AN ARAB HUMORIST
AL-JĀHIZ AND 'THE BOOK OF MISERS'

By DAVID R. MARSHALL

BEFORE the advent of Islam and the subsequent collection into one volume of those formal utterances which Muhammad accepted as being divinely inspired, the Koran, there was no prose literature in Arabic. Poetry, however, – and poetry of a high standard – had made its appearance by the 5th century of our era, and, apart from a temporary setback during the early days of Islam when poets came into a certain disrepute since they were regarded as being inspired by jinn, it was to progress steadily, finding new themes and new styles.

Although for some time the Koran remained the sole example of Arabic prose literature, it was soon to be followed by other prose literature, and its influence on this latter was to be tremendous. It was due to the flexibility given to it by the Koran that 'Arabīya (High Arabic) could be quickly developed and adapted to different literary needs.

The earliest succeeding prose works were all of a factual nature, almost entirely connected with religion, in the form of commentaries on the Koran, and its ancillary disciplines of jurisprudence and the science of Tradition, the latter two leading to the study of history. Unfortunately, not a great deal of this early prose literature remains, partly because the Arabic script of that time was deficient and oral transmission was still a dominant habit, and there may also have been a certain reluctance to putting into writing anything except the Koran.

But prose was still in its infancy as a literary medium, and it was not until the 8th century that it matured. Foreign influences, especially that of Hellenism, came to play their part under the cosmopolitan empire of the Abbasids, and Arabic literature suddenly came quickly to its Golden Age. A clear, precise and fluent Arabic literary prose developed, and this was the final product of the coalescing of the activities of the different schools of scholarship – of the secretaries, philologists, lawyers and Traditionists. Their various amalgamated products laid the foundations of a discursive and argumentative prose.

During the early Abbasid period, the greater part of the large amount of literature produced had a religious significance, much of it centring on the various religious controversies of the time. That part of the literature, however, that was purely secular was faced, at the beginning of the 9th century, with a problem. How could the Arabic humanities be brought out

of their isolated position into a more positive relation with the public interests and issues of the day, and so challenge the pretensions of the secretarial school?

It was at this point that Jāhiz lived and wrote, and his writings started to resolve this problem, although its final solution was found by his later contemporaries. Born in Basra in the 770's, he died, more than 90 years old, in 869. Jāhiz deserves to be much more widely appreciated than he is. Known very little outside the Arab world and Orientalist circles, he deserves to take his place among the great writers of humanity. Rising from very humble origins, he became an avid student and reader. A man of vast learning, endowed more than usual as an acute observer among a race renowned for their intellectual curiosity and innate powers of observation, a gifted writer drawing on a seemingly boundless reservoir of erudition, he left, in addition to more than one hundred shorter works on a variety of topics, three large works, 'The Book of Animals', 'The Book of Exposition and Demonstration' and 'The Book of Misers'. It is with this last work that we are at the moment concerned.

Before we look at possible motives which may have prompted Jāhiz to write this book, and before we examine it more critically, let us first get a general impression of its nature and contents from the words of Jāhiz himself. In his introductory remarks, he shows us immediately his acute powers of perception and of analysis of character, and more than a hint of sympathy. How well he has his subjects weighed up! He explains why misers call avarice 'parsimony' and meanness 'economy', why they are against giving to charity, which they regard as synonymous with squandering, why they also consider generosity as squandering, and altruism as stupidity. Why do misers renounce praise and care little for those who blame them? Why do they despise him who is happy to be praised and rejoices at giving, while they admire him who neither seeks praise nor turns away from blame? Why do misers argue in favour of a life of abstinence over one of ease, and one of bitterness over one of sweetness? How is it that misers do not feel ashamed of shunning the good things of life in their own possessions, while they dote on them in others'? They rush into miserliness and choose what the name of being a miser involves, despite their sense of shame at the name. They love to acquire money, and yet they shun spending it. They act, although they are rich, as if they are afraid that their riches will pass away, and not as if they hope they will last. They increase their amount of fear and decrease their amount of hope, despite lasting security and perfect health, for healthy people are far more numerous than sick people, and good luck is no less rare than bad luck.

How, Jāhiz continues, can someone who is dedicated to distress claim

happiness, or how can someone who begins by deceiving people in private profess to give sincere advice in public? Misers argue despite the strength of their own reason, to defend something which the whole world unites in condemning, and they are proud of it. How can misers possibly be intelligent while making excuses for their avarice and hastening to argue in defence of it, using far-fetched views and subtle meanings, and yet not to be intelligent with regard to their obvious turpitude, the ugliness and humiliation of the title of miser, and the damage it does to those who merit it?

Then in a further series of questions which he puts, Jāhiz shows us the really acute observer – one almost feels tempted to say the psychologist – at work. Some misers merely feign ignorance and stupidity, in adopting an attitude of being simple, and arguing in defence of their avarice. In doing this, they use very tight reasoning, carefully chosen words, and they hit the nail right on the head. Surely, then, says Jāhiz, doesn't the very competence of their arguments and explanations give the lie to their feigned ignorance? How can misers avoid the truth and deny all the evidence, and yet, side by side with great stupidity, there is really a surprising intelligence?

