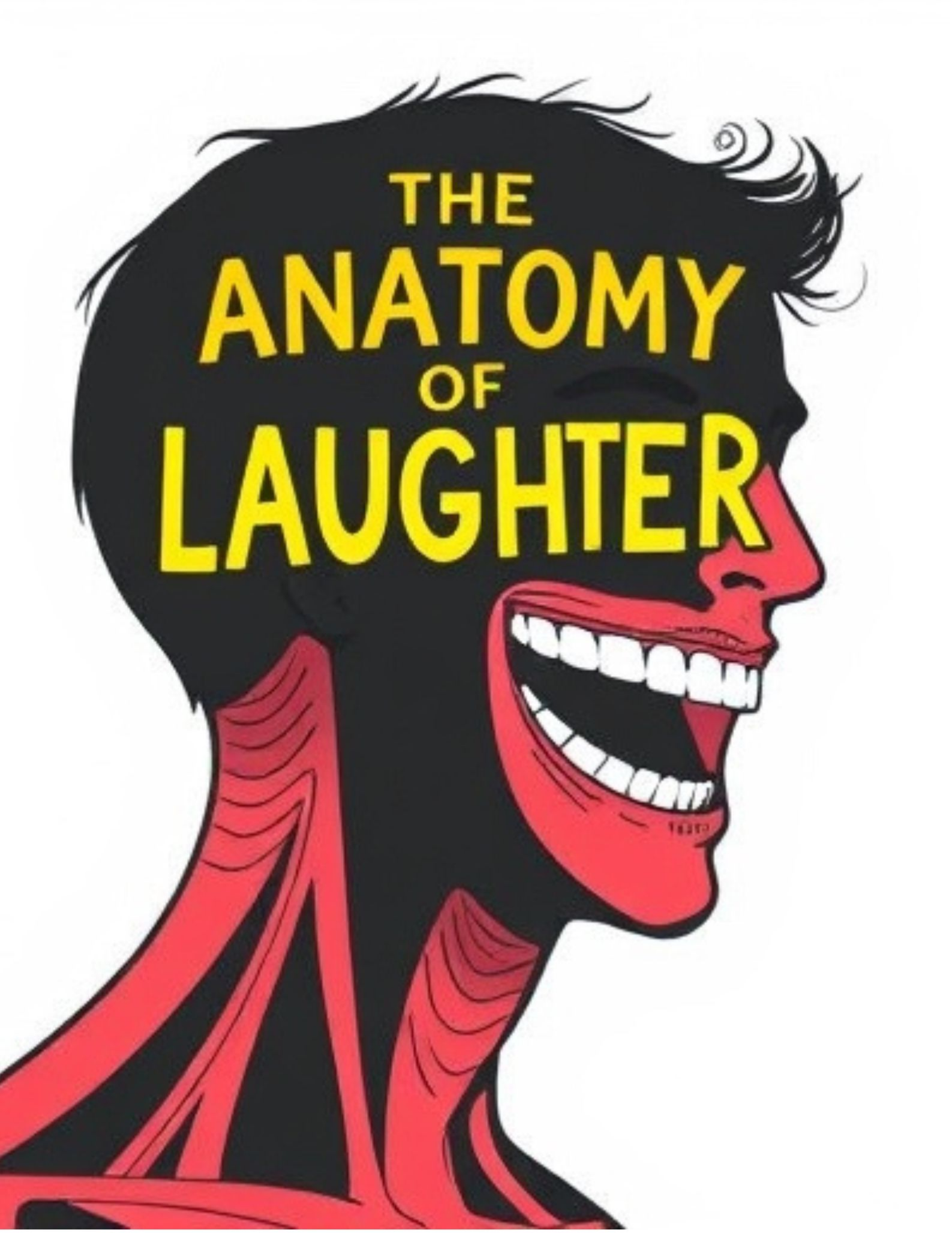

UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN SENSE OF THE LUDICROUS

No creature save man, say the advocates of the last definition, seems to have any “sense of humour.” However this may be, there can be little doubt that man in all ages of which we have any knowledge has possessed that faculty which perceives ridiculous incongruities in the relative positions of certain objects, and in the actions and sayings of individuals, which we term the “sense of the ludicrous.” It is not to be supposed that a dog or a cat—albeit intelligent creatures, in their own ways— would see anything funny or laughable in a man whose sole attire consisted in a general’s hat and sash and a pair of spurs! Yet that should be enough to “make even a cat laugh”! Certainly laughter is peculiar to our species; and gravity is as certainly not always a token of profound wisdom; for The gravest beast’s an ass; The gravest bird’s an owl; The gravest fish’s an oyster; And the gravest man’s a fool. Many of the great sages of antiquity were also great humorists, and laughed long and heartily at a good jest. And, indeed, as the Sage of Chelsea affirms, “no man who has once heartily and wholly laughed can be altogether, irreclaimably bad. How much lies in laughter!—the cipher key wherewith we decipher the whole man!… The man who cannot laugh is not only fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils, but his whole life is already a treason and a stratagem.” Let us, then, laugh at what is laughable while we are yet clothed in “this muddy vesture of decay,” for, as delightful Elia asks, “Can a ghost laugh? Can he shake his gaunt sides if we be merry with him?” It is a remarkable fact that a considerable proportion of the familiar jests of almost any country, which are by its natives fondly believed to be “racy of the soil,” are in reality common to other peoples widely differing in language and customs. Not a few of these jests had their origin ages upon ages since—in Greece, in Persia, in India. Yet they must have set out upon their travels westward at a comparatively early period, for they have been long domiciled in almost every country of Europe. Nevertheless, as we ourselves possess a goodly number of droll witticisms, repartees, and jests, which are most undoubtedly and beyond cavil our own—such as many of those which are ascribed to Sam Foote, Harry Erskine, Douglas Jerrold, and Sydney Smith; though they have been credited with some that are as old as the jests of Hierokles—so there exist in what may be termed the lower strata of Oriental fiction, humorous and witty stories, characteristic of the different peoples amongst whom they originated, which, for the most part, have not yet been appropriated by the European compilers of books of facetiæ, and a selection of such jests—choice specimens of Oriental Wit and Humour—gleaned from a great variety of sources, will, I trust, amuse readers in general, and lovers of funny anecdotes in particular. To begin, then—place aux dames! In most Asiatic countries the ladies are at a sad discount in the estimation of their lords and masters, however much the latter may expatiate on their personal charms, and in Eastern jests this is abundantly shown. For instance, a Persian poet, through the importunity of his friends, had married an old and very ugly woman, who turned out also of a very bad temper, and they had constant quarrels. Once, in a dispute, the poet made some comparisons between his aged wife and himself and between Night and Day. “Cease your nonsense,” said she; “night and day were created long before us.” “Hold a little,” said the husband. “I know they were created long before me, but whether before you, admits of great doubt!” Again, a Persian married, and, as is customary with Muslims, on the marriage night saw his bride’s face for the first time, when she proved to be very ugly—perhaps “plain-looking” were the more respectful expression. A few days after the nuptials, she said to him: “My life! as you have many relatives, I wish you would inform me before which of them I may unveil.” (Women of rank in Muslim countries appear unveiled only before very near relations.) “My soul!” responded the husband, “if thou wilt but conceal thy face from me, I care not to whom thou showest it.” And there is a grim sort of humour in the story of the poor Arab whose wife was going on a visit of condolence, when he said to her: “My dear, if you go, who is to take care of the children, and what have you left for them to eat?” She replied: “As I have neither flour, nor milk, nor butter, nor oil, nor anything else, what can I leave?” “You had better stay at home, then,” said the poor man; “for assuredly this is the true house of condolence.” And also in the following: A citizen of Tawris, in comfortable circumstances, had a daughter so very ugly that nothing could induce any one to marry her. At length he resolved to bestow her on a blind man, hoping that, not seeing her personal defects, he would be kind to her. His plan succeeded, and the blind man lived very happily with his wife.

