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Also by Elmer Bendiner:

THE FALL OF FORTRESSES

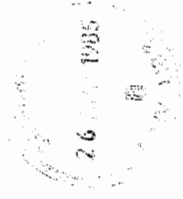
*A TIME FOR ANGELS: THE TRAGICOMIC
HISTORY OF THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS*

THE VIRGIN DIPLOMATS

THE BOWERY MAN

The Rise and Fall of Paradise

ELMER BENDINER

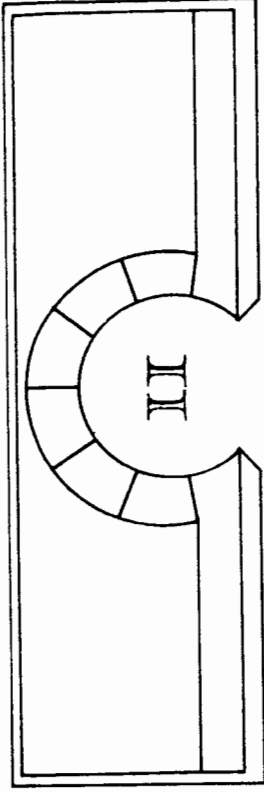


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which his scholarship entitled him. It was useless to dream of returning to Pumbedita when Cordoba was at his feet. Jews from all parts of the Caliphate, from Narbonne, Africa and over the mountains in Gaul, began to send their problems to Moses ben Hanoch in Cordoba instead of to the older academics of Babylon.

The spreading fame of the new rabbi shed added luster on the Caliphate. Abd-er Rahman saw in the emancipation of Cordoban Jews from their spiritual dependence on Arabia a happy parallel with his own assumption of the Caliph's title and his independence from Moslem capitals. Now both Moslem and Jew in Andalusia were free from foreign overlordship, spiritual or military.

The authority of Moses ben Hanoch, chief rabbi of Cordoba, was hailed and protected by the Caliph's friend, adviser, diplomat, physician and poet, then considered to be the world's most powerful Jew. In the words of a medieval writer it was he who "opened the gates of cities not by swords or arrows but by his eloquence and the sweet clarity of his thoughts." His name was Abu-Yusuf Hasdai ben Isaac ibn Shaprut.



Doctor and Diplomat

Hasdai ibn Shaprut came of "good family," a phrase that suggested to tenth-century Jews a lineage of intellectual distinction, generosity, piety and wealth, in that order of importance. He exhibited the self-confidence of the well-born by a display of charm and good manners that may have carried a hint of condescension, although no such failing is recorded by his worshipping chroniclers.

He was a worldly young man, respectful of religious tradition but not conspicuously pious. He was not as concerned with the Talmud as he was with the poetry and politics of his time and with the new rationality that was quickening the heart of the Caliphate.

His father, Isaac, celebrated for his piety and philanthropy, had been a pillar of the Jewish establishment in Jaen. He had collected a library of some distinction and was known as a patron of literature. The writers and scholars whom he subsidized were not the poets who used the sacred language of Hebrew to celebrate wine and women or who imitated the Arabic cadences and indulged in linguistic acrobatics. The beneficiaries of Isaac ibn Shaprut had to keep their minds on sacred themes and adapt their verse to the ritual of the synagogue.

The venerable Isaac, for reasons that are now unknown, moved his family from Jaen to Cordoba, where, some time between the years 910 and 915, Hasdai was born. It was about the time that Abd-er Rahman III came to the throne.

The elder Shaprut continued to bestow his wealth on worthy charities—building a synagogue here, a library there—but still put aside enough to give Hasdai proper tutors and to launch him upon a suitably intellectual career. Hasdai grew up, however, in a society that had burst the provincial and tribal bounds his father knew. The young man reveled in a legacy of Baghdad, Byzantium, ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, India and China along with the glories of the Torah and Talmud.

Heinrich Graetz, the authoritative nineteenth-century historian of the Jews, becomes almost sprightly in speaking of Hasdai:

“His easy, pliant and genial nature was free both from the heaviness of the Orientals and the gloomy earnestness of the Jews. His actions and expressions make us look upon him as a European, and through him, so to speak, Jewish history receives a European character.”

Hasdai cultivated not only a literary Hebrew but an equally stylish Arabic. A couple of priests taught him Latin and so opened his way to the study of natural sciences and medicine. He could also speak and write the popular language called Romance, a modified Latin on its way to becoming Spanish and absorbing a good deal of Arabic en route. He was, in short, a medieval man with a premature Renaissance appetite for the glories of the world.

There seems to be no record of how Hasdai looked, since those who wrote about him were content to describe mainly the brilliance of his mind and the gentility of his manners. He had few critics, and those few were seemingly motivated by personal clashes they might have had with him after his power somewhat subverted his character.

In his youth he must have been viewed by many families as eminently suitable marriage material but—and this was almost un-Jewish of him—apparently he stayed a bachelor all his life. Since his charm was winning and his style gallant, and since he was far from shy or overly bound by convention, one must assume that he loved and was loved not only as a leader but as a man. With whom and how he took such pleasures is unrecorded.

