The Handsome Butcher

Once a very long time ago, in the days of the best-known caliphs, Harun Reşit (Haroun al-Raschid) flourished around 800 A.D. there was a butcher shop which was run by a chief butcher and his apprentice. The apprentice was a very attractive young man, and everyone called him Handsome Butcher. Every day the chief butcher worked until mid-afternoon, and after he left to go home, his helper took over the responsibility of operating the store until evening.

One day the chief butcher went home at his usual time, and the helper took over the work. An old woman entered the shop, carrying her cane in one hand and her shopping bag in the other. She asked the Handsome Butcher for a kilo of boneless meat. He went to the rear of the shop to prepare the meat. When it was ready, he took it to the counter and dropped it into the old woman's bag.

The woman picked up her bag and cane and left the shop. Right after she had left, the apprentice realized that the woman had not paid for the meat. He immediately began to
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follow her. The woman went; the Handsome Butcher went. The woman went farther; the Handsome Butcher went farther. After a while the woman arrived at a large palace and sat down on a stone before that palace. The Handsome Butcher walked up to her. Looking up, she said, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, have you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

She said, "Go into the first room. The lady there will give it to you."

He went into the first room, where the lady said, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, I came for the money."

She said, "Go into the next room. The lady there will give it to you."

When he went into the next room, the same thing happened. The woman there also asked, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, have you come for the money?"

"Yes, I have come for the money."

"Well, go into the next room. The lady there will give it to you."

Proceeding to the next room, he saw a girl working over an embroidery frame. The girl was saying, "I am beautiful!"

The embroidery was also saying, "I am beautiful!"
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The girl was in fact very beautiful. She said, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

The lady gave him a mecediye. The young man debated with himself as to whether he should accept or reject the mecediye from this beautiful girl. He thought, "If I accept this mecediye, it will not make me rich; on the other hand, if I refuse to accept it, that will not make me poor.

While he was thinking in this way, the beautiful girl asked, "What do you want, Handsome Butcher?"

He said, "Lady, permit me to give the money back to you. It really makes no difference to me whether I take the money or not. Give me a kiss instead of a mecediye." When the beautiful girl heard his request, she slapped him so hard that he found himself back in the butcher shop before he quite knew what had happened.

The following day the chief butcher went home at his usual time. He had no sooner left than the same old woman entered the store, holding her cane in one hand and her shopping bag in the other. This time the Handsome Butcher had prepared the meat ahead of time for her. He asked her, "Lady, did you come for the meat?"

2 The mecediye was a silver coin minted during the reign of Sultan Abdülmeçit (1839-1861).
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She answered, "Yes, Handsome Butcher, I came for the meat. I should like to have one kilo of boneless meat."

The meat was ready, and the Handsome Butcher placed it in the old woman's bag. Again, it was not until after the woman had left the shop that the Handsome Butcher realized that she had not paid for her purchase. He followed her again until she arrived at the palace and sat down upon the stone in front of that building. When she saw him there, she asked, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

"Go into the first room. The lady there will pay you."

When he entered the first room, the lady there asked "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

"Go into the next room, and the lady there will pay you."

He proceeded to the second room and the lady there said, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

"Go into the next room, and the lady there will pay you."

The apprentice entered the third room where a lady asked him, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

"Go into the next room, and the lady there will give it to you.
The apprentice then went into the next room where again the same beautiful girl was embroidering. She too asked, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

She gave him a red golden coin.3 The young man again thought, "If I take this coin, it will not make me rich; if I do not take it, that will not make me poor." He therefore said to the girl, "Lady, take back this golden coin and the mecidiye, which is still here on the table from yesterday. Take both of them and in place of them give me a kiss."

Again the girl slapped him so hard that he found himself back in the butcher shop without quite knowing how he got there.

