

The Search for Mercy

Translated by Brian Spooner

A burning wind stirred up the dust and sand and blew it in the travelers' faces. The sun scorched and withered everything. The monotonous sound of iron and brass bells kept time with the camels' steps. The camels' necks swayed with dignity, and their surly faces showed how discontented they were with their lot.

The caravan moved slowly along the gray dirt road through the dust and sand and passed into the distance. Flat, gray, waterless earth rolled away into the distance as far as the eye could see. Here and there low hills extended away on either side of the road. Mile after mile passed without a single date palm to change the scene. Wherever there was a hollow where a little fetid water had gathered, a one-family village had grown up round it. The air scorched. Breathing was painful—as though they had crossed the threshold of hell.

For thirty-six days the caravan had been traveling. All mouths were dry, bodies were sick, pockets empty. The pilgrims' money had melted like snow before the blaze of the Arabian sun.

But today when the chief muleteer went up onto the "Hill of Greeting," where pilgrims catch their first glimpse of the Holy City, and received his tip from the pilgrims, the golden minarets shone in the distance, and all the travelers shouted blessings on the Imam, as though fresh life had been breathed into their ailing frames.

Khanom Golin and Aziz Agha, in long dusty veils, had been shaken up and down in the camel litter all the way from Qazvin. Every day had seemed like a year to them. Aziz Agha was black and blue with the continual jolting, but she said to herself: "It's very good for me because I'm on a pilgrimage."

A barefooted Arab with a dark face, large mischievous eyes and a thin beard kept beating the mule's thigh with a thick iron chain, and the skin had broken. Now and then he turned around and, one by one, looked hard at the women's faces.

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Mashdi Ramazan Ali, the man of the group, who shared a litter with Hoseyn Aqa, Aziz Agha's stepson, was counting his money carefully.

Khanom Golin, her face pale, pulled back the curtain in her litter, nodded her head, and said to Aziz Agha, who was on the other side of the same litter: "When I saw the minarets in the distance my soul soared. Poor Shabaji—it just wasn't her luck."

Aziz Agha, busily waving the fan she held in her tattooed hand, answered, "She had had a row with her husband, and it got to the point of divorce. Then she ate some pickled onions, and in the morning she was paralyzed from the waist downwards. Whatever we gave her, it got no better. I'd brought her with me for the Holy Imam to cure."

"I don't suppose the jolting of the journey did her much good."

"But her soul has gone to paradise. After all, once pilgrims resolve to set off, even if they die on the way, all their sins are forgiven."

"Looking at these coffins makes me shiver. No, I want to go into the sacred precinct and open my heart to the Holy Imam, buy myself a shroud and then die."

"Last night I dreamt of Shabaji. It was a long time from now. You were there as well. We were walking about in a big green garden. A seyyed came up to us. His face shone. He was dressed all in green from head to foot. "Welcome!" he said. "You have brought purity." Then he pointed to a big green building and said, "Go and rest after your journey."

"God bless him!"

The camel train trundled noisily on, and the leader chanted in front:

"Whoever longs for Karbala, *besmellah*,¹

Whoever wants to come with us, *besmellah*."

Another answered:

"Whoever longs for Karbala, Blessed be he!

Again the first chanted:

"For Karbala brings a man to his senses,

"In the name of God."

The wailing of Zainab still sings in our ears.”

Again the second chanted back:

“How blessed is Karbala, my friends, God grant us a share in it.
God make our lives a sacrifice for the Stranger-King.”

The leader started waving his banner and shouting at the top of his voice:

“May God cut out the tongue that does not sing with us:

Blessings on the Beloved of God, the Seal of the Prophets,

On the eleven sons of Ali, son of Abu Taleb,

On the beautiful face of each one, one by one, be blessings!”

And at the end of every line all the pilgrims shouted blessings altogether as hard as they could.

A resplendent golden dome with its slender minarets appeared in the distance, and another dome, this time blue, opposite the first one, an inappropriate patch in among the mud houses. . . .

It was nearly dusk when the caravan entered the main street. On either side stood ruined walls and small shops. A fearsome mob had collected—Arabs with their trousers rolled up, stupid, grinning faces under fezzes; sly, lying mollah-expressions; hennaed beards and fingernails, shaven heads and rosaries slipping through fingers. They walked up and down in their long sleeveless cloaks, pajama trousers and sandals. They talked, now Persian, now broken Turkish, or Arabic issued from the very root of their throats or from inside their bowels and resounded across the street. Arab women with beauty spots on their dirty faces, vacant hungry eyes, and rings through their noses. One of them had rammed half her black breast into the mouth of the grubby baby under her arm.

