

Story 2065 (Transcribed from his field tape by Ahmet Ali Arslan and used later in his unpublished dissertation.)

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Mehmet the Master Thief\*

Time within time,<sup>1</sup> when the sieve was in the straw,<sup>2</sup>

\* The entire first paragraph is not part of the narrative but is a formulaic opening for many Turkish folktales, a device known as a tekerleme. A full tekerleme may run to many lines, though most narrators nowadays use only one or two parts of a tekerleme. The tekerleme is a nonsense jingle, rimed, that is filled with paradoxes and comic incongruities. It is used 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 too difficult to reproduce in English the rime scheme.

<sup>1</sup>"Time within time" refers to the chronology of events in an interior world. A person may dream or fantasize at great length during only a few seconds of ordinary time. One may even seem to spend many years in that other world within; one may take a job, marry, have children, and see them grow to maturity. In Turkish this is called Zaman Zaman İçinde. It is elsewhere sometimes referred to as "Frozen Time" or "Moments of Eternity."

<sup>2</sup>The humor here derives from the fact that the sieve is never in the straw; the straw is in the sieve. It refers to the traditional threshing of grain on farms too small or too remote to have available modern threshing machinery. On a dried-clay threshing floor stalks of grain are thrown. They are chopped up into small pieces by a döven, a heavy wooden rectangle from the bottom of which protrude scores of sharp pieces of flint. When the chopped-up mass is winnowed, the chaff blows downwind, but there fall directly

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when jinns,<sup>3</sup> played cirit<sup>4</sup> in the old public bath, when the camel was a town crier and the flea was a barber, when I was rocking my father's cradle, tingir mingir,<sup>5</sup> a to the floor kernels of grain and small bits of the stem to which grain is still attached. Both the kernels and the small grain-laden bits of straw are then thrown into a large-mesh sieve (about 30 inches in diameter). The kernels fall through onto a sheet of canvas, but the grain-laden straw remains in the sieve. The final threshing of these bits of straw is done by the fingers of the threshers.

<sup>3</sup>The word jinn suggests two very different kinds of supernatural creatures. The first is the huge otherworldly being who comes forth from a jar or vase or who responds to some signal, such as the rubbing of a magic lamp or ring. This creature then proceeds to give the caller supernatural or magic aid to achieve what he wishes. The other kind of jinn is never seen. It is a spiritual force referred to in some Sufi beliefs and in other mystical systems.

<sup>4</sup>Cirit (pronounced jirit in English) is an ancient Turkish game similar to European jousting at tournaments. The difference, however, is this: Tournaments feature contests between two participants; cirit is often a "battle royal," a free-for-all struggle in which each of several participants fights against all other participants. Once a deadly game, cirit in modern times is played not with real javelins but with blunted sticks.

<sup>5</sup>Onomatopoeia for the sound of a rocking cradle. Turkish tales frequently employ onomatopoeic devices--perhaps more often than do folktales of other cultures.

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coffee cup fell from a shelf and broke. My mother grabbed a big spoon and my father grabbed a stick and set out after me. They chased me little, they chased me they chased me for six months and a summer, but when I looked back, I discovered that I had not traveled a distance as long as a grain of barley.<sup>6</sup> When I finally escaped them, I sat down upon the ground to take a rest. When a group of people came along and asked me where I was coming from, I answered, "Such and such a place."

Well, back in those days there were two padishahs who were hostile to each other. They kept making impossible demands upon each other. One day the foreign padishah sent a bag of wheat to the Turkish padishah. With it was a note which said, "The grains of wheat in this bag are as numerous as my soldiers."

The Turkish padishah sent back a rooster with a note attached to it. The note said, "My rooster eat all of your wheat, and if you send your soldiers here, I shall have a large creature devour them too."

<sup>6</sup>This sentence is a common formulaic description in Turkish tales for a long, uneventful, and probably tedious journey.

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The two rulers kept sending each other aggressive messages of this kind.

Shortly after the bag of wheat had arrived, the Turkish padishah discovered that apart from such trouble, he had another problem entirely within his own country. He was informed one day that the royal treasury had been robbed of a certain amount of gold. The thief had left no evidence of any kind that could be used to trace him and possibly catch him. Guards examined the doors of the palace, the windows, and the chimneys, but all of these were intact and secured. The padishah said to the guards, "I am not interested in how this robbery was carried out. All that I want you to do is to discover the thief and bring his name to me." The guards renewed their search, but they could neither identify the thief nor determine how he had been able to enter the treasury.

