

Story #652 (1976, Tape #17)

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#652 #652
The Pasha and the Imam

Sultan -- era of

An old general (pasha) of the Sultan's era retired. He wore his civilian dress, wore his cap, and sat by the window to watch the passersby. He also had a pile of Veysel Kara Ali's books beside him, since he enjoyed reading that poet.¹

Every day the imam² of the neighborhood would pass by in front of the retired general's house, and each time they would look each other in the eye. Imam Halis used to pray and perform burial service for the people who died in the neighborhood and received a small payment in return for his efforts. He was a poor religious man, and this was his sole source of income. The reason the imam turned to look at the general each time he walked by his house was to wonder when this elderly person would die and bring him a small fee, in spite of the fact that the general was robust and in good health, enjoying the leisurely time of his life. However, the poor imam could only think of washing the general's dead body so he could earn a little bit of money.

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2 The imam is a Moslem priest who leads the prayer services in the mosque.

The general shuddered each time he came eye to eye with the imam, for his one fear in life was death. He took great pains to ensure an enjoyable leisure for his latter years. He ate with great care and rested regularly. But the glance of the imam was one thing that had grown very disturbing to the general. One day he called to the imam from the window and asked him to come inside to visit for a while. The imam readily accepted this invitation, and the two men sat opposite each other talking. After a while the general asked the imam, "Imam Efendi, I understand that you wash corpses for a living.³ How much money do you receive for washing a body?"

The imam replied, "Efendi, I receive one gold piece from the poor and three gold pieces ^{gold piece -- three} from people as affluent as you are."

"Hum-m-m-m," said the general as he pondered upon this piece of information. "Here are ten gold pieces ^{ten} for you," he said, counting out the money before his guest. "You will take these ten pieces of gold, but henceforth when you go past my window, you will not, under any circumstances, turn to look at it. You will not look at the house at all!"

A very obliging man, the imam said, "Very well, general efendi, and may you have a long and healthy life! May Allah bless you!" Having spoken thus, the imam left the home of the general.

But in spite of their arrangement, every time that the imam passed the general's house, he could not help gazing into the general's eyes for just a split second before he averted his gaze. At first the general

³ The washing of the corpse is more than this expression implies in English. It is more than a simple cleansing of the dead body. It is also a ritual ablution.

thought this really accidental, but after the third time that this happened, he went to the window and again called the imam to come inside. He asked the imam, "What is going on here? Did you not make agreement about your not looking at my house, and did you not count out gold pieces for my part of that bargain? Has your agreement broken your agreement and started looking the other way again?"

The imam replied sadly: "Oh most honored general, you do not really know the answer to your question. The ten pieces of gold which you gave me were really a blessing for they were not his sacred wages of oil. Had you died, and had you received the usual payment of three gold pieces, you could have savored and enjoyed the payment much more."

The general was furious when he heard the imam's explanation. Taking off his slipper, he chased the imam out of the house with it and shouted after him, "You miserable, dishonest fellow!"