

Story 880 (1964 Tape 2)

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in Giresun Province

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The Fools Of Greeting

There were once three friends who lived in Istanbul. They were all devout men, but they had an obsession in common: they were fascinated with the exchange of greetings. They were very fond of being greeted in the street by others, and they were equally fond of giving greetings to people they recognized in the street

One day these three men heard a (hoca) preaching a sermon. One point in the sermon was the hoca's opinion that the farther a person had to travel to pray in a mosque, the more favor he would find in God's eyes. He said, "If you perform your (Friday noon prayer service)¹ in a faraway mosque, you will earn 70,000 credits of recorded virtue in God's book² for every step you take in getting there."

¹ In pre-Republican days Friday was the Moslem sabbath in Turkey, as it still is in many Moslem countries. The noon prayer service on Friday was the high point of the religious week. It still retains some of that eclat, though the sabbath is now Sunday.

² This is stated in Moslem theological terms. Sevab (sevab) [here given the dialectal form savab (savap)] denotes credit earned on earth which will win reward in heaven from God. The narrator uses the expression sevab

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The three devout friends were very much impressed with this sermon and decided to follow its advice. At that there were the Side-by-Side Coffeehouses³ just opposite Saint Sophia⁴ in Istanbul, and these three friends agreed to meet there the following Friday, early in the morning, in order to walk to the distant mosque at Ok Meydanı⁵ for the noon prayer service.

Just as they had planned, the three pious friends met at the Side-by-Side Coffeehouses on Friday and began to walk toward Ok Meydanı. As they were walking along, the Tatar Ağa⁶ rode past them on his way toward the Edirne Gate.⁷ As he passed them, he saluted the three friends,

yazmak, meaning to record or score virtues in God's book.
 --Günah means sin, and günah yazmak means to record sins or discredits in God's book.

³ The Turkish is Sıra Kahveler

⁴ Saint Sophia, the largest church in Christendom for nearly 1,000 years, became a mosque in 1453 with the Turkish capture of Constantinople; during the Republic it became a museum.

⁵ The name means Arrow Square.

⁶ Ağa as noun refers to a rural landowner. As an adjective following a proper name it is a complimentary or honorific term. Tatar (Tartar) horsemen demonstrated great riding prowess long after most Turks became sedentary and lost some of their riding skills. Consequently Ottoman sultans used Tatar messengers to carry their decrees throughout the empire, and Tatar horsemen were often cross-country mail carriers comparable to the American Pony Express

⁷ Edirne was the second Ottoman capital, Istanbul the third.

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They all responded, "Aleykümselâm."

Tatar Ağa rode on without any other comment. After he had gone a short way, one of the three friends asked, "I wonder which of us he greeted?"

The other two responded, "He greeted all three of us. Selâmünaleyküm means Greetings to you."

the first insisted that that was not the way it should be interpreted. He said, "I am a tailor, and every time he has his trousers patched, I am the one who sews them. It was I whom he greeted!"

"No!" said the second. "I am a barber, and he always comes to my shop to be shaved. It was I whom he greeted!"

"No!" said the third. "I am a saddler, and he always brings his saddle to me to be repaired. He saluted me just now!"

They soon started quarreling about this, and quarreling led to hitting. They were hitting each other so hard that in the hurly-burly they were wearing each other's hats.⁸ Finally, one of them said, "We cannot settle the matter in

⁸ There is a proverbial expression to describe people in such a broil: "They were wearing each other's fezzes." The narrator employs that expression here, but he does not say fezzes but külahs. The külah is a conical hat.

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this way. Let us call Tatar Ağa back and ask him which of us he greeted."

All agreed with this suggestion, and so the three of them stood on a small knoll and shouted in unison, "Oh-h-h Tatar Ağa!"

The Tatar Ağa looked back from where he was and then called, "What is the matter?" He wondered if he had dropped something from his mail bag.

"Come back! Come back!" they shouted. When he returned to where they were standing, they asked him, "Which of us did you greet a few minutes ago?"