By-and-by, there arrived in the city a doctor who was celebrated for restoring sight to many people, and the girl's father was urged by his friends to engage this skilled man to operate upon his son-in-law, but he replied: "I will take care to do nothing of the kind; for if this doctor should restore my son-in-law's eyesight, he would very soon restore my daughter to me!" But occasionally ladies are represented as giving witty retorts, as in the story of the Persian lady who, walking in the street, observed a man following her, and turning round enquired of him: "Why do you follow me, sir?" He answered: "Because I am in love with you." "Why are you in love with me?" said the lady. "My sister is much handsomer than I; she is coming after me—go and make love to her." The fellow went back and saw a woman with an exceedingly ugly face, upon which he at once went after the lady, and said to her: "Why did you tell me what was not true?" "Neither did you speak the truth," answered she; "for if you were really in love with me, you would not have turned to see another woman." And the Persian poet Jámí, in his Baháristán, relates that a man with a very long nose asked a woman in marriage, saying: "I am no way given to sloth, or long sleeping, and I am very patient in bearing vexations." To which she replied: "Yes, truly: hadst thou not been patient in bearing vexations thou hadst not carried that nose of thine these forty years." The low estimation in which women are so unjustly held among Muhammedans is perhaps to be ascribed partly to the teachings of the Kurán in one or two passages, and to the traditional sayings of the Apostle Muhammad, who has been credited (or rather discredited) with many things which he probably never said. But this is not peculiar to the followers of the Prophet of Mecca: a very considerable proportion of the Indian fictions represent women in an unfavourable light—fictions, too, which were composed long before the Hindús came in contact with the Muhammedans. Even in Europe, during mediæval times, maugre the "lady fair" of chivalric romance, it was quite as much the custom to decry women, and to relate stories of their profligacy, levity, and perversity, as ever it has been in the East. But we have changed all that in modern times: it is only to be hoped that we have not gone to the other extreme! — According to an Arabian writer, cited by Lane, "it is desirable, before a man enters upon any important undertaking, to consult ten intelligent persons among his particular friends; or if he have not more than five such friends let him consult each twice; or if he have not more than one friend he should consult him ten times, at ten different visits [he would be 'a friend indeed,' to submit to so many consultations on the same subject]; if he have not one to consult let him return to his wife and consult her, and whatever she advises him to do let him do the contrary, so shall he proceed rightly in his affair and attain his object." We may suppose this Turkish story, from the History of the Forty Vezírs, to be illustrative of the wisdom of such teaching: A man went on the roof of his house to repair it, and when he was about to come down he called to his wife, "How should I come down?" The woman answered, "The roof is free; what would happen? You are a young man—jump down." The man jumped down, and his ankle was dislocated, and for a whole year he was bedridden, and his ankle came not back to its place. Next year the man again went on the roof of his house and repaired it. Then he called to his wife, "Ho! wife, how shall I come down?" The woman said, "Jump not; thine ankle has not yet come to its place—come down gently." The man replied, "The other time, for that I followed thy words, and not those of the Apostle [i.e., Muhammed], was my ankle dislocated, and it is not yet come to its place; now shall I follow the words of the Apostle, and do the contrary of what thou sayest " And he jumped down, and straightway his ankle came to its place. In the Turkish collection of jests ascribed to Khoja Nasrú 'd-Dín Efendi is the following, which has been reproduced amongst ourselves within comparatively recent years, and credited to an Irish priest: One day the Khoja went into the pulpit of a mosque to preach to the people. "O men!" said he, "do you know what I should say unto you?" They answered: "We know not, Efendi." "When you do know," said the Khoja, "I shall take the trouble of addressing you." The next day he again ascended into the pulpit, and said, as before: "O men! do you know what I should say unto you?" "We do know," exclaimed they all with one voice. "Then," said he, "what is the use of my addressing you, since you already know?" The third day he once more went into the pulpit, and asked the same question.

The people, having consulted together as to the answer they should make, said: “O Khoja, some of us know, and some of us do not know.” “If that be the case, let those who know tell those who do not know,” said the Khoja, coming down. A poor Arab preacher was once, however, not quite so successful. Having “given out,” as we say, for his text, these words, from the Kurán, “I have called Noah,” and being unable to collect his thoughts, he repeated, over and over again, “I have called Noah,” and finally came to a dead stop; when one of those present shouted, “If Noah will not come, call some one else.” Akin to this is our English jest of the deacon of a dissenting chapel in Yorkshire, who undertook, in the vanity of his heart, to preach on the Sunday, in place of the pastor, who was ill, or from home. He conducted the devotional exercises fairly well, but when he came to deliver his sermon, on the text, “I am the Light of the world,” he had forgot what he intended to say, and continued to repeat these words, until an old man called out, “If thou be the light o’ the world, I think thou needs snuffin’ badly.” To return to the Turkish jest-book. One day the Khoja borrowed a cauldron from a brazier, and returned it with a little saucepan inside. The owner, seeing the saucepan, asked: “What is this?” Quoth the Khoja: “Why, the cauldron has had a young one”; whereupon the brazier, well pleased, took possession of the saucepan. Some time after this the Khoja again borrowed the cauldron and took it home. At the end of a week the brazier called at the Khoja’s house and asked for his cauldron. “O set your mind at rest,” said the Khoja; “the cauldron is dead.” “O Khoja,” quoth the brazier, “can a cauldron die?” Responded the Khoja: “Since you believed it could have a young one, why should you not also believe that it could die?” The Khoja had a pleasant way of treating beggars. One day a man knocked at his door. “What do you want?” cried the Khoja from above. “Come down,” said the man. The Khoja accordingly came down, and again said: “What do you want?” “I want charity,” said the man. “Come up stairs,” said the Khoja. When the beggar had come up, the Khoja said: “God help you”—the customary reply to a beggar when one will not or cannot give him anything. “O master,” cried the man, “why did you not say so below?” Quoth the Khoja: “When I was above stairs, why did you bring me down?” Drunkenness is punished (or punishable) by the infliction of eighty strokes of the bastinado in Muslim countries, but it is only flagrant cases that are thus treated, and there is said to be not a little private drinking of spirits as well as of wine among the higher classes, especially Turks and Persians. It happened that the governor of Súricastle lay in a state of profound intoxication in a garden one day, and was thus discovered by the Khoja, who was taking a walk in the same garden with his friend Ahmed. The Khoja instantly stripped him of his ferage, or upper garment, and, putting it on his own back, walked away. When the governor awoke and saw that his ferage had been stolen, he told his officers to bring before him whomsoever they found wearing it. The officers, seeing the ferage on the Khoja, seized and brought him before the governor, who said to him: “Ho! Khoja, where did you obtain that ferage?” The Khoja responded “As I was taking a walk with my friend Ahmed we saw a fellow lying drunk, whereupon I took off his ferage and went away with it. If it be yours, pray take it.” “O no,” said the governor, “it does not belong to me.” Even being robbed could not disturb the Khoja’s good humour. When he was lying in bed one night a loud noise was heard in the street before his house. Said he to his wife: “Get up and light a candle, and I will go and see what is the matter.” “You had much better stay where you are,” advised his wife. But the Khoja, without heeding her words, put the counterpane on his shoulders and went out. A fellow, on perceiving him, immediately snatched the counterpane from off the Khoja’s shoulders and ran away. Shivering with cold, the Khoja returned into the house, and when his wife asked him the cause of the noise, he said: “It was on account of our counterpane; when they got that, the noise ceased at once.” But in the following story we have a very old acquaintance in a new dress: One day the Khoja’s wife, in order to plague him, served up some exceedingly hot broth, and, forgetting what she had done, put a spoonful of it in her mouth, which so scalded her that the tears came into her eyes. “O wife,” said the Khoja, “what is the matter with you—is the broth hot?” “Dear Efendi,” said she, “my mother, who is now dead, loved broth very much; I thought of that, and wept on her account.” The Khoja, thinking that what she said was truth, took a spoonful of the broth, and, it burning his mouth, he began to bellow.

