

# THE STORY OF ABUL CASSIM'S SHOES FROM THE ORIGINAL IN TURKISH<sup>1</sup>

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It is related that there once resided in Bagdad a very wealthy man named Abul Cassim, who was celebrated for his avarice and parsimony. So strong was his ruling passion that he could not even be prevailed upon to throw away his old shoes, but whenever it became urgently necessary, he would have them stitched at a cobbler's stall, and continue to wear them for four or five years. So finally, they became so heavy and large that it was proverbial in that city to say that a thing was 'as clumsy as Abul Cassim's shoes.

'Now one day as this man was walking in the bazaars of Baghdad<sup>2</sup>, a friend of his, a broker, informed him that a merchant from Aleppo<sup>3</sup> was just arrived, bringing some bottles for sale. 'Come,' added he, I will get them for you at a low price, and after keeping them month or so, you can sell them again for three times as much as you gave, and so make a handsome profit.' The matter was soon arranged between them; Abul Cassim bought the bottles for sixty dinars<sup>4</sup>, and after employing several porters to carry them to his house, he

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<sup>1</sup> The story that appears in the Knickerbocker seems to be an adaptation of *The Tale of Qadi and His Slipper*, which is a part of a bigger tale called, *The Tale of The Kazı and The Bhang-eater*, from *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. A summary of the tale, which appears only in Wortley-Montague manuscript of the *Nights*, can be found in summary form in the *Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (Marzolph, Van Leeuwen). The summary version is also included in the Editor's note above. A seemingly legitimate online translation of the original story in its entirety appears on a website blog that is compiling various editions and versions of the *Nights* (Burton).

<sup>2</sup> The word 'bazaar' derives a Persian word meaning "the places of prices". The Middle East has a long history of having grand bazaars ("Bazaar").

<sup>3</sup> A city in Syria, and one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world ("Aleppo").

<sup>4</sup> The main unit of currency in Islamic countries.

passed on. He had also another friend, a public crier<sup>5</sup>, whom he likewise happened to meet, and who told him that a merchant from the town of Yezd<sup>6</sup> had some rose-water for sale. 'Come,' said he, 'I will get it for you now at a low rate, and dispose of it for you some other time for double the amount.' So Abul Cassim was prevailed upon to buy the rose-water also, and on reaching home he filled the bottles with the water, and placed them on a shelf in one of his apartments.

The day following, Abul Cassim went to a bath, and while undressing himself, one of his friends going out saw his old shoes, and jokingly said: 'Oh! Cassim, do let me change your shoes, for these have become very clumsy.' Abul Cassim only replied, '*Inshallah!* If God wishes;<sup>7</sup>' and continuing to undress himself, went into the bath. Just then the Cadi, Ol' judge of the city, came to the bath, and undressed himself near to Abul Cassim. Some time afterward Abul Cassim came out of the inner room of the bath, and when he had dressed himself, looked for his shoes, which not finding, but seeing a new pair in their place, he thought his friend had made the change that he desired; so putting them on, he returned to his house.

When the Cadi came out of the bath, and had put on his clothes, he asked for his shoes, but lo! they could nowhere be found; and seeing, close by, the old ones of Abul Cassim, he naturally concluded this latter person had purloined his. So the Cadi was greatly enraged; and ordering Abul Cassim to be brought before him, he accused him of stealing shoes out of baths, imprisoned him two or three days, and fined him.

Abul Cassim on his release said to himself: 'These shoes have dishonored me, and I have been severely punished for their sake; 'so with revengeful feelings he threw them into the Tigris. Two days afterward some fishermen, on drawing their seines out of that river, found a pair of old shoes in them, which they immediately recognized as those of Abul Cassim. One of them remarked that perhaps he had fallen into the river; and taking the shoes in his hand, carried them to Abul Cassim's house, and finding its door closed, he threw them in at a window which was open. Unfortunately the shoes fell on the shelf where the bottles of rose-water were ranged, so that it was thrown down, the bottles broken, and all the rose-water was lost.

When Cassim returned to his house, he opened the door and beheld the loss he had sustained. He tore his hair and beard with grief, wept aloud, and charged the shoes with being his ruin. To be free from farther misfortune on their part, 'I will bury them,' said he, 'in a corner of my house, and then all will end.' So the same night he arose and commenced digging a hole in a corner of his dwelling; but his neighbors hearing the noise, thought he was undermining their house; and rising in affright, they complained to the governor of the city, who sent and apprehended Cassim, and threw him in prison, from which he was released only on the payment of a fine.

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<sup>5</sup> Also referred to as a town crier. A person formerly employed by a town to proclaim announcements in the streets ("Town Crier").

<sup>6</sup> Referring to the town of Yazd, the capital of Yazd Province, Iran ("Yazd").

<sup>7</sup> The phrase is of Arabic-Islam origin. A direct translation is 'if Allah will it' ("Inshallah").

After this Cassim returned to his house, overwhelmed with grief, and taking his old shoes, he threw them into the sluice of a neighboring caravansary. In the course of a few days, the sluice being stopped, it overran its banks, and workmen having been called to clean it out, lo! Cassim's shoes were found to be the cause of the inconvenience. So the governor again threw him in prison, and fined him to a large amount.

