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THE JOE MILLER OF THE DEAR EAST

By Albert Rapp



Ö N S Ö Z

By Nat Schmulowitz

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*Like merry Momus, while the Gods were quaffing,
I come to give an Eulogy on Laughing.
But, in the main, tho' laughing I approve,
It is not every kind of laugh I love;
For many laughs e'en candour must condemn,
Some are too full of acid, some of phlegm.
The honest laugh, unstudied, unacquired,
By nature prompted and true wit inspired,
Alone deserves th' applauding Muse's grace;
The rest is all contortion and grimace.
But should my feeble efforts move your glee,
Laugh, if you fairly can—but not at me!*

—EXCERPT FROM EULOGY ON LAUGHING, by J. M. Sewall.

ABOUT the worst thing we can say of a man (in the U.S.) is that he has no sense of humor. For humor is regarded as an essential part of "the American way." It helps to equalize, and we believe in equality. It is often a symbol of freedom, for it permits the common man to speak freely to his leaders; it helps him cut them down to size. It deflates stuffed shirts. It allows us to look at ourselves in perspective, for when we laugh at ourselves we have surmounted our short-comings. . . . It is the grammar of confidence, the rhetoric of optimism, the music of brotherhood.

—Bradford Smith, WHY WE BEHAVE LIKE AMERICANS (Lippincott).

A merry heart doth good like a medicine.

—PROVERBS 17:22

The gladness of the heart is the life of a man; and the joyfulness of a man prolongeth his days.

—ECCL. 30:21:22

A light heart lives long.

—LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST, Act V, Scene 2

'Tis mirth that fills the veins with blood
More than wine or sleep or food.
Let each man keep his heart at ease.
No man dies of that disease.
He that would his body keep
From diseases must not weep;
But whoever laughs and sings,
Never he his body brings
Into fevers, gouts or rheums,
Or ling'ringly his lungs consume,
But contented lives for aye;
The more he laughs, the more he may.

—BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER



Ö Ğ S Ö Z

“Uulara masal, biglere saglik”¹

HUMOR appears to be one of the most fashionable infectious diseases in the world for which medical science has neither found nor sought a remedy. If laughter could be procured from a pharmacist every doctor would certainly prescribe it. Paradoxically, physicians often try to prescribe the “disease” of humor as a cure for many ailments, recognizing its great therapeutic value.

In his era, Nasreddin Hojah² helped to spread many benign germs or gems of humor which seem to have survived seven hundred years, more or less. During this long period the Nasreddin humor germs radiated from the villages of Khorto (Hortu) and Aksehir, Turkey, practically into all the four corners of the earth, sometimes appearing as a Nasreddin anecdote and sometimes appearing in the habiliments of a purely local provincial wit or noodle-head.³

These parallel jests pose the questions to the collector of ana and facetiae and to the scholar-historian of humor as to who originated the quips and who were the plagiarizing borrowers or unconscious imitators, or whether two or more widely separated wits in either place or time created the same witticisms unknown to the others. Some of the best known jests, like proverbs, prevailing in one country have their analogies in regions which seem farthest removed and in cultures sharply different therefrom. There seems to be an instinctive human quality of humor which may be found in these parallels which have evidently emanated from nearly all peoples of varying cultures throughout the world. Men may differ in the varieties of race, in

¹A benediction most favored by Turkish story tellers: “A good story for them and a good health to us all.” ²The name will be spelled variously throughout A.S. 4. We found no uniformity of spelling in Nasreddin literature. ³See appendix No. 4.

faiths and religions, in languages, circumstances and environment, but the common sense of humor is everywhere much the same.

These Nasreddin humor germs are not to be confused with Kuru, an authentic laughing ailment which is regarded as one of the world's rarest and almost always fatal diseases native to New Guinea. That's another story!

Neither Albert Rapp's delightful monograph nor this önsöz is designed to be a definitive biography of the Hojah. There is much that appears to be legendary and little that appears to be authentic history concerning the charming personality of the Hojah, who brought to his multiple callings of teacher, preacher and judge, the erudition of a scholar, the profound talents of a philosopher, Pundit and Mullah, the wit of an accredited humorist and jester and, at times, the appearance of an entertaining buffoon. It is claimed that the Hojah referred to himself as a "disturber of the peace and a sower of discord, a man with a high price on his head." His custom of turning everything into ridicule brought him much distinction and honor and served to convert a man into a tradition. How could he refrain from laughing at men after considering them attentively!

The Turkish people, young and old, know the Hojah, that is, they know his jests, tales and proverbs which seem to be the "cayenne" of their conversation. They know exactly what he looked like, how he was usually dressed and how devoted he was to his inseparable famous donkey. They know that while he generally rode on his donkey facing in the direction of the donkey's head, they also know the story of the occasion when he rode facing the donkey's posterior. While they know all these things, they really don't know certain important data about him, such as where or when he was born, how many wives or children he had, just where he lived, how he made his living and other biographical details. They believe that unquestionably he once lived—not only because of his great anecdotal legacy, but also because in a large cemetery in northwestern Aksehir is the Hojah's tomb, which bears an unauthenticated date of 1284 (683 in the Mohammedan calendar) as the date of his death. We have been told that in keeping with the Hojah's love of a practical joke, the tomb had a sturdy door with a huge padlock on it securely fixed but no walls on any side. Since we personally did not visit the tomb, we are relying upon hearsay information in this respect, as did Wesselski, who in making a similar statement attributed

it to Walawani and Cantamir. We hasten to add, however, that Wesselski must have doubted the accuracy of this report, since he quotes William Burckhart Barker, *who visited the area* and who reported: "It is a simple, unassuming monument with an iron railing around it and a small gate and a lock like the rest of the tombs of the Moslems near it." A photograph of the tomb as published in "Hayat" appears to confirm Barker's statement. The structure over and around the tomb is circular in shape with a cone-like roof resting on a series of white columns. In between these columns is a wrought iron grille or fence in which a gate—half grille and half solid metal has been installed.