"What is the matter with you?" said his wife. "Why do you cry?" Quoth the Khoja: "You cry because your mother is gone, but I cry because her daughter is here." Many of the Muslim jests, like some our of own, are at the expense of poor preachers. Thus: there was in Baghdád a preacher whom no one attended after hearing him but once. One Friday when he came down from the pulpit he discovered that the only one who remained in the mosque was the muezzin—all his hearers had left him to finish his discourse as, and when, he pleased—and, still worse, his slippers had also disappeared. Accusing the muezzin of having stolen them, "I am rightly served by your suspicion," retorted he, "for being the only one that remained to hear you."—In Gladwin's Persian Moonshee we read that whenever a certain learned man preached in the mosque, one of the congregation wept constantly, and the preacher, observing this, concluded that his words made a great impression on the man's heart. One day some of the people said to the man: "That learned man makes no impression on our minds;— what kind of a heart have you, to be thus always in tears?" He answered: "I do not weep at his discourse, O Muslims. But I had a goat of which I was very fond, and when he grew old he died. Now, whenever the learned man speaks and wags his beard I am reminded of my goat, for he had just such a voice and beard." But they are not always represented as mere dullards; for example: A miserly old fellow once sent a Muslim preacher a gold ring without a stone, requesting him to put up a prayer for him from the pulpit. The holy man prayed that he should have in Paradise a golden palace without a roof. When he descended from the pulpit, the man went to him, and, taking him by the hand, said: "O preacher, what manner of prayer is that thou hast made for me?" "If thy ring had had a stone," replied the preacher, "thy palace should also have had a roof." Apropos of misers, our English facetiæ books furnish many examples of their ingenuity in excusing themselves from granting favours asked of them by their acquaintances; and, human nature being much the same everywhere, the misers in the East are represented as being equally adroit, as well as witty, in parrying such objectionable requests. A Persian who had a very miserly friend went to him one day, and said: "I am going on a journey; give me your ring, which I will constantly wear, and whenever I look on it, I shall remember you." The other answered: "If you wish to remember me, whenever you see your finger without my ring upon it, always think of me, that I did not give you my ring." And quite as good is the story of the dervish who said to the miser that he wanted something of him; to which he replied: "If you will consent to a request of mine, I will consent to whatever else you may require"; and when the dervish desired to know what it was, he said: "Never ask me for anything and whatever else you say I will perform." It is well known that deaf men generally dislike having their infirmity alluded to, and even endeavour to conceal it as much as possible. Charles Lamb, or some other noted wit, seeing a deaf acquaintance on the other side of the street one day while walking with a friend, stopped and motioned to him; then opened his mouth as if speaking in a loud tone, but saying not a word. "What are you bawling for?" demanded the deaf one. "D'ye think I can't hear?"—Two Eastern stories I have met with are most diverting examples of this peculiarity of deaf folks. One is related by my friend Pandit Natésa Sastrí in his Folk-Lore of Southern India, of which a few copies were recently issued at Bombay. 29 A deaf man was sitting one day where three roads crossed, when a neatherd happened to pass that way. He had lately lost a good cow and a calf, and had been seeking them some days. When he saw the deaf man sitting by the way he took him for a soothsayer, and asked him to find out by his knowledge of magic where the cow would likely be found. The herdsman was also very deaf, and the other, without hearing what he had said, abused him, and said he wished to be left undisturbed, at the same time stretching out his hand and pointing at his face. This pointing the herd supposed to indicate the direction where the lost cow and calf should be sought; thus thinking (for he, too, had not heard a word of what the other man had said to him), the herd went off in search, resolving to present the soothsayer with the calf if he found it with the cow. To his joy, and by mere chance, of course, he found them both, and, returning with them to the deaf man (still sitting by the wayside), he pointed to the calf and asked him to accept of it. Now, it so happened that the calf's tail was broken and crooked, and the deaf man supposed that the herdsman was blaming him for having broken it, and by a wave of his hand he denied the charge.

This the poor deaf neatherd mistook for a refusal of the calf and a demand for the cow, so he said: “How very greedy you are, to be sure! I promised you the calf, and not the cow.” “Never!” exclaimed the deaf man in a rage. “I know nothing of you or your cow and calf. I never broke the calf’s tail.” While they were thus quarrelling, without understanding each other, a third man happened to pass, and seeing his opportunity to profit by their deafness, he said to the neatherd in a loud voice, yet so as not to be heard by the other deaf man: “Friend, you had better go away with your cow. Those soothsayers are always greedy. Leave the calf with me, and I shall make him accept it.” The poor neatherd, highly pleased to have secured his cow, went off, leaving the calf with the traveller. Then said the traveller to the deaf man: “It is, indeed, very unlawful, friend, for that neatherd to charge you with an offence which you did not commit; but never mind, since you have a friend in me. I shall contrive to make clear to him your innocence; leave this matter to me.” So saying, he walked away with the calf, and the deaf man went home, well pleased that he had escaped from such a serious accusation. The other story is of a deaf Persian who was taking home a quantity of wheat, and, coming to a river which he must cross, he saw a horseman approach; so he said to himself: “When that horseman comes up, he will first salute me, ‘Peace be with thee’; next he will ask, ‘What is the depth of this river?’ and after that he will ask, how many máns of wheat I have with me.” (A mán is a Persian weight, which seems to vary in different places.) But the deaf man’s surmises were all in vain; for when the horseman came up to him, he cried: “Ho! my man, what is the depth of this river?” The deaf one replied: “Peace be with thee, and the mercy of Allah and his blessing.” At this the horseman laughed, and said: “May they cut off thy beard!” The deaf one rejoined: “To my neck and bosom.” The horseman said: “Dust be on thy mouth!” The deaf man answered: “Eighty máns of it.” The laziness of domestics is a common complaint in this country at the present day, but surely never was there a more lazy servant than the fellow whose exploits are thus recorded: A Persian husbandman one night desired his servant to shut the door, and the man said it was already shut. In the morning his master bade him open the door, and he coolly replied that, foreseeing this request, he had left it open the preceding night. Another night his master bade him rise and see whether it rained. But he called for the dog that lay at the door, and finding his paws dry, answered that the night was fair; then being desired to see whether the fire was extinguished, he called the cat, and finding her paws cold, replied in the affirmative.—This story had gained currency in Europe in the 13th century, and it forms one of the mediæval Latin Stories edited, for the Percy Society, by Thos. Wright, where it is entitled, “De Maimundo Armigero.” There is another Persian story of a lazy fellow whose master, being sick, said to him: “Go and get me some medicine.” “But,” rejoined he, “it may happen that the doctor is not at home.” “You will find him at home.” “But if I do find him at home he may not give me the medicine,” quoth the servant. “Then take this note to him and he will give it to you.” “Well,” persisted the fellow, “he may give me the medicine, but suppose it does you no good?” “Villain!” exclaimed his master, out of all patience, “will you do as I bid you, instead of sitting there so coolly, raising difficulties?” “Good sir,” reasoned this lazy philosopher, “admitting that the medicine should produce some effect, what will be the ultimate result? We must all die some time, and what does it matter whether it be to-day or to-morrow?” The Chinese seem not a whit behind other peoples in appreciating a good jest, as has been shown by the tales and bon mots rendered into French by Stanislas Julien and other eminent savans. Here are three specimens of Chinese humour: A wealthy man lived between the houses of two blacksmiths, and was constantly annoyed by the noise of their hammers, so that he could not get rest, night or day. First he asked them to strike more gently; then he made them great promises if they would remove at once. The two blacksmiths consented, and he, overjoyed to get rid of them, prepared a grand banquet for their entertainment. When the banquet was over, he asked them where they were going to take up their new abodes, and they replied—to the intense dismay of their worthy host, no doubt: “He who lives on the left of your house is going to that on the right; and he who lives on your right is going to the house on your left.” There is a keen satirical hit at the venality of Chinese judges in our next story.

