

The lime pit digger

So that I would not refuse the lime he had loaded in his cart , the lime seller had even brought a laborer to dig the lime pit. A heavy-set , Yörük¹ 50 years old, his facial lines, deep-set, his eyes looked bold and serious. His stately posture resembled an old pine tree. He did not want too much money. He was to dig a pit and slacken 1500 kg of lime.

"I'll work for a peasant 's wage, " he said.

"So how much?"

"15 liras"

"All right, " I said. The lime-seller was very pleased with our quick agreement. Smiling, he pulled the cart from the shade and dumped the lime. After taking care of odds and ends, he stepped on the axle and jumped into the cart. In an attitude of a wrestler ready for the combat, the yörük laborer readied himself for digging. He called the lime seller who started to leave:

"Hey you! Don't take your time to bring the rest of the lime! We don't wanna wait for you doin' nothin'!"

The cart driver grabbed the horse straps.

"In this clay land you'll hardly dig that pit by sundown. By the time you're half done, I'll pull in ten carts full of lime. Don't you worry, brother!" he said. He cracked the whip. "Hurrah-hee!!!"he yelled.

The yörük wrapped his yellow embroidered neckerchief around his head:

"I made mud tiles for years. I've struggled with clay all my life! You talk about a lime pit! Man! A three-man-deep hole won't last three hours in front of me!"

The cart started to leave.

Heavy-set laborer took off his shirt, folded it: " Ali, put these under the shade, son "he said. I had not been aware of the little boy with him. He was squatting under the shade of the reed shelter. He had hidden himself from our sight. Ali is a pale, frail boy. Under his long eyelashes his dark eyes look dull and powerless. Two large, wide open eyes. Ali left the shade underwhich he had hidden timidly.

" Your grandson?" I asked.

A shy, shildish smile flittered across his face. "No," he said, "Ali is our last scrap."

¹ Yörük a Turkish semi-nomadic ethnic group inhabiting the mountains of Southern Anatolia

He placed his folded shirt under Ali's arm. " Hold it tight so it won't unwrap, Ali. Watch it now or you'll lose your ice-cream money. G'on sit in the shade. How about singing me a song. C'mon c'mon, put me in a workin' mood!"

A love mixed with tenderness sparkled in his eyes. He spit on his palms and grabbed the pickax. With a " Bismillah" ²he began to dig. A powerful and satisfied " hum" left his mouth each time he stroke and a large hunk of earth broke from the sun-baked surface.

"What a blessed soil!" he said while cleaning the clay hunks. " It makes great tiles. When you knock with your finger, it sounds tin, tin. When I was young, up that way there was a clay thrasher. I used to work at Fahri Bey's thrasher. I used to make mud out of this here clay you see. He used to love me like his own son. Haydar, my son, he'd say. Sure thing: Not any man can dig this here soil. It bounces back like a European tire. It needs strong arms."

He was speaking and digging at the same time. He watched his son with the side of his eyes. "You hushed down kid! Ain't you gonna sing for me? Did I pull you from your ma's skirts for this? Cmon let's hear a song!" He wiped the sweat seeping down his forehead with the back of his hand.

"My boy, he loves his ma too much. Never leaves her knees. Son, I says, you're gonna be a soldier. Let go of your ma a little. So, what does he answer? I'm gonna take my mom along when I'm gonna be a soldier, he says. So, now I take him along when I go to work. When I take my break, we pa and son, open up our lunch packs and...." He slapped his forehead. " Ali! Don't tell me that lime-seller went with our lunch? He'd put the pack in that pail under the cart. Hell! He really did take it, the bastard!" Shading his eyes with his hands, he looked at the way the cart disappeared. Way ahead, on the sea shore, the cart was moving slowly.

"Let Ali run up and get it," I suggested. "Nooo! " he said quickly. "He ain't got the strength. I'll go snatch it and come back" He stopped digging and started to walk toward the cart. But after a few running steps, he stopped. He knew he could not catch up with the cart. Waving his arms back and forth, swearing, he came back.

"I told him when he pulled the cart under the shade. I says to him, give me the lunch pack before you forget. An' he did not. He says, you'll get it when I dump the lime an' now we ain't got nothing to eat! And I'd bought everything.... My boy here likes tomatoes, cucumbers..."

"Now, don't worry, " I tried to soothe him. "We have bread. We'll surely find some tomatoes and cucumbers."

He somewhat calmed down but, while digging, he swore at the lime-seller for a longtime.

² " wiith God's help"

Like a hedgehog sticking his head out of his cover, Ali had left the reed shelter's shade and slowly arrived at the pit his father had dug to his waist.

"Ali, don't stand under the sun," said the laborer. "This sun scorches little kids like a tomato sprout. Go under the shade, son." Ali did not say a word nor did he leave his place. He watched his father work with big wide eyes. "If you're bored, go down to the field uncle Fettah is planting tomato seedlings. Go an' play with his daughter in the shade."

