

Story #658 (1961-1962, Tape, #70)

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#658
#658 thief -- clever
Kara Mehmet, the Clever Thief

Once in the past there was a young man called Kara Mehmet. At that time the padişah had imprisoned the man of the land. Kara Mehmet lived with the village hoca. The land was very poor at that time and money was scarce. Each night after everyone else in the household had gone to sleep, the hoca would slip out and go from roof to roof taking a few piasters¹ from the pockets of the sleeping population. For it was summer and people slept on the flat roofs of their homes².

One night Kara Mehmet heard the hoca sneak out and suspected the hoca's ways. The hoca would return towards dawn, change from his dark clothes into his white garments, and then go to the mosque to recite the morning prayers. The night Kara Mehmet became aware of the hoca's thievery, he waited behind the closed door for his return. When the hoca arrived back home towards dawn to change his clothes, Kara Mehmet braced himself against the door and would not let the hoca in until he told him where he had been all night. At first the hoca claimed that he had just been walking around because he could not sleep, but Kara Mehmet said he knew better and would not let him in until he told him the truth. So the hoca, finding no other way out, told Kara

¹The coin called piaster was once common throughout the Middle East, though it had different values in different countries. In Turkey it was worth a kuruş, a hundredth part of a lira.

²In Central Anatolia peasants do indeed sleep on their flat mud roofs during hot summer nights.

Mehmet to let him in and he would tell him the truth. When he came in, he admitted that he had been taking a few piasters from the sleeping population. Kara Mehmet asked to see how much he had taken, and the hoca took out the piasters out of his pocket. They counted seven piasters.

Kara Mehmet took the money and said, "I can put this to good use. Let us go and rob the treasury in the palace of the padishah where there is more than just a few piasters." The hoca agreed to go along and help him. Kara Mehmet went to the metal workshop the next day and ordered a huge nail and a circular saw. *Saw -- Circular* At night the hoca and Kara Mehmet took these implements and went to the palace, going to the back of the building since there were guards at the front entrance. They drove the nail into the outer wall, and tied a rope to it. Then Kara Mehmet climbed up the rope to the roof. On the roof he determined the location of the treasury room and drilled an opening above it with the hand-operated circular saw. Then he extended the rope to the opening, dropped into the room below, and lowered himself into the place where the treasury was located. He opened a chest and filled his fez³ with gold. He called to the hoca to pull the rope which he had passed over the nail, and he was thus pulled out of the treasury onto the roof. Then he climbed down with his fez jammed tightly on his head. He showed the hoca their profit

³The fez was a round hat, tapering upward, and flat on top. It was outlawed as headgear in public after the founding of the Republic, largely because it had come to symbolize the Islamic power of the past.

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for the night. The hoca asked, "Is this all that you have gotten? there not more gold there than that?"

Kara Mehmet answered, "Yes, there was, but we shall have to return tomorrow night for it. When we return, it will be your turn to enter the treasury to get the gold."

In the morning the guards discovered the open chest ^(4 run k) and informed the padişah of the theft. The padişah went to the treasury, but he could not understand how the thief had entered, since the door had been locked and was still locked in the morning. He asked to have the wise man ^{wise man} in the land brought to his presence at the treasury, and this was done. The padişah told the intelligent man what had happened and said, "I want you to solve this problem!"

The wise man said, "I shall need a sack of hay." ^{hay -- sack of} When it was brought he placed the hay on the chest and set fire to it. Then, watching the smoke rise, he looked up at the ceiling and said to the padişah, "The thief entered from the rooftop. My advice is that you have a big cauldron ⁴ fifteen meters in diameter, brought into the room and put beneath the hole. Place twenty kilos of coal ^{coal -- twenty kilos of} under the pot filled with water, and then tonight build a fire beneath the cauldron until the water is boiling. The thief will surely return tonight and fall into the boiling water!" He also told the padişah to have the door locked till the morning.

When night came, Kara Mehmet and the hoca returned to the palace.

⁴The narrator's imagination has obviously run away with him here, for a cauldron nearly fifty feet in diameter is most unlikely!

