

ABU NEUT AND ABU NEUTEEN

A person named Abu Neut (or the well-intentioned), being much distressed in his own country, resolved to seek a better livelihood in another. Accordingly he took with him a single piastre, which was all that he possessed, and began his journey. He had not travelled far when a man overtook him, whose name was Abu Neuteen (or the double-minded). They entered into conversation, and as they were both seeking to improve their fortunes, they agreed to travel together; and it was settled that Abu Neut should be the bearer of the common stock. The other possessed ten piastres.

After some days' toilsome journey, they reached a city; and when they entered, a beggar cried out, "Worthy believers, disburse your alms, and you shall be rewarded tenfold." Upon this, Abu Neut gave him a piastre; but his companion, enraged at what he considered prodigality, demanded back his money, which was given him, when he marched off, leaving his new friend penniless. Abu Neut, resigned to his fate, and relying on Providence, proceeded to a mosque to pay his devotions, hoping to meet with some charitable person who would relieve his necessities. But he was mistaken, for although he remained in the mosque for a night and a day, no one offered him charity. At length he stole out in the dusk of evening, and wandered through the streets fainting with hunger. Presently he perceived a servant throwing fragments from an eating-cloth, when he advanced, gathered them up, and sat down in a corner, where he gnawed the bones and broken fragments with eagerness, after which he raised his eyes to heaven, and thanked God for his scanty meal. The servant, who had watched his proceedings, was surprised and affected at his wretched condition and his devotion. He informed his master, who being a charitable man, took ten piastres from his purse, and ordered the servant to give them to Abu Neut.

The avaricious servant retained one piastre as his perquisite, and delivered the rest to Abu Neut, who counted the money, and thanked God for his bounty, but said that, agreeably to the scriptural declaration, he ought to have had tenfold for the piastre which he had given to the beggar. The master of the servant, overhearing this, called Abu Neut upstairs and having seated him, inquired his story, which he faithfully related to his host, who was a merchant, and was so much pleased with his pious simplicity, that he resolved to befriend him, and desired him to abide in his house for the present.

After Abu Neut had resided with his new friend for some days, the merchant, who was punctual in discharging the duties of religion, examined his stock, and set apart the tenth of it in kind, which he bestowed upon his guest, advising him to open a shop, and try his fortune in trade. Abu Neut did so, and was so successful that in a few years he became one of the richest merchants in the place.

One day, as he was sitting in his warehouse, he caught sight of his old companion, Abu Neuteen, in the street. He was lean, clothed in rags, and his eyes were sunken and dim, and he was begging alms of the passengers with the importunate cry of distress. Abu Neut, compassionating his miserable situation, sent a servant to call him, and on his arrival he saluted him, and sent for refreshments to relieve his immediate want. He then invited him to spend the night at his house; and in the evening he shut up his warehouse and conducted him home, where a bath was made warm for him; and when he had bathed, he was presented with a change of handsome apparel. Supper was served, and when they had eaten till they were satisfied, they conversed on various subjects. At length Abu Neut exclaimed, "Do you not recollect me, my brother?"

"No, by Allah, most liberal host," replied the other; "who are you?"

"I was your travelling companion at such a period," answered Abu Neut; "but my disposition is still unchanged, and I have not forgotten our old connection. Half of what I possess is yours."

Having said this, Abu Neut balanced his accounts, and gave half his property to his distressed fellow-traveller, who stocked a warehouse, and traded for himself with good success. The two friends lived near each other for some time in good repute, when Abu Neuteen became restless, and requested Abu Neut to quit their present abode, and travel for recreation and profit.

"My dear friend," replied Abu Neut, "why should we travel? Have we not ease and affluence here, and what more can we enjoy in any part of the world?"

But his remonstrances had no effect on Abu Neuteen, who became so importunate that at length his kind friend yielded to his whim. So they prepared a caravan, loaded an ample stock of merchandise on mules and camels, and departed for the city of Mosul.

After travelling for ten days, they encamped one evening near a deep well. In the morning, Abu Neut was let down into the well by his own desire, in order to fill the water-bags more easily for the use of the men and animals belonging to the caravan, little suspecting what Providence had decreed to befall him; for his ungrateful friend, who envied his prosperity and coveted his wealth, loaded the beasts, cut the rope at the top of the well, and departed, leaving him to his fate.

Abu Neut remained all day without food, but humbly putting his trust in Allah for deliverance. About the middle of the following night, he overheard two afreets conversing with each other, when one said: "I am now perfectly happy, for at length I have possessed the beautiful Princess of Mosul; and no one can drive me away, unless by sprinkling the infusion of wormwood under her feet on a Friday, during Divine service in the great mosque; a form of exorcism which will hardly be found out."

