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# **Chapter 1**

# **City of Planets**

Isfahan, which was one of the big legendary cities, seemed within seven years after al-'Allamah al-Majlisi's demise, declining toward the pit of degradation. It appeared as being deserted after the passing away of its great 'ulama', like Baha' al-Din al-'Amili, Mir Damad and al-Majlisi, while Sultan Husayn inclined toward the life of meekness and entertainment, letting rulership affairs and politics to be handled by others.

Muhammad al-'Akmal, who descends from al-Shaykh al- Mufid's lineage, was the last of those stars that set from the sky of the Wafawid capital, which started to vanish away. He was living in one of the city corners, being a scholar that people used to revere, acquiring from his knowledge, and praying behind him.

# **His Birth**

The small house seemed that night so active... a group of women doing various works, one heating the water, another washing the dishes, and the other cooking the food, while an old woman was serving soft drinks. It was after midnight, and all those present there were sleeplessly awaiting (the birth). Also Muhammad al-'Akmal, as his usual habit, went to his small library, beseeching Allah.

O Lord, shower Your mercy upon us, protect the mother and her child against every evil. My wife keeps the memory of great men like al-Mulla Walih al-Mazandarani and al-'Allamah al- Majlisi, O Allah I swear by their status and beg You to safeguard her against every kind of harm, O my Lord.

Suddenly, the old woman approached him, tighting her chadur, and so delightedly gave him the good tidings: It is a boy, O my master, may Allah bless him and make him of good augur for you. He is like a blossoming flower, and so healthy.

Thereat Muhammad al-'Akmal prostrated expressing his gratitude to the Almighty Allah for His bounty, the child.

He immediately responded to the old woman, taking out a money-purse, offering it to her saying: May Allah reward you good, O Karbala'i2 Najmah.

The old woman, while leaving the room, replied: May Allah make you long-lived, summon me whenever necessary, and I will urgently be at your disposal.

After some moments, his sister came carrying the child to its father, who embraced it, uttering the adhan and iqamah inside its ears, giving it the name of the Fifth Imam of AhI al-Bayt (A) – Muhammad al-Bagir.

#### **The Green Creed**

A portion of night elapsed, with nothing to break. The night's deep silence except the barking of remote dogs. Thereat, Muhammad Baqir was, with his family, on the house roof, gazing at the glittering stars, concerned about tomorrow. Thinking about his new life has snatched sleep from his eyes, while recalling his aunt's words resounding in the depth of his soul:

"O Muhammad Baqir! You have learnt a bit of the Qur'an, Arabs' manners, logic and the Persian disciplines... from now on your father will undertake your education."

Then he began to mumble with himself, recalling his kind aunt's face and her warm smile (saying): How poor is my aunt, she has become aged. In the meantime, drowsiness overcame his eyes, overshadowing his face, whereat he surrendered to deep sleep.

With the breaking of the dawn, Muhammad Baqir set forth to attend his father's class eagerly, whereat a new phase started in the boy's life... a stage replete with manners, wisdom, fiqh (jurisprudence), usul (principles), exegesis of the Qur'an and hadith (tradition).

There at a new door and wide horizons have opened before him that shaped his talents, where he began to acquire from those treasures, quaffing from those fountains, caring for nothing else. But fate (qadar) was of another opinion, as a horrible incident was lying in wait for him.

### The Catastrophe

For the last time he returned, contemplating the wet soil, mumbling with himself: Is it reasonable that earth can conceal such a bright face, warm heart and pure eyes? Is it credible that all this can be covered under earth? Ah O earth, how dare you to hide the sea?

He uttered this and went into tears.

In the meantime, his aunt called him. O Muhammad Baqir, aren't you coming with us? These sad words brought him to his consciousness, where he came to his senses, and, while drying his teardrops, he

whispered:

"Yes, I am coming... I am coming."

After saying this, he joined all the family members, who, after gathering their sorrows, returned home.

His father's demise meant a fatal blow for him, but this could not weaken his will at all, remaining as he used to be sublime in the domain of thought.

At one Autumn evening his mother said to him: O Muhammad Baqir, what is the matter with you my son? You go out in the morning and never return but in the evening. It seems as you have turned away from knowledge-seeking.

He replied, with touchy words, feeling as if they were coming out from the inmost of his heart (saying). Ah, my mother... I wish you could know how much I am looking here and there for a teacher competent to occupy my father's position. But how can this be attained while tumult and chaos are prevailing all the metropolis, and everything has become so confused after being attacked by the Afghanis.

