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Keloğlan¹ from Dream to Throne

Once there was and once there wasn't,² when the
sieve was in the straw,³ when the flea was a barber and

¹The word keloğlan means bald boy. The loss of hair referred to comes not from aging but from ringworm infestation of the scalp. Ringworm is encouraged by uncleanliness, and it is more common in remote rural areas where bathing facilities are minimal. In a large family the younger children, often unattended, are prey to this disease. In folktales the keloğlan is a sympathetic figure: intelligent, courageous, and often lucky; thus despite his handicap, he is usually successful. By selective extension, the word often has an altered connotation. Keloğlan may simply refer to the youngest male child in the family, all the way from the royal household down to that of the most lowly peasant. As such, he retains all of the qualities of the bald boy except his baldness. Like everyone else, the keloğlan must have a name, but we almost never learn what it is. The word keloğlan is simply capitalized and serves as his name.

²This is the beginning of a tekerleme, a formulaic device used to introduce many a Turkish tale. It is a rhymed nonsense jingle that charms and amuses listeners, sharpens their wits, and prepares them for the fact that a tale is about to begin. Much of the nonsense is based upon absurdity and paradox. Frequently a tekerleme will be longer than this one. Occasionally it may become a tour de force that runs for a page or more.

³The humor here derives from the fact that the sieve is never in the straw; the straw is in the sieve. It refers to the threshing of grain on farms too small or

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the camel was a porter, when I was rocking my mother's cradle tingir mingir,⁴ and sending my father off to school every morning--well, back in that time there was in a certain country a keloğlan

This keloğlan used to dream every night that he was a padishah.⁵ When he told this dream to his mother, she said, "Oh, my poor son, you cannot become a padishah. You do not know even the first thing about becoming such a ruler."

Keloğlan responded, "Mother, why are you saying such a thing? Why can't I become a padishah? What is really so

too remote to have available modern threshing machines. On a dried-clay threshing floor, stalks of grain are thrown. They are chopped up into small pieces by a döven, a heavy wood 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 to the floor kernels of grain and small bits of the stem to which grain is still attached. Both the kernels and the small pieces of straw to which some kernels are still attached are then thrown into a 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.

⁴Onomatopoeia for the sound of a cradle rocking.

⁵The title of a ruler. He might be as important as an Ottoman sultan, or he might be only a local head of state. He is usually an absolute monarch, regardless of the size of his domain.

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difference between a padishah and me? He is a human being like me. But, anyway, even if I cannot actually become a padishah, I can enjoy dreaming that I have become one."

As he continued to have this dream, he told not only his mother about it but also anyone else who would listen to him. After some time had passed, the boy's dream was being talked about by so many people that even the padishah of that land heard about it. One day the padishah said to his viziers, "Bring to me at once that keloğlan who keeps talking about his dream of becoming padishah." A couple of hours later they took Keloğlan into the presence of the ruler. He said to the boy, "Keloğlan, look at me! I have heard that you are continually dreaming about becoming a padishah and that you tell people about this dream day after day."

"Yes, Your Majesty, that is true.

"But whatever you may dream and whatever you may say, don't you know how difficult it is to be a padishah? It is not as easy as it might seem to you. And, besides that, possession of the throne is usually a hereditary matter. How can you expect to come out of nowhere and become a padishah?"

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"Please forgive me for saying that I know all this already, Your Majesty. But I also know that a padişah, like me, is a human being. We were both created in the same way, and so we were once equal in that respect. Why, then, is it necessary that the throne be passed from a father only to his son?"

Because the ruler could not answer that question, he pretended to accept Keloğlan's reasoning. He said, "Very well, Keloğlan, I shall give you my throne if you can fulfill four requirements. Three requirements are questions which you must answer, and the fourth is a task which you must complete. If you can do these four things, then you can have my throne."

"All right, my padishah. There is no question in this world that cannot be answered, and there is no task that cannot be completed, if the person undertaking it first understands how much he himself can do and how much help he will need."

The padishah then said, "Let me ask you my three questions now. Here is the first. Suppose that there is a box within a box and within that interior box is a still smaller box made of strong metal. If after the

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boxes have been opened, one after another, there turns out to be nothing whatsoever inside the small metal box, what does that mean? Here is the second question. If someone should dream of a golden platform upon which are standing one goblet of sherbet⁶ and one goblet of poison what could these things possibly represent? The third question is this: If the daughter of a padishah places upon a silver tray one male doll and one female doll with a silver ring between them, what are these objects meant to suggest? After you have answered these three questions, your task is to construct a palace which is unique in its beauty and in its strength. You may have three days or three months to complete these requirements. I do not care how long it takes. Whenever they are completed, the throne will become yours."

