

Story 1817 (1970 Tape 16)

Narrator: Unidentified

Location: Karaağaç village,
Karacabey kaza,
Bursa Province

Date: 1970

From Beggars to Intruders to Guests

Once there was and once there was not, when God had many people, a person might travel a short distance or a very long distance, sometimes slowly and sometimes swiftly, passing through rivers and over mountains, but then when looking backward, discover that he had gone no farther than the length of a salt bag.¹

At the time of conflict in Romania,² many people were hungry, including the troops of the Ottoman army. During the Romanian campaign, whenever a military headquarters was set up near a village, soldiers would go to

¹This begins as a tekerleme (series of nonsensical jingles) with which many a masal (märchen) begins. After the first line, however, it shifts away from the tekerleme to a set of formulaic expressions used to describe very long and arduous journeys to complete quests or tasks. This confusion is a measure of the narrator's lack of familiarity with the Turkish oral tradition.

²Peasant narrators are often vague about historical events. Is the reference here to the two Balkan Wars (1912-1914), or to the attempted union of principalities (including Moldavia) following the Peace of Paris in 1856?

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that village and plead for food. One day there were three such soldiers who went to a village and began knocking on doors and requesting bread. Some of the residents said that they had no bread. At some houses there was no response to their knocking because there were apparently no people at home at that time. They finally saw through a small window in one house a woman who was baking bazlama.³ When she realized that there was someone in her backyard, she put the bazlama and all of her baking equipment in a cupboard and shut the cupboard door. The three men walked around the house and knocked on the front door. When the woman opened the door, they asked, "Could you give us a few pieces of bread?"

The woman answered, "Oh-h-h, my husband has gone to the mill for flour. Because we had no flour, I was unable to make any bread." But of course the men had seen her baking bazlama and had seen her hide it in the cupboard. Therefore, when the woman went to meet her husband, they decided to eat that bread. They entered the barn in the

³A type of flat bread baked on the top of the stove on a slightly convex piece of sheet metal (sac or saç). More commonly referred to is a similar bread, baked in the same way, known as yufka.

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basement and found there a door leading to the room in which the woman had baked the bazlama.

They had only begun eating the bread, however, when they heard the gacur, gacur, gacur sound of a kağni⁴ approaching. Realizing that they were trapped in the house, they tried to find some way to escape. They returned to the barn, where they saw a huge storage barrel that would hold hundreds of kilograms of whatever was put into it. All three men climbed into this barrel to hide

The wife of the owner of that house placed a ladder against that storage barrel. The husband carried in a sack of flour weighing sixty or seventy okas.⁵ Climbing up the lowest rungs of the ladder, he dumped the flour into the storage bin on top of the three soldiers. After he had dumped in a second sack of flour, the owner said to his wife, "This storage barrel is beginning to get full already. Was there any flour left in it from before?"

⁴A rather primitive two-wheeled cart with two solid wooden wheels. These wheels do not turn on their axle. The axle turns with the wheels, and the friction caused by its rubbing against the frame of the wagon creates a loud squealing sound that can be heard for 100 or 200 yards.

⁵Over the years the word oka has represented various units of weight. In recent times it has been equivalent to 2.8 pounds.

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"No," she answered. "I swept it all out."

The husband went back to get a third bag. The woman was holding a kerosene lamp in such a way that it shone into the barrel. One of the men inside the barrel stood up and blew out the flame of the lamp. Then the three soldiers, completely covered with flour, rushed out of the barn past the woman and her husband.

When the astonished husband saw this, he became furious. Beating his wife severely, he shouted, "Why did you take such good-for-nothing fellows into our home? Who are they?"

In the meantime, the three soldiers went into the backyard, shook the flour out of their clothes, and cleaned themselves. They then reentered the house, where the husband was beating his wife so hard that he was in danger of killing her. The three pretended to be very concerned about what was going on there. "What is the matter?" they asked. "What is all this noise about? Why are you fighting?"

The husband said, "Just now three fellows rushed out of this house and disappeared. Who were they? Did they come here to commit robbery or to do some other evil

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thing?"

The three strangers asked, "Who would ever do such a thing to this place?"

After talking for a few minutes with the three strangers, the husband grew calmer. He said to his wife, "Bake some bazlama for these guests." He saw to it that their stomachs were full before they left

Yonder there is a sakal,⁶

But here you have a small masal⁷

⁶⁻⁷Sakal means beard; masal means folktale. In Turkish folktales a rimed couplet is sometimes used as a terminal narrative device. A beard is a symbol of status or wisdom. It is impossible to know whether the narrator was referring to a specific beard in the audience or whether he simply needed a word to rime with masal.