On June 21, 1959 the people of Turkey paid tribute to the Hojah by celebrating either the 751st anniversary of his birth, the date of which is dubious, or the 675th anniversary of his death, the date of which is equally dubious.

One would suspect that in Turkey the Hojah is quoted almost as frequently as is the Koran. The pilgrims at Mecca consider it an essential part of their devotion that they call upon their prophet to preserve them from sad faces. There appears to be no situation or incident in the daily life of the Turk which cannot be adorned with a Hojah anecdote or moral.

In an article published in the issue of June 19, 1959 of a Turkish magazine, *Hayat* (Istanbul), an accredited authority on the Hojah, Fuat Köprülü, wrote in part:

"Nasrettin Hoja is a delightful old gentleman whom we know from our childhood. We don't know exactly from where or how or when he came but we do know that the mention of his name brought a quick smile and a vision of the Hoja with his famous donkey and stick appeared before our laughing eyes. We were certain that each one of us had something of the Hoja within us. On many varied occasions we would remember the fine jokes, stories and proverbs of this old and dear friend. Those same words of the Hoja are still on the lips of our people, from all walks of life. They reflect, with simplicity, the experience of life and are as familiar as if they were from the scriptures."

In an introduction by Mübin Manyasig to an anthology of Nasreddin Hojah anecdotes published by the Turkish Press, Broadcasting and Tourist Department in Istanbul in 1959, we find the following statement:

"Things have been attributed to him which he never said, or did, for

Nasreddin Hoca's name tagged on to any anecdote was the hall-mark of wit, and originators of numerous priceless or worthless stories, as the case may be, have preferred to remain anonymous behind the resplendent cloak of Nasreddin Hoca's celebrity.'

Thus it is difficult, if not impossible, to assert what are and what are not the jests of the Hojah. In the struggle for identity with the Hojah a certain number stand out because of their repeated publications and express association with the Hojah accompanied by "Near East" atmosphere or flavor. However, even in these jests there is no fixed text, though the situation and the gag-line are substantially the same.

George Borrow, who translated from the Turkish what purported to be all of the authentic anecdotes of the "Cogia,"⁴ wrote this concluding panegyric:

"The Cogia, now with God, was master of all learning, and perfect in every art. If some people should now say, 'We were in hope of receiving instruction from his sayings, but have read nothing but the ravings of madness'; and if they should require some other book of his utterances, we must tell them that he uttered nothing beyond what is noted here. Some people say that, whilst uttering what seemed madness, he was, in reality, divinely inspired, and that it was not madness but wisdom that he uttered. The mercy of God be upon him, mercy without bounds."

"They say" that when Nasreddin was at school as a young student several of his schoolmates played a shameful trick upon their teacher. This involved the slaughter, cooking and eating of a lamb to which the teacher had become attached. After investigation, the teacher was able to identify the offenders and each finally disclosed what role he had played in this sordid episode. As each culprit was pressed by the teacher to disclose what Nasreddin had done, to the surprise of the teacher each, with unexpected unanimity and fairness, asserted that Nasreddin had only watched and laughed. Thereupon, the teacher imposed a variety of punishments upon each boy according to the specific act of offense he had committed and then as to Nasreddin—after careful deliberation—the teacher imposed the following judgment. "Let him who laughed be laughed at by the whole world as long as there are people in the world capable of laughing."

⁴"The Turkish Jester, or The Pleasantries of Cogia Nasr-Eddin Efendi," Ipswich, W. Webber, Dial Lane, 1884.

The jests of Nasreddin, who is appropriately described as the Joe Miller of the Near East, may be classified into various categories. Some are purely topical or provincial as to either time or place. Some are timeless and universal.

Broadly speaking there are two classes of humor which may be found in the lore of any people, the provincially topical and the universal. The universal is understood by everyone, even when translated out of the language of origin. The provincial or topical generally requires supplementary comments to greater understanding. Albert Rapp's tract has anecdotes that fall in both domains.

Many of the tales of the Hojah relate to his ubiquitous, audacious, droll exploits in Aksehir, Bagdad, Bukhara, Damascus, Istanbul, Tehran and elsewhere. Among these is the very popular earthy, lively story of Guljan (who became, presumably, one of his wives), the Emir of Bukhara, Maulana Husain, the Sage, and the Hojah's appointment as Chief Eunuch, from which office by resourceful tom-foolery and shenanigans he escaped physical qualification and later evaded the sentence of death proclaimed by the Emir.

In fact (so "they say") the Hojah declared to the Bukharaians, "Don't you know I am immortal."

I, Hojah Nasreddin,
 Ever free have I been!
 And I say, 'tis no lie,
 That never shall I die!

This prediction certainly has been fulfilled in the thousand and one anecdotal memorials of this Near East Joe Miller.

Albert Rapp needs no introduction to SCOWAH readers. His contribution to A.S. 3, "The Ancient Greeks and Joe Miller," followed logically in the wake of Evan Esar's scholarly and definitive "Legend of Joe Miller," (A.S. 2), and now in the wake of A.S. 3 we are delighted, proud and again honored to present Albert Rapp's "The Joe Miller of the Near East"—Nasreddin Hojah—A.S. 4.

The appendix contains:

1. A chronology and bibliography which has been collated partly from each of the following: Albert Wesselski's Standard Treatise, the catalog of

the Library of Congress, the catalog of the British Museum, the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, СОВАН, and partly with the help of interested friends.

2. A selection of Hojah platitudes culled mostly from *Les Reflexions D'Ebn Goha*.

3. Two anecdotes taken from a publication entitled *Folk Tales from China, First Series*, published by the Foreign Languages Press in Peking, 1957, in which there is a segment devoted to "Stories About Nasrdin Avanti" (from the Uighur people). It is interesting to observe that the illustrations accompanying these anecdotes present the appearance of Nasrdin as an Oriental, with Chinese features, rather than as a Turk or Persian.

