

# Hovhannes Tumanyan

Submitted by Armenian Constitutional Right-Protective Centre (ACRPC), this story is written by the late great Armenian writer, Hovhannes Tumanyan (1869-1923). According to Tumanyan biographer E. Jrbashyan, 'Before Tumanyan there was no one who could extract poetry from things seemingly not poetic and banal as he could. No one came forth with his kind of skill and talent to expose complex human characters in their entire tragedy and beauty.' Tumanyan started writing at age 11 but only became known as a poet in 1890. A prolific reader and writer, he left behind a vast body of work in both poetry and prose.

**ACRPC is the member education coalition of the Global Campaign for Education from Armenia. Find out more about ACRPC on [www.acrpc.am](http://www.acrpc.am)**

## MY FRIEND NESO

✿ Written by Hovhannes Tumanyan (1914)

*I*

We were a group of village children—all friends. There was no school, no lessons, no education. Left as we were entirely to our own devices we did nothing but play together all the time. How we played! And how fond of one another we were and how used to one another! Whenever we were hungry, we would run home, snatch a piece of bread from the basket and a piece of cheese from the cask and hurry back to find one another. In the evenings we used to gather together to romp about and laugh or tell stories. One of the groups was called Neso. He knew so many, many stories that there was just no end to them. On moonlit summer nights we used to sit about on logs at our door and stare in bright-eyed admiration at Neso's face glowing with enthusiasm. He would tell us of the Houri Fairies, of the Emerald Bird, the world of Light and Darkness.... "Neso, Neso! Now tell us about the Blind King, the story of the Tout Bird, the story of the Bald Man and the Kasak."

*II*

It so happened that a school was opened in our village. Some thirty children including myself were sent to it. But since the yearly fee for each child was three rubles, most of the village children were unable to attend because their parents could not afford it. Thus, most of my playmates were left out, and among them Neso. This was the first time that we had been separated from one another, and we were separated by the school and the teacher. For the first time we became conscious of the fact that there were those of us who had and others who had not. Even today Neso's bitter crying still rings in my ears. He was rolling on the ground before their house yelling that he also wanted to go to school. And his father's voice too still rings in my ears, "I haven't got the wherewithal! I just haven't got it! How can I pay what I haven't got? If I had three rubles I'd buy bread to feed you. But I haven't and



there you are, hungry!” Neso and the other of our playmates who were unable to go to school used to come and gather in the doorway, listening to what we were doing. But the teacher would not let them in, and would drive them away. He would not even allow them to play with us during the breaks, saying that outside children had no business playing with the schoolchildren. They would squat about at the foot of the school walls waiting for our lessons to be over so that we could all go home together. During my first year at school I gradually made friends with new boys. By the end of the school year Neso and my other friends outside the school no longer came to squat near the walls to wait for me.

### III

After a couple of years at our village school, my father sent me to the school in the nearby town. This was an entirely new world. The houses were white with red roofs and the people well-dressed and clean. The school itself was large and beautiful, and there was not only one teacher, as in our village, but a number of them, and there were even lady-teachers, which was a novelty and surprise for me, but a very agreeable one. My clothes were also changed to suit the place and the school.

I wore a town pupil’s uniform, smart and clean. And thus transformed, I returned to the village for the holidays. Hearing of my arrival, Neso and my other friends had come early in the morning and were milling about outside our house and murmuring at the foot of the wall. I came out and approached them. I do not remember how we greeted one another. All I recollect is that gone was the former frankness and intimacy. They first turned their attention to my clothes. Neso even went so far as to joke about my short school tunic, “Just like a bobtail magpie.” All of them laughed and I was very hurt but said nothing. Then Neso stroked my clothes, the others followed suit and they expressed surprise at the softness of the material. That day, for the first time, I took a close look at their clothes and noticed how dirty and ragged they were. And indeed our entire village looked dirty and poverty-stricken.



#### IV

After a couple of years at this second school, my father sent me to the city, to a still bigger school. When I returned home, my former playmates, who were already strapping youths, came to greet me like the rest of the villagers, and stood at a respectful distance. Only once, in the course of the conversation in which others put questions to me, did Neso ask, “Remember how we used to sit about on logs at your door and tell stories?”

“Do I remember!?” I exclaimed. “How could I forget? It’s one of my very best childhood memories.

Neso seemed delighted, but he still remained aloof, and like a stranger. When the time came for me to go back to school it so happened that we hired Neso’s father’s horse for me to ride on. Neso was to walk behind the horse. As we started, I on horseback and Neso in rags and worn-out sandals walking alongside, I found this weighed too heavily on my heart. After a while I declared that I preferred to walk and dismounted. So we went on either walking together or taking it in turns to ride. Neso was very pleased at this, but I noticed that he ascribed my act not to my kindness and friendly feeling but to my foolishness. I was greatly upset by this, but a bigger disappointment awaited me. On our way we stopped to rest and have a bite. When we got to the watermelon, I produced my pocket knife and handed it over to Neso to cut it. As we were preparing to leave I noticed that the knife had disappeared. Neso insisted that he had returned it to me and that I had put it away in my pocket. Although I knew very well that he had not returned it to me, I searched my pockets just the same and we set off again. There was no doubt in my mind but that he had stolen my knife, and later people in the village reported having seen him with it. I travelled on with a heavy heart; not because I had lost my knife, but because I had lost something else, far more valuable, a very precious thing which was incomprehensible to Neso. When we reached our destination and it was time for Neso to go back, I presented



him with a cape on top of the charge for the horse. Yet his only reaction was to ask me rudely, “What about a tip then?” Extremely abashed, I gave him a tip too. But since then every time I remember my childhood days and those nights with our group sitting on logs under the moon and Neso telling stories, my heart fills with grief and sorrow.

V

“Neso is poor. Neso is ignorant. Neso is crushed by the hardships of the peasant’s bitter lot. If he too had received an education, and had security, he might have become a good man, perhaps far better than I . . .” I always think thus now whenever I remember Neso, and I try to justify him, understand him, and love him again as I loved him in childhood. I always want to have in my mind’s eye the picture of Neso of the quiet, starry, moonlit nights. But in vain, all in vain; for at once another picture comes forth, a shameful and painful one. When I had graduated and was making my way in life I returned once more to our village. Going to the centre I found a noisy crowd of villagers gathered there and in their midst Neso with drooping head, his hands tied with a rope.

To my enquiries as to what was the matter, they answered, that he had been thieving. I intervened and got them to release him. But in my mind’s eye I still see him, his head hung low and his hands tied with a rope, standing in the blazing sun, and the crowd roaring around him. Thieving, tying people’s hands with a rope, and beatings are quite usual occurrences in our village. Yet this scene sticks firmly in my mind, as does that other picture: Neso the small boy, Neso the story-teller, seated on a log on moonlit nights, the innocent and naive Neso, my childhood friend Neso. ONCE UPON A TIME... Most fairy tales start with the phrase “once upon a time”.

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