



## A TALE OF FOUR DERVISHES

MIR AMMAN was born in Delhi into a family of distinguished retainers at the Mughal Court, some time in the second half of the eighteenth century. Forced to leave the city of his ancestors at the close of the century owing to the declining fortunes of the Mughal Empire, he found employment as a munshi at the British East India Company's Fort William College in Calcutta. It was here that he translated *Bāgh-o-Bahār* (in 1803) and Husain Wāiz Kāshifī's celebrated book on good manners, *Akhalāq-e-Muhsinī*, which was published much later under the title *Ganj-e-Khoobi* (*Treasure House of Virtue*).

MOHAMMED ZAKIR was born in 1932 in Delhi and educated at St Stephen's College, Delhi University, where he took postgraduate degrees in economics and Urdu literature. His main interests have been translation, literary criticism and Urdu linguistics. Among his published works are *Distracting Words*, translations from Ghalib's Urdu and Persian poetry; *The Quintessence of Self-Culture*, a translation of K. G. Saiyidain's writings; *Lessons in Urdu Script*, which has seen several reprints, and some anthologies of Urdu prose and poetry. Presently he is working on a book for English readers on N. M. Rashed, a major Urdu poet. Mohammed Zakir lives in Delhi where he has been teaching Urdu language and literature at the Jamia Millia Islamia for over three decades.

# MIR AMMAN

# **A Tale of Four Dervishes**

*Translated from the Urdu with an Introduction by*  
MOHAMMED ZAKIR

PENGUIN BOOKS

*This translation is humbly dedicated to my parents  
who do not need to read it*

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## ***Introduction***

*A Tale of Four Dervishes* is a translation of Mir Amman's *Bāgh-o-Bāhār*, literally 'Garden and Spring'. Itself an Urdu translation cum compilation of earlier Persian and Urdu versions of *Qissa-e-Chahār Darvesh*, which Mir Amman ascribes to Amir Khusrau (d. AD 1325), it has seen several translations and transcriptions in many Indian and European languages. Recent research leads us to believe that the *Qissa* was compiled several years after Khusrau and that its Turkish, Persian and Urdu versions already existed before Mir Amman took it up. Be that as it may, Mir Amman's work remains significant in that it appeared at a time when very little prose literature existed in Urdu for, like many other modern Indo-Aryan languages, Urdu was seldom employed for serious writing. This was done in Persian, the language of the court and administration of Mughal India.

Most of the known prose literature in Urdu, as later traced down from the fourteenth century onwards in the Deccan or in northern India, consisted of tracts, treatises, pamphlets and translations invariably religious in character. The fictional part of it was generally marked by the tendency to use involved sentences and rhyming words. Use of simple, direct prose in fiction, except in a few works which have been unearthed by later researchers, was generally the work of the writers of the Fort William College, Calcutta, established in AD 1800 to acquaint the officers of the English East India Company with the customs and traditions of the people of India. In fact, Mir Amman must have taken great pains to work out the simplicity and directness of his work and show off in full measure the richness of the Urdu language which was a significant manifestation of the Indo-Muslim culture which originated and flourished after the advent and spread of Islam in India. At times one cannot but feel that there is a fusion here of the Indian and the Islamic Middle Ages, both in methodology and literary ideals.

Early prose in Urdu, as in many other languages, has been more akin to the literature of oral transmission. As such, it needs little introduction. It is the creation of imagination bordering on fancy and is essentially romantic in nature. In Urdu, this genre, known as *dāstān*, has been distinguished more by polished literary presentation than by lofty aims and ideals. It does not pretend to serve any moral purpose, though it has a moral framework and may give us guidelines of good conduct, good government, or virtuous living. In the accounts of the fanciful acts of chivalry and romance, individual responsibility may also have its play in the form of proselytizing zeal.

