The Padishah’s Three Sons and the Giant in the Garden

Once there was and once there wasn’t,¹ time within time,² when the sieve was in the straw,³ there was a sultan who had a marvelous apple tree in the garden of his palace. The sultan was very fond of the fruit of this magic tree, which produced thousands of apples every year. There came a time, however, when the sultan could no longer enjoy the apples from this tree. As soon as the apples began

¹Formulaic 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.

² “Time within Time” refers to the chronology of events in an interior world. A person may dream or fantasize at great length during only a few seconds of ordinary time. One may even seem to spend many years in that other world within; one may take a job, marry, have children, and see them grow to maturity. In Turkish this is called Zaman Zaman İçinde. It is elsewhere sometimes referred to as “Frozen Time” or “Moments of Eternity.”

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.
Story 1897

to ripen, some unknown, mysterious force would carry them away. No one knew what it was that caused all of the apples to disappear before the sultan could even taste them. The wonderful fruit of this tree could be picked only at night, but the darkness hid from his sight the thief who was taking the delicious apples.

As soon as the sultan became aware of what was happening to his favorite apples, he called his sons into his throne room. He said to them, "I want you to catch the thief who is stealing my apples."

The oldest son said, "Father, I shall catch the thief." He then went and hid himself in some bushes three or ten meters away from the apple tree and began watching for any intruder. When night came, some huge creature approached, growling loudly, and picked three apples from the tree. Then it left the garden. The oldest son was so terrified that he was unable to throw a spear or shoot an arrow at the huge creature. Instead, he fainted. When morning arrived, the servants found him still lying in the bushes.

That day the middle son said to the sultan, "Father, I am the only one who can solve this problem." He too went and hid himself in the bushes, just as his older brother had done. What had happened to his brother also happened to him, and in the morning the servants also found this middle brother lying unconscious in the bushes. No one
Story 1897

could tell whether it was the great size or the noises of the unidentified thief which had frightened him so badly.

It was then the turn of the youngest son to attack the huge thief. But his two older brothers mocked him. They said, “We are older and stronger than you, but we could not catch that creature. How do you think that you could capture or kill it?”

The youngest son went into the garden and hid himself in the bushes. When darkness fell and the monstrous creature arrived, it did not frighten the youngest son either by its size or by its very loud growling noises. Pulling back the string of his bow as far as it would go, he shot an arrow into the giant’s leg. Although the thief managed to steal three apples before escaping, it left a trail of blood wherever it went. The youngest son ran to the palace and reported to the sultan, “Father, Father, I wounded the giant creature with an arrow before he escaped from the garden.”

The sultan said, “Tomorrow take your two brothers with you and follow the creature’s bloody footprints until you overtake it. Then finish this job which you have begun.”

On the following morning the three brothers began following the bloody trail of the giant creature. That trail led them to an old abandoned well, and it was clear that the giant had gone down into that well. The brothers had brought with them from the palace a long,
Story 1897

strong rope. The oldest brother said, “Tie the rope around my waist and lower me into the well so that I can kill the giant.” After they had lowered him part way down the well, he shouted, “Oh, I am freezing!” Then after they had lowered him a little farther, he screamed, “Help! I am burning!” They then raised him to the surface.

The rope was next tied around the waist of the middle brother. He too shouted first, “I am freezing!” and soon afterwards, “I am burning!” And so he too was raised to the surface without ever having seen the giant in the well.

When it was the turn of the youngest brother to enter the well, he said, “No matter what I may call up to you, do not pull me out of the well. I want to reach the bottom.” Like his two older brothers, he shouted, “I am freezing!” and screamed, “I am burning!” but the older brothers lowered him farther.

At the bottom of the well, the youngest brother came to an iron gate, which made a gargle sound when he opened it. Inside that gate he came upon the body of the giant lying unconscious in his own blood. Standing beside him were three beautiful girls. One of them said, “O brave young man, be silent! This giant has seven heads. You must kill all seven of those heads in order to kill him. If even one of his heads remains alive, he will be able to kill all of us.” The youngest brother
Story 1897

quickly cut off all seven heads, though one of the heads was still slightly attached to the body.

The giant screamed, "Hey, young man, if you are really brave, come and sever completely my last head!"

The three girls said, "Oh, please do not! Let us flee from this place as fast as we can!" Having said this, they ran through the iron gate to the bottom of the well.

