

#36

The Persistent Creditor and the Dishonest Debtor

There was a man in a village who became known as the Persistent Creditor because he had hounded his neighbor for months for the payment of one kurus<sup>1</sup> which this neighbor had borrowed from him. The neighbor was determined not to pay the one kurus, and so he was called the Dishonest Debtor. The Persistent Creditor grew more and more determined to collect the debt, and he demanded payment of the kurus.

That night the Dishonest Debtor went home and said to his wife, "That bastard will never leave me in peace. There is no getting away from him. I am going to pretend that I have died. Put me in the coffin and take me to the mosque. We may perhaps be able to get away from him in this way."

The Dishonest Debtor "died" according to plan, and his wife grieved for him. She called in the neighbors and said, "My husband has died." The neighbors came to her house and prepared for the funeral. They washed the husband's body and put him in the coffin,<sup>2</sup> and took him to the mosque. Before he was taken to the mosque, his wife said to the hoca,

a silver coin first minted in the 1620's,

<sup>1</sup>Kurus--a very small amount today, 1/100 of a lira, roughly 1/10 of an American penny. A few years ago, however, this would have amounted to more, for the kurus, was divided into 100 paras, and the para was the standard small coin. The word para is still used in Turkish, even though there are no para coins minted. The expression Kaç Para? means How much money? or How much does it cost?

<sup>2</sup>When a Moslem dies, his body is given a ritual washing with soap and water; this is usually done by the village hoca, the priest, though it may be done by anyone. The body is then wrapped in a piece of white linen, about 30 feet long and 5 feet wide, and the shroud thus formed is tied at the top and bottom, though the knots there are untied again when the body is laid in the grave. In poor villages peasants may not be able to afford coffins, and in such villages, there is a community coffin called Dört Kollu (The Four-Armed One), stored at the mosque. It is used to carry the body to the cemetery; after the body is buried, the coffin is returned to the mosque for the next funeral. The grave mound is heaped up & a trough is left at top into which water is poured.

"Before my husband died, he willed that his corpse should be kept in the mosque one night before he was buried.

"All right," said the hoca, "we shall leave him in the mosque tonight." And so they left him there after the funeral service.

Now the Persistent Creditor was suspicious about the sudden death of the Dishonest Debtor, and when he saw that his neighbor was not buried but left in the mosque, he was sure that there was some trick. He went to the mosque and hid in the mimber<sup>1</sup> and from there he quietly watched the coffin of the Dishonest Debtor to see whether he was really dead or was only pretending.

The mosque in that village was a gathering place for all the thieves in the province, and that night, around midnight, the thieves met there *Division--of* *stolen goods--* *by this* They divided into equal portions all the food that they had stolen, and then they divided the money, but there was also a very valuable sword in their booty and they could not agree on who was to receive this weapon. They quarreled for some time over the sword, and then one of the thieves suggested, "Let us give the sword to the one who can drive it through that corpse with one blow."

"All right!" said all the thieves, and they lined up to take turns stabbing the corpse.

"Wait! Wait!" shouted the Persistent Creditor from the mimber. "He still owes me one kurus!"

When the thieves heard his voice, they were frightened and then ran out of the mosque leaving behind all the food, all the money, and the sword. The Persistent Creditor came from the mimber and the Dishonest Debtor came from the coffin, and they started to divide the booty.

<sup>1</sup>The mimber is the staircase, usually rather ornate, that leads up to the pulpit in a mosque. The hoca performs some parts of the ritual from the mimber rather than from the pulpit proper.

Story #36

In the meantime, the thieves had gone about a kilometer down the road when one of them said, "Why are we running away? We are <sup>forty thieves</sup> forty and <sup>thirty</sup> they are but one man and a corpse. We can surely handle them. Let us go back and get our booty." But to make sure that the booty was still there, they sent one of their members back to the mosque to see what the situation was.

When this thief, who was to act as scout for the rest, got back to the mosque, he stuck his head in the open window and watched the Persistent Creditor and the Dishonest Debtor divide the booty. They had it divided exactly evenly, but the Persistent Creditor said, "Where is that one kurus that you owe me?" They started quarreling about the one kurus, but then the Dishonest Debtor saw the thief's head sticking through the mosque window. He walked over to the window, snatched the cap off the thief's head, and said to the Persistent Creditor, "Here, take this. It is worth a Marus. Now our accounts are settled." The Persistent Creditor was satisfied, and they started to pack up their unexpected wealth.

The thief ran back to his companions and said, "Damn that booty! There is a curse on it. Let us not go back for it. Even two people cannot divide it satisfactorily. They had to add my cap to it in order to make their shares balance!" And so the thieves left all that booty to the Persistent Creditor and the Dishonest Debtor, and these two were now wealthy. They lived happily ever after.