

Story 937 (1988 Tape 25)

Narrator: Behçet Mahir

Location: Erzurum, capital city  
of Erzurum Province

Date: May 19, 1977

Behçet Mahir as Young Poet

The story I am going to tell you concerns something that happened forty years ago. It will include a poem that I composed also more than forty years ago.

In those days there was very little electricity available in Turkey. The government at that time used to distribute kerosene to the stores for sale for lighting. One day my mother gave me a small bottle and said to me, "Son, go to such-and-such a store and buy enough kerosene to fill this bottle.

I went to the bazaar and tried to buy kerosene at the place she indicated, but they had none. Actually the officials at that time were providing only about one store in ten with kerosene. I went to five different bazaars in the city of Erzurum looking for oil. There were about 100 people lined up in front of every store that had oil or was thought to have oil. At such places it was very crowded, and everyone was pushing and shoving in order to get into a better position. The rattling noises of bottles and the banging noises of cans could be heard everywhere. Fists

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were flying in the sky, and I was quite frightened, even though I was watching the crowd from a place well behind the stores. I could not face the risk of getting mixed up in those crowds. I turned back and reached the gate of Tevrezé.<sup>1</sup> There were a number of grocery stores at Tevrezé Gate, the largest being one owned by Niyazi. We always called him Niyazi Ağa.<sup>2</sup> He came to me and said, "Mahir your fame and your name are known to all. Why don't you tell us a story now, right here in front of my store?"

I said, "Niyazi Ağa, let me first go home. I want to go home to see my mother. Later on I shall return, and I shall tell you a story then."

He said, "Do you promise that?"

"Yes," I said. Everyone in the village believed my word. They trusted me because they knew that I always did what I had said I would do. I returned home with the bottle still empty.

Then my mother welcomed me and then asked, "Where is the kerosene for which you were sent?"

"Mother, I could not get any," I said

<sup>1</sup> Apparently a section of Erzurum

<sup>2</sup> Ağa is a title given to large rural landowners, who are powerful and often rich. By extension the term is also applied to any prominent man. It is also used to flatter someone who may not be at all prominent.

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I knew that," she said. "You are quite a helpless and hopeless boy. Anyone else could have gotten some. Why couldn't you?"

I said, "Oh, my dear Mother, sit here on our front steps. (I could die for you Now I shall tell you why it was that I was unable to get any. You must listen to me Our neighbors never went to bed until I had done so first, for I never let them go to sleep. My songs and stories filled the air for long hours. They would ask, "Has Mahir gone to bed?" If my mother said that I had retired, then they would go to bed and fall asleep

The young men and the brides surrounded me to listen to me. Taking up my saz,<sup>3</sup> I began my song. I was really telling my song to my mother, but everybody else in the neighborhood began to listen, too. I was still a fairly young man then, for that was forty years ago.

To whom should I sing of my situation?

To whom should I give an account of that place?

I witnessed a struggling crowd today,

Shouting out, "Oil! Kerosene oil!"

<sup>3</sup> The saz (formerly known as bağlama) is a plucked instrument with three double strings. The melody is all played on just one string, and the other strings are used either for "drone notes" (as in a bagpipe) or for chords. It is the instrument used by virtually all Turkish minstrels and the folk poets to accompany their sung tales and lyrics.

\* \*

went with a bottle myself for oil,  
Leaving my job, forsaking my work.  
The bottle returned as dry as it went,  
Dry--without oil, kerosene oil.

\* \*

He who got oil lighted his room;  
He who did not, sat in the gloom.  
Daily the cry is "Kerosene oil!"  
Whatever may happen, the cry is for oil!

\* \*

Let us be patient for this, my Mother;  
Cow dung<sup>4</sup> has risen to ten kuruş.<sup>5</sup>  
Crowds search for oil, bottles in hand--  
Kerosene, kerosene, kerosene oil!

\* \*

"Turkey, be prosperous!" says Mahir  
Thank God that bread remains only twelve kuruş.  
Thank God that no one can buy vats of oil  
For all need a share of kerosene oil!

<sup>4</sup> Dried cow dung (tezek) is still used for fuel, especially in eastern Turkey, where wood is scarce. Its is similar to the use of "buffalo chips" by people on the Great Plains of America, where wood was also scarce.

<sup>5</sup> The kuruş was worth 1/100 of a Turkish lira. Now (1987) that the lira is worth only 1/700 of a U.S. dollar the kuruş has become meaningless.

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After I had finished this song, my mother bowed her neck<sup>6</sup> and observed, "O my son, you already have your talent. What more can I say?"

From that time onward, everyone began to talk about my poetry. Even the mayor, Maksut Bey, heard about it. One day he said to his council, "There is someone among our citizens who has sung a song about bread, dried cow dung and kerosene. Who can that

On the council was the chief of firefighters, a man named Mehmet Çavuş.<sup>7</sup> He said, "I know who that person is. He is our Behçet, Behçet Mahir."

"Go out and find him and bring him here," said the mayor. Some men came to me and took me to the mayor's office, where I sang my kerosene song again. After he had heard it, the mayor said, "I hope that you do not oppose our system for distributing oil.

"Of course not!" I said. "I simply sang about my individual problem. This country is my country; this government is my government; these people are my people. I

<sup>6</sup> In Ottoman times tilting the head to one side and exposing the neck was a gesture of submission to the Sultan --as if to say one was prepared to give his head.

<sup>7</sup> Çavuş means sergeant, and so the reference here may well be to Sergeant Mehmet. In fact, since he is chief of firefighters, he probably does have Çavuş as a title. Occasionally the word is used just simply as a name.

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to pour hot water on that millstone, but he did not explain just why I shouldn't do that. I should like to try pouring hot water on it, just to see what would happen."

The girl poured hot water on the millstone, and almost immediately the stone began to move, and soon the giant burst forth from the cave. Because the girl had no one there to help her, the giant forced her to marry him. She was helpless to do anything but accept his offer of marriage. He then threatened her, saying, "If you say a single word about our relationship, I shall kill you at once." Thus the girl was unable to tell her brother about her marriage to the giant.

While the brother was at home after having hunted all the giant hid in the cave. As soon as the brother left, the giant returned to his wife and to his former home

As the days passed, the relationship between the giant and the girl continued. After a while, however, the belly of the girl began to grow larger and larger. Her brother grew anxious about this and asked what was happening to her belly. "How should I know?" asked the girl. "What could happen here in these desolate mountains, Brother? It must be something sent by God!"

The innocent brother answered, "Well, if it is something sent by God, then there is nothing that we can do but accept