

Story 1584 (1977 Tape 19)

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Sultan Mahmut¹ and the Wise Sewer Worker²

In the old days sultans and their viziers sometimes disguised themselves as ordinary people and went to poorer sections of the city or the country to learn about the problems of unfortunate people. Sultan Mahmut and his grand vizier decided to do this, and so they disguised themselves as dervishes and set forth

As they were walking through a poor section of the country, they passed a man who was working below the street level in a sewer. The filth and the very bad smell of the sewer made this man sad and depressed, and his shoes were very dirty. But this sewer worker kept speaking aloud to himself and encouraging himself. He said, "O my heart, don't be sad. Your fate could cast you into a worse place than this."

¹Peasant narrators often have little knowledge about history and make little effort to be historically accurate. There were six Ottoman sultans named Mahmut (one of several forms of Mohammed), but narrators rarely specify which one they are talking about. Those few who do specify usually refer to Mahmut IV, who reigned from 1648 to 1687. In some tales the context suggests Mahmut IV.

²This tale is an independent story recorded during an interlude in the taping of the extremely lengthy ATON 1700, "Hamzai Sahip Kiran." It is on a tape devoted to the multi-hour Hamzai story.

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Sultan Mahmut heard only part of this man's remark, but he did not understand the man's situation. The sultan asked his vizier, "What was that man doing?"

"My sultan, he was doing sewer maintenance work, and he said, 'O my heart, don't be sad. Your fate could cast you into a worse place than this.'"

Sultan Mahmut asked, "Is there any place that is worse than an underground sewer?"

"I don't know, my sultan. Let us ask the man that question."

Sultan Mahmut agreed to this, and he and his vizier returned to the palace. There the sultan ordered some of his men, "Go to such and such a place, where you will find a sewer tender at work. Bring that man to me without doing any harm to him.

found the man, who was still working on the same sewer job. They greeted him and then told him that his presence was wanted by the padishah. When the poor man heard this he became very frightened. But the padishah's men said to him, "Don't be afraid. Our padishah wishes only to talk with you."

The sewer worker thought, "Alas, what have I done? What mistake have I made?" But to the padishah's attendants he said, "All right. Let us go

(That is the reason I always say, "Don't interfere with

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the business of God or government. Don't get involved in any way with politics. Learn how to support your family, but don't think that you can contend with the authorities. If human beings simply work for the best interests of themselves and their families, they will also be helping their country, the people in general, and their government.")

The sewer worker cleaned himself up and went to the palace with Sultan Mahmut's men. After he had entered the presence of the ruler, Sultan Mahmut said to him, "Come closer, my son." He then said to the sewer worker, "Young man, what are you doing to earn a living?"

The young man answered, "My padishah, may you live long. I am a sewer worker

The padishah then said, "All right, young man. Earlier today when I saw you at work, you were talking to yourself. What were you saying to yourself? Tell me."

my padishah. While I was working in the underground sewer today, the filth and the bad odor made me feel sad. That is the reason I tried to encourage myself by saying, 'O my heart, do not be sad. You could be cast by fate into a worse place than this

Sultan Mahmut asked, "Young man, is there really any place that is worse than an underground sewer?"

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"Oh, yes, my padishah. Yes, there are worse situations than that of working in an underground sewer."

"What would be worse? Tell me

The young man said, "O my padishah, we were created by the same Power. He made you a padishah, and He made me a sewer tender. But this is a matter of Fate which was written³ by the powerful One. We cannot blame each other for that. You are rich and I am poor, but we are both human. The worst situation for me would be an inability to get any work at all I could be just looking for a sewer job or some other job all day and be unsuccessful in finding one. Then when I went home at night, my wife and children would look at my hands and see that they were empty. They would see that they bore no food. They would be disappointed, and I should be very unhappy. That would be a much worse situation for me than working in an underground sewer. That was the reason I encouraged my heart, which had paused momentarily to be sad. There are many situations worse than working in a sewer system."

"Yes, my son, that is true," said Sultan Mahmut. "I admire your answer." Then, turning to one of his aides, he said,

³Even though they may be illiterate, peasant narrators often visualize Fate preordained by God as something written, something recorded in a divine book. Perhaps making it graphic in this way aids in conceptualizing it.

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"Give many pieces of gold to this young man."

(Poverty can cause a man to be less intelligent and less wise. If you are poor, you think continuously about your empty stomach, and you cannot think accurately about anything else. That is why we always pray that God may not sent anyone to bed hungry. Poverty is the worst of illnesses, for it cannot be treated with medicines.