The thief was a man named Mehmet. This Mehmet was such an accomplished thief that he could not sleep at night if he had not committed a robbery of some kind earlier that day. His wife warned him against making any further robberies of gold from the royal treasury. She said, "My man, you have already gone to the royal



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treasury several times. By now the padishah's wise men have probably devised a method for catching you. When you are captured, you will be executed. Give up any idea you may have of going there again. Spend your time doing something else."

"No, my woman, I shall continue taking gold from the treasury, even at the risk of my life

His wife said, "Whatever you wish to do, you will try to do it. But I am warning you to stay away from the royal treasury."

That day he mingled with people walking past the palace and admiring its great size and beauty. When Mehmet glanced through the window of the treasury room, he saw that just inside the window was a barrel of tar. The padishah himself had ordered that barrel placed there, supposing that any intruder would get enough tar on his shoes to be traceable. Having observed the barrel of tar, Mehmet made different plans for his robbery of the treasury that night. He went to his cousin and said, "Come and work with me tonight, and I shall give you a bag of gold for your effort. We shall go and rob the royal treasury."

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"No," said his cousin. "Why should we try to do such a thing? There are many soldiers stationed all around the palace, and they would catch us."

"Don't worry about that. The soldiers are not very clever, and we shall stay out of their sight. Come along with me. But whether or not you come with me, I shall give you a bag of gold."

The cousin finally agreed to accompany Mehmet, and the two of them cautiously crept up to the treasury shortly after midnight. Mehmet quietly removed the window and then said to his cousin, "Enter this opening and stand in the barrel just inside the window. I can then get past the barrel by stepping on your shoulders. I shall help you get out of the barrel later." As soon as the cousin lowered himself into the barrel, he was standing in tar up to his waist. By the time that Mehmet returned to the window with a large bag of gold, the cousin had sunk into the tar up to his shoulders. Mehmet cut off his head and took it with him after replacing the window.

When morning arrived, one of the guards went to the ruler and said, "Good news, my padishah! We have trapped in the tar barrel the person who has been stealing your gold

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The padishah ordered, "Let us open up the barrel and see who is inside it." They rolled the barrel outside and emptied it. They then melted the tar off the captured thief, but to their surprise, that man had no head. The guards planned to continue their search for any living person who had been involved in robbing the royal treasury, but the ruler himself took a different approach to the matter. He said, "The real thief must be an ingenious man, and I should like to meet him. I swear by the seal of Sultan Süleyman<sup>7</sup> that I shall not harm that man in any way if he will come to me and identify himself."<sup>8</sup>

That evening Mehmet said to his wife, "I have decided to go to the padishah and identify myself as the thief who robbed his treasury."

"You must be crazy," his wife said. "If you do that,

<sup>7</sup>Peasant narrators often confuse Biblical Solomon (Süleyman in Turkish) with Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (ruled 1520-1566) or some other sultan named Süleyman, though the two figures being confused were historically 2,000 years apart. The Hebrew Solomon's seal (in a signet ring) was a sacred magic object given to Solomon by the Deity. It is mentioned prominently in a number of folktales about the son of David.

<sup>8</sup>In ATON variants of this tale the master thief outwits the palace guards in two or three other ways before identifying himself.

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they will surely kill you."

"If they eventually caught me, they probably would kill me, but if I go to them willingly, they probably will not."

"Well, go then," said his wife. "I know very well that I cannot change your mind about such matters

Mehmet did indeed go to the palace, but the guards stopped him, saying, "Where are you going, stupid? Who do you think you are?"

"My name is Mehmet, and I am the thief who stole the gold from the padishah's treasury."

They immediately grasped him and took him into the presence of the padishah. "What is it, my son?" asked the ruler.

"May you live very long, my padishah. I am the one who stole the gold from your treasury."

"Is that true?" asked the padishah. "Are you really that person?"

"Yes, your majesty."

"Son, if you were really the one who accomplished that robbery, then you will be able to explain it to me. How did you do it?" After Mehmet had given him a complete



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description of his method of eluding all guards and stealing the gold, the padishah understood how very clever this man was. He said, "Mehmet, from now on, you will be of very great use to me. Some time ago a certain foreign padishah sent me a bag of wheat as a threat. He wrote a message saying, 'My soldiers are as numerous as the kernels of wheat in this bag.' I answered him 'We have roosters who can devour that wheat.' Son, if you are ingenious enough to cope with that foreign ruler then I shall know for certain that you were the robber who took the gold from my treasury. Can you go to him at such and such a place and steal a gold coin from his treasury? Can you go to him at such and such a place and steal a gold coin from him?"

"Your majesty, nothing would be easier for me than that. Let me go home for a few minutes to tell my wife where I shall be going." Mehmet returned home and told his wife everything that had happened at the palace. His wife tried to persuade him not to go on his new mission, he had already decided to carry it out. Returning to the palace, he said, "Your majesty, I shall need three things for my visit to the foreign padishah: a mule, a coffin,

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and a fur coat with tiny bells sewed everywhere on it."