A husbandman, who wished to rear a particular kind of vegetable, found that the plants always died. He consulted an experienced gardener as to the best means of preventing the death of plants. The old man replied: “The affair is very simple; with every plant put down a piece of money.” His friend asked what effect money could possibly have in a matter of this kind. “It is the case now-a-days,” said the old man, “that where there is money life is safe, but where there is none death is the consequence.” The tale of Apelles and the shoemaker is familiar to every schoolboy, but the following story of the Chinese painter and his critics will be new to most readers: A gentleman having got his portrait painted, the artist suggested that he should consult the passers-by as to whether it was a good likeness. Accordingly he asked the first that was going past: “Is this portrait like me?” The man said: “The cap is very like.” When the next was asked, he said: “The dress is very like.” He was about to ask a third, when the painter stopped him, saying: “The cap and the dress do not matter much; ask the person what he thinks of the face.” The third man hesitated a long time, and then said: “The beard is very like.” And now we shall revert once more to Persian jests, many of which are, however, also current in India, through the medium of the Persian language. When a man becomes suddenly rich it not unfrequently follows that he becomes as suddenly oblivious of his old friends. Thus, a Persian having obtained a lucrative appointment at court, a friend of his came shortly afterwards to congratulate him thereon. The new courtier asked him: “Who are you? And why do you come here?” The other coolly replied: “Do you not know me, then? I am your old friend, and am come to condole with you, having heard that you had lately lost your sight.”—This recalls the clever epigram: When Jack was poor, the lad was frank and free; Of late he’s grown brimful of pride and pelf; You wonder that he don’t remember me? Why, don’t you see, Jack has forgot himself! The humour of the following is—to me, at least—simply exquisite: A man went to a professional scribe and asked him to write a letter for him. The scribe said that he had a pain in his foot. “A pain in your foot!” echoed the man. “I don’t want to send you to any place that you should make such an excuse.” “Very true,” said the scribe; “but, whenever I write a letter for any one, I am always sent for to read it, because no one else can make it out.”—And this is a very fair specimen of ready wit: During a season of great drought in Persia, a schoolmaster at the head of his pupils marched out of Shíráz to pray (at the tomb of some saint in the suburbs) for rain, when they were met by a waggish fellow, who inquired where they were going. The preceptor informed him, and added that, no doubt, Allah would listen to the prayers of innocent children. “Friend,” quoth the wit, “if that were the case, I fear there would not be a schoolmaster left alive.” The “harmless, necessary cat” has often to bear the blame of depredations in which she had no share—especially the “lodging-house cat”; and, that such is the fact in Persia as well as nearer our own doors, let a story related by the celebrated poet Jámí serve as evidence: A husband gave a mán of meat to his wife, bidding her cook it for his dinner. The woman roasted it and ate it all herself, and when her husband asked for the meat she said the cat had stolen it. The husband weighed the cat forthwith, and found that she had not increased in weight by eating so much meat; so, with a hundred perplexing thoughts, he struck his hand on his knee, and, upbraiding his wife, said: “O lady, doubtless the cat, like the meat, weighed one mán; the meat would add another mán thereto. This point is not clear to me—that two máns should become one mán. If this is the cat, where is the meat? And if this is the meat, why has it the form of the cat?” Readers of our early English jest-books will perhaps remember the story of a court-jester being facetiously ordered by the king to make out a list of all the fools in his dominions, who replied that it would be a much easier task to write down a list of all the wise men. I fancy there is some trace of this incident in the following Persian story, though the details are wholly different: Once upon a time a party of merchants exhibited to a king some fine horses, which pleased him so well that he bought them, and gave the merchants besides a large sum of money to pay for more horses which they were to bring from their own country. Some time after this the king, being merry with wine, said to his chief vazír: “Make me out a list of all the blockheads in my kingdom.” The vazír replied that he had already made out such a list, and had put his Majesty’s name at the top.

“Why so?” demanded the king. “Because,” said the vazír, “you gave a great sum of money for horses to be brought by merchants for whom no person is surety, nor does any one know to what country they belong; and this is surely a sign of stupidity.” “But what if they should bring the horses?” The vazír readily replied: “If they should bring the horses, I should then erase your Majesty’s name and put the names of the merchants in its place.” Everybody knows the story of the silly old woman who went to market with a cow and a hen for sale, and asked only five shillings for the cow, but ten pounds for the hen. But no such fool was the Arab who lost his camel, and, after a long and fruitless search, anathematised the errant quadruped and her father and her mother, and swore by the Prophet that, should he find her, he would sell her for a dirham (sixpence). At length his search was successful, and he at once regretted his oath; but such an oath must not be violated, so he tied a cat round the camel’s neck, and went about proclaiming: “I will sell this camel for a dirham, and this cat for a hundred dínars (fifty pounds); but I will not sell one without the other.” A man who passed by and heard this exclaimed: “What a very desirable bargain that camel would be if she had not such a collar round her neck!” 31 For readiness of wit the Arabs would seem to compare very favourably with any race, European or Asiatic, and many examples of their felicitous repartees are furnished by native historians and grammarians. One of the best is: When a khalíf was addressing the people in a mosque on his accession to the khalífate, and told them, among other things in his own praise, that the plague which had so long raged in Baghdád had ceased immediately he became khalíf; an old fellow present shouted: “Of a truth, Allah was too merciful to give us both thee and the plague at the same time.” The story of the Unlucky Slippers in Cardonne’s Mélanges de Littérature Orientale is a very good specimen of Arabian humour: 32 In former times there lived in the famous city of Baghdád a miserly old merchant named Abú Kasim. Although very rich, his clothes were mere rags; his turban was of coarse cloth, and exceedingly dirty; but his slippers were perfect curiosities—the soles were studded with great nails, while the upper leathers consisted of as many different pieces as the celebrated ship Argos. He had worn them during ten years, and the art of the ablest cobblers in Baghdád had been exhausted in preventing a total separation of the parts; in short, by frequent accessions of nails and patches they had become so heavy that they passed into a proverb, and anything ponderous was compared to Abú Kasim’s slippers. Walking one day in the great bazaar, the purchase of a large quantity of crystal was offered to this merchant, and, thinking it a bargain, he bought it. Not long after this, hearing that a bankrupt perfumer had nothing left to sell but some rose-water, he took advantage of the poor man’s misfortune, and purchased it for half the value. These lucky speculations had put him into good humour, but instead of giving an entertainment, according to the custom of merchants when they have made a profitable bargain, Abú Kasim deemed it more expedient to go to the bath, which he had not frequented for some time. As he was undressing, one of his acquaintances told him that his slippers made him the laughing-stock of the whole city, and that he ought to provide himself with a new pair. “I have been thinking about it,” he answered; “however, they are not so very much worn but they will serve some time longer.” While he was washing himself, the kází of Baghdád came also to bathe. Abú Kasim, coming out before the judge, took up his clothes but could not find his slippers—a new pair being placed in their room. Our miser, persuaded, because he wished it, that the friend who had spoken to him about his old slippers had made him a present, without hesitation put on these fine ones, and left the bath highly delighted. But when the kází had finished bathing, his servants searched in vain for his slippers; none could be found but a wretched pair, which were at once identified as those of Abú Kasim. The officers hastened after the supposed thief, and, bringing him back with the theft on his feet, the kází, after exchanging slippers, committed him to prison. There was no escaping from the claws of justice without money, and, as Abú Kasim was known to be very rich, he was fined in a considerable sum. On returning home, our merchant, in a fit of indignation, flung his slippers into the Tigris, that ran beneath his window. Some days after they were dragged out in a fisherman’s net that came up more heavy than usual. The nails with which the soles were thickly studded had torn the meshes of the net, and the fisherman, exasperated against the miserly Abú Kasim and his slippers—for they were known to everyone—determined to throw them into his house through the window he had left open.

