

Story 2087 (Videotaped  
and translated into  
English in the late  
1980s by Ahmet Uysal  
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Dostra.)

Narrator: Şeref Taşlıova, a  
distinguished aşık

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The Grand Vizier and Behlül Dane's<sup>1</sup> Heaps of Dust

It is said that Behlül Dane was a brother<sup>2</sup> of Harun Reşit, the most illustrious of the Abbasid caliphs. The minds of some great people are not easily penetrated, and in his own time Behlül Dane was understood and appreciated by only a few people. One morning Behlül Dane, very shabbily dressed, was sitting in the dirt opposite the entrance gate of his half brother's palace.

After awhile Harun Reşit and his grand vizier, Numan, came out of the palace and saw Behlül Dane sitting there. Numan was one of those who were well aware that the mind of Behlül Dane was a deep well of wisdom. He called out

<sup>1</sup>Behlül Dane is largely a legendary figure in the Muslim past of the Abbasid period (750-1258). Whether there is any historicity to this figure is questionable, though until the 18th century there was a grave at Baghdad that was supposedly his. He was said to be the mad half brother (not brother) of Harun Reşit (Haroun al-Raschid), greatest of the Abbasid caliphs, who flourished around 800. There was method to his alleged "madness," for his antic behavior was a "cover" for his role as satirist and critic of the worldliness of the powerful and wealthy--notably the caliph himself. At times he was like a saintly fool, a Muslim schlemiel.

<sup>2</sup>Several of the Abbasid caliphs had grand viziers from a family of Persian intellectuals named Barmakid (Barmecide in

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to Behlül Dane, "Greetings to you, O my heavenly friend!"

"Greetings to you, O vizier brother!"

Noticing then that Behlül Dane was shaping the dry earth into three small heaps of dust, Numan asked him, "What is the meaning of those little piles of dust you are making?"

"Well, one of those heaps represents those who are providers of wisdom. One represents those who confide a secret to a woman. And the third is for those who are abandoned in a crisis by their relatives and friends."

At that point Harun Reşit interrupted: "Oh, don't pay any attention to what he says. He is our Behlül, a fool." After the caliph and the vizier had been walking for a few minutes, Harun Reşit said, "O my vizier, I hope that you know that I would rather have the whole city of Baghdad destroyed than have even a single hair of your head harmed."

English). The Barmakid who served Harun Reşit was named Yahya, though in this tale he is referred to as Numan. Among distinguished early Muslims named Numan, none was of the time of Harun Reşit. The caliphs had given the Barmakids more and more power, but when that family presumed to grab much more power, they seemed to be a threat to the Abbasid dynasty. Harun Reşit finally executed several of them and ended the services of that family to the caliphate.

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"Is that so?

"Yes, it is," answered Harun Reşit. "And if there is anything that you wish from me, just tell me what it is."

"Well, I should sometime like to eat food of the kind that the sultana eats."

Harun Reşit had a message-carrying goat which always accompanied him whenever he left the palace. He now wrote a note to his wife listing all of the fancy food dishes that Numan liked, and then he fastened the note to the back of his goat. After the two men parted, the vizier intercepted the goat on its way to the palace. He did so because he was thinking about what the caliph had said: "I would rather have the whole city of Baghdad destroyed than have even one hair from your head harmed." Numan wondered if that was really true. "Would he tolerate losing anything, even this goat, to protect me? I shall find out." Accordingly, he took the goat home with him and locked it in the basement of his house.

He then went to his wife and said, "I have accidentally killed the caliph's goat. You know that Harun Reşit issued a firman<sup>3</sup> announcing that anyone who harms his goat will

<sup>3</sup>An imperial decree by a sultan or an order by someone of great power. It superseded all other orders or laws.

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be executed, along with his family. We must find some way to hide the carcass." Numan was testing his wife as well as the caliph.

His wife objected to this. After he had slapped her several times, she climbed to the roof of their house and began shouting, "Oh, people of Baghdad, come here! The vizier has slaughtered the caliph's message-carrying goat! The vizier has slaughtered the caliph's message-carrying goat!" This information spread quickly, and soon it was being repeated by town criers, who also directed that anyone who found the dead goat should take it at once to the palace. When this news reached Harun Resit, he immediately ordered that in front of the palace there should be erected a gallows upon which the vizier would be hanged

Again Numan thought of the caliph's words: "I would rather have the whole city of Baghdad destroyed than have a single hair of your head harmed." The vizier was confused by the fact that the caliph was now going to have him hanged

In the crowd gathering before the gallows were all of the palace officials who had worked for him. They were

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interested in seeing how far his tongue would stick out when he was hanged. In the crowd also were close relatives of his, including cousins and nephews, who rubbed their hands together but did nothing to assist him.

The vizier then asked Harun Reşit, "Do you remember the action of Behlül Dane and the words he spoke this morning?"

"No, I don't remember. What was that fool doing and saying?"

"He said that one of the heaps of dust he was making represented the providers of wisdom. Have you ever had a wiser counselor than I?"

"No," replied Harun Reşit.

"Another one of the dust heaps was a warning against telling a secret to a woman. Whose wife was being referred to quite clearly?"

"Yours," answered the caliph.

"The third heap of dust represented those relatives and friends who fail to support a man in difficulties. This crowd waiting to see me hanged is made up largely of people who were supposedly close to me. Is that not so?"

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"Yes, that is so."

"Behlül Dane may have seemed to be merely playing in the dirt, like a child, but his heaps of dust were symbols of what was about to happen. Your special goat is still alive, shut up in my basement. Go and find it there."

I present this to all listeners as a moralistic tale