"I have been as fortunate as yourself," replied the other afreet, "for I am in possession of such a hidden treasure of gold and jewels under the mound near Mosul that the amount cannot be computed. The talisman cannot be opened to any one unless by killing a white cock on the mound, and pouring the blood over

it. I imagine that no man will discover the secret." Having said this, the afreets took their flight from the well.

Abu Neut treasured up in his mind the conversation of the afreets, and at daylight was happily released from the well upon the arrival of a caravan, some of the followers of which were let down to fetch water, and having discovered him, charitably drew him up, and gave him some food. When he was somewhat revived, they asked him by what accident he had remained in the well; upon which he concealed the treachery of his ungrateful companion, and informed them that he had slept by the brink, and had fallen in; and as his fellow travellers had not missed him at the time, the caravan had continued its journey without him. He then begged leave to accompany his generous deliverers to Mosul, to which they agreed, and liberally furnished him with a conveyance.

On entering the city, Abu Neut perceived all the population in motion, and on inquiring the reason, was informed that they were hastening to the great square before the palace, to see the beheading of a physician, who had failed in attempting to expel a demon who had long possessed the daughter of the Sultan, and that this had been the fate of many unhappy men who had tried their skill upon the unfortunate princess. Upon this intelligence he hastened with all speed to the palace, and having obtained admission to the Sultan, made the usual prostrations, after which he offered to expel the demon, and begged as part of his reward the life of the unsuccessful physician. The Sultan consented to delay the execution, but declared that if Abu Neut should fail in his undertaking, he would execute them both together, as ignorant pretenders to their art. Abu Neut then begged that the trial of his skill might be deferred until the next Friday, which he requested of the Sultan might be solemnly observed, as the devout prayers of all true believers would draw down a blessing on his operations. To this the Sultan agreed, and the unfortunate physician was released from the executioner, and commanded to be kept in the palace, in which Abu Neut had likewise an apartment allotted to him. Proclamation was then made throughout the city for the strict observance of religious worship on the approaching Friday, under pain of the royal displeasure on those who should neglect it.

When Friday arrived, and the whole city was assembled at prayers, Abu Neut prepared the infusion of wormwood as the afreet had mentioned. Being introduced into the apartment of the princess, who lay in a melancholy stupor, he poured the infusion upon her feet, when a loud yell was heard near her, and she started up as if from sleep, and called to her attendants to assist her in rising. News was immediately conveyed to the Sultan of the princess's recovery, and he came, overjoyed to find that her senses had returned. He commanded public rejoicings to be made, distributed large sums in alms, and desired Abu Neut to demand what he chose for his important services, at the same time ordering the unsuccessful physician to be set at liberty with a handsome present.

Abu Neut, who had been captivated by the beauty of the princess, asked her hand in marriage as his reward. Upon this the Sultan consulted with his viziers,

who advised him to dismiss the petitioner for the present, with orders to return in the morning, when he should receive the Sultan's decision on a request which demanded much consideration. When Abu Neut had retired, the viziers represented to the Sultan that it was fitting that the husband of his daughter should at least possess great wealth; for although Abu Neut had expelled the demon, yet if he could not support her in a manner becoming her rank, he was not worthy to marry her. They therefore advised him to select a number of his most valuable jewels, to show them to Abu Neut, and to demand as a dowry for the princess some of equal value. If he could produce them he was ready to receive him as his son-in-law, but if not he must accept a compensation for his services more suited to his condition than the royal alliance.

When Abu Neut appeared at court next day, the Sultan displayed the jewels, and made the proposal advised by his viziers. But Abu Neut looked upon the brilliant stones before him with the utmost indifference, and assured the Sultan that he would next day present him with ten times the number, of superior value and lustre. This astonished the whole court; for it was well known that no prince possessed richer gems than those belonging to the Sultan of Mosul.

Abu Neut took leave of the Sultan, and proceeded to the poultry market, where he bought a cock which was entirely white and free from blemish. He carried it to his lodgings, where he continued till the rising of the moon, when he walked out of the city alone, and hastened to the mound of bluish earth which the afreet of the well had mentioned as containing in valuable hidden treasures. Having arrived at the mound, he ascended it and cut the throat of the cock, and as soon as the blood began to flow the earth shook and made an opening, through which, to his great satisfaction, he perceived such heaps of inestimable precious stones of all sorts as are not to be adequately described. Abu Neut now returned to the city, where, having procured ten camels with two panniers on each, he returned and loaded them with his treasure, which he conveyed to his lodging, having first filled up the opening in the mound.