The slippers, thrown with great force, reached the jars of rose-water, and smashed them in pieces, to the intense consternation of the owner. “Cursed slippers!” cried he, tearing his beard, “you shall cause me no farther mischief!” So saying, he took a spade and began to dig a hole in his garden to bury them. One of his neighbours, who had long borne him ill-will, perceiving him busied in digging the ground, ran at once to inform the governor that Abú Kasim had discovered some hidden treasure in his garden. Nothing more was needful to rouse the cupidity of the commandant. In vain did our miser protest that he had found no treasure; and that he only meant to bury his old slippers. The governor had counted on the money, so the afflicted man could only preserve his liberty at the expense of a large sum of money. Again heartily cursing the slippers, in order to effectually rid himself of them, he threw them into an aqueduct at some distance from the city, persuaded that he should now hear no more of them. But his evil genius had not yet sufficiently plagued him: the slippers got into the mouth of the pipe and stopped the flow of the water. The keepers of the aqueduct made haste to repair the damage, and, finding the obstruction was caused by Abú Kasim’s slippers, complained of this to the governor, and once more was Abú Kasim heavily fined, but the governor considerately returned him the slippers. He now resolved to burn them, but, finding them thoroughly soaked with water, he exposed them to the sun upon the terrace of his house. A neighbour’s dog, perceiving the slippers, leaped from the terrace of his master’s house upon that of Abú Kasim, and, seizing one of them in his mouth, he let it drop into the street: the fatal slipper fell directly on the head of a woman who was passing at the time, and the fright as well as the violence of the blow caused her to miscarry. Her husband brought his complaint before the kází, and Abú Kasim was again sentenced to pay a fine proportioned to the calamity he was supposed to have occasioned. He then took the slippers in his hand, and, with a vehemence that made the judge laugh, said: “Behold, my lord, the fatal instruments of my misfortune! These cursed slippers have at length reduced me to poverty. Vouchsafe, therefore, to publish an order that no one may any more impute to me the disasters they may yet occasion.” The kází could not refuse his request, and thus Abú Kasim learned, to his bitter cost, the danger of wearing his slippers too long. Too many Eastern stories turn upon the artful devices of women to screen their own profligacy, but there is one, told by Arab Sháh, the celebrated historian, who died, in a collection entitled Fakihat al-Khalífa, or Pastimes of the Khalífs, in which a lady exhibits great ingenuity, without any very objectionable motive. It is to the following effect: A young merchant in Baghdád had placed over the front of his shop, instead of a sentence from the Kurán, as is customary, these arrogant words: It happened one day that a very beautiful young lady, who had been sent by her aunt to purchase some rich stuffs for dresses, noticed this inscription, and at once resolved to compel the despiser of her sex to alter it. Entering the shop, she said to him, after the usual salutations: “You see my person; can anyone presume to say that I am humpbacked?” He had hardly recovered from the astonishment caused by such a question, when the lady drew her veil a little to one side and continued: “Surely my neck is not as that of a raven, or as the ebony idols of Ethiopia?” The young merchant, between surprise and delight, signified his assent. “Nor is my chin double,” said she, still farther unveiling her face; “nor my lips thick, like those of a Tartar?” Here the young merchant smiled. “Nor are they to be believed who say that my nose is flat and my cheeks are sunken?” The merchant was about to express his horror at the bare idea of such blasphemy, when the lady wholly removed her veil and allowed her beauty to flash upon the bewildered youth, who instantly became madly in love with her. “Fairest of creatures!” he cried, “to what accident do I owe the view of those charms, which are hidden from the eyes of the less fortunate of my sex?” She replied: “You see in me an unfortunate damsel, and I shall explain the cause of my present conduct. My mother, who was sister to a rich amír of Mecca, died some years ago, leaving my father in possession of an immense fortune and myself as sole heiress. I am now seventeen, my personal endowments are such as you behold, and a very small portion of my mother’s fortune would quite suffice to obtain for me a good establishment in marriage. Yet such is the unfeeling avarice of my father, that he absolutely refuses me the least trifle to settle me in life. The only counsellor to whom I could apply for help in this extremity was my kind nurse, and it is by her advice, as well as from the high opinion I have ever heard expressed of your merits, that I have been induced to throw myself upon your goodness in this extraordinary manner.”

