

Story 2152 (Miscellaneous
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The Compassionate Woodcutter as Hero

A poor woman and her son, Ahmet, lived in a very small cottage on the edge of a village. Their small income was barely enough to buy the food needed to keep them alive. Each day the mother would go to the forest and knock down dead branches from trees. She would break those branches into pieces small enough to carry, and she would return home with a bundle of firewood. Ahmet would then take that bundle to the nearest town and sell it, sometimes to a baker, sometimes to a miller. With whatever money Ahmet got for the wood he would buy flour, oil, cheese, and bread and take them to his mother.

One day after Ahmet had sold a bundle of wood, he started to the marketplace to buy food. On the way he came upon three small Jewish boys who were trying to kill a baby snake. He shouted, "Boys, do not kill that baby snake! I shall give you what money I have for it." Those boys agreed to sell the snake to Ahmet. When he reached home, he put the snake in a clay jar that was half full of soil. That night Ahmet and his mother went to bed hungry, for after

Story 2152

buying the baby snake, Ahmet had had no money left to buy food.

The next morning Ahmet's mother went to the forest as usual, broke up a quantity of dead branches and took them home for Ahmet to sell. After selling that wood to the owner of a public bath, Ahmet headed for the marketplace to buy food, but again his attention was drawn to the same three boys who, this time, were torturing a kitten. They were doing this in hope of getting more money from Ahmet. Their trick worked. Ahmet shouted, "Boys, don't kill that baby cat! I shall give you some money for it." He then returned home with a kitten but no food, and again he and his mother went to bed hungry.

On the third day a similar thing happened. After Ahmet had sold his bundle of wood and was going to the marketplace, he saw the three children severely beating a small puppy. He took home the puppy but no food. His mother asked, "Ahmet, why didn't you bring us any food?"

"Because I used the money I had to save the life of this little puppy.

After going three days without food, Ahmet's mother was exasperated. On the fourth morning she said, "I am an old woman, and I cannot continue working without food. Today

Story

we shall go to the forest together and then to the market-place together. In that way I can prevent you from losing the money we need for food. I cannot trust you any longer." They both worked hard in the forest and were able to sell a larger bundle of wood than they usually did, and with the money they received for it, they were able to buy a good quantity of food.

After that, both mother and son worked together and spent their money together. This arrangement continued for five or six years until the time the mother died. By then the kitten had grown into a large cat and the puppy had become a strong dog. One day the clay jar holding the snake burst, and from its parts came a snake so large that it looked like a dragon. It said to Ahmet, "Hey, human being, how could you leave me such a long time in that clay jar without food?"

"I did not know that you would need food to survive. I thought that snakes lived in soil, and so that was what I put in the jar with you. I saved your life from the boys who were attacking you when you were a baby, but you may kill me now if you wish."

"No. You helped me once, and now I shall help you. Take from my mouth the tiny box which lies beneath my tongue. When

Story 2152

you open that box, three jinns¹ will appear as if from nowhere. They will be your servants. Ask from them anything that you wish, and they will provide it." Having said that the snake moved away from the fragments of the clay jar and began to depart through the grass.

"Stop!" called Ahmet. "Don't go away, for you belong here. Are you not my snake?"

The snake answered, "Yes, but I must leave you right now. Do not worry. Whenever you may need me, I shall know how to find you in order to give you help." He then left.

That evening Ahmet fed the cat and the dog. Then he took out the tiny box he had gotten from the snake's mouth. After Ahmet had opened that box, three Arabs² appeared suddenly, bowed before Ahmet, and spoke to him. They said, "Master, we are your servants. Ask for whatever you wish from us."

Ahmet said, "If you look around my home here, you will see how poor I have been. All of my life so far I have lived

¹In Turkish belief there are two kinds of jinns. One type is large, clearly visible, and is constrained to work for the human being who calls it up. It has magic power and is capable of achieving almost anything for its master. The other type is rarely seen except by highly religious people. It is a spiritual force in Sufi and other Muslim mysticism.

²In Turkish lore the servant jinns are sometimes Arabs, though they may also have Negroid facial features. Sometimes they are called black Arabs.

Story 2152

on very little. I worked hard and sold firewood in order to buy food for myself and for my mother. But I have never had anything else. I have had a difficult life so far, and I suffered much. I now want you to build for me a large mansion and equip it with many servants and beautiful female attendants. I want that mansion built near the palace of the padishah of this land." After giving those orders, Ahmet retired for the night.

