

Story 1261 (1972 Tape 10)

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Storytelling Contest of Miller and Customer

Once there was and once there was not, when the giants were town criers, and when my father was a barber,¹ there was a watchman who went to a mill with just one kilo of grain to be ground. After the grain had been ground, the miller said to the watchman, "We are hungry now. Let us make some bread with part of this flour and eat it."

The watchman agreed to this, and they started to mix some water with a small part of the flour, but the dough that was formed was too soft to be baked. They added more flour to the mixture, with the result that the dough now became too dry. So they added water, then flour, then more water, and then more flour, until finally all of the flour had been thrown into the dough. When the watchman saw this, he said, "Friend, what shall I be able to take to my children? We have used up

¹This is a very poor attempt at a tekerleme, one with just a few scraps of the kinds of elements that are usually employed for this purpose. The formulaic opening for many Turkish folktales is known as a tekerleme. A full tekerleme may run to several lines, though most narrators nowadays use only one or two parts of a tekerleme. The tekerleme is a non-sense jingle filled with paradoxes and other comic incongruities. It is meant both to amuse and to alert the audience to the fact that a tale is to follow. Some of the humor is lost in translation because it is difficult to reproduce in English the rhyme scheme.

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all of the flour to make bread here."

"In that case," answered the miller, "let us each tell a story, and the one who tells the better story will get the whole large loaf." When the watchman agreed to this, the miller continued, "We once sowed watermelon seeds, and the vines that grew from them developed so rapidly that they stretched across a river, and when the fruit was ripe, there were watermelons in great quantity on both sides of the river."

Then the watchman started his story. "We once had forty hives of bees. One evening we discovered that all of the bees had returned to their hives except for a certain lame bee. On the following day we looked everywhere for our lame bee, and we finally found him working in a field. Someone had caught him and harnessed him with an ox to a plow. This mismatched team was being used to plow the field. The plow opened a hole in the ground, and from that hole a monster sprang forth. In the monster's mouth there was a piece of paper upon which was written this statement: "The miller did a very rude thing. The bread belongs to the watchman." Therefore, the watchman got the large loaf of bread.²

²The narrator has heard this tale--a very common one in Turkey-- but missed the whole point of it. The dispute over the bread and the storytelling contest to resolve that dispute are mere gimmicks to set up a couple of tall tales. The watermelon tale and the tale of the lame bee are extended fantasies which grow more and more ridiculous as they progress. The narrator here does not tell the stories but simply provides a couple of the opening lines of each. See variants in ATON for the stories themselves.