

Story 768 (1970 Tapes 13, 14) Narrator: Şerif Mehmet Ceylan,  
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Bekri Mustafa and the Fortune Made in Chamber Pots

Once long ago there was an elderly Turkish merchant in Istanbul with a son who was still a child when the merchant died.

The partner checked the books after the death of the Turk to see how much of the business was to be the son's share. With the son's inheritance the boy and his widowed mother were able to live without want

When the boy reached the age of seventeen or eighteen, his mother said to him, "You are now of an age when you should enter some business in order to make a living. Go and tell Avram Bey,<sup>1</sup> your father's former partner, that you want to into business, and let him give you some advice. We have a considerable amount of capital with which you can start a business that will continue to earn you a good living."

<sup>1</sup>Bey means, literally, lord but in modern times it has become more a term of respect than a title. Now it means Sir.

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The young man went to Avram Bey and said, "Uncle Avram, I want to go into some kind of business, but I don't know what. If you would advise me of some business to undertake, I should invest three or five<sup>2</sup> kuruş<sup>3</sup> in it in hope of making a living."

right, I have a very good prospect for you. It was something I wanted to do myself, but because I have so many other things to do, I couldn't get to this one. There is an empty shop at such-and-such a place. Let us go and rent that store for you, and after that I shall advise you what business to undertake." They went and examined the shop and soon agreed to rent it. Avram then said to the young man, "Now you should hire a ship to go to Çanakkale<sup>4</sup> and buy a shipload of baby's chamber pots right away. You will stock your new shop with chamber pots and sell them."

"Very well," said the young man, for he believed strongly in the business wisdom of this Jew. He went immediately

<sup>2</sup>Many Turkish people use the expression three or five where Americans would say a couple, three or four, or a few.

<sup>3</sup>The kuruş equals 1/100 of a lira, and the lira in 1986 is worth only 750 to the dollar. If, then, the lira is worth less than 1/6 of a cent, the kuruş has become meaningless. In an earlier time it was worth considerably more, but at no time in Turkish history would three or five kuruş be enough for a business investment. What the narrator here means by three or five kuruş is a moderate amount.

<sup>4</sup>The choice of Çanakkale here is apparently in keeping with the absurdity of the mission there. Just inside the Dardanelles, this very small city has never been industrial.

and hired a ship and sailed at once to Çanakkale. There he began buying chamber pots, but it took him more than a month to purchase the total number he wanted. He simply could not find a whole shipload of chamber pots right away, nor did he ever find a whole shipload at any one place. He collected all that were available in many local markets, and with each purchase he placed orders for more. When he had finally accumulated a whole shipload of them, he returned to Istanbul with them and stocked his store completely.

He waited in his store for customers a month, two months, three months, and by the end of five months, he had sold only three chamber pots. His store was an old tumbledown shop some distance from any of the main streets.

One day Bekri Mustafa<sup>5</sup> happened to pass along that street, and the young man's shop somehow attracted his attention. Entering the shop, he said, "Selâmunaleyküm,"

"Aleykümselâm."<sup>6</sup>

"Son, what are you doing here?"

"Well, I am trying to make a living by selling these

<sup>5</sup>Bekri Mustafa was a legendary trickster, wag, and alcoholic of the time of Sultan Murat IV (1623-1640). He is the protagonist of numerous short tales and fıkraları (anecdotes).

<sup>6</sup>These words constitute the traditional Muslim exchange between strangers: Peace be with you / And may peace be with you also.

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chamber pots."

Bekri Mustafa noticed that the young man looked very dejected, and so he sat down beside him and asked him about his problem. The young man explained the whole thing to him; "The situation is such-and-such, and I am unable to sell these things."

Bekri said, "Son, if I were to give you a piece of good advice, would you listen to it?"

"Of course I would!" The young man was desperate to get some help from someone--even from the birds that fly in the

"Son, there are a great many Jews in Istanbul.<sup>7</sup> Go buy another shipload of chamber pots. There will not be enough of them. Since you have laid your problem before me, should follow my advice by going after another shipload of chamber pots."