By various means the crowd attracted customers: one chanted while another beat his breast; one sold amulets, and rosaries, and consecrated shrouds, while another cast out devils; others wrote charms or had rooms to let.

Jews in long gowns bought gold and jewels from the travelers.

In front of a coffee house an Arab sat picking his nose. With the

other hand, he picked the dirt from between his toes. His face was covered with flies, and lice crawled over his head.

As soon as the caravans stopped, Mashdi Ali and Hoseyn Aqa ran to the front to help Khanom Golin and Aziz Agha down from the litter. People crowded round the travelers: each piece of luggage got to a different person's hand; everyone invited them to their homes. But in this process Aziz Agha disappeared. However much they looked for her, wherever they asked, it was no use.

In the end, after Khanom Golin, Hoseyn Aqa, and Mashdi Ramazan had rented a dirty mud-built room for seven rupees a night, they went off again to look for Aziz Agha. They covered the whole town. One by one they asked all the people who worked at the shrine—the man who minded the shoes, the mollahs who read the special prayers for the pilgrims. . . . They gave her name and description to everyone but could find no trace of her. It was now nearly sunset. The shrine was emptying, and for the ninth time Khanom Golin went inside. She saw a group of women and mollahs gathered around a woman who was clinging to the lock on the rails surrounding the tomb and kissing it and crying, "Hail, dear Imam Hoseyn, save me! What am I going to do at the questioning of the tomb on the day which lasts fifty thousand years when all eyes will roll up in their sockets. Save me! Save me! I repent. I repent. I have sinned. Forgive me!"

However much they asked her what the matter was, she did not answer. In the end, however, after much insistence, she said, "I've done something for which I'm afraid the Prince of Martyrs won't forgive me."

She repeated this again and again as a flood of tears poured from her eyes. Khanom Golin recognized Aziz Agha's voice and went up to her. She tugged at her arm, took her out into the courtyard, and with the help of Hoseyn Aqa got her home.

Once home they all gathered around her. After they had given her two cups of sweet tea and filled a nargileh for her, she said she would tell them, if Hoseyn Aqa left the room. As soon as he had gone out, Aziz Agha pulled the nargileh towards her and started. "Dear Khanom Golin, you know when I went to Geda Ali's house—God rest his soul—

for three years we were so happy together that Sakineh Soltan was always holding up Geda Ali as an example to her own husband. Geda Ali worshipped me!

“But throughout these three years I never got pregnant. And that’s why one day—it was inevitable—my husband said he had to have a child. Every night he used to cuddle me and say, ‘What can I do with this bad luck? My hearth is cold.’ Whatever I did—drugs, medicine, charms—still I couldn’t have a baby! Then one night Geda Ali cried and said, ‘If you’ll let me, I’ll take a contract wife, just to do what’s necessary for our home, and as soon as I get a child, I’ll divorce her, and you can bring the child up as your own son.’ And I believed him (God rest his soul!)”

“Why not?” I said. “I’ll arrange it myself.”

“The next day I put on my veil and went and asked the hand of Khadijeh, the daughter of Hasan the milk-curdler, for my husband. She was a dark, ugly girl, with a pockmarked face. The day Khadijeh came to our home her clothes were in such a stage that if you’d thrown millet all over her it wouldn’t have fallen off. She was so thin you could have blown her away. Well, anyway, I was the lady of the house, and Khadijeh did the work and the cooking. My dear, not one month had passed when she started putting on weight, and up came her stomach. She was pregnant. Well, after that it became obvious she’d got her foot well in the door. My husband’s mind was on her all the time. If she wanted cherries in midwinter, he would have turned every stone to find some for her. It was clear my marriage was on the rocks. Every night when Geda Ali came home, he took a kerchief full of flowers to Khadijeh’s room while I almost had to beg him for my food. When Khadijeh, the milk-curdler’s daughter, first came to our house, one of her shoes chanted while the other beat its breast; now she wouldn’t even look at me except to give me orders. Then I realized how big a mistake I had made.

“My dear, for nine months I put up with hell on earth, though I had a terrible time carrying it off in front of the neighbors. But during the day, when my husband was out, I put her properly in her place. There wasn’t much she could do about it. I used to tell tales about her to my husband, too. I used to say, ‘An old man like you, head over heels in

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love with a girl with eyes like a frog! You'll never get a son! Khadijeh's had a lover. It's Mashdi Taqi, the smith's child she's got inside her! Khadijeh used to make it hot for me too and tell tales about me to Geda Ali. To cut a long story short, you can't imagine the rows we had every day! The noise drove the neighbors crazy. I was scared stiff she was going to have a son. I resorted to books. I thought perhaps magic might do the trick. God forgive me! But she might have eaten pig's meat for all the good it did. She got bigger and bigger every day, until on the dot of nine months and nine days and nine hours and nine minutes, Khadijeh had her baby—and it was a boy!