When Ahmet awakened in the morning, he looked around but could not believe what he was seeing. He saw a large mansion with many rooms, many servants, and many female attendants. He went to a balcony and gazed at the scenes around his mansion. Among the many things he saw was the palace of the padishah, which stood near his mansion

When the padishah arose, he was even more amazed to discover a large and beautiful mansion next to his palace. It seemed to have appeared from nowhere. He at once called some of his guards and ordered them to find out who owned the new mansion and what kind of a person that owner was.

Those guards went to the mansion and knocked on the front door. When Ahmet opened that door, the guards said, "Our padishah would like to talk with you."

"Of course," said Ahmet, and he followed the guards into

Story 2152

the palace. The ruler was surprised to discover that the mansion was the property of such a young and previously poor person. He said to Ahmet, "My son, you were a poor woodcutter and the son of a poor widow. How did you become so wealthy that you were able to build your new mansion? Tell me your secret."

"Allah gave me my wealth. There is no secret about that."

"You had better tell me your secret. Otherwise, I shall have my executioners behead you."

"Please give me a day to think about this," said Ahmet.

"Then I shall tell you how I became rich."

That night when Ahmet was preparing to go to bed, he took the tiny magic box from his chest pocket where he kept it. When he opened that box, the three Arab jinns appeared and asked for his orders. He said to them, "Take me back to the small cottage in which I used to live. That is all." He fell asleep in the mansion, but he woke up in the morning in his former home, where he was glad to see again his cat, his dog, and his donkey. That same morning the padishah looked out of a palace window and discovered that the mansion had disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

Ahmet returned to the kind of work he and his mother had formerly done. While he was gathering wood in the forest,

Story 2152

Ahmet saw an old woman doing the same thing. He thought, "is probably a poor lonely person, as my mother used to be." He then gave some thought to asking her to come and live with him and become his stepmother. He called to her, "Greetings mother. Are you alone in this world? Do you have any husband or son or daughter or close relative?"

"I live alone, having no one to look after me--neither husband nor son nor daughter nor relative. That is why I gather wood to make a living."

"In that case, let me ask you something. Would you be willing to come and live with me? Would you like to share my small house and become my stepmother? My real mother died some time ago. We could look after each other."

The old woman happily accepted Ahmet's offer, and they began living together in Ahmet's cottage. As the days passed, they continued to collect wood and sell it, thus earning enough money to buy their food

In the meantime, the padishah had not forgotten about Ahmet, and one day he asked some of his men to search for that young man. But how could they locate a poor woodcutter in the wide area ruled by the padishah?

One night when he went to bed, Ahmet took from his chest pocket the tiny magic box given to him by the snake. When he

Story 2152

opened the lid of the box and the three Arabs appeared, he said to them, "Build for me an ordinary house a little larger than this cottage. Build it in a settlement of similar houses

In the morning Ahmet and his stepmother woke up in that new house. The old woman was astonished by what she saw. She ran to Ahmet and asked, "What happened to our small cottage? How did we get here? Can you explain to me how we got this new house?"

"Do not ask questions, Mother. We have finished our wood-cutting days, and I have sold my donkey. Rest and enjoy a comfortable living here."

Two or three months later Ahmet said to the old woman, "Mother, I want you to go to the padishah and ask for the hand of one of his daughters in marriage to me

Surprised, the old woman said, "Oh, my dear son, are you out of your mind? How could you dare to ask for the hand of one of the padishah's daughters in marriage? You have been a poor woodcutter. How can you imagine that you can marry a princess?"

But Ahmet insisted on his request, and the old woman had no choice but to go to the palace and ask for the hand of a princess. Taking her cane and putting on her old coat,

Story 2152

she set out to accomplish this task.

When she reached the palace gates, several people asked her what she was doing there. She answered, "I want to see the padishah." But several observers looked closely at her and concluded that she was no more than a beggar. They offered to give her some money to buy food if she would leave the palace. But she refused such offers, saying, "I did not come here for money but to see the padishah."

One of the palace guards said to her, "Mother, the padishah is now engaged in a very important meeting. He cannot possibly see you now, but come back tomorrow at same time and you may possibly be able to see him." When she returned on the following day, several people at the gates told her that the padishah was attending another important meeting. "Here are two bags of flour for you, but do not come back here again!"

When she returned home, she told Ahmet, "Again they told me at the gates that the padishah was too busy to see me. After all, Ahmet, he is a ruler and we are poor people. How could you dare to send me there?"

Ahmet answered, "Mother, you will go to the palace again tomorrow. You have no reason to feel shy or embarrassed. Hold up your head and continue asking to be admitted

Story 2152

into the padishah's presence. If you do not present my request to the padishah, I shall be very angry."

