Jewels of Wisdom: A Parable

One day Behlül Danel was walking about in the palace garden with a human skull in his hand. When Harun Reşit and his attendants came out of the palace, they all saw Behlül. There were men among those attendants who did not like Behlül Danel, and they complained frequently to Harun Reşit about the behavior of his brother. On this occasion they said, “Look, your majesty! He has taken the head of a dead body from its grave and is playing with it! This is very offensive, and you should do something about it! If Behlül continues to do such things, he will eventually ruin you!”

When the group reached Behlül Danel, Harun Reşit asked him, “Brother, what is that in your hand?”

“It is a skull.”

1Behlül Danel was supposedly the mad half brother of the caliph Harun Reşit (Haroun al-Rashid), the most colorful of the Abbasid caliphs. (So colorful was he, in fact, that he appeared in several of the tales of A Thousand Nights and a Night, better known as The Arabian Nights.) Behlül’s historicity is in some doubt. As Behlül Danel appears in folktales, however, he is anything but mad. He was a saint who put on an antic disposition as a “cover” for his often sharp criticism of prominent and powerful men—especially Harun Reşit. His madcap capers were akin to those of Shakespeare’s fools.
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“What do you intend to do with it?” asked Harun Reşit.

“Sell it.”

“Who will buy it from you?”

“Well, whoever wants it,” answered Behlül Dane.

On the right side of Harun Reşit stood the Seyhülislam, who was well aware of the profundity of many of Behlül’s ideas. The Seyhülislam said to Harun Reşit, “I advise you to buy this skull yourself. You can learn much from it.”

The caliph asked his brother to come a little closer, and Behlül did so, showing respect for Harun Reşit’s position. (Behlül Dane always made an effort to show the respect that was due to those deserving it.) “How much do you want for this skull?” asked Harun Reşit.

“I should be willing to sell it for forty golden liras.”

“Is it really worth forty golden liras?”

“Buy it only if you think it is worth that price. Otherwise don’t buy it. I am not urging you to buy it,” answered Behlül Dane.

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2The highest authority on Islamic law. In Ottoman times he had considerable influence on matters of politics as well as on religious issues. After the founding of the Republic, his duties were restricted to religious affairs. Much of his duty is administrative. He it is, for example, who establishes the precise times for the five daily prayer services and for the beginnings and endings of Ramazan and the religious holidays.
Hamn Reşit looked questioningly into the face of the Seyhülislam. That official said to him quietly, “Your majesty, if you lose anything by making this purchase, I shall personally compensate you for it.”

Hamn Reşit then ordered immediately that forty golden liras be brought to him. When they arrived, the caliph counted them into Behlül’s hand and took the skull. Looking into the skull, Harun Reşit saw nothing. He then looked into Behlül’s face and also into the face of the Seyhülislam. Behlül Dane said, “Why do you look into our faces in that way? If you will have a handkerchief spread out, I shall show you what you have purchased.” When the handkerchief was opened up, Behlül stood above it and smashed the skull with his fist. From the broken skull poured many valuable jewels. When Harun Reşit saw this treasure in the handkerchief, he forgot all else. Behlül Dane then said, “Since you are very fond of material wealth, here is something that should please you. Take it and do not bother me any more.”

Harun Reşit was so excited by his surprising gain of new wealth that he forgot entirely where he had been going and what he had intended to do when he left the palace that morning. All that he now wanted to do was to return to the palace and think about the treasure he had gotten from a skull. After considering the matter for some time, he decided to have all of the graves in the kingdom opened so that the skulls they
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contained could be removed. He hired all the laborers between seven and seventy³ to do this work. All of the skulls were brought to the palace, but when they were smashed, not a single jewel fell from any of them.

Completely baffled by this, Harun Reşit finally decided to consult the Seyhülislam about the matter. He asked that official, “What do you think about this, hoca?”⁴

“Your majesty,” answered the Seyhülislam, “I think that it is time you awaken from your sleep of ignorance. Stop having graves opened. You should ask Behlül Dane from what grave he took the skull loaded with jewels.”

One day shortly after that, Harun Reşit and his attendants were taking a walk. Before they had gone very far, they noticed Behlül Dane standing in the corner of a cemetery and holding another skull in his hand. When the padishah and his party reached the place where Behlül was standing, Harun Reşit wanted to buy the skull before anyone else

³This is a common figurative expression which means all available manpower.

⁴A hoca today is a Muslim preacher. Before the founding of the Republic, however, he was both preacher and teacher, for during the Ottoman era education was the responsibility of the clergy. The Seyhülislam is here probably being referred to as teacher.
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could do so. Behlül went to his brother and bowed respectfully. "What is in your hand?" asked Harun Reşit.

"A skull."

"Are you going to sell it?"

"Perhaps."

"How much do you want for it?"

"Sixty paras."5

When Harun Reşit heard this, he looked inquiringly into the Seyhülislam's face. The Seyhülislam said to him, "Your majesty, I shall not become involved in this transaction. If you want it, buy it; if not, then leave it." The Seyhülislam knew that the skull being sold contained nothing. After Harun Reşit had bought the skull, he spread out a handkerchief to receive the contents of the skull, but when he struck it with his fist, nothing fell out of it but some dust. Harun Reşit looked first into the face of Behlül Dane and then into that of the Seyhülislam.

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5This was a very small sum of money. There were 40 paras to the kurus, and 100 kuruşes to the lira. By the middle of this century, inflation and the devaluation of the Turkish lira were pushing the kurus into extinction, and the para had already become valueless. By the 1990s it took 40,000 Turkish liras to equal one U.S. dollar, and so both para and kurus became parts of history.
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Behlül Dane said nothing, but the Şeyhülislam advised, “Your majesty, ask Behlül why the head you bought the other day produced so many jewels while this one yielded nothing.”

When his brother asked this question, Behlül Dane proceeded to explain this matter. “The skull sold you the other day belonged to a man who lived in this world, just as you and I do. He ate and he drank all of his life, and on the day that his life span ended he died. No one can continue here after his allotted time has expired. But the owner of that skull had kept in his head all of the wise words he had heard, and there they had turned into jewels. Then when that man died and went to the next world, he took the wisdom with him and left the jewels here in this material world. This second skull, which you broke here, belonged to a man who just existed in this world all his life and then died. He never bothered to remember any of the wise words which he heard. He kept neither good words nor bad words, and so his skull, as you have seen, contained only dust. In other words, the second head was empty, like, say, mine.” But Behlül Dane was a very modest man. He said that the second head was empty “like mine,” but he really meant “like yours.”