing was left him, saying in himself, 'Tomorrow's provision will come tomorrow.' Presently, his wife gave birth to another child, making ten in all, and it chanced that day that he had nothing at all. So he said, 'Under favour of God the Most High, I am going today to the sea, to fish in the name of this new-born child, that we may see its luck.' And she answered, 'Put your trust in God.'

So he took his net and went down to the sea-shore, where he cast it in the name of the little child, saying, 'O my God, make his living easy, not hard, and abundant, not scant!' Then he waited awhile and drew in the net, which came up full of rubbish and sand and pebbles and weeds, and he found therein no fish, neither much nor little. He cast it again and waited, then drew it in, but found no fish in it, and threw it a third and a fourth and a fifth time, with no better success. So he removed to another place, beseeching God the Most High to grant him his daily bread, and thus he did till the end of the day, but caught not so much as a sprat; whereat he fell a-marvelling in himself and said, 'Has God then created this new-born child, without an appointed provision? This may never be; He who slits the corners of the mouth has engaged for its provision, for He is the Bountiful, the Provider!' So saying, he shouldered his net and turned homeward, broken-spirited and heavy at heart for his family, for that he had left them without food, more by token that his wife was in the straw.

As he trudged along, saying in himself, 'How shall I do and what shall I say to the children tonight?' he came to a baker's oven and saw a crowd about it; for it was a time of dearth and food was scant with the folk; so they were proffering the baker money, but he paid no heed to any of them, by reason of the much crowd. The fisherman stood looking and snuffing the smell of the hot bread,—and indeed his soul longed for it, by reason of his hunger,—till the baker caught sight of him and cried out to him, saying, 'Come here, O fisherman!' So he went up to

him, and the baker said to him, 'Do you want bread?' But he was silent. 'Speak,' said the baker, 'and be not ashamed, for God is bountiful. If thou have no money, I will give you bread and have patience with you till good fortune betide you.' 'By Allah, O master,' replied Abdallah, 'I have indeed no money! But give me bread enough for my family, and I will leave you this net in pawn till the morrow.' 'Nay, good fellow,' rejoined the baker, 'this net is, as it were, your shop and the means of your livelihood; so, if you pawn it, how will you fish? Tell me how much bread will suffice you?' 'Ten paras' worth,' replied the fisherman.

So he gave him ten paras' worth of bread and ten paras in money, saying, 'Take these ten paras and cook yourself a mess of meat therewith; so wilt you owe me twenty paras, for which bring me fish to-morrow; but, if you catch nothing again, come and take your bread and your ten paras, and I will have patience with you till better luck betide you, when you will bring me fish for all you owes me.' 'May God the Most High reward you,' said the fisherman, 'and requite you for me with all good!' Then he took the bread and the money and went away, glad at heart, and buying what he could of meat and vegetables, returned to his wife, whom he found sitting up, soothing the children, who were weeping for hunger, and saying to them, 'Your father will be here soon with what you may eat.' So he set the bread before them and they ate, whilst he told his wife what had befallen him, and she said, 'God is bountiful.'

On the morrow, he shouldered his net and went forth of his house, saying, 'I beseech you, O Lord, to vouchsafe me this day what shall whiten my face with the baker!' When he came to the sea-shore, he proceeded to cast his net and pull it in; but there came up no fish therein; and he toiled thus till ended day and caught nothing. Then he set out homeward, in sore concern, and the way to his house lay past the baker's shop; so he said in himself, 'How shall I go home? But I will hasten past that the baker may not see me.' When he reached the shop, he saw a crowd about it and quickened his pace, being ashamed to face the baker; but the latter raised his eyes to him and cried out to him, saying, 'Ho, fisherman! Come and take your bread and spending-money. Seems you forgot.' 'By Allah,' answered Abdallah, 'I had not forgotten; but I was ashamed to face you, because I have caught no fish today.' 'Be not ashamed,' answered the baker. 'I said to you, "At your leisure, till good hap betide you?"'

Then he gave him the bread and the ten paras and he returned and told his wife, who said, 'God is bountiful. If it please the Most High, good luck shall yet betide you and you will give the baker his due.' On this wise he did forty days, betaking himself daily to the sea, from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof, and returning at nightfall, without fish; and still he took bread and spending-money of the baker, who never named the fish to him nor neglected him nor kept him waiting, like the folk, but gave him the bread and the ten paras. Whenever the fisherman said to him, 'O my brother, reckon with me,' he would

say, 'Go your ways; this is no time for reckoning. Wait till good luck betide you, and then I will reckon with you.' And the fisherman would go away, blessing and thanking him.