The hoca climbed to the roof in the same way the Kara Mehmet had the night before and dropped into the boiling water and died. Kara Mehmet waited and waited for the hoca to call for the rope to be pulled, and after a long wait, he decided to go up himself and see what had happened to the hoca. He climbed up, and when he got to the hole in the roof, he looked down and saw the burning fire with the huge kettle containing the hoca. He jumped down to the side of the room and went to examine the hoca. When he saw that he was dead, Kara Mehmet realized that he himself would be caught if the hoca was recognized. *corpse -- of hoca -- decepit + atel* Therefore, he cut off the hoca's head, stuck it in a sack, climbed out of the treasury through the roof, and went home. He put the sack beside his bed and went to sleep.

In the morning the guards unlocked the treasury and discovered the hoca's dead body floating in the kettle. Since his head had been cut off, they could not recognize who the thief was. They went and reported to the padişah. He had the wise man called again and he asked him, "How can we identify the dead man?"

The wise man advised him, "Have the body laid out on the village square and proclaim him to be a saint. Have many guards stand by with orders to observe closely the people who passed by to look at the corpse. Whoever sheds tears at the sight of the corpse will certainly be the one able to provide a clue to his identity. The padişah did as he had been advised. He had the headless corpse laid out on the village square, and he placed ten guards to stand by. In the morning when Kara Mehmet awoke he heard a commotion from the village square and went out

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to take a look. When he saw the hoca's body laid out, he returned to the house to work out a plan of action. He then went out again to hire an ass and loaded both its baskets with sacks of watermelons. He walked towards the village square with the donkey and its load. When he got to the square, he was stopped and asked what he had in the tightly knotted sacks. He told them he had watermelons which he was taking to the market place to sell. When the guards asked to see the watermelons, he told them that the knots on the sacks were too tight for him to undo, but that they were welcome to open them themselves. While the guards were busily working on the knots, he grabbed an empty sack, placed the corpse in it, and fled. The guards finally got the sacks opened and started to feast on the watermelons. When they were done, they went back to their posts to stand guard, but they saw that the corpse had disappeared. They looked all about, but it was nowhere to be found. They agreed to say that there had been a commotion in the street and that when they had gone to see what was happening, the sainted corpse had ascended to heaven. The padişah was very angry when he heard the guards' story, and he called the wise man for advice again.

The wise man said, "The corpse could not fly anywhere. It probably had been stolen, and the guards have made up the story to protect themselves. My advice is to set another trap for the thief. One way to draw him out would be to dress a camel in fineries and take it out to the village market to be auctioned off to the highest

bidder."

So the padişah had his men deck out, in jewels and other ornaments, the finest camel they could find and had a horseman tie a rope to the camel and lead it to the market place to be auctioned off. When Kara Mehmet saw what was happening in the market place, he found an old ~~woman~~ --old woman standing by and paid her three gold pieces to bid for the camel gold piece-- and keep the auctioneer occupied while he stole the camel. The old three woman made her bid a bit higher each time any other bid was placed, while Kara Mehmet cut the bridle of the camel from the horseman and placed an ass behind him, tying its bridle to the horse. When the auctioneer realized he no longer had the camel tied behind him but instead had only a miserable donkey, he ran to the padişah in dismay to tell him what had happened. The padişah had the wise man called to his presence again and told him what had happened to the camel.

The wise man acknowledged Kara Mehmet's ability: "Whoever that thief is, he is indeed an expert, inasmuch as he has succeeded in getting away so many times. Your majesty, there is one sure way to stop future thefts by this man, and that is to proclaim that the person who had stolen the corpse, stolen the camel, and stolen the money from the treasury will be rewarded with 1000 gold pieces if ^{1,000} he will step out and claim these deeds. There will be no punishment." The padişah agreed to put an end to such expert thievery at any cost and he immediately had such a proclamation read in the village square.

Kara Mehmet heard the proclamation and promptly presented

himself at the palace, claiming to be the clever thief. The padişah merely laughed at him and said, "You will have to eat many more loaves of bread before you can perform any of these deeds, let alone all of them."

ring -- signet

The padişah had been wearing a signet ring, and just as Kara Mehmet was leaving, he realized that he no longer had his ring. He quickly bade his man call Kara Mehmet back. When they brought him to his presence, Kara Mehmet took the signet ring out of his pocket and returned it to the padişah. He explained to the padişah, "I had to do this to prove to you that I was the expert thief." The padişah rejoiced at having discovered the clever thief, and, true to his words, gave him 1000 gold pieces in reward for his cleverness. But he also issued an order, saying, "Kara Mehmet, you must never again rob in the kingdom."

Kara Mehmet happily took his reward and said he would abide by the padişah's edict. He took the reward money and returned to his native village.