

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE SUFI SAINTSHIP

Certain attributes which Lesser and Greater Saints provide for the Sufi can be judged from the incident related regarding Sheikh Shahabuddin, but although these powers could be manifested after long and protracted Meditation, cases are frequently recorded in Sufi history where actual transportation and what is generally called the 'Spiritual Flight' have been performed by the Sufis. The following incident, however, is well known:

The Sultan of Egypt, having heard of the powers of *Karamat* (spiritual flight) of a Sufi, summoned all the learned men of his kingdom to meet on a certain day in his palace, when there arose a dispute among them. It is said that the angel Gabriel, having one night taken Muhammed out of his bed, showed him whatever is in the seven heavens, in Paradise and in Hell, and that the same great Prophet after having had fourscore and ten thousand conferences with God, was brought back again into his bed by the same angel.

Some of the doctors advanced that all was done in so short a space of time that Muhammed, on his return, found his bed still warm, and that he took up a pot of water which was not yet run out although the pot had been thrown down the very moment the angel Gabriel carried Muhammed out of his chamber.

The Sultan who presided in this assembly maintained that this was impossible.

'You teach,' said he, 'that there are seven heavens, between

each of which there is no less a distance than a man can well travel in five hundred years, and that each heaven is as thick as it is distant from the next to it. How then is it possible that Muhammed, having passed through all these heavens, and having had fourscore and ten thousand conferences with God, should at his return find his bed still warm, his pot thrown down and the water that was in it not spilt? Who can be credulous enough to believe so ridiculous a fable. Do you not know that if you throw down a pot full of water, though you take it up again in a moment, you will find no water in it?’

The learned men answered that this indeed could not naturally be, but that all things were possible to the Divine Power. The Sultan of Egypt who was of an obstinate temper, and had made it a maxim never to believe anything contrary to reason, would not give credit to this miracle, and the learned men broke up their assembly.

This dispute made a great noise in Egypt and the news of it came to the ears of the learned Sheikh Shahabuddin who, for some reasons not set down in the history, could not be present at the assembly. However, he went to the Sultan’s Palace in the midst of all the heat of the day.

The Sultan, informed of the doctor’s visit to the Court, went to him, carried him into a stately chamber where, after having made him sit down, he spoke to him in this manner: ‘You need not have given yourself the trouble of coming hither, it would have been enough to have sent one of your servants for we should willingly have granted him anything he had asked us in your name.’

‘Sir,’ answered the doctor, ‘I am come on purpose to have a moment’s conversation with your Majesty.’ The Sultan, who knew the Sheikh was famed for behaving himself haughtily in

the presence of Princes, showed him many civilities and made him abundance of compliments.

The room they were in had four windows, on each side one. The doctor desired the King to order one of them to be shut. This being done they continued for some time their conversation, after which the doctor made one of the windows, which had the prospect of a mountain called Kzeldaghi—Red Mountain—be opened and then did the King look out. The Sultan put his head to the window, and saw on the mountain and in the plain, a body of horses, more in number than the stars of heaven, armed with bucklers and coats of mail, with their swords drawn advancing full speed towards the Palace.

At this sight the Prince changed colour and in great dismay cried out: 'O heaven! What dreadful army is this that is coming to attack my Palace?'

'Be not afraid, sir,' said the doctor, 'there is nothing in it.' In saying this he shut the window himself and opened it again the same moment; the King looked out but saw not one single person on the mountain or in the plain.

Another of the windows had the prospect of the city and the doctor made that be opened. The Sultan saw the city of Cairo all on fire and the flames ascended even to middle region of the air. 'What dreadful burning is that?' exclaimed the King, 'See there my city, my fine city of Cairo reduced to ashes.'

'Be not afraid, sir,' said the Sheikh, 'there is nothing in it.' At the same time he shut the window and when he had opened it again the King saw no more the flames he had seen before.

The doctor made the third window be opened, out of which the Sultan perceived the Nile overflowing its banks, and

its waves rolling with fury to drown his palace. Now, though the King, after having seen the army and the flames disappear, had no reason to be terrified at this new prodigy yet he could not help being dismayed at it. 'Alas!' cried he once more, 'all is lost; we are now undone indeed! This dreadful inundation will bear away my palace and drown me and all my people.'

'Be not afraid, sir,' said the doctor, 'there is nothing in it.' And indeed the Sheikh had no sooner shut and opened the window again than the Nile appeared pursuing its course within its banks, as usual.

