



Merchant Ali and the Forty Brigands

Adapted by Chip Colquhoun from the Grecian-Arabian folk tale

Illustration by Erica Trinity-Rose

Long ago, everyone who lived in the land of Persia was scared to leave their village. They were happy to visit their neighbours, or go to the village market to buy turbans, or go to the village farms to buy food. They even went down to the village river to wash their clothes.

But it was dangerous to go further than that – especially into the forest.

That's because brigands lived

in the forest. Brigands were robbers who could be very mean indeed, and carried very sharp swords. When people went through the forest, they sometimes came out with no money. Sometimes they came out with no money and no hands. And sometimes they didn't come out at all.

It didn't matter if you were a farmer, a teacher, or even a princess – the brigands stole from anyone,

and they would hurt anyone. So everyone was scared of going through the forest.

Even so, some people had to go through the forest – like merchants. A merchant’s job was to take things from one village and swap them for different things in a different village.

For example, people in one village might make fine clothes, but terrible frying pans. So a merchant took those fine clothes to a village that made terrible clothes, but fine frying pans. He swapped them over, and brought the frying pans back to the first village.

If, of course, he got through the forest without meeting any brigands. Do you think you could be brave enough to be a merchant?

The village in this story had two merchants who were brothers: Cassim was the oldest, and Ali the youngest. They both lived with their sister Morgiana, who looked after their home.

Cassim and Ali were good at sneaking through the forest: no brigand had heard them – yet...

Even so, both brothers were worried before every journey. Travelling alone was scary – but they couldn’t travel together, because that made too much noise. So instead they took it in turns – and, at the start of this story, it was Ali’s turn.

Ali was creeping through the forest when he suddenly heard a voice. Was it a farmer? A teacher? A princess?

As Ali listened, he heard even more voices – and they were mean voices. Brigands! Lots of them! They were talking and laughing nastily.

Ali saw a tall tree next to a big rock. He quickly climbed the tree, and hoped the brigands wouldn’t see him...

To Ali’s horror, the brigands came right up to the rock. There were so many of them! But they hadn’t seen Ali – yet...

Each brigand held a sack and wore a black turban and cloak – apart from one. That brigand wore the biggest turban, and had a silver cloak. This brigand stood in front of the rock and said, “Open, sesame?”

What happened next made Ali gasp. The rock split in two! The pieces moved apart to show a cave inside, and the brigands walked in one at a time.

Ali counted them as they went inside: one, two three... all the way up to forty brigands.

Once all the brigands were inside, the two pieces of rock stuck together again.

Ali thought this was his chance to run. But he also wanted to know... Where the brigands had gone? What were they doing? Would they come back?

So Ali waited in the tree.

Nearly an hour later, Ali heard a voice shout, “Open, sesame?” The rock split open again, and the brigands came out. Ali counted

them all: one, two, three... All the way up to forty. When Ali finished counting, he noticed that the brigands weren’t carrying their sacks anymore. They had left them in the cave.

The brigands walked off into the forest. Ali waited until he couldn’t hear their laughs anymore, then climbed down the tree. He faced the rock and said, “Open, sesame?”

As if by magic – well, it was magic – the rock split open. Ali took out a lamp from his bag to light his way, and stepped into the dark, thin cave.

Soon Ali found himself in an enormous space full of treasures! Everything the brigands had ever taken was right there: gold, jewels, plus some very fine clothes and frying pans.

Ali didn’t know who the treasure belonged to, but he knew it didn’t belong to the brigands. The brigands had stolen it all. Ali

said to himself, "It's fine to rob from robbers, right?"

Ali wasn't completely sure. So only filled his bag with a little treasure – including a small teddy bear with a shiny red coat, and a necklace with a picture of a silver unicorn.

Afterwards, Ali ran back through the cave. The rock had closed again, so Ali had to say, "Open, sesame?" That made the rock open; Ali stepped out into the forest, and hurried back home.

Cassim and Morgiana were glad to see their brother come home safe – but they were soon gasping with amazement at Ali's story. Together they looked at the treasure that Ali had taken from the brigands. Even that small amount was enough to make them rich!

But then Morgiana saw the teddy bear with the shiny red coat. She said, "Ali – this belongs to the farmer's daughter! She lost it many weeks ago."

"Really?" said Ali. "Then we should take it back to her."

Cassim nodded, and said, "I wonder if there is anything else the brigands have stolen that we could take back to where it came from? Maybe I could go to the cave this time, while you take the teddy to the farmer's daughter?"

Ali agreed, and told Cassim how to get inside the cave. So that Cassim didn't forget the special words, Ali wrote them down on a piece of paper: "Open sesame".

While Ali and Morgiana went to see the farmer's daughter, Cassim crept into the forest. He found the rock by the tall tree, faced it, and said, "Open sesame."

Nothing happened.