The emotions of the young merchant on hearing this story, may be readily imagined. “Cruel parent!” he exclaimed. “He must be a rock of the desert, not a man, who can condemn so charming a person to perpetual solitude, when the slightest possible sacrifice on his part might prevent it. May I inquire his name?” “He is the chief kází,” replied the lady, and disappeared like a vision. The young merchant lost no time in waiting on the kází at his court of justice, whom he thus addressed: “My lord, I am come to ask your daughter in marriage, of whom I am deeply enamoured.” Quoth the judge: “Sir, my daughter is unworthy of the honour you design for her. But be pleased to accompany me to my dwelling, where we can talk over this matter more at leisure.” They proceeded thither accordingly, and after partaking of refreshments, the young man repeated his request, giving a true account of his position and prospects, and offering to settle fifteen purses on the young lady. The kází expressed his gratification, but doubted whether the offer was made in all seriousness, but when assured that such was the case, he said: “I no longer doubt your earnestness and sincerity in this affair; it is, however, just possible that your feelings may change after the marriage, and it is but natural that I should now take proper precautions for my daughter’s welfare. You will not blame me, therefore, if, in addition to the fifteen purses you have offered, I require that five more be paid down previous to the marriage, to be forfeited in case of a divorce.” “Say ten,” cried the merchant, and the kází looked more and more astonished, and even ventured to remonstrate with him on his precipitancy, but without effect. To be brief, the kází consented, the ten purses were paid down, the legal witnesses summoned, and the nuptial contract signed that very evening; the consummation of the marriage being, much against the will of our lover, deferred till the following day. When the wedding guests had dispersed, the young merchant was admitted to the chamber of his bride, whom he discovered to be humpbacked and hideous beyond conception! As soon as it was day, he arose from his sleepless couch and repaired to the public baths, where, after his ablutions, he gave himself up to melancholy reflections. Mingled with grief for his disappointment was mortification at having been the dupe of what now appeared to him a very shallow artifice, which nothing but his own passionate and unthinking precipitation could have rendered plausible. Nor was he without some twinges of conscience for the sarcasms which he had often uttered against women, and for which his present sufferings were no more than a just retribution. Then came meditations of revenge upon the beautiful author of all this mischief; and then his thoughts reverted to the possible means of escape from his difficulties: the forfeiture of the ten purses, to say nothing of the implacable resentment of the kází and his relatives; and he bethought himself how he should become the talk of his neighbourhood—how Malik bin Omar, the jeweller, would sneer at him, and Salih, the barber, talk sententiously of his folly. At length, finding reflection of no avail, he arose and with slow and pensive steps proceeded to his shop. His marriage with the kází’s deformed daughter had already become known to his neighbours, who presently came to rally him upon his choice of such a bride, and scarcely had they left when the young lady who had so artfully tricked him entered with a playful smile on her lips, and a glancing in her dark eye, which speedily put to flight the young merchant’s thoughts of revenge. He arose and greeted her courteously. “May this day be propitious to thee!” said she. “May Allah protect and bless thee!” Replied he: “Fairest of earthly creatures, how have I offended thee that thou shouldst make me the subject of thy sport?” “From thee,” she said, “I have received no personal injury.” “What, then, can have been thy motive for practising so cruel a deception on one who has never harmed thee?” The young lady simply pointed to the inscription over the shop front. The merchant was abashed, but felt somewhat relieved on seeing good humour beaming from her beautiful eyes, and he immediately took down the inscription, and substituted another, which declared that Then the young lady communicated to him a plan by which he might get rid of his objectionable bride without incurring her father’s resentment, which he forthwith put into practice. Next morning, as the kází and his son-in-law were taking their coffee together, in the house of the former, they heard a strange noise in the street, and, descending to ascertain the cause of the disturbance, found that it proceeded from a crowd of low fellows—mountebanks, and such like gentry, who had assembled with all sorts of musical instruments, with which they kept up a deafening din, at the same time dancing and capering about, and loudly felicitating themselves on the marriage of their pretended kinsman with the kází’s daughter. The young merchant acknowledged their compliments by throwing handfuls of money among the crowd, which caused a renewal of the dreadful clamour. When the noise had somewhat subsided, the kází, hitherto dumb from astonishment, turned to his son-in-law, and demanded to know the meaning of such a scene before his mansion.

The merchant replied that the leaders of the crowd were his kinsfolk, although his father had abandoned the fraternity and adopted commercial pursuits. He could not, however, disown his kindred, even for the sake of the kází's daughter. On hearing this the judge was beside himself with rage and mortification, exclaiming: "Dog, and son of a dog! what dirt is this you have made me eat?" The merchant reminded him that he was now his son-in-law; that his daughter was his lawful wife; declaring that he would not part with her for untold wealth. But the kází insisted upon a divorce and returned the merchant his ten purses. In the sequel, the young merchant, having ascertained the parentage of the clever damsel, obtained her in marriage, and lived with her for many years in happiness and prosperity. Avaricious and covetous men are always the just objects of derision as well as contempt, and surely covetousness was quite concentrated in the person of Ashaab, a servant of Othman (seventh century), and a native of Medina, whose character has been very amusingly drawn by the scholiast: He never saw a man put his hand into his pocket without hoping and expecting that he would give him something. He never saw a funeral go by, but he was pleased, hoping that the deceased had left him something. He never saw a bride about to be conducted through the streets to the house of the bridegroom but he prepared his own house for her reception, hoping that her friends would bring her to his house by mistake. If he saw a workman making a box, he took care to tell him that he was putting in one or two boards too many, hoping that he would give him what was over, or, at least, something for the suggestion. He is said to have followed a man who was chewing mastic (a sort of gum, chewed, like betel, by Orientals as a pastime) for a whole mile, thinking he was perhaps eating food, intending, if so, to ask him for some. When the youths of the town jeered and taunted him, he told them there was a wedding at such a house, in order to get rid of them (because they would go to get a share of the bonbons distributed there); but, as soon as they were gone, it struck him that possibly what he had told them was true, and that they would not have quitted him had they not been aware of its truth; and he actually followed them himself to see what he could do, though exposing himself thereby to fresh taunts from them. When asked whether he knew anyone more covetous than himself, he said: "Yes; a sheep I once had, that climbed to an upper stage of my house, and, seeing a rainbow, mistook it for a rope of hay, and jumping at it, broke her neck"—whence "Ashaab's sheep" became proverbial among the Arabs for covetousness as well as Ashaab himself. Hospitality has ever been the characteristic virtue of the Arabs, and a mean, stingy disposition is rarely to be found among them. A droll story of an Arab of the latter description has been rendered into verse by the Persian poet Liwá'í, the substance of which is as follows: An Arab merchant who had been trading between Mecca and Damascus, at length turned his face homeward, and had reached within one stage of his house when he sat down to rest and to refresh himself with the contents of his wallet. While he was eating, a Bedouin, weary and hungry, came up, and, hoping to be invited to share his repast, saluted him, "Peace be with thee!" which the merchant returned, and asked the nomad who he was and whence he came. "I have come from thy house," was the answer. "Then," said the merchant, "how fares my son Ahmed, absence from whom has grieved me sore?" "Thy son grows apace in health and innocence." "Good! and how is his mother?" "She, too, is free from the shadow of sorrow." "And how is my beauteous camel, so strong to bear his load?" "Thy camel is sleek and fat." "My house-dog, too, that guards my gate, pray how is he?" "He is on the mat before thy door, by day, by night, on constant guard." The merchant, having thus his doubts and fears removed, resumed his meal with freshened appetite, but gave nought to the poor nomad, and, having finished, closed his wallet. The Bedouin, seeing his stinginess, writhed with the pangs of hunger. Presently a gazelle passed rapidly by them, at which he sighed heavily, and the merchant inquiring the cause of his sorrow, he said: "The cause is this—had not thy dog died he would not have allowed that gazelle to escape!" "My dog!" exclaimed the merchant. "Is my doggie, then, dead?" "He died from gorging himself with thy camel's blood." "Who hath cast this dust on me?" cried the merchant. "What of my camel?" "Thy camel was slaughtered to furnish the funeral feast of thy wife." "Is my wife, too, dead?" "Her grief for Ahmed's death was such that she dashed her head against a rock." "But, Ahmed," asked the father—"how came he to die?" "The house fell in and crushed him." The merchant heard this tale with full belief, rent his robe, cast sand upon his head, then started swiftly homeward to bewail his wife and son, leaving behind his well-filled wallet, a prey to the starving desert-wanderer.