These, then, are the topics with which the book deals, but one must by no means imagine that they are answered in any dull or uninteresting way. They are freely illustrated with anecdotes, both humorous and satirical, drawn with a masterly touch whose immediate impression on the reader is twofold. Any fear that the stories might be dull or boring is immediately dispelled by their atmosphere. It seems to this writer that, behind the stories, one can almost see Jāhiz with his tongue in his cheek, laughing wryly, and thoroughly enjoying describing his subjects and their antics. The second immediate impression the stories make is that one cannot but like these misers: one would expect to feel annoyance or infuriation with them, and yet the reader feels himself warming to them. One may feel tempted to ask, 'If Jāhiz had drawn his characters properly and faithfully, should we not be made to dislike these contemptible men violently?' But is not the purpose of the book primarily to amuse (a point referred to below), and how could it do so if it made the reader feel revulsion towards its heroes? Why should not a certain licence be allowed?

How does Jāhiz depict his subjects? Let it be stressed immediately that these misers are genuine people, not fictional figures, but the real, living people of Basra, the home town of Jāhiz, and Khurasan. He depicts them precisely and vividly, keeping a careful and pleasing balance between scorn for their faults and mocking them, the serious and the laughing and criticism and merriment. He depicts them not merely objectively, but subjectively by showing us the devious inner workings of their minds,

their views, their worries and hopes, and their deepest secrets. He gives us rounded characters with personalities at whom we must laugh, but whom we cannot dislike because, for all their faults, they do not leave any bad impression upon us. Thanks to the subjective writing of Jāhiz, these people are capable of stepping out of the pages of the book, and we would welcome meeting them!

A further question which must be asked is what motives prompted Jāhiz to pick such a theme and write 'The Book of Misers'? Tāhā al-Hājirī has argued that it was probably intended to stigmatize the avarice of non-Arabs as opposed to the generosity of the Arabs but, as often happens when Jāhiz lets his verve run away with him, the original intention is soon forgotten, and the most pertinent arguments are furnished to the opponents whom one wished to reduce to silence.

This is indeed very pertinent, but could there not also be a simpler explanation and more direct motive? Bearing in mind the fact that the purpose of the book is primarily to amuse and to give straightforward enjoyment, could not the motive be one which could surely apply to any humorist of any nation, and that is to poke fun at distinctive national characteristics, and especially to poke fun at those in whom they are lacking? Since generosity was so highly prized a virtue among the Arabs, it was almost inevitable that a humorist, such as Jāhiz, should let loose his wit and satire on its opposite, the theme of miserliness and misers.

So much, then, for an appreciation of Jāhiz and 'The Book of Misers'. Below are a number of selected stories which will illustrate the foregoing remarks. They have been translated freely and slightly adapted in places in an attempt to keep closely to the spirit of the original, and thus do more justice to it than would a too close translation.

Main Bibliography:

AL-BUḪALĀ', Ed. Dar Sader, Dar Beyrouth.
GIBB, H.A.R., *Arabic Literature.*
PELLAT, C., *Le Livre des Avares de Ǧāḥiẓ.*

THE BOOK OF MISERS

You Lose Either Way

Misers can be found in any town, in any country, but it is said that the inhabitants of Merv are exceptionally greedy and mean. There was, however, one particular man in Merv who stood out above the others for his avarice. When some visitor paid a call on him, he would say to this visitor, 'Have you had lunch yet?' If the visitor replied that he had already had lunch, the miser would say, 'What a pity. If you had not, I would have given you a really superb meal'. If, on the other hand, the visitor were to reply that he had not, in fact, eaten yet, his host would say, 'It's a pity, because if you had, I could have given you some excellent wine to drink after your lunch'.

Whatever he might say, the poor visitor would get neither one thing nor the other!

The Mean Child

Ahmad Ibn Rashid was once staying with a certain sheikh in Merv. As he sat under a large tree in the garden, one of the sheikh's little children was playing in front of him. Partly in fun and partly out of curiosity, Ahmad asked the child to let him have a piece of the bread it was eating.

'You wouldn't like it', said the little boy, 'it's bitter'.

'Alright then, never mind', said Ahmad, 'let me have a drink of your water instead'.

'You wouldn't like that either', was the child's reply. 'It's salty'.

Ahmad asked him for one thing and another, but each time the child's immediate answer was, 'You wouldn't like it. It's too so-and-so', or 'It's too this-or-that'. Ahmad asked the child for all sorts of things, each of which he refused him, making it appear that Ahmad wouldn't really like it because it wasn't very nice.

In the end, Ahmad just gave up trying to get anything from the child and had to laugh.

The Blindfold

Several Khurasanians were sharing the same apartment. They did without lighting the lamp as long as they possibly could, but then, when it became too dark to see without it, they all contributed some money towards the cost of buying some oil. One of them, however, refused to pay his share of the cost and would not give anything. When the lamp was lit, therefore, the others fastened a handkerchief over his eyes to blindfold

him, and it was not until they put out the lamp to go to sleep that they would uncover his eyes.

Two's Company

Two Khurasanians were making a journey in company together. Shortly after the beginning of the journey one of them said to the other, 'Why don't we take our meals together? It is pleasing to God that people should assemble together, and He blesses them. And isn't it a well known saying that "Food for two suffices for three"?'