Structurally akin to the *Arabian Nights*, *Bāgh-o-Bahār* comprises five stories interspersed with several other sub-stories of uneven length and interest, loosely bound together and all with traditionally romantic themes. The four dervishes (and others) who relate their experiences are princes or rich merchants who have renounced the world on account of their unsuccessful love lives. They are guided by a supernatural

force to a city where, with the intercession of a king (himself a frustrated man pining for the birth of a son to succeed him) and the help of the king of the djinn, they are reunited with their loves. Typically medieval, the stories describe a magnificent world of romance and affluence—of fairies and the djinn, moonlight and oriental gardens, feasts and ceremonies, and, of course, adventures and mishaps. It is a world where anything might and does happen as man is tossed about by fate. The basic premise, though, is that providence always takes care of us all and that in the end good always triumphs over evil.

As in the *Arabian Nights*, there is no rationality in this work in so far as the treatment of time and space is concerned, yet there is comparatively little that is supernatural in it. Also unlike the *Arabian Nights*, it is not marked by elaborate wooing scenes and erotica or by the frailty and treachery of the fair sex. Though some of the female characters may appear vengeful at times, on the whole they show remarkable courage, faithfulness, integrity and ingenuity. *Bāgh-o-Bahār* thus portrays the more impressive features of Indian womanhood.

Through the genius of the Urdu language, *Bāgh-o-Bahār* affords us a glimpse of the typical Indo-Muslim culture that was prevalent among the cultured classes of India at the time. The stories may be set in Basra, Baghdad, Azerbaijan, Sarandeeep, Damascus or Constantinople but the atmosphere is typically that of a Mughal city of India. The weather, the courtly manners, the female guards and personal attendants, the dress, the variety of dishes, festivals and ceremonies, the fireworks, the superstitions and traditions as brought out by the proverbs and apt idioms, are all Indian and bring before us a passing panorama of the Indian elite of the middle ages.

Its interesting tales, its simple and elegant prose as a precursor to the works of the writers of the Delhi College and the Aligarh Movement, its plain yet distinguished style couched in the purity of the idiom, and its portrayal of Indian manners and customs have contributed to make *Bāgh-o-Bahār* a monumental classic of Urdu literature. These qualities have kept it ‘green as ever’—still a worthy index of the faiths and beliefs, customs and ceremonies of the people of India.

Very little, in fact no more than what he has written about himself in the preface of the present work, is known about Mir Amman. He hailed from Delhi and after experiencing many vicissitudes in life he finally found employment as a *munshi* at the Fort William College, Calcutta where he translated *BĀgh-o-BahĀr*. While there, he also translated Husain Wāiz Kāshifi’s celebrated book on good manners, *Akhīāq-e-Muhsim*, which was published much later under the title *Ganj-e-Khoobī (Treasure-house of Virtue)*. Recently a critical edition of this work has been published. But it is on *Bāgh-o-Bahār* alone that Mir Amman’s fame rests, and rightly so. Its literary quality and value have never been ignored, nor has it ever ceased being popular as a piece of entertaining literature.

Translation, I believe, is a noble activity as it brings different cultures closer to each other and thus provides for the enrichment of human civilization. It is in this spirit that the present work was undertaken.

With a sense of indebtedness I have availed of the earlier literal translations of the work by Lewis Ferdinand Smith and Duncan Forces, done more than a hundred years ago. My endeavour has been to find the equivalent English idiom without sacrificing the cultural content of Urdu.

I am grateful to those who took the trouble to read the manuscript and offer their comments. Particular thanks are due to Mr L.G. Deo and Mr Muhammad Anas. I am deeply indebted to Mr Zamir Ansari but for whose timely help this translation might not have been published.

*March 1987*  
*October 1989*

*Mohammed Zakir*

Note. In order to facilitate the printing, footnotes and the diacritical marks have been reduced as much as possible. A glossary has been provided of necessary proper names and words of Indian origin.

