

Story 2025 (Transcribed from
tape of Atatürk
İlkokulu)

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Location: Karacabey, kaza
town of Bursa Province

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Tekerleme¹

Once there was and once there was not, when the
sieve was in the straw,² I went little, I went far,³
sweating as I went down hill and loosening the nails in
my shoes when I went uphill, but straightening out rivers
and smoothing down mountains as I moved along.

Three villages appeared ahead of me. Two of them
were in ruins, and the third one had a known origin but

¹Formulaic verse opening for many Turkish folktales. A full tekerleme may run to twice the length of this one, though most narrators nowadays use only one or two parts of such a jeu d'esprit--often a matter of a few lines. The tekerleme is a nonsense jingle filled with paradoxes and other comic incongruities. It is meant both to amuse and 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 rime scheme.

²The 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 need further threshing. So, the straw is in the sieve, not the sieve in the straw.

³One of several formulaic expressions in Turkish folktales which indicate obliquely a long journey.

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no history of people who had lived there before. I dug three wells for the village that had a known origin but no history of people who had once lived there. For this work I earned three kuruş,⁴ two of which had upon them no inscription at all, while the third had an inscription but lacked the signature of a sultan. I took the one without a sultan's signature to the marketplace. What did I see there? I saw there a gun shop containing three guns, of which two were broken-moken.⁵ The other one had a gun stock but no trigger. I did not look at the two broken guns but took the one without a trigger and hung it on the branch of a tree.

I took my father out for a walk, but as I went along, I could not see my shadow following me. What I did see were three rabbits beneath a sapling. Two of them had not

⁴The para was formerly the smallest monetary unit. There were 40 paras to the kuruş and 100 kuruş to the Turkish lira. By mid-20th century, devaluation had eliminated from use the para, and by the 1970s the kuruş also fell out of circulation. When the lira sank to the value of 1/10 of a U.S. cent (and much lower in the 1980s), the kuruş became utterly meaningless.

⁵Repeating a word but changing its first letter to m is a device used for humor or mockery. If a child keeps asking for bread (ekmek) just to be a nuisance, an irritated parent may rebuke the child mildly by saying ekmek-mekmek. This brief wordplay is not limited to Turkish lore; we have observed it in Israeli, Yiddish, and Spanish tales. The Turkish for broken-moken is kırık-mırık.

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yet been born, and the third had a name but no fame. I oiled my gun with pekmez⁶ and shot the rabbit who had a name but lacked any fame.

Let us say, "Have a safe trip" to the best-known hunter. I went little, I went far. I went six months and an autumn, sleeping at night on the grass of pastures. From the middle of the pasture grass I picked wild turnips and hyacinths. I finally reached three houses. Two of the houses were in ruins, while the third had a roof but no walls. Three ladies came forth from the house with a roof but no walls. Two of these ladies were lifeless, and the third had been born in the Kaf Mountains.⁷ I requested a cauldron from the lady born in the Kaf Mountains. She took from her pocket three cauldrons, two of which were all twisted out of shape, and the third had a rim but no bottom. I took the third one. Although I had neither axe nor knife (and none was available there),

⁶Grape juice boiled down into a thick syrup.

⁷The circumambient mountains which form a rim around the edge of the world. They are always described as being very far away, and one cannot go beyond them without falling off the edge of the world, according to ancient cosmography.

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I managed to chop up the rabbit and cook it in the bottomless cauldron.

May the person who sits and enjoys the tale I am about to tell never be harmed by anyone with an evil eye⁸

⁸Worry about evil eye (nazar in Turkish) is one of the oldest human concerns. Charms to protect one against malignant glances were found in some of the most ancient Egyptian pyramids. Some peoples seem more prone to accept this superstition than others are. It is believed in by a high proportion of Turkish people, not excluding Turkish intellectuals.