There the youngest brother shouted up to his brothers, "Lower the rope again! I have here three beautiful girls. The oldest one is your destiny, my oldest brother. The next oldest is your destiny, middle brother. Hurry! Lower the rope and pull us up one at a time!" They lowered the rope and pulled up first the oldest girl and then the next. The oldest brother decided to marry the older of those two girls, and the middle brother decided to marry the younger.

4There is a folkloric convention in this tale (and most of its variants) which the present narrator apparently does not understand or perhaps simply forgot. The hero is not supposed to cut off all seven heads but only six of them. The badly wounded giant challenges him to cut off the seventh head, knowing that this will restore him to full strength. The narrator fudges this convention by saying that the hero had cut off all seven heads but that one remained somewhat attached to the body. In good form, the giant tempts the hero to sever completely the last head, but the hero ignores the temptation. In some tales he says, "I was born just once, not twice. I have already attacked you once, and shall not do so again." Giants who have lost six heads usually bleed to death anyway!
Story 1897

When they lowered the rope a third time, the youngest girl said, "Wait a minute! You should go up before I do. Otherwise your brothers may decide to leave you down here."

"No, no! They would not do such a thing. You must go to the surface first."

"Very well. But just in case your brothers do decide to desert you, take these three locks of my hair. If you are left down here, rub those locks of hair together and two rams will appear, one white and one black. If you mount the white ram, it will carry you up to the surface of the earth, but if you mount the black ram, it will carry you downward seven levels deeper into the earth." She then called up to the two older brothers, "All right! You can now pull me up!"

They pulled up the youngest girl, but they did not lower the rope again to raise the youngest brother. At the bottom of the well he shouted several times, "Lower the rope and pull me up!" But there was no response from his brothers. They had already taken all three girls and started back to their father's palace.

When the young man realized that his brothers had indeed deserted him, he took from his sash the three locks of hair given to him by the youngest girl. He rubbed these locks together, and two rams, one white and the other one black, appeared. These rams began running very swiftly in a circle around the young man. He made a dive
Story 1897

for the white ram but accidentally landed instead on top of the black one. That ram carried him downward so swiftly that the young man was unconscious by the time they reached the seventh level. That seventh level had six months of light each year and six months of darkness. The youngest brother arrived there during the period of darkness.

When the youngest son recovered consciousness, he was weak from hunger and thirst. With great difficulty he finally found a house in the darkness and knocked on its door. When a very old woman, eighty or ninety years old, opened the door, he said to her, “Grandmother, I am very thirsty. Can you give me some water to drink?” The old woman went inside and a few minutes later returned with a cup of dark and dirty-looking water. Looking at that water, the young man thought, “I am very thirsty, and I really have no choice but to drink some of this water.” He drank a little and then washed his face with what was left. “My dear lady,” he said, “how very dirty that water was! Have you no clean drinking water down here?”

The old woman replied, “Yes, we have a large fountain of clear water, but it is controlled by a huge giant. Unless we feed him as much as he wants, however, he will not allow us to take any of that water. Our lives are in the hands of that giant. In order to get any water at all, we give him a young girl to eat every day. While he is
ripping off her clothes and devouring her, he is too busy to bother the rest of us, and so during that brief time we draw as much water from the fountain as we can. While he is eating, we rush to the ten spouts of that fountain and fill as many jugs with water as we can.”

“Is it this way every day?”

“Yes, it is, and tomorrow it is the turn of the sultan’s daughter to be sacrificed so that we can get some water.”

The youngest son said, “My dear grandmother, take me to the fountain tomorrow, and perhaps I can find a solution to this difficulty.”

The following morning the old woman and the youngest brother approached the fountain quietly and stealthily. The giant was already tearing off the clothes of the princess so that he could eat her. He paid no attention to anything else, and so the youngest brother was able to slip up alongside him unnoticed. With one strong swing of his sword the young man cut off the giant’s head. The princess covered herself as well as she could with the remains of her clothes. Then she dipped her hand into the giant’s blood and pressed a bloody handprint upon the back of the young man so that she would be able to identify him later. The youngest brother then disappeared into the large crowd of people who had gathered there.
The princess ran home as fast as she could to the palace of her father. She said to the sultan, "My dear father, I have been rescued by a brave young man who killed the giant. The young man disappeared into the crowd afterwards, but before he left, I marked his back with some of the blood of the giant. If you will have all of the young men in the country pass before the front window of the palace, I think that I would have no difficulty in recognizing him."

