"What God May Neglect, the Fish Will Not Forget"

Once there was and once there wasn't, when the sieve was in the straw, when the camel was a town crier and the cock was a barber, when God had many creatures, but it was a sin to talk too much, there was a padişah who was blind in both eyes. He said to his attendants one day, "Go find someone or something that can cure my eyes."

After many doctors had visited the padişah without being able to help him, one finally came along who said, "There is a certain kind of black fish, a trout, in the sea. If such a trout could be caught and oil from its flesh applied to your eyes, your blindness would be cured."

All of the sea fishermen of that land were ordered to put to sea and catch such a black trout. They went out in their many boats and fished all day, and as evening was approaching, one of them finally caught one. When the fisherman landed with this rare fish, the padişah's son, his only

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1 This nonsense jingle at the beginning of a Turkish folktale is known as a tekerleme. Its humorous rhyming and its many absurdities and contradictions both delight audiences and challenge their wits enough to awaken them sufficiently to be good listeners.
child, was just returning from a hunting trip. Seeing the fishermen gathered at the seaside, he questioned them: "What are you going to do with that black fish?"

"We are going to cook out the oil from the flesh of this fish and apply that oil to your father's eyes so that he may see again.

"Let me see what kind of creature it is," said the prince, and he picked up the fish to examine it. By then the fish was gasping for air and was about to die. "Let my father's eyes remain blind rather than kill this creature," he said, throwing the fish back into the sea.

Infuriated by this, the fishermen went to the padişah and explained what had happened. "Your Majesty, after working very hard all day long, we finally managed to catch a black trout, but your son came along and threw it back into the sea!"

When the padişah heard this, he said, "Tomorrow at dawn my son is to be hanged. This is my order. See to it that it is carried out." The executioners were called, and they made the necessary preparations to hang the prince the following morning.

All of this came to the attention of the boy's mother, who called the prince to her room. She said, "My son, listen to me. Did you enjoy the treachery that you committed against
your father? I understand that you threw back into the water 
black fish which the fishermen had labored so long to 
catch. What a thing to do!"

"What is so wrong about that? After all, it was a living 
creature."

"Your father has given orders to have you hanged in the 
morning. Here is some money, three loaves of bread, and 
three pieces of advice for you. If you follow these three 
pieces of advice, you will be saved. If you do not follow 
them, you will die. When you meet a man along your route 
tomorrow morning, ask him to sit down and eat bread with you. 
If he takes the larger portion of bread and leaves the smaller 
you, do not make friends with him. Proceed on your way alone. At noon when you meet a man along the way, invite 
to stop and eat bread with you. If this man takes the 
smaller portion and give you the larger, do not make friends 
with that man, either. Again, proceed on your way alone. 
When evening comes, stop another man along the way and invite 
to share with you your third loaf of bread. If this man 
weighs the two portions of bread carefully and then offers 
them to you, saying 'Take your choice,' then that is a man 
with whom you should become friends

Before the executioners could come for him in the morning, 
young man ran away from home. When the hangman reported
to the padişah that his son had fled, the ruler gave orders that troops be sent out after him to catch him.

After he had been traveling for a while that morning, the prince became hungry and decided to eat some bread. It happened that a stranger came along at that moment, and so the prince said to this stranger, "Come, brother, and slice this bread, and then join me in eating it." The stranger cut the bread and gave the smaller portion to the prince. After they had eaten the loaf, they parted, and the prince continued his flight. At noon he met another stranger to whom he said, "Come, brother, and cut this loaf of bread so that we two may eat it." This stranger cut the loaf and gave the larger portion to the prince, taking the smaller portion for himself. Observing this, the prince ate his portion of the bread and then bade farewell to the stranger. Having traveled all day as fast as he could, the young man was weary and hungry at evening. A black Arab came along and asked him, "Have you any bread?"

"Yes, I have, and I invite you to share it with me"

Cutting the bread into two pieces, the Arab closed his eyes, held the bread out to the prince, and said, "Take your

\[2\] In Turkish folktales Arabs are often pictured as black. They are sometimes given distinctly Negroid facial features.
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choice

The prince also closed his eyes, reached out, and took of the pieces of bread. As they were eating, the prince asked, "Why don't we become friends and travel along together?"

"Very well," said the Arab. "Let us plant a tree here as a sign of our friendship. It will also be a place where we can return in the future." After planting a tree there, the two of them set out on a long journey. Traveling for days and then weeks, they at last reached a land so far away that the padişah's men could not possibly reach them there. In of some means of livelihood there, they agreed to settle and open a law office. The prince was to be the counsel and the Arab his assistant.

One day a young man came along with a legal problem, and the prince typed—he had a typewriter, of course—an

3 This is a literal translation. The expression used by the narrator is dava vekili.

4 This is clearly the rural peasant's perception of a lawyer. In villages there are quasi-legal advisors whose chief virtue is the possession of a battered old manually operated typewriter on which they can type, in semi-literate fashion, applications and petitions, both of which are great mysteries to villagers. Inasmuch as there are no real lawyers (avocats) in villages, these jackleg lawyers serve a useful if limited function. --To have a typewriter in the context of padişahs—absolute despots in most cases—super-natural monsters, and magic is obviously an anachronism.
excellent legal petition for him. It was so well written that it received a good bit of admiration in court. The ruler of that land inquired, "Who was it that wrote that excellent petition?"

He was told, "There is such-and-such a young man in so-and-so corner of our city. It was he who wrote that petition."

The ruler was worried that there was such a brilliant young man in his kingdom, and he said to his vizier, "This man may well become a problem for us some day." He gave orders to his attendants to bring the young man to his presence. When he arrived, the padişah said to him, "Young man, do you know who it was who wrote this petition?"