He then made them open the fourth window which looked on to a parched barren desert. The other wonders had not more terrified the King than this delighted him. His eyes, which were accustomed to see nothing from this window but a barren waste, were agreeably surprised to behold Vineyards and Gardens hung with the most delicious fruits in the universe, rivulets that gently murmured as they glided, and whose banks were adorned with roses, basils, balms, narcissuses and hyacinths, at once presented a pleasing object to the sight and charmed with the smell of a variety of fragrant odours. Among these flowers were hopping up and down an infinite number of turtles and nightingales, some of which were already fallen in a trance with overstraining their little throats, while the others made the air resound with their sweet and mournful songs.

The King was so charmed with all the wonders which now offered themselves to his sight that he believed he beheld the garden of Eden. 'What a change is this,' cried he in the excess of his admiration, 'O the beautiful garden! The charming abode!' 'Be not so transported, sir,' said the Sheikh, 'there is nothing in it.' At these words the doctor shut the window and then opened it again, and the Sultan, instead of seeing those delightful phantoms, saw nothing but the desert.

'Sir,' said the Sheikh, 'I have shown you a great many wonders but all this is nothing in comparison with the astonishing prodigy of which I will make your majesty a witness. Give your commands for a tub full of water to be brought hither.' The King ordered it to be done and when the tub was brought into the chamber the doctor said to the Sultan, 'Be pleased to suffer yourself to be stripped stark naked and let a towel be girt about your loins.' The King consented to have all his clothes taken off, and when the towel was girt about him, 'Sir,' said the Sheikh, 'be pleased to plunge your head into the water, and draw it out again.'

The King plunged his head into the tub and in an instant found himself at the foot of a mountain on the seashore. This unheard-of prodigy astonished him more than the others.

'Ah, doctor!' cried he in a transport of rage, 'perfidious doctor, that has thus cruelly deceived me! If ever I return into Egypt from whence thou hast forced me away by thy black and detestable art, I swear I will revenge myself of thee! O mayest thou miserably perish!'

He continued his imprecations against the Sheikh, but reflecting that his menaces and complaints would avail him nothing, he took courage and went to some men whom he saw cutting wood on the mountain, resolved not to discover to them who he was; for, thought he to himself, if I tell them I am a king they will not believe me but rather take me for an impostor or a madman.

The woodcutter asked him who he was.

'Good people,' answered he, 'I am a merchant, my ship bilged on a rock and was dashed to pieces. I have had the good fortune to save myself on a plank: you see the condition I am in which ought to excite your pity.'

They were concerned for his misfortune but the poorness of their circumstances would not allow them to relieve him. However, one of them gave him an old gown, and another an old pair of shoes, and when they had put him in this condition, scarcely fit to be seen, they conducted him into their city which was situated behind the mountain. They no sooner arrived there than they took leave of him and, abandoning him to Providence, went away, each to his own home.

The Sultan was left alone, and though men take delight in seeing objects that are new to them, yet he was too much taken up with the thoughts of his adventure to give attention to anything he saw. He walked up and down the streets, not knowing what would become of him. He was already weary and looking for a place to lie down and rest himself, stopped before the house of an old farrier, who, judging by his looks that he was fatigued, desired him to come in.

The King did so, and set himself down on a bench that was near the door. 'Young man,' said the old farrier, 'may I ask you what profession you follow and what has brought you hither?' The Sultan gave him the same answer he had given to the woodcutters. 'I met,' added he, 'with some good people who were cutting wood on the mountain and having told them my misfortunes, they were so kind as to give me this old gown and these cobbled shoes.'

'I am glad,' said the farrier, 'that you escaped being drowned, comfort yourself for the loss of your goods. You are young and will not perhaps be unhappy in this city where our laws and customs are very favourable to strangers who come to settle among us. Do you not intend to do so?'

'I desire nothing better,' answered the Sultan, 'provided I could have any prospect of retrieving my affairs.'

'Well, then,' replied the old man, 'follow the advice I am about to give you. Go this moment to the public baths of the women, set yourself down at the gate and ask each lady who comes out if she has a husband. She that shall answer you No, must be your wife, according to the custom of this country.'

The Sultan being determined to follow this advice bade farewell to the old man, and went to the gate of the baths, where he set himself down. It was not long ere he saw coming out a lady of ravishing beauty. Ah! how happy shall I be, thought he, if this lovely person be not married. Were she but mine I could forget all my misfortunes.'

