

Narrator: Abdurrahman Kayalı (shepherd, of
a Yürük tribe that had been
nomadic until 50 years ago)
Location: Near Ereğli--in fields
Date: February 1962

Ali Merdan Bey, Killer of Forty Souls

also
Horse

Once there was a woman whose husband had died. She lived in a small village with her son. In order to make a living the son and the mother used to herd all the cattle of the village. Each morning the mother used to gather the cattle to take them to the hills, and the son used to collect bread from whatever home was supposed to provide them that day with their food.¹ The son, however, was rather lazy, and while his mother attended all day long to the cattle in the country he would often come back to the village and enjoy himself there. One day the mother told the villagers not to give her son any bread because he did not work for it but wasted his time. Thereafter, the villagers gave food only to the mother. The neighbors followed her request about this. As a result, the boy would starve unless he had found some other way of living. He decided to leave the village after borrowing a little money from the few friends that he had.

He started out along the road and he bought several loaves of bread and some helva with some of the money that he had borrowed. After eating some of the bread and some of the helva, he fell asleep. While he was sleeping there settled on his mouth, where there was still some helva, a number of flies. In his sleep, he struck at them and accidentally killed a number of

¹In Turkish villages herds made up of five to fifty sheep may be from several different families. They are all tended by one shepherd, and this man (or woman) is paid in kind from the crops of the sheep owners. Each day one family in the village is responsible for providing the food for the shepherd.

them. In truth, he was actually very afraid of flies, but he killed forty of them while he was asleep. When he woke up he said to himself, "If I were that courageous, why didn't I make use of my valor until now?" He went directly to the blacksmith and with the money that he had left he ordered him to make a sword and he had the following words inscribed on the blade: "Ali Merdan Bey, killer of forty souls in one blow." He then returned to his former place of rest, stuck the sword in the ground, lay down again, and fell asleep again once more.

There were (seven brothers) in the neighborhood who had a sister for whom they used to fight three times a week. They were riding across the countryside when they came upon the young man asleep with his sword stuck in the ground along side of him. The sword was glittering in the sun, so they noticed it at once. They dismounted from their horses, came to where he lay, and looked at the sword. The oldest brother read aloud the words inscribed on the blade: "Ali Merdan Bey, killer of forty souls." They shouted several times to wake him up. Ali Merdan Bey got up suddenly, very much afraid, and stood at attention. The eldest brother said to him, "What are you doing here?"

"I am resting," said Ali Merdan Bey. He looked at the horses and he looked at the fully-armed seven brothers, and he was now more frightened than ever. They invited him to mount one of the extra horses that they had with them and ride with them.

"I would not condescend to ride on one of your horses," he said. But the real reason for his refusal to ride was that he really was very much afraid of horses, and of all other animals too. The seven brothers decided among themselves to give Ali Merdan Bey their sister in wedlock, for they believed that a man as fierce as he was could save them from the continual

annoyance of fighting off the kings who were forever seeking her hand.

The eldest brother said to Ali Merdan Bey, "We have a sister, and because of her we are engaged in battle three times each week. We would like you to have our sister as your wife, provided you will protect us from the various kings who have been demanding her. Would you like this arrangement?"

"All right," said Ali Merdan Bey, "I'll marry your sister."

After accepting this proposal, Ali Merdan Bey was asked by one of his brothers-in-law to mount a horse in order to return to their farm. But Ali Merdan Bey was so afraid of horses that he could not even get near them, let alone ride on one

He said to his brother-in-law, "Thank you, but I prefer walking.

When the brothers were about a half a mile from their farm, the youngest of them rode on ahead to give the news to his sister. He said to her, "We have given you to a lion of a man today. Such a fine fellow he is!"

They had a very long wedding, and the day after the wedding was to be a battle day, one of the three days a week on which the seven brothers fought for their sister. The seven brothers put on their battle clothes and went to fight, but Ali Merdan Bey was nowhere to be seen. He didn't even leave the bridal chamber. Ali Merdan Bey kept indoors for several days, and finally his young wife asked, "Why don't you go to battle and fight alongside my brothers? My brothers gave me to you in order to save me from the surrounding kings."

