

Story #516 (not on tape)

Narrator: Suzan Koraltürk

Location: Informant a resident of Trabzon but working in Ankara

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The ~~Shepherd~~ and His Secret

Once there was and twice there wasn't a poor shepherd who earned his bread and cheese by watching his master's sheep. One day as he was watching the sheep, he heard a fire crackling. He hurried toward the fire. In the midst of the flames there was a young snake, hissing, "Save me! Save me!" *much of her as a snake*

The shepherd held out his crook toward the snake. Quickly the snake slithered along the crook to the shepherd's arm and then onto his shoulder. "Do not fear," the snake said. "I will not harm you. But take me to my father, the king of the snakes. He will reward you richly for saving me."

"I need no reward," said the shepherd. "Besides, I must stay here and watch my master's sheep."

"The sheep are resting," said the snake. "You will be gone only a little while. Please carry me to my father."

The shepherd looked at the sheep. They would be safe with his two big sheepdogs. He set off toward the forest with the snake. On the way, the young snake gave him this advice: "My father will offer you gold, and silver, and precious stones. Take none of these as your reward. Ask instead *Animal language understood by human* to understand the language of animals. He will not want to give this to you, but you must ask for it until he does."

"I do not need to know the language of animals," said the shepherd.

"Do as I say," the snake hissed. "You will find the gift valuable."

At last the shepherd agreed to do as the young snake directed. Just

then, they arrived at the door of the snake king's home. The snakes guarding the door hissed at him, but the young snake commanded them to open the door, and so they did.

snake king greeted his son with great joy. "We had feared you were lost forever!"

"Except for the help of this young man, I could never have returned once, to you, my father," said the young snake. At ^{he} he told the king the whole story.

The snake king looked then at the shepherd. "What can I give you as your reward?" he asked. "In my treasury, I have much gold. Will you take gold?"

"Sire, I ask only that you have good health. I wish no more."¹

"If you will not take gold, will you take silver for yourself?" the snake king asked.

Sire. I wish only your good health. I ask no more."

"Then will you take precious stones?" asked the snake king. "Would you accept those as your reward?"

Sire. I wish only your good health. That is reward enough."

"My health is for me," the snake king said. "Come. Ask something--anything--for yourself."

"Well," said the shepherd slowly, "I would like to understand the language of animals, if that is within your power. Otherwise, I want no reward at all."

The snake king shook his head. "That is a dangerous gift," he said, "and you have saved my son's life. You are foolish to ask for such power. If you had that power and told any living soul about it, you would die at that very moment. I do not wish your death. Ask for something else."

¹In Turkish oral narratives, one offered his wish shows the mandatory courtesy of asking only the good health of his prospective benefactor--not only once, but twice or thrice, before he specifies anything for himself.

*Is bu - agent
revealing ability to
speak animal
language*

The shepherd looked steadily at the snake king. Then he shook his head. "No, Sire. If I cannot have that gift, I want no gift at all. May God be with you." And he turned to go.

"Wait!" said the snake king. "If you must have it, then I will give it to you. But, I warn you: tell no one about this power, or you will surely die. Now, open your mouth so that I can blow my breath into it."

*Blowing to
bring about desired
effect*

The shepherd opened his mouth, and, truly, the snake king blew his breath into it. "Now you must blow your beath into my mouth," the snake king ordered, and opened his mouth wide.

The shepherd blew his breath into the snake king's mouth.

Twice more, the blowing was repeated.² "Now," said the snake king, "you have received your reward: you will be able to understand the language of animals. But guard your secret well, or it will cost you your life."

"I will remember," said the shepherd. "And now I must return to my master's sheep."

As the shepherd hurried back to the flock, he could indeed understand what the birds were saying to each other as they sang, and what the small animals said as he went by.

He found the sheep safe in the care of the sheepdogs. Then, feeling tired, he lay down in the shade of a tree to rest. He had just closed his eyes when he heard three crows in the tree above him.

"See that poor shepherd lying there," said the first one.