He developed his interest in medicine very early in his student years. He completed his theoretical studies, based on Galen though not limited to him. He then worked as an apprentice and finally passed the requisite examination prepared by the court physicians. He became quite popular as a Cordon general practitioner but set himself the goal of rediscovering a seemingly miraculous pharmaceutical panacea that had been known to the ancients but had long been lost.

The original formula, it was said, was devised by Mithradates VI, who ruled the kingdom of Pontus on the shores of the Black Sea until he was conquered by Pompey in the first century B.C. This king was obsessed by a fear of poisons, whether in the fangs of snakes or dropped into his food by assassins. In his efforts to find an antidote he experimented freely on his slaves, whose ranks, one supposes, needed constant replenishment.

The king developed what appeared to be a successful formula for an antidote to common poisons. It came to be called Mithradatum. This had a considerable vogue throughout the Mediterranean world among those in power who were haunted by a fear of poison. Some two hundred years later Nero's medical adviser Andromachus improved on the old formula by adding a number of ingredients, including the chopped meat of venomous snakes. It was this last rather shocking addition that gave the new antidote the name *theriaca*, meaning “wild beast.”

Galen and subsequent investigators threw more ingredients into the pot until one had to have at hand more than one hundred substances to manufacture the improved *theriaca*. Its reputed powers also grew, so that municipalities began producing it in quantity and advocating its use not only for snakebite and subtler poisons but also for asthma, impotence and the plague, among other dire disorders.

(*Theriaca* as rediscovered by Hasdai came ultimately to include opium and survived as a panacea until late in the nineteenth century, when European and American pharmacists reluctantly relinquished it for greater wonder drugs.)

When Hasdai ibn Shaprut began his practice in Cordoba the secrets of Nero and subsequent panacea hunters had been lost or garbled. Hasdai used his linguistic studies to unravel frag-

ments of old scrolls and in the end came up with a formula for theriaca that, with some confidence, he offered as probably very close to the ancient model. Other physicians agreed that by ingenious associations and etymologies he had correctly identified the herbs and potions listed in an old formulae. It was acclaimed as a breakthrough of enormous clinical significance.

Abd-er Rahman sent for Hasdai, of course, and, being impressed with the young man, appointed him to serve as one of the court physicians. The stocky Caliph, still lithe and active though in his fifties, and the genial, soft-spoken Jewish physician, then in his thirties, had reason to like each other. Neither was dogmatic about his religion and neither saw in the other a man beyond the pale. They could converse not only concerning the advances of medicine and of science in general but also of politics and art.

In view of Abd-er Rahman's declared policy of recruiting political aides from outside the preserves of Arab aristocracy, it is not surprising that he found a post for Hasdai. Certainly a Caliph who could make room at the top for Eastern European slaves would not hesitate to appoint a Jew who was as much a product of Cordoba as he was himself. He gave Hasdai the important post of director of customs, in charge of collecting revenue from every ship entering or leaving the ports of the Caliphate. As a major source of income for the government the department had to present a shining example of efficiency and honesty. Corruption in an agency given into the hands of a Jew would be embarrassing for the Caliph and dangerous for the Jew.

Hasdai took the job and carried it off with his customary even-tempered aplomb, conducting the business with a grace, formality and eloquence much valued by the Caliph in his bureaucratic.

Hasdai was also assigned to be spokesman, ombudsman and governor of his people. The Caliph granted him viceregal authority to settle all disputes and develop the necessary statutes to regulate Jewish life. The Jews, who took his advancement as

a tribute to themselves, responded by calling him prince and flooding him with complaints and demands.

His title of Nasi or prince, although not a hereditary one, was taken seriously enough by the Jews of Cordoba so that Hasdai was accorded a kind of royal homage. In turn he displayed a noble largesse, scattering alms as if he were a great lord. It became a minor fashion to write poetry in his honor, flattering him as a power in his own right and as conduit to and from a greater power. It is possible that the Jews of Cordoba felt themselves more of a nation with a prince of their own, just as did the Jews of Narbonne. By temperament and history Jews tend to be royalists as well as rebels.

The Caliph found still another use for Hasdai's talents. So long as Cordoba dealt only with Andalusian rebels or with Arab and Berber states in North Africa or with the old Caliphates of Babylon, a knowledge of Arabic, graced by the customary literary flourishes, was enough. Now, however, the Caliph of Cordoba had to deal with the Christian kingdoms in the north and beyond the mountains. For such a correspondence only Latin would do.

Though not averse to drawing on Christian talent, the Caliph was wary of priests as he was of mullahs and rabbis. For Abd-er Rahman politics was a secular game. The mullahs grumbled at that, for it was contrary to orthodox Islamic principles, but they would fly into a storm at the spectacle of an infidel priest conducting their foreign affairs. The Caliph therefore turned to Hasdai, who was discreet, perceptive, worldly and gifted with an elegant Latin style. He offered the Caliph sound advice and an enormous fund of background information on geography, politics, poetry, linguistics and natural science. It was also helpful to have him available for consultation by the other doctors on the palace staff. And it added to the prestige of the court to have in attendance the renowned rediscoverer of theriaca.