The sultan ordered that all the young men in that underworld country should pass beneath the front window of the palace. Without knowing why they were required to do so, all of the young men gathered in the palace garden and then passed beneath the main window. When the youngest brother finally came along, the princess pointed to him and said, "That is the young man who saved my life!"

Servants were ordered to bring the young man into the palace to the presence of the sultan. When the youngest brother arrived there, the sultan said, "Brave young man, you saved my daughter's life when you rescued her from the hands of the giant, and you have also benefited my country greatly. By killing that evil giant you have removed a difficulty endured by my people for a long time. You may, therefore, ask of me anything you want."

"Your Majesty, I am very tired. Please allow me to rest for awhile, and then I may make a request if there is anything that I want."
He then went a short distance from the palace, where he lay down in the shade of a large tree. After he had slept for awhile, he was awakened by the loud screeching of baby birds. Climbing into the top of the tree, the young man saw there a nest of several baby birds which were frightened and were crying. Looking across the nest, he saw on the other side of it a large snake trying to catch one of the baby birds. He drew his sword quickly and cut the snake into three pieces. Then, still tired, he returned to the base of the tree and fell asleep again.

After awhile the huge mother bird returned with food for its babies. When she saw the young man beneath the tree, she began to attack him, but her nestlings called down, “No, no, Mother! That young man saved our lives when a large snake began to attack us.” When the mother bird heard this, she let the youngest brother continue to sleep, and to be sure that he would be safe, she spread her wings above him for protection. When the young man finally awakened, the bird said, “O young man, you have saved the life of my babies. As a result, you have the right to ask of me anything that I can do for you.” The youngest brother answered, “You are a very large and strong bird. Please carry me upward seven levels to the surface of the earth.”

As the narrator reveals subsequently, this bird is an anka, a member of one of several species of huge imaginary birds of Middle Eastern folklore and literature. Among the other giant birds are the roc...
“I shall carry you up there, young man, but I need a supply of food and drink while I am making that difficult flight.”

The youngest brother replied, “Please wait for a few hours until I can get together the supplies that you will need for that journey.” He then ran back to the palace and gained permission to enter the presence of the sultan again. He said, “Your Majesty, because I saved the life of your daughter, you promised to give me anything that I wished. I came to tell you what I want. An emerald green anka has agreed to carry me back up to the surface of the earth if I can provide her with enough food and drink for such a long journey. Can you give me those supplies?”

The sultan ordered his servants to slaughter many camels and cook their meat. He also ordered them to fill many large jugs with water. After these supplies had been prepared, they were taken to the anka and loaded upon her back. When the bird said, “Cik,” in flight, the young man gave it some food; when it said, “Cak,” he gave it some water to drink. The supply of meat was finished, however, before they reached the surface of the earth. In order to provide the anka with

(rukḥ), the phoenix, and the simurgh. The anka is often described as being emerald green in color.

Like most of its variants, this tale has an anomaly in the speech of the anka. When talking with the hero after his slaying of the snake, the anka speaks human language like a human being. But when
Story 1897

the food it needed, the young man cut a piece of flesh from his leg and fed that to the bird. As soon as it was put into her beak, the bird recognized that the meat was human flesh, and so she did not eat it but just held it beneath her tongue.

The surface of the earth was finally reached. The anka said, “For the rest of your trip home you will have to walk.” As the young man moved away from the mouth of the well, the anka saw that he was limping. She said to him, “You are a very good-hearted young man. In order to feed me, you cut flesh from your own leg, but I have saved that piece of your leg, and I shall replace it.” She put the piece of flesh in place on his leg and then touched it with one of her feathers. As soon as she did that, the cut in his leg was completely healed.

The youngest brother then walked to the palace and went to his father, the sultan. He told the father about everything he had experienced since leaving home, including the treachery of his older brothers. After the sultan had punished his two older sons, the youngest was married to the youngest girl he had found in the well. They attained permanent happiness, and I hope that we can all live long and share some of that happiness.7

she asks simply for food or water, she does so in nonhuman bird sounds, Çık and Cak.

7The ending of this variant of a very popular Turkish tale has been considerably truncated.