

THE DEATH OF ABU NOWAS AND OF HIS WIFE

FROM THE CRIMSON FAIRY BOOK, EDITED BY ANDREW LANG

Once upon a time there lived a man whose name was Abu Nowas, and he was a great favourite with the Sultan of the country, who had a palace in the same town where Abu Nowas dwelt.

One day Abu Nowas came weeping into the hall of the palace where the Sultan was sitting, and said to him: 'Oh, mighty Sultan, my wife is dead.'

'That is bad news,' replied the Sultan; 'I must get you another wife.' And he bade his Grand Vizir send for the Sultana.

'This poor Abu Nowas has lost his wife,' said he, when she entered the hall.

'Oh, then we must get him another,' answered the Sultana; 'I have a girl that will suit him exactly,' and clapped her hands loudly. At this signal a maiden appeared and stood before her.

'I have got a husband for you,' said the Sultana.

'Who is he?' asked the girl.

'Abu Nowas, the jester,' replied the Sultana.

'I will take him,' answered the maiden; and as Abu Nowas made no objection, it was all arranged. The Sultana had the most beautiful clothes made for the bride, and the Sultan

gave the bridegroom his wedding suit, and a thousand gold pieces into the bargain, and soft carpets for the house.

So Abu Nowas took his wife home, and for some time they were very happy, and spent the

money freely which the Sultan had given them, never thinking what they should do for more when that was gone. But come to an end it did, and they had to sell their fine things one by one, till at length nothing was left but a cloak apiece, and one blanket to cover them. 'We have run through our fortune,' said Abu Nowas, 'what are we to do now? I am afraid

to go back to the Sultan, for he will command his servants to turn me from the door. But you shall return to your mistress, and throw yourself at her feet and weep, and perhaps she will help us.'

'Oh, you had much better go,' said the wife. 'I shall not know what to say.'

'Well, then, stay at home, if you like,' answered Abu Nowas, 'and I will ask to be admitted to the Sultan's presence, and will tell him, with sobs, that my wife is dead, and that I have no money for her burial. When he hears that perhaps he will give us something.'



‘Yes, that is a good plan,’ said the wife; and Abu Nowas set out.

The Sultan was sitting in the hall of justice when Abu Nowas entered, his eyes streaming with tears, for he had rubbed some pepper into them. They smarted dreadfully, and he could hardly see to walk straight, and everyone wondered what was the matter with him.

‘Abu Nowas! What has happened?’ cried the Sultan.

‘Oh, noble Sultan, my wife is dead,’ wept he.

‘We must all die,’ answered the Sultan; but this was not the reply for which Abu Nowas had hoped.

‘True, O Sultan, but I have neither shroud to wrap her in, nor money to bury her with,’ went on Abu Nowas, in no wise abashed by the way the Sultan had received his news.

‘Well, give him a hundred pieces of gold,’ said the Sultan, turning to the Grand Vizir. And when the money was counted out Abu Nowas bowed low, and left the hall, his tears still flowing, but with joy in his heart.

‘Have you got anything?’ cried his wife, who was waiting for him anxiously.

‘Yes, a hundred gold pieces,’ said he, throwing down the bag, ‘but that will not last us any time. Now you must go to the Sultana, clothed in sackcloth and robes of mourning, and tell her that your husband, Abu Nowas, is dead, and you have no money for his burial. When she hears that, she will be sure to ask you what has become of the money and the fine clothes she gave us on our marriage, and you will answer, “before he died he sold everything.”’

The wife did as she was told, and wrapping herself in sackcloth went up to the Sultana’s own palace, and as she was known to have been one of Subida’s favourite attendants, she was taken without difficulty into the private apartments.

‘What is the matter?’ inquired the Sultana, at the sight of the dismal figure.

‘My husband lies dead at home, and he has spent all our money, and sold everything, and I have nothing left to bury him with,’ sobbed the wife.

Then Subida took up a purse containing two hundred gold pieces, and said: ‘Your husband served us long and faithfully. You must see that he has a fine funeral.’