Abul Cassim, now perfectly in despair, took his old shoes, and after washing them clean, laid them on the terrace of his house, with the intention, after they were well dried, to bum them, and so put an end to all shame and misfortune on their account. But it happened that while the shoes were drying, a neighbor's dog passing over the terrace saw them, and mistaking them for dried meat, took one in his mouth, sprang from one terrace to the other, and in doing so let it fall. The neighbor's wife was *enciente*<sup>8</sup>, and as she happened to be sitting at the foot of the wall, the shoe fell upon her, and in her alarm she was prematurely brought to bed. Her husband, in great anger, complained to the governor, and Abul Cassim was once more thrown into prison and made to pay a fine

Abul Cassim now tore his hair and beard with grief, and accusing the shoes of being the cause of all his misfortunes, he took them in his hand, and going before the Cadi of Bagdad, related to him all that had befallen him. 'I beg you,' added he, 'to receive my declaration, and I hope all these Mussulmans<sup>9</sup> will bear witness that I now break off all farther relation between me and these shoes, and have no longer any thing to do with them. I ask also a certificate showing that I am free from them, and they free from me; so that if henceforth there are any punishments or fines to be incurred, questions to be asked or answers to be given, that they may take the all upon themselves!'

The Cadi, much amused with what he heard, gave the desired certificate, and added a present to Abul Cassim. Behold in this tale to what misfortunes the avaricious subject themselves!

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<sup>8</sup> The only definition of this word that seems to fit the context of this sentence comes of the website Urban Dictionary, where it is defined as "old word used back in 1800s meaning unwed pregnant woman bringing shame to family" ("Enciente"). (hahahah I can't believe you're using urban dictionary as a source. That's great!)

<sup>9</sup> Archaic term for Muslim ("Mussulman").



## EDITOR'S NOTE

This folktale is an adaptation from an original story found in some versions of *The Arabian Nights*. *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, gives background context and a summary of the tale, called *The Tale of the Qadi and His Slipper*, which is a part of a larger fable called *The Tale of the Qadi and the Bhang-eater*. The background and summary of this story notes that the tale is known only from the Wortley-Montague manuscript of the *Nights*. The summary of the story is a much simpler version than the story in *the Knickerbocker* and the other, later, adaptations of the story as well. In the original, the Qadi is the subject of the tale. The paragraph summary of the story is as follows:

“The qadi once had a slipper that was far too large for him. When he threw it away, it fell through the roof of the house of a certain man and broke a shelf with glasses containing rose water. The qadi had to pay the damage. When he disposed of the slipper in the bathhouse, the pipe got choked and several houses were damaged by the water. When he cut the slipper into four parts and threw them away, one part fell onto the bed of the river Nile; sand accumulated around the slipper and held up the flow of water. Witnessing all this, the qadi fled from the city” (Marzolph, Van Leeuwen 336).

The original tale may be more accurately called *The Tale of Kazî and His Slipper*, rather than *The Tale of Qadi and His Slipper*. A translation of this may be found on the Wollamshram blog site, which contains a compilation of tales from various editions and volumes of the *Nights*. The translation is from *Supplemental Nights*, translated by Richard Burton (Burton).

There seems to be two popular and contemporary adaptations of the tale: *The Story of Abu Kasem's Slippers* (Svehla) and *The Everlasting Shoes* (McCaughrean). Despite some minor differences, the common themes and morals within the stories create a strong tie between all three versions, and show the timelessness of the tale. The common themes and morals of the tale may be the reason behind why it has remained relevant in the area of folktales to this day; the moral, as expressed through the warning at the end of *the Knickerbocker* edition, to “Behold in this tale to what misfortunes the avaricious subject themselves”. This final line reveals the warning that is created through the entire telling of the story: being greedy and stingy will lead to misfortunes in one’s life.

While this does seem to be the overarching and lasting moral of the tale, other elements of the story in this *Knickerbocker* edition highlight the new relationship between human and thing created during the time period. Abul has a unique relationship with his shoes in that he seems to see the shoes as another human. He personifies the shoes when he claims that the shoes have ‘dishonored’ him. Additionally, his need to divorce the shoes through a certificate at the end of the story elevates the shoes to a position equal to himself.

In his essay, 'Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny', Bill Brown explores the relationship between humans and things through a discussion of ontology—the study of the nature of being. Brown uses Marx's theory of commodity fetishism—the idea that "the commodity form itself depends on 'the conversion of things into person and the conversion of persons into things...'" to support the idea of a fluidness between humans and things (Brown 6). This fluidness, apparent in the story between Abul and his shoes, also has heavy parallels in the antebellum issue of slavery—which Brown uses as his foundation to evaluate the relationship between human and thing in his essay. Slavery was a prime example of the fluidness, since human beings became a kind of 'thing', labeled as a 'slave'.

In addition to applying commodity fetishism to the evaluation of slavery in the idea that slaves were commodities—things to be used—he also asserted Igor Kopytoff's theory that the boundary between person and thing may be more permeable than we're inclined to believe (4). In a time where slavery created and distinguished the slave as a thing rather than a human, as well as place human and things in two separate spheres, the idea of a permeable boundary between human and thing is challenging to the prevailing thought. The clear permeability of the boundary between human and thing shown in *the Knickerbocker* version of Abul Cassim's Shoes may serve as a subtle suggestion and/or argument for the ambiguity around the relationship between humans and things. The shoes at first seem like only a 'thing', but later seem to have human characteristics attribute to them through Abul's interactions with them.

This ambiguity regarding the relationship between humans and things, and our definitions of what is a 'human' and what is a 'thing', has, like the surface moral of the story, continued through time. In the technological advances of 'smart' devices today, there is much discussion and debate over how 'human' technological devices and features—smartphones and computer systems such as 'siri'—are. The question of how our 'things' come to impact our lives in 'human'-like ways is seen in the relationship between Abul and his shoes, and in society today and our technology. The idea of the human and thing relationship, arising in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, seems to be timeless—in the same way as the moral to "not be greedy or stingy" is.

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