The next day arrived. The chief butcher remained in the shop until mid-afternoon and then went home. After he had left, his apprentice prepared a kilo of boneless meat for the old woman. She appeared at her usual time, holding her cane in one hand and her shopping bag in the other. When she asked for a kilo of boneless meat, the Handsome Butcher just dropped it into her bag. Just as before, she left the butcher shop without having paid for the meat. Just as

3 Turkish peasants often speak of red gold, almost always with the clear implication that red gold is rarer and more valuable than ordinary yellow gold. This is a mere popular delusion. There is no red gold per se. If what passes for gold is red, it is an alloy, probably containing a high percentage of copper.
before, the apprentice began to follow her. She went; 
Handsome Butcher went. She went farther; the Handsome 
Butcher went farther. After a while she reached the same 
palace and sat on the same stone. When the apprentice 
approached her, she asked, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you 
come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

"Go into the first room, and the lady there will give it 
to you."

He entered the first room, where a lady said, "Oh, 
Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

"Go into the next room, and the lady there will give it 
to you."

When he went into the second room, the lady there 
asked, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

"Go into the next room, and the lady there will give it 
to you.

In the third room the lady there asked, "Oh, Handsome 
Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

"Go into the next room, and the lady there will give it 
to you."
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Entering the next room the apprentice found the same very beautiful girl sitting upon a chair and embroidering. She asked, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

the girl again gave him a red golden coin, the apprentice thought in the same way that he had the day before and the day before that: "If I take the coin, it will not make me rich; if I refuse to take it, that will not make me poor." He therefore said to the girl, "Take back these two gold coins and the mecidiye, and in place of them give me a kiss." Again the girl slapped him so hard that he opened his eyes and found that he was in the butcher shop.

The next day the old woman came again with her cane in one hand and her bag in the other hand. After receiving one kilo of boneless meat, she again left without paying. The apprentice again followed her to where she sat upon the stone before the palace. There she asked him, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

into the first room, and the lady there will pay you."

He entered the first room, where a lady asked, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come here for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."
"Go into the next room, and the lady there will pay you."

When he entered the second room, the lady there asked him, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

"Then go into the next room, and the lady there will pay you.

Going into the third room, he was asked by the lady there, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?"

"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."

"Go into the next room, and the lady there will pay you."

In the next room was the beautiful girl. Again she gave him a red golden coin. The apprentice said, "There are now three golden coins and one mecidiye on the table. Take all four back and give me a kiss instead.

But this time the girl gave him a very valuable string of prayer beads set with jewels. She then said, "Handsome Butcher, take these prayer beads now, but bring them back and show them to me every day, and every day I shall give you fifty golden coins."

Handsome Butcher took the prayer beads. Every day after that he took the prayer beads to the palace, showed them to the girl, and received his fifty golden coins. He came and went. He came and went many times. As time passed, the chief butcher became aware of this arrangement, for the
Handsome Butcher was growing richer and richer. News of spread, and in time even Harun Reşit heard about it
day Harun Reşit said to his first and second viziers
"Go and invite this Handsome Butcher to the palace, and we can see just what kind of a person he is."

The viziers went to the Handsome Butcher's shop in disguise. Having heard about the great amount of business that shop was doing, the viziers decided to use that information as a way of taking the Handsome Butcher to the palace secretly. They said, "Oh, Handsome Butcher, we have large herds of livestock. Would you like to buy our herds to supply meat for your butcher shop?"

"Where are your herds? I shall have to see them before I can decide whether or not to buy them."

The three men left the butcher shop, supposedly to examine the livestock, but instead of leading the Handsome Butcher to a pasture, the viziers led him to the palace and to Harun Reşit. There the four men talked together for a while. Then Harun Reşit made the following proposal: "To pass the time pleasantly, let each of us relate his favorite experience, including in it nothing that is not true. As each relates his story, the other three will listen."

Turning to the first vizier, he said, "It will be your turn first. Tell us your story."
The first vizier began at once to tell his experience.

"Back in the days when I was young, I was very fond of hunting. One day my hunting took me a great distance from home. I traveled and traveled, but I could find neither a fountain nor a stream where I could get a drink of water. Looking out from the mountain where I had been hunting, I saw a green area on the plain below. I thought to myself, there must be water there or that place could not be so green.

"Climbing down from the mountains to the plain, walked to the green place I had seen. There I discovered what appeared to be a deep well. I said to myself, 'I'll throw a rock into this well to see if I can tell just how deep it is. If it is not too deep, I can climb down to the water level and get a drink.

