

Story 1272 (1969 Tape 5)

Narrator: Aslan Tan

Location: Rüştü village,
Bayburt kaza,
Gümüşhane Province

NOTE: Tale taped before
Bayburt city became
capital of newly created
Bayburt Province, c. 1990

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Taped by Dr. Saim Sakaoğlu

A Comic Journey from Poverty to Wealth

During my childhood and youth I lived in a village with my parents. My family, along with everyone else in that village, were on the edge of starvation because of several years of crop failures in the area. Fathers were sending away their older sons to earn their livings elsewhere, and one my father dismissed me from his household. He said, "You eat too much bread, and you do too little work. Go now and find some way to support yourself."

I joined two friends who had been dismissed in a similar way, and the three of us set out to find some way to fill our bellies. We hoped that in some other village or in some town we might be able to find jobs. We went little, we went far; we went over hills and through dales,¹ and all the time suffered from

¹This is part of a very common formulaic description of extended travel. It can be found in many ATON tales.

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the pains of hunger. We finally grew so weak from lack of food that we were unable to go any farther. I said to my two friends, "You wait here alongside the road, and I shall go to that village across the way and see if I can find something that we can eat."

After my friends had agreed to this proposal, I set out for the nearby village. It was evening when I entered that village. The first person I encountered was a man with a child in his arms. This man asked me, "Who are you?" After I told him who I was and what our situation was, this fellow said "Here! Hold this child for a few minutes, and I shall bring you far better food than you might have expected to find along your way." Very pleased to hear this, I took the sleeping baby from him and held it in my arms. Time passed and more time passed but the fellow never returned with any food, nor did he come back to recover his child. Not knowing what to do, I kept waiting there, and at last I could hear someone approaching. But when the person reached the place where I was waiting, discovered that it was not the fellow that had given me the child but someone else.

This second person asked me what I was doing there. I told him our situation and how I had gotten the baby I was carrying. He said, "This child is probably an unwanted bastard, and have been tricked into taking it. If you keep this child, it

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may cost you a great deal of trouble. There is a house at such and such a place in this village where such children are kept, and I advise you to take this child to that house and leave it there."

I decided to take this advice, and I started running in the direction of the house he had described. By now it was almost dark, and I could not see the ground ahead of me as I ran along. I fell into what I thought was a hole, and the child slipped from my arms as I started to fall. Groping around blindly, I came upon a heap of what turned out to be watermelons, and then I realized that I had fallen into someone's fruit cellar. Hungry as I was, I grabbed a watermelon and broke it with my bare hands. I ate not only that melon but also a second and a third² before my hunger was satisfied. Only then did I give much thought to finding a way out of that place.

Looking around in the half-dark fruit cellar, I saw some light shining around the edges of a door. Going very quietly to that door, I looked into the lighted room beyond the door. There I saw a woman preparing food. She had slaughtered several fowls: a goose, a hen, a duck, a cock, and a pheasant. At that

²Turkish watermelons are not nearly as large as American watermelons, and they are not oblong but perfectly spherical--about 12 or 14 inches in diameter. Eating three of even these smaller melons is still quite a gastronomical feat!

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moment she was busy cooking helva³ and börek,⁴ and she seemed to be in very good spirits as she did this work. Crouching down, quietly, I waited to see what might develop from this situation.

Soon there was a knock at the door on the opposite side of the room. When the woman opened that door, a very handsome man entered the room. The woman welcomed him, embraced him, and said, "Please come in and sit down." She treated him as if he were her lover. At that very moment, however, there was another knock on the door. The woman exclaimed, "Oh, that must be my husband! Where shall I hide you? Come here! I shall hide you in the fruit cellar, which right now is filled with water-melons." Opening the door, she let her lover into the fruit cellar, where he immediately went and hid beneath a large fruit basket. Quickly bringing into that cellar the fowls she had cooked, she closed the cellar door and opened the other door to permit her husband to enter the house. I was watching all of this from the place where I had been hiding all along.

When the woman admitted her husband, she said, "Oh-h-h, I

³Helva is a favorite confection in Turkey. The basic ingredients of one kind of helva are sugar or a syrup of some kind plus sesame oil. Sometimes ground nuts may be added.

⁴Börek is made of many layers of paper-thin pastry into which is folded cheese, meat, or selected vegetables. The whole is then deep-fried. The börek is a staple of Turkish cuisine.

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am sick enough to die of exhaustion. That is how hard I have been working."

The husband said, "My dear, I am hungry! Is there any food ready to eat? If there is, serve it at once and let us eat it."

She answered, "Husband, I have been too tired to cook any new food, but there is some of yesterday's soup left. Let us drink that soup and then go to bed." Not having any other choice, the man began to drink some of that soup.