On the one-and-fortieth day, he said to his wife, 'I have a mind to tear up the net and be quit of this life.' 'Why would you do this?' asked she. And he said, 'It there is an end of my getting my living from the sea. How long shall this last? By Allah, I am consumed with shame before the baker and I will go no more to the sea, so I may not pass by his shop, for I have no other way home; and every time I pass, he calls me and gives me the bread and the ten paras. How much longer shall I run in debt to him?' 'Praised be God the Most High,' replied his wife, 'who has inclined his heart to you, so that he gives you our daily bread! Why don't you like this?' He said, 'I owe him now a great sum of money, and he will without fail demand his due.' 'Has he vexed you with words?' asked his wife. 'Nay,' answered Abdallah; 'on the contrary, he still refuses to reckon with me, saying, "Wait till good luck betide you."' And his wife said, 'If he presses you, say to him, "Wait till there come the good luck for which we hope, you and I."' 'And when will the good luck come that we hope for?' asked the fisherman. 'God is bountiful,' answered she.

Then he shouldered his net and went down to the sea-side, saying, 'O Lord, provide You me, though but with one fish, that I may give it to the baker!' And he cast his net into the sea and pulling it in, found it heavy; so he tugged at it till, after sore travail, he got it ashore and found in it a dead ass, swollen and stinking; whereat his soul sickened and he freed it from the net, saying, 'There is no power and no virtue save in God the Most High, the Supreme! Verily, I can no more! I say to yonder woman, "There is no more provision for me in the sea; let me leave this craft." And she still answers me, "God is bountiful: good will betide you." Is this dead ass the good of which she speaks?' And he was sore chagrined.

Then he removed to another place, so he might be quit of the stench of the dead ass, and cast his net there. He waited awhile, then drew it in and found it heavy; whereupon he said, 'Good; we are hauling up all the dead asses in the sea and ridding it of its rubbish.' However he gave not over tugging at the net, till the blood streamed from the palms of his hands, and when he got it ashore, he saw a man in it and took him for one of the Afrits of the lord Solomon, whom he was wont to imprison in vessels of brass and cast into the sea, supposing that the vessel had burst for length of years and that the Afrit had come forth and fallen into the net; wherefore he fled from him, crying out and saying, 'Mercy, mercy, O Afrit of Solomon!' But the creature called out to him from within the net and said, 'Come hither, O fisherman, and flee not from me; for I am a human being like yourself. Release me, so you may get a recompense for me of God.'

So the fisherman took heart and coming up to him, said to him, 'Art you not an Afrit of the Jinn?' 'Nay,' replied the other, 'I am a mortal and a believer in God and His Apostle.' 'Who threw you into the sea?' asked the fisherman; and he answered, 'I am of the children of the sea and was going about therein, when you cast the net over me. We are people who obey God's commandments and show loving-kindness unto the creatures of the Most High, and but that I fear and dread to be of the disobedient, I had rent your net; but I accept that which God has decreed unto me; wherefore you are become my owner and I your captive. Will you then set me free for the love of God the Most High and make a covenant with me and become my friend? I will come to you every day in this place, and do you come to me and bring me a gift of the fruits of the land. For with you are grapes and figs and melons and peaches and pomegranates and what not else, and all you bring me will be acceptable unto me. Moreover, with us are coral and pearls and chrysolites and emeralds and rubies and other precious stones, and I will fill your the basket, wherein you bring me the fruit, with precious stones of the jewels of the sea. What do you say to this, O my brother?'

The fisherman said, 'Be the first chapter of the Koran between you and me upon this.' So they recited the Fatiheh in token of their agreement, and the fisherman loosed the merman from the net and said to him, 'What is your name?' 'My name is Abdallah of the sea,' answered he; 'and if you come here and see me not, do you call out and say, "Where are you, O Abdallah, O merman?" And I will be with you presently. But you, what is your name?' 'My name also is Abdallah,' answered the fisherman. The merman said, 'You are Abdallah of the land and I am Abdallah of the sea; but abide here till I go and fetch you a present.' And the fisherman said, 'I hear and obey.'

Then the merman went down into the sea and disappeared; whereupon the fisherman repented him of having released him and said in himself, 'How know I that he will come back to me? Indeed, he beguiled me, so that I released him, and now he will laugh at me. Had I kept him, I might have made a show of him for the diversion of the people of the city and taken money from all the folk and entered with him the houses of the great.' And he repented him of having let him go and said, 'You have let prey go from your hand.' But, as he was thus bemoaning his credulity, behold, the merman returned to him, with his hands full of pearls and coral and emeralds and rubies and other jewels, and said to him, 'Take these, O my brother, and excuse me, for I had no basket that I might fill it for you.'