Ali left the pit but he did not go where his father told him to. Instead, he went to the water pump and started to pump up some water. Hanco woman who was washing the dishes in the reed shelter called to Ali:

"Hey child... Don't waste the water. Do me a favor, fill up this pail and bring it to me." Ali walked toward the woman with a peasant's obedience. He was about to pick large pail up when suddenly the yörük jumped out of the pit. "You leave it to me, Ali. I'll take the water to the lady." He filled up the pail and brought it to her. "Here you are, mam."

"Oh, why did you bother? The child could've brought it to me. But just put it there," she said. "God bless you, uncle!"

"Bless you, too, mam." He walked toward his son et did not say a word more. He caressed Ali's chin:

"You don't listen to me, son. I won't take you along again. An' you call yourself a Democrat! A Democrat don't hush up like you. C'mon, I'll take you to uncle Fettah." Speaking to his son, the yörük took him toward the few men working in the field across. He sat him next to the little girl. Saying something, he caressed her head and then went toward the men in the field. He chatted with them until he had finished his cigarette and then came back. Before he jumped in to the pit:

"Today's youth, sir, they don't keep their words. This one boy didn't come to work 'cause he's gonna play ball at the village. An' the other won't work as he should. His mind is out with them in the village. Fettah is annoyed. He says to me, c'mon and help me plant these tomatoes if you're done early. I told 'im I'd come. God willing, I'll be be done by noon." He jumped in the pit, grabbed the pick axe. Before starting to dig, he checked his son once more. He and the little girl were running around chasing each other.

"There you go! Pep up a little, kid!" He smiled and brought the pickaxe down with pleasure. "You know, sir, once a kid ain't got none of his ma' milk, he's no good. My Ali was an orphan when he was forty days old. We fed 'im with cow milk. His stepmother loves him like her own. She takes care of my Ali so well but it don't work. He's as frail as a girl. He won't make a good peasant. So he don't get worse, I keep 'im off work. I'm gonna send him to school so long as I can afford it. Let 'im go and live in the city like an éfendi."

Before the lime seller brought the second cart of lime, the yörük finished the pit. I gave him two peaches while he was drying up his sweat with his neckerchief in the shelter's shade.

"Help you wet your mouth," I said. He took but did not eat them:

"It's no good on an empty stomach," he said, wrapped them in his neckerchief. When the lime seller delayed to come, he got up. "Instead of sittin' here and growin' moss, I'll go an' help uncle Fettah," he said. I watched him go. First he went to Ali, gave him the peaches in his neckerchief and then walked toward Fettah.

The lime seller brought the second cart late in the afternoon. The yörük made a long fuss about his lateness and the the forgotten lunch pack.

"We gotta slacken this lime, carrying water with pails. For sure, I'll be here all night!"

Heedless, the fat lime seller slapped the yörük's shoulder.

"Sorry, man, I didn't know you had the strength of Holy Ali! I'll help you slacken the lime. God willing, we'll finish the work before the night falls. These words pleased the yörük. He said nothing more. And when the lime seller's practical mind thought up an easy way to convey the water from the pump to the pit by a shallow channel, he was truly happy.

"Man! You must've Menderes's¹³ intelligence," he said. "I like your idea! I won't need you no more. You can go back now."

The lime seller took his money and after a drink from the pump, he left. The yörük grabbed the pump: within half an hour, he filled half the pit with water. He then started to shove the lime into the pit. A little later, the water in the pit began to boil with the lime's heat. The wind blew softly the steam coming out of the pit to our faces.

"This steam is real good for lungs and eyes. Show yourselves to it, your eyes will start glowing like a mirror," said the yörük.

None of us saw when Ali and the little girl had come near us. We realized it when we heard their laughs as they threw bunches of lime in the boiling pit. When the yörük saw his son at the edge of the pit, he panicked, dropped the shovel:

"Step back, Ali! You'll fall in!" Before he could finish his sentence, Ali, trying to get back, slipped on the wet clay and fell face down into the pit. The yörük screamed with fear:

3 Prime Minister in the fifties

“Oh my god! Was my boy to burn in this hell fire?” He ran to his son, gripped him by his shirt and pulled him out. The little boy’s front was smeared white with lime. As soon as he could take a breath, he shrieked:

“Daddy, I’m burning all over!” The yörük’s face was pale as stone.

“It’ll be over as soon as we wash it off. Hold on, son.”

He stripped his son and put him under the pump. While washing the little boy, he was swearing at the turn of his luck:

“Wish my leg was broken and not bring the boy with me!”

Ali kept on screaming. His head, hands, his bare feet were red and swollen with burns.

“Give me a cup of olive oil, sir, so I can put on his burns, “ called the yörük. We did. Ali was still screaming after his father rubbed the oil on his burns.

“My eyes are burning, dad, I can’t see a thing!”

The yörük threw him on his back:

“I’ll take my son to a doc, if you give me permission, sir!” he said. “If his eyes go blind, how’ll he go to school. I’ll come back and finish up at night.”

Without waiting for an answer, he began to run down the dusty country road. For a while, the wind brought Ali’s screams and the father’s low, soothing voice.

ⁱ Prime Minister in the fifties