"Picking up a rock, I threw it into the well and listened. When it hit the bottom, a voice came up out of the well which said, '0 human being, if you are a woman, you will now become a man. If you are a man, you will now become a woman.

"Thus I became a woman. The place where I was then was part of an Arab country, and not far from the well there were, I now realized, some Arab tents. A servant from this Arab group saw me and took me to his tent by force, and by
force he compelled me to marry him. I tried in every way to save myself from him, but it was no use.

"Years passed, and during that time I had two children by that servant. At one point I tried to play a trick on him by having him go to the well where I had become a woman, but I was at first unsuccessful in this attempt. Then I tried a different approach. I said to him, 'You are only a servant here, but in my country you could be a lord. Let us move there! I have a father and mother still living there. We have many vineyards, many gardens, and there I am very wealthy. You could be a very important man in my country.' Finally I persuaded him to go to my country. The two of us, along with our two children, started out on horseback. Before we left, however, I had baked bread for the trip, and I had made my husband's loaves very salty. After we had eaten some of the bread, he became very thirsty. His thirst reached the point where it prevented him from going any farther without water.

"By then we had come to the well where I had become a woman. I said, 'Look! A well! Test the depth of the well. If there is any water in it, we can climb down and get some.

"He threw a rock into the well to see how far down the water was. I threw another down immediately after his

4 The Turkish word used here is bey.
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the rocks hit the bottom, a voice was heard from the well saying twice, 'O, human being, if you are a woman, you will become a man. If you are a man, you will become a woman.' In this way I became a man again, and the servant became a woman. I got married to her and took her to my own country. There we had two more children, but she still kept calling me her wife.

"There, my Padişah. That is the story of my experience."

The padişah, Harun Reşit, then turned to his second vizier and said, "Vizier, now it is your turn."

The second vizier then started to tell his story. "For some time after I was married, I had no children. Finally, however, God gave me a daughter. I reared her with great care, for she was my only child. Every night I went to her room to see if she was all right and to put her blanket over her.

"But one night when I went to her room to look at her, I was unable to find her. She was not in her bed, and I could not find her anywhere else in the house either. I looked outside but could not find her there either. I said, "O my God! Where is my daughter?"

"It seemed that during the night she had changed into a pigeon and flown somewhere. When she returned to her room
in the morning, I asked her, 'Where were you last night? Where did you go?'

"But instead of answering my questions, she became very angry at me. She said, 'You have discovered my secret!' She then placed a magic spell on me which changed me into a dog.

"We happened to have a number of strong watchdogs on our property, and now this frightened me. I thought, 'My God, if these dogs see me, they may think me a strange dog and kill me! O God, help me!'

"As soon as I found an opportunity to escape, I ran away from my own house just as fast as I could. While I was walking about in the marketplace, I saw a man coming toward me. I immediately went to him, smelled his clothes, and started to lick his feet. I laid my face on his feet. The gentleman said, 'This animal seems to be a very smart dog. I shall take him home with me.' After we had reached his house, the man said to a servant, 'Give this animal some food.'

"The servant gave me some leftover food which looked like garbage to me. Of course I could not eat any of this. Waiting for the right opportunity, I again ran away, but before very long I realized that I was terribly hungry. At
that time, I saw coming in my direction Mehmet Ağa, the caravan leader from Egypt. I had known this man at an earlier time. I ran up to him, rubbed my face against his feet, and licked them. He said, 'This animal looks like a very smart dog. I shall take him to my lodgings with me.' When we got there, he said to a servant, 'Take this dog and give him some food to eat.' The servant took me to the kitchen, and just as the other servant had done, he gave me some leftover food. I could not eat a single bite of that food. Mehmet Ağa came to the kitchen and asked the servant, 'Did you give this dog some food?'

''Oh, yes, my Ağa, I did, but he wouldn't eat any of

''Where is that food?' the ağa asked him. The servant showed him the food which he had placed before me. Mehmet Ağa took a look at that food and said, 'Of course he cannot eat this. This is not food, but garbage!' He then took me to a restaurant and ordered for me the very kind of food I liked to eat. I ate and ate and ate, and finally I felt full. When we returned to his lodgings, Mehmet Ağa said to

Ağa is a title given to a rural landowner of substantial means. It may also be used as a term of respect after the name of any distinguished man or any man one wishes to flatter. It is this honorific meaning that the term seems to have here.
his servant, 'Put this dog in a room right here in this building, and don't let him go anywhere alone. If we go anywhere, we shall take him with us.'