The keloçlan said, "All right, my padishah. Nothing could be easier to accomplish than these things you have asked me to do. Let me begin by answering the questions. Your first question concerned a metal box inside a larger box which was within a still larger box. When the metal

⁶In some parts of the world, including the Middle East, sherbet is usually a fruit drink, not the icy confection that it is in the United States.

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box was opened, no jewel was found inside. The boxes within boxes must be a treasury, and the fact that it is empty must mean that there are very clever thieves in your country. In your second question you asked about the meaning of a goblet of sherbet and a goblet of poison standing upon a golden platform. The platform is your throne, and the sherbet is the sweetness provided for you. The poison is the hardship it inflicts upon your people. In your third question you asked for the meaning of your daughter's placing upon a silver tray a male doll and a female doll with a silver ring between them. It is a message to you that your daughter is of a marriageable age and yearns for love. It also means that you have failed in your fatherly duties to her. The questions can be thus quickly answered, but the marvelous palace

⁷This is an instance of the symbolic language often used in Turkish tales and to a lesser degree in Turkish life. Sometimes when three daughters come of age and wish to be married, they prompt their father to consider the matter by sending him a tray on which are three melons. The one slightly overripe represents the oldest girl, the one perfectly ripe stands for the middle daughter, and the still slightly unripe melon refers to the youngest sister. Whether in fantasy or in real life in Turkey, when a plate of candy or a bouquet of flowers is sent as a gift, the arrangement of its parts often conveys a message. See Walker and Uysal, Tales Alive in Turkey, p. 269.

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you have requested will take more time. May I now have your permission to leave so that I can begin work on that palace?"

"Yes, you are free to go

Keloğlan returned home and described to his mother everything that had happened that day. She said to him, "Oh, my keloğlan, every cock crows from its own dunghill,⁸ and the padishah's dunghill is his throne. Give up your impossible attempt to become a padishah!"

"Don't say that, Mother. There is nothing impossible in this world." Keloğlan then went to consult a wise old man who lived in that town. He asked, "How can I build a palace that is unique in beauty and unusually strong in its structure?"

"No one can do such a thing alone," the wise man said. "You must consult all of your relatives and all of your friends about this matter. You will need many helpers to build such a palace

Keloğlan followed the wise man's advice. He went to

⁸This is a well-known Turkish proverb: "Her horoz kendi çöplüğünde öter."--See Yurtbaşı, Metin A Dictionary of Turkish Proverbs (Ankara: Turkish Daily News, 1993), p. 472.

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all of the people he had earlier talked to about his dream. They agreed to help him. Some provided marble and other building supplies. With so many people at work on the building, the palace was completed in just three months.⁹

Going to the padishah, Keloğlan said to him, "I have kept my promise and built the kind of palace that you required. Now it is time for you to keep your promise to me."

The padishah was shocked by this statement. After examining the new palace, he said, "I do not understand how you managed to do this!"

Keloğlan smiled and answered, "Your Majesty, a person must first know what he himself can do. Then he must learn how others can help him. Great tasks become easy when people work together."

The padishah now realized that this keloğlan was a very clever young man--far more clever than he had supposed. He realized now that he would have to kill

⁹The building of marvelous palaces quickly, sometimes overnight, occurs frequently in folktales. Usually, however (and especially in keloğlan tales), this feat is accomplished by means of magic or with some other supernatural aid.

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Keloğlan in order to save his throne. He said, "Very well, Keloğlan, I shall give you my throne. I shall do so at a large banquet to which all of the people will be invited."

day set for the feast arrived, and a great many people went to the padishah's palace to attend that event. Everyone was served wine in golden goblets, but the padishah had a servant place before Keloğlan a goblet of poisoned wine. When the young man picked up his goblet, the wise man sitting beside him said, "Beware, Keloğlan! A throne is not something that a padishah can relinquish easily!"

Keloğlan understood the wise man's message. Waiting until he thought that no one would observe him, Keloğlan switched his goblet and the goblet of the padishah. The ruler himself, however, observed what had happened. Before the padishah could do anything about that situation, Keloğlan arose, lifted his goblet, and said loudly for everyone to hear, "Your Majesty, I propose a toast to the good people of our country!" Unable to join this toast without drinking the poison, the padishah announced angrily that the banquet was canceled.

The guests were stunned. As they sat in silent

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confusion, the wise man arose and said, "O fellow citizens, you now know who it is that should be our padishah!"

The people then deposed the padishah and gave his throne to Keloğlan. They also gave to him in marriage the daughter of the former padishah. There was then begun a wedding celebration that lasted for forty days and forty nights. After that, the young couple lived happily together and had all their wishes fulfilled.