Cassim tried again: "Open sesame."

Still nothing happened. Can you think why?

Cassim was confused. He didn't think Ali was lying. He tried one more time: "Open sesame!"

Still nothing happened – so Cassim went back home without any treasure.

When Cassim told Ali how the rock didn't open, Ali was confused too. He said, "What did you say?"

Cassim said, "Exactly what you told me to say: 'Open sesame.'"

Ali had an idea. "Those were the right words, but I don't think you said them the right way. You should have said, 'Open, sesame?'"

But Cassim was still confused. "Your writing didn't tell me that! How could I remember that?"

The two brothers scratched their heads. But Morgiana noticed an ant crawling across the table; it looked like a dot with a tail – and it gave Morgiana an idea.

She took the paper with the magic words on it, and drew two marks. Now the paper read, "Open, sesame?"

Morgiana pointed to the first mark and said, "This is a comma. It means you pause for a quick breath." Then she pointed to the

second mark and said, "This is a question mark. It means you sound like you are asking a question."

Cassim understood. He had a little practice, and then went back into the forest.

As Cassim reached the rock this time, though, he heard the brigands coming through the trees! He quickly hid in the tall tree.

The brigands arrived – there were so many! And each one held a sack of treasure. Cassim watched in amazement as the leader of the brigands, with the silver cloak, stood in front of the rock and said, "Open, sesame?"

Just as Ali had seen, the rock opened up. All the brigands went into the cave, then the rock closed behind them. After nearly an hour, Cassim heard someone shout, "Open, sesame?" The rock opened again, and all the brigands came out.

Finally, the rock closed, and the brigands left.

At last it was Cassim's turn. He stood in front of the rock and said, "Open, sesame?" And this time, the rock opened for Cassim.

Just like Ali, Cassim stood in the cave and said to himself, "It's fine to rob from robbers, right?"

But unlike Ali, Cassim was completely sure. He filled his bag full with treasure – including a purple umbrella that he knew belonged to the fisherman's wife.

Over the next few days, Ali and Cassim took it in turns to visit the cave of stolen treasure. Sometimes they saw the brigands and hid in the tree; sometimes they didn't see the brigands at all. But each time they brought back gold, jewels, and something that belonged to someone in their village. Soon everyone thought they were heroes.

But Ali only ever filled his bag with a little treasure; Cassim always filled his bag full with treasure.

One day, Ali was hiding in the

tree counting the brigands going into the cave: one, two, three... All the way up to forty. He waited for nearly an hour, and then the rock opened again. He counted the brigands coming out: one, two, three... All the way up to – thirty-nine?

The other brigands left, but Ali stayed up in the tree. He stayed up there until the sun went down, and the moon came up.

Ali was almost falling asleep when he noticed the leader of the brigands come out through the trees. The leader still hadn't seen Ali – yet...

The leader said, "Open, sesame?" and went into the cave. The rock closed behind him. After a short while, Ali heard a voice shout, "Open! Sesame..."

The rock opened, and two brigands came out.

After they had gone, Ali climbed down and faced the rock. He said, "Open! Sesame..."

The rock opened, and Ali went in to take some treasure.

Ali had taken so long that Cassim and Morgiana were getting worried – so they were delighted when Ali finally came home. But Ali had something important to tell them.

“The brigands have changed how we have to say the magic words! We now need to say, ‘Open! Sesame...’”

Cassim scratched his head. “How will I remember that?”

Just then, Morgiana noticed more ants crawling in the room. Two were in a line crawling up the wall – a long one followed by a short one. Another three were walking in a line across the table – three short ones.

This gave Morgiana another idea. She wrote the words down on some paper again, with some new marks. She said, “This mark is an exclamation mark: it means you must say the word like you’re

really excited about it. This mark is an ellipsis: it means you should say the end of the word slowly, like it’s a mystery.”

Cassim nodded and took the paper.

Then Ali said, “Oh! One more thing! Always count the brigands as they come out! If there are less than forty, you mustn’t go in – that means there is a brigand hiding inside.”

“Why would they do that?” Cassim said.

“Maybe you have been taking too much,” said Morgiana. “You should be careful to only take small amounts at a time.”

So they kept on stealing from the brigands. But do you think Cassim remembered to only take small amounts? If he did, he didn’t care: he still filled his bag full of treasure!

This meant the brigands kept changing the way they said the magic words – so Morgiana and

her brothers kept having to think of new marks to help remember how to say them.

There was something else Cassim forgot to do though. Can you remember what that was?

One day, Cassim was hiding in the tree as the brigands went into the cave. He waited for nearly an hour, and then the rock opened again. The brigands came out and walked off into the forest.

After they had gone, Cassim climbed down and faced the rock. He said, "Open: sesame."

The rock opened, and Cassim went in to take some treasure...

"Gotcha!"