# PETITION OF MIR AMMAN OF DELHI TO THE AUTHORITIES OF THE COLLEGE

May God preserve the Exalted Managers and Patrons of noble men. On hearing the proclamation<sup>\*</sup>, this humble being who has fallen away from his home has composed with great labour and pain, the *Bāgh-o-Bahar* in the *Urdū-e-Mu'allā* language<sup>\*\*</sup> from the *Qissa-e-Chahār Darvesh*. By the grace of God, this 'garden' has been revived by your gracious presence. I hope I may also enjoy its fruits so that the budding desire of my heart also blossoms forth like a rose. About the *Shahnama*, Firdausi<sup>‡</sup> says:

*For thirty years I worked on it and took pains,  
And thus I revived Persia by my Persian verse.*

Like him, of my present work I may say:

*I have polished the Urdu language  
And made Bengal a Hindustan<sup>++</sup>*

Gentlemen, you are to judge for yourselves. May the star of your prosperity shine forever!

## **Prologue**

Glory be to God! What an excellent workman He is! With just a handful of dust, He has created so many diverse faces and figures. Although of two colours, one white and one black, and though He has given to each a nose, ears, hands and feet, even then all of them have distinct features and colours. One is so sharply distinguished from the other in countenance and person that you may easily tell one from the other in the multitude. The sky is a bubble in the Sea of His Unity. And the earth, too, a fragile ball of air; but how so wonderful, the sea beats itself against it yet can cause it no harm. In praise of One who has such power and authority over all, man verily becomes dumb. What words can he find? Silence is better when all eloquence should fail:

*How can I have the power  
To write in praise of One  
Whose work expands from Heaven to the Earth?  
When even the Prophet said,  
'I could not comprehend Him',  
One will be a great fool  
To make such a claim.  
Day and night the sun and the moon wander  
Through their course to see His works  
But each comes to have  
Only the looks of wonder.  
One whose equal has never been  
Nor will there be,  
To such an Unique One  
To be God suits in every way.  
He is the Creator and Nourisher of all.  
He has always been graceful and kind to me.*

And blessings be on His friend, for whose sake He created the Earth and Heaven and elevated him to Prophethood:

*The pure body of Mustafa  
A light emanating from God,  
And as is well-known  
It cast no shadow.  
Where have I the power to utter a word in his praise?  
But it is obligatory with poets all.  
And blessings be on his progeny, the Twelve Imams!  
After the praise of God and the Prophet  
Now I mention what I presently propose to do.*

*May God, for the sake of the progeny of His Prophet  
Make what I say acceptable to all.*

I undertook this work in AH 1215/AD 1801, corresponding to 1207 Fasli when Lord Mornington, Marquess Wellesley, the Noble of Nobles, took office as the Governor General and learning came to be very much in vogue. (One actually finds oneself at one's wit's end in his praise. He has all the qualities required of great men. It was the good fortune of this country that such an ingenious administrator came here. By his charity and beneficence the majority of people lead a happy life; the poor pray for his life and prosperity. No one dares tease or wrong another; the tiger and the goat drink at the same fountain, as though.) The noble high officials became interested in learning the Urdu language to be able to converse with Indians and carry out the administration of the country more effectively. As such, many books were compiled the same year at his instance.

A few words about the learned and those who speak the language of Hindustan. This tale was originally narrated by Amir Khusrau of Delhi. It so happened that his spiritual guide, Nizamuddin Aulia, the bestower of gold, whose saintly residence was near Lal Bangla, beyond the Matia Darwaza outside the Lal Darwaza, about three miles away from the Fort, was once taken ill. Amir Khusrau was by his bedside. He related this tale to entertain him. By the grace of God, Nizamuddin Aulia was cured of his illness in a few days. The day he took his bath of health, he gave the benediction: 'Whoever hears this tale, will, by the grace of God, remain in health.' Since then it has been quite popular and has had many versions in Persian.

Mr John Gilchrist, the noble and beneficent and a great patron of the noble ones (may he ever remain exalted as long as the Jamuna and the Ganga flow), kindly urged me to render this tale into pure Hindustani which the Urdu people, the Hindus and the Muslims, men and women, young and old, and high and low use in common parlance. As desired by him, I have written it in the conversational style.