His companion replied acidly, 'If it weren't for the fact that I know you are a much bigger eater than I am, I would regard your words as genuine advice and a sincere suggestion. But as you eat more than I do, I have my doubts about your motives in suggesting we eat together'.

The next day the former made the same suggestion once again. Still doubting his sincerity, his reticent fellow traveller replied, ' 'Abdullah, you have a loaf, and I too have a loaf. Unless you had some evil designs you would not be so greedy as to want to share my meal. Aren't you satisfied with enjoying my company and my conversation? But supposing we took just one plate, and each of us put his own loaf in front of him. Unless I am very much mistaken, I have no doubt that when you had eaten all your own loaf and half of mine, you would indeed find it blessed, as you said earlier. The only thing is that I am the one who will receive God's blessing, and not you!'

A Simple Question

Abu 'Abdullah was the most charming man you could ever wish to meet, but at the same time, unfortunately, he could also be the most miserly and the most blatant hypocrite. One day he was introduced to a certain Tahir Ibn Al-Husain, whom he already knew in Khurasan as he was famous for his knowledge of dogmatic theology. Tahir asked Abu 'Abdullah how long he had lived in Iraq. 'I have lived here for twenty years,' he replied, 'and I have fasted for no less than forty years'.

Tahir laughed and said, 'My friend, I asked you only one question, but you have given me the answer to two!'

The Miser of Merv

A certain man from Merv frequently used to travel in other countries, either on pilgrimage or in connection with his business affairs. Whenever he was travelling in Iraq, he would stay at the house of a certain Iraqi friend. This Iraqi was extremely kind; he always made the Mervian very

welcome, showed him great hospitality, saw that he lacked nothing, and always supplied him with provisions for his journey when he left. The Mervian for his part often said to the Iraqi, 'How I wish I could entertain you in Merv some time, so that I could return all the kindness you have shown me, and repay you for having always made me so welcome. Here, in Iraq, I am accepting all your kindness, without being able to do anything for you in return'. Of course, the Mervian did not mean that he said about entertaining the Iraqi: he was a mean, selfish miser, but since he was quite sure the occasion would never arise when he would have to return the Iraqi's kindness, he at least felt safe in making fervent, although insincere, invitations and protestations.

Now it so happened that, some considerable time afterwards, the Iraqi had, in fact, to visit Merv on some matter of importance. He was not at all looking forward to the hardships of the journey and had great doubts and misgivings about being in a foreign country. However, these worries were alleviated to a certain extent by the pleasing prospect of meeting his Mervian friend again, and knowing that at least he would not be completely among strangers.

When he arrived in Merv he went straight to his friend's house in his travelling clothes, his veil, turban, cap and his cloak, to leave his luggage there and unpack; for he knew that, with them being true friends, the Mervian would gladly let him stay there. The Iraqi found his friend sitting among a group of his companions, and he went over to him and embraced him. The Iraqi was very surprised when his friend did not recognise him and did not ask him how he was. It was as if he had never seen him before. So he said to himself, 'Perhaps he doesn't recognise me because of my veil'. He therefore took it off and began to question his Mervian friend for his news, but still there was no sign of recognition on the latter's face. 'Is it because of my turban that he doesn't recognise me?' thought the Iraqi. So he took off his turban as well, then told the Mervian who he was, and began to ask him for his news once again. To the Iraqi's great astonishment, the Mervian still did not seem to recognise him. So, wondering if it might be on account of the cap which he was wearing, the Iraqi took off his cap as well.

The Mervian, of course, being so mean and miserly, had deliberately pretended not to know his Iraqi friend, even though he had, in fact, recognised him the moment he entered. Finally, realising that, with his friend's face now fully visible, he could no longer feign any ignorance of who the Iraqi was, he said in selfish annoyance, 'You would even be prepared to take off your skin in order to make me recognise you, wouldn't you?'

Free Polish

On one occasion Abu Ishaq was invited by one of his neighbours to share a meal with him. There were a number of other guests there, sitting round the table, sharing the frugal meal of dates and cooking butter. While one of the people there was eating, Abu Ishaq noticed him letting the butter fall drop by drop on to the table. As the man was rather overdoing it and his behaviour was really bad mannered, Abu Ishaq quietly asked the man sitting next to him, 'Why is that man wasting someone else's butter, displaying very bad manners, and taking more than his share?'

'You don't know the reason?', asked his neighbour, to which Abu Ishaq replied that he hadn't the faintest idea.

'Well', said the other, 'this table actually belongs to that man. He once beat his wife because he caught her washing the table with hot water. He thought this was sheer extravagance, and asked her why she didn't just wipe it. But he is so mean that he is deliberately spilling butter on it so that, when he gets the table back home, he can use this grease as a polish and so save his money!'

A Lie for a Lie

One day the governor of the province of Fars, a man named Khalid, was in his office very busy with his accounts and his affairs. In order not to be disturbed he had concealed himself as much as possible. However, a poet had obtained entrance to his office and suddenly appeared before Khalid, reciting a poem in his honour in which he eulogised Khalid and sang his praises.