He stopped her and said, 'Fair lady, have you a husband?' She answered, 'Yes, I have.'

'I am sorry for it,' replied the King, 'you would have made a fit wife for me.'

The lady went her way and soon after out came another who was frightfully ugly. The Sultan shuddered at the sight of her. 'What a piece of deformity is this!' said he. 'I had rather be starved to death than live with such a creature; I will let her pass without asking her if she be married, for fear I should hear she is not.'

Nevertheless, the old farrier bid me ask this question of every one of the ladies. In all appearance the custom is so, and I must submit to it. How do I know that she has a husband. Some unfortunate stranger whose ill destiny has brought him hither, as mine has me, may perhaps have married her.'

In short, the King resolved to ask her if she was married: she answered, 'Yes,' and this answer pleased him as much as that of the first lady had troubled him.

There next came out a third lady, as ugly as the other. 'O heavens!' said the King as soon as he saw her, 'this is more horrible than the last. No matter! Since I have begun I must go through with it. If she has a husband I must own there are men more to be pitied than myself.' As she was going by him, he addressed himself to her and tremblingly said, 'Fair lady, are you married?'

'Yes, young man,' answered she without stopping. 'I am glad of it,' replied the Sultan. 'I bless my stars,' continued he, 'that I have got free of these two women. But it is not yet time to rejoice. All the ladies have not come out of the baths, nor have I yet seen her that is destined for me. Perhaps I shall get nothing by the change.'

He was expecting to see one as ugly as the other two, when a fourth appeared, who surpassed in beauty the first he thought so charming. What a difference, thought he, there is not so much disparity between day and night as between this fair person and the two last who came out before her! Are angels and devils to be seen in the same place?

He advanced to her with a deal of eagerness. 'Lovely lady,' said he, 'have you a husband?'

She answered 'No,' looking on him with as much disdain as attention. Then she went away leaving the King in a deep surprise.

'What am I to think of this?' said he. 'The old farrier has certainly put upon me. If according to the laws of this country I am to marry this lady, why did she leave me in so rude a manner? Why put she on that haughty and disdainful air? She viewed me from head to foot, and I saw in her looks the marks of contempt and scorn. The truth is she is not much in the wrong. In justice I cannot blame her. This threadbare gown,

full of holes, sets not off my good mien to the best advantage and is not proper to engage a lady's heart. I forgive her for thinking she may chance to mend herself in a husband.'

While he was making reflections a slave accosted him. 'Sir,' he said, 'I am sent to find a stranger all in tatters, and by your air methinks it is you. If you will please give yourself the trouble of following me I will lead you to a place where you are expected with great impatience.'

The Sultan followed the slave who led him to a great house, and showed him into an apartment very handsomely furnished, where he bid him wait a moment. The Sultan stayed fully two hours without seeing a soul but the slave, who ever and anon came and desired him not to be impatient.

At length, there came in four ladies very well dressed, who accompanied another that glittered all over with jewels, but was yet more resplendent by her matchless beauty. The Sultan cast his eyes upon her and immediately knew her to be the last lady whom he had seen coming from the baths. She drew near him with a soft and smiling air. 'Forgive me, sir,' she said, 'for having made you wait a little. I was loth to appear in my undress before my lord and master. You are in your own house; all you see here belongs to you. You are my husband; command me what you please and I am ready to obey you.'

'Madam,' answered the Sultan, 'not a moment ago I complained of my destiny, and now I am the happiest of men. But since I am your husband, why did you just now look so disdainfully upon me? I fancied you were shocked at the sight of me and, to confess the truth, I could not blame you much.'

'Sir,' replied the lady, 'I could not do otherwise; the ladies of this city are obliged to carry themselves haughtily in public, it is the custom, but to make amends they are very familiar in private.'

'So much the better,' replied the king, 'they are the more agreeable. But since I am master here,' continued he, 'to begin to exercise my little sovereignty, let somebody go and fetch me a tailor and a shoemaker, for I am ashamed to be seen in your presence in this tattered gown and these cobbled shoes which suit but ill with the rank I have hitherto held in the world.'