In the morning Abu Neut repaired with his loaded camels to the palace, and, entering the court of the divan where the Sultan sat expecting him, he made a profound obeisance, and exclaimed: "Descend for a moment, my lord, and examine the dowry of the princess."

The Sultan rose from his throne, and descended the steps of the hall. The camels were made to kneel, and he examined the panniers, and was so astonished at the richness of their contents, being jewels far surpassing his own in size and lustre, that he exclaimed: "By Allah, if the treasures of all the sultans of the world were brought together, they could not afford gems equal to these!"

When he was a little recovered from his surprise, he asked his viziers how he should now act towards Abu Neut, when they all cried out together: "By all means give him your daughter!"

The marriage was immediately celebrated with great splendour; and Abu Neut conducted himself so well in his high station that the Sultan, his

father-in-law, committed to him the giving public audience in his stead, and the decision of all appeals three days in each week.

Some days after his elevation, Abu Neut was giving audience in the magnificent hall of one of his country palaces, when he beheld a man among the crowd of a sorrowful aspect, who cried out: "O true believers, O charitable gentlemen, relieve the distressed!"

Abu Neut sent one of his attendants to bring him to his presence, when he immediately recognised his treacherous companion who had left him in the well. Without making himself known, or betraying any emotion but that of compassion, he ordered attendants to conduct him to the warm bath; and after bathing he was arrayed in a magnificent robe and again brought to the divan. Abu Neut then retired with him into a private apartment, and said: "Do you not know me, my old friend?"

"No, by Allah!" replied the other.

"Know then," returned he, "that I am Abu Neut, your benefactor and companion, whom you treacherously left in the well." He then related all his adventures, and added that so far from resenting his treachery, he regarded his conduct as the impulse of fate, and as the means by which he himself had attained to his present dignity and affluence, which he would share with him.

But the envious heart of Abu Neuteen was unconquerable; and, instead of thanking the noble-minded Abu Neut for his forgiveness and liberality, he exclaimed: "Since the well has been so fortunate to you, why should it not also prove so to me?" Having said this, he hastily rose up and quitted the palace, without even taking leave of Abu Neut, who would not punish his rudeness.

Abu Neuteen then hastened with all speed to the well, and, having descended by a rope, sat down, impatiently expecting the arrival of the two afreets, who alighted on the terrace above about midnight. They sat down by the well and began to inquire into each other's adventures.

"Since we last met," said one, "I have been rendered miserable; for a cunning Muslim found out the means of overpowering me, and has married my princess, and I cannot revenge myself, for he is under the protection of one of the converted genii, whom the Prophet has appointed to watch over him."

"I have been just as unfortunate as yourself," replied the other afreet, "for the same man who has married the princess discovered my hidden treasure, and keeps it in spite of my efforts to recover it. But let us fill up this abominable well, which has been the cause of all our misfortunes."

Having said this the two afreets immediately hurled the large stones from the terrace into the well, and crushed the ungrateful and envious Abu Neuteen to atoms.

Some days afterwards the good Abu Neut, finding that he did not return, visited the well, and seeing it fallen in, ordered it to be cleared, when the discovery of the body proved to him that the malicious spirit of the wretch had been the cause of his own destruction. He exclaimed reverently:

“There is no strength nor refuge but in Almighty God. May He preserve us from envy, which is destructive to the envious alone!”

Abu Neut returned to the capital, where his father-in-law, the Sultan, soon afterwards died, and left him heir to the kingdom. His succession was disputed by the husbands of the two elder sisters of his wife; but the ministers and people being in favour of the Sultan’s will, they resigned their pretensions and submitted to his authority. But when two sons were successively born, the sisters bribed the servants to make away with them, and accounted for their disappearance by some idle tale. On the occasion of the birth of a princess, however, Abu Neut happened to intercept the servant who was carrying away the infant. The two other children had been thrown out at the gate of one of the royal palaces, but were taken up by the gardener and his wife, who brought them up as their own. A few years afterwards Abu Neut visited the garden with his daughter, who showed an instinctive affection for them. From this, and from observing their martial sports (for they had made themselves horses of clay, bows and arrows, etc.) he was led to ask the gardener if they were really his own children. Upon this the gardener told him that he had found them exposed at the gate of the palace; and further inquiries resulted in the discovery of the royal birth of the children, and in the disclosure of the whole plot. But Abu Neut, though informed of the wickedness and imposition of the sisters, left them to be punished by the pangs of their own consciences, convinced that envy is its own severest tormentor. The two young princes were acknowledged as the sons of the good Abu Neut, who had the satisfaction of seeing them grow up to follow his example.



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