

Once, When Fleas Were Barbers

by Dennis Payton Knight

Once upon a time, who knows when, storytellers hadn't yet discovered "Once upon a time" as a way to get a story started. Geoffrey Chaucer used it in the 1300's to introduce his *Canterbury Tales*. "Once upon a time," he wrote, "there were near about 29 pilgrims who were going to their pilgrimage. On their way going to pilgrimage, they had a stop at the Tavern."

The English versions of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, *The Gingerbread Man* and *Sleeping Beauty* all open that way. Fable tellers around the world use those words or something similar. "There once was", "Once there was", "At the beginning of time" and "A very, very long time ago" are all switches to turn little minds on to tales to engage the imagination and, almost always, to plant a moral.

The Germans use a variant, "Back in the days when it was still of help to wish for a thing," the Armenians begin, "There was, there was not," and the Estonians, "Behind seven lands and seas there lived..."

But the loquacious Turks take the *baclava*, engaging minds with some fifty words, "Once there was, and once there wasn't. In the long-distant days of yore, when haystacks winnowed sieves, when genies played jereed in the old bathhouse, when fleas were barbers, when camels were town criers, and when I softly rocked my baby grandmother to sleep in her creaking cradle, there lived ..."

And when storytellers finish rich narratives of events and things fantastic, they put minds to rest with the phrase, "they lived happy ever after." That is pretty standard around the world, but there are some variations. Icelanders capriciously conclude with "A cat in the bog put up his tail and there ends the fairytale." The Catalan say, "Here's a cat, here's a dog, this tale is finished." The Swedes have fun by ending, "Snip, snap. snute, thus the story ends."

A Georgian tale might end, "Disaster there, feast here, bran there, flour here." A wrap-up in Bengal goes, "My story ends and the spinach is eaten by the goat." The Nepali offer "a golden garland to the listener." The Spanish have a satisfying ending with the declaration, "and they lived happy and ate partridges," and the Lithuanians celebrate endings even better with "And I was there, drank some mead, dribbled through my beard, had not in my mouth."

Now we return to the Turks, who, as they do in their openings, like to close their stories with a flourish of another fifty words. "Lastly, three apples fell from the sky; one for our story's heroes, one for the person who told their tale, and one for those who listened and promised to share. And with that, they all achieved their hearts desires. Let us all now step up and settle into their thrones."

And finally, a popular Hungarian finale as a tribute to my friend Sophy: "This is the end; run away with it."