

Story 1641 (1974 Tapes 44-45) Narrator: Behçet Mahir, 65;  
odacı at Atatürk  
 University and  
 coffeehouse racon-  
 teur

Location: Erzurum, capital  
 city of Erzurum  
 Province

Date: 1974

Kindness Interpreted<sup>1</sup>

in the past there was a poor man who was hungry day after day. When his hunger became unbearable, the poor man went to the flock of an ağa<sup>2</sup> and stole a sheep. He took the sheep home, but by the time that he had slaughtered this animal, he was already in danger of being caught and punished for his theft. The loss of the ağa's sheep had been detected, and a search for it had begun. In fact, the poor man was soon informed by his neighbors

<sup>1</sup>This is an interpolated story that was included in ATON tale No. 1698. It has nothing to do with the theme or action of No. 1698. It is a separate story complete unto itself. We have, therefore, given it independent status as ATON No. 1641.

<sup>2</sup>An ağa (English, agha) is a rural landowner, sometimes wealthy, often powerful. The word does not indicate an official title but describes an economic status. They are often the principal employers of farm workers, and they are often viewed by their employees as harsh, driving, and abusive. The term ağa is also used in a complimentary way, as an honorific, for a distinguished or just older person than the one using the term. Thus an older brother is called ağa bey by his younger siblings. Ağa bey may be used as a deferential term to one older or more prestigious than the speaker. A taxi driver may refer to his passenger as ağa bey; a salesman speaking to a male customer may call him ağa bey.

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that all of the homes in their area were being searched.

The poor man thought, "The ağa will take this meat from me. Then he will have me punished for stealing

With these thoughts in mind, he decided to go for protection to a dervish tekke<sup>3</sup> that was located nearby. He ran to the sheik of the tekke and said, "Because I was hungry, I went and stole a sheep from the flock of the ağa. I slaughtered the sheep at my house, but now the entire neighborhood is being searched to find that sheep. If they find the meat in my house, they will punish me. Please help me."

[1974 Tape 45 begins here.]

The sheik said to the other dervishes, "Go to this man's house and cut up the carcass of the sheep into small pieces. Then each of you should put a part of it in his pocket and bring the meat here. Bring a griddle, too, and we shall all eat fried meat."

Sixty dervishes ran to the poor man's house, where each got a piece of the meat and put it in his pocket.

<sup>3</sup>A tekke is the headquarters and lodging place of a dervish order. It is administered by an official known as a sheik. In Arab lands a sheik is often the leader of a tribe. In Turkey a sheik is usually the leader only of a religious community.

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Without leaving any trace of the meat at the poor man's house, they took it all to the tekke. There the sheik said to the poor man, "Don't worry, young man, for we have rescued you. They will not be able to find any trace of the meat in your house." They had brought a grill, fried the meat, and eaten it. The following morning the ağa's men had searched the poor man's house and had found no scrap of the sheep there.

Although he had been saved from detection and punishment, the poor man was confused by the way he had been rescued. He said to himself, "What kind of a sheik and what kind of dervishes are these men who would eat food that was haram?"<sup>4</sup> He therefore went to the sheik of a

<sup>4</sup>Helal/Haram--Moslem religious concepts. That which is helal is that which is permissible according to canonical law. That which is haram is forbidden. There is no obligation or restriction or penalty for doing or taking whatever is helal, but there will be a penalty on Judgment Day for doing or taking what is forbidden. To accept something from a donor is helal; to take it or steal it is haram. To do anything morally or religiously improper is haram. Dying or endangered people often declare helal anything they have given to or done for another person, so that No. 2 will not go to Judgment indebted to another (which is haram unless declared helal by the benefactor).

Because dervishes are a religious order, the poor man is probably confused that they of all people would eat stolen (and thus forbidden) food. The tale does not reveal what dervish order the residents of this tekke belong to. If they had been Bektāşis, their momentary lapse from righteousness would not be surprising, for the Bektāşi stereotype that appears in folktales (though not in real life) is often a bit sacrilegious.

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second tekke and complained about this. The sheik listened to his complaint and then said, "My son, one drop of dye will not stain the whole sea. Go now and mind your own business!"

But the poor man did not understand the meaning of what the second sheik had said. Still troubled about this matter, he went to a third tekke and made his complaint to its sheik. After listening to the poor man's account, the sheik said quietly, "My son, this is not the kind of nightingale that will land on every branch."

The poor man was even more confused now than he had been before. He did not understand at all what either the second or third sheik had said to him. He finally went to a fourth tekke and lodged his complaint with the sheik in charge there. "Didn't you understand either of the explanations given to you?"

"No," said the poor man. "If I had understood them I probably would not be here now."

"Sit down, and I shall explain this to you. You went to the first tekke to ask the residents there to rescue you. You asked them to save you from punishment and save both you and your family from suffering. To help you, the sheik sent sixty dervishes to your home to remove all

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traces of the stolen sheep from it. All of the evidence against you disappeared, for those men ate the evidence. Even though the meat was haram, they ate it in order to save you. They distributed the responsibility for that sin among themselves. There were so many of them that they were like a sea. If just one drop of color falls into a sea, will it stain that whole large body of water? The sheik at the second tekke explained very aptly what had happened, but you did not understand his explanation. The dervishes at the first tekke represented the whole sea, and the sheep was the foul drop. In saying 'one drop cannot stain a whole sea,' he had explained the situation accurately.

"The third sheik had also made a wise comment on what had happened. He said, 'It is the kind of nightingale that does not land on every branch,' meaning that not every man can provide an antidote against poison. Those dervishes in the first tekke made an antidote for what could have poisoned you. But if you have a crack in your head, what can we do for you? Go now, my son, and do not condemn the men who rescued you from serious trouble."