"After a while they loaded the caravan and departed without me. They went away forgetting that I was still in the room. They had gone quite a distance when Mehmet Ağa suddenly remembered me. He said, 'Alas, we left the dog in its room.' He then said to his servant, 'Go back and get the dog.

"They had forgotten, however, that though they had left me in my room, they had not closed the door of that room. As soon as I realized that they had left, I came out of the room and started following the caravan tracks in order to catch up with them. I met the servant about halfway back to get me. He took me and placed me on the back of a camel.

"As soon as we arrived in Egypt, we went to Mehmet Ağa's home. We entered the courtyard of his house where his daughter had been in the habit of welcoming her father whenever he returned from a caravan trip. She had also been accustomed to helping to unload the goods from the camels. But this time when the caravan arrived, she took one look at me and immediately rushed into the house, saying, 'Oh, my God, has this really happened to him?' She refused to come out of the house again.
"After a while her father went in to her and asked, 'Dear Daughter, what is the matter with you? Up to this time you have always helped us to unload when we arrived with a caravan. Why are you acting so strangely this time? Why aren't you helping us today?'

"She said, 'Father, did you see that dog? It is really not a true dog but a human being under a spell. I was so shocked to see him in that form that I ran inside to avoid having to look at him. He is the second vizier of the caliph I went to school with his daughter, and the two of us learned how to enchant people so that they took different forms, and it must be his daughter who has done this to him.'

"Mehmet Ağa then said to the girl, 'Daughter, Harun Reşit's second vizier was my best friend. Turn him back into a human being! Save him!'

"The girl uttered some magic words, and suddenly I became a human being again. I became the second vizier again. I soon returned to Baghdad after that, but I could not return to my own home because of my great fear of my daughter. I took a temporary job at a public bath, but I knew exactly what I had to do in order to return to my former life. After writing a letter to my wife with instructions about what she was to do, I hired a woman to deliver this letter to my home. I said to the woman, 'Go
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give this letter to my wife, who lives at such-and-such an address

Before I left Egypt, Mehmet Ağa's daughter had given me very precise directions about how I was to proceed. 'I shall give you this magic object,' she had said. 'Place this charm in your palm whenever you want to use it. I shall also teach you a magic incantation. When you chant this incantation, it will cause your daughter to become ill. Then you pretend that you are a doctor and go to her in disguise. When you are examining her, touch her back with your magic hand, and your daughter will immediately be transformed into a mule.'

"I described all of this procedure in the letter that I sent to my wife. Chanting the magic incantation over a glass of water, I sent that glass of water to my wife by the same woman who had carried my letter to her. My wife then had our daughter drink that glass of water, and the result was that daughter immediately fell sick. Pretending then to be a doctor, I went to our house to diagnose the patient's illness. While examining my daughter, I placed the magic charm against her back and she at once became a mule. I then took the mule to an inn and rented out her services is still working there as a beast of burden, used by all the people at the inn
"O my Padişah, that is my story," said the second vizier.

This time Harun Reşit turned to the butcher's apprentice and said, "Handsome Butcher, it is now your turn. Tell us your story.

The Handsome Butcher then began to tell his story. "I was working in a butcher shop as an apprentice. Our chief butcher worked in the shop every day until mid-afternoon, and then he would go home. We--I and another helper--would then work there and keep the shop open from mid-afternoon until closing time in the evening."

"One day just after the chief butcher had left, an old woman entered the shop, holding her cane in one hand and her shopping bag in the other hand. She ordered one kilo of boneless meat. I prepared the meat that she wanted and placed it in her bag. After she had left the shop, however, I suddenly realized that the woman had not paid for the meat. I began following her in order to get the money she owed me."

"She went farther; I went farther. After a while she arrived before a large palace where she sat down upon a stone. When I approached her, she asked, 'Oh, Handsome Butcher, have you come for the money?'

"'Yes, Lady, I have come for the money,' I said."
"She said, 'Go into the first room, and the lady there will give it to you.'