First, this humble being prone to sin, Mir Amman of Delhi, begs to say a few words about himself. My ancestors, from generation to generation, served the emperors from the time of Humayun. The emperors exalted them by giving *jagirs* (estates), titles and rewards in plenty. We were called genial retainers, as recorded in the royal archives.

When the great family of rulers (on which rested the prosperity of all others) met such a calamity, which is too well-known to require mention, Suraj Mal Jat confiscated our *jagir* and Ahmad Shah Durrani destroyed our homesteads. Thus I left Delhi (which was my birthplace and where my navel-string is buried). When such a ship (which was steered by the king) was wrecked, I was tossed about on the sea of helplessness and misfortune. A drowning man clutches at a straw, so for a few years I stayed in Azimabad, to have some breathing space. There I saw both good days and bad but ultimately had to leave as I could not have a favourable time there any more. Leaving my family behind I embarked a boat and came to Calcutta, the city of cities, to earn my destined bread. For a short time I remained unemployed, till one day Nawab Dilavar Jung sent for me and appointed me tutor to his younger brother, Mir Muhammad Kazim Khan. I carried on for about two years and then, realizing that it would not be possible for me to continue any longer, I managed to get introduced to

Mr John Gilchrist (may he ever remain exalted) through Munshi Mir Bahadur Ali. It is my good fortune that I found the patronage of such a benevolent person. So I hope for better days ahead; otherwise even this I take as a blessing for me. I have bread to eat. I sleep well. I support the ten members of my family and they pray for my patron. May God grant their prayers.

A few words about the Urdu language. I have it from my ancestors that Delhi, according to the Hindus, has existed since the creation of the world. The rajas and their subjects lived there from the earliest times and spoke their own *bhaka* (dialect). A thousand years ago, the Muslims became the masters there. Mahmud of Ghazni was the first, and after him the Ghurs and the Lodis became the rulers. This led to an intermingling of the languages of the Hindus and the Muslims. Finally, Amir Timur (in whose family the empire remains to this day) conquered India. As he camped with his troops in the city, its bazar or marketplace came to be known as *Urdu*. Then after the establishment of Mughal rule Humayun, distressed at the hands of the Pathans, went to Persia. When he returned and punished the troublemakers, no mischiefmonger remained to create any disturbance; the empire prospered.

When Akbar ascended the throne, people from all parts of the country were attracted towards his capital because of his patronage and liberality. They spoke different languages and dialects. But now that they were together and had to converse with each other in the ordinary business of life, a common language was born in the city streets.

When Shahjahan Sahib Qaran got the Red Fort, the Jama Masjid and the city walls erected and the Peacock Throne studded with precious stones installed in a tent made of gold and silver brocade pitched on poles, and when Nawab Ali Mardan Khan built a canal to Delhi, he (Shahjahan) was much pleased. He held celebrations and made that city his capital and it came to be known as Shahjahanabad. (Although the old city of Delhi is distinct from it, yet that is called the old city and this the new). He gave the name '*Urdū-e-Mu'allā*' to the bazar of Shahjahanabad.

Thus from the time of Amir Timur until the reign of Muhammad Shah and even to the time of Ahmad Shah and Alamgir II, the empire remained undisturbed generation after generation in the same family and, in the course of time, the Urdu language became so chiselled and refined that the language of no other city could match it. Nevertheless, one should be impartial to appreciate and judge it; otherwise, who conceives his headgear, dialect and behaviour to be improper? If you ask a countryman, he censures the city idiom and considers his own to be the best. But then, only the learned ones know which is correct. After a long time, God has sent one such learned and discerning man in Mr John Gilchrist who, with his profound knowledge and insight and immense labour and research, compiled books of grammar. The language of Hindustan became common throughout the country and got a new elegance and flourish.