The young man agreed to do this. As soon as Bekri Mustafa had departed, he went after another shipload of pots, and these too he managed to get into his shop. He had no idea of a way to sell them.

<sup>7</sup>Although there had been Jews in Istanbul since classical times, the great influx came after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. There is still a large community of these Sephardic Jews in Istanbul who still speak fifteenth-century Spanish.

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On a Friday Bekri Mustafa came to the young man's shop and said, "Today every one of all those chamber pots will be sold for one golden Ottoman lira apiece. If you dare to sell them for less than a lira, I shall beat you!" The young man agreed to sell at that price, even though he had begun to have doubts about what Bekri had said.

The day before, Bekri Mustafa had gone to the sultan and asked, "Your Majesty, what mosque do you plan to attend tomorrow?"

"I shall go to New Mosque at Galata Bridge."<sup>8</sup> 124, 125

[At this point Tape 13 ends. All that follows is on Tape 14.]

"I shall wait for you at Galata Bridge, and I have one small favor to ask of you. Will you kindly stop there for a moment and speak to me? That is all that I request."

"Good heavens! What shall I say to you?"

"It doesn't matter. Just say 'Selâmünaleyküm' if you wish. Say just a word or two. Later I shall tell you something very important."

"All right," said the sultan, "I'll do it."

Bekri Mustafa then left the sultan's presence. Early on the following morning Bekri sent a number of town criers to the Jewish quarter of the city to make an announcement. When the criers arrived there, to the beating of many drums,

<sup>8</sup>Galata Bridge spans the waterway known as the Golden Horn in Istanbul, and New Mosque (Yeni Cami) stands close to it.

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they announced, "All Jews of the city will meet in the Karaköy district, close to the Galata Bridge and the New Mosque tomorrow morning. The sultan wants all Jews to assemble at that place before the noon prayer service begins today."<sup>9</sup>

of the Jews in the city turned out to meet this order--old and young. Even the sick ones were there, brought in carts. Bekri Mustafa was waiting on Galata Bridge when the sultan's carriage appeared. When the royal carriage came to where he stood, it stopped. Bekri went to its door and spoke briefly with the sultan, and then the carriage moved on

After it had gone, several of the leading Jews of the city pressed forward to Bekri Mustafa and said, "Mustafa Ağa Bey,<sup>10</sup> what did our sultan tell you?"

is the order of the sultan that he should see, on his way back from the mosque, a chamber pot on the head of every Jew."

<sup>9</sup> During the Ottoman period the Muslim sabbath in Turkey (as elsewhere in the Islamic world) was on Friday. The Friday noon service at the mosque was the religious high point of the week.

<sup>10</sup> Calling Bekri by the name Mustafa Ağa is not mere flattery or fawning here. Bekri Mustafa Ağa was sometimes the humorous and ironic appellation applied to him in folk stories.

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"Very well," they said, "we shall do whatever His Majesty wishes us to do. Where are such chamber pots sold?"

"There is a shop at such-and-such a place where you can buy them," he said, and he gave them the address of the young man's shop.

All of the Jews of Istanbul rushed to that store, and each bought a chamber pot for himself, placed it on his head, and returned to the gathering place near Galata Bridge. Avram, who had originally advised the young man to stock chamber pots, was late in getting there because he trusted that the young man, being his friend, would reserve one for him. But the young man was selling pots at one gold Ottoman lira apiece, and by the time Avram arrived, there wasn't a single pot left. "Please, son, find me one," he said. "The sultan may execute me if you don't.

"There is a broken one somewhere here. If you would like, we could glue it together and you could have that one." Saying this, he went into the back yard and found the broken pot which had been thrown away. He tied it together and placed it on Avram's head. Of course the young man got an Ottoman lira from Avram, just as he had from all the rest, and the whole matter was settled in this way