He said, "I greeted the most intelligent of you, whichever of you that may be." He then rode away and never even looked back again.

Of course, as it is well known, intelligence is not something that can be weighed. Naturally, each claimed to be the most intelligent, and so they began fighting all over again. As they did so, the first shouted, "I am the most intelligent!"

"No, I am!" shouted the second.

"No, I am!" shouted the third.

While they were carrying on in this way, the time for the Friday noon service passed, and they never did get to the Ok Meydanı mosque. When they stopped fighting, they

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 decided to go to the Galata kadı⁹ to ask his opinion as to which of them was the most intelligent. "Let us tell what has happened today," said one of them, "and ask him to issue a court decree declaring which of us is the most intelligent." The other two agreed with this.

The following day they went to the kadı at Galata told him their problem. After hearing their account, the kadı said to his secretary, "While I talk to one of these men, you keep the other two in two separate rooms. Don't let them talk with each other or negotiate in any way." After the two had been taken away by the secretary, the kadı said to the first man, "Now I want you to tell me the most interesting experience you have had during your life. I shall base my decision on the stories the three of you tell."

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 The first man began his story. "Your Honor, my wife and I were living happily for some time after our marriage but at last this situation ended. We bought a mule and put it in our stable, but occasionally this mule would get loose and cause us great difficulty. Then we drove a pole into the ground and tied him to that pole, but he somehow

⁹ In pre-Republican times the kadı was a judge of canonical law. Galata is a section of Istanbul along the waterway known as the Golden Horn.

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managed to get loose from that, too. First my wife would catch him and tether him, and the next time I would catch him and tether him. It went on this way long enough so that we were both tired of the whole thing. We then reached an agreement that the one of us who spoke first would be the one to tether him the next time he got loose. Well, neither of us spoke a word for three or five¹⁰ days. But my wife, like most women, could not control her tongue, and so she was the first to speak. As soon as she spoke, I said, 'Go out and tether the mule!'

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"My wife was very upset by this. She thought that I had been rude, and she also thought that it was a man's not a woman's job, to tether a mule. She was so upset that she went out of the house and went to a neighbor's home.

"Shortly after this her brothers came to visit us. When they asked me where their sister was, I said nothing just pointed toward the mule. They did not understand what I meant, and so they asked, 'What has become of our sister. Did you kill her? Is she sick? Was she taken to the hospital?' I still kept quiet. They then went to court filed a complaint that such-and-such a man had somehow

¹ This is not to be taken literally. Three or five means a few in colloquial Turkish.

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done away with their sister. As a result, I was ordered to appear in court

"When I arrived there, the judge asked me, 'Where is your wife?'

"I said nothing in response, but I made signs and gestures as if trying to say, 'Go out and tether the mule!'

"They finally decided that my silence amounted to a confession that I had killed my wife, and that I should be hanged for this crime. They sent forth town criers to make this announcement: 'Such-and-such fellow is to be hanged at Politics Square.¹¹ Anyone who wishes to learn a lesson from it should come to witness the execution.'

"A great crowd gathered in the Square where a ^{Galley}scaffold had been set up. The noose had been greased¹² and placed around my neck, and I had been placed on a chair which stood atop a table. Just as the gypsy¹³ was ready to kick away the chair, my wife, who had wandered there among the

¹¹ This is apparently just an imaginary place name.

¹² In hangings in Turkish folktales, the rope is always oiled or greased to make it more flexible and thus better able to grip the neck of the condemned. This may possibly be done in real life, too.

¹³ In order to avoid having a Moslem take the life of a fellow Moslem, Turkish authorities, even to this day, hire gypsy executioners.

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spectators, recognized me and shouted, "Don't hang him! I am here

"As soon as I heard her shout this, I shouted back, right, then. Go out and tether the mule!"

After listening to this tale of the first man, the kadı said to his secretary, "Take this man away and lock him a room. Then bring the second one here." When the second man arrived, the kadı said to him, "Now I want you to tell me the most interesting experience of your life."