The Samradian sect of fire-worshippers, who believe only in the “ideal,” anticipated Bishop Berkeley’s theory, thus referred to by Lord Byron: When Bishop Berkeley said, “there was no matter,” And proved it—’twas no matter what he said; They say, his system ’tis in vain to batter, Too subtle for the airiest human head. Some amusing anecdotes regarding this singular sect are given in the Dabistán, a work written in Persian, which furnishes a very impartial account of the principal religions of the world: A Samradian said to his servant: “The world and its inhabitants have no actual existence—they have merely an ideal being.” The servant, on hearing this, took the first opportunity to steal his master’s horse, and when he was about to ride, brought him an ass with the horse’s saddle. When the Samradian asked: “Where is the horse?” he replied: “Thou hast been thinking of an idea; there was no horse in being.” The master said: “It is true,” and then mounted the ass. Having proceeded some distance, followed by his servant on foot, he suddenly dismounted, and taking the saddle off the back of the ass placed it on the servant’s back, drawing the girths tightly, and, having forced the bridle into his mouth, he mounted him, and flogged him along vigorously. The servant having exclaimed in piteous accents: “What is the meaning of this, O master?” the Samradian replied: “There is no such thing as a whip; it is merely ideal. Thou art thinking only of a delusion.” It is needless to add that the servant immediately repented and restored the horse.—Another of this sect having obtained in marriage the daughter of a wealthy lawyer, she, on finding out her husband’s peculiar creed, purposed to have some amusement at his expense. One day the Samradian brought home a bottle of excellent wine, which during his absence she emptied of its contents and filled again with water. When the time came for taking wine, she poured out the water into a gold cup, which Was her own property. The Samradian remarked: “Thou hast given me water instead of wine.” “It is only ideal,” she answered; “there was no wine in existence.” The husband then said: “Thou hast spoken well; give me the cup that I may go to a neighbour’s house and bring it back full of wine.” He thereupon took the gold cup and went out and sold it, concealing the money, and, instead of the gold vase, he brought back an earthen vessel filled with wine. The wife, on seeing this, said: “What hast thou done with the golden cup?” He quietly replied: “Thou art surely thinking of an ideal gold cup,” on which the lady sorely repented her witticism. I do not know whether there are any English parallels to these stories, but I have read of a Greek sage who instructed his slave that all that occurred in this world was the decree of Fate. The slave shortly after deliberately committed some offence, upon which his master commenced to soften his ribs with a stout cudgel, and when the slave pleaded that it was no fault of his, it was the decree of Fate, his master grimly replied that it was also decreed that he should have a sound beating. In Don Quixote, it will be remembered by all readers of that delightful work, Sancho begins to tell the knight a long story about a man who had to ferry across a river a large flock of sheep, but he could only take one at a time, as the boat could hold no more. This story Cervantes, in all likelihood, borrowed from the Disciplina Clericalis of Petrus Alfonsus, a converted Spanish Jew, who flourished in the century, and who avowedly derived the materials of his work from the Arabian fabulists—probably part of them also from the Talmud. His eleventh tale is of a king who desired his minstrel to tell him a long story that should lull him to sleep. The story-teller accordingly begins to relate how a man had to cross a ferry with sheep, two at a time, and falls asleep in the midst of his narration. The king awakes him, but the story-teller begs that the man be allowed to ferry over the sheep before he resumes the story. —Possibly the original form of the story is that found in the Kathá Manjarí, an ancient Indian story-book: There was a king who used to inquire of all the learned men who came to his court whether they knew any stories, and when they had related all they knew, in order to avoid rewarding them, he abused them for knowing so few, and sent them away. A shrewd and clever man, hearing of this, presented himself before the king, who asked his name. He replied that his name was Ocean of Stories. The king then inquired how many stories he knew, to which he answered that the name of Ocean had been conferred on him because he knew an endless number. On being desired to relate one, he thus began: “O King, there was a tank in breadth, and in length. This was densely filled with lotus plants, and millions upon millions of birds with golden wings [called Hamsa] perched on those flowers. One day a hurricane arose, accompanied with rain, which the birds were not able to endure, and they entered a cave under a rock, which was in the vicinity of the tank.”

The king asked what happened next, and he replied that one of the birds flew away. The king again inquired what else occurred, and he answered: “Another flew away”; and to every question of the king he continued to give the same answer. At this the king felt ashamed, and, seeing it was impossible to outwit the man, he dismissed him with a handsome present. A story bearing some resemblance to this is related of a khalíf who was wont to cheat poets of their expected reward when they recited their compositions to him, until he was at length outwitted by the famous Arabian poet Al-Asma’í: It is said that a khalíf, who was very penurious, contrived by a trick to send from his presence without any reward those poets who came and recited their compositions to him. He had himself the faculty of retaining in his memory a poem after hearing it only once; he had a mamlúk (white slave) who could repeat one that he had heard twice; and a slave-girl who could repeat one that she had heard thrice. Whenever a poet came to compliment him with a panegyrical poem, the king used to promise him that if he found his verses to be of his own composition he would give him a sum of money equal in weight to what they were written on. The poet, consenting, would recite his ode, and the king would say: “It is not new, for I have known it some years”; and he would repeat it as he had heard it; after which he would add: “And this mamlúk also retains it in his memory,” and order the mamlúk to repeat it, which, having heard it twice, from the poet and the king, he would do. Then the king would say to the poet: “I have also a slave-girl who can repeat it,” and, ordering her to do so, stationed behind the curtains, she would repeat what she had thus thrice heard; so the poet would go away empty-handed. The celebrated poet Al-Asma’í, having heard of this device, determined upon outwitting the king, and accordingly composed an ode made up of very difficult words. But this was not the poet’s only preparative measure—another will be presently explained; and a third was to assume the dress of a Bedouin, that he might not be known, covering his face, the eyes only excepted, with a litham (piece of drapery), as is usual with the Arabs of the desert. Thus disguised, he went to the palace, and having obtained permission, entered and saluted the king, who said to him: “Who art thou, O brother of the Arabs? and what dost thou desire?” The poet answered: “May Allah increase the power of the king! I am a poet of such a tribe, and have composed an ode in praise of our lord the khalíf.” “O brother of the Arabs,” said the king, “hast thou heard of our condition?” “No,” answered the poet; “and what is it, O khalíf of the age?” “It is,” replied the king, “that if the ode be not thine, we give thee no reward; and if it be thine, we give thee the weight in money equal to what it is written upon.” “How,” said the poet, “should I assume to myself that which belongeth to another, and knowing, too, that lying before kings is one of the basest of actions? But I agree to the condition, O our lord the khalíf.” So he repeated his ode. The king, perplexed, and unable to remember any of it, made a sign to the mamlúk, but he had retained nothing; then called to the female slave, but she was unable to repeat a word. “O brother of the Arabs,” said the king, “thou hast spoken truth; and the ode is thine without doubt. I have never heard it before. Produce, therefore, what it is written upon, and I will give thee its weight in money, as I have promised.” “Wilt thou,” said the poet, “send one of the attendants to carry it?” “To carry what?” demanded the king. “Is it not upon a paper in thy possession?” “No, O our lord the khalíf. At the time I composed it I could not procure a piece of paper on which to write it, and could find nothing but a fragment of a marble column left me by my father; so I engraved it upon that, and it lies in the courtyard of the palace.” He had brought it, wrapped up, on the back of a camel. The king, to fulfil his promise, was obliged to exhaust his treasury; and, to prevent a repetition of this trick, in future rewarded poets according to the custom of kings. Apropos of royal gifts to poets, it is related that, when the Afghans had possession of Persia, a rude chief of that nation was governor of Shíráz. A poet composed a panegyric on his wisdom, his valour, and his virtues. As he was taking it to the palace he was met by a friend at the outer gate, who inquired where he was going, and he informed him of his purpose. His friend asked him if he was insane, to offer an ode to a barbarian who hardly understood a word of the Persian language. “All that you say may be very true,” said the poor poet, “but I am starving, and have no means of livelihood but by making verses.