When diplomatic overtures came from Byzantium Hasdai was obviously the man to handle the affair. The Byzantine emperor of the time was Constantine VII, called Porphyrogenitus

because he was born in a chamber decked out in royal purple. He was never very interested in imperial power, preferring to have himself admired as a scholar and an artist. To support that image he gathered around him a staff of erudite men and set them to write encyclopedias and histories. The only aspect of empire that seemed to interest him was the theatrical, the ritualistic. He himself wrote *The Book of Ceremonies* to instruct his diplomats and courtiers on etiquette. It was perhaps the only subject on which they took their emperor seriously.

What impelled Byzantium to think of Cordoba at all was the growing nuisance of the Fatimid navy, which was preying on Byzantine shipping from North African bases. Byzantine diplomats reasoned that the best way to stop a Fatimid was with an Omayyad. Accordingly they set their emperor to woo Abd-er-Rahman III. Diplomacy of any sort moved slowly in those years but Byzantine diplomacy, freighted with the emperor's delight in the ceremonial dance, was particularly ponderous.

In 947 a Byzantine eunuch arrived in Cordoba attended by a glittering retinue and bearing gifts to Abd-er-Rahman but empowered only to invite the Caliph to send an emissary to Constantinople for friendly discussions and an exercise in protocol. The eunuch displayed the finery of his emperor and in turn beheld the finery of the Caliph. He then proceeded northward on a similar ceremonial mission to Otto the Great, the emperor rising from the ruins of the German part of the Carolingian empire. Fatimid pirates had made their way up from Italy, making the Alpine passes hazardous and bringing Otto into common cause with Byzantium.

In the following summer—948—a delegation from the Caliph led by a Latin-speaking Catholic priest sailed from Cordoba to Constantinople carrying gifts to the Byzantine emperor and an invitation to send a mission to Cordoba. It took the priest some three months to make the journey and, what with resting, feasting, ceremonial audiences and sight-seeing, it was the end of the year before he returned to Cordoba.

In the spring of 949 three Byzantine warships arrived at the Andalusian port of Pechina (subsequently to be called Al-

mería). The Caliph dispatched the usual eunuch and retinue, heavily laden with gifts, to the port to greet the ambassadors. The visitors came up by easy stages to Cordoba, where the city turned out in a gala display as the Byzantine party was escorted to the palace of one of the numerous princes of the realm.

Abd-er-Rahman and the court, which usually included Hasdai, galloped down from Madinat al-Zahra on streets covered with red carpets, with the Sudanese guard flashing scimitars, with the rumbling of tambours and the strumming of lutes. The Caliph met the Byzantine envoys in the *madjilis* of the Alcazar across the road from the Great Mosque.

With a superb sense of theater Abd-er-Rahman was clad in a simple white robe of coarse material. He sat cross-legged on the floor, a scimitar beside him. The contrast with his opulent guard and the carpeted road was overwhelming, like a pure diamond in a gaudy setting.

The courtesies however, must have been as elaborate as Constantine Porphyrogenitus could have wished. The envoys knelt and handed to the Caliph an elaborately carved silver box with a lid of solid gold. Inside was a blue parchment scroll bearing a heavy gold seal. On one side of the seal was a miniature portrait of the emperor himself with his son. The other side—and it was hard to know which was heads and which was tails—bore the face of Jesus.

Unrolled, the blue scroll was seen to bear a message in gold Greek letters that not even the scholarly Hasdai could translate. The meaning of the letter, it turned out, was as nothing compared with the artistry of the presentation. It was an illuminated bill of lading—a list of the gifts the envoys had brought. In addition to the usual bolts of silk and bars of gold and rare gems there were the presents that best characterized the giver—rare literary works masterfully copied. One of those was a work by Paulus Orosius, a fifth-century churchman from Tarragona. His *History* was an effort to refute the notion that the empire had declined because the old Roman gods had been outraged by official acceptance of Christianity. The subject was

of only academic interest to Moslems and Jews, although the author was an Iberian.

Another great work in the envoys' baggage was received with far greater excitement although it was in Greek, much less accessible than Latin. It was the leading medical classic of its time, a gigantic pharmacological text presenting some six hundred plants in handsome illustration and elegant description. It listed the properties of each, the indications for use, the suggested dosages and possible side effects. It was *De Materia Medica*, a work of the first-century Greek physician Pedanius Dioscorides, who not only compiled most of what was then known about medicinal herbs but also added the findings of his own field research, arrived at in the spare moments of a military career. The Arabs had not neglected it. Actually the Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad had engaged some Christian scholars to translate it, but since these monks were neither physicians nor herbalists they were at a loss to find equivalents of many of the Greek plants and therapies mentioned by Dioscorides. Because there were wide gaps and glaring inaccuracies in the version that had come out of Baghdad, all of Cordoba's medical community hankered after an authentic version of *De Materia Medica*.