On the following morning she went to the palace at a very early hour. While she was waiting at the gates, padishah himself came out of the palace to take a walk. Seeing Ahmet's stepmother there, he spoke rudely to her "Hey, you old witch woman, why do you come here every day? What do you want?"

She answered, "Your Majesty, I have not been coming here to beg for alms but rather to bring you an important message."

Hearing that, the ruler said to one of his guards "Take this woman to my office so that I may talk with there."

When the old woman was admitted into his presence, she bowed and said, "Your Majesty, I have come to ask for hand of one of your daughters in marriage to my son."

Not believing what he heard, the padishah shouted, "What is that? What are you saying?"

She repeated her request: "Your Majesty, I have come to ask for the hand of one of your daughters in marriage to my son."

"Listen to me, old woman. I have three demands which must be met by any man who wishes to marry one of my daughters. If he can fulfill those demands, all will go well for

Story 2152

him, but if he fails to do so, I shall have him executed
His head will be cut off."

"Tell me, Your Majesty, what those three requirements
are."

"Go and tell your son that once he has committed him-
self to undertaking my three requirements, he cannot then
withdraw from the agreement."

Frightened by the padishah's conditions, the old woman
hurried back home. Ahmet was anxiously awaiting her return,
and as soon as he saw her, he said, "Tell me what happened!
Did you finally manage to talk with the padishah? Tell me
everything!"

The old woman replied, "Yes, I have seen the padishah
and talked with him. I asked for the hand of one of his
daughters in marriage to you. He told me that you could win
the girl only if you could meet his three demands. He did
not tell me what those demands are, because once you know
about them, you cannot then refuse to undertake them. If
you fail to fulfill his three requirements, he will have
both of our heads cut off. There is still time for you to
change your mind and thus avoid this frightening situation."

Ahmet then said, "Oh, my dear mother, now I understand
why you are so upset and frightened. Don't worry, for there

Story 2152

is really nothing to fear. Return tomorrow, discover what his conditions are, and then return to me." Once more she had no choice but to go to the padishah again, even though she was frightened and trembling.

When she arrived at the palace, the padishah asked if her son would accept his conditions. She answered, "Yes, Your Majesty. My son will accept your three conditions, whatever they are."

"Your son's first task is to build a palace larger than mine and trimmed with more gold and silver than mine is. The equipment and furnishings in that new palace should also be richer than those of my palace

When the old woman heard this requirement, she almost fainted. She went at once and told her son the padishah's first condition. She then added, "The only choices that we have are to meet his requirement or to run away and escape. The only way to save our lives is to flee from this cruel padishah."

"Calm down, Mother. Let us sit and rest now. You have nothing to worry about. Furthermore, there is no way to escape from the padishah, for he would surely find us wherever we might go." He then reassured his mother by saying, "Go and get a good night's sleep, for tomorrow will be another day."

Story 2152

When Ahmet himself went to bed, he opened the tiny magic box and said to the three Arab jinns that appeared, "I want you to build for me a palace right alongside the padishah's palace. It should be larger and more beautiful than any other palace."

Ahmet's stepmother was so worried that she could not sleep at all that night. She arose very early, as Ahmet had expected, she would, and dressed. She then went to Ahmet and asked, "Well, what now?"

Her son answered, "Go back to the padishah's palace and find out what the ruler's second requirement is."

"What about his first requirement? Have you completed that already?"

"Please go and do what I requested."

As she went back to the padishah's palace, she could not help noticing the more magnificent palace alongside it. The padishah also saw that new palace, and for awhile his eyes were dazzled by its glitter of gold and silver. He had Ahmet's mother immediately shown into his presence. He asked her, "How was that new and superior palace created so quickly when I had many laborers spend years in the construction of my own palace?"

"I cannot answer that question, but I have come to be told

Story 2152

the second task which my son must accomplish."

The padishah answered, "Your son must build a tunnel in the middle of which there must be flowing a channel of liquid gold. That tunnel must connect my palace with your son's palace. When one looks into my end of the tunnel, one must be able to see your son's palace, and when one looks through your son's end of the tunnel, one must be able to see my palace."

The old woman went home immediately and reported to Ahmet what the padishah had ordered him to do. "It is a task that no one could complete," she said to him. Ahmet again comforted his stepmother.

Upon retiring that night, Ahmet opened his tiny magic box and then told the three Arabs who appeared exactly what the padishah had demanded. The three jinns said, "Very well, master."

The next morning Ahmet said to his stepmother, "Return again to the padishah and learn from him what his third requirement is." When she reached the padishah's palace, she found the ruler waiting for her arrival.