The fisherman rejoiced and took the jewels from the merman, who said to him, 'Come here every day, before sunrise,' and taking leave of him, went down into the sea; whilst the other returned to the city, rejoicing, and stayed not till he came to the baker's shop and said to him, 'O my brother, good luck is come to us at last; so do your reckon with me.' 'There needs no reckoning,' answered the

baker. 'If you have something, give it me; and if not, take your bread and spending-money and begone, against good betide you.' 'O my friend,' rejoined the fisherman, 'indeed good has betided me of God's bounty, and I owe you much money; but take this.' So saying, he took up, at a handful, half of the pearls and coral and rubies and other jewels he had with him, and gave them to the baker, saying, 'Give me some ready money to spend this day, till I sell these jewels.'

So the baker gave him all the money he had by him and all the bread in his basket and rejoiced in the jewels he had given him, saying, 'I am your slave and your servant.' Then he set all the bread on his head and following the fisherman home, gave it to his wife and children, after which he repaired to the market and fetched meat and vegetables and all kinds of fruit. Moreover, he left his shop and abode with Abdallah all that day, busying himself in his service and doing all his occasions. 'O my brother,' said the fisherman, 'you will tire yourself.' 'This is my duty,' answered the baker; 'for I am become your servant and you have overwhelmed me with your bounties.' 'Not so,' rejoined the fisherman; 'it is you who was my benefactor in the days of dearth and straitness.' And the baker passed the night in feasting with him and became a faithful friend to him. Then the fisherman told his wife what had befallen him with the merman, whereat she rejoiced and said, 'Keep your secret, lest the magistrates come down upon you.' But he said, 'Though I keep my secret from all the folk, yet will I not hide it from the baker.'

On the morrow, he rose before the sun and shouldering a basket, which he had filled overnight with all manner fruits, repaired to the sea-shore, where he set down the basket and called out, saying, 'Where are you, O Abdallah, O merman?' And he answered, saying, 'Here am I, at your service;' and came forth to him. The fisherman gave him the fruit and he took it and plunging into the sea with it, was absent awhile, after which he came up, with the basket full of all kinds of precious stones and jewels. The fisherman set it on his head and went away; and when he came to the baker's shop, the latter said to him, 'O my lord, I have baked you forty brioshes and have sent them to your house; and now I will bake wastel-bread, and as soon as it is done, I will bring it to the house and go and fetch you meat and vegetables.'

Abdallah gave him three handfuls of jewels out of the basket and going home, set it down there. Then he took a jewel of price of each sort and going to the jewel-bazaar, stopped at the Syndic's shop and said to him, 'Buy these jewels of me.' 'Show them to me,' said the Syndic. So he showed them to him and the jeweller said, 'Do you have other than these?' 'Yes,' answered Abdallah, 'I have a basketful at home.' 'And where is your house?' asked the Syndic. 'In such a quarter,' replied the fisherman; whereupon the Syndic took the jewels from him and said to his servants, 'Lay hold of him, for he is the thief who stole the

queen's jewels.' And he bade beat him. So they beat him and bound his hands behind him; after which the Syndic and all the people of the jewel-market arose and set out to carry him to the king, saying, 'We have gotten the thief.' One said, 'None robbed such an one but this knave,' and another, 'It was none but he stole all that was in such an one's house;' and some said this and some that.

But he was silent and spoke not a word nor answered any of them, till they brought him before the king, to whom said the Syndic, 'O king of the age, when the queen's necklace was stolen, you sent to acquaint us therewith, requiring of us the discovery of the culprit; wherefore I strove beyond the rest of the folk and have taken the thief for you. Here he is before you, and these jewels we have recovered from him.' Thereupon the king said to the eunuch, 'Carry these jewels to the queen and say to her, "Are these your jewels that you had lost?"' So the eunuch carried the jewels to the queen, who marvelled at them and sent to the king to say, 'I have found my necklace in my own place and these jewels are not my property; nay, they are finer than those of my necklace. Wherefore oppress you not the man; but, if he will sell them, buy them of him for your daughter Umm es Suwood, that we may string them on a necklace for her.'

When the eunuch returned and told the king what the queen said, he cursed the Syndic of the jewellers and his company with the curse of Aad and Themoud and they said to him, 'O king of the age, we knew this man for a poor fisherman and deemed these jewels too much for him to come by honestly, so made sure that he had stolen them.' 'Wretches that you are!' cried the king. 'Do you begrudge a true-believer good fortune? Why did you not question him? Peradventure God the Most High has vouchsafed him these things from a source on which he did not reckon. Why did you make him out a thief and dishonour him amongst the folk? Begone, and may God not bless you!'