The Caliph and Byzantine envoys watched the excitement of the doctors, Arab, Christian and Jewish, who stared in wonder and frustration at the undecipherable Greek characters. Then the Caliph brought on his poets, who were to improvise for the guests, some of whom may have understood enough Arabic to appreciate the word-juggling they were about to hear.

Actually the court's most brilliant poets, including one who had been lured at enormous expense from Baghdad, had an off day, performing lamely at what was to be an elaborate display of Cordoban literary skill. Overawed into silence by the grandeur of the company and the challenge of the day, they were about to disgrace their Caliph when Sa'id al-Balluk, an old teacher, lawyer and poet of a Berber family, rose and rattled off a long discourse on the glories of Cordoba—all in impeccable rhyme and meter and in the most florid Arab style of imagery

and metaphor. The performance won the lasting gratitude of the Caliph, who afterwards appointed him to a lifetime post as a judge.

The caustic Sa'id later delivered with impunity some very harsh criticism of the Madinat al-Zahra. When the Caliph asked him to comment on the gold-and-silver roofs of the royal buildings the aging curmudgeon said: "I would never have believed that some demon could have debased you to the level of the infidels." Instead of lopping off the old man's head, the Caliph accepted the strongly worded suggestion, ordered the gold and silver removed and substituted a more modest roof. All that was still in the future when Sa'id proved himself a literary hero at the reception of the Byzantine ambassadors.

In time the Byzantine envoys left for home, bearing the Caliph's request that the emperor lend them a scholar who could translate Greek into Latin. What the Caliph may have communicated to Byzantium concerning the Fatimid pirates, the ostensible occasion of the embassy, is not clear from the history books.

The piracy crisis was replaced in time by other and graver political questions, but the preparation of *De Materia Medica* in a form in which it could be passed on to subsequent generations was a matter of far more significance. That seems to have been the view of the scholarly emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus.

In 952, some five years after the first Byzantine mission was sent to Cordoba, a monk named Nicolas arrived on loan from Constantine to help translate Dioscorides. Hasdai organized a team of physicians and copyists and herbalists to carry out whatever research was necessary but took upon himself the prime job of collaborating with the monk on a definitive edition of *De Materia Medica* in Latin and Arabic.

To Abd-er Rahman the translation would be a significant achievement of his Caliphate, no matter that it was done by a Christian monk and a Jewish scholar.

The matter of pirates continued to trouble the European powers, including the new German entity springing up in

Northern and Central Europe. Otto I, known subsequently as the Great, was in the process of building on the fragments of the Carolingian empire a structure that would eventually appear in history as the Holy Roman Empire. He had not yet succeeded in maneuvering the pope into crowning him, but Otto was well on his way when he sent an envoy to Cordoba asking that the Caliph do whatever was necessary to control whatever pirate bands were operating from Spanish bases.

Otto was a tough man and certainly he played a very tough political game with the pope, but he was nevertheless a devoted churchman. In his vast, disordered and contentious realm the only literates were the high ecclesiastics from whom he drew his counselors.

When in 950 an Arabized Christian bishop from Cordoba caught up with the emperor, probably near Mainz, he was received royally. It seemed a gracious gesture on the part of the Caliph of Cordoba to use a bishop as a messenger to the chief protector of the Church. The letter itself, however, was a major diplomatic gaffe, which is scarcely explicable except as an example of bureaucratic arrogance and a lapse of vigilance at the executive level. It contained references to Christianity that outraged the churchly advisers to the German monarch.

Otto was so taken up with wars and politics in Germany and Italy, and among the Eastern tribes, that he took almost three years to respond. Astonishingly his temper had not improved in the interim. Neither had that of his advisers. They drafted a stinging response full of ingenious insults to Islam. It was strongly suggested that such blasphemy might well be dangerous to the messenger, who might have to be offered as a sacrifice.

Otto asked the bishop of Metz to find a volunteer. He in turn asked the abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Gorze to select a couple of hardy potential martyrs. Two monks were thereupon proposed as candidates for the sacrifice. One of them became too panicky to be allowed out of the monastery. The other was the prior who had helped to found the monastery. Brother John of Gorze was a passionate man, burning with re-

ligious zeal, but he was also a well-traveled man, who had been to Italy and France, who knew how to deliver even so hot a message with the necessary niceties. He went off bearing gifts to the Caliph, for it would have greatly demeaned Otto to send even his insults in a plain scroll.

With him went another monk, no doubt persuaded by John's grim determination, a businessman from Verdun, and two Jews, who enter and vanish from history with little more than their names—Saul and Joseph. Why John of Gorze included these Jews in his delegation is a matter for speculation. Were they navigators, translators, advisers on Arab protocol? It is not known. Also traveling with the delegation were some remnants of the Caliph's party of emissaries who had come to Germany three years earlier. The bishop who carried that ill-worded message to Otto had died waiting for an answer.

The strangely assorted group, on what must have seemed a doomed mission, traveled by mule and ship in the summer of 953. It is a pity that their voyage was not recorded in greater detail than John of Gorze saw fit. They must have carried on a fascinating dialogue, touching perhaps on faith, morals, politics and martyrdom as well as on the sights and sounds of medieval Europe and the price of wolfbane.