He immediately began to describe the third and most difficult task for Ahmet to undertake. "I want your son to construct a garden filled with every different kind of tree and

Story

every different kind of flowering plant known throughout the entire world. When I go into the garden to prepare myself for the morning prayer service, I want to be able to hang my hat on one of the branches of a blooming rosebush."

The old woman went home and reported to Ahmet what she had learned. "The padishah's third task is something impossible to complete." She then repeated, word for word, the padishah's instructions.

"That is not an impossible task, Mother. Don't worry about it. We can carry out his orders."

Ahmet said nothing further about it. When he went to bed, however, he again opened the lid of his tiny magic box to bring the three Arabs. When these jinns arrived, Ahmet described for them the wonderful garden he wanted built near the padishah's palace.

In the morning Ahmet said to the old woman, "Go tell the padishah that all his requirements have been fulfilled and that he should set a date for my marrying his daughter."

Relieved to know that she and Ahmet were now safe, the old stepmother trotted all the way to the padishah's palace. There she was received readily and not given any of the difficulties she had experienced during earlier visits. She was now treated with respect. When she was shown into the presence

Story 2152

of the ruler, she bowed and said, "Your Majesty, my son has completed your three assignments, and now he is expecting you to keep your promise to have him married to one of your daughters. He requests that you set a date for the wedding."

"Yes, I shall keep my promise to have him marry one of my daughters. I want him to have made a golden palanquin. After the wedding ceremony has been completed, I want the bride and groom to ride in it to their palace past the tunnel and past the beautiful garden."

The old woman went home and reported to Ahmet the final request of the padishah. "He wants you to have built a golden palanquin in which you will have his daughter carried to her new home." That evening Ahmet called up the three jinns and ordered them to construct that golden palanquin.

After a wedding ceremony of several days, the bride and groom were carried to their new home in the golden palanquin. The padishah had given Ahmet his youngest daughter, who was the cleverest of his children. When the newlyweds went to bed that night, the bride noticed the small box in Ahmet's pocket. After Ahmet had fallen asleep, she took the tiny magic box and opened it. The three Arabs appeared and said to her, "We are your servants. Ask for whatever you wish, and we shall fulfill your request."

Story 2152

The bride said, "Put Ahmet and his stepmother back in the cottage from which they first came. Then build a palace in the middle of the seven seas³ where my lover and I can live."

On the following morning Ahmet and his mother awoke in their old home, the cottage. Ahmet's donkey was there again, and so too were his cat and dog. Once again they would be reduced to collecting and selling wood in order to make a living. They were shocked to discover this

On that same morning the padishah was also shocked when he looked out of a window and discovered that the palace of the newlyweds had disappeared. He said, "O Allah, Allah! What has become of that beautiful palace, and what has become of my youngest daughter?"

Ahmet said to his stepmother, "I cannot bear to live here again in this way. I am going to travel for awhile." Taking his cat and dog with him, he set forth and traveled aimlessly. Along the way he came to a mouse village. Ahmet's cat ate so many mice that the ruler of those small animals came to negotiate.

The ruler of the mice said to Ahmet, "If you will prevent your cat from killing any more of my subjects, I shall provide a troop of mouse soldiers to accompany you on your

³This trope is illogical and cannot be taken literally. It is a figure of speech meaning some distant place in the middle of a sea. It occurs in several other tales.

Story 2152

travels."

Ahmet accepted this arrangement. Then, weary from travels, he retired for the night. In his sleep he had a dream. An old man spoke to him in that dream. That old said, "Your tiny magic box is in the possession of your unfaithful wife. She has used it to have built for herself and her lover a palace with many towers in the middle of the seven seas.

When Ahmet awoke the next morning, he continued to travel, but this time he went toward the seashore. Several hours after they had reached the coast, they could see at some distance from the land the towers of a large palace. Thinking that that palace was probably the new home of wife and her lover, Ahmet said to his dog, his cat, and his mouse troops, "If you can reach that palace and recover from it my tiny magic box, I shall reward you generously

His animals agreed to undertake this task. The cat jumped on the shoulders of the dog, and the mice climbed up and stood on the shoulders of the cat. The dog swam to the island on which the palace of the princess was built. mice then dug a tunnel from the shore of that island to the bedroom of the lovers in the palace. The cat brought some ground pepper from the palace kitchen and sprinkled it over

Story 2152

the face of the sleeping princess. She sneezed so violently that she dropped, among other things, the tiny magic box.

One of the mice seized the box, but the cat took it away from the mouse. Then the dog said, "I shall not bear any of you back to the mainland unless you let me carry the little box." So, the dog put the box in its mouth, and they all started back to the seacoast. Along the way the cat asked a question, and when the dog tried to answer it, the box slipped from its mouth and fell into the sea. A passing fish then swallowed that box.