When the poet had finished, Khalid congratulated him and said to him, 'Well done!' Then he turned to his clerk and told him to give the poet 10,000 dirhams. The poet was so pleased that he went into raptures. When Khalid saw the effect on the poet of the prospect of 10,000 dirhams, he said, 'I can see that what I said has certainly moved you and made you very happy'. Then, turning to his clerk, he said, 'Make it 20,000'. The delighted poet almost jumped out of his skin for joy. And when Khalid saw that his happiness had doubled, he said, 'I see that your joy doubles as what I say doubles. Clerk – give him 40,000!' The poet was just about beside himself with joy.

After a little while the ecstatic poet calmed down and came back to his senses. 'Oh Sir', he said to Khalid, 'may I be made your ransom: what a generous man you are! I know that, as each time you saw how my joy had increased, so you have increased your gift to me. But to accept this from you would only be with a lack of sufficient thanks'. He thanked

Khalid profusely, bowed deeply, and went out of the office.

When the poet had left, the clerk, bewildered by his master's behaviour, came over to Khalid and exclaimed, 'Good heavens! This man would have been satisfied with a gift of 40 dirhams, and yet you go and give him 40,000!'

Khalid replied, 'You stupid fellow. Do you actually want to give him anything?'

'What are we going to do then?' the bewildered clerk asked.

'You idiot', Khalid told him. 'This poet fellow simply pleased me with words, so I likewise pleased him with words. When he pretended that I was more beautiful than the moon, stronger than a lion, that my tongue was more cutting than a sword and my orders more penetrating than spears, did he put into my hand any single tangible thing which I could possibly take home with me? Don't I know that he was simply lying? But nevertheless he made me happy when he lied to me. I likewise made him happy with my words, and ordered rewards for him – though that was a lie as well. Thus it will be a lie for a lie, and hollow words for hollow words. As for returning and paying for a lie by truth, and rewarding hollow words by deeds, this is something I would never be stupid enough to do!'

Dinner or Dinar?

One day some of his friends had been forced, against their wishes, to have a meal with a certain man. They did not want to go at all, but simply had to put up with it and make the best of a bad job. The host thought that they were aware of his extreme meanness where providing food was concerned; in fact, this idea was quite firmly embedded in his mind, and he was sure people talked about this behind his back.

So, when his friends were invited to have a meal, he deliberately placed before them a large number of dishes and, to show that he wanted his guests to do justice to the meal, he said, 'Whoever stops eating first, we shall compel him to pay a fine of one dinar'. The crafty fellow was sure that one of the guests would prefer to pay the dinar rather than carry on eating, and in this way, he hoped, deep down, that he would be in pocket after all!

The Comic Miser

As a miser, Abu Ja'afar at-Tarsusi had no equal, and his miserliness was taken to almost comical extremes. One day, he was visiting some friends who treated him very well and kindly and generally made a fuss of him. On this particular occasion they put a very fragrant and very expensive perfume on his moustache and beard. A little later, unfortunately,

his upper lip started to itch. In order to scratch it, he put his finger into his mouth and scratched it from the inside because he was afraid that if he scratched it from the outside, some of the perfume might rub off on to his finger and he might lose it!

THE RUDE HOST

Sometimes, when Mohammad ibn al-Mu'ammal was at home, one of his friends might call to see him. If he already had one or two guests, in order to preserve the food on his table, he would use various tricks and ruses.

When an unexpected guest arrived on some occasion when Mohammad already had a visitor or two, it really grieved him to have to offer a meal to this third person. So, as soon as this latter had come in and taken off his sandals, Mohammad called to his servant in a loud voice and in a tone that was an insult to the new arrival and would make him feel uncomfortable,

'Mubashshir, bring so-and-so something to eat! Find something for him!' Mohammad was counting on his friend's feeling of discomfort or his anger, or even his scorn, hoping that he would say, 'It's alright – I have eaten already'.

If the latter were unfortunate enough to be timid and nervous and said, 'It's alright – I have eaten already', Mohammad was liable to tease him. He knew that not only had he come out of it well, but he had the poor fellow right where he wanted him, and indeed had got him in his pocket. However, he did not stop there: he was not satisfied until he had pushed his cruelty farther and asked, 'What did you have for lunch?' Consequently the poor wretch had no choice but to tell a lie or to dodge the question.

Mohammad used to play another trick on his guests when they were actually seated round the table. As soon as the meal was served, Mohammad would turn either to the most timid person present, or alternatively to the biggest eater, and would ask him to tell some lengthy story or to recite some long incident, making sure that the story-teller needed to make ample use of his hands or of his head while talking, and this would therefore prevent him from eating. This dealt with one of the guests.

As for the others, Mohammad used another trick to limit the amount they ate. Once they had eaten a little – needless to say, only a very small quantity – Mohammad would appear languid and preoccupied, and he would pick at his food as if he had had enough. He would pick a bit from here and a bit from there, each time holding his hand up between mouthfuls. Invariably one of the guests would stop eating and he too would hold his hand in the air, and often Mohammad's gesture was im-

itated by all the guests.

Then when Mohammad knew that his trick had worked and the guests had got up from the table and returned to their easy chairs, he began to eat in earnest, like someone starved.

False Hopes

Ath-Thauri used to lend money on a large scale, and had a deceitful trick in order to get more customers. It was well known that he had no heir. He would joke with some of his clients and would say at the moment when they were actually witnessing and signing the transaction, 'You know, of course, that I have no heir. If I die, it might give you a pleasant surprise to know who might get my money...' Many people were keen to do business with him for this reason, fondly hoping that they might be the lucky ones in the event of his death.