They arrived in Cordoba in the fall of the year and were taken to a princely villa where they were left to while away their time in lavish idleness. The Caliph's representatives, who saw the group from time to time, gently deflected Brother John's increasingly irritated protests by reminding him that after all, the Caliph had been kept waiting three years for an answer from Otto. Surely, they suggested, John could put up with a few months spent in the best accommodations Cordoba had to offer.

Actually the Caliph was stalling for time, because word had leaked that the message John carried was so offensive to Islam as to demand, at the very minimum, the decapitation of the messenger, and perhaps even war against Otto. Clearly, it was felt, it would be better for the peace of the world if such letters

were never written. Once written, it would be best if they were not read.

The undoing of Otto's message was a matter calling for exquisite tact. The Caliph put the affair in the hands of Hasdai. Although in the beginning Brother John refused to divulge the contents of Otto's letter, he eventually yielded to Hasdai's blend of argument, friendly advice and delicate references to the inevitable consequences of blasphemy under the stern Islamic code. He confirmed the worst: The letter was highly explosive.

The year 953 came to an end with John and his party allowed to celebrate the Christmas holidays at a nearby church, after which they returned to the gentle life of an Andalusian court in a sumptuous villa amid luxuries that must have shocked an austere monk.

In the spring of 954, a bishop came to the villa to advise the monk that everyone would breathe much more easily if he would find a way to avoid delivering the message. One's faith may be inviolable, but surely one can fit one's instructions to circumstances, the bishop pleaded. Indeed, Mozarabes—those Christians clad in burnouses to mark their adaptation to an Islamic world—had to make these adjustments all the time. They were necessary adjustments sanctioned by the Church.

Brother John furiously rejected such compromise. He was ordered to deliver a message he knew would doom him. He would not shrink from the fate he expected.

Early in 955, as John was on his way to church, a message was put into his hand pointing out that he held the fate of all the Christians in Andalusia. The Caliph's duty to Islam might be seen as requiring not only John's head, it was pointed out, but the heads of all available Christians, if the letter were delivered. On the other hand, the unsigned note informed the monk, if Otto's inflammatory message were not officially transmitted, the Caliph would be pleased to enhance the lives of Christians in his realm.

John's logic is not altogether clear, but he drew an analogy between such Christian advice and that of Haman, who urged

his king to let him slaughter the Jews. Was this odd reference attributable to the frequent visits to the villa of Hasdai ibn Shaprut? Perhaps, because it is known that the monk had conceived an admiration and a deep affection for this Jewish negotiator. Nevertheless, Hasdai had so far failed to persuade John to a solution that would be less ideological and more politic.

As the third year of John's strange embassy opened, the question of war or peace, of life or martyrdom, was being weighed in the monk's uncluttered simplicity of mind. The Caliph and the emperor would have preferred to bend their supple consciences around the hard realities of politics, but John, having no responsibility for the world or for anything but his soul, could afford the luxury of inflexibility.

In the end the Caliph chose a direct approach. He sent a message to John asking for advice on how to solve the dilemma of the message nobody wanted to hear. John, possibly because he was worn out by the luxurious idleness of his days, possibly because the sweet reasonableness of Hasdai had at last made some impression on him, decided to relax his rigid spirit. He suggested that the Caliph send an ambassador to Otto asking him to dispatch new instructions to his faithful servant, John.

A Christian layman who spoke fluent Latin volunteered for the mission. For greater protection he was ordained not only as a priest but also as a bishop. The Church in Cordoba was as eager as the Caliph to evade the terrible consequence of the monk's message. They organized an impressive retinue and sent the bishop-messenger on his way on a June morning in 955.

It took the bishop ten weeks to reach John's monastery of Gorze. He made it to Metz before the snow fell and had to stay there until the spring. Then the travelers, along with the abbot of Gorze and another bishop picked up along the way, went on to Frankfurt where, after the usual delays for protocol, they were granted an audience with Otto.

The original insult had long been forgotten and the emperor, dreaming of adventures in Italy, saw every reason to make a friend of the Caliph. He sent off a new ambassador with in-

structions to thank Brother John for his loyalty and his heroic steadfastness of purpose. The monk was now to destroy the collection of insults and to see if he could draft a treaty of friendship with the Caliph, stipulating an end to piracy in the mountains, and also a beneficent neutrality in the event that Otto's armies should embark on a parade through Italy. The new instructions arrived in June 956.

John, possibly with more relief than he would have cared to admit, accepted his new orders and, three years later, was given a royal reception at the Madinat al-Zahra. He rode on the customary royal red carpet to the palace. Before him and behind him galloped the ceremonial cavaliers of the Caliphate, the Sudanese guards on Arabian horses, letting their cloaks fly and flourishing their scimitars aloft. The monk noted that the Caliph's light cavalry were mounted quite handsomely and effectively on mules.

John of Gorze, clad in somber brown robe and cowl, walked into the royal audience chamber where Abd-er Rahman sat enthroned amid gold, pink and blue columns, facing his pools, his trees, his orchards, his fields and beyond them the Guadalquivir. The monk presented Otto's message of peace and affection as if there had never been a correspondence of curses.

