

Taksim Square was teeming

with crowds of people. Six pigeons had perched on the Monument of the Republic. The Continental Hotel loomed high above the square, like a large four-cornered minaret.

They dragged their cages to the steps that led into the park. The place where they had stopped smelled strongly of urine. Hayri looked around to see whether there was a stable or something nearby. Then he realised that the stink came from the wall beside the steps.

Traffic lights kept blinking, green, red, yellow. Cars and people surged through the place, all in a tangle, and the blast of automobile horns mingled with the voices of the crowds in a deafening roar. Meatball vendors, newsboys, gypsy flower-sellers with their baskets lined along the pavement, shoeblacks in a long row, their boxes gleaming like gold, taxi station barkers shouting at the tops of their voices, men and women pressing and pushing, scuttling this way and that to escape being run down by the cars, a barefooted villager rubbing shoulders with a fur-clad woman, elegant florist shops, dirty pavements littered with paper and vomit, petrol fumes mingling with the stink of urine... All in a rolling snarl.

Hayri had crouched down in a corner of the steps, his head drawn between his shoulders.

"What a lot of people!" he said.

Mahmut smiled at him.

"Yes," he said. "And not one laughing face..."

It was with new eyes that he was gazing at the crowds.

Süleyman stood by, his eyes bulging, his neck longer than

ever. He was so shaken by the noise and confusion that his mind had gone blank. Forgotten were the birds, Hayri, Mahmut, even his own self. It was a dream world of teeming humanity he was floating in, of huge apartment blocks and rushing traffic. The odour of greasy smoke drifting from the meatball barbecue carts made him come to himself. It was an odour that could drive man a crazy with hunger. His eyes focused on the meatball vendors.

The nearest cart was set on small wheels. It was painted blue, with a design of tiny pink flowers and pale green leaves. A glass showcase was set on the cart, and, beside it, a brazier piled with glowing embers. It was a beautiful copper brazier, and from it rose a tall stovepipe, maybe two metres high. In the showcase were meatballs, ready to be grilled, a mound of minced meat in reserve, bright red tomatoes, parsley and onions. And right in the middle was a large rose, a pink full-blown Ottoman rose. The meatball merchant had a drooping light brown moustache. His knee breeches were bound at the waist with a wide black sash. He was counting some money. Süleyman stared. What long fingers he had! Instinctively, he glanced at his own hands, then his eyes returned to the man, examining him from top to toe, and came to rest on the long, blunt face which had the sad resentful expression of someone struggling to overcome his lack of faith in himself and in life.

Mahmut was gazing at the birds, agonising in their cages, at the boys, the pressing crowds, the traffic. He was remembering...

He had spent exactly three and a half years of his life polishing shoes in Taksim Square. His place had been right there, the sixth in the row of shoeshiners. His box, inlaid with nacre in the shape of fish, trees, clouds and even a mermaid, had been famous, not only among his fellow shoeshiners but in the whole of Istanbul. It was the last box that Mestan, the master craftsman at Bakirköy, had made before his death. And what's more, Master Mestan, who never put his signature on a piece of paper, but always marked documents with his thumb, well, on this shoeshine box, he had engraved his sign on a blue inlay of nacre. It looked like a character from a cuneiform or Chinese script, a hieroglyph, a bird in flight, but more than anything it looked like Mestan's signature on the box was the very likeness of the master, as though it had been taken at the studio of Foto-Sabah! How

could an inscription, and such an elaborate one at that, ever resemble a human face? Mahmut could not explain this, but so it was. Besides, there were those words Master Mestan had spoken when he'd given him the box. "Here," he had said, "take your box, Mahmut, my son, I've fashioned many shoeshine boxes in my life, but in never a single one have I put Mestan... Take it and may it bring you luck."

How he had laughed then, showing his toothless gums... It warmed Mahmut's heart to think of the old craftsman, here, beside the two children with their cages of half-dead birds, in the midst of the doomsday confusion of the square. His mind went back to the day Master Mestan had given him the shoeshine box. How he had flown at once to Taksim Square... He remembered his first client. The man he had been struck dumb by Mahmut's joy which communicated itself to every living thing, to the whole world, to the very earth and stones and passing cars. He must have felt it in the marrow of his bones, for instead of paying Mahmut when he had finished, he just stood there, the money passing from one hand to the other, and then, suddenly, he had turned away, his legs dancing, flying, and had vanished in the crowd. Here, today, if the boys could manage to sell some birds, with what joy would they go back to Menekşe, their feet hardly touching the ground, just like Mahmut on that day long ago... Süleyman was still gaping, entranced at the meatball merchant. Let him look on, Mahmut thought, better let him be until...

Make it twenty, Süleyman heard a man say. The meatball seller kept wiping his hands on the blue apron he wore. He was short and thin, young too, twenty-five maybe. On his right cheek was a deep scar, the result of an Aleppo boil. His eyes were large and of the clearest blue, and even at that distance Süleyman could see how they shone.

Mahmut, and Hayri too from where he was crouching, were watching the meatball man as with deft hands he quickly disposed the meatballs on the greasy blackened grill over the embers. When they were done, he sliced open a half-loaf of bread and with a small pair of tongs picked up the meatballs one by one, very carefully so as not to damage them, and inserted them into the loaf. He added a sprinkling of parsley, a little chopped onion and a couple of tomato slices. Then, wrapping the bread in

a pink sheet of paper, he handed it over to his customer. Smoke was still swirling from the stovepipe, spreading that aroma, maddening for empty stomachs.

The customer, darting anxious glances to right and left, hastily bit into the bread. Such a large mouthful it was that his cheeks swelled. With another quick look around, he hurried away, still munching very fast, and disappeared into the crowd. The meatball man followed him with smiling eyes.

Mahmut, too, was smiling, maybe at the boys, maybe at something else... He was trying to decipher some words that had been scrawled in a clumsy hand on the side of the cart. And when he did, it made him so happy that for a moment he forgot the heavy pain weighing deep down inside him at the plight of these boys and of the birds dying in their cages. Stumbling over the syllables, he read it out aloud: Look not for fire in Hell, each man brings his own fire... Yes, Mahmut murmured, from this earth each takes his fire...

There were inscriptions like this one on every barbecue cart that was spitting greasy fumes about the crowded square. One said: Never say die, Erzurum town, bring thou solace to my soul... Another: Bread and sweat, toil and trouble, so goes this bastard world... And still another: Roads, days, life, all things must end, but Istanbul town never will end...

Yaşar Kemal (1922), born in the small village of Hemite in Adana, is perhaps the most successful and productive novelist from Turkey. He has been nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature. Many of his novels have been translated into all major Western languages and he enjoys an international readership. Although a deep romanticism can be observed in his fiction, his socialist ideology constitutes the dominant aspect of his art.