4. A list of personalities comparable to the Hojah who have been identified in various jest books and other writings.

5. Acknowledgments.

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THE JOE MILLER OF THE NEAR EAST

By Albert Rapp

ONE of the most lovable and amusing figures in the world's joke lore is a Turk named Nasreddin Hojah.

While there are several theories as to when he actually lived¹, persistent Turkish tradition connects him with Timur, the lame tyrant and conqueror, better known among us as Tamerlane. Tamerlane, the terrible Tartar, having taken up the mantle of Genghis Khan, had spread slaughter and destruction from Moscow to India to Syria. In 1401 he proceeded to Baghdad, stormed that city, massacred 20,000 people and destroyed all its famous monuments. In the next year he set out for Anatolia, Asiatic Turkey, where (according to this tradition) Nasreddin Hojah (together with his donkey) had already become a legendary figure among lovers of laughter.

Nasreddin was a simple person and poor. He had had enough schooling to earn the title "Hojah," which is roughly something like our word "professor." This qualified him to act as "Imam" or leader of public prayers in the mosque; also occasionally as "Cadi," a magistrate dispensing Islamic law.

Tamerlane asked to meet him. Tamerlane (the tradition says) was so impressed that he spared the inhabitants of the Hojah's city, Akshehir. He and Nasreddin became close friends. Fairly close, that is. After all, Tamerlane was a dictator and a ruthless autocrat. Still, according to Turkish tradition, he enjoyed the Hojah's company.

I have emphasized *according to tradition*. There isn't much else to go by, for about a century and a half after his death, at least.

¹ See Supplementary Notes post.

If we accept contemporaneity with Tamerlane (whose dates we know) we might use 1400 as a convenient date to remember for the genial Hojah. The earliest known manuscripts of any of his stories date toward the end of the 16th century.

In 1816 a German prelate by the name of von Diez, an expert on the Near East, translated five Hojah stories into German and sent them to Goethe. Von Diez was not happy about Nasreddin; he did not like the stories too well and he deplored Nasreddin's friendly relations with the Butcher of Baghdad. Goethe was delighted to receive the Hojah tales, enjoyed them and recommended that somebody make a translation of a larger collection.

In 1837 the first printed edition of the stories appeared in Istanbul, published in Turkish. It is called the *Folk's Book* and consists of 125 tales.

In 1854 appeared in London the first translation into English of the *Folk's Book*. The translator was William Barker. Barker omitted somewhat less than half of them, on the grounds that the point was lost in translation or that some were vulgar.

Three years later, the entire *Folk's Book* (125 tales) was translated into German by Camerloher. In 1876 into French, by Decourdemanche. Two years later Decourdemanche published a supplement, bringing the total to 327, excluding duplications.

Finally, in 1911 appeared the *magnum opus*, *Der Hodscha Nasreddin*, two volumes in German by Albert Wesselski. Volume One contains 338 stories from the *Folk's Book* and other Turkish sources. Volume Two adds stories from various sources, Arab, Berber, Maltese, Sicilian, Calabrian, Croatian, Serbian, and Modern Greek, bringing the total to 555.

It would be difficult to try to disentangle from this mass the stories that were really authentically first told by and of Nasreddin and those that were cast into the Nasreddin cycle of stories from other sources. Quite a few, for example, are Ancient Greek in origin and appear in the earliest jokebook of the Western World, the *Philogelos* (see Supplementary Notes on page 27, A.S. 3.). Some are Syrian and some Persian.

But the Nasreddin tradition is now by itself a fact. His stories are told from Morocco to Mongolia. What is the character of the Hojah that has developed? Let's name some of its many facets and illustrate with characteristic tales.

Though a holy man and a judge, the genial Nasreddin often kidded both religion and law. Some of the more famous religious stories still told about him in modern Turkey go as follows.

One day some of his friends came up to Nasreddin and said to him: "Hojah, you are old now and you don't know a single line of the Scriptures by heart." The Hojah said: "But I'll bet no one of you has heard the great holy man Ikrimah, and the wonderful things he had to say."

"Tell us about him." "I once heard the great Ikrimah say: 'There are two qualities that are found in every faithful Moslem.' " "What are they?" "Ikrimah had forgotten one of them. I have forgotten the other."

One day when the Hojah walked into a mosque, he saw a dog sitting back of the door. He gave the dog a sound kick and the frightened animal fled up to the chancel and stood near the pulpit. Whereupon the Hojah exclaimed: "Forgive me, please. I don't yet know all the local preachers."

One day the Hojah went out to the field to reap. When night fell he quit and went home. His wife said to him: "Have you harvested much today?" The Hojah answered: "I will finish it up by tomorrow noon." She said: "You should add: 'God willing.'" The Hojah answered: "Even without calling on Him, I will finish by that time."

In the morning he took his scythe and went out to the field. On the way he met some men on horseback, who shanghaied him and compelled him to go along with them to act as their guide. At nightfall they released him. The Hojah ran as hard as he could, but it was midnight when he got home and knocked on his door. His wife came to the door and asked: "Who is knocking at this hour?" "It is I," said the Hojah, "it is I—God willing—. Open the door."

A variant on this story carries the same caution, of which every devout Moslem is aware, that when you say you are *going* to do something you

should always add “Inshallah!” (God willing!). Our genial Hojah was not always that devout.

One day the Hojah went to the market to buy a donkey. A man met him and said: “Where are you going?” “To the market, to buy a donkey.” “Say ‘God willing,’ Hojah.” The Hojah answered: “Why should I say ‘God willing’? I have the money and there are donkeys at the market.” When he got to the market, a thief sidled up to him and stole his wallet. The Hojah made his way back home without having bought a donkey. The same friend encountered him again and said to him: “What have you bought, Hojah?” The Hojah answered: “My money has been stolen, God willing; curse the man who begot you, God willing.”