So they went out in affright and the king said to Abdallah, 'O man, may God bless you in that He has bestowed on you! no harm shall befall you; but tell me truly, where did you get these jewels; for I am a king and have not the like of them.' 'O king of the age,' answered the fisherman, 'I have a basketful of them at home.' And he told him of his friendship with the merman, adding, 'We have made a covenant together that I shall bring him every day a basketful of fruit and that he shall fill me the basket with these jewels.' 'O man,' said the king, 'this is your lot; but wealth has need of station. I will protect you for the nonce against men's usurpations; but it may be I shall be deposed or die and another be made king in my stead, and he shall put you to death, because of his love of the things of this world and his covetousness. Wherefore I am minded to marry you to my daughter and make you my vizier and bequeath you the kingdom after me, so none may oppress you after my death.'

Then said he to his officers, 'Carry this man to the bath.' So they carried him to

the bath and washed his body and clad him in royal apparel, after which they brought him back to the king, and he made him his vizier and sent to his house couriers and the soldiers of his guard and all the wives of the notables, who clad his children in royal apparel and mounting the former in a horse-litter, with the little child in her lap, carried her to the palace, whilst the guards and couriers and Cadis walked before her. Moreover, they brought her elder children in to the king, who made much of them, taking them in his lap and seating them by his side; for they were nine male children and the king had no male offspring, nor had he been blessed with any child, save this one daughter, Umm es Suwood. Meanwhile the queen entreated Abdallah's wife with honour and bestowed favours on her and made her her vizieress. Then the king commanded to draw up the contract of marriage between his daughter and the fisherman, who assigned to her, as her dower, all the precious stones and jewels in his possession, and they opened the chapter of festivity. Moreover, the king made proclamation, commanding to decorate the city, in honour of his daughter's wedding, and Abdallah went in to the princess and did away her maidenhead.

Next morning, the king looked out of window and saw Abdallah carrying on his head a basket full of fruit. So he said to him, 'What do you have there, O my son-in-law, and where are you going?' 'I go to my friend Abdallah the merman,' answered the fisherman; and the king said, 'O my son-in-law, this is no time to go to your friend.' Abdallah said, 'Indeed, I fear to break tryst with him, lest he reckon me a liar and say, "The things of the world have distracted you from me."' 'True,' rejoined the king. 'Go to your friend and God help you!' So he passed through the city on his way to the sea-shore, and as he went, he heard those who knew him say, 'There goes the king's son-in-law to exchange fruit for jewels;' whilst those who knew him not said, 'Harkye, how much a pound? Come, sell to me.' And he answered, saying, 'Wait till I come back to you,' for that he would not vex any.

Then he fared on till he came to the sea-shore and foregathered with his friend the merman, to whom he delivered the fruit, receiving jewels in return. As he passed by the shop of the baker, on his return, he saw it closed; and thus he did ten days, during which time the shop abode shut and he saw nothing of the baker. So he said in himself, 'This is a strange thing! I wonder what is come of the baker!' Then he enquired of his neighbour, saying, 'O my brother, where is your neighbour the baker and what has God done with him?' 'O my lord,' answered he, 'he is sick and comes not forth of his house.' 'Where is his house?' asked Abdallah; and the other replied, 'In such a quarter.'



So he went thither and enquired of him; but, when he knocked at the door, the baker looked out of window and seeing his friend the fisherman, with a full basket on his head, came down and opened the door to him. Abdallah entered and throwing himself on the baker, embraced him and wept, saying, 'How are you, O my friend? Every day, I pass by thy shop and see it closed; so I asked thy neighbour, who told me that you was sick; and I enquired for thy house, that I might see you.' 'God requite you for me with all good!' answered the baker. 'Nothing ails me; but it was told me that the king had taken you, for that certain of the folk had lied against you and accused you of being a thief; wherefore I feared and shut my shop and hid myself.' 'It is well, said Abdallah and told him all that had befallen him with the king and the Syndic of the jewellers, adding, 'Moreover, the king hath given me his daughter to wife and made me his vizier: so do you take what is in this basket to thy share and fear nothing.'

Then he left him, after having done away his fear from him, and returned with the empty basket to the king, who said to him, 'O my son-in-law, it would seem you have not foregathered with your friend the merman today.' 'I went to him,' replied Abdallah; 'but that which I got of him I gave to my friend the baker, to whom I owe kindness.' 'Who is this baker?' asked the king; and the fisherman answered, 'He is a benevolent man, who did with me thus and thus in the days of my poverty and never neglected me a single day nor vexed my spirit.' The king asked, 'What is his name?' 'His name is Abdallah the baker,' replied the fisherman; 'and my name is Abdallah of the land and that of my friend the merman Abdallah of the sea.' 'And my name, also, is Abdallah,' rejoined the king; 'and the servants of God are all brethren. So send and fetch your friend the baker, that I may make him my vizier of the left.'

So he sent for the baker and the king invested him with the vizier's habit and made him vizier of the left, making Abdallah of the land his vizier of the right. On this wise the fisherman abode a whole year, every day carrying the merman the basket full of fruit and receiving it back, full of jewels; and when fruit failed from the gardens, he carried him raisins and almonds and hazel-nuts and walnuts and figs and so forth; and all that he brought him the merman accepted and returned him the basket full of jewels, as of wont.

