

Story 2205 (Collected by Ahmet Uysal and transcribed from a tape of Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi.)

Narrator: Kadir Nalbant

Location: Paşagiftlik village, Gönen kaza, Balıkeşir Province

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The Sultan and the Boatman¹

Once there was and once there was not² an Ottoman sultan who issued a strong edict against the use of alcoholic beverages in his land.³

One day a short while after this prohibition had been declared, the sultan wondered how well it was being obeyed. He asked his grand vizier to investigate this matter. After traveling here and there in the İstanbul area, the vizier returned and reported to the sultan. He said, "Your Majesty, your people seem to be following your order very strictly."

¹In the best-known variants of this tale, the sultan and the boatman are named. The boatman is said to have been a legendary alcoholic known as Bekri Mustafa. The sultan with whom he was associated was sometimes said to be Murat IV (reigned 1623-40) or Mahmut IV (ruled 1648-1687)

²This is the beginning of a narrative formula for the beginning of a Turkish tale. It may continue in a long nonsense jingle.

³Islam requires complete abstinence from alcohol for all its members. Muslim leaders have often initiated campaigns to punish violators of this rule.

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A few days later the sultan said to his grand vizier, "Let us travel over to Üsküdar and see how well people on that side of the Bosphorus are abstaining from the use of alcohol." Traveling in disguise for security reasons, they proceed to the waterfront and hired a water taxi to take them to Üsküdar ⁴

After the ferryman had been rowing for several minutes he took out a pitcher and drank several swallows from it. The sultan asked the ferryman, "What are you drinking?"

"It's just water.

"May I have some too?" asked the disguised sultan. The boatman handed the pitcher to the sultan and continued rowing. The sultan took two or three swallows from the pitcher and then said, "This is very tasty, but it is actually wine. Do you not know the sultan has forbidden all drinking of alcohol throughout all the land which he rules?"

"Yes, I know that drinking is forbidden throughout the land. But his edict did not forbid drinking alcohol while at sea

⁴Istanbul is a city divided into two parts. After 1482 Turkish sultans lived and ruled on the west side of the city for centuries. The Bosphorus separates that west side from the east (Asian) side. Üsküdar is on the Asian side. Until late in the 20th century there were no bridges across the Bosphorus. Numerous water taxis and also freight boats passed back and forth across the Bosphorus day and night.

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Angered by what he considered arrogance on the part of the boatman, the ruler shouted at him, "Do you realize to whom you are talking? I am the sultan!"

yes!" said the ferryman. "And if you drink anymore from that pitcher, you will probably think that you are Allah!

⁵For variants of this tale in which Bekri Mustafa is the boatman and Murat IV or Mahmut IV is the sultan, see tales numbered 186 and 747 in the Archive of Turkish Oral Narrative.