



Ahmed Al-Tenbel - Ahmed the idle one

(An Iraqi folktale retold by Noorah Al-Gailani)


There was once a young man called Ahmed. He was lazy and liked staying at home doing nothing but sitting around and playing with his string of prayer beads. His idleness upset his mother who nagged him to get up and find something useful to do. She wished for him to find a job and earn a living so that she could find him a wife. But Ahmed did not take much notice of her pleading.

Eager to get him out of the house, and seeing how useless he was, Ahmed's mother suggested that he should go to the mosque, with his prayer beads, to sit there as a dervish. He could while away his time there and speak to the visitors. And, if anyone asked for his advice, he could offer him or her what ever he thought.

Equipped with the prayer beads in his hand and a big white turban on his head, Ahmed went to the mosque and found himself a corner in the courtyard to sit. He sat there fancying himself as a Sufi mystic, playing with his beads and reciting the 99 names of God. As people passed by him, they mistook him for a true Sufi mystic, a dervish. They would stop by him for advice; and women would ask him to foretell their future. Every now and then, whenever he got it right, these women would reward him with money. His reputation grew, and he became known as Ahmed the Dervish.

One day the sultan lost a very precious jewelled ring. Having given up on trying to find it, his attendants suggested that they send for Ahmed the Dervish to help them search for the sultan's ring, for Ahmed had become known for being able to tell of invisible things and fortunes. The sultan agreed, and Ahmed was sent for. Ahmed became concerned once he heard of the sultan's summons. He feared being found out for being a fraudulent dervish.

The sultan welcomed Ahmed and explained to him how he had lost the ring while washing his hands and face by the water fountain in the courtyard of his palace. He had left the ring on the edge of the fountain, but could not find it when he was finished. They had searched high and low for it, but no one was able to find it.





The sultan said that as Ahmed was a saintly man, he would have powers to see and know what ordinary uninspired people could not see or know, and therefore, he gave Ahmed three days to come up with the ring. Ahmed went back to the mosque full of dread of what could happen to him once the three days had passed, and the ring still not found.

The next morning, while Ahmed was sitting in the mosque attending to his usual seekers and their requests, a man sitting near him leaned over and whispered in his ear that he was the servant who stole the sultan's ring, and begged Ahmed for his mercy, and not to tell the sultan of him. Ahmed kept a straight face and told the servant not to worry, for he had a plan to save him and return the ring to the sultan. Ahmed asked the servant to stuff the ring in a lump of dough and feed it to one of the ducks that roamed the gardens of the sultan's palace. The servant was also to mark that duck out by colouring its beak with henna dye. All of this was to be done by the end of the three days given to Ahmed to try and locate the ring.

When three days had passed, Ahmed was summoned to the palace. He greeted the sultan and asked if they could go out for a stroll in the palace gardens, for which the sultan obliged. They passed by the various beautiful birds that populated the gardens, and Ahmed spotted the henna-dyed duck. He requested of the sultan to share the duck with him over dinner that evening; and assured the sultan that the ring would be found before the end of the day.

The henna-dyed duck was then taken to the kitchen of the palace and the cook started to prepare it for the sultan's dinner. Once the duck was plucked and cut open, the cook found the ring inside its belly, whole with all its shimmering gemstones in place. There was much jubilation, and Ahmed the Dervish was rewarded for his efforts with money, a lovely meal, and an honourable farewell. And he became even more famous, and much better off.

One morning, some months later, the sultan's treasury was found empty. It had been burgled, and no one knew who had done it. But the sultan knew that Ahmed the Dervish would be able to find out where the treasures had gone, so he sent for him.





Ahmed panicked when he found out that the sultan wanted him to solve the burglary. He worried about what the sultan would do to him if he found out that Ahmed was really an impostor. So, to buy time, Ahmed asked the sultan to give him forty days to solve such a grave burglary, and said that he needed the time to meditate and pray for guidance. The sultan agreed on condition that Ahmed spent the forty days at the palace.

Ahmed the Dervish found himself left alone in a room in the palace to contemplate. In the evening of the first day, a servant came in with a tray of food for Ahmed's supper. As the servant was leaving he heard Ahmed sigh and say: "there goes one of the forty"; meaning the first of the forty days. But the servant, being a guilty man, misunderstood, and hurried to his accomplices in the servants' quarters to tell them that Ahmed the Dervish had already found them out for being the burglars of the palace treasury. After some discussion, one of the other thirty-nine servants involved in the burglary said that they need to be absolutely sure of this, and to do so, he would deliver the next supper to Ahmed.

On the second evening, the second servant took Ahmed his food and heard him say: "So this is the second of the forty!" The second servant hurried back to confirm that the Dervish knew all about them. The days passed one by one, on each of them Ahmed would sigh and reflect on how many were gone. By the thirty-ninth day, the panicking servants decided to beseech the Dervish not to expose them to the sultan, who would most probably execute them.

All forty of them went to see Ahmed in his room. Ahmed had no idea for what all these servants had come. When they started to talk, begging him to keep quiet and save their lives, he realised that they were the burglars! Ahmed managed to keep a straight face this time too, and promised not to betray them if they returned all the treasury's contents back. They gladly agreed. So Ahmed instructed them to bury the treasure forty steps beyond the palace gate.





On the morning of the fortieth day, Ahmed the Dervish was summoned to the sultan's presence. Ahmed asked the sultan to accompany him out of the palace, and to bring with him some of his gardeners. They all walked the distance of forty steps outside the palace gate, and Ahmed asked the gardeners to dig where he had just stopped.

They soon found the buried treasure. The sultan was very happy, and showered Ahmed with gifts and money, and asked him to wish for anything he fancied. Ahmed, now a much wiser man than he had been when he first started to sit in the mosque, thanked God for all his mercies and wished to go back to his home. Not long after, Ahmed's mother chose for him a lovely bride, and stopped him from pretending to be a Dervish.