Ali Merdan Bey said, "To be quite frank with you, I am not a lion of a man at all. Your brothers found me while I was taking a nap after eating some helva. Some flies had alighted on my mouth to eat the remains of the helva, and half asleep, I slapped them and killed forty of them. That is

'Forty souls' refers to--the forty flies which I killed, only accidentally

for I am terrified of flies."

The girl cursed him saying, "You damned fellow! Take off those battle clothes right away." Ali Merdan Bey took off the battle clothes and his wife put them on, mounted a horse and rode rapidly to reach her brothers who were engaged in a fierce battle for her safety. When she reached the scene of the battle she killed one enemy after another, and all the time her brothers thought that it was their brother-in-law who was fighting in this way. Finally she gave her brothers a signal to return, and they decided to obey, for they were afraid to offend such a fierce man as Ali Merdan Bey. But the youngest brother became suspicious, and he told the others that this was not really their brother-in-law but probably their sister that had helped them in the battle. The others thought that this was hardly possible, because if their sister was so courageous, she would have appeared thus long before and have helped them to defeat their enemies. They laughed at the youngest brother. But the youngest brother insisted that it was their own sister. He spurred his horse until he reached the side of his sister, and with his sword he made a small cut on her leg with it, so that he could identify her.

When the sister reached home she said to her husband, "Here, quick, put on your clothes again and get in your bed. My brothers are going to come and look at you now." Ali Merdan Bey put on the battle clothes again, got into bed, and waited. Shortly afterwards, the seven brothers arrived. all stood in a line and stared at Ali Merdan Bey. The eldest brother said, "Our youngest brother had a cut made in your leg. We want to see that now."

"What are you talking about?" asked Ali Merdan Bey. "I received sword wounds today in my body in which a seven-year-old fish could hide. What could such a small cut as he gave do to me? Your sister has cured me of my wounds since I reached home. There is no sign of any of my wounds now."

Come and see for yourself."

When they heard this and they saw that he was quite well, the seven brothers walked out of the room and discussed the situation among themselves. "How could that have been our sister? Did you hear him? He has received sword wounds in his body in which a seven-year-old fish could hide. Let us thank God that he saved us from our enemies." In this manner Ali Merdan Bey continued to deceive his seven brothers-in-law.

In that same part of the world there were two rulers, a king and a Sultan.² The wives of both of these rulers were pregnant at the time. The two rulers agreed between themselves to marry their children that were about to be born if it should turn out that one was a boy and the other a girl. When the children were delivered, they discovered that the Sultan had a daughter and the king had had a son. The king said to the Sultan, "We shall have the children marry when they reach the age of twenty."

Let us now leave these children to grow up, and let us take a look at the kingdom³ of the Sultan. The territory of the Sultan was being harrassed by a monster who ate three men a week. The Sultan had by this time heard of the fame of Ali Merdan Bey. He decided to write a letter to Ali Merdan Bey and invited him to come and fight this monster. ~~The Sultan had by this time heard of the fame of Ali Merdan Bey. He decided to write a letter to Ali Merdan Bey and invited him to come and fight this monster.~~ The Sultan had

²The narrator referred to these two as a king padişah and an emperor padişah. The word padişah to the peasant means any important ruler: mayor, governor, king, emperor, sultan. We interpret them here simply as king and sultan.

³The narrator actually said, ". . . and let us take a look at the vilayet of the emperor padishah." --A vilayet is a province, administered by an appointed governor.

sent many companies, many regiments, and many battalions against the monster, but he had been unable to destroy it. The only hope that he had left was Ali Merdan Bey.

The Sultan sent the following letter to Ali Merdan Bey: "There is a fierce monster who has been taking lives and destroying property in my realm. I have to feed him three men a week in order to keep peace with him. If I do not do this the monster would dry our roots.⁴ I have sent all of my forces against but I have been unable to kill this creature. Please come and save us from this terrible evil with which we have been cursed. You're the only man I trust for this difficult task."

