

Story #550 (1974 Tape #10)

Narrator: Talibî Coşkun, 76, folk poet and former heavyweight wrestler

Location: Taped in Ankara but narrator is from Tonus village, kaza of Şarkısla, Province of Sivas

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How the Servant Was Paid His "Hiç"

In the twelfth century¹ an ağa hired a servant. He asked him, "What do you want for your wages?"
"Ten golden liras."²
"All right."
"My wages are to be ten golden liras plus Hiç,"³ said the servant.
"How can we pay you Hiç?" the ağa asked
"I do not know, but those are to be my wages: ten golden liras plus Hiç."

"All right, then, we shall pay that." They signed a contract for ten golden liras and a Hiç.

The man started working, and after a year had ended, he said, "All right, my time is completed. I have done my best to do your work. Now I want my pay."

"Come back to my palace and I shall pay you," said the ağa, and then later he said, "Here are your ten golden liras."

"But what about my Hiç?"

"What do you mean, 'Hiç'?"

¹ Having enough knowledge on the subject to know that many folktales are old, this narrator regularly sets his tales in a very remote time.

² With typical disregard for such details, the narrator fails at juncture to indicate how long the servant is to work for ten liras.

³ Hiç means nothing.

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"It was in my contract. I want my Hiç."

"Well, yes, it is written here, but how can Hiç be paid?"

The servant went to court, and there it was decided that the ağa would have to pay the servant what he had promised, but no one could devise a way of paying this Hiç. Finally the padişah heard of this case, and he and his advisers tried vainly to find a solution. The viziers and the Şehül Islam⁴ sought an answer too. They announced the problem in various schools. They asked, "Is there not a single person in all of the Ottoman Empire who can find a solution for this man's Hiç? If there is, tell him to come, make his signature, and collect his reward."

Finally there was a student who claimed that he had a way of paying the man's Hiç. The newspapers wrote about this,⁵ and the student was brought in. He called the servant to him and told him, "You come this way." And he asked the ağa, "What did you agree to pay this man this year? Ten golden liras and a Hiç--was it not?"

"Yes."

To the servant he said, "What do you want from the ağa now?"

"I also want my Hiç."

No one contested his legal right to his Hiç. The student had previously covered the mouth of a big pot with a white cloth. He had left a small hole in the cloth. Now he told the servant, in the presence of witnesses, "Put your hand through the hole and stir the pot."

⁴ The Şehül Islam was the Chief Mufti (senior priest) during the Ottoman period. The office was abolished in 1924.

⁵ The many anachronisms in this tale are quite obvious. Servants probably did not sign contracts in the twelfth century, and there certainly were no newspapers.

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The man did so.

"Keep stirring. Stir it a lot!"

The man stirred and stirred for fifteen or twenty minutes.

"Keep on stirring. Now," said the student, "pull your hand out quickly! What came out with it?"

"Hiç."

"Well, then, if you took Hiç from the pot, have you not had your Hiç?"

"Yes."

There was a body of witnesses there, and they all said, "That serves him right."