By that time my hunger had begun to return, and so I grabbed a leg of the goose and wrenched it free. The lover saw the leg disappear, and he said, "H-s-s-t, black cat, if you cause me to be heard, I shall kill you!" I ate the leg of the goose, and then I reached out and took a börek. Again he said, "H-s-s-t, black cat, if you cause me to be heard, I shall kill you!"

In the meantime, the husband was saying to his wife, "Darling, I have sold our watermelon crop. Let us go into our fruit cellar and count the watermelons."

The woman answered, "Oh, Husband! I am half dead from exhaustion! How can I count watermelons at this time?"

But her husband said, "Darling, I sold our watermelons, and I promised the buyer that I would count them. We must count

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them! Come along!"

When the man opened the door into the fruit cellar, woman shouted to her lover, who then came out from beneath the basket where he had been hiding. The woman and her lover then began beating the husband. I watched for a minute or two from my hiding place, and then I jumped up and shouted, "Hey, two! Look here! What is the matter with you?"

The woman and her lover were frightened by this and tried to run away. The woman managed to escape, but we caught the lover, tied him to a pillar, and gave him a thorough beating. Then the husband turned to me and asked, "Who are you? What are you doing here?" I told him everything that had happened to me, step by step (just as I have told it all to you). When I had finished telling him all of this, he seemed to be completely satisfied with my report, and he rewarded me very generously. Taking a saddlebag, he stuffed one side full of meat and böreks and the other side with bread and watermelons. He placed this loaded saddlebag on my shoulder and wished me farewell.

I ran to the place where I had left my two friends, and I found them there, lying on the ground, exhausted and helpless from their hunger. When they saw all of the food that I had brought, they stared in amazement at it. We all ate and ate and ate until our strength was renewed, and then we resumed our

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traveling. We went and went and went--going little, going far--until we came to three lakes. Two of these lakes had dried up and the third had no water. In that waterless lake three ducks were swimming. Two of them were dead, and the other one was lifeless. With us we had our rifles, two of which were loaded and the third was without bullets. I aimed the empty rifle at the lifeless duck, and--Tak!--I shot it.

We had no means of cooking this duck, and so we grabbed it and took it to the nearest village we could see. When we arrived there, however, we discovered that all of the houses in that village were demolished, and, worse yet, none of them had a tandır.⁵ We lighted a fire at the edge of a house that had no walls, and I went inside the house to see what I could find. There I discovered the remains of three güveçes.⁶ Two were too badly broken to be of any use, and the third was bottomless. We cooked the duck thoroughly in this bottomless güveç. We ate the duck, and our stomachs continued to grow fuller until there was nothing more passing our lips. Then we threw the bones of the duck before the door of that house and

⁵An outdoor oven. It is made by burying to its neck a great earthenware vase known as a küp. Such huge vases, like the amphora of classical times, are common throughout the Middle East; they are used mainly for storage of liquids: water, olive oil, and so forth.

⁶An earthenware cooking pot

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went to bed for the night.

In the morning when we arose we found that during the night a great rain had fallen, and now the waters were swirling in torrents around us as if they might reach the sky. It was only with difficulty that we were able to reach a great tree on which we could climb high enough to stay above the water. That tree was not only very tall but also very broad. In fact, we discovered at the top of the tree an extensive area of excellent farmland. We plowed this field and then we sowed wheat in it.

Wheat grew very well in that huge field, and at the end of the summer we had a great crop. We began to reap this wheat. We reaped and reaped and reaped, but there was so much wheat there that we thought we might never be able to reap all of it. One day after I had been working under a hot sun for several hours I had such a headache that I thought my head would burst. I sat down in the shade of a bush to rest, and what did I see there? I said to myself, "Isn't that a fox running out from beneath this bush?" Yes, it was a fox. As the animal started running, I hurled my sickle at it. The point of the sickle stuck into the fox. He ran in greater and greater circles trying to shake off the sickle, and as he did so, the sickle was constantly cutting the wheat. The fox ran more, and the sickle reaped more wheat. The fox ran still farther, and the sickle mowed down even more

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of the wheat.

After the fox had in this way reaped all of the wheat, we gathered it all together in one place and began to thresh it. We chopped it all up⁷ and then winnowed it to separate the grain from the straw. We then carried the harvest home and placed it in three compartments, two of which had been demolished and the third had no walls. These compartments we filled and filled and filled to their very brims. We became very rich, and we still live very comfortably. And that is the way this whole experience ended.

This was one of two stories told to me by a friend (whose name I cannot now remember) at a Teacher Training Institute⁸ we were both attending in 1963

⁷The narrator says literally that they plowed the wheat crop. It is not plowed, of course. It is cut up by a döğen, a plank structure the size of a door with many pieces of sharp flint protruding from the bottom. Döğen derives from dövmek--to beat or thrash.

⁸To teach the five grades of a rural elementary school, one does not need a university degree. Special elementary "normal schools," called Teacher Training Institutes, provide the necessary education.