Now its mosques are demolished, schools are destroyed, and all hopes and desires have vanished, so what to do?

Shall he forsake knowledge-seeking, secluding himself a safe place? Shall he follow the example of other knowledge- seekers? But Muhammad Baqir was never thinking that way at all.

# **Autumn of the Aunt**

At the last days of October, the aunt seemed at the end of her life... her face has shrunk into ridges, and she was inflicted with disease. So she came to her brother's house, where Muhammad Baqir's mother offered her some sweet and pomegranate, saying I was so concerned about you... I know that you were so shocked with the calamity.

The aunt said: I wish I were dead as happened to my brother Muhammad. Sometimes I think that my brother was lucky, since he passed away from the world before experiencing misfortunes, never witnessing all this devastation.

The mother said: Don't worry, the destined hour for these people shall come and they will perish. Have some sweets please.

The aunt said: where is Muhammad Baqir? What have I done to make him depart me, that I never see him but once a month? Does he ever ask about his aunt?

His mother said: What is that you utter? He owes you much favour... and only some days ago...

At this moment she heard the sound of door opening with Muhammad Baqir's footsteps breaking the silence of the place. "Salam 'Alaykum (peace be upon you)," said he.

The aunt, with a smile, replied: "And peace be upon you.... I was about to forget you till I opened the door. You have become a man... a man who forgets his aunt."

He interrupted her saying: "O my aunt, we are living hard days."

"She said: Really? Where are you studying these days?"

"Are there any more schools after the devastation caused by the Afghans."

"What do you say? I heard that Mirza Yahya is teaching knowledge-seekers at this house vault, and so is Mulla 'Ali, who is a muitahid too."

"I am fed up with this town O aunt."

He added, while taking a piece of sweets, after sitting beside his aunt: I am thinking of departing this land.

"Where to? Qum or Kashan? The sky has the same colour wherever you go."

"Well, I will go to a cloudless sky, whose sun never sets." "The aunt laughingly said: The city of poets?"

He replied: "No my aunt, I mean the holy city of Najaf... the city of 'Ali or I may go to Karbala'."

"I should travel there. Before some days, I saw in dream the Messenger of Allah (S), being annoyed by a group of his people. So I rushed to separate them from him, then I saluted him. He was holding a half-cubit scroll, which he handed to me. I took it running to the shrine of al-'Imam al-Husayn (A)."

His mother, without hiding her concern, said: "So you are determined to travel?"

"Yes mother, I have talked to Karbala'i Nasr Allah al- Qatarchi, and he apprised me that the caravan will set out to Karbala' next Saturday."

His aunt was listening with a smiling face, then she said:

"You can go... I foretell that a hopeful future is before you. But as you reach there, do not forget to pray for your aunt at the holy shrine."

# **Would You Delay Your Travel**

The big caravansary (Khan) was near to the bridge of Si wa seh pul. 3 The place was so busy with the travellers' movements and grumbling, with Muhammad being engaged in conversation with his mother in one of the caravansary corners.

His mother said to him: "Would that you stay some other days!" "What for, mother?" He asked.

"Karbala'i Ghulam Husayn told me that your brother Muhammad Husayn will come back from Kazerun4 next week, may you postpone your trip for another week, so that you can meet your brother," she said.

"I found travel-mates and it is improper to delay any more, mother. Give him my regards and apology."

At that moment his brother Hasan Ridha appeared, taking his little son's hand. He approached them and saluted. Then the mother angrily said:

"Have you forgotten that your father is dead, your brother is at Kazerun, and your mother has turned to be a lonely woman, and that Muhammad Baqir may be needing you, as the elder brother being in the position of the father.

He asked: "What happened mother?"

"What is that you like to happen further? The caravan is about to set out."

"O mother, I was busy.... Muhammad Ibrahim is sick, so I was looking for a doctor and medicine for him."

His eldest sister, being out of breath, said: "Yesterday he was intending to talk to his brother, hoping to persuade him to give up the idea of travelling."

(His mother said): "What do you say? Muhammad Baqir is not a lad. He knows well that life is so hard, and it is infeasible for anyone to send him the money he needs."

Muhammad Baqir was silently listening to the conversation, but said then: "Are you worried about me mother, regarding this aspect?"

The mother said: "If you linger awhile, your brother Muhammad Husayn may do something. He may furnish you with a sum of money, or recommend any of the merchants to aid you in case of need."

The mother was muttering these words, while drying her tears with the skirts of the chadur. Handing Muhammad Baqir a bag, she added: "Since the demise of your father, our situation is not all right... excuse me my son."

