

Story 1331 (1988 Tape 6)

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Mehmet and the Death-Marvel Craft¹

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Once there was and once there was not,² when the sieve was in the straw,³ when the camel was a town crier and the flea was a barber, when I was rocking my father's cradle /tıngır, mıngır⁴/, there was a boy named Mehmet. One day after he had reached the age of puberty, Mehmet went to the market with his father. As he was wandering about the market-

¹The Turkish name for this tale type is almost always "The Ali Gengiz Game." "Death-Marvel Craft" is a literal translation of what the narrator called this skill or "game."

²Formulaic opening for many Turkish folktales, this is known as a tekerleme. A full tekerleme may run to several lines, though most narrators nowadays use only one or two parts of a tekerleme. The tekerleme is a nonsense jingle filled with paradoxes and other comic incongruities. It is meant both to amuse and to alert the audience to the fact that a tale is to follow. Some of the humor is lost in translation because it is difficult to reproduce in English the rhyme scheme.

³The sieve is never in the straw. While threshing grain, workers pass the detached grain and finely ground straw through a large-mesh sieve. Longer pieces of straw which may still have grains attached to them do not pass through and will need further threshing. So the straw is in the sieve, not the sieve in the straw.

⁴Onomatopoeia for the sound of a rocking cradle.

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place, he heard an increase of noise in one part of the crowd there. Going in the direction of the noise to see what was happening, he saw the king's soldiers parting the crowd to clear a path for the padişah's coach. In that coach Mehmet saw a very beautiful girl, and he fell in love with her at first sight.

As soon as they reached home, Mehmet began asking his father to ask for the hand of that girl for him. His father said to him, "Son, who are you to marry the daughter of the padişah? Do you think that the padişah would ever give his daughter to you?" But Mehmet kept insisting on having his wish, and in the end his father went to the palace and asked for the girl's hand for his son.

At first the king was outraged at the boldness of this request, but then he decided not to break the boy's heart with a flat refusal. He determined to ask Mehmet to accomplish some impossible task in order to win the girl. Then when Mehmet failed in that task, he would not have to give away his daughter. He said to Mehmet's father, "If your son will learn the Death-Marvel Craft, I shall give him my daughter in marriage."

After the father had left the king's presence, he returned

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home and told his son of the king's decision. Beginning that very day, Mehmet began going here, there, and yonder asking people what the Death-Marvel Craft was and from whom he could learn it. He finally met a man who had the answers to his questions. This man said, "The Death-Marvel Craft is the ability to turn yourself into any form you want to be. There is only one man in the world who can teach you that craft, and he is a magician who lives in a well⁵ near the edge of Kaf Mountain.)⁶

Determined to fulfill the task set by the padişah, Mehmet went to Kaf Mountain accompanied by his father. When they found the magician's well, they uttered some magic words they had been taught to say to bring the magician up from the well Mehmet's father told the magician the reason for their coming: "My son wishes to learn the Death-Marvel Craft

The magician told them his conditions for accepting Mehmet as his student. Then he added, "I shall try to teach your son this craft, but if he does not learn it within the time I have specified, that will be his problem and not mine." Having

⁵In Turkish folktales wells do not always contain water. Sometimes pit might be a better word to use. Almost all entrances to the underworld are called wells, though at times cave or grotto might be a better word.

⁶A fabulous mountain--sometimes a range of mountains--at

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spoken in this way, the magician kicked Mehmet's butt and thrust him into the well.

Mehmet began living in the well with the magician, doing everything he was told to do. However, he soon received a warning from three girls who lived there in the well with the magician.⁷ These girls came to be very fond of Mehmet, and so they cautioned him of the possible danger in which he stood. They said, "This magician is capable of teaching you the craft you wish to learn, but, unfortunately, in the end he always kills those students who have mastered his lessons."

Upon hearing this, Mehmet continued to learn from the magician, but he pretended that he could not understand his lessons. At the end of the specified period of time, Mehmet acted as if he had learned nothing at all. Disgusted with Mehmet, the magician gave him back to his father, saying, "Here Take your stupid son and do whatever you wish with him!"

Happy to have his son back safely with him, Mehmet's father hoped that by now Mehmet had abandoned his foolish notion of the end or edge of the world. It is often represented as being the homeland of jinns.

⁷In some variants of this tale, the three girls are the magician's daughters.

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tion of marrying the padişah's daughter. But he was also saddened by the realization that his son had been unable to learn the Death-Marvel Craft. The road they took home to their village led through a town. As they approached that town, Mehmet excused himself to go into the bushes for a few minutes to urinate. But when he emerged from the bushes he did not do so as Mehmet but as a very beautiful horse which trotted around the father. The man called to his son to come quickly and help him catch the horse. But Mehmet, transformed into a horse, pranced around two or three times and then disappeared into the bush.

When Mehmet came out of the bush in his normal form, his father scolded him, saying, "Where have you been? There was a beautiful horse here a minute or two ago. If you had been here with me, we might have caught it and ridden it back to our village."

The boy then told his father that he had indeed learned the Death-Marvel Craft, despite what the magician had thought, and that he himself had been the beautiful horse that appeared from the bushes. His father was both surprised and pleased by this news

As they approached their village, Mehmet said to his

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father, "I am going to change myself into a horse again. After I have done that, you should take me to the marketplace and sell me for a high price. Then after I have turned back into a human being again, we shall have enough money to buy all of our household needs there at the market. But whatever you do, do not under any circumstances give my halter to the person who buys me." He gave his father this warning, for without the halter, he would be unable to turn himself immediately back into human form.

When they arrived at the marketplace, Mehmet was in the form of a horse being led by his father. People there were amazed at the great beauty of the horse, and many of them wished to buy it. Among those in the marketplace was the magician, and as soon as he saw Mehmet in horse form, he recognized him. The magician outbid all of the others trying to the horse. In fact, he finally halted all bidding by offering three times as much money for the horse as any other bidder could offer. Mehmet's father was so excited by the small fortune that he was offered for the horse that he completely forgot his son's warning to keep the halter.⁸

⁸This tale is truncated at this point. In most variants the protagonists make a great amount of money by transforming themselves several times into salable livestock and then returning to human shape--all this before the sinister magician

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After the magician had paid for the horse, he led it and started out in the direction of the mountain. As they walked along, Mehmet turned himself into a pigeon and flew away. The magician at once turned into a hawk and pursued Mehmet. Mehmet flew to the palace and landed on the balcony, where the princess was crocheting lace and her father was sitting in the warm sunshine. When the girl saw a beautiful geon pursued by a hawk, she was startled and called out to her father. Meanwhile, as the hawk was about to pounce upon pigeon, Mehmet turned himself into a handful of kernels of corn. The magician thereupon turned into a chicken and began to eat the pieces of grain as they lay on the balcony floor. It ate all of the corn except one kernel which had fallen behind a floorboard. The padişah had the chicken caught and butchered, ordering that it be cooked for dinner. As soon as the blood had flowed from the chicken's body, the magic spell was broken, and Mehmet returned to his human shape.

The padişah himself had witnessed two of Mehmet's transformations, and he was convinced that the boy had actually learned the Death-Marvel Craft. He therefore kept his promise and gave his daughter to Mehmet in marriage.

reenters and attempts to kill the protagonists.