His tongue-in-cheek attitude toward the law has endeared him to millions of Turks in the past five centuries, but it did not always endear him to Turkish rulers. During the reign of Abdul Hamid the Second, all Nasreddin stories were banned. Not until the famed Young Turks overthrew the power of this Sultan in 1909 were stories like the following again permitted to circulate.

One day when the Hojah was sitting as Judge a man came into the court and said: “Your Honor, our cattle were grazing in a field, when your cow attacked my cow, ripped it up the belly and killed it. What is to be done about it?” Said the Hojah: “The owner is not responsible and you cannot sue a cow.” “Excuse me, Your Honor. What I meant to say is: It is *your* cow that was killed and *mine* did it.” “That is different,” said the Hojah. “Hand me down that book from the shelf and we’ll see what the law says.”

Since Nasreddin was also a teacher, I suppose it should not be surprising that we find attributed to him many “absent-minded professor” type stories.

One day some of Nasreddin Hojah’s students came to his house to visit him. He did not want to see them, so he told his wife to get rid of them. His wife went to the door and said: “The Hojah is not

home.” “But we saw him come in by this very door,” said one. An argument followed, whereupon the Hojah stuck his head out of the upstairs window and said: “The house has two doors. Maybe he went out by the back one.”

Absent-minded professor stories often border on moron stories, or as the Germans call them, “Dummkopf” stories. These are perhaps the most numerous in the great Nasreddin cycle; though paradoxically enough, a close second in number are the “quick-witted” tales. The following are some of the favorite “Dummkopf” stories.

One night the Hojah woke up his wife in a state of excitement and said: “Quick, give me my spectacles before I get fully awake.” She handed them to him and then asked to know what the excitement was about. “I am having a beautiful dream,” he said, “but there are one or two things in it I can’t make out very clearly.”

Another time, a friend was spending the night with the Hojah. At midnight the guest woke up, nudged the Hojah and said to him: “There is a candle on your right side. Will you please hand it to me?” The Hojah answered: “How can I tell in the dark which is my right side?”

On another day, the Hojah went to market and he bought some liver. As he was carrying it home, a friend met him and said: “How are you going to cook it?” “Just boil it.” “Listen. I know a wonderful recipe,” said his friend. He began to describe it. “I can’t remember all that. Write it down,” said the Hojah. So his friend took a scrap of paper and wrote it out in detail. As the Hojah was proceeding home a hawk swooped down, seized the liver and made off with it. The Hojah ran after him, holding the scrap of paper in the air shouting: “Come back. You haven’t got the recipe.”

One night as the Hojah slept, he dreamt that somebody was offering him nine gold pieces, but that he kept refusing and demanding ten. Then he woke up and found his hands empty. The

Hojah quickly closed his eyes, stretched forth his hand, and said: "I've thought it over. Give me the nine."

One moonlight night the Hojah was searching for something on the pavement in front of his house. A friend came by and said: "Can I help you, Hojah? What have you lost?" "I've lost my gold ring and I can't find it." "Exactly where were you standing when it fell?" "In the coal cellar." "In the coal cellar! Then why are you looking for it out here?" The Hojah answered: "The light is better here."

Teachers were poor in ancient Turkey. Many of the stories emphasize their poverty.

One night when the Hojah was asleep a burglar entered his house and was rummaging through it. The Hojah's wife was awakened and she quietly roused her husband and urged him to go downstairs and face the burglar. "Let's wait," said the Hojah. "Maybe he'll find something. Then I can jump up and take it from him."

So poor was the Hojah that he occasionally, I am afraid, resorted to a little amiable thievery or attempted thievery.

One day the Hojah sneaked into a farmyard to steal a rooster. Just as he got his hands on it, the rooster began to crow. This alerted the owner, who hurried to the scene, and said: "Hojah, what are you doing here?" Said the Hojah, innocently: "As you can see, I'm teaching your rooster to crow."

One day the Hojah brought wheat to the mill; then he began to take wheat out of the baskets of other people and add it to his own. Finally the miller saw him and came up and said: "What are you doing there?" "Don't mind me. I'm just a fool." "Why then don't you take the wheat from your basket and put it in the others?" Said the Hojah: "I'm not that big a fool."

The Hojah's donkey is a hero of many of the stories. In the minds of the Turks, their beloved Hojah and his donkey are inseparably joined, even though in his lifetime his relations with his donkey were not always cordial.

One day the Hojah bought a load of pickles and went down to the market to sell them. Every time he started crying out "Pickles for sale," the donkey would start to bray and he would bray so loudly that nobody could hear the Hojah. Finally the Hojah lost his temper and he turned to the donkey and said: "Look here, friend, are you selling these pickles or am I?"

A neighbor came to the Hojah and asked to borrow his donkey for the day. The Hojah did not want to give it to him, so he said he had already lent it out to someone else.

Just at that moment, from the stable the donkey let out a loud bray. The neighbor said: "Aren't you ashamed? Lying like that?"

The Hojah answered him: "You mean you'd believe a donkey and not me?"

The Hojah's donkey died, and he was in great grief. The neighbors kidded him, and said: "Why, you didn't grieve that much when your wife died." The Hojah answered, ruefully: "When my wife died, everybody in the village offered me another one. But nobody has offered to give me another donkey."

In some of the stories the Hojah is pictured as having two wives, though that seems a trifle hard to believe, in view of the teacher's financial station, if nothing else. We gather that in polygynous societies, a favorite subject for conversation across the breakfast table is "Whom do you love best?"

In the following stories the Hojah answers this question twice, the first time tactfully.

The Hojah had two wives. He gave each of them a blue shell, as keepsake, telling each not to let anyone else see it. One day they came in together and asked him: "Which of us do you love best?" "The one who has my blue shell," he answered. Each was happy and pitied the other.

His tact slips a couple of notches in the next one, but only under the heaviest of pressures, that of youthful femininity.