It chanced one day that he carried him the basket, full of dry fruits, according to custom, and his friend took them from him. Then they sat down to converse, the fisherman on the beach and the merman in the water, near the shore, and conversed; and the talk went round between them, till it fell upon the subject of tombs; whereupon quoth the merman, 'O my brother, they say that the Prophet whom God bless and preserve! is buried with you on the land. Do you know his tomb?' 'Yes,' answered Abdallah. 'It lies in a city called Yethrib.' 'And do the people of the land visit it?' asked the merman. 'Yes,' replied the fisherman, and the other said, 'I give you joy, O people of the land, of visiting the tomb of that noble and compassionate prophet, which whoso visits merits his intercession! Have you visited it, O my brother?' 'No,' answered the fisherman; 'for I was poor and had not what to spend by the way, nor have I been at my ease but since I knew you and tyou bestowed on me this good fortune. But it behoves me to visit it, after I have made the pilgrimage to the Holy House of God, and nothing withholds me therefrom but my love for you, for I cannot leave you for one day.'

'And do you set the love of me,' rejoined the merman, 'before the visitation of the tomb of Mohammed whom God bless and preserve!, who shall intercede for you on the day of appearance before God and shall save you from the fire and through whose intercession you shalt enter Paradise? And do you, for the love of the world, leave to visit the tomb of your Prophet Mohammed, whom God bless and preserve?' 'No, by Allah,' replied Abdallah. 'I set the visitation of the Prophet's tomb above all else, and I crave you leave to visit it this year.' 'I grant you leave,' answered the merman; 'but I have a trust to give you; so come you with me into the sea, that I may carry you to my city and my house and entertain you there and give you a deposit; and when you stand by the Prophet's tomb, do you lay it thereon, saying, "O apostle of God, Abdallah the merman salutes you and sends you this present, imploring thine intercession to save him from the fire."'

'O my brother,' said the fisherman, 'you was created in the water and it is thine abiding-place and do you no hurt; but, if you should come forth to the land, would any harm betide you?' 'Yes,' answered the merman; 'my body would dry up and the breezes of the land would blow upon me and I should die.' 'And I, in like manner,' rejoined the fisherman, 'was created on the land and it is my abiding-place; but, if I went down into the sea, the water would enter my belly

and choke me and I should die.’ ‘Have no fear for that,’ replied the other; ‘for I will bring you an ointment, wherewith when you have anointed your body, the water will do you no hurt, though you should pass the rest of your life going about in the sea; and you shall lie down and rise up in the sea and nothing shall harm you.’ ‘If the case be so,’ said the fisherman, ‘well and good; but bring me the ointment, so I may make proof of it.’ ‘So be it,’ answered the merman and taking the basket, disappeared in the sea.

After awhile, he returned with an ointment, as it were the fat of oxen, yellow as gold and sweet of savour. ‘What is this, O my brother?’ asked the fisherman. ‘It is the liver-fat of a kind of fish called the dendan,’ answered the merman, ‘which is the biggest of all fish and the fellest of our foes. Its bulk is greater than that of any beast of the land, and were it to meet a camel or an elephant, it would swallow it at one mouthful.’ ‘O my brother,’ asked Abdallah, ‘what eats this baleful beast?’ ‘It eats of the beasts of the sea,’ replied the merman. ‘Have you not heard the byword, “Like the fishes of the sea: the strong eats the weak?”’

‘True,’ answered the fisherman; ‘but have you many of these dendans in the sea?’ And the other said, ‘Yes, there be many of them with us. None can tell their tale save God the Most High.’ Quoth Abdallah, ‘Verily, I fear lest, if I go down with you into the sea, one of these beasts fall in with me and devour me.’ ‘Have no fear,’ replied the merman. ‘When it sees you, it will know you for a son of Adam and will fear you and flee. It fears none in the sea as it feared a son of Adam; for that, if it eat him, it dieth forthright, because his flesh is a deadly poison to this kind of creature; nor do we gather its liver-fat save by means of a man, when he fall into the sea and is drowned; for that his favour becomes changed and oftentimes his flesh is torn; so the dendan ate him, deeming him of the beasts of the sea, and died. Then we light upon it dead and take the fat of its liver. Moreover, wherever there is a son of Adam, though there be in that place a hundred or two hundred or a thousand or more of these beasts, if they but hear him cry once, they all die forthwith and not one of them can avail to remove from its place; wherefore, whenas a son of Adam falls into the sea, we take him before he can drown and anoint him with this fat and go round about the sea with him, and whenever we see a dendan or two or three or more, we bid him cry out and they all die forthright for his once crying.’