The wife took the money, and, kissing the feet of the Sultana, she joyfully hastened home. They spent some happy hours planning how they should spend it, and thinking how clever they had been. ‘When the Sultan goes this evening to Subida’s palace,’ said Abu Nowas, ‘she will be sure to tell him that Abu Nowas is dead. “Not Abu Nowas, it is his wife,” he will reply, and they will quarrel over it, and all the time we shall be sitting here enjoying ourselves. Oh, if they only knew, how angry they would be!’

As Abu Nowas had foreseen, the Sultan went, in the evening after his business was over, to pay his usual visit to the Sultana.

‘Poor Abu Nowas is dead!’ said Subida when he entered the room.

‘It is not Abu Nowas, but his wife who is dead,’ answered the Sultan.

‘No; really you are quite wrong. She came to tell me herself only a couple of hours ago,’ replied Subida, ‘and as he had spent all their money, I gave her something to bury him with.’

‘You must be dreaming,’ exclaimed the Sultan. ‘Soon after midday Abu Nowas came into the hall, his eyes streaming with tears, and when I asked him the reason he answered that his wife was dead, and they had sold everything they had, and he had nothing left, not so much as would buy her a shroud, far less for her burial.’

For a long time they talked, and neither would listen to the other, till the Sultan sent for the door-keeper and bade him go instantly to the house of Abu Nowas and see if it was the man or his wife who was dead. But Abu Nowas happened to be sitting with his wife behind the latticed window, which looked on the street, and he saw the man coming, and sprang up at once. ‘There is the Sultan’s door-keeper! They have sent him here to find out the truth. Quick! throw yourself on the bed and pretend that you are dead.’ And in a moment the wife was stretched out stiffly, with a linen sheet spread across her, like a corpse.

She was only just in time, for the sheet was hardly drawn across her when the door opened and the porter came in. ‘Has anything happened?’ asked he.

‘My poor wife is dead,’ replied Abu Nowas. ‘Look! she is laid out here.’ And the porter approached the bed, which was in a corner of the room, and saw the stiff form lying underneath.

‘We must all die,’ said he, and went back to the Sultan.

‘Well, have you found out which of them is dead?’ asked the Sultan.

‘Yes, noble Sultan; it is the wife,’ replied the porter.

‘He only says that to please you,’ cried Subida in a rage; and calling to her chamberlain, she ordered him to go at once to the dwelling of Abu Nowas and see which of the two was dead. ‘And be sure you tell the truth about it,’ added she, ‘or it will be the worse for you.’

As her chamberlain drew near the house, Abu Nowas caught sight of him. ‘There is the Sultana’s chamberlain,’ he exclaimed in a fright. ‘Now it is my turn to die. Be quick and spread the sheet over me.’ And he laid himself on the bed, and held his breath when the chamberlain came in. ‘What are you weeping for?’ asked the man, finding the wife in tears.

‘My husband is dead,’ answered she, pointing to the bed; and the chamberlain drew back the sheet and beheld Abu Nowas lying stiff and motionless. Then he gently replaced the sheet and returned to the palace.

‘Well, have you found out this time?’ asked the Sultan.

‘My lord, it is the husband who is dead.’

‘But I tell you he was with me only a few hours ago,’ cried the Sultan angrily. ‘I must get to the bottom of this before I sleep! Let my golden coach be brought round at once.’

The coach was before the door in another five minutes, and the Sultan and Sultana both got in. Abu Nowas had ceased being a dead man, and was looking into the street when he

saw the coach coming. 'Quick! quick!' he called to his wife. 'The Sultan will be here directly, and we must both be dead to receive him.' So they laid themselves down, and spread the sheet over them, and held their breath. At that instant the Sultan entered, followed by the Sultana and the chamberlain, and he went up to the bed and found the corpses stiff and motionless. 'I would give a thousand gold pieces to anyone who would tell me the truth about this,' cried he, and at the words Abu Nowas sat up. 'Give them to me, then,' said he, holding out his hand. 'You cannot give them to anyone who needs them more.'

'Oh, Abu Nowas, you impudent dog!' exclaimed the Sultan, bursting into a laugh, in which the Sultana joined. 'I might have known it was one of your tricks!' But he sent Abu Nowas the gold he had promised, and let us hope that it did not fly so fast as the last had done.