"Your Honor, once I had a bad toothache. In those days barbers used to pull teeth, and they charged ten paras¹⁴ for doing so. I was a rather henpecked man, and so I asked my wife for the ten paras to have my tooth pulled. Having no change at the time, she gave me a five-kuruş piece and said, 'Have your tooth pulled but then bring back the remaining four kuruş and thirty paras

"I went to the barber and had my tooth pulled. When I handed him the five-kuruş piece, he dropped it into his till and said, 'Thank you May God give you great abundance!' he did not give me any change

"When I returned home, my wife asked, 'Well, what

¹⁴ The para has for decades been devaluated out of circulation. There were forty paras to the kuruş, and 100 kuruş to the lira. With the lira worth only 1/7 of a U.S. penny in the late 1980's, both para and kuruş have become meaningless.

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happened?'

"'Well, I had it pulled out.'

"'Where is the rest of the money?' she asked.

"'I gave him the five kuruş, but he would not give me any change.'

"She said, 'You go immediately and bring back four kuruş and thirty paras.'

"I returned to the barber and said to him, 'Give me back my four kuruş and thirty paras or pull out the nineteen teeth that I have left.'¹⁵

"'Aman!'¹⁶ said the barber, but he didn't hesitate to do the work. Taking his forceps out, he pulled the nineteen perfectly sound teeth. Of course, my mouth then looked as jagged as a broken nut, but I didn't care, because I was so pleased to see how hard he had to work and how much he sweated to pull them out. And I didn't feel a bit sorry for a man like that who wouldn't return my change!"

After the kadı had heard this story, he said to this second man, "It seems as if it might have been you who was greeted by that Tatar Ağa, but let me listen to the third

¹⁵ At the rate of ten paras per tooth, nineteen extractions would come to exactly four kuruş and thirty paras.

¹⁶ A very common exclamation in Turkish, it is roughly equivalent to "Good heavens!" or "Oh, my!" or "My gosh!"

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man's story before I decide." He then said to his secretary, "Return this man to his separate room and bring the third man to me."

The third man had been waiting in his room for a long while, and becoming bored, he had looked for something to do to pass the time away. He saw a knot in one of the floorboards, and he pushed on this knot with his finger until it fell through into a stable which was directly below. In that stable there was an Arab who was (blind) in one eye. It was his job to chase away the flies and other insects that bothered the horses. He had taken down an old halberd from the stable wall, and he used that as a weapon to swing at the flies.

After the third man had poked out the knot, there was left a knothole in the floor. He first inserted his penis in this knothole and then his testicles, as well. When the one-eyed Arab looked up, he saw something move on the ceiling of the stable. He took a swing at it with his halberd, and one of the testicles fell to the floor.

In the meantime, the kadı had become impatient, and he shouted to his secretary, "Hurry up! Bring that third fellow here."

When the secretary went to the third man, that man said

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to him, "Take my greetings to the Kadı Efendi,¹⁷ and tell him to come here with an adze or a saw

When the kadı came, he looked at the man and asked, "What happened to you? What is this?"

"Your Honor, I am a businessman. When I came into this room, I saw a knot in the floor. I pushed on the knot, and it fell through. There was a knothole left in the floor then, and I wondered if I could put my penis in that hole. After I did that, I wondered if my testicles would also fit in that hole. They did. Well, I discovered that there was a stable beneath this room, and that in that stable there was a partially blind Arab driving insects away from the horses kept there. When he saw something move on the ceiling, he must have thought it an insect, for he swung his halberd up this way and cut off one of my testicles. Now I am caught fast here, bleeding. Please have a carpenter come here and cut this plank apart to free me."

When the kadı heard this, he said, "I know now that the Tatar Ağa's greeting must have been intended for you, for this is the most remarkable story I have ever heard!" He

¹⁷ Efendi is a complimentary or honorific term added to a personal name. It was once applied to distinguished men, but its prestige has been so devaluated that today it is applied only to children and servants.

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notified the first and second man of this decision and had all three of them sent away.