As soon as these items had been provided, Mehmet set forth on his journey.

After traveling for many days, Mehmet arrived in the city where the foreign ruler lived. There he rented a house from an old woman. She was very pleased with the handful of gold that he gave her. During the first night that Mehmet was in that city, he went to the royal palace. Using his special skills, he found a way to enter the palace and then locate the padishah's room. Mehmet entered that room and put out all of the candles. Then, putting on his special fur coat, he danced up and down, causing all the little bells to jingle. The noise awakened the padishah, who was very frightened. He prayed for help, but no help was given to him. He then called out, "Who are you?"

Mehmet replied, "I am Azrail,<sup>9</sup> and I shall return in the morning to take your life. In the meantime, go to

<sup>9</sup>Azrail is the Hebrew and Muslim Angel of Death. At the end of a person's life span, Azrail is sent by the Deity to take the soul of that person. Many Turkish folktales include Azrail, and in several ATON tales he wears a coat with many bells. There are tales in which especially clever mortals find some means of delaying Azrail's soul-taking for days, months, or even years.

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your wife and children and request them to make helal<sup>10</sup> all of your obligations to them. Now close your eyes keep your head beneath your blankets." Mehmet then departed through a window

The next morning the padishah said, "I hope that the experience that I had last night was just a dream. I saw Azrail last night, and he said to me, 'Tomorrow morning I shall come and take your life '"

His wife answered, "My man, nothing like that can really happen. It must have been just a dream

"I hope so, my wife, but I am afraid that it was more than just an ordinary dream."

That night after the padishah had gone to bed, Mehmet again appeared to him as Azrail and asked, "Did you do what I told you to do?"

<sup>10</sup>Helal/Haram--Muslim religious concept. That which is helal is that which is permissible according to canonical law. That which is haram is forbidden. There is no obligation or restriction or penalty for doing or taking whatever is helal, but there will be a penalty on Judgment Day for doing or taking what is forbidden. To accept something from a donor is helal; to take it or steal it is haram. To do anything morally or religiously improper is haram. Dying or endangered people often declare helal anything they have given to or done for another person, so that No. 2 will not go to Judgment indebted to another (which is haram unless declared helal by the benefactor).

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"No, but I promise to do so tomorrow morning

"You do that," said Mehmet, "and direct your family not to open the door of this room for forty days after your death."

In the morning the padishah asked members of his family to make helal all his obligations to them. After writing his will and giving it to his family, he returned to his room, where Azrail was waiting for him. "Did you do as I ordered?" asked Azrail.

"Yes, I did," answered the padishah.

✓ Mehmet then blindfolded the padishah and tied him tightly hand and foot. He then carried him out of the palace and placed him in the coffin he had brought. After he had loaded the coffin onto the back of the mule, Mehmet said to the padishah, "I did not drown you or kill you in some rough way, for you are a padishah. I shall instead take you away in this fashion. If you need anything, knock on the wall of the coffin, and I shall bring it to you."

"All right," answered the foreign padishah. Then one day after they had traveled quite a distance, he asked, "O Azrail, let me be a sacrifice for you. Where are



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you taking me? I could see stars when you opened the lid of this box."

Mehmet answered, "I know that you come from a good family, and so instead of taking you to some corner of hell, I am taking you to heaven."

When Mehmet reached his home city, he took the foreign padishah to his own home and locked him in a dark room. Mehmet said to him, "You will suffer here for a while." Mehmet then went to his own padishah and reported, "Your majesty, I have brought the foreign padishah to you."

"What did you do?" asked his ruler. "Did you bring me any gold from the foreign padishah?"

"I brought you much more than that. I brought you the foreign padishah himself. He will be here for forty days, and then I shall take him back. Please act as if it is perfectly normal for him to be here. I want him to be your servant for forty days and to think that he has come to heaven from the other world just to work for you."

The ruler was quite amazed, but he said, "Very well."

Mehmet returned to his own home, placed the foreign padishah in the coffin, and loaded the coffin on the mule again. "Where am I?" asked the foreign padishah

"You are in part of heaven. It is ruled by the former

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padishah of Turkey, who died forty days before you did. He is here, along with many of his soldiers. When we reach his palace, I shall take you out of this coffin. You should go to him at once and kiss his hands and feet so that he may feel compassion for you. He may wish to keep you with him, since you too were once a padishah."

Mehmet opened the coffin in the presence of the Turkish padishah and his vizier. The captive said to the Turkish ruler, "May you live happily here, my padishah. Please don't torture me or send me to hell, but allow me to enjoy life here briefly."