"My dear, I was like dirt in my husband's house. I don't know whether Khadijeh had a lucky charm with her, or had given some potion to Geda Ali, or what. My dear, sweet Khanom Golin, that same ragged beggar girl that I myself had saved from cotton-spinning, had sized me up beautifully. In front of my husband she said, 'Aziz Agha, I haven't got time, would you wash the baby's diapers!'

"When she said this, my blood boiled. In front of Geda Ali I said the first things that came into my head, both to him and his son! I told him to divorce me. But you know what he did? God rest his soul! He fell down and kissed my hands, and said, 'Why are you like this? I'm afraid the baby's milk will turn. Just wait till the baby's weaned, and I'll divorce Khadijeh.'

"But from that day on I couldn't sleep for thinking how to get back at Khadijeh, until, God have mercy on me, to break her heart and pride, when she went out to the *hammam*² and the house was empty, I took off my brooch, turned my face away, and rammed the pin down as far as I could into the baby's navel. I got out of the room as fast as I could. My dear, for two days and two nights that baby did not take the breast. Each time it screamed, my heart split in two. However much they prayed for him and gave him medicine, it was no good. The second day, in the afternoon, it died.

"Well, obviously, Khadijeh and my husband wept for the baby, and mourned, but for me—it was as though they'd poured cold water on me. I said to myself, 'At least they're *mourning* for their damned son! But

²A public bathhouse.

two months later Khadijeh was pregnant again. This time I just didn't know what to do. My dear, I swear by Prince Hoseyn, I was in such a state I spent the next two months in bed, ill and almost unconscious. At the end of nine months Khadijeh produced another son, and, once again, became the darling of the house. Geda Ali was all over the child. He would have died for it. God had given the Jews a sickle and him a blue-eyed, fair-haired son. For two days he sat at home and held the swaddled baby in front of him like a pestle and gazed at it.

"It was the same story all over again. My dear, I just couldn't control myself. I couldn't bear to see this rival wife and her baby. One day when Khadijeh was busy with something else, as soon as I was sure she was out of the way, I took my brooch off again and rammed the pin into the child's navel. This one died after one day. Tumult broke out. This time you can't imagine what a state I was in. On the one hand I couldn't have been happier, having left the scar of another son on Khadijeh's heart. On the other hand I realized I'd taken two lives. I set up a howl for the baby. I beat my head and wept. I cried so much that Khadijeh and Geda Ali felt sorry for me. They were surprised how fond of a rival wife's baby I had been. But it wasn't for the baby I was crying, it was for myself, for the Day of the Resurrection and the Questioning of the Tomb. That same night my husband said to me, 'It seems I just wasn't meant to have any children. They just don't seem to get going before they die.'

"It wasn't six weeks before Khadijeh was pregnant again. There wasn't a vow my husband didn't make for that baby's life. If it was a girl, he would give it to the seyyeds. If it was a boy, he would call it Hoseyn and not cut his hair till he was seven. Then he would weigh the hair in gold and take the boy to Karbala. It was eight months and ten days when Khadijeh bore her third son! But this time it was as though something had changed in her. She never left the child alone a minute. I was also of two minds, whether to kill the third one as well, or do something to make Geda Ali divorce Khadijeh. But this was just idle thinking. Khadijeh was once more the lady of the house. She was in top form, and my heart shrank inside me. She started ordering me about again, and it was no use me answering her back . . . until the baby came to four months.

"Every day I drew lots to see whether I should kill the baby or not,

when one night I had such a row with Khadijeh that I vowed I'd drown young Master Hoseyn. For two days I kept watch. It was on the second day, Khadijeh went to buy some violets from the druggist on the corner. I ran into the room and grabbed the sleeping baby from its hammock. I undid my brooch, but just as I was going to ram the pin into him, he woke up, and instead of crying, laughed in my face. My dear, you don't know how I felt! My hand dropped, and there was nothing I could do about it. I didn't have the heart. After all, I am human. I put the baby back in its place and went out of the room. Then I said to myself, 'Anyway, what fault of the baby's is it? The smoke comes from the wood. I must get rid of its mother if I'm to get any peace.'

"My dear, now as I tell you, my body trembles. But what can I do? It was all the fault of my damned husband that I'd become the maid of a milk-curdler's daughter. God! Don't let him hear what I'm saying!