"Yes," said the second one. "If he only knew, he is lying just a few meters away from a treasure that could make him rich."

*buried treasure
revealed to
him by birds*

"You are right," said the third one. "Under the spot where the black ram is lying, there is a cave filled with silver and gold."

The shepherd lay there, thinking. Could he believe what he had heard?

²In Turkish oral tradition--as is true also in many other oral traditions--the number "three" is held to have magical properties; other traditionally significant numbers in Turkish narrative are "seven" and "forty."

Quickly he got up and fetched stones from here and there. He carried the stones to the place where the black ram was lying, and he made a small pile of them to mark the spot.

That evening after he had shut the sheep in for the night, he went to his master. "My master," he said, "today I noticed that there was a hollow sound to the ground at the place where the sheep were grazing. I have marked the place with stones. Could there be a cave there, under the ground?"

"There may be," said his master. "Tomorrow we will look and see."

The next day, the master went with the shepherd and the sheep to the the shepherd had marked. The two men removed the pile of stones and began to dig. As God would have it, there was a large cave beneath the pasture. And inside, they found more gold and silver than the master had ever seen. They left the sheep in the care of the sheepdogs, and load by they carried the treasure to the master's house.

"My son," said the master, who was above all an honorable man, "the treasure is yours. You were the one who found the cave."

"But the land is yours, my master," said the shepherd, "so the treasure belongs to you."

"Hear me, my son," the master said. "I have everything that I need, but you have little or nothing. You must use this treasure to get some good things for this life. Build a house. Find a wife, marry her, and have children, and lead a good life." Thus the shepherd gained the treasure for himself.

In time, the shepherd found a suitable wife, and they settled down to lead a happy, prosperous life. And with all this good living, his wife became not only healthy but very fat.

One day the two went out to view their lands. The former shepherd rode

his best stallion, while his wife rode a fine mare. As they went along the mare fell a little behind the stallion. Suddenly the stallion said to the mare, "Come along, why don't you?"

"It's all very well for you to talk!" answered the mare crossly. "You're only carrying the master, while I have to carry his wife, who weighs three times as much as he does."

Hearing this, the former shepherd began to laugh.

"Are you laughing at me?" his wife asked.

"No, no, not at all!" said her husband, and he tried not to laugh any more, but what the mare had said was so funny that he laughed again.

"You are laughing at me!" his wife said angrily.

"Indeed not," said her husband.

"Then what were you laughing at?"

"I cannot tell you," he said. "Believe me, it was nothing important at all."

"Tell me!"

"I cannot."

But she insisted so strongly that he knew he must tell her why he could not tell her. "My wife," he said, "if I should tell you my secret, I would die immediately."

"Then it was important!" she said. And she insisted even more on knowing why he had laughed. At last, he had no other choice but to tell her.

"I'll tell you, my wife," he said, "but first I must have my coffin made." And at once he ordered the village carpenter to make him a coffin, with his wife fussing at him all the while about his secret.

How "Now, I must wash myself and prepare for burial," he said sadly. And he did. When he was ready, he climbed into the coffin.

But while he was settling himself down, he overheard the ~~rooster~~ talking to a sheepdog. "He may be rich, but he knows nothing about wives!" said the rooster.

"He's a good man," answered the sheepdog, "and the best master I ever had."

"Still, he's a fool," the rooster said. "Here I manage a hundred hens, and not a one gets the upper hand of me, and he can't rule one wife!"

"Why, the rooster is right!" thought the former shepherd. "And what is the use of knowing the language of animals if I cannot profit from their wisdom?"

Climbing out of the coffin, he picked up a stout stick. "Come, my wife," he called. "I am ready to tell you now what you need to know."

At a glance, his wife read the message of the stick. She said quickly, "Oh, my husband, now I know what I should have remembered before: 'Part with your head, but not with your secret.'³ In the of God, let us be at peace."

Thus the former shepherd kept the gift the snake king gave him. He had his life and his happiness. Let us go up and sit in his seat.

³This is one of a great number of cautionary Turkish proverbs.