The Hojah had two wives, one very young and one old. One day they came in together and asked him: "Which of us do you love best?" The Hojah was very much embarrassed and he kept saying: "I love you both." But they were not satisfied and continued to press him for an answer. Finally, the younger of the two said: "Suppose we two were in a boat and it capsized. Suppose you were standing on the shore. Which of us would you save first? Now, answer me." The Hojah turned to the old wife and said: "I think you know how to swim a little, don't you?"

It seems possible to have marital troubles even with one wife, if we may judge from the Hojah's experiences.

The Hojah brought home three pounds of meat and he said to his wife: "Cook this tomorrow." The next day she cooked it, but her lover appeared, and they ate it up, all three pounds of it. When the Hojah came home he asked: "Where is the meat?" His wife answered: "I was busy in the kitchen and the cat ate it." The Hojah got up, caught the cat and weighed it; it weighed exactly 3 pounds. Then he shouted: "If this is the cat, where's the meat? And if this is the meat, where's the cat?"

One day when the Hojah's wife was trying to cross a river she drowned and the villagers were downstream in search of the body. But the Hojah was searching for her upstream. "Why do you search there?" they shouted. "The river is flowing this way." The Hojah replied: "You don't know how contrary my wife was."

Nasreddin's love of food provides the impetus in many of the stories. His special favorites were *pilaf*, the tasty rice dish, *baklavá*, a honeyfilled pastry, and *halva*, a sesame-seed candy. But he also just plain loved to eat.

One day a neighbor of the Hojah was holding a big wedding party and Nasreddin had not been invited. He heard about the great

quantities of *baklavá* that had been made for the feast. The Hojah took his wife to one side and set up a plan. When the party was at its height, the Hojah beat his wife roundly. She fled across the street to this neighbor in tears and told what had happened. A delegation from the wedding party descended upon the Hojah and rebuked him for his behavior. The penitent Hojah returned with them, apologized to his wife and spent the rest of the evening eating *baklavá*.

The Hojah was at a dinner party at the home of a very wealthy man. They had just been served a tasty meat pie and the Hojah was eating it greedily. His host said to him: “Hojah, don’t eat so much of that. Whoever eats too much of it, will die.” The Hojah debated a while and finally said: “Take care of my family; I bequeath them to you.”

One of the Tamerlane stories combines the theme of Nasreddin’s love of food with the theme of “quick-wittedness.” If the story is actually based on truth, we can imagine the barbarous world-conqueror giving out a raucous laugh over it. Only Nasreddin Hojah could have gotten away with it.

After his conquest of Turkey, Tamerlane permitted some of the local rulers to remain in charge; subject, of course, to himself. One day Tamerlane found out that the ruler of Akshehir was very wealthy and Tamerlane wanted his money. So he ordered the man to appear before him and bring all records of his public financial transactions. When he appeared, Tamerlane accused the man of fraud, confiscated all his wealth, tore up the written records in feigned anger and made him eat them. The next day Tamerlane sent for the Hojah and put him in charge of public finances. The Hojah pleaded several different varieties of illnesses but it did no good. Tamerlane said he wanted a man of proved integrity. Shortly afterwards, Tamerlane called upon his friend the Hojah and asked about the public accounts. The Hojah left for a few moments, then returned with the financial reports, all neatly inscribed on a platterful of griddle cakes. Tamerlane laughed and said: “Hojah, what is

the meaning of this?" The Hojah answered: "Just in case I have to eat them."

The Hojah loved to play a sly joke. One of the most famous of the stories illustrates this.

One day the Hojah went up into the pulpit to preach and he said: "Moslems, do you know the subject on which I am going to preach?" "No," was the reply. Then the Hojah said: "How can I speak to you about something that you don't know anything about?" He left the pulpit. The next day he went up into the pulpit again and he said: "Do you know, my true believers, the subject on which I am going to preach?" "Yes, we know," was the answer. "What need have I to speak then, when you know it already?" Again he left the pulpit. The community was perplexed. One man suggested that, on the next day, one group would say, "We know," and the other "We don't know." This decision was approved. Again the Hojah mounted the pulpit and he called out as before: "Brethren, do you know the subject on which I am going to preach?" They replied: "Some of us do, but the others don't." "Good," answered the Hojah. "Then let those that do tell those that don't."

The sly Hojah was good at repartee, as may be judged from the following stories.

One day the Hojah, being asked his age, said: "Forty." A year later, he was asked again and he again said: "Forty." "But, Hojah, that is what you said last year!" "I am a man of my word. I always stick to what I say."

A neighbor came to the Hojah's house and said: "I understand that you have vinegar which is forty years old. Could you please let me have some?" "No," said the Hojah. "You see, it wouldn't be forty years old if I kept on giving it to others."

The professor had some interesting theories of education, as appears in the next story.

One day the Hojah told one of his pupils to fetch some water from the fountain. "Take care not to break the pitcher," he said, giving the boy a resounding slap on the face. "Why did you strike him?" said a neighbor. "He hasn't broken it yet." The Hojah replied: "What good would it do to strike him *after* he breaks it?"

Incorrigibly witty, he could suffer patiently and turn his suffering to amusement with a comic remark.

The Hojah wanted a shave one day, but he came to a very poor barber who lacerated him with every stroke of the razor. The Hojah suffered acute pain and the tears ran down his cheeks. Soon from outdoors there came a cry and the Hojah asked the barber what the cry was.

The barber looked out, and said to him: "There is a blacksmith in the vicinity and he is shoeing a horse." "Oh," said the Hojah, "I thought they were shaving him."

The Hojah was awakened one night by the shouts of two men quarreling in front of his house. He threw his blanket around him and rushed outside to separate the men who were by now coming to blows. Both men were annoyed by his interfering and they fell on him, gave him a terrific beating and finally ran off with his blanket. Aching from top to toe, he returned to his bedroom. His wife said: "What were the two men quarreling about?" Said the weary Hojah: "About my blanket, apparently."

Nasreddin Hojah went on laughing and joking and causing others to laugh even to his dying day. They tell this story of him on his death bed.