The Christian monk could now cultivate the friendship of Hasdai, the Jewish courtier of the Caliph, less guardedly and in greater leisure. It is not known precisely what was accomplished by John's mission, but in the years that followed, the Caliphate did nothing to harass the German emperor, and the Christians of Andalusia continued to enjoy the peace that comes from compromise.

Actually, in that final year of Brother John's mission—before he returned to Gorze to become abbot and to write his memoirs—Hasdai could not have been as available for chatting as either would have liked. The Caliph had found another task for his doctor-diplomat, this one with one of the quarrelsome Christian kings on the northern borders.

Early in his reign the Caliph had been obliged to fight Ordoño II of Leon. Periodically that minor monarch would

sweep down from his walled dominions to ravage the countryside. Afterwards he would nail to the gates the heads of his Moslem foes and dedicate a new church—or rededicate an old one—by way of sanctifying the bloodshed and legitimizing the loot.

Later on, in 939, when Ramiro II of Leon formed an alliance with the wily queen-regent Theuda of Navarre, Abd-er Rahman came close to catastrophe at the battle of Simancas. The Caliph's armies were led by one of his favorite Slav generals, Najda, to whom the purebred Arab princelings had been forced to salaam. It is safe enough to humiliate dependent princes in peacetime but a mistake to send them, still brooding, into battle. At Simancas, the princes and nobles deserted their Slav commander and led a general rout. When they saw Najda killed they tried to stem the panic, but it was too late and in the disorder whole regiments of the Caliph's armies were wiped out. The outcome of the battle at Simancas, it was said, gave heart to Christians as far away as England and the German forests.

It might have signaled the end of Moslem rule if at that time the Christian forces had been capable of political unity and military discipline. As it was, Leon, Navarre and Castile were soon embroiled in deadly internecine warfare. The Caliph, for the sake of his own prestige, and to keep the Christian warriors from straying into Moslem territory, kept up the pressure on his northern frontier. His generals, mainly Slavs now and without even a show of Arab lieutenants, sent back to Cordoba a stream of souvenirs—crosses, church bells and occasionally the heads of fallen Christians.

In 955, Ordoño III of Leon and Abd-er Rahman simultaneously felt an urgent need for peace on the frontier. The Caliph was faced with a threat of invasion from the Fatimids of North Africa and Ordoño desired a respite so that he could be free to demolish his half-brother, Sancho of Navarre.

The Caliph thereupon broke into Hasdai's routine of pleasant chats with John of Gorze and of playing the prince among the Jews of Cordoba and Lucena. Hasdai was dispatched on his

first foreign mission—to make peace with Leon. He accomplished the affair smoothly enough but no great diplomatic bargaining was necessary. Both sides were so eager for peace that it was a simple matter to negotiate a kind of mutual disarmament.

Ordoño readily agreed to Hasdai's proposals for eliminating certain fortifications that had always constituted jumping-off points for incursions into the Caliphate. Hasdai thus brought home a treaty that left the Caliph free to organize a defense against the North African threat.

A war fever then gripped the Caliphate, from the fashionable salons of the capital to the Jewish synagogues. There loyalty to Abd-er Rahman and to Hasdai was loud, vigorous and heartfelt, for Jews could scarcely imagine that an alternative regime would prove as safe or as pleasant.

Recruiters beat the drums up and down Andalusia to build a navy and an army that would once and for all settle the threat from the rival Caliphs across the straits.

All was in order in 955 when Ordoño III died and left the throne available to his sworn enemy and half-brother, Sancho the Fat. This was a most unfortunate prince who had the ambitions of a gallant hero encased in grotesque rolls of lard, which rendered him ridiculous. His attempts to subdue the scornful nobility of Leon usually led to hilarious laughter. He could not mount a horse without an embarrassing amount of engineering and finally had to give up riding altogether. That made it difficult to lead his men in battle or on parade. As a matter of fact, he found it awkward even to walk without leaning on an attendant.

Sancho attempted to assert himself by disowning the treaty his late half-brother had signed with the Caliph. He resolutely refused to leave unfortified the frontier positions specified in the treaty that Hasdai had secured. There was nothing for the Caliph to do but to send part of his carefully assembled forces from their southern bases north to chastise Sancho the Fat.

The Caliph's army did that effectively, but their victory only served to undermine whatever tatters of power were left to the

wretched Sancho. His cousin, the king of Castile, contrived to stir up a faction of the army that, in the spring of 958, sent the king rolling eastward toward Pamplona.

Oddly enough the kingmakers of Leon, with some help from Castile, foisted upon the kingdom a far more deformed character than Sancho the Fat. He was Ordoño IV, otherwise known as El Malo—the Wicked. He was singularly unattractive, but a hunchbacked king with a malevolent face could evoke a chilling horror not incompatible with majesty. His subjects did not laugh at him as they did at Sancho.