Ahmet's animals returned to him and explained what happened. Ahmet was so angry about this that he left his animals where they were and traveled on by himself

The cat had grown hungry by then, and it began catching small fish in the shallow water and eating them. While this was going on, a large fish was washed ashore by a strong wave. The cat seized that large fish and began to eat it. As the cat was doing so, the magic box fell out of the fish's belly. After running for a whole day, the cat began to overtake its master. It called out, "Meow! Meow!" Hearing his cat's voice, Ahmet stopped to let the cat catch up with him. Ahmet was delighted to recover his magic box. He was so grateful to the cat that he washed its tired and sweaty body.

Story 2152

Later Ahmet called up the three Arabs again and gave them new orders. "I want you to take both the padishah and me to the palace in the middle of the seven seas." When the padishah and Ahmet arrived there, they began searching the building. When they found the princess and her lover sleeping in the same bed, they were both angry. The padishah drew his sword and killed the lover. Ahmet then left his unfaithful wife with the padishah and said that he would renew his travels

The padishah said, "Before you go, will you please tell me the source of your power? How were you able to accomplish so many marvels?" Ahmet explained the magic help he had received. He then reached into his pocket for the tiny magic box

When the lid of that box was lifted, the three jinns appeared. They asked, "What are your orders to us?" When Ahmet said that he had no further orders, the three jinns turned into black clouds and floated up into the sky.

Having explained to the padishah the services provided by the three jinns, Ahmet took his farewell from that place. He said to the padishah, "I no longer have any reason to remain here, and so I shall travel again."

After he had walked along the seashore for a day, Ahmet

Story

saw a large ship stranded in the shallow water of a beach. Passengers on the deck told him that the engines⁴ of the vessel had stopped. When Ahmet went to the engine room of the ship, he found there a beautiful naked girl holding the control levers of the engines. He struggled with this girl and took from her hands the controls. As soon as he did so, the girl vanished, and Ahmet concluded that she must have been a sea jinn. The passengers cheered Ahmet and offered to pay him for saving their ship.

A little farther along his way Ahmet came to a village which was being attacked by what seemed to be a black cloud. It had already killed many of the inhabitants of the village. Survivors told Ahmet that their persecutor was a weather jinn. Ahmet drove away the deadly cloud and saved what was left of the village.

A day later Ahmet came to a beautiful palace. As he stood admiring this very impressive structure, he was suddenly attacked by an armed guard. After he had defeated and thrown to the ground this guard, Ahmet had a surprise. He found that

⁴Engine-powered ships are an anachronism in this tale. The frequency of magic and marvels in the tale would seem to indicate that it is of ancient origins, when only sturdy backs and sails powered ships.

Story 2152

his opponent was a beautiful girl, who now begged Ahmet to forgive her. Then she too vanished.

Ahmet entered the beautiful palace and began to explore its many rooms. On the second floor he found three empty bedrooms and a kitchen in which food was cooking. Ahmet became suspicious of this unusual situation and decided to hide himself and watch to see what might occur there.

After a short while three pigeons flew in through a window and became three beautiful girls. They began to tell each other of their most recent experiences. The youngest said, "While I was flying over the sea, I captured a ship-load of passengers. I had shut down the engines of that ship in order to let the waves ground that vessel. But along came a strong young man who wrestled the control of the ship away from me."

The second girl said, "I attacked a village and began to kill its inhabitants. This slaughter was stopped, however, by a strong young man who came along and fought with me. I was so overwhelmed by him that I had no choice but to vanish from that place."

Then the oldest girl reported her adventure. "Earlier today I was guarding the front entrance to our palace. When a strong man came along, I tried to drive him away. He fought

Story 2152

so fiercely, however, that I had to beg him to spare my life. When he did so, I quickly deserted my guard post."

The three girls were silent for a moment. Then the oldest asked, "Do you suppose that all three of our experiences were with the same young man?" As they were discussing this idea, they were surprised by Ahmet, who suddenly came out of hiding. The oldest girl asked him, "Who are you? And what are you doing in this palace?"

After Ahmet had told them his life story, he said, "Now tell me who you girls are and what you are doing here."

"We were originally three sister giantesses. We were enchanted by an evil witch and made the slaves controlled by your tiny magic box. When you said that you had no further work for us to do, you freed us from our enslavement, and we then disappeared as three black clouds."

After a brief silence, the oldest sister said, "We could all live here together in this beautiful palace. You could marry our youngest sister, who is both the most beautiful and most clever of us. You could protect us, and we could spend our lives here happily

May all who have heard this tale become as happy as they were.