The Hojah was dying, and his wife sat by his side weeping. He kept trying to soothe her and finally said to her in a weak voice: "Would you do something for me?" "Anything at all," she said, sobbing. "Put on your best clothes, your jewels, and dress yourself up as pretty as you can." "But how can I do that, when you are so ill?" "If you love me," he said, "you will do what I ask." Now her curiosity was aroused and she said she would agree, but only if

he told her why he was making such a strange request. So the Hojah told her: "It occurred to me," he said, "that when the Angel of Death comes for my soul and he sees you sitting there looking so pretty, he might decide to take you rather than me."

The Hojah died and he was buried in the tomb built for him near the entrance to the graveyard of Akshehir, which is some 150 miles west and south of Ankara. That tomb is there to see today and the tradition goes that anyone who passes by this tomb and does not laugh, will receive from the Hojah himself some unexpected punishment.

They say that this does not happen very often; for it is very difficult for any Turk, on this, one of his favorite pilgrimages, not to break out laughing; at least in the memory of the hundreds of stories of the beloved Hojah that he has heard and told. Among these, the following is very likely one of his favorites.

Some time after Nasreddin Hojah had died, the people of Akshehir were gathered at prayer at the Hojah's favorite mosque. A man rushed in and interrupted the service. "Good people," he cried, "I have a strange thing to tell you. I have just come from the cemetery and who do you think I saw there? Nasreddin Hojah, sitting on top of his coffin. He turned to me with that same funny face of his, and he said: 'Go, tell the people at the mosque to come here immediately and see me. Anyone who fails to come, does so at his peril.'" So the people rushed to the grave. But there was no Hojah. Laughing, as they remembered how often in life he had played such tricks, they returned to the mosque. When they got there, its dome had disappeared.

The Hojah is beloved in all of Turkey. His memory is fresh. Tonight, in Istanbul, in many a café on the Golden Horn, these stories and stories like these will cheer men's hearts and help people forget the many things which could use a little forgetting.



Supplementary Notes

FOR SCHOLARS, the most controversial issue in the study of Nasreddin, the Hojah, is: *in what century did he live?* The problem of establishing his chronology is an extremely complex one for several reasons. First of all, he is a folk hero, in a medium transmitted primarily orally. Whether he lived in the eighth century A.D., or the thirteenth century, or the fourteenth, or in any of the other suggested eras, it is likely that no written collections of his tales were made for many generations after his death and we can't be sure how many. Even if we accept the latest of the suggested dates, the fourteenth to fifteenth century, there is a considerable lapse of time between it and the earliest existing manuscripts of any of the stories, that is late sixteenth century.

Nomenclature provides an additional factor of confusion. Patronymics were rarely used in the Moslem world. That means the necessity of depending upon given names; of these Nasreddin, "Victory of the Faith," was not an uncommon one.

There was, for example, a learned man by the name of Mohammed Nasreddin, contemporary of Harum al-Rashid (763-809 A.D.), known to have been condemned to death for anti-religious sentiments. Some Turkish scholars have equated Nasreddin Hojah with Mohammed Nasreddin. I think this identification can be rejected, and that it is (as the Hungarian scholar Kunos first observed) an *ex post facto* attempt to chronologize Nasreddin Hojah upon the known fact that some of his stories are irreligious.

Nasreddin's honorary title, in our Roman alphabet, utilizing English sounds, is approximated closely but not exactly by "Hojah." In Turkish it means "teacher" or "scholar," and it remotely resembles our Ph.D., "Doctor of Philosophy." Even the title has compounded the difficulty. For there existed in the tenth century A.D. a comic character among the Arabs with a somewhat similar name, one which in English we might transliterate roughly "Johah." In the *Fihirst of Ibn Ishakan an Nadim* (who died in 995), a bibliography of Arab literature, there is mention of a joke book dealing with Johah stories.

It is quite natural that the Johah and the Hojah stories first became confused, then amalgamated. They were finally equated, in one of the most popular joke

books in the Orient today: *Nawadir Johah Nasreddin Effendi Hojah* (see Chronology and Bibliography), for which unfortunately the First Edition date is unknown.

Of theories with the strongest support among scholars there are two: that Nasreddin Hojah lived in the thirteenth century; or that he was contemporary with Tamerlane, a century or more later.

Those who hold for the thirteenth century date point to the evidence of the inscription over his tomb in Akshehir, Anatolia. This inscription reads:

“THIS IS THE TOMB OF THE IMMORTAL,
MOST DESERVING NASREDDIN,
TO WHOM PARDON OF HIS SINS IS GUARANTEED
BY THE MERCY OF HIS LORD, THE PARDONER.
SAY A PRAYER FOR HIS SOUL. 386”

If the 386 identifies the date of his death, and not the date of a tomb put up much later, as the Nasreddin legend began to grow, and if we assume the 386 really means 683 (by typical Hojah joking)—683 of the Moslem era, that is, then we get the date 1284 A.D.

I, for one, am not prepared to accept these assumptions; but many are, and we must not forget that the matter rests chiefly upon folk memory and tradition.

But why shouldn't the 386 “really mean” 386? That would give us 987 A.D. Or why shouldn't it mean 836, which would give us 1437 A.D.? This would bring us closer to the other of the two most strongly held hypotheses: that the Hojah was contemporary with and an intimate of Tamerlane (1336?–1405 A.D.), Timur, the world-conquering Tartar who completely crushed the Turks and Bayazid in 1402 A.D.

This theory which I find attractive and which Wesselski prefers, gets its chief support from a cycle of Nasreddin stories dealing with the terrible Tamerlane. These may, of course, be a later intrusion. But to me the stories sound plausible, sincere, and acceptable. In them the Hojah is never fawning, but he is at times afraid. He is occasionally daring, but up to a point. He is at times angry and helpless; at other times he is able to use his influence to win better treatment for his people.