The fat prince went home to Pamplona where his uncle Garcia and his grandmother Theuda ran the kingdom of Navarre. Theuda had gotten used to ruling the country while serving as regent for her son Garcia. She used to don armor and take to the field at the head of her armies. She was not overwhelmingly successful as a general—having had to acknowledge the suzerainty of the Caliphate on at least one occasion—but her bravery was never in doubt. And as governor and politician she was generally acknowledged to be one of the most capable of all the Christian rulers of Spain. For a woman who could govern Navarre in those days when treachery and a lack of scruple were the requisites of leadership, there was no difficulty in ruling her son Garcia. As he advanced to middle age and she to old age she allowed the nominal king to sign state documents, as long as she countersigned them. For a quarter of a century Theuda had led her kingdom, avoiding all threats to the throne, including financial bankruptcy. She was an effective ruler.

Clearly she had a sentimental side, for she was inordinately fond of her unfortunate grandson Sancho. She was determined to restore him to the throne of Leon, although apparently that would take considerable doing, since it would mean that Navarre would have to confront Castile as well as the people of Leon, who tended to laugh at the spectacle of their ponderous prince being groomed for his post by his aging grandmother.

Theuda saw that Sancho's problem was not gluttony, or at least not solely that. The queen mother was a level-headed lady who did not believe that her grandson had been transformed

into an elephantine freak by malevolent spirits or as a punishment for his family's or his own iniquities. It was, she surmised, a medical matter. She needed, then, a doctor and an army. For either or both there was only one place to turn—Cordoba. Everyone knew that the Jews and Arabs had a near-monopoly of medical skills. And the armies of Cordoba were the only ones to strike terror in the heart of a Christian city-state. Of course, there was the question of seeming to crawl into bed with the anti-Christ, but such sins can be atoned for in time. It was also true that Moslems had burned and plundered Navarrese villages, but so had the Christians of Castile and Leon. If one does not make peace with one enemy one must with another and, after all, with whom can one make peace if not with an enemy?

The queen sent a mission to Cordoba bearing the usual gifts and sweet words. Her ambassadors stipulated the queen's concerns—medical attention for her oversized grandson and perhaps some assistance that the Caliph might be kind enough to offer to remedy the terrible injustice that had driven the poor young man from his throne.

The Caliph sent word that a physician and a statesman would be sent to confer with Her Majesty at Pamplona. There was only one physician-statesman in the court of Cordoba, and that was Hasdai.

The Caliph's envoy went off to Pamplona, where he proceeded to display a consummate knowledge of why men grow fat and how aging queens can be played upon as on a lute. He examined Sancho the Fat and talked with him at length. Finally he declared that in his professional view something could be done to reduce the dethroned monarch to something approaching human proportions.

Unfortunately, however, it would be difficult to affect such a transformation in Pamplona. In Cordoba, he pointed out, he had his medications, implements, advisers and texts. Before Sancho came, however, it would be well to settle a few controversies that would otherwise trouble the minds of patient and physician, the doctor suggested. Would Sancho reaffirm a

pledge made by his predecessors to dismantle the fortifications on the frontier? Sancho temporized but in the end complied with the doctor's orders.

Then, over lunches and dinners and in conversations while walking and riding, Hasdai hinted that once Sancho was of a size to fit a throne, a Moslem army might be available to put him into it. Such affairs would require the presence of the queen, he pointed out, and suggested that she accompany her grandson when he came to Cordoba for the cure. The queen felt neatly boxed in. Never before had a Christian been obliged to so openly solicit the help of an infidel to take a Christian throne.

Hasdai appreciated the delicacy of the queen's position, but he might have pointed out that to the Caliph the very Christian queen of Navarre was as much an infidel as he was to her. For him, as for her, the precedent would be far-reaching. Yet the exigencies of the queen's situation demanded extraordinary boldness.

With the queen wavering, Hasdai pressed his luck and suggested that since it would be a royal state visit with a critical agenda for discussion, it would be proper to allow her son Garcia, the king of Navarre, to come as well. No doubt he expatiated on the delights of Cordoba, the red carpets, the Madinat al-Zahra, the glories of the Caliphate. And, above all, he stressed the political astuteness Her Majesty would demonstrate by such a move. Without such queenly brilliance, he suggested, Sancho might well regain his figure, but probably not his throne.

A Jewish commentator of the time reported that the "haughty" queen had been conquered "by the charm of his [Hasdai's] words, the ripeness of his wisdom, the power of his cunning and his manifold wiles." In the autumn of that same year, 958, the queen mother, with her royal son and grandson in tow, took the road from Pamplona to Cordoba.

It was a long procession that wound diagonally across the Iberian peninsula. Sancho, who could not straddle a horse, was carried on a litter or walked leaning on his new-found friend

and physician, Hasdai. The queen, in her seventies, and her middle-aged, dutiful son, the king of Navarre, rode an assortment of vehicles that preserved as much as possible of the royal dignity. A collection of priests and nobles, soldiers, servants and muleteers brought up the rear.

They plodded along for five hundred miles, up the Sierra de Guadarrama and down onto the great central plains, then up again into the Sierra Morena and at last down to the valley of the Guadalquivir, where the Caliph's honor guard came to meet them and bring them to the capital.

