

Story #440

Narrator: Hasan Yurtseven

Location: Üçhisar village; kaza of
Ürgüp, Prov. of Nevşehir

Date: Winter 1972

The Sheik and His Disciple

Once a sheik had a disciple who worked with him for a long time.

Ahmet Uysal: "Where did this take place?"

Hasan Yurtseven: "Perhaps it was Akshehir, perhaps some other place.

Let us say it was at Akshehir."

At last the disciple asked the sheik for permission to return home.¹

The sheik gave him permission to go, and as he left, he also gave him a donkey. "This is a present for you," he said.

The disciple bade his master farewell and started toward home. On the way, however, his donkey died. He felt so sad about this that he built a tomb for him by the side of the road. He sat by the tomb weeping about the death of his donkey. People passing along the road noticed the tomb and began to leave pieces of cloth on it, and some threw money on the ground before it. As a result of this, the disciple grew rich. He soon added a coffeehouse to the land near the tomb.

After some time, the disciple returned one day to visit the sheik.

¹ In pre-Republican Turkey most education was provided by religious institutions and by individual religious leaders. A boy would often serve as an apprentice to a hoca or to the sheik of a tekke or to a teacher at a medrese. He would share the master's quarters and food, and he would be instructed by the master for several years; in return, he would do chores and assist the master. When he had served a sufficient time to have acquired an education, he would then be released by the master. Hafız Osman Uysal began his higher education in this fashion.

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The sheik asked, "Nasreddin,² what has happened? How did you become rich? What was the source of your wealth?"

"Well," said the disciple, "the donkey you gave me died, and at that point along the road I built a tomb for it"

"For goodness' sake, be quiet! My donkey was its mother!"³

This word here is used as a religious epithet, not a proper name.

³ Either this tale was so well known that the audience understood the humor even though the narrator failed to tell the tale well, or we do not here have the best possible translation. The implication is clear: The sheik before him had become affluent by duping the religiously gullible with a fake shrine. In pre-Republican Turkey there were thousands of shrines at which passersby left small offerings; some were the tombs of saints or local religious leaders who had been raised to sainthood in a particular locality by devout followers. In time, the identity of the bodies buried in many of these tombs was lost; this loss of identity was undoubtedly aggravated by the turmoil of invasions and migrations. Accepting the sanctity of tombs on blind faith, people often left gifts at places that were probably not tombs of anyone in any way deserving of sainthood. A common story told around Ankara alleges that when the newer section of that city was being built, two tombs of supposed saints were demolished to make room for a street, and it was discovered that the bones inside were camel bones! The story may be apocryphal, but it is the kind of account which would almost inevitably be created in such circumstances.