A city flourishes from the prosperity of the king. When Ahmad Shah Abdali came from Kabul and got the city of Delhi pillaged, Shah Alam was in the eastern parts of the country, There was no one to look after the city and so it was destroyed. The nobles of the city too had to leave and take refuge where they could. Wherever they settled, their idiom got impure when they interacted with the local people. Then there were many others who happened to go and stay for a few years in Delhi. How can they too speak the pure languages of the city? Sooner or later they are bound to make an

error. But the person who suffered great misfortunes and floundered about like a piece of stone in the streets of Delhi where five to ten generations of his family have lived, one who saw the court of the nobles and participated in the fairs and religious congregations, and who even after leaving the city kept his language uncorrupted, his and his language alone will be pure and correct. One such, this humble being, has arrived here (Calcutta) after seeing every city and witnessing every spectacle.

## *The Beginning*

Now the tale. Please listen and deal justly with it. Thus it is, as written in *Qissa-e-Chahār Darvesh*, and as it is told.

Once upon a time there ruled a king in Turkey, as just as Naushervan and as benevolent as Hatim. His name was Azad Bakht and his capital was Constantinople (Istanbul). Everyone was happy under his rule. The treasury was full, the army well off and the poor at ease. Every day was festive and every night full of joy. No thefts and robberies took place as thieves, robbers, pickpockets, swindlers and mischiefmongers were banished from his kingdom. Nobody shut the doors of his house or shop at night. The travellers who passed through his kingdom went safe with their silver or gold.

He was a great king ruling over a thousand cities and many a ruler and overlord paid him the annual tribute. Yet he was a God-fearing man. He never neglected his duties or his prayers to God. He had all the pleasures and comforts but no son and this worried him constantly. After his daily prayers he prayed to God to bless him with a son who might be like a lamp in his dark abode, carry on his name and ascend the throne after him.

He reached his fortieth year and this remained his cherished hope. One day, after he had said his prayers, he was passing through his crystal palace when he happened to see his image in one of the gilt-edged mirrors. To his dismay, he saw a white hair, glittering like a silver wire in his beard. His eyes were filled with tears and a sigh issued from his heart. 'Alas,' said he to himself, 'all my life has gone to waste. I oppressed the people for things mundane. What use are all these big countries I have conquered and the heaps of gold and precious stones I have gathered in my treasury? I see my death so very near. Even if I live for a few years more I will only grow weaker day by day. Perhaps it is so destined that I should have no son to inherit my throne. I must die one day and leave all these things to no one. I am now fairly advanced in age; it is better for me to quit them now and devote the rest of my life wholly to God.'

Having resolved thus he came into the palace garden where all his court members were assembled. Ordering all others to go he made his decision known to his ministers and the nobles of the court. He ordered them to assemble only in the Hall of Public Audience and to look after the affairs of the kingdom themselves and not to disturb him any more.

He then retired to his private chambers. For days and days together he remained there and kept lamenting and praying to God and observing fasts. He would break his fast only with a date and three mouthfuls of water, barely sufficient to keep his body and soul together. Nobody dared disturb him. He prayed to God night and day.

By and by all his people came to know that the king had secluded himself. Thus there was confusion and turmoil in the kingdom. Mischief-makers and evil-doers raised their heads. Corruption became the order of the day and rebellions broke out. The nobles of the court assembled to discuss this state of affairs. None of them had the

courage to go to the king and request him to reconsider his decision. At last they went to the grand old vizier, Khiradmand the Wise. They respected him very much as he, more than anyone else, had been in the confidence of the king. They related to him the state of affairs and said, 'If this continues, the entire kingdom will be lost.' Khiradmand the Wise replied, 'Though the king has forbidden us to disturb him, yet let us take a chance. We should all proceed together and humbly request him to kindly reconsider his decision.' He took them all with him. Leaving them in the Hall of Public Audience, he proceeded to the Hall of Private Audience and sent word through the royal page to the king that, 'This old servant is in waiting and humbly seeks Your Majesty's favour to grant me presence. It is long since I have had the honour of seeing Your Majesty. Kindly allow me to kiss your feet.'