Ali Merdan Bey consulted with his wife as to what he should do. He said to "I am so timid that I cannot even look at a monster, let alone kill one. shall I do?"

His wife said, "Well, I did not put you to shame in the presence of my brothers, but now it is up to you to find a way to solve this problem. I cannot help you in this matter at all."

Ali Merdan Bey decided to go and try his luck and hope for the best, but before he left, his wife told his brothers that Ali Merdan Bey was going to the palace of the Sultan in order to kill a monster for him. The brothers, thereupon, caught a horse from among their herd and they asked Ali Merdan Bey to mount this horse to ride to the palace of the Sultan. The eldest brother said to him, "It would be shameful for you to go to the palace of the Sultan on foot."

Ali Merdan Bey said, "But no one would dare go into the presence of the Sultan on horseback, would he?"

⁴To dry one's roots means to destroy one. On the semi-arid Anatolian plateau there are many references in proverbs and folk speech to the importance of water.

Upon this, they let the horse go. Ali Merdan Bey took some bread with him because God knows how long he would take to reach the palace of the Sultan--perhaps a whole month. He fastened his famous big sword to his belt, like the leg of an ox. Then he set out

When the Sultan looked from his window, he saw someone coming in the distance. He wondered who it could be, for, because of fear of the monster, no one walked freely in that country during the day. The Sultan called his vezir, and asked him for a pair of binoculars. He said to his vezir, "Could that possibly be Ali Merdan Bey?"

The vezir said, "I hardly think so. This man is coming on foot. Ali Merdan Bey would be on horseback."

"Perhaps that hero is coming to our palace on foot," said the Sultan, "and perhaps he is doing this purposely so that he can earn greater respect from us. Let us send for a horseman and let him find out who it is. If it is Ali Merdan Bey, let two horsemen accompany him while the other two return here and bring back the good news of his arrival."

When the horsemen approached him, Ali Merdan Bey began to tremble for fear of them. "Who are you?" they asked him.

"I am Ali Merdan Bey," he answered

The two horsemen went immediately back to the palace and told the Sultan that the stranger was Ali Merdan Bey. Upon this the Sultan ordered that silk carpets be unrolled all the way from the palace to the place where Ali Merdan Bey was standing. The Sultan rode in a chair carried by ten men along this carpet. When the Sultan's chair reached Ali Merdan Bey, the two embraced, and Ali Merdan Bey was helped into the chair. When he sat down, the Sultan said to him, "I have been waiting for you for so long. You are the only hope that I have left. I am sure that you are the only man who can save us

from this terrible monster."

Ali Merdan Bey said, "Don't worry any more, your majesty. It is a simple matter. Wait until tomorrow. I shall just catch hold of that monster by the ear and finish him off with a few blows of my sword.

Ali Merdan Bey was taken to the highest part of the palace without ever having his feet touch the floor, the people in that country respected him so much. Ali Merdan Bey rested for two days in the palace during which time they fed him with everything imaginable, including bird's milk.⁵ On the third day the Sultan said to Ali Merdan Bey, "Come let me introduce you to the people of my realm.

The Sultan took him to the town square where he had had assembled all the people of his realm. He addressed the crowd in this way: "O, my people, here is Ali Merdan Bey, a great hero. He is going to save us from the monster.

The people all applauded him enthusiastically, but Ali Merdan Bey said to the Sultan, "Your majesty, I do not feel very well. I should like to go back and lie down for a while. You must not worry about the monster. I shall take care of it easily in the morning."

When Ali Merdan Bey got back to the palace, he took the Sultan's binoculars, went up to his room, and surveyed all of the land around the palace. He looked to the East and saw that there was nothing there but only vast plain--so wide that it would take twenty days to walk across it. He looked to the West, and saw there a similar open plain. There were plains in both of those directions, with nothing around those plains to shelter him. He looked to the North, and there he saw that there was a good bit of

⁵To want birds' milk in Turkey is equivalent to wanting an egg in one's beer in the United States. Motif B735--Bird gives milk.

low brush, and so he decided that he would make his escape in that direction, hoping to hide in the brush.

