

Story #332 (Tape #1, 1972)

Narrator: Zehra Bakır

Location: Korucuk Köy, kaza of
Hasankale, Province of
Erzurum

Date: Spring 1972

Riddle What Is Bitterer than Bitter and Sweeter than Sweet?¹

Once upon a time there was a padishah. One day, in a riddling contest, he was asked this question by his vizier: "What is bitterer than bitter and sweeter than sweet?" The padishah thought and thought about this question but could think of no answer. According to the terms of the contest, the padishah had to answer the vizier's riddle within three days or lose his life.²

That evening the padishah looked very troubled. After dinner, his daughter, a very intelligent girl, asked him, "Father, what is the matter? What is bothering you?"

"I do not want to endanger your life by involving you in any way in the riddle that the vizier asked me. I cannot answer it. If I still cannot answer it after three days, I shall forfeit my life."

¹This tale is only a fragment. There are parts missing from the original, as Ahmet Uysal's questions to the narrator indicate. There are also parts lost in the translation: words that are not readily translated because they are not clear, passages that do not seem to come through clearly on the recording. Subsequent attempts at translation may extract more of the questionable parts. Because the riddling questions are of great interest, it seemed worthwhile to include the tale, fragmentary as it is. If further clarification is made subsequently, we shall add the information to the Notes.

²Was this tale once quite different? It is not logical for a vizier to have the power of life and death over his sovereign for any reason--certainly not because he fails to solve a riddle. Symbolic language and clever girls who use it and understand it are common motifs in folktales, especially Turkish folktales.

Story #332

"What is it? Tell me." his daughter asked

The padishah repeated the riddle, "What is more bitter than the bitter and sweeter than the sweet?"

"Couldn't you answer it?" the girl asked. "It is another man's wife."³
There is nothing sweeter or more bitter than another man's wife."

The next morning the vizier asked the padishah, "Have you found the answer to the riddle?"

"Yes," he said. "Another man's

Clever
"Who told you the answer?" the vizier asked. "I don't think you thought of it by yourself.

"My clever daughter did," the padishah answered.

"Why don't you find a lover for your daughter?" the audacious vizier asked.

"Watch what you are saying," the padishah warned the vizier.

Despite the warning, the vizier said, "I can guarantee that your daughter will find a lover within forty days." Then the vizier went to a hodja whose prayer was very effective. He paid him well to influence the dreams of the padishah's daughter.

The padishah's daughter was in the habit of whiling away her time by sewing at the sewing machine.⁴ One night in her dream she heard a voice tell her to find Ahmet the storekeeper and marry him. She kept

³The narrator's answer for the riddle proved, probably unintentionally, the riddle itself. The second of the two words of the answer is either evlat, which in rural Turkish means woman or wife, or evlat, which means offspring. It is probably avrat. The first word, modifying the evlat, is elini, meaning belonging to someone else.

⁴This sentence makes no sense here. Is there something that was missed? The anachronism of the sewing machine is so prominent, if inconsistencies in time and technology are common in folk tales.

hearing the same voice for several days. Finally, she decided to find this Ahmet.

Into a paper sack she put bits of wood, coal, a rope, some pieces of iron, wire, oats, wheat, and several other things--everything she could think of. Then she disguised herself in peasant clothes and went to Ahmet's store. There were several customers at the store. After everybody was gone, she put the paper sack on the counter and left the store without saying a word.

At the closing time of the store, Ahmet noticed the paper sack on the counter. He took it home with him. Ahmet had an older sister who was thirty-five years old. For some time she had sensed a change in Ahmet's behaviour, for the same hodja had influenced Ahmet's dreams also. She asked her brother, "What's the matter with you, Ahmet. You look preoccupied

"Nothing," he said and dismissed the question. However, he showed her the paper sack and said, "I found this on the counter. A girl dressed in shabby clothes came to the store near closing time. She stood by the counter for some time without saying anything. She must have left it on the counter. What do you make of this, my wise sister?"

She looked at the different objects in the paper sack and said, "The girl who put this on your counter cannot be the daughter of a woodcutter, of a storekeeper, of an officer, or of a man of any common trade. Here you can find the symbol of the trades, but there isn't a symbol for the position of a padishah. Therefore, the girl must be the daughter of the padishah. Evidently, she wants to talk with you. Go to the palace and wait by her window."

Jayige, ngubeli

~~Sign language~~ / Sign language

Ahmet did as his sister told. ^[him] The padishah's daughter opened her window, raised her arm first and then lowered it, showed him her five fingers, removed the ring on her finger, then shut the window and disappeared. Since the young man could not make any sense of these gesticulations, he returned home to consult his sister. He said to her, "When the padishah's daughter saw me waiting by her window, she opened it, raised her arm, then lowered it, showed me her five fingers, removed her finger ring, then shut the window. I could not tell what all this meant."

"Couldn't you?" his sister asked. "It's simple. When she raised her arm she asked you to meet her under the tree. By lowering her arm she asked you to come after sunset. When she showed her five fingers, she indicated the exact time: she wants you to come exactly at five. By removing the ring from her finger she asked you to [make love?]"⁵

Love, read

That evening the couple met secretly at the indicated time and became lovers. The vizier had them caught and thrown into jail. Ahmet bribed one of the guards to go to his sister's house and throw three stones at her window.

The sister had been reading the Koran when she heard three stones strike her window. She understood that her brother had been thrown in jail. Since three stones were thrown, it meant he was being held in the jail of the third district.⁶ She made some helva, put on her coat and scarf, and went to the jail.

⁵This is not at all certain. The remainder of the tale makes this guess.

The use of secret or symbolic language here becomes ridiculous. When used well, symbolic language is reasonable when understood. Because it seems almost like magic to peasants, they often abandon all sense of logic, cause and effect, and insert into their tales sign language which could possibly communicate anything.

Story #332

(After some further difficulties, not at all clear, the daughter
the padishah and Ahmet are married. The weak padishah is reproached
b. his clever daughter before this "happy" ending is reached.)