Suddenly a brigand jumped out from the shadows and grabbed Cassim! He pushed Cassim to the ground, then pointed his sword so that Cassim couldn't get up.

After a while, the leader of the brigands came back. He showed Cassim a nasty smile, and said, "Tell me where you have taken our

treasure, or I will cut you into little pieces."

Cassim was very scared, so he told the leader everything.

After Cassim had finished, the leader said, "So: your brother is guarding the treasure back at your home is he? I think me and my gang need to go and pay him a visit..."

The two brigands dragged Cassim out from the cave, where the rest of the brigands were waiting. The leader pointed the end of his sword at Cassim's back and said, "Take us to your home! Now!"

And off they went...

Cassim brought the brigands to the edge of the forest, where they could look through the trees at the village. He nervously pointed to his house.

The leader turned to the brigands and said, "Here in the forest we are dangerous, but there

in the village there are enough people to beat us in a fight. If they see us all go into Cassim's house, they might try to stop us. So we need to be sneaky. Here's my plan..."

First, the leader hid his sword in his boot, and turned his cloak inside-out so became a brown colour. Then he went into the village pretending to be an ordinary merchant with sugar to sell. He told people that his cart had broken, and they took him to see the cart maker.

Meanwhile, the rest of the brigands tied Cassim to a tree and stuck a rope in his mouth so he couldn't call for help. They didn't want to kill him yet – just in case he was lying about the treasure being in the house.

The leader brought a cart into the forest. The rest of the brigands got onto the back of the cart, then hid inside their sacks.

At last the leader was ready to pull the cart into the village. He

dragged it all the way to Ali and Cassim's house, and knocked on the door.

It was Morgiana who opened the door. The leader said, "Hello miss. I am a merchant from four villages away, and I have some sacks of sugar to swap with your brother Ali. Is he home?"

Morgiana nodded, and called for Ali. Then she invited the leader inside.

When Ali came into the room, he did not recognise the leader with a brown cloak. The two men shook hands, and Ali said, "It is very nice to meet you. How many sacks of sugar do you have?"

"Thirty-nine," said the leader. "Let me bring them all inside, and you can see how heavy they are."

Ali shook his head. "Ah – you mustn't bring them in here. We have ants in the house – and ants love sugar! Wait here while I get the key for our shed – we can put them in there."

While Ali went to get the key, Morgiana stayed in the room with the leader – and inside her head, she was saying to herself, “Thirty-nine sacks of sugar? Thirty-nine plus one is forty... That’s the number of brigands Ali talked about! And look! I can see a sword hiding in that man’s boot! He’s not a merchant – he’s a brigand! But what can I do? He looks much stronger than Ali or me...”

The sight of some ants dancing on the floor gave her an idea.

Morgiana said to the leader, “While you wait for my brother, would you like me to dance for you? I know a special knife dance from the land of Arabia.”

The leader smiled. Morgiana thought his teeth looked horrible, and his eyes looked mean. But the leader said, “Yes please – I haven’t seen a good dance in ages.”

So Morgiana took two knives from the kitchen and began to dance in front of the leader.

She was still dancing when Ali came back into the room, holding the key and saying, “Found it!”

The leader looked at Ali...

...and Morgiana suddenly stuck the knife right into the leader’s chest!

The leader was surprised, so he couldn’t do anything except fall to the floor.

Ali was surprised too – but Morgiana quickly explained. She showed Ali the sword, and Ali recognised the silver on the inside of the cloak.

“But what about the other thirty-nine?” said Morgiana.

Ali looked at the sacks of brigands sitting on the cart. “It’s a shame they’re not sacks of sugar,” he said. “If they were, the ants would crawl in – and make them scratch and scratch until they have to run away!”

Morgiana smiled. “Then that’s what we’ll do! Ants like sugar, but they also love honey!

Let's go pour some into those sacks...!"

That's exactly what Ali and Morgiana did: they snuck up to the cart and poured a few drops of honey into every sack. A short while later, every ant in the street had climbed onto the cart and into the sacks – making the brigands scratch and scratch and scratch!

All of the brigands were scratching so hard that they fell out of their sacks. Now they could see everyone in the village watching them, and it was their turn to be scared – so they all ran off into the forest, scratching as they went.

Ali and Morgiana went into the forest to look for Cassim. It didn't take them long to find him.

Now that the brigands were gone, everyone could feel safe going into the forest again: farmers, teachers, even princesses! And speaking of princesses...

One princess was really happy that she could go back into

the forest. She went to the village where Ali, Cassim, and Morgiana lived, because she had been told that Ali had found something that belonged to her: a necklace with a silver unicorn.

And that's how Ali ended up meeting this princess – and that's when they fell in love. Not long later they were married, and Ali became a prince. The two of them had a daughter; and when that daughter grew up, she met a young man who found a magic lamp inside a magic cave of treasure...

...but that, of course, is another story.

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