The fisherman said, ‘I put my trust in God,’ and putting off his clothes, buried them in a hole, which he dug in the beach; after which he rubbed his body from top to toe with the ointment. Then he descended into the water and diving, opened his eyes and the water did him no hurt. So he walked right and left, and if he would, he rose to the surface and if he would, he sank to the bottom. And he saw the water of the sea vaulted over him, as it were a tent; yet it did him no hurt. Then said the merman to him, ‘What do you see, O my brother?’ ‘O my brother,’ answered Abdallah, ‘I see that which is good; and indeed you spoke

truth in that which you said to me; for the water does me no hurt.' The merman said, 'Follow me.'

So he followed him and they fared on from place to place, whilst Abdallah saw mountains of water before him and on his right and left and diverted himself by gazing thereon and on the various kinds of fish, some great and some small, that sported in the sea. Some of them were like unto buffaloes, others to oxen and others to dogs and yet others unto human beings; but all to which they drew near fled, whenas they saw the fisherman, who said to the merman, 'O my brother, how is it that I see all the fish, to which we draw near, flee from us?' 'Because they fear you,' answered the other; 'for all things that God has made fear the son of Adam.'

The fisherman ceased not to gaze upon the marvels of the sea, till they came to a high mountain and fared on beside it. Presently, he heard a great cry and turning, saw some black thing, the bigness of a camel or bigger, coming down upon him from the mountain and crying out. So he said to his friend, 'What is this, O my brother?' 'This is the dendan,' answered the merman. 'It comes down in quest of me, seeking to devour me; so cry you out at it, O my brother, ere it win to us; else will it snatch me up and devour me.' So Abdallah cried out at it and it fell down dead; which when he saw, he said, 'Extolled be the perfection of God and His praise! I smote it not with sword nor knife; how comes it, then, that, for all the vastness of the creature's bulk, it could not endure my cry, but died?' 'Marvel not,' replied the merman; 'for, by Allah, O my brother, were there a thousand or two thousand of these creatures, yet could they not endure the cry of a son of Adam.'

Then they fared on, till they came to a city, whose inhabitants the fisherman saw to be all women, there being no male among them; so he said to his companion, 'O my brother, what city is this and what are these women?' 'This is the city of women,' answered the merman, 'for its inhabitants are of the women of the sea.' 'Are there any males among them?' asked the fisherman; and the merman said, 'No.' 'Then how,' said Abdallah, 'do they conceive and bear young, without males?' The other said, 'The king of the sea banishes them hither and they conceive not neither bear children. All the women of the sea, with whom he is wroth, he sends to this city and they cannot leave it; for, should one of them come forth therefrom, any of the beasts of the sea that saw her would devour her. But in the other cities of the sea there are both males and females.'

'Are there then other cities than this in the sea?' asked the fisherman, and the merman said, 'There are many.' 'And is there a Sultan over you in the sea?' asked the fisherman. 'Yes,' answered the merman. Then said Abdallah, 'O my brother, I have indeed seen many marvels in the sea!' 'And what have you seen of the marvels of the sea?' asked the merman. 'Have you not heard the saying,

"The marvels of the sea are more in number than the marvels of the land?" "True," answered the fisherman and fell to gazing upon the women, whom he saw having faces like moons and hair like women's hair, but their hands and feet were in their bellies and they had tails like fishes' tails.

When the merman had shown him the people of the city, he carried him forth therefrom and forewent him to another city, which he found full of folk, both males and females, after the fashion of the women aforesaid and having tails; but there was neither selling nor buying amongst them, as with the people of the land, nor were they clothed, but went all naked and with their privities uncovered. 'O my brother,' said Abdallah, 'I see males and females alike with their privities exposed.' And the other said, 'This is because the folk of the sea have no clothes.' 'And how do they, when they marry?' asked the fisherman. 'They do not marry,' answered the merman; 'but every one who hath a mind to a female does his will of her.' Abdallah said, 'This is unlawful. Why does he not ask her in marriage and dower her and make her a wedding-festival and marry her, in accordance with that which is pleasing to God and His Apostle?' 'We are not all of one religion,' answered his companion. 'Some of us are Muslims, believers in the unity of God, others Jews and Christians and what not else; and each marries in accordance with the ordinances of his religion; but those of us who marry are mostly Muslims.'

The fisherman said, 'You are naked and have neither buying nor selling among you: of what then is your wives' dowry? Do you give them jewels and precious stones?' 'Jewels with us are but stones without value,' answered the merman: 'but upon him who is minded to marry they impose a dowry of a certain number of fish of various kinds, that he must catch, a thousand or two thousand, more or less, according to the agreement between himself and the bride's father. As soon as he brings the required amount, the families of the bride and bridegroom assemble and eat the marriage-banquet; after which they bring him in to his bride, and he catches fish and feeds her; or, if he be unable, she catches fish and feeds him.' 'And how if a woman commit adultery?' asked the fisherman. 'If a woman be convicted of this case,' answered the merman, 'they banish her to the City of Women; and if she be with child, they leave her till she be delivered, when, if she give birth to a girl, they banish her with her, naming her adulteress, daughter of adulteress, and she abideth a maid till she die; but, if she give birth to a male child, they carry it to the Sultan of the Sea, who puts it to death.'

