

Story 981 (1985 Tape 3)

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Suitor Tests Passed with Aid of Hızır

I shall try to recall a folktale that I heard a long time ago. It was told by the older people in my family when I was still a very small boy.

Once there was and once there was not--it was a long time back in the past--there was a padişah who lived in a large and extremely beautiful palace. With him lived his only child, a daughter.

Time passed, and after a while the daughter of the padişah reached a marriageable age. To whom should she be married? The padişah set certain standards which the groom would have to comply with. He would test each suitor to see if he could meet these requirements. If a suitor could meet the requirements, then he was to have the girl in marriage, but if he failed to pass the test, then he would have his head cut off. The ruler sent town criers everywhere in the land to make the following announcement: "Our Padişah wishes to have his daughter married to a suitable man. He will test each suitor, and the

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first one to pass his test will win the girl. But any suitor who fails the test will lose his head."

For some time after the announcement had been made, there was no one with sufficient courage to take the test. They waited one,

by the padişah had almost expired.

to the suitor test. He said, "I shall take the risk for the sake of my beloved.

When he reported to the palace, the shepherd was told, "The first part of your test is a task. We shall give you a herd of rabbits in the morning. You will take these rabbits to the forest, keep them there all day, and then in the evening bring them back without having lost a single rabbit

The shepherd took the herd of rabbits on the following morning and led them into the forest. But the padişah's men followed him, and when it was time to return to the palace these men began firing into the air above the herd. Very frightened by all of the noise, the rabbits scattered in all directions. The helpless shepherd tried desperately to gather them all together again, but this was impossible. The situation seemed to him quite hopeless until, quite suddenly, a very old white-bearded man appeared. This old man asked the shepherd, "Son, what are you thinking?"

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After the shepherd had explained his hopeless predicament, the old man gave him a special kaval¹⁶⁰⁻⁶² and said to him, "Son, whenever you feel helpless, play a tune upon this kaval. Then the old man disappeared as mysteriously as he had appeared.²

The shepherd again started brooding over the difficulty of his situation. Then, remembering the kaval and the old man's advice about it, he began to play a simple tune on this instrument. As soon as they heard this music, the rabbits began to gather around him, and soon they had all returned to his herd

When he returned to the palace with the herd of rabbits, both the padişah and his men were greatly surprised. They counted the rabbits and found that exactly the correct number were there. They then said, "Bravo, Brother Shepherd! You have passed the first test! Now we shall give you the second test, which is the completion of a much harder task. When night comes, we shall place you in a granary filled with a mixture of wheat and barley. Your task will be to separate

¹A shepherd's pipe that is played like a recorder or fipple flute.

²Both the old man's appearance and his behavior fit the description of Hızır. One of the many functions of this saint is to be a last-minute rescuer from disaster. Why neither narrator nor character recognizes the old man as Hızır is strange.

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all of the wheat from the barley by the time morning arrives."

They placed the shepherd in the granary, and he at once began to separate the wheat from the barley, but this was a very difficult and time-consuming job. Time passed too quickly, and it was almost dawn. He began to think how terrible it would be to have one's head chopped off by an executioner. Then, once again, he remembered the special kaval and started to play a tune upon it. Immediately thousands of ants and mice appeared and began, very rapidly, to separate the wheat from the barley. Working with great speed, they had all of the grain separated by the time that the padişah's men returned to the granary at dawn.

Perplexed by the shepherd's success in separating the wheat from the barley, the padişah and his men now devised another task for him to accomplish. They said, "Now that you have passed the second test, you will be given the third test, which is the most important and most difficult of all. If you can pass this third test, you will really deserve the hand of the princess. We shall place you in a warehouse full of sacks of wool. You must first spin all of the wool into thread, and then you must make a huge carpet from this thread. The carpet must be ready by the following morning."

Just as they said they would, they put the shepherd into the warehouse full of wool. When the shepherd saw how many

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sacks of wool the warehouse contained, he felt utterly hopeless. He thought, "Oh, how difficult it would be to spin all of this wool and then to make a carpet from the spun wool! This time I shall certainly lose my head!"

He went on thinking in this dejected way for some time. Then he again remembered the kaval. Pulling it from his sash, he began playing it, and as if from nowhere thousands of spiders appeared. They spun thousands of skeins of woolen yarn, and from this yarn they then made a huge carpet.

When the padişah and his men arrived in the morning and saw the unusually large and finely made carpet, they were amazed. The ruler's attendants said, "Oh-h-h, this young man really deserves the princess!"

And the padişah agreed with them, saying, "Yes, I shall give my daughter as wife to this shepherd. He has passed all three tests very successfully."

The shepherd and the princess were married in a wedding ceremony that lasted for forty days and forty nights. They had their wishes fulfilled, and may we all move up and sit in their seats.³

³In Turkish rural society there is a prescribed seating arrangement based on status. The most distinguished person is seated exactly opposite the entrance to the room, and the least distinguished guests are seated farthest from that position. If a still more distinguished person should then arrive, everyone would move down one seat so that the new guest could have the position of greatest honor. On the other hand, if there

it
is at
twice

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are empty seats, then one may move up from the seat he would be assigned in a full house. The very common formulaic expression with which this tale ends would seem to be a reference to this moving down / moving up tradition.