Double Value

One day Ath-Thauri was sitting among a group of men in the mosque. They used to meet quite regularly and were widely famous for their discussions. One of the wealthiest men there was expressing his views on how to be thrifty and economical, and Ath-Thauri was listening to him intently. 'Double everything you have', the man was saying, 'and it will last longer. Not for nothing has God made the life hereafter eternal, while the life of this world is but transient'. And Ath-Thauri listened still more intently as the man went on to say, 'Perhaps you have seen a single doubled upper-garment does just as well as four shirts, and a single turban does just as well as four veils. This is caused simply by the assistance of the doubling of the folds. Double a screen of woven reeds, double the curtains, double the carpets and double the meal with a cold drink'.

'Aha', said Ath-Thauri, 'I have been trying to follow your argument, but I haven't understood a word of what you have been saying except for this last one!'

Profitable Fever

One day Ath-Thauri was seized with fever, and his family and servant also fell victim to it. On account of the intensity of the fever they did not feel at all like eating, and consequently they needed no bread. During the days that they were ill, Ath-Thauri saved a measure of flour. This fact pleased him considerably, and the mean, callous miser remarked, 'If I were to live at Suq al-Ahwaz, Natat Khaibar, Wadi l-Juhfa or some other such place where fever persists, then I would hope to save a hundred dinars a year'.

He wouldn't have cared if his family had had fever all the time, provided that he could save their ration of flour.

You Just Can't Win

Tammām ibn Ja'afar was as mean as could be where food was concerned, and was one of the most niggardly misers you could ever find. He used to attack those who ate his food with all kinds of abuse and scathing remarks, and sometimes he would even pretend it was lawful to put some unfortunate guest to death, thus making him feel very uncomfortable.

If, in the course of conversation, some guest were to say quite casually, 'There is nobody on earth a better walker or faster runner than I am', Tammām would reply, 'You certainly should be one of the best. As it is the stomach which gives strength to the legs, you should be energetic, considering that you eat enough for ten men'.

Supposing, however, the guest were to make exactly the opposite remark, and said, 'I hardly walk at all because I'm so weak: I get short of breath after only a hundred yards'. To this, Tammām would reply, 'How can you possibly manage to walk when you have put in your stomach such a large amount it would need half a dozen porters to carry it? Aren't people fit only when they eat light meals? And what is worse, with a stomach the size of yours, how can you possibly manage to kneel down and prostrate yourself when it comes to praying?'

Let us imagine that another guest complained of toothache and said to Tammām, 'I couldn't sleep a wink last night because of the pain I was suffering'. Far from expressing any sympathy, Tammām would reply icily, 'I'm surprised you had toothache in only one tooth and not in the whole lot! It's a wonder, in fact, that you have any teeth at all left. Can you really expect any teeth to do as much chewing and grinding as you make yours do? Even a mill or the toughest pestle would be worn out if they had to do that much work'.

Imagine, however, that the guest had a perfect set of teeth, white and firm, and were to remark, 'Never once have I suffered from toothache, nor have I a single loose tooth'. Would Tammām be short of an answer? – far from it! 'That doesn't surprise me at all', he would say. 'Your body becomes strong when you take exercise and work hard, but becomes weak and feeble if you are idle for too long. It's exactly the same with your teeth – and with the amount of work you make yours do, eating so much, they certainly should be strong and healthy. But although your teeth may be alright, what about your stomach – doesn't it ache instead?'

In the very hot weather a guest whom Tammām had invited to share a meal with him (and needless to say it was a very meagre meal) had drunk

a lot of water with his food. 'I drink an awful lot of water', remarked the guest, 'I doubt if anybody in the world can drink more than I do'. Tammām, of course, would never make a rude remark when being entertained by somebody else, but only when he himself was the host, and on this occasion also his cruel, biting tongue had a ready answer. Now it is a well-known fact that many substances absorb a large amount of water: a bucket of clay, for example, will absorb almost its own volume of water. So, when the guest made mention of the large amount of water he drank, Tammām said, 'The earth and clay need water to moisten them. And isn't it a fact that they need water in proportion to their own amount? Even if you drank all the water in the River Euphrates I shouldn't think it would be enough, when I see the tremendous amount you have eaten'.

But what if the guest had drunk nothing with his meal, and had remarked, 'I haven't drunk a single drop of water today, and I had only about a cupful yesterday. I shouldn't think anybody drinks less than I do'. What would Tammām's scathing comment have been? 'You drink almost nothing because, with the amount you eat, you don't leave any room in your stomach for water. Anyone would think your stomach was a casque with buried treasure in it, specially sealed so that no water can get to it. If you don't drink at table, you don't realise how much you have eaten'.

On another occasion, Tammām had a very weary guest with him, having had a disturbed night's sleep the previous night. 'I didn't sleep a wink last night', he said with a yawn, 'and I'm just dying of tiredness'. 'How can you expect to sleep with your stomach so full?' asked Tammām nastily. 'With the amount you eat you probably have to get up in the middle of the night, so how can you hope to have a good night's sleep?'