About midnight he walked out of his room and he found two sentries with bayonets standing outside of his door. "What are you waiting for here?" he asked.

"We are your body guards, Efendi. The Sultan has placed us here to protect you," they said

"I don't need you," said Ali Merdan Bey; "go back to your places

When his two guards heard this, they said to him, "God bless you! We have been here all the time that you have been at the palace, and we have been without adequate food or drink!"

Ali Merdan Bey noticed, however, that there were two more guards waiting at the next door too. Realizing that it would be impossible for him to get out of the palace easily in a normal way, he decided to return to his room and jump down from his window. He said to himself, "If I get killed in that way, they will at least give me a good Moslem burial, thinking I fell from the window in my room." He struck the glass from the window with one blow, and he threw himself out of the window. He landed along the bottom of the palace wall, after falling for five minutes, but he landed on a place that happened to be a manure pile. Because the manure was soft and springy he bounced up and down several times, fainting the third time that he bounced. When he woke up two hours later, he found himself on the manure pile, and he examined himself to see if he had been seriously injured in any way. When he was satisfied that he was not hurt, he began to run toward the North, having nothing on his body except a vest and a pair of underpants.

When he reached the brush area he was frightened by the shaking of the trees, for a storm was beginning to blow. He climbed to the top of a pine

tree for fear that if he spent the night down below, the monster would perhaps eat him. He was worried when the tree trembled from the wind, but he was absolutely terrified when the tree suddenly shook as if a gale had hit it.

He thought perhaps an earthquake was taking place. The tree was shaking so violently that Ali Merdan Bey finally fell from it and landed on the neck of the monster who was butting the tree and making it shake in that way. He fell astraddle of the neck of the monster, and so he caught the monster by one of his ears. The monster was completely baffled by this and didn't know what to do. He rolled over several times on the ground, but there was no way of getting rid of this strange thing that was astraddle his neck. But as far as Ali Merdan Bey was concerned, he was rigid with fear. The monster was thrashing about trying to think in what direction he should go, and he became so confused that he began running towards the palace instead of running away from it.

At dawn the Sultan discovered that Ali Merdan Bey had gone and the window in his room was broken. He had all of his palace guards search the area but they were able to find no sign of Ali Merdan Bey. Then the Sultan took his binoculars and looked through them. He was amazed to see Ali Merdan Bey, half naked in his underpants, riding on the back of the monster towards the palace and holding the monster by one of its ears. The Sultan ordered a regiment of soldiers to go and meet them. He also ordered that a rope be stretched across the plain to stop the monster. The monster ran into the rope and became so entangled in it that the soldiers were able to kill it. All this time the Sultan watched from the palace window with his binoculars, and he was so excited at all of this that he almost collapsed.

Ali Merdan Bey was so terrified with what had happened that he lost all consciousness; in fact, he looked as if he were dead. When they observed him closely, however, they saw that there was a vein just under his ear that still pulsated a little. The monster's head was cut off, for Ali Merdan Bey was still holding it by the ear, and his legs were still astride the monster's neck. Three people pulled on his right leg to get it away from the monster, and three people pulled on his left leg in order to get it away from the creature. Finally they removed him from the monster. But he held the ear so tightly that they could not release it from his grasp. They had to cut the monster's ear off at the base, and then they took Ali Merdan Bey to a bath where they washed him until that evening. They then brought him back to his bed in the palace.

When he opened his eyes he saw sitting on one side of him the Sultan, and on the other side the vezir. When he saw them, he was very much frightened, because he remembered that he had escaped from the palace, and he feared that he might be punished for this. He didn't know that he had brought back the monster and had caused it to be killed. He listened quietly to the Sultan and the vezir talking, and then he discovered what he had achieved. The Sultan asked his people, "What shall we give this great hero?"

"Your daughter, your daughter; give him your daughter. He deserves her!"

The Sultan agreed to give his daughter to Ali Merdan Bey, and after the wedding Ali Merdan Bey stayed two more months in the palace. Then Ali Merdan Bey explained to the Sultan that he was also married to the sister of the seven brothers, and that he had to return to his first bride.