Pertev Naili Boratav, who prefers the thirteenth century (pre-Tamerlane) date, reports that I. H. Konyali, Turkish scholar, has brought up a new piece of evidence: a *graffito* inscribed on the wall of the Hojah's tomb by a Turkish soldier, and dated 1393. Of course if this were genuine, and the date were honest, that would terminate the matter; or, at the very least, it would throw out the hypothesis of contemporaneity with Tamerlane.

However, evidence from wall scratchings has to be handled with care and some skepticism; we can imagine the plight of future epigraphers as they try to piece together the biography of the ubiquitous Kilroy. Boratav himself admits that the researches of the past twenty years have not established anything of a decisive nature on the dating of the Hojah, whether thirteenth century or whether he met Tamerlane in 1402.

Of course, there are other theories. The Persians, for example, claim him as their own and say he lived circa 1200 A.D., under the reign of Khwarizmshah Ala al-Din Takash, who ruled from 1172 to 1200.

Over his birthplace, too, there are conflicting traditions. Here the rivalry is between Sivrihisar and Akshehir, both in Anatolia, Turkey. There is some opinion among Turkish scholars that he was born in Sivrihisar, or rather in the nearby village of Khorto, and spent the latter part of his life in Akshehir, where his tomb is. But the people of Akshehir deny this. They say he was born in Akshehir and they agree that he spent the major part of his life there and of course that his tomb is there.

They go even further. Among them he has been converted into a saint in heaven and a worker of miracles. Many go to his tomb to pray and to ask intercessions. It is said there is hardly an alley or a fountain that does not have a tradition connected with his name; that in every mosque it is maintained that Nasreddin Hojah preached here; the guides will show tourists the exact spot where the Hojah spoke his famous humorous words about the omnipotence of God: "If God's hands did not guide everything, surely once in my life something would have happened like I wanted it to."

The Hojah is not a hero in Akshehir alone, or in Turkey alone. The Turkish Nasreddin is a legendary comic figure in Croatian, Serbian and Modern Greek folklore. Here he is called by one or both names Nasreddin and the Hojah and he is accepted as Turkish. In Sicilian and Calabrian folklore he may be the model for the humorous character called variously Giufà or Giucà or Hiohà or Juvadi. Wesselski at any rate apparently thinks so and includes their stories in the Nasreddin cycle. Among the Arabs, the Berbers and the Maltese he has been irretrievably amalgamated and confused with the tenth century Arab Johah (*vide supra*) and nativated.

But the Turkish Nasreddin, unamalgamated and un-nativated, has enjoyed increasing popularity from Spain to Russia and his stories are told as far away from his native Akshehir as Siberia and Mongolia.

As to the various spellings of Hojah, they are, of course, attempts to reproduce in English, or German, or Spanish, or other languages, how the word sounds in Turkish. In English it has been printed Hojah, Hoja, Hodja, Khoja, Coja, Kwajah,

and in other ways; in German Hodscha; in Spanish Yehá; in French Goha; *ad infinitum*. When the Turks converted to the Roman alphabet they settled on Hoca, which they pronounce (roughly) Hojah.

However you pronounce him or spell him, the Hojah is one of the great figures in the world's joke lore. He ranks with Hierocles and Philagrius, compilers of the Western World's earliest joke book (see A.S. Number 3.) He ranks with Poggio, the Renaissance Florentine and publisher of the *Facetiae*, jokes and novellas that went all through the countries of Europe. He ranks with Joe Miller, the English comic actor who never wrote a joke, but who has given his name to any joke or any joke book (see A.S. Number 2). He ranks with John Mottley, the compiler of the classic work of joke lore, "The Jests of Joe Miller" (see A.S. Number 2).

A. R.

APPENDIX

No. 1

Chronology and Bibliography

No. 2

A Selection of Hojah Platitudes

No. 3

Two Illustrated "Nasrdin Avanti" Anecdotes

No. 4

List of Humorous Personalities
comparable to the Hojah

No. 5

Grateful Acknowledgments.

Nasreddin Hojah

Chronology and Bibliography

THE FOLLOWING NOTE is designed to set forth the chronology of events allegedly associated with Nasreddin Hojah under the multiple spellings which various authors and anthologists have utilized. Wherever, among the items referred to, there is an item which is in the Library of Congress, the reference is abbreviated to "L. of C." Items which are in the British Museum are classified by the letters "B.M." Items in the SCOWAH collection are so noted. Many of the items listed are referred to in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. III, pages 875 to 878, and some of the items come from Albert Wesselki's bibliography.

Nasreddin may have been a contemporary of Khwarizmshah Ala al-Din Takash, who reigned from 1172 to 1200. Others advance the theory that he was the contemporary of Harun al-Rashid (763-809). Others claim he lived in the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century, the period of Bayazid I, Timur, and the Eighth Karamanid Ala al-Din. Another group indicates he belongs in the thirteenth century during the period of Saldjuk Ala al-Din. Another group declares he is a contemporary in 1200 of Shaiyad Hamza. (See *Letaif*, by Lamii (circa. 1532).)

According to Hasan Efendi, the Hojah was born in the village of Khorto (Hortu) near Siwri-Hisar in 1208. There he was supposed to have held the office of Imam, in which he succeeded his father. The same authority indicates that he moved in 1237 to Aksehir, where he died in 1284 at the approximate age of 76 (15 years before the foundation of the Turkish Ottoman Empire).

995 (circa.) *Book of Anecdotes of D' Juha*, referred to in Fihrist of Al-Nadin.

1040-41 (circa.) Reference to *D' Juha*, by Minucihri.

1124 (circa.) Maidani: *Arabium Proverbia*.

1190 (circa.) Reference by Anwari.

1201 (circa.) See *Tales of Karahush*.

1273 (circa.) See Stories in *Djalal al-Din Rum'i*.

1370-71 (circa.) See Stories in *Ubaid-i Zakani*.

Between 1300 and 1400 there are references to the Hojah in the *Travels of Ewilya Celebi*.

