

Story 2129 (Miscellaneous
Tape 10, 1972)

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Location: Bodrum, kaza city
of Muğla Province

Date: February 12, 1972

The Guessing Children II

Long ago there was a man who owned a wayside inn near a small village. He had four sons. This innkeeper was an excellent host for travelers who used his facilities. His inn was always clean. He served good food, and he always did his guests the courtesy of dining with them.

One day after he had prepared a good meal, two gendarmes¹ arrived at his inn. The owner served them dinner and ate along with them. After a few minutes the innkeeper's four sons entered the dining room, where the oldest said, "Father, the task which you assigned to us has been completed. We have arranged to have our youngest brother married for a bride price of 200 golden liras.

Overhearing this conversation, one of the gendarmes said, "What is that? Do you mean that you had to pay 200

¹Turkish cities and larger towns have their own police forces, but villages and rural areas can afford no more than watchmen. Law and order are maintained in rural Turkey by soldiers assigned to the Ministry of Interior for that purpose. The troops in that special force are called gendarmes. That loan word is one very small token of French influence during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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golden liras for a bride? In our area of the country we pay no more than 200 kuruşes² for a bride. Why should anyone spend 200 liras for a bride?"

The innkeeper answered, "Marriages arranged for 200 kuruşes produce offspring like you fellows. We spend 200 golden liras for a marriage, but boys like my four sons turn out to be respectful and honorable young men. But look at you fellows! You have no such qualities. I am an old man, but you have no respect for my age. You sit down and wait for me to serve you in every way. Cheap 200-kuruş marriages of your parents produced children like you."

After the gendarmes had left, the innkeeper sat thinking for awhile. He was reminded by his conversations with the gendarmes of his advanced age, and he realized that he might die at any time now. He therefore called his sons together again to talk about this matter. He said to them, "I am a very old man, and my time to leave this earth may soon arrive. When I die, go to the innkeeper who lives at such and such a place and ask him to help

²The para was formerly the smallest monetary unit. There were 40 paras to the kuruş, and 100 kuruşes to the Turkish lira. By the mid-20th century, devaluation of Turkish money had eliminated from use the para, and by the 1970s the kuruş also fell out of circulation. When the lira fell to the value of 1/10 of a U.S. cent (and much lower in the late 1980s), the kuruş became utterly meaningless.

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you divide my estate among you. He is an old friend of mine."

"Very well, Father, we shall follow your directions," answered the young men.

It was not long after that that the innkeeper did in fact die. Following their father's instructions, the sons set forth to travel to the innkeeper who lived at such and such a place. At their first stopping place along the road, the oldest brother looked at the ground and said, "I think that a camel lay here to rest."

The second oldest brother gazed at the ground said, "Apparently the camel had no tail "

The third oldest brother said, "The camel seems to have had no packsaddle."³

Finally the youngest brother said, "For some reason or another, this camel limped when it walked."

A short while after they had continued their journey, the four brothers met a Yürük.⁴ This nomad said to them, "Hey, travelers, have you seen an unattended camel along

³The term used here is havut, which refers not simply to any packsaddle but to the very large variety suitable for a creature the size of a camel.

⁴Yürüks are the only totally nomadic people living in Turkey. They pasture their large flocks in the high Taurus Mountains

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this route?"

The oldest brother answered, "No, we have not seen any camel, but we passed a place along the road where a camel had lain and rested."

The second brother asked the Yürük, "Was your camel lacking a tail?"

"Yes, it was."

The third brother asked, "Did your camel also lack a packsaddle?"

"Yes, yes," answered the nomad.

The youngest brother then asked, "Did your camel limp?"

"That is correct. My camel does have a limp. Now tell me what you did with my camel.

"We have not seen your camel," the four brothers insisted. But the Yürük refused to believe this, and he traveled along with the brothers until they reached the inn they were seeking.

The innkeeper was so pleased to see the sons of his best friend that he slaughtered a sheep in their honor. in the summer and along the warm Mediterranean shores in the winter.

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When evening arrived, the host served his guests an excellent dinner, but he did not join them as they ate their food. Instead, he hid himself in an adjacent room where he could overhear their conversation.

After the oldest brother had taken his first bite of the bread, he said, "This bread was made by an impatient old woman."

The second son said, "This meat that we are eating was the flesh of a sheep that had been nursed by a dog."

The third son said, "This wine was made from grapes which grew in a graveyard."⁵

The youngest son commented, "This innkeeper was a good friend of our father, but unfortunately he is a bastard."