"All right," said the Sultan, "you may go, but whenever I need you, you will come to my aid, won't you?"

"Of course I will," said Ali Merdan Bey. "Just send me a letter when you need me

The Sultan said, "As long as I have a son-in-law like you, I will not be afraid of anything in the whole world." He ordered that a regiment of horsemen go as a guard of honor with Ali Merdan Bey to escort him to his own country

One day the seven brothers saw a huge force approaching in the distance. They sent a horseman to find out the purpose of this large group. The horseman returned to tell them that the Sultan was sending an escort with Ali Merdan Bey in appreciation for his having killed the monster. The brothers

the good news to the sister. Ali Merdan Bey and his second wife came in a covered chair carried by ten men. After staying a few days, during which there was much eating and drinking, the Sultan's horsemen and the chair carriers returned to the palace

Now let us see, what the king, the ruler in the other part of the world, is doing. He wrote a letter to the Sultan reminding him of their agreement. "As our children are now past twenty years of age, I propose that we begin their wedding preparations."

In reply to this letter, the Sultan wrote, "I do not know what it is that you are talking about. It has been a long while since my daughter has been married. You can do with your son as you like."

The king threatened war against the Sultan. He sent an ultimatum to the Sultan to the effect that he would fight with his forces a month from that date. In his reply to the ultimatum, the Sultan said, "You can send as many men against me as you like, but I shall send one man against them all. He then wrote a letter to Ali Merdan Bey asking him to come and help him in

the battle which he was going to have to fight against the forces of the king

Ali Merdan Bey came to the Sultan's palace. When he was asked to choose a horse from the stable he didn't choose one because he was frightened by all animals. He said, by way of an excuse, "There isn't any horse here that I can ride." The grooms asked, "Why? We have the finest horses in the whole world."

Ali Merdan Bey answered, "No, I could not use any of these. They are really not battle horses." Just before he left the stable, however, he pointed to a very lean and weak horse, and he said, "That is the horse that I need."

"But it is so weak," said the grooms, "that it cannot even stand up on its feet."

"But you must get him up on his feet," said Ali Merdan Bey, "and I shall ride on him."

When they helped the horse to its feet it quivered with excitement, for it was really a very fine horse indeed, but old. Ali Merdan Bey got on the horse and he lay flat on it and had himself bound to the horse with a rope fifty meters long. Then he asked the attendants to let the horse go.

As it was an old battle horse, this creature knew just how to behave in battle. The Sultan himself was not at all surprised when he saw Ali Merdan Bey had chosen that particular horse, because he knew that that horse was one of the greatest fighters in his stable, and was the father of all the other horses there. The horse reached the battlefield and started fighting with every horseman there. It bit any one who approached him from the front, and it kicked anyone that approached him from behind, but all this time Ali Merdan Bey lay unconscious on its back, not even aware of what was happening.

In the confusion of the battle, about four or five meters of the rope binding Ali Merdan Bey unwound and trailed along the ground. The rope caught in the trunk of a fallen pine tree with many branches. The tree was dragged along behind the horse knocking many enemy horsemen from their mounts. The enemy was routed so badly by this odd weapon that it wasn't long before they raised the flag of truce, but the horse did not know the meaning of the flag of truce, and it continued to kick and bite until the whole enemy army was destroyed. Only those who fled escaped with their lives. Finally, the horse returned to the Sultan's palace with Ali Merdan Bey still bound to its back. The grooms unbound him, and he climbed down, and he said, "I have not only defeated your enemy, but I have also brought you enough firewood for six years

Then one of the vezirs began to cry. The Sultan asked him, "Why are you crying? Was the king or one of his soldiers a relative of yours?"

"No," said the vezir, "I am crying because I would like to have Ali Merdan Bey marry my daughter, but that seems impossible now.

The Sultan said, "Well, let us ask him. If he wants to marry your daughter, too, let him then have another wife."

They asked Ali Merdan Bey whether he would like to marry the daughter of the vezir. "Yes, why not? For a hero like me, even three wives could not be too many."

He married the vezir's daughter too, and they ate and drank, and he lived happily with his three wives ever afterwards.