All along the route, in cities and villages people came to stare at the royal Christians and the black-robed priests on their way to petition the Caliph of Cordoba. Few could have missed the high irony that the whole affair seemed to be managed by a beguiling Jew.

Once again the Caliph's troops came out in full regalia. Once again the poets composed elaborate commemorative rhymes, all probably lost on the guests of honor, though Hasdai was on hand to interpret from Arabic to Romance or (for the benefit of the clergy) to Latin.

The Moslems of Cordoba came out in huge throngs to watch the royal infidels being overawed by Moslem magnificence. The Jews of Cordoba were even more ecstatic, for the diplomatic coup had been brought off by their own princeling. They knew that as Hasdai mounted to glory his people would undoubtedly rise in the favor of the Caliph. Their writers went to work in a glow of euphoria, of which this is a fair sample:

"Bow down, O ye mountains, to Judah's chief. . . God hath given him to us as our chief; he standeth at the right hand of the King, who calleth him Prince, and hath exalted him above the mighty. . . Without sword or arrows, by the word of his mouth alone he hath taken by storm the fenced cities of the devourers of accursed flesh."

It is not likely that for his royal guests Hasdai translated that last unkind reference to the Christian taste for pork.

When he was not needed to soothe the queen mother or otherwise engage in the ritual dances of diplomacy Hasdai and a

team of doctors went to work on Sancho. Unfortunately the methods they used to render the fat from the prince have not been transmitted to later generations of doctors.

Very little has come down from medieval sources on the treatment of obesity. Often fat was considered a status symbol beyond the reach of the poor. Although the ancients had deplored it as a cause of shortness of breath, if not of life, it was not considered a major medical problem.

It is likely that although Hasdai and his colleagues dressed up their cure with herbal concoctions—perhaps appetite depressants—they attained their success by a rigidly enforced diet and a regimen of exercise that kept the caloric intake substantially below the outgo.

Whatever the method, within six months Hasdai had Sancho in very presentable shape. Historians depict the prince restored to the slim proportions of early youth but that may be an exaggeration. In that age of wonder chroniclers insisted on describing the merely remarkable as absolutely miraculous. It seems to be true that Sancho, at the end of his treatment, could not only walk unaided but also mount a reasonably sized horse and cut an acceptable cavalier figure.

In 959 a Moslem army with Sancho in its midst captured Zamora and then most of the Asturian countryside of the kingdom of Leon. In the autumn of 960 the capital city of Leon fell to the Caliph's armies and Sancho was securely seated on his throne. He was pleased to note that his subjects and courtiers had stopped laughing. He sent delegations to all the neighboring states, to announce that the kingdom had been restored to the previous management. And special envoys went off to express eternal gratitude to Cordoba, to the Caliph and to his ingenious doctor-diplomat Hasdai for all that they had done for him.

The gratitude proved less than eternal, and a few years later a Moslem army was required to lay waste a few cities and burn the crops to remind him of his solemn promise to remove the ten menacing fortifications. But that was after the reign of Abd-er Rahman III.

It was barely a year after Sancho the Fat was restored to the throne of Leon that the Caliph fell ill. His physicians, undoubtedly including Hasdai, gathered at his bedside and, with the customary bleedings and the skillful blendings of samples from the herbal gardens of the palace, he rallied.

When the winds of autumn swept down the valley of the Guadalquivir, however, the Caliph began to fail once more and on October 16, 961, the grandest European monarch of his time, the first Caliph of Cordoba, died. He was just seventy years old and had reigned for forty-nine years.

He left a country in what passed for a serene peace in those years. Both the Christian and Fatimid enemies were held at bay, and no rebels were rising in Andalusia. To succeed him there was his son Hakam, a man approaching middle age with a passion for peace, literature and, they say, comely boys.

The Caliphate, when the Caliph left it, was one of the world's bright glories, gilded by the refinements of wealth and fashion. Ladies, high-born or middle class, took their daily baths while masseuses anointed them and taught them how to pinch their waists and apply their makeup with telling effect. Fruit was never more abundant or cheaper than in the year of the Caliph's death. Prosperity dazzled visitors and left the residents satisfied with themselves and their state. Every man and woman, it seemed, had a mule to ride, and they made a constant cheery clatter on the cobbled streets.

Making possible all this comfort was that supreme stabilizer of social order, a competent civil service, which, it was hoped, would always carry on the day-to-day tasks of government, regardless of palace coups and harem politics.

Except for the most remotely situated farmers, nearly everyone in the Caliphate could read and write. And this on a continent where literacy was rare even among nobles.

At such felicitous times only professional doom-sayers listen for rumbles beneath their feet and sniff the wind suspiciously. When the honor guards took the body of Abd-er Rahman III on a bare plank from his pleasure palace, the Madinat al-

Zahra, through the streets to the tomb of his ancestors in the Alcazar at Cordoba, there were no grim prophets to note that the evening of the Caliphate was creeping in beneath the blaze of afternoon.