⁵Considerable truncation of the tale begins with the brothers' comments about the food. In other ATON versions of this tale, the brothers simply complain about the taste of the various foods without indicating the reasons for their unpleasant flavor. The hidden host queries his kitchen staff to discover the reasons for the distasteful foods. One brother says that the wine has about it a distinct scent of death; the host queries his vintner about this comment and is told that the wine was made from grapes grown in a cemetery. The comment made here about the bread by the oldest brother is sheer nonsense, but in the better-told ATON variants a reasonable complaint about the bread is lodged and later explained. This is also true for the third brother's complaint.

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The innkeeper in hiding overheard all these remarks of the four brothers. When the meal had ended, he came out of hiding and said to the oldest brother, "You said that the bread was baked by an impatient old woman. What made you think that?"

The oldest brother replied, "I knew that because when the bread was dipped into the juicy part of the food, it would not absorb any of the moisture."

The host then asked the second brother, "Why did you conclude that the sheep whose flesh you ate had been nursed by a dog?"

The second brother answered, "Because the fat had settled to the bottom of the meat dish. The fat of a sheep would ordinarily rise to the surface,

Turning to the third brother, the innkeeper asked, "Why did you say that the wine you drank had been made from grapes grown in a cemetery?"

The third brother said, "Because wine is supposed to quench one's thirst, but the wine we were served did not do so."

Finally the host asked the youngest son, "What could have made you think that I was a bastard?"

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"I thought that because you failed to come and dine with your guests. Only a host who was a bastard would do such a thing."

The innkeeper did not attempt to dispute any of these opinions but turned to another subject. "What was it that brought you here? Is there anything that I can do for you?"

The brothers told him about the deathbed wish of their father concerning the settlement of his estate. The innkeeper then questioned all of the brothers about their understanding of that matter. To the four brothers he said, "What did your father tell each of you was to be yours?"⁶

"He told me I was to have his pack of horses," said the oldest brother

"He told me I was to have the income from the inn," said the second brother.

"He gave me the garden behind the inn," said the third.

⁶At this point the inept narrator destroys his own story. The brothers' journey (with its tangential complications with the Yürük) was made in order to have the second innkeeper prescribe their respective inheritances. In more logical variants the adjudicator must solve a mystery about the brothers before being able to render a judgment. Here the adjudicator turns out to be functionless in the settlement of the estate in question.

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The youngest brother held up some objects and said, "He gave me these things."

The innkeeper said to them, "The inheritances from your father have already been divided. You do not need my help." Turning then to the Yürük, he asked, "Why are you here?"

"I have lost a camel, efendi,⁷ and I believe that these young men know where it is."

"Why do you think that?" asked the innkeeper.

"Because they described my camel accurately in every detail. How could they have done this unless they had seen that camel?"

"I do not know, but I want you now to ask each one of them that question. I shall listen to both your questions and their answers. Then I shall make the best judgment that I can about your claim."

The Yürük asked the oldest brother, "How did you know that a camel had passed along your trail unless you

⁷In earlier times distinguished men were honored or flattered by having the word efendi attached to their first names: Ahmet efendi, Hasan efendi. By the middle of the 20th century, however, the prestige of efendi had so eroded that the word was used only when speaking to children or servants.

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had seen that animal?"

"On the side of the trail the shape of a camel had been impressed in the sand. It was obvious that some camel had lain there."

To the second brother the Yürük said, "How did you know that the camel had no tail?"

"Because all its manure fell into one small heap. If the camel had had a tail swinging back and forth, the manure would have been scattered."

To the third brother the Yürük said, "How did you know that the camel did not have a packsaddle?"

"Because in the place where the camel had lain, there were marks indicating that the animal had rolled over. It could not have rolled over if it had been harnessed with a packsaddle."

Turning then to the youngest brother, the Yürük asked, "Why did you conclude that the camel limped?"

"Because three of its hoofprints sank deeply into the sand but the fourth one was barely visible."

Having heard these exchanges between the Yürük and the four brothers, the innkeeper declared, "There is no evidence that these young men have seen your camel."

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Looking then more sternly at the Yürük, he said, "Leave this place and continue to search for your camel.

After all of his guests had departed, the innkeeper went to his aged mother and asked her about his father. "Was not my father the man from whom I inherited this inn?"

"Because my husband could not impregnate me, I paid an overnight guest well to permit me to adopt his infant son. You were that son, but I never learned the identity of the guest who was your father."⁸

⁸An unlikely explanation. In most variants a guest fathers a child upon the willing wife of the innkeeper.