"I got some of Khadijeh's hair and took it to Mollah Ebrahim, the Jew, and started some magic going against her. I put a horseshoe in the fire and gave three tomans to Mollah Ebrahim to set a spell on her. He promised me she would die within the week. But after a month had passed Khadijeh looked healthier than ever. My dear, my faith in magic and charms and those things has weakened.

"A month later—it was the beginning of winter—Geda Ali fell very ill. Twice he made his will. Three times we gave him his last drink. One night, when he was especially bad, I went to the *bazar* and bought some poison from the druggist. When I got home I poured it into the stew, stirred it up well, and put it back on the fire. For myself, I had bought some ready-made, which I ate on the quiet. When I'd finished, I went to Geda Ali's room. Twice Khadijeh said to me, 'It's late. Let's go and have dinner.' But I said I had a headache and I wasn't hungry, and anyway it was better my stomach should stay empty.

"My dear, Khadijeh ate her last dinner and went to bed. I went and listened behind the door to hear her moaning. But since it was cold and the doors were shut, I could not hear anything. I stayed all night with Geda Ali, saying he needed nursing. Just before sunrise I went again in fear and trembling to listen behind the doors. The baby was crying, but I didn't dare open the door. I went back to Geda Ali's room. My dear, you don't know how I felt!

"In the morning when everyone woke up I went and opened Khadijeh's door. She'd gone as black as coal—and dead. She'd tossed and turned so much the blanket had fallen to one side and the mattress to the other. I pulled her back onto the mattress and threw the blanket over her. The baby was crying and yelling. I came out of the room and went and rinsed my hands in the yard. Then weeping and wailing and beating my head, I took the news of Khadijeh's death to Geda Ali.

"Whenever anyone asked me what Khadijeh died of, I said that for some time she'd been taking drugs and things to get pregnant. Then she got fat, so perhaps she had a heart attack. No one doubted me. But inside I was burning. I said to myself, 'Is this I who have done three murders?' I was scared of my own face when I saw it in a mirror. I went to *rozeh-khani*³ and cried. I gave to beggars. But still I could find no peace.

"When I thought of the Day of the Resurrection and the Questioning of the Tomb and Nakir and Munker,⁴ God knows how I suffered. Then I thought of going to Karbala, so I could live close to the Imam, and as Geda Ali had made that vow to take his son, he wasn't against going. But he always scraped up some excuse to get out of it. He would say, 'We'll go to Mashhad next year.' And so he kept putting it off, until he died as well.

"This year I was honest with myself. Everything Geda Ali had I sold and turned into cash, for he'd left everything to me. Then they told me about your party, and we set off from Qazvin together. The young man with me thinks I'm his nurse. He's Hoseyn Aqa, Khadijeh's son. I told him to go out of the room so he wouldn't know."

They had all been listening in astonishment to Aziz Agha's story. Her eyes filled with tears and she said: "Now I don't know whether God will forgive me or not. On the Day of the Resurrection will the Prince intercede for me or not? My dear, I don't know how many years it is I've wanted to tell this story to someone. Now that I've told it, it's as though someone's thrown water on the fire. But on the Day of Resurrection . . ."

³Ritual narration of the martyrdom of Imam Hoseyn.

⁴Angels at the gates of Paradise.

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Mashdi Ramazan Ali knocked the ashes out of his pipe and said: "God bless you, what do you think we've come here for? Three years ago I was a driver on the Khorasan road. I had two rich passengers. On the way we had an accident, one of them died. I killed the other one and took the one thousand five hundred tomans he had in his pocket. Now that I'm getting old, this year I thought of the fact that the money was unlawful, and so I came to Karbala to have it made lawful. Today I gave it to a mollah, and he made one thousand of it lawful for me. It took only two hours. Now that money is more lawful to me than my mother's milk."

Khanom Golin took the nargileh out of Aziz Agha's hand, drew deeply on it, and after a pause said:

"That Shabaji Khanom who was with us—I knew that the jolting of the road was bad for her. I had asked a mollah to consult the Koran for me, and it was unfavorable. But still I brought her. You know, she was my stepsister. Her husband fell in love with me and married me as well. I used to push her about in the house so much that in the end she became a cripple, then on the way I killed her so that she wouldn't get my father's inheritance."

Aziz Agha was so happy she was crying and laughing at the same time.

"So—so you . . ." she stammered.

Khanom Golin, without taking her lips away from the nargileh, said:

"Surely you've heard from the pulpit that as soon as a pilgrim makes up his mind and sets off, even if his sins equal the number of leaves on a tree, he becomes good and pure."