I must, therefore, proceed." He went and stood before the governor with his ode in his hand. "Who is that fellow?" said the Afghan lord. "And what is that paper which he holds?" "I am a poet," answered the man, "and this paper contains some poetry." "What is the use of poetry?" demanded the governor. "To render great men like you immortal," he replied, making at the same time a profound bow. "Let us hear some of it." The poet, on this mandate, began reading his composition aloud, but he had not finished the second stanza when he was interrupted. "Enough!" exclaimed the governor; "I understand it all. Give the poor man some money—that is what he wants." As the poet retired he met his friend, who again commented on the folly of carrying odes to a man who did not understand one of them. "Not understand!" he replied. "You are quite mistaken. He has beyond all men the quickest apprehension of a poet's meaning!" The khalífs were frequently lavish of their gifts to poets, but they were fond of having their little jokes with them when in merry mood. One day the Arabian poet Thálebí read before the khalíf Al-Mansúr a poem which he had just composed, and it found acceptance. The khalíf said: "O Thálebí, which wouldst thou rather have—that I give thee gold dínars, or three wise sayings, each worth dínars?" The poet replied: "Learning, O Commander of the Faithful, is better than transitory treasure." "Well, then," said the khalíf, "the first saying is: When thy garment grows old, sew not a new patch on it, for it hath an ill look." "O woe!" cried the poet, "one hundred dínars are lost!" Mansúr smiled, and proceeded: "The second saying is: When thou anointest thy beard, anoint not the lower part, for that would soil the collar of thy vest." "Alas!" exclaimed Thálebí, "a thousand times, alas! two hundred dínars are lost!" Again the khalíf smiled, and continued: "The third saying"—but before he had spoken it, the poet said: "O khalíf of our prosperity, keep the third maxim in thy treasury, and give me the remaining hundred dínars, for they will be worth a thousand times more to me than the hearing of maxims." At this the khalíf laughed heartily, and commanded his treasurer to give Thálebí five hundred dínars of gold. A droll story is told of the Persian poet Anwarí: Passing the market-place of Balkh one day, he saw a crowd of people standing in a ring, and going up, he put his head within the circle and found a fellow reciting the poems of Anwarí himself as his own. Anwarí went up to the man, and said: "Sir, whose poems are these you are reciting?" He replied: "They are Anwarí's." "Do you know him, then?" said Anwarí. The man, with cool effrontery, answered: "What do you say? I am Anwarí." On hearing this Anwarí laughed, and remarked: "I have heard of one who stole poetry, but never of one who stole the poet himself!"— Talking of "stealing poetry," Jámí tells us that a man once brought a composition to a critic, every line of which he had plagiarised from different collections of poems, and each rhetorical figure from various authors. Quoth the critic: "For a wonder, thou hast brought a line of camels; but if the string were untied, every one of the herd would run away in different directions." There is no little humour in the story of the Persian poet who wrote a eulogium on a rich man, but got nothing for his trouble; he then abused the rich man, but he said nothing; he next seated himself at the rich man's gate, who said to him: "You praised me, and I said nothing; you abused me, and I said nothing; and now, why are you sitting here?" The poet answered: "I only wish that when you die I may perform the funeral service." Muslims and other Asiatic peoples, like Europeans not so many centuries since, are always on the watch for lucky or unlucky omens. On first going out of a morning, the looks and countenances of those who cross their path are scrutinised, and a smile or a frown is deemed favourable or the reverse. To encounter a person blind of the left eye, or even with one eye, forebodes sorrow and calamity. While was in Persia, as British Ambassador, he was told the following story: When Abbas the Great was hunting, he met one morning as day dawned an uncommonly ugly man, at the sight of whom his horse started. Being nearly dismounted, and deeming it a bad omen, the king called out in a rage to have his head cut off. The poor peasant, whom the attendants had seized and were on the point of executing, prayed that he might be informed of his crime. "Your crime," said the king, "is your unlucky countenance, which is the first object I saw this morning, and which has nearly caused me to fall from my horse." "Alas!" said the man, "by this reckoning what term must I apply to your Majesty's countenance, which was the first object my eyes met this morning, and which is to cause my death?" The king smiled at the wit of the reply, ordered the man to be released, and gave him a present instead of cutting off his head.

—Another Persian story is to the same purpose: A man said to his servant: “If you see two crows together early in the morning, apprise me of it, that I may also behold them, as it will be a good omen, whereby I shall pass the day pleasantly.” The servant did happen to see two crows sitting in one place, and informed his master, who, however, when he came saw but one, the other having in the meantime flown away. He was very angry, and began to beat the servant, when a friend sent him a present of game. Upon this the servant exclaimed: “O my lord! you saw only one crow, and have received a fine present; had you seen two, you would have met with my fare.” 38 It would seem, from the following story, that an old man’s prayers are sometimes reversed in response, as dreams are said to “go by contraries”: An old Arab left his house one morning, intending to go to a village at some distance, and coming to the foot of a hill which he had to cross he exclaimed: “O Allah! send some one to help me over this hill.” Scarcely had he uttered these words when up came a fierce soldier, leading a mare with a very young colt by her side, who compelled the old man, with oaths and threats, to carry the colt. As they trudged along, they met a poor woman with a sick child in her arms. The old man, as he laboured under the weight of the colt, kept groaning, “O Allah! O Allah!” and, supposing him to be a dervish, the woman asked him to pray for the recovery of her child. In compliance, the old man said: “O Allah! I beseech thee to shorten the days of this poor child.” “Alas!” cried the mother, “why hast thou made such a cruel prayer?” “Fear nothing,” said the old man; “thy child will assuredly enjoy long life. It is my fate to have the reverse of whatever I pray for. I implored Allah for assistance to carry me over this hill, and, by way of help, I suppose, I have had this colt imposed on my shoulders.” Jámí tells this humorous story in the Sixth “Garden” of his Baháristán, or Abode of Spring: A man said the prescribed prayers in a mosque and then began his personal supplications. An old woman, who happened to be near him, exclaimed: “O Allah! cause me to share in whatsoever he supplicates for.” The man, overhearing her, then prayed: “O Allah! hang me on a gibbet, and cause me to die of scourging.” The old trot continued: “O Allah! pardon me, and preserve me from what he has asked for.” Upon this the man turned to her and said: “What a very unreasonable partner this is! She desires to share in all that gives rest and pleasure, but she refuses to be my partner in distress and misery.” We have already seen that even the grave and otiose Turk is not devoid of a sense of the ludicrous, and here is another example, from translation of the History of the Forty Vezírs: A party of Turkmans left their encampment one day and went into a neighbouring city. Returning home, as they drew near their tents, they felt hungry, and sat down and ate some bread and onions at a spring-head. The juice of the onions went into their eyes and caused them to water. Now the children of those Turkmans had gone out to meet them, and, seeing the tears flow from their eyes, they concluded that one of their number had died in the city, so, without making any inquiry, they ran back, and said to their mothers: “One of ours is dead in the city, and our fathers are coming weeping.” Upon this all the women and children of the encampment went forth to meet them, weeping together. The Turkmans who were coming from the city thought that one of theirs had died in the encampment; and thus they were without knowledge one of the other, and they raised a weeping and wailing together such that it cannot be described. At length the elders of the camp stood up in their midst and said: “May ye all remain whole; there is none other help than patience”; and they questioned them. The Turkmans coming from the city asked: “Who is dead in the camp?” The others replied: “No one is dead in the camp; who has died in the city?” Those who were coming from the city, said: “No one has died in the city.” The others said: “For whom then are ye wailing and lamenting?” At length they perceived that all this tumult arose from their trusting the words of children. This last belongs rather to the class of simpleton-stories; and in the following, from the Knowles’ Folk Tales of Kashmír, we have a variant of the well-known tale of the twelve men of Gotham who went one day to fish, and, before returning home, miscounted their number, of which several analogues are given in my Book of Noodles,: Ten peasants were standing on the side of the road weeping. They thought that one of their number had been lost on the way, as each man had counted the company, and found them nine only. “Ho! you—what’s the matter?” shouted a townsman passing by.