"I did, Efendi," said the young man, thinking that perhaps the padişah might hire him as private secretary. He was greatly surprised, therefore, when the padişah began shouting at him angrily and ended his criticism by ordering the young man to leave his territory.

The prince returned to his office and continued to work there as he had been doing before. He continued writing petitions for other people, ignoring the padişah's orders to

5 Efendi is a complimentary or honorific epithet added to a name, as in Ahmet Efendi or Mehmet Efendi. It is sometimes used alone as a noun, just as the adjective Reverend is sometimes used alone as a noun. When added to a proper name, Efendi was once a prestigious epithet. In recent years, however, the prestige of Efendi has eroded so much that it is now applied only to the names of children and servants.
Unable to deal with this young man himself, the padişah one day called a meeting of his viziers and discussed with them ways in which they might get rid of him. After many suggestions had been made, one of the viziers finally made this proposal: "Your Majesty, your daughter has been married four times, and each time she has been married, her new husband had died four or five days after the wedding. Let us marry this young man to your daughter and get rid of him in that way."

The padişah accepted this proposal and invited the young man to the palace to talk with him. He said, "I have one final request for you. If you accept it, all will be well, and you may remain here. If you do not accept it, then it will be necessary for you to leave my kingdom.

"If it is something that I can accept, I shall, of course, be glad to fulfill your request."

"Will you marry my daughter?"

"I probably shall do this, but only after I have first consulted my Arab friend. If he says, 'Marry,' I shall do so; if he says, 'Don't marry,' then I shall not do so."

"Why do you listen to that Arab so much? After all, he is only your apprentice--isn't he?"

"No, I shall never do anything of which he does not
We set out together on our journey to your land, and whatever we do, we shall do together."

Going to his Arab friend, the young man said, "The padişah has offered me his daughter in marriage. Should I accept this offer or not?"

Arab said, "Marry his daughter but only upon one condition, and that is that he give his daughter to both of us. If he accepts this condition, then marry her. Otherwise, refuse the offer."

The young man returned to the presence of the ruler and said, "Your Majesty, I shall marry your daughter if you will agree to give her both to me and to my Arab friend." The padişah at first refused to accept this condition, but after consulting his viziers, he changed his mind. They advised him that this would be a good way to get rid of both the young man and his Arab friend.

Accordingly, a wedding was hurriedly arranged. It was shorter than most royal weddings, lasting for only three days.

the first night that the newlywed couple slept there. While they were asleep, a serpentine monster crawled out of the womb of the bride and began to attack the prince. Observing
this monster, the Arab drew his sword and killed it on the spot.

No one mentioned what had happened during the night, and the next morning the padișah was amazed to see the young man walking about in the palace garden. "How could this fellow survive the night with my daughter?" he asked his viziers. "All her other bridegrooms died during the nuptial night."

But the viziers consoled him, saying, "Perhaps he will die tonight or tomorrow night.

However, the Arab continued to remain hidden behind the curtain each night in the bridal chamber. He killed a second monster which crawled out of the bride. Like a snake, it seemed to be the mate of the first monster that the Arab had slain. The bride was a huge woman, as big as a wrestler, weighing perhaps 250 kilos.

After they had lived at the palace for almost a year, the Arab said to the prince, "We have stayed here long enough. As soon as your wife's child is born, let us go somewhere else."

The prince agreed to this, and after his wife had delivered a child, he took the infant to present the padișah.

6 The bride would indeed be huge if she weighed 250 kilos, for that would be more than 500 pounds!
with a grandson. At the same visit to the padişah, the young man informed him that he wished to return to his land. The ruler did not oppose this move, for he still feared that some day the young man might replace him as padişah if he remained there. As the time for departure approached, the padişah gave to the young couple many expensive gifts--horses, gold, jewelry--as well as the provisions needed for their journey. Finally, the prince, the padişah's daughter, their child, and the Arab all left that country and began their long return trip.

After traveling for two months, they reached again the place alongside the road where the prince and the Arab had planted the tree. The Arab said, "It was here that we became friends, and it is here that I must take leave of you. This was the place where our companionship began, and it is the place where it must end."

Inasmuch as they had agreed to share all of the wealth that they might come to possess, the Arab now suggested that it was time for them to divide their wealth. After they had divided equally of all of their money, jewels, and other material things, the time came when they had to divide padişah's daughter. After her hands and feet had been tied, the Arab drew his long sword, indicating that he would split her from head to toe in two equal parts. He said, "Just as I

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divided the first loaf of bread we shared, I am now going to
divide this woman, and when I have done so, you may take
whichever part you want, the left side or the right side. I
shall then divide the child in the same way."

The woman had, of course, been watching and listening to
all of this, and she was terrified. When the Arab lifted
his sword to strike, she grew sick and gagged. As she did
so, a brood of young serpents, the offspring of the two
slain monsters, poured out of her mouth.

When this happened, the Arab said to the prince, "Now
you can see, friend, that my purpose was not to take your
wife from you but to save you from danger. If these young
serpents had remained in her belly, they would have grown
and eventually killed you." After a moment he continued
"I shall also now tell you my secret. I am the black fish
that you threw back into the water when I was being taken to
the palace to be used as a cure for your father's blindness.
What God may neglect, the fish will not forget." 7

7 An old and well-known Turkish proverb is very aptly
applied here:

"Halik bilmezse
Balık bilir.

Literally, this says, "God may not know but the fish
knows." The implication is that if God does not cause
justice to prevail, the fish may do so. Mrs. Necibe Ertaş
informs us that she knows the proverb with Allah rather than
When the young man, with his family, reached his native land, he found that his father had died during his absence. He now ascended to the throne and became padişah. In a similar way may our wishes, like theirs, be fulfilled.

Halik in the first line. Halik, however, seems to be the better choice, for it intensifies the rhyming in the proverb.