

Story #76 (Tape #18, 1961-1962)

Narrator: Hasan Hazır

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Solomon and the Vulture

One day Allah sent Azrail<sup>1</sup> to the Emperor Solomon<sup>2</sup> telling him he had come to take his life. Solomon was a ruler who had great power and also the ability to understand a great many things about

When Azrail told him that he had come for his life, Solomon said, "Very well, but who is going to rule after I am dead? Will the ruler who comes after me be a good one or a bad one? I have lived for five hundred years. How can I leave my realm without knowing what the world will be like after I die? I am entitled to know this."

Azrail thought him right and went back to God and repeated to God what Solomon had said. God listened to Azrail's report and said this: "I shall give him forty more days of life. Go and tell him that in that time he must find out what has happened in the past. Why should he want to live longer? When he sees what has happened in the past, maybe he will change his mind."

Azrail returned to Solomon and told him that he had been given forty more days by God. "During these forty days,

<sup>1</sup>Azrail is the Angel of Death in Islamic mythology. He is comparable to the "grim reaper" in our Western tradition. Frequently he is envisioned as an old man carrying a scythe.

<sup>2</sup>In Turkish folk tales there is frequently a merging of two historical figures, the Hebrew King Solomon, of the 10th century B.C., and the Sultan Suleiman (the Magnificent) of the 16th century A.D. Here, the ability to talk with birds suggests the Hebrew King; the Islamic background and the word "Emperor" would seem to refer to the Sultan.

you are to travel around the world to find out what has happened in all of the past."

Solomon consulted with his wise men about which creature had the longest life span in the world. He was told that the Ak Baba, the vulture, was the creature that lived longest.<sup>3</sup> Solomon went out and found a vulture that was fifteen hundred years old. Solomon said to the vulture, "I have lived five hundred years and God has given me forty more days of life. During this time, I must find out what has happened during the past. Can you tell me this?"

To this the vulture said, "I have lived only fifteen hundred years. Go and talk to my brother, who is two thousand years old and lives on the other side of yonder mountain."

Solomon went around the mountain and there he found the vulture that he was looking for. He asked the vulture about the past, but this vulture said to him, "I am only two thousand years old, but I have a friend who is a vulture who lives at the river near here who is two thousand five hundred years old. Go and talk to him.

Solomon went to the place where the vulture of two thousand five hundred years lived and explained to him his mission. "O vulture, tell me what remarkable experiences you have had in your life."

<sup>3</sup>Ak Baba means, literally, "White Father." It is a common sobriquet for the vulture, thought to be a very wise bird. Although vultures do not live for two thousand years, these birds are indeed remarkably long-lived, sometimes reaching the age of 150. In 1964 one of the vultures in the Atatürk Farm Zoo was listed as being 165 years old. In many Turkish folktales the vulture is a substitute for the phoenix, for the Zümrüdü Anka (Emerald-Green Anka Bird), and for the roc (rok, rukk)--all of which are credited with great longevity.

The bird said, "In my long life I had a series of memorable experiences and I will tell you of the most important of these. I was caught up in a terrible winter during which I almost starved to death. During this winter I landed one day on a top of a minaret which was made of gold. When I looked down, I saw that there was a service in progress in the mosque to which this minaret was attached.<sup>4</sup> Men with white beards were sitting in the front row. Ones with black beards<sup>d</sup> were standing behind them in a row, and the shaven men were in the rear. When they finished praying, the congregation looked up and saw me standing on the minaret. One of them<sup>said</sup>, 'Poor bird. He is perhaps hungry. Let us kill an ox and give it to him to eat.' They killed an ox and gave it to me to eat. After eating it I was happy and I flew away.

"One hundred years later there was another terrible winter. I flew to a strange country during that winter and I landed on the silver minaret of a mosque, and there I looked down and saw that a service was in progress. Black-bearded men were standing in the front row. White-bearded men were behind them, and the shaven ones were at the rear. When the service was over they looked up and saw me, and one of them said 'This poor bird must be hungry. Let us kill a sheep and give it to him. They killed the sheep and gave it to me. I ate it and flew away.

<sup>4</sup>If the story is meant to be about the Hebrew Solomon, then, of course, there is<sup>an</sup> anachronism here that eludes the narrator, for he pre-dated the Islamic faith by nearly fifteen centuries. Whether the Solomon referred to is the Hebrew King or the Ottoman Emperor, the anachronism here is obvious.

"One hundred years later there was another long and terrible win-

This time I found a mosque with a minaret that had a bronze top. I landed on the top of the minaret and looked down. I saw a service in progress. Shaven men were in the front; black-bearded ones were behind them; and the white-bearded men were at the rear. When the services were over the people saw me there on the minaret. In great excitement they said, one to another, 'Look, there is a bird on the minaret. Bring a gun and let us shoot it.' Everyone went home for his gun. When I realized that I was in danger, I flew away and thus saved my life.

"As you can see from this, the world does not get any better.<sup>5</sup> After you die it will be a worse place than when you lived in it. Go back to your kingdom and accept God's will."

<sup>5</sup>The decline of civilization is suggested in three ways by this allegory: 1) the cheapening of the materials used for the mosques' minarets--from gold, to silver, to bronze; 2) by the diminishing charity--from giving an ox, to giving a sheep, to killing the needy one; and 3) by the loss of prestige and position suffered by the old and white-bearded men--who in the golden age were in the forefront. The Turkish audience, well aware of Islam's emphasis on the importance of charity and its respect for age, easily inferred the meaning of the tale.