But what if the person were a very sound sleeper, and had remarked, 'As soon as I put my head on the pillow I sleep like a log until the morning', would Tammām have been beaten for an answer then? Of course not: he would say, 'No wonder you sleep so soundly. That is because food is an intoxicant and makes your whole body relax. The food you eat is just like a drug. And with the amount you eat, you should be able to sleep all day as well as all night!'

Finally, one of the guests who had had more than his fair share of abuse from Tammām decided that, when next invited for a meal, he would not give Tammām chance to make any rude comments about what he ate – he would eat nothing at all! The opportunity duly presented itself, and the guest declined to eat, saying, 'Today I don't want anything at all to eat, thank you'. But if he thought this would prevent Tammām from making any rude comments, he was to be sadly disappointed. Tammām still managed to get the last word – and as usual, a biting word at that. 'I should

think you don't want anything to eat', he said, 'when you probably ate enough for ten people yesterday'.

The Funny Miser

Abu' l-Qumāqim was a renowned miser, but yet one could not help but like him because his meanness was so funny, as can be seen by some of the things he used to say. Here are some of them.

'The first basis of thrift and economy is that I should omit to give back to you what I have in my hands or what I may have borrowed, even though it may be yours. If what I have in my hands actually belongs to me, then it is mine. And if somebody else puts something into my hands, then I deserve it more than the person who put it in my hands. In effect, whoever hands something of his over to somebody else, without good reason, gives it to that person. So, when anybody hands you anything – keep it!'

On one occasion a woman said to him, 'Abu' l-Qumāqim, I have a gentleman coming to see me today, so I want to make a good impression on him and look attractive. He is due any minute now, and I am still not ready yet: I still have to make myself smart. Will you take this loaf of bread, please, and buy me some myrtle in exchange, and here is some money for some oil. Your kindness will be repaid. Perhaps, when this man meets me, God will kindle in his heart some love for me and, thanks to you for doing this bit of shopping, he may then provide for me. Goodness only knows what a pitiful state I am in, and I have had just about as much as I can stand.' So Abu' l-Qumāqim took the bread and the money, and then kept them for himself.

When the woman saw him several days later, she said with tears in her eyes, 'You should be ashamed of yourself. Don't you feel any pity for me for the way you treated me and let me down?'

Abu' l-Qumāqim replied, 'Calm down, and let me explain. Unfortunately I lost the money and, out of sheer grief, I ate the bread'.

There was another woman with whom Abu' l-Qumāqim was very much in love. He courted and followed her all the time, with tears in his eyes, until at length she took pity on him. She was very rich, while he was correspondingly poor. One day he asked her for some stew, because, he said, she was really good at preparing it. Then, several days later, he begged and begged her to prepare him some sheep's heads. Yet a further few days later he asked her for some date curd. And then, not long afterwards, he made yet a further request – how he wished she would make him some broth, which he loved.

At length the woman said in exasperation, 'I have often seen a man's love fill his heart, his liver, and indeed his whole inside. Your love gets

no farther than your stomach!'

When Abu' l-Qumāqim eventually decided to get married, he pressed his future wife's family for information about their means and their wealth, and wanted to know how much her dowry would be. They gave him the information he requested, and then they said to him, 'We have told you of her means. Now, what about you – what are your means?'

'Why bother to ask such a question', replied Abu' l-Qumāqim. 'My wealth doesn't matter. Her money is enough for both of us!'

Isma'īl's Pillow

One night, al-Makki was invited to stay with Isma'il, and he relates this amusing little story.

I once spent the night with Isma'īl. He invited me, I know, simply because he knew that I had had dinner elsewhere, and consequently he wouldn't have to give me a meal, and because I also had with me a jar of wine. In the course of the evening, he drank the larger part of this. It was already very late before I went to bed, and I was tired out: I was far from comfortable, because I had to use the carpet as a mattress and my hand as a pillow. There was, however, one pillow in the room, which Isma'īl picked up and threw to me. I refused it and threw it back to him, until each of us ended by refusing it and giving it to the other. Isma'īl said, 'Come on, you have the pillow: I've got some more'. So I took it and put it under my cheek. But, not being used to this position, and having a very hard bed in the form of the carpet on the hard floor, I couldn't sleep.

Isma'īl, however, thought I was in fact asleep, so he crept over to me on tiptoe and gently pulled the pillow out from under my head. When I saw him going back to his place with it I started to laugh, and said, 'But you said you didn't want it'.

Isma'īl replied, 'I only came over to make you comfortable. But when I saw that I had the pillow in my hand, I had forgotten that I came over for. It's wine, you know – it makes you lose your memory!'

A Ruinous Horse

A man from Medina once left his horse with someone for him to look after it in his stable. Waking up in the middle of the night, the latter found the horse busy eating. The man went off to sleep again, but woke a couple of hours later to find the horse still eating. Calling his servant, he pointed to the horse, and, gesticulating wildly, he said, 'Sell it, give

it away, send it back to its owner, slaughter it, or do anything you like with it! When I am asleep, why doesn't it sleep as well? It simply stays awake and eats. It is just working its way through my fortune and the crafty beast is intent on ruining me completely!'