The king recalled to his mind the services of Khiradmand the Wise and ordered that he be called in. He was conducted to the private apartment of the king. He bowed low in respect to him. He saw that the king had grown weak; his face was pale and his eyes had sunk into their sockets. He could not restrain himself. Devoted to the king and his father as he had been, he was moved to see him in that state. He threw himself at his feet and wept. The king helped him to his feet and said, 'Now that you have seen me, do not disturb me any more. Go and leave me alone.'

But Khiradmand did not leave. With tears rolling down his cheeks and his beard he said, 'What is it, Your Majesty? Why have you thus secluded yourself? This sudden withdrawal of Your Majesty from public affairs has led to utter chaos in the kingdom. Kindly recall what pains Your Majesty's ancestors took to build it? Your Majesty's seclusion will ultimately bring it to ruin. Why is it that Your Majesty has so resolved? If Your Majesty will be pleased to let it be known, this humblest servant may be of some help. After all, what are we servants for if we cannot at least partake of our master's troubles and do all that we can to bring him comfort?'

The king said, 'That is all right, Khiradmand. But my sorrow is such that no one can help me. I have now grown old. My death is so very near; this hoary head of mine reminds me of it. And you know I have no son who may take my place after me. This makes me sad and so I have renounced it all. I am no more interested in retaining my kingdom; nor do I bother about my riches. Enough of this world I have seen! It's of no use. I wish to go to some far off lonely mountain, away from this fretful life. In the woods I shall retire and pass the rest of my life praying to God. Thus alone may I hope for a better life when I pass away.' He then heaved a sigh and became silent.

Khiradmand the Wise had been the vizier to the king's father as well and had held the king dear to his heart ever since he was a prince. He said, 'To despair of God is not just. One who has created eighteen thousand worlds by uttering one single word, can it at all be difficult for him to bless you with a son? May Your Majesty be pleased to banish such thoughts from your mind, or else the empire which your ancestors took great pains to build will be lost in no time. There will be utter confusion and chaos and, God forbid, you will leave behind a bad name. And then you will be censured on Judgment Day and held responsible for it in the eyes of God. Even your prayers here will not bring you any good there. Man's heart is the seat of God and you know a king will be judged by his justness and good deeds to his subjects. Pardon me, Your Majesty! To leave home and wander about in the woods is the way of hermits and those who have renounced the world. It does not become a king. You are a king and ought to behave like one. Worship and devotion to God does not rest on becoming a recluse or retiring to the woods and mountains. Your Majesty may have heard this verse:

*God is always with man  
But man seeks Him in the wilderness;  
The child is well in your arms*

*And you search for it in the city.*

‘Kindly consider what I say. Always keep God in mind and pray to Him. No one has ever been disappointed in His grace. In the morning attend to the affairs of your kingdom, dispensing justice to all; help the poor and the needy so that they may live in peace and pray to God for your prosperity. At night you may say your prayers and invoke His blessings on the pious ones. Feed the orphans and the prisoners, the poor and the destitute, and the widows every day. If God wills it so, such good deeds will help you win His favour and you will get your heart’s desire fulfilled and be happy. Have confidence in God’s grace. He can accomplish in a moment what He wills.’

The king felt relieved to hear these words of sincerity. He said, ‘Be it so, Khiradmand; let me do as you say. God’s will alone be done! What have the other nobles and ministers been doing?’ Khiradmand said, ‘All the nobles and ministers are concerned about Your Majesty’s welfare and pray for your prosperity. At the moment they are in the Hall of Public Audience. Would Your Majesty be pleased to let them have the honour to see Your Exalted Self and thus comfort them?’ The king said, ‘Not just now, Khiradmand. I will hold a general court tomorrow; tell them all to attend.’

Khiradmand was quite happy at this. He raised his hands and blessed him thus: ‘As long as this earth and heaven exist, may Your Majesty’s throne and crown remain!’ Then he took his leave. He came to the nobles and ministers. He gave them the good news and informed them of the king’s wish that all of them and the citizens attend court the next day. They were relieved and left rejoicing in the good news. The whole city rejoiced.

