

Story #133 (Tape #41, 1961-62)

Narrator: Nuri Genç,  
about 65

Location: Iskenderun

Date: February 1962

The Well-Bearded Köse

Tefik-bey, who lived in Antakya, had a wealthy friend in a village nearby. His friend was named Köse Ağa, even though he had a very heavy beard. One day Tefik-bey wanted to pay a visit to his friend, Köse Ağa, and so he sent a message to him saying that he would arrive at the village at such-and-such a time. As was the custom in those days, Köse Ağa met his friend at the edge of the village and welcomed him. After the usual greetings, however, Köse Ağa told Tefik-bey that he could not have him as his guest. "I'm sorry," he said, "but this village is under a medical quarantine. There is an epidemic of cholera here. You could enter the village all right, but you would not be permitted to leave." Upon hearing this, Tefik-bey bent his neck [sign of submission or resignation in Ottoman days] and went away sadly.

Actually, Tefik-bey was very angry, though he did not show it, for he interpreted Köse Ağa's refusal to entertain him simply as a matter of meanness. In keeping with the current practice of many to act as informants to the Sultan, Tefik-bey sent a wire to Sultan Abdul Hamid II with this message:

"Your Majesty, when I was passing through such-and-such a village on such-and-such a day, I met a man by the name of Köse Ağa. While we were talking about this and that, Köse Ağa expressed numerous complaints about your Majesty's increasing cruelty to your subjects that he had heard--complaints from people who claimed that they suffered from poverty and tyranny. He added that he too felt this way about you and your government. Finally, he went on to say that if the state of affairs continued as they were, he would renounce Turkish citizenship and become a British subject."

The padişah took this message very seriously, for he interpreted its contents as not only a very grave accusation against himself but also as an indication that there was a plot against him by a foreign government. Accordingly, he issued orders for the arrest and examination of Köse Ağa.

In a short while Köse Ağa was arrested and sent to Adana to the presence of the Governor of Adana for questioning. The Governor of Adana in those days was named Bahri-Paşa, a man who was not only one of the protégés of Abdul Hamid II but also one of his most important informers [jurnalçılık = carrying news, intelligence man], and he had for many years kept the province of Adana in a state of constant terror. There was hardly a man in that part of Turkey who had not

been robbed or blackmailed by him at one time or another. Bahri-Paşa now saw a good opportunity to extort a good sum of money from a wealthy ağa.

"Bring him over here," Bahri-Paşa said to his men. After looking at Köse Ağa for a moment Bahri-Paşa exclaimed, "By God, they call you Köse-Ağa in spite of the fact that you have an armful of beard!"

"You see how it is, sir," responded Köse-Ağa. "All the slanderous statements about me are like this one."

Bahri-Paşa liked this response and so he let Köse Ağa go his way with a much smaller bribe than he would otherwise have required.