Abdallah marvelled at this and the merman carried him to another city and thence to another and another, till he had shown him fourscore cities, and he saw the people of each city to be different from those of every other. Then said he to the merman, 'O my brother, are there yet other cities in the sea?' 'And what hast thou seen of the cities of the sea and its wonders?' replied the other. 'By the virtue of the noble prophet, the benign, the compassionate, were I to

show thee a thousand cities a day for a thousand years, and in each city a thousand marvels, I should not have shown thee one carat of the four-and-twenty carats of the cities of the sea and its wonders! I have but shown thee our own province and country, nothing more.'

'O my brother,' said the fisherman, 'since this is the case, what I have seen sufficeth me, for I am sick of eating fish, and these fourscore days I have been in your company, you have fed me morning and night upon nothing but raw fish, neither broiled nor boiled.' 'And what is broiled and boiled?' asked the merman. Abdallah said, 'We broil fish with fire and boil it in water and dress it in various ways and make many dishes of it.' 'And how should we come by fire in the sea?' rejoined the other. 'We know not broiled nor boiled nor nothing else of the kind.' said the fisherman, 'We also fry it in olive-oil and oil of sesame,' and the merman said, 'How should we come by olive-oil and oil of sesame in the sea? Verily we know nothing of that you name.'

'True,' said Abdallah, 'but, O my brother, you have shown me many cities; yet you have not shown me your own city.' The merman said, 'As for mine own city, we passed it long since, for it is near the land whence we came, and I only left it and came with you here, thinking to divert you with the sight of the greater cities of the sea.' 'That which I have seen of them sufficeth me,' replied Abdallah; 'and now I would have you show me your own city.' 'So be it,' answered the other and returning on his traces, carried him back thither and said to him, 'This is my city.'

Abdallah looked and saw a city small by comparison with those he had seen; then he entered with his companion and they fared on till they came to a cavern. Quoth the merman, 'This is my house and all the houses in the city are on this wise, caverns, great and small, in the mountains; as likewise are those of all the other cities of the sea. For every one who is minded to make him a house repairs to the king and says to him, 'I wish to make me a house in such a place.' Whereupon the king sends with him a band of the fish called peckers, which have beaks that crumble the hardest rock, appointing a certain dole of fish to their wage. They betake themselves to the mountain chosen by the owner of the house and hew therein the house, whilst the owner catches fish for them and feeds them, till the cavern is finished, when they depart and the owner of the house takes up his abode therein. After this wise do all the people of the sea; they traffic not with one another nor serve each other save by means of fish; and their food is fish and they themselves are a kind of fish.'

Then he said to him, 'Enter.' So Abdallah entered and the merman cried out, saying, 'Ho, daughter mine!' whereupon there came to him a damsel with a face like the round of the moon and long hair, heavy buttocks, languishing black eyes and slender waist; but she was naked and had a tail. When she saw the

fisherman, she said to her father, 'O my father, what is this lacktail you have brought with you?' 'O my daughter,' answered he, 'this is my friend of the land, from whom I use to bring you the fruits of the earth. Come here and salute him.' So she came forward and saluted the fisherman with eloquent tongue and fluent speech; and her father said to her, 'Bring victual for our guest, by whose coming a blessing has betided us:' whereupon she brought him two great fishes, each the bigness of a lamb, and the merman said to him, 'Eat.' So he ate, in his own despite, for stress of hunger; because he was weary of eating fish and they had nothing else.

Before long, in came the merman's wife, who was fair to look upon, and with her two children, each having in his hand a young fish, which he munched as a man would munch a cucumber. When she saw the fisherman with her husband, she said, 'What is this lacktail?' And she and her sons and daughter came up to him and fell to examining his breech and saying, 'Yea, by Allah, he is tailless!' And they laughed at him. So he said to the merman, 'O my brother, have you brought me here to make me a laughing-stock for thy wife and children?' 'Pardon, O my brother,' answered the merman. 'Those who have no tails are rare among us, and whenever one such is found, the Sultan takes him, to make him sport, and he abideth a marvel amongst us, and all who see him laugh at him. But, O my brother, excuse these young children and this woman, for they lack understanding.' Then he cried out to his family, saying, 'Hold your peace!' So they were afraid and kept silence; whilst he went on to soothe Abdallah's mind.