"Don't be concerned about me mother. Allah is present everywhere, and He never neglects His bondmen."

Ridha Hasan smiled and said: "It is no good to cry at the time of travel. O mother, laugh and delight the heart of your son. By the way, have you given him the address of al-Sayyid Muhammad?"

"It was not an exact address. He lives in one of the houses sorrounding the sanctuary, and further, he is

widely known there."

"Come on! All should get on, the caravan is about to set out. The voice of Karbala'i Nasr Allah al-Qatarchi spread all over the carvansary, while calling the passengers to get on."

Thus, the young knowledge-seeker bade his family farewell for the last time, and got on.

# **Mashhadi Murad's Precepts**

The travellers got down at a caravansary on the caravans road for rest. Muhammad Baqir sat down with five of his fellows at a caravansary corner, having their supper around fire.

Mashhadi 'Abbas Quli was a merchant wearing a gray dress, with a black hood on his head. Swallowing the morsel, he said: "Are you really the son of Muhammad al-'Akmal, who died two years ago?!" "Yes, I am."

"May Allah's mercy be upon him... for a long time I used to pray behind him. Why don't you eat something, son?" The aged man never moved, and while gnawing a hen's leg, said: "Eat, my son. O Mirza Qasim, hand me the jar, please."

Then he said: "There are some principles to be followed during travel; first he has to eat nourishing food, to be able to endure the hardships of the road."

After having some water, he praised Allah, and as he intended to continue his speech, he was interrupted by a man called Qasim, who said: Isn't there other than Mashhadi Murad to cite these sage precepts?

Zulf'ali, who has just finished having his supper, laughed and said:

"Yes, and if you like to sleep in quietness you should take off your shoes. Third: When you intend to put on your shoes, you should check it carefully that there might be a thorn inside them that harms you. Fourth: If...." Qasim roared with laughter and resumed his speech saying: Fourth, if you pass by a bathroom, you should not take a bath before taking off your clothes, then...

Mushhadi Murada's wrinkled face was illuminated with a big smile, as he said: "Let me complete my discourse.... I was to say: Second: which is more important, if your travel happened to be with ignorant people like Zulf'ali or Mirza Ridha Quli, turn away from them, endure and forbear as I did."

All attendants burst into laughter, whereat Zulf'ali said: "Now it is time to sleep, it is better to sleep early, and Karbala'i usually travels early."

Ridha Quli broke his silence and said: "Is this the time fit for sleep? Can we actually sleep now?" "Let's rest upon pillows and talk, and may Qasim chant some poetry till we sleep."

The travellers pillowed their heads, as Mashhadi laughingly said: "O company, be cautious, al-Hajj Muhsin, on returning from pilgrimage to the sacred shrines last year told me that this caravansary was assailed by hornless and tailless ghosts."

'Abbas Quli worriedly said: "What do you mean?"

"Nothing... at midnight, for instance, we might be attacked by Afghani soldiers, who are in fact responsible for prevalence of security here. After coordinating with the governor, they may embark on looting everything from the travellers, even their clothes."

"Can this be reasonable? Highwaymen usually lie concealed in the lanes."

Zulf'ali said: "They are not highwaymen." "Who are they then?"

"It is obvious... highwaymen assail caravans on the roads not caravansaries, but these people are caravansaries burglars... ha ha!"

Mashhadi Murad angrily said: "I am warning you, whereas you are only mocking and hallucinating?"

Muhammad Bagir, who used to be silent, said:

"This caravansary is not secure against thieves' assailment then?"

Zulf'ali disapprovingly said: "What are you after, O Mashhadi Murad? Do you intend to snatch sleep from the youth's eyes, making him stay up all night?"

"I just wanted to warn you, and excused is that who warned."

Ridha Quli said: "O company, go to bed... nothing of the sort will take place. The Afghans were hungry at that time, but they have become satisfied now. O Qasim, chant... so Qasim commenced intoning with Hafiz5's poems about night, love and loyalty."

- 1. Chadur: is an abayah (oriental cloak) with which the woman in Iran covers her body. (Translator).
- 2. It is a name usually given to whoever visits the shrine of al-'Imam al-Husayn (A) at Karbala'. (Translator).
- 3. It is a monumental big bridge at Isfahan (Iran), consisting of thirty-three pillars. (Translator).
- 4. It is a small town at the west of Shiraz.
- 5. Al-Hafi z al-Shirazi is a well-known Iranian poet.

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