'I have taken care of that already,' replied the lady. 'I have sent a slave to a Jew who sells clothes ready made and who will furnish you at once with all you want. Meanwhile, let us refresh ourselves.' In saying this she took him by the hand and led him into a hall where there was a table covered with all sorts of fruits and all sweetmeats. They both sat down, and while they were eating, the four attendant ladies who stood behind them sang several songs, written by the poet Baba Saoudai. They played also on several instruments and at length their mistress took a lute and accompanying the music with her voice acquitted herself so well that the Sultan was charmed with her performance.

This concert was interrupted by the arrival of the Jewish tradesman who came into the hall with some young men who brought bundles of clothes of different colours. They looked at them all, one after another, and made choice of a white satin vest flowered with gold and a gown of purple cloth. The Jew furnished them with the rest of the apparel and went his way. Then the lady admired the good mien of the king; she was very well satisfied to have found such a husband and he well pleased to have met with so beautiful a wife.

He lived seven years with this lady, by whom he had seven sons.

Both of them taking delight in an expensive way of life and loving to feed high and divert themselves, they got the

better of the lady's estate. They were obliged to put away their waiting-ladies and to sell their household furniture, piece after piece, for subsistence. The Sultan's wife, seeing herself reduced to great want, said to her husband, 'As long as my estate lasted, you never spared it; you lived an idle life and enjoyed yourself. It behoves you now to think of some way or other to maintain your little family.'

These words saddened the king, who went to the old farrier to ask his advice. 'O my father,' said he, 'I am now in a worse condition than when I first came to this city. I have a wife and fourteen children, and nothing to keep them with.'

'Young man,' replied the aged farrier, 'were you not brought up to some trade?' The Sultan answered, 'No.' The farrier put his hand into his pocket, and taking out two *aqichas*, gave them to the king, bidding him go immediately and buy himself some *ypes* and wait in the place where the porters plied. The king bought himself some *ypes* and went to ply among them.

Scarce had he been there a moment when a man came and asked him if he would carry a burden. 'I am here for that purpose,' answered the Sultan. Then the man loaded him with a great sack which the king had much ado to carry, besides, the cords wrung the skin off his shoulders. He received his hire which consisted of one *aqicha* and carried it home. His wife, seeing he brought no more money, told him that if he earned not ten times as much every day, his whole family would soon be starved to death.

The next morning the king, overwhelmed with grief, instead of going to ply among the porters, went to the seaside, reflecting on his miserable condition. He looked very earnestly on the place where he had unexpectedly found himself by

means of the science of Sheikh Shahabuddin and, recalling to mind that strange and fatal adventure, he could not refrain from tears. Now the ceremony of ablution being indispensable before prayers, he plunged himself into the sea, but as he raised his head out of the water he was in the utmost astonishment to find himself again in his own palace, in the middle of the tub, and surrounded by all his officers.

'O barbarous doctor!' cried he, perceiving the Sheikh in the same place where he had left him, dost thou not dread that God will punish thee for having played this trick with thy Sultan and thy master?'

'Sir,' said the Sheikh, 'why is your majesty angry with me? You but this moment plunged your head into this water. I tell you nothing but truth; if you do not believe me, ask your officers, who are eyewitnesses of it.'

'Yes, sir,' cried all the officers with one voice, 'the doctor says true.'

The king would not believe them. 'It is full seven years that this cursed doctor has detained me in a foreign country by the force of his enchantments. I was married and have got seven daughters and as many sons, but it is not this I complain of, so much as of my being a porter. Ah! villainous Sheikh! Couldst thou be so cruel as to make me carry *yves*?'

'Well, sir,' replied the doctor, 'since you will give no credit to my words, I will convince you by my actions.'

In saying this he stripped himself naked, tied a towel round his loins, got into the tub and plunged his head into the water. While his head was covered with the water, the Sultan, who was still enraged against him and remembered how he

had sworn to punish him if he ever returned to Egypt, took a sabre to cut off the doctor's head the moment he raised it up out of the tub, but the Sheikh, by the science called *Mekashefa*, knew the king's intention, and, by the science of *Algaib-an alabsar*, disappeared all at once and was transported to the city of Damascus, from whence he wrote to the Sultan of Egypt a letter in these words:

'Know, O King, that you and I are both but poor servants of God. During the time that you plunged your head in the water, though you drew it out again in the same moment, you made a journey of seven years, you married a wife, you underwent many hardships, you got seven daughters and as many sons; you laboured hard for a livelihood; and you will not believe that our great prophet Muhammed found his bed warm and his pot of water not empty.

Learn that nothing is impossible to him who, out of nothing, created heaven and earth by the single word *koun*.'