

Story #462

Narrator: Professor Suheyl Ünver

Location: Istanbul

Date: 1971

Behlül Dane and the Parable of the Skulls

One day Behlül was walking in a cemetery when he found three human skulls. He took these to the marketplace and started shouting, "Gentlemen, I am selling skulls! Skulls for sale!"

Some who recognized him came to him and asked, "What did you say that you are selling?"

"I am selling skulls," he repeated.

When they heard this, they jeered at him. "How much do you want for them?" one of them asked.

"Well," said Behlul, "this one is called Stone-Head, this one is called Empty-Head, and this last one is called Pleasant-Head."¹

"Yes, but how much do they cost?" the man demanded.

"Well, Empty-Head costs five akches."²

"Oh, that is very cheap."

¹In Turkish there is a verbal effect in the three names lost when translated: Tash kafa [Stone-Head], Bosh kafa [Empty-Head], and Hosh kafa [Pleasant-Head] produce near-rhymes.

²An akche--a third of a para, which is the fortieth part of a kurush, which, in turn, is the hundredth part of a lira. The Turkish lira in 1974 is worth seven or eight U.S. cents. The akche and para are no longer in circulation, the smallest coin being the kurush piece; actually, the smallest coin one normally sees in circulation is the five-kurush piece. Even before inflation had eliminated the akche, it was a piece traditionally of little worth.

"And Stone-Head I give away for nothing. But as for Pleasant-Head, he is worth 100 dirhems.³

The customer was surprised and asked, "Why do they have such different prices when they all seem alike?"

"Well," said Behlül, "Empty-Head would like to learn from good advice, but he was unable to do so. It went in one ear and went right out the other. As for Stone-Head, he would never accept advice. But Pleasant-Head was a mature head. He would both read and value what others had read. This one is precious in Allah's scale of values."

³The dirhem was an ancient Arabian coin of silver. The dirhem was also a unit of weight for measuring silver. There were 400 dirhems to the okka, which weighed 2.8 pounds.