MUGHIRA'S DATES

Al-Mughira was eating some dates with some of his friends, and they were throwing the stones into a basin. Suddenly the light went out, and they were cast into darkness. At one point soon afterwards, al-Mughira heard two date-stones fall into the basin together. 'Alright', he said, 'who is the greedy person eating two dates at once?'

THE DISTRUSTFUL MASTER

A servant brought Khalid ibn Safwan a tray of plums, which had come either from his garden, or as a present from someone. When the servant put them before him, Khalid said, 'If it weren't for the fact that I know you have already eaten some, I would give you one'.

THE EVIL EYE

One day I was on a small river boat with a fellow from Ahwaz. I was at the stern of the boat, and he was in the bows. When it came to lunch-time he uncovered a small basket which he had with him and took out a chicken and some fresh peaches. He began to eat, all the time talking to me, but without inviting me to join him. There were no other passengers on the ship apart from the two of us. He saw me looking sometimes at him and sometimes at the food in front of him, and he imagined that I would have loved to share his food but found him very slow in inviting me to do so.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' he asked. 'Whoever has food with him eats as I am doing, and whoever does not have food with him stares as you are doing'.

A moment later our eyes met. 'Here, steady on', he said, 'I am a man who eats well, and everything that I eat is good. I am frightened that you have an evil eye. An evil eye like yours causes trouble quickly, so don't stare at me – look the other way'.

This annoyed me because it really was more than any man can take. So

I leapt upon him, grabbed his beard with one hand and got hold of the chicken with the other, and proceeded to beat him over the head with it, with bits flying all over the place, until it finally fell to pieces in my hand. When I had finished he changed places with me, wiped his face and his beard, then turned to me and said, 'I was certainly right when I said that you had an evil eye, and that you were going to cast it on me'.

'What has this got to do with the evil eye?' I asked him.

He replied, 'The evil eye always results in some discomfort. Your eye has brought a considerable discomfort on me!'

At this remark I laughed as I had never laughed before, and from then on we started chatting just as if he had not said anything unkind to me, and as if I hadn't been too hasty and severe in my actions.

The only trouble was that, in the end, neither of us got any chicken to eat!

Innocent Blame

One day Hassan was at the house of Ibn Abi Karima, who saw Hassan washing himself from an earthenware jug, of the type used for holding fresh, drinking water. Considering it extremely wasteful to use fresh water for washing, Ibn Abi Karima said to him, 'Good heavens. You are using fresh water to get washed with when there is a well beside you'.

'But I'm not using fresh water', protested Hassan. 'It is water from the well I have here'.

'In that case, then', replied Ibn Abi Karima, 'you are spoiling the jug by putting salt water in it'.

Poor Hassan. If he didn't get the blame for one thing, he got it for another!

A Common Saying

There was a very common Arabic saying which, people used to say laughingly, could come from nowhere but Merv: 'He looks at me askance, as if I had eaten two parts of my own food and had only given him one part.'

Short Measure

One day, as Zubaida ibn Humaid had no money on him and needed some cash to pay a labourer, he borrowed two pounds and a few shillings from a greengrocer who was selling his goods at the door of his house.

When, after six months, Zubaida decided it was time to repay the debt, he gave the greengrocer two pounds in cash, and paid the few

shillings in kind with three measures of barley. The greengrocer was very angry at this, and shouted at Zubaida, 'Good heavens! You have hundreds of pounds, but as for me, I'm just a poor greengrocer who is lucky if he can scrape together a hundred shillings. I have to slave away all day long, all for a few coppers. A camel-driver and a labourer come calling at your door, and look what happens: you have no money on you, your secretary is away, and so I paid them in cash for you with two pounds and the equivalent of four measures of barley. Now, six months later, you have the cheek to pay me back two pounds and only three measures. What a nerve you have!'

'You stupid fellow,' replied Zubaida. 'You lent me this money in summer, but I am repaying it to you in winter, and three moist grains in winter are heavier than four dry grains in summer. If you ask me, you are still doing well out of it!'

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

'How do you feel about people saying, "'Abd Allah is a miser?"' a friend asked him once.

'Heaven preserve me from ever losing that title,' he replied.

'Why? What do you mean?'

'One is never called a miser unless one is very rich. Give me a fortune, and you can call me whatever name you wish.'

'But at the same time, you don't call anyone generous unless he is rich,' replied his friend. 'To be called generous is surely much better. It combines praise with wealth. To be called a miser, on the other hand, combines wealth with blame. You have chosen the viler and lower of the two.'

'But there is a distinct difference between them,' insisted 'Abd Allah.

'What?' asked his friend.

'When people say that someone is a miser,' replied the other, 'this proves that his wealth remains in his possession. But when they say that someone is generous, this shows that his wealth leaves his possession. The name of miser thus combines the idea of preservation with blame, while the title of generous implies squandering with praise. Wealth is bright and useful, it makes those who have it respected and powerful: praise, on the other hand, is just wind and mockery, and paying any attention to it is just weakness and stupidity. When a man's stomach craves for food, when he has no clothes to wear, when his family suffer deprivations, and those who used to envy him now gloat over his affliction, what use is praise then? Give me the blame of being a miser any day – as long as I have the wealth to go with it.'