1402. Legendary meeting between Nasreddin and Tamerlane.
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1789. Karl Friedrich Flogel: *Geschichte der Hofnarren*, Liegnitz und Leipzig.
1816. Translation of five Hojah stories by Von Diez.
1827. Hammer: *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches*, Pest.
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1853. A. Pann: *Anthology of Anecdotes of Nasr Eddin* (Roumania).
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1862. R. Kohler: *Orient and Occident*.
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1875. Giuseppe Pitre: *Fiabe, novelle e racconti popolari siciliani*, Palermo.
1876. J. A. Decourdemanche: *Les plaisanteries de Nasr-Eddin Hodja*, traduites du turc, Paris. (126 tales.) Part of the *Bibliothèque Oriental Elzevirienne*. (B.M. and SCOWAH)
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 MS. Bodleian Oriental (Selden superius) 8

Excerpts from *Les Reflections d'Ebn Goha*, by J. Ascar Nahas, Paris, 1945.

Some Advice

Do not fight if you are sure to be the loser.
Before thanking the one who offers you a jewel box, see what the box contains.
Stay in the shadow of your leader, he will give you his light.
One must learn to arrive when you are wanted and to leave before you are no longer wanted.
The last word belongs to him who hollers the longest, not the loudest.
Don't ask for mercy before knowing if you are in danger.
When your wife is in labor, don't speak of your bellyache.
Undertake only a few things but do them well. One judges the soldier by his victories not the number of his battles.
Don't stir up a problem when you don't want to be faced with solving it.
If you don't want to be shoved, don't put yourself in the way.
Don't say that your enemy cannot conquer you if you are out of his reach. The monkey, at the top of the tree, easily mocks the elephant.
The more you reveal, the less you are interesting. The open book attracts little notice.
If you hold the tail of your donkey, don't complain of his kicks.
Throw a dog a bone if you don't want him to covet your meat.
If you cut the wings of the bird, don't ask him to fly.
Spend half of your time mistrusting others, and the other half mistrusting yourself.
Liberty, today, is the art of knowing how to submit.

And Some Considerations

The beautiful courtesan allows her charms to be seen before giving the price of her favors. Should good merchandise be afraid of display?
Will it not encourage a man's deceit to show him you mistrust him?
To be just is to refuse yourself that which you refuse others.
Correction of an error often draws attention to it.

Obsequiousness is for some a necessity, for others, a need.

One doesn't hold a reasonable conversation with a fool.

One chokes some by silence, others by publicity.

The leader must love battle and seek to avoid it.

A broom in the hand of a determined man is a fearful weapon.

In life you must learn sometimes to stay in the background but not disappear altogether.

A tiger doesn't understand petting even when it comes from the hands of a pretty woman.

There are times when we unknowingly become the instruments of torture for those who prefer to remain anonymous. For not all have the candour to play the executioner.

There is no remedy for constipation of either the heart or the mind.

The silence of an imbecile is an art . . . that of a wise man a virtue.

We are very often apt to mistake our stubbornness for willpower and our rashness for a decisive spirit.

To be a fool at the right moment is an art.

We live in jest but we die in earnest.

A wise man cares not for what he cannot have.

(Translated By Miss CAROLYN GRAHAM)

Two Illustrated Anecdotes from China

ANECDOTES and illustrations from "Stories About Nasrdin Avanti," (*Folk Tales from China, First Series*, Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1957).



The Only Remedy

A neighbor intended to make fun of Avanti and told him: "Last night, a mouse crept into my stomach while I was sleeping. What shall I do?"

"What you must do at once is to find yourself a live cat and swallow it. That's the only remedy for you," was Avanti's immediate rejoinder.



The Ring

One of Avanti's friends, a businessman, came to say goodbye to him before setting out for a long journey. He saw Avanti wearing a golden ring and schemed to get it.

“Avanti,” said the friend, “I can’t live in peace if I don’t see you for a long time. I’ll be missing you so much when I am away! Why don’t you let me have your ring for the sake of our friendship? Whenever I look at it, I’ll then feel like seeing you in the flesh and this’ll be a great comfort to me.”

But the ring was the only valuable thing Avanti had ever had in his life and he would not give it away.

So he replied: “I’m deeply grateful for your kind sentiments. But I too cannot live in peace, if I have to miss you for a long time. Be merciful and let me keep the ring! Whenever I look at it, I’ll remember how my friend asked me for it, but I didn’t give it to him, and so it’ll constantly remind me of you.”



Humorous Personalities

THE STORIES associated with the Hojah reflect jests of wit, foolishness, absurdity, or moronity. The personality of the Mullah bears a strong resemblance to characters associated with similar anecdotes in areas other than Turkey and in eras other than the one in which Nasreddin lived. Stupid people have always been a fine harvest for satire. We suggest a few of such jesters.

Joe Miller; Tyll Eulenspiegel of Flanders; Burtoldo, Pasquino, Pietro, and Giufa of Italy; Balakirew and Lutonya of Russia; Rabbi Itzik the Fool; Hersh Ostropoler, Polish of Jewish faith; George Buchanan, the King's Fool; Tabourot's Lord Gaulard of Burgundy; Lamkin of France; the Moronic Citizens of the Village of Chelm, Poland and of Durachesok, Russia; Leper the Taylor; Lothian Tom; the Wise or Mad Men of Gotham; the Beni Jennad of North Africa; the Gooroo; the people of Tumpane Village, Ceylon; the people of Sivrihisar; Simple Simon; Foolish Sachuli; Xailown; Dandaka; Nigniaca of Florence; Wise Willie and Witty Eppy; Paddy of Cork; Juan Bobo of Puerto Rico; Sancho Panza of Spain; Lala and Sosa of Croatia; Ping Sin and Pu Shih of China; Sankuro of Japan; Wabassi of South America; Knuckle-head John of England; Peter the Fool of Denmark; Silly Matt of Norway; Kultani of Finland; Tandala and Pakala of Roumania; Johnny Lynch of Ireland; Mortimer Snerd of Hollywood; and many others. N.S.



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