



BOY SCOUTS IN TURKEY

## PLAY IN TURKISH VILLAGES

BY HELEN VROOMAN

International College, Izmir, Turkey

ON going into a Turkish village for the first time, one might feel that the spirit of play was lacking. Turkish crowds seem quiet and serious; little children seem solemn for their years. But with better acquaintance, one is soon impressed with the genuine and hearty hospitality which is perhaps their chief recreative enjoyment. I shall never forget the delight we experienced on entering a small village after a strenuous hike when the inhabitants came to meet us, gave us mats to sit on under the trees, and then brought baskets of fresh grapes and small cups of coffee. As we partook of this delectable fare, we exchanged experiences and stories. The unhurried poise of most Turks, high or low, makes one love to linger over coffee and conversation.

The feast of Ramazan is still celebrated in Anatolia. Thirty days of fasting from sunrise to sunset followed by three days of feasting and visiting is the custom. After each long day of fast comes a night of merry-making and eating. During these evenings there is dancing to the beating of the drum, singing in a minor key, and story-telling.

The Turks possess a charming traditional character called Nasreddin Hoja, an old man about whom there are innumerable stories which depict either his extreme cleverness or his stupidity. Often of an evening village folk will sit around and rock with laughter over the tales of his escapades. Sometimes a traveling story-teller, called a "mete," will go from village to village telling about old Nasreddin Hoja. A favorite story is the following:

One day Nasreddin was sitting on the limb of a tree sawing away between himself and the trunk. A traveler went by, looked startled and said, "Old man, pretty soon if you aren't careful, you are going to get a bad fall." Nasreddin paid no attention, and the traveler went on. In a few minutes the limb broke and down went the old fellow. After he had recovered from the shock, he rushed after the traveler and cried, "I beg you to tell me when I am going to die." The traveler answered that he could not do such a thing. "But," said Nasreddin, "you told me I was going to fall and I did, and of course you can prophesy when I shall die."

Another story, illustrating his cleverness is often told: Once Nasreddin borrowed a big soup kettle from his neighbor. After a few days he returned it and a small kettle in addition. The neighbor said he had loaned only the large kettle, but Nasreddin declared the large kettle had had a baby while at his house. At that the neighbor delightedly accepted the little one.

Some time later, the old fellow again borrowed the big kettle. This time weeks went by and it was not returned. Finally, the neighbor came after it. Nasreddin sadly shook his head, "Your kettle died," he said.

"Whoever heard of a kettle dying?" indignantly protested the neighbor.

"Well," said the old Hoja, "if a kettle can have a baby, it can also die."

From early times comes a kind of "Punch and Judy" show, called "Kara Göz" (Black Eye). Huge, hook-nosed old "Black Eye" is always having narrow escapes in marital or financial troubles, but by his ingenuity he usually wins out. During the Ramadan evenings "Black Eye" is performed in a corner of a coffee house behind a small lighted screen. The little marionettes are cleverly made from camel's hide and are nicely colored.

Often, during these nights and at many other times a national folk dance of distinctive charm is performed, which has descended



ZEYBECK DANCE

from the romantic, Robin-Hood type of mountain robber. The Zeybeck, as it is called, is often performed by villagers in the center of a group of friends who sing, clap or strum their accompaniment. The athletic instructors teach it to the children in the city schools, where it is often done in the old national costume.

With the Westernization and educational programs, of course, sports such as volley ball and basket ball are coming into the village schools. For the older men, however, the coffee house still seems to be the chief center of recreation. For a cent one can buy a tiny cup of coffee and can sit at a table under a huge sycamore

by a running stream. All the men in the village seem to gather here during their leisure hours to talk, to sit, or to play a bit of backgammon. There are always a few to smoke the "hubble-hubble" pipe or nargile. It would be fascinating to sit in on some of the coffee house discussions if one knew the language well enough. It is the country club and golf course of the Turkish villager.

And what of the women? The young girls are more and more getting education with all the broadening interests which it brings with it. Marriage comes at eighteen or twenty where before it came

at fourteen or fifteen. The older women still keep apart from the men, however; they have their gossip fests in each other's homes or they take an all-day picnic in some green spot. It was my privilege a few years ago to spend a few nights in a rather isolated village. In the evening I was invited to join the women at their recreation. They put on a program of native dances and dances improvised to some western jazz records. I could not but think that the stage had lost some excellent talent in one of these women.

The little girls seem always to be playing hopscotch or little singing games. Rarely are dolls seen. Sometimes one sees little girls playing with two sticks between which is suspended a slack string. On the string is a big spool which flies into the air as the arms are extended and the string becomes taut. The skilful ones catch the spool on the string as it descends. This game is sometimes seen depicted on a frieze of an old ruin. More often one sees a group of little girls throwing balls into the air, endeavoring to see who can clap their hands behind their backs the most before the ball is caught on its return.

Little boys announce spring in Turkey by flying beautiful kites. Wind and hills and a little urchin with a colored kite! One can hardly look up in the sky without seeing a kite somewhere. The most distinctly Turkish game which the boys play, seems to be one called *chelik chomak*. Even the donkey boys who drive in from the hills often steal a few minutes to indulge in *chelik chomak*. Sometimes just two play though any number can take part. The words mean a special kind of stick which is always used. The boys divide into teams about thirty feet apart. One side bats the stick, which is laid in a hole, into the air. If it is caught, it gives several points toward the final score which may be five hundred. If not caught, it is left lying and the number of steps taken to retrieve it count for the batter. When the players are skilful, it is a clever and attractive game to watch.

Clubs for sports are growing. Soccer and basketball are popular and well played. A Turk recently won the Balkan tennis championship. Baseball is practically unknown, as is American football. The old sport of *jirit* which is essentially Turkish is still played in some villages, and is being revived by the army to improve the cavalry. This is a game which seems to hold the tradition of its people.

Originally it was played in Central Asia. It has a warlike air and smacks of Jengis Khan and Tamerlane. In different villages, it has different versions. I have been told it originated in the custom of a man fighting for and carrying off his bride.

The most common form it takes seems to be the mock battle. Armed with long sticks called *jirits*, horsemen strive to touch each other. When the stick falls to the ground it must be recaptured without dismounting. When a rider is hit he is out of the game.

Another version of the game comes from a village near Ancient Pergamos, where there are many good horsemen. This is played at weddings. The host pins various articles of clothing on a high rope strung between poles. The riders come at breakneck speed from a distance, hurl their sticks at the ground point down, and, if the sticks bounce over the rope, they are entitled to an article of clothing.

Most often now it seems to be played as a test of the skill with which riders can hurl the jirit stick on to the ground and catch it again on the bounce.

With the Westernization program that is being effected by the President, traditions will change in Turkey. One cannot but hope, however, that the gracious hospitality, the delightful Zeybeck, jirit, the stories of Nasreddin, and old Kara Göz will always be part of Turkish life.