The Inconsiderate Miser

Abu Qutba's wealth amounted to several thousand dinars and, making this money work for him, he managed to live comfortably on the interest he got from this capital. Yet despite all this money he possessed, he was so miserly that he used to leave the task of cleaning out his sewer until some day when it was raining very heavily. Consequently the rain water was just pouring down the gutters in a stream, and thus he needed to hire only a single man to do the job. The workman cleaned the refuse out of the sewer and tipped it into the street, where the rushing current of water swept it away and carried it into the canal. There was a distance of only a couple of hundred yards between his sewer and the canal: but in order to save a couple of dirhams in wages, he was prepared to wait a month or two for rain even at the risk of the dirt from the sewer overflowing into the street and causing inconvenience to the neighbours.

A Crafty Excuse

There were once three brothers, Abu Qutba, at-Tiyal and Baru. One of them was making the pilgrimage on behalf of Hamza, a famous warrior. He said, 'Unfortunately he was killed in battle before he could make the pilgrimage, so I am doing it for him.' The second of the brothers offered up a sacrifice on behalf of Abu Bakr and 'Umar. He said his reason for doing so was that they had gone against the law of the Prophet by neglecting the sacrifice. The third of the brothers broke the fast for the beautiful Ayesha on the three days following the feast of the sacrifice. 'She committed a sin,' he explained, while defending his action, 'by fasting on a feast day, and one must not do this. There are some people who fast for their father or their mother: as for me, I am breaking the fast for Ayesha to make up for her fasting when she should not have done so.' He hoped that this excuse would ease his conscience, and let him eat and enjoy his food instead of having to fast!

Keeping a Promise

Ibn Judhām ash-Shabbī and I used to attend meetings together, and sometimes, as we returned from them, he would stop by at my house for a while. He would usually have a meal with me, and would wait until the mid-day heat was past and the temperature was cooler. I knew him to be both extremely mean and very rich. Time and again he insisted that I should visit him in return, but each time I declined. In the end he said, 'For heaven's sake! Do you think that I am one of those who just gives you an invitation without really meaning it, and that you would be putting me to some trouble? Far from it! Some pieces of dry bread, some honey

and some berry juice will be all we will have – nothing special.' I suspected that he wanted to deceive me, trying to make it look as if it really was no trouble at all to him if I accepted his invitation, so I remarked, 'You are like the man who says to his servant, "Bring me some bread to eat, and give five dates to the beggar"'. My words had a double meaning, for I didn't think that anyone could invite someone of my standing all the way from al-Hurabiyya to al-Bātina, only to give him bread and honey for his meal.

When I eventually did go to his home, I was somewhat surprised and taken aback to see that he did give me just what he had promised – bread and honey, and nothing more. As we were eating, it so happened that a beggar stopped by his door. He was a poor, thin wretch who said in a feeble voice, 'Give me some of the food you are eating, and God will give you the food of Paradise.'

'May you be blessed,' replied ibn-Judhām.

The beggar again asked for food, and ibn Judham gave him the same reply.

For a third time the beggar made his request, to which ibn Judhām retorted in a curt voice, 'Be off with you, you miserable creature. You have had your reply. I have given you my blessing: how much more do you want?'

'Good heavens,' replied the beggar, 'never before have I seen someone actually seated at the table with the food before him ever refuse to give a mouthful to a poor beggar.'

'Be off with you, I said', shouted ibn Judhām angrily, 'or else I'll come out there and I swear I'll break every bone in your body.'

'Here's a sad state of affairs,' grumbled the beggar. 'God forbids it for a beggar to be driven away, and yet you swear you are going to break his bones!'

At this point I entered into the conversation and, remembering how ibn Judhām had said he would give me only bread and honey to eat and done just that, I said to the beggar. 'You had better go now, quietly. If you only knew how he carries out his word, you wouldn't stay here a second longer, after what he said he would do to you! Believe you me, I can tell you from bitter experience that when he says something, he means it!'

Ridiculous Actions

People sometimes do some ridiculous things, but probably none more so than Abu 'Uyaina. He came in one evening, and his wife put before him a meal without any meat. When he asked her what had happened to the meat, she replied that the cat had eaten it. Abu 'Uyaina jumped up

from the table, grabbed hold of the cat and put it on the scales to weigh it. 'This is just the weight of the meat: now where is the cat?' he remarked both cynically and angrily.

On another occasion a piece of melon was lost, and Abu 'Uyaina insisted on finding out from his family what had happened to it. Once again the poor cat got the blame. When Abu 'Uyaina heard that the cat had eaten it, he immediately threw the other piece of melon in front of the cat to see if what they had told him was the truth or not. Then when he saw that the cat did not eat it, he made his family pay for the cost of the whole melon.

His family tried to explain, saying, 'It was night time, and so it was dark. If the cat which ate it was not one of those from the neighbourhood, but our own cat, then you threw it the other piece of melon while it was still satisfied with the first bit. Let's wait a while, and then try it with another piece of melon to see if we told you the truth.' But Abu 'Uyaina refused, and made them pay just the same.

Abu 'Uyaina tried to justify his actions and his apparent meanness, even quoting sayings of the Prophet in the attempt. But, of course, he would never change. He had been a miser for years and years, and was too old and set in his ways to think differently now. Perhaps it was true of Abu 'Uyaina that you can't teach an old dog new tricks.