

Story 1023 (1974 Tape 17)

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Caliph Ömer¹ and Corporal Punishment

blessed Ömer during his reign as caliph had forbidden corporal punishment. One day Caliph Ömer visited Baghdad for the first time. He wanted to look around the city. When he reached the outskirts of Baghdad, he saw a camel herder. He said to this person, "Here, boy, mind my camel for a short while. I shall give you some akças² for doing so. I shall stroll around in Baghdad for a while and then return

The camel herder said, "All right." The Blessed Ömer gave the herder some akças and turned the camel over to him.

walked around the city for a couple of hours and then returned. He said to the camel herder, "All right, I shall take my camel now."

"What camel?" asked the camel herder. "I didn't see

¹The fourth caliph who followed Mohammed as the head of Islam.

²An akça was a small coin worth a third of a para; a para was 1/40 of a kuruş, and a kuruş was 1/100 of a lira. Inflation and devaluation of Turkish money eliminated both akça and para long ago, and in the late 20th century when the lira was devalued to 1/10 of a U.S. cent, the kuruş also disappeared.

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any camel-mamel."³

"Boy, I gave you a (camel) to tend, and I gave money for doing so. You know very well that I did!"

But the herdsman repeated, "I didn't see any camel-mamel," and in this way dismissed the Blessed Ömer

The Caliph went to a nearby mosque to attend the prayer service that would soon start. As he was taking his ablutions at the mosque fountain, he was still so angry at the camel herder that he grew confused in the way he performed the ritual ablutions. A bey⁴ was looking from the window of his nearby mansion. He said to himself, "That man looks intelligent and he is a clean man, and yet he is performing his ablutions incorrectly." Descending to the street level, he went to Ömer (whom he did not recognize) and said, "Friend, you seem to be a born gentleman, and you appear to be an intelligent person, but you are performing your ritual ablutions incorrectly.

"Don't ask me why!" said the Blessed Ömer. "I was so

³To add to any word a similar-sounding word that begins with m is to mock mildly the person addressed. If someone becomes obnoxious by repeatedly asking for ekmek (bread), someone may say, "Oh, ekmek-mekmek." There is no word mekmek per se, nor is there any word mamel per se.

⁴Prior to the time of the Republic bey (roughly lord) referred to an aristocrat.

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upset that I did not know what I was doing. It was because of an incident!"

"What incident?" asked the bey.

"Well, they will not give me back my camel! I left it in the care of a camel herder, and I paid him in advance to tend it, but neither he nor the other herders will now return it to me."

"Come along with me, and I shall get your camel back," said the bey. They went together to the camp of the camel herders, and Ömer pointed out the one to whom he had trusted his camel. The bey said to the herder, "Boy, this man gave you a camel to tend. Do you intend to bring it back and give it to him?"

The herder answered, "I didn't see any camel-mamel.

"I shall beat you severely if you do not bring it back," said the bey.

"Oh, no-o-o-o!" said the herder. "If the Blessed Ömer had not forbidden corporal punishment, you might have been able to do that, but now you cannot." Neither the herder nor the bey knew that it was Ömer who was standing right there with them.

The bey began to beat the camel herder, and it was only a few minutes before the herder agreed to bring back

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the camel. The bey then insisted that Caliph Ömer be a guest in his home that night. Of course, he still did not know that his guest was the Caliph.

During the night Caliph Ömer, who then ruled all Islam, wrote the following upon a piece of paper: "I am hereby appointing you Mayor of Baghdad." He then signed his name to this letter and placed it under a cushion. When he arose the following morning, he bade his host farewell and departed.

When the servants were cleaning up the room where the guest had slept, they found his letter and gave it to the bey. Surprised but pleased by what it said, he went to the Mayor of Baghdad and said, "I have been appointed to replace you as Mayor. Here is the command from Caliph Ömer. Get up and let me sit in that chair now."

The former Mayor looked at the letter and said, "A command is a command."

Saying, "A command is a command," the former Mayor of Baghdad arose and surrendered his official chair to his successor. The bey sat down in that chair and began presiding over the affairs of the city.

In the meantime, the young camel herder who had tried to take Caliph Ömer's (camel) filed suit in court against the

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bey. He charged the bey with having beaten him illegally, for Caliph Ömer had previously banned corporal punishment.

The next day as the trial was about to begin, Caliph returned and entered the courtroom. He said to the judge and to all those present, "At an earlier time I issued an ordinance forbidding the use of corporal punishment. Yesterday, however, I discovered that corporal punishment was sometimes very useful, and so I canceled ordinance." (Laughter from the audience.)