Presently, as they were talking, in came half a score mermen, tall and strong and stout, and said to him, 'O Abdallah, it has reached the king that you have with you a lacktail.' 'Yes,' answered the merman, 'and this is he; but he is not of us nor of the children of the sea. He is my friend of the land and has come to me as a guest and I purpose to carry him back to the land.' The man said, 'We cannot depart without him; so, if you have something to say, arise and come with him to the king; and whatsoever you would say to us, that say you to the king.' Then said the merman to the fisherman, 'O my brother, my excuse is manifest, and we may not gainsay the king: but go you with me to him and I will do my endeavour to deliver you from him, if it please God. Fear not, for he deemes you of the children of the sea; but, when he sees you, he will know you to be of the children of the land, whereupon he will surely entreat you with honour and restore thee to the land.' 'It is for you to decide,' replied Abdallah. 'I will put my trust in God and go with you.'

So he took him and carried him to the king, who, when he saw him, laughed at him and said, 'Welcome to the lacktail!' And all who were about the king fell to laughing at him and saying, 'Yea, by Allah, he is tailless!' Then Abdallah of the sea came forward and acquainted the king with the fisherman's case, saying, 'This man is of the children of the land and he is my friend and cannot live

amongst us, for that he loves not the eating of fish, except it be fried or boiled; wherefore I desire that thou give me leave to restore him to the land.' 'Since the case is so,' answered the king, 'I give you leave to restore him to his place, after due entertainment. Bring him the guest-meal.'

So they brought him fish of various kinds and colours and he ate, in obedience to the king's commandment; after which the latter said to him, 'Ask a boon of me.' He said, 'I ask of you that you give me jewels;' and the king said, 'Carry him to the jewel-house and let him choose that whereof he has need.' So his friend carried him to the jewel-house and he chose out what he would, after which the merman brought him back to his own city and pulling out a purse, said to him, 'Take this deposit and lay it on the tomb of the Prophet, whom God bless and preserve!' And he took it, knowing not what was therein.

Then the merman went forth with him, to bring him back to land, and by the way he heard singing and merry-making and saw a table spread with fish and folk eating and singing and holding high festival. So he said to his friend, 'What ails these people to rejoice thus? Is there a wedding toward amongst them?' 'Nay,' answered Abdallah of the sea; 'only one of them is dead.' 'Do you then,' asked the fisherman, 'when one dies amongst you, rejoice for him and sing and feast?' 'Yes,' replied the merman; 'and you of the land, what do you!' 'When one dies amongst us,' said Abdallah, 'we weep and mourn for him and the women buffet their faces and rend the bosoms of their garments, in token of mourning for the dead.' The merman stared at him with wide eyes and said to him, 'Give me the deposit.' So he gave it to him.

Then he set him ashore and said to him, 'Henceforward our love and our friendship are at an end, and you shall no more see me, nor I you.' 'Why do you say this?' asked the fisherman; and the other said, 'Are you not, O folk of the land, a deposit of God?' 'Yes,' answered Abdallah. 'Why then,' asked the merman, 'is it grievous to you that God should take back His deposit and wherefore weep you over it? How can I entrust you with a deposit for the Prophet, whom God bless and preserve, seeing that, when a child is born to you, you rejoice in it, albeit God the Most High setteth the soul therein as a deposit; and yet, when He taketh it again, it is grievous to you and you weep and mourn? Since it is uneath to you to give up the deposit of God, how shall it be easy to you to give up the deposit of the Prophet? Wherefore we reck not of your companionship.' So saying, he left him and disappeared in the sea.

The fisherman donned his clothes and taking the jewels, went up to the king, who received him with open arms and rejoiced at his return, saying, 'How are you, O my son-in-law, and what is the cause of thine absence from me this while?' So he told him his story and acquainted him with that which he had seen of marvels in the sea, whereat the king wondered. Moreover, he told him

what the merman had said anent the mourning for the dead; and the king replied, 'Indeed you was at fault to tell him this.' Nevertheless, he continued for some time to go down to the sea-shore and call upon the merman; but he answered him not nor came to him; so, at last, he gave up hope of him and abode, he and the king his father-in-law and their families, in the happiest of case and the practice of righteousness, till there came to them the Destroyer of Delights and the Sunderer of Companies and they died all. And glory be to the EverLiving One, who dieth not, whose is the empire of the Seen and the Unseen, who can all things and is gracious to His servants and knoweth all that pertaineth to them!

Stories help us explore cultures, learn moral lessons, connect with nature — or simply have fun. That's why ririro.com offers 3,000+ free stories — fairy tales, fables, bedtime stories, myths and more — for every age, in 13 languages, with free printable PDFs and often audio. Reading should be a right, not a privilege. Share ririro.com and spread the joy of reading.

Instagram: @ririro_reading · Pinterest: pinterest.com/ririrocom