I entered the first room, and the lady there asked, 'Oh, Handsome Butcher, have you come for the money?'

"'Yes, Lady, I have come for the money.

into the next room, and the lady there will give it to you

"When I went into the second room, the lady there asked, 'Oh, Handsome Butcher, have you come for the money?'

"'Yes, Lady, I have come for the money.

"She said, 'Go into the next room, and the lady there will give it to you

"When I entered the third room, the lady there asked me, 'Oh, Handsome Butcher, have you come for the money?'

"'Yes, Lady, I have come for the money.'

"'Go into the next room' she said, 'and the lady there will give it to you

"When I entered that next room I discovered there a girl, a very beautiful girl, who was embroidering, and while she was embroidering, she was saying, 'I am beautiful!'

"The embroidery was also saying, 'I am beautiful

"This girl asked, 'Oh, Handsome Butcher, have you come for the money?'

"I said, 'Yes, Lady, I have come for the money.'
then handed me a mecidiye. I thought to myself, 'If I take this mecidiye, it will not make me rich. On the other hand, if I refuse to take it, that will not make me poor either.'

"As I was thinking in this way, the girl asked, 'What do you want, Handsome Butcher?'

"I answered, 'Lady, please take this mecidiye back, and in its place give me a kiss.'

"When the girl heard this, she slapped me so hard that I found myself back in the butcher shop without quite knowing how I had gotten there.

"The old woman came to the shop at the same time the next day carrying her cane in one hand and her shopping bag in the other hand. She again bought a kilo of meat and left without having paid for it. Again I followed her. She went; I went. She went farther; I went farther. She arrived before the same palace and again sat down on the mounting stone there.6 When I went up to her, she asked me, 'Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?'

6 In older times there were very often mounting stones or "saddle stones" before houses to aid people in mounting their horses. It seemed obvious throughout the earlier episodes that the stone the old woman sat down upon was such a mounting stone but this is the very first instance in which it is actually called a mounting stone.
"Yes, Lady, I came for the money."
"Go into the first room, and the lady there will pay you.'
"I went into that room and the lady there asked, 'Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?'
"Yes, Lady, I came for the money.'
"She said, 'Go into the next room and the lady there will pay you.'
"When I entered the second room, the lady there said, 'Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?'
"Yes, Lady, I came for the money.'
"Go into the next room, and the lady there will pay you.'

Upon entering the third room, I was asked by the lady there, 'Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?'
"Yes, Lady, I came for the money.'
"Go into the next room, and the lady there will pay you.'

When I entered the next room, the same beautiful girl was there again. She said, 'Oh, Handsome Butcher, did you come for the money?'
"Yes, Lady, I came for the money

This time she gave me a red gold coin. I thought to myself, 'This gold coin, and that mecediye, which is still
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on the table from yesterday, cannot make me rich if I take them. On the other hand, if I do not accept them, that cannot make me poor either.' I therefore said to the girl, 'Take both of these back and give me a kiss instead.'

"Again the girl slapped me so hard that when I opened my eyes, I was somehow back in the shop again.

"To keep from making the story too long, this same sequence of events continued for four days. On the fourth day the beautiful girl gave me a very expensive string of prayer beads, and she said to me, 'Bring this back every day and show it to me, and every day I shall give you fifty gold coins.' Now I go there every day and collect my fifty gold coins simply by showing her the prayer beads."

Harun Reşit then said to the Handsome Butcher, "Show me the prayer beads." When the young man drew forth the prayer beads, the padişah recognized them at once as his own. He touched a spring that opened a trapdoor in the floor, and when the Handsome Butcher looked down through the trapdoor, he saw on the next-lower level the same very beautiful girl embroidering. The padişah asked him, "Is she the girl you have been telling us about?"

"Yes."
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The padişah then said to the Handsome Butcher, "I shall give you that girl as your wife." The Handsome Butcher accepted this offer, and the two were married.  

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7 It is almost unbelievable that an accomplished raconteur like Ali Çiftçi would allow a long story like this to fall apart at the end. Even if the narrative is a frame for three separate tales--those of the two viziers plus that of the Handsome Butcher--the artistic integrity of the framing narrative is badly violated.