Early the next day all the nobles and ministers, and the citizens, came to the court and took their seats. The king then appeared to the beat of drums and sat on his throne. All of them bowed in respect and laid before him the presents they had brought according to their ranks. They were rewarded by the king accordingly. Every one was glad that he had again started to call his court and attend to the affairs of the kingdom himself. At midday he dismissed the court and went into his palace. There he partook of the royal repast and retired to rest.

Thereafter, the king held his court in the morning and in the afternoon he would peruse some religious book or say his prayers to God to fulfil his heart’s desire after repenting over his sins and craving mercy from God.

One day he happened to read in a book that ‘one who is afflicted with grief and feels helpless, should submit himself to Fate, visit the tombs and pray to God to bless his soul for the sake of His Prophet and should always fear Him; he should always remember that he is nothing before Him and that there have been countless powerful kings and monarchs who passed away from this world; as is so aptly said:

*Seeing the moving handmill*

*Kabir wept and said,*

*‘Alas, no one has survived*

*The pressure of the two millstones*

*(Of the heavens and the earth).*

They left all their mighty empires and pomp and show behind them and but for

a handful of dust no trace remains of their existence. Nobody knows about them or about what happened to them after their death—what insects ate them up and how they fared with God. Thus alone shall one realize that this world is a transitory place and man has nothing to gain from it; it is a puppet show. Thus alone shall one find peace.’

The king found the passage highly significant. He found in it an echo of what Khiradmand the Wise had said to him. He decided it was divine guidance for him and resolved that at night he would pray to God or present himself before the holy men who lived in seclusion so that he might get what he desired in this world and deserve deliverance in the next.

And so one night, without telling anyone, he left his palace in disguise. Outside the city he went and in a short while reached a cemetery. It so happened that a mighty storm broke out just then. Roaring violent winds began to blow all around. But the king was firm in his resolve. To his surprise, he saw at a distance a flame, bright like a morning star in that cemetery. ‘How is it,’ he wondered, ‘that a flame remains unextinguished in such a storm? Is it a talisman? Or has someone sprinkled alum and brimstone around its wick to sustain it? Or is it some holy spirit which makes it burn? Whatever it is, let me go and find out. Maybe this very light kindles the lamp of my house and by its grace my heart’s desire is fulfilled.’

As he went nearer he saw four dervishes, all wearing the dress of the dead and sitting quietly against each other with their heads on their knees. The king could not see their faces but by their postures he felt that they were afflicted with grief. They seemed like dead figures on the wall. An earthen lamp placed on a stone and untouched by the stormy wind shone brightly near them as though shaded by the heavens. A pot of fire also lay nearby. Azad Bakht was somehow convinced by this sight that his desire to beget a son would be fulfilled if those saintly persons prayed to God for him, and that the dry tree of his hope would revive and bear fruit if they attended to it. Still, before joining or greeting them he thought it would be better for him to make sure that they were not some evil spirits in the garb of men. So he hid himself quietly in a corner wherefrom he could see them more clearly and hear them if they talked to each other.

There was profound silence when by chance one of the four dervishes sneezed and then said, ‘Praise be to God!’ The other three dervishes raised their heads from their knees. One of them trimmed the wick of the lamp. All of them lit their hookahs from the pot of fire nearby and began to smoke. One of the dervishes, after some pulls at his hookah, said, ‘Friends, we have wandered long and seen many ups and downs in life. We are all in misery but know nothing of each other. Praise be to God! By some strange stroke of luck we are brought together. We know not what will happen tomorrow, whether we will remain together or go our separate ways. The night is telling on us and it seems early to retire. It will be better if we start narrating, without any exaggeration, the stories of our lives. We may thus talk out the night. We shall just lie down here when a quarter of it remains.’ The other dervishes said, ‘It’s a good idea. God be our guide. First you kindly tell us how you fared in life. We shall certainly profit by it.’