"All right," said the Turkish padishah, "but do not act as if you are dead."

"Oh, but I am really dead, for Azrail came and took my soul."

The foreign padishah was given several outfits of clothing, and he was provided with a very comfortable room in the palace. Every day the Turkish ruler spent some time talking with him.

Speaking to Mehmet one day about their foreign guest, the Turkish ruler said, "I realize that all of this was your work. You are so clever that you can steal

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not only gold from a royal treasury but even the padishah of a powerful land. Why don't you become my vizier and my adviser? In that way you might even come to wear my crown after I am gone."

"No, my padishah, I do not wish to do any of those things."

"You may ask me for anything that you want, and it will be yours."

"Your majesty, my work for you is a pleasant pastime for me, but it is not the work to which I have become accustomed. I have been a thief so much of my life that I cannot sleep unless on that day I have stolen something from your treasury or elsewhere."

"All right, my son. I used to have my treasury locked every night, but from now on I shall leave it open so that you can come and take a gold coin every day."

"My padishah, may you live long," said Mehmet, and then he left. But every night after that he returned to the palace and took a gold coin or two."

On the following day the two padishahs talked together very seriously. The guest said, "I once sent you a bag of wheat, which represented my army. You sent back

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a rooster which could eat the wheat."

"But I also sent you a greater rooster, one which could devour more than wheat. It was Robber Mehmet, whom I asked to steal a gold coin from your royal treasury. I did that to test him. We had had numerous robberies from my treasury, and we searched and searched for the person responsible for those thefts. All our efforts to identify the thief failed, but Robber Mehmet identified himself as the culprit. The thefts from the treasury had been carried out so cleverly that we remained uncertain about Mehmet's guilt even after he had confessed to it. To steal one of your gold coins he asked for a mule, a coffin, and a fur coat covered with bells. He returned later with no coin from your treasury but with the owner of that treasury! How did he manage to do that?"

The foreign padishah answered, "I was really very confused by him. He appeared to me in what seemed to be a dream. He said, 'I am Azrail, and I have come to take your life.' I could hear myself breathing, and so I knew at that time I was still alive. He then said, 'Before I kill you, I shall give you time to go to your wife and your children and ask them to make helal all your obligations to them.' Thinking that I had had just a silly



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dream, I did not immediately seek to have my obligations made helal. But when Azrail appeared the next night, I had to believe that his presence was real and not merely a dream. After I had been absolved of all debt by my wife and children, I obeyed another order he had given me. I wrote a will indicating that no one was to enter my room for forty days after my death."

The padishah of Turkey interrupted him and said "At one time you thought that you could defeat my soldiers, but do you think that you could defeat my thief?"

"No! I know now that I can defeat neither your soldiers nor your thief." He then described how he had been brought there by Mehmet

After thirty-eight days had passed, Mehmet said to his ruler, "My padishah, it is time for me to return your guest to his own palace so that on the fortieth day after his 'death' his family and friends will find him in his room." He then placed the captive in the coffin again and loaded him on the back of the mule. During the night of the thirty-ninth day they arrived back in the palace of the "dead" man. His door still stood closed. After they had entered the padishah's room, Mehmet made this sign and handed it to the "dead" man: "I went to

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the other world but now I have returned. Do not fear me, for I shall not harm you. Instead, I shall give you some gold." Mehmet then left quietly and returned to his own country.

No one had entered the padishah's room since he had "died" forty days earlier. His subjects had mourned for him all that time, and they had had several days of fasting during which they neither ate nor drank. They entered his room on the fortieth day expecting to take his coffin to the cemetery for a funeral ceremony. They were astounded, however, to see him sitting up in his bed and looking just as he had always looked. News of this flew everywhere, and many people were awed by it. Those who entered his room did not wish to get close to him, for they were filled with fear. The padishah said to them "Do not be afraid. I am not dead. I went to the other world for awhile, but now I have returned." He then held up the sign Mehmet had given him and said, "Look here! Read this, and you will understand that I am alive.

"No, you are dead!" they said. But some of those who had read the sign began to move in closer to him.

"From now on, I shall be a different kind of ruler

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I shall allow each of you to make most of your own decisions, and I shall not interfere with them. Furthermore, I shall give each citizen some of the gold from my treasury.

He assembled his people and gave each of them several gold coins. They ate and drank and lived comfortably, and may all of us do the same.

A number of apples fell from the sky. Someone kindly gave me his share.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Apples appear in one of the more popular terminal devices of Turkish tales. Their use is often more structured and equally often embodies a touch of wry humor: "Three apples fell from heaven--one for the narrator of this tale, one for the listener, and one for me."