

The last hope

It was afternoon. A strong and annoying wind was blowing. It scattered the soft soil into the air. The thorny bushes were in the hands of the wind and moved from side to side with every blow.

The innkeeper was standing in the veranda of the caravanserai. He was shielding his face with a hand and looking at a faraway distance.

Not very far, a caravan was emerging from the middle of the dust. The sound of the camels' bells was getting louder every moment. At last, the caravan passed through the gates of the town of "Samera" and came close to the caravanserai. "Muslim" came down from the veranda and ran towards the caravan to welcome the new travelers.

The travelers entered the courtyard of the caravanserai. They dismounted from their camels after the animals settled on the ground and started to unpack their belongings. Moslem came to the travelers and greeted them. From among them, a tall thin man came up with trembling steps. He removed his dusty chafiyeh (shawl worn on the

head by Arabs) from his face when he got close to Muslim. For a moment, Muslim stared at him, not believing his eyes. Then he ran towards him with a laughing face, and embraced him:

"Ahmed, my dear friend what are you doing here?"

Ahmed, the son of 'Jafar Hemyari' returned his friend's embrace. The two friends hugged one another intimately. Tears of happiness filled Moslem's eyes. He looked his friend up and down from behind his tears. Ahmed looked tired and sand covered his face. Sweat streaked his dusty features. His beard was grayer and longer than the last time he had seen him. His eyes were sunken and his back seemed a bit bent.

Moslem called his son. They took the luggage inside. The guests washed their faces and shook the dust off their clothes. Then they went to the cool basement. Moslem's son brought them fresh dates and milk.

Ahmed leaned on the wall and put his weight on his thin legs. Moslem sat next to Ahmed and put a hand on his shoulder. "I sought you in heavens old man, what are you doing here?" he asked.

Ahmed smiled and said, "I fell sick some time ago. I was on my deathbed, and short of breath. The doctors held no hope for my recovery. I made a vow that if I stayed alive I would visit imam Hasan Askari."

Moslem gave a long sigh. Ahmed noticed his sad look and said:

"I know. We were close to Baghdad when we were informed of imam Hasan Askari's martyrdom. After this news, we should have

returned; however, we had another matter to attend to. So we had to continue on our trip."

"You have probably brought the religious tax sum of the people of Qom with you?"

"Yes; it was only a short while after my recovery when I heard that some of the well known people of the town were going to visit the imam, so I joined them to see the imam."

Ahmed fixed his eyes on the burning light that trembled with the evening breeze and cast its shadow on the smoke covered wall.

"By the way, what is to become of us shi'as? Who is our leader, guardian, and imam after imam Hassan Askari (p.b.u.h)?" he murmured.

The food was served. They ate in silence. A hidden sadness ached their hearts, which prevented them from speaking.

After finishing their food, the guests circled around Muslim.

"Who is imam now?" they asked him.

Moslem turned his face and looked each of his friends in the eye. "I don't know for sure. A lot of rumors are around. Our enemies are trying to mislead the people with their false propaganda. The brother of imam Hasan Askari, Jafar, has claimed to be the next imam. But you all know him very well. He openly commits wrong, and has relations with the wicked caliph and his court." he answered.

Then he lowered his voice and continued: "it is whispered among shi'as that 'the promised Mahdi' has suddenly appeared and prayed on

the body of his honorable father."

"Have you done anything for recognition of the imam?" Ahmed asked.

The host shook his head sadly and said, "no one dares to ask anything out of fear of the caliph's secret agents."

The guests said nothing more because they were all deep in their thoughts. At last, the old man got up, performed ablution and stood to prayer. After praying, the tired travelers went to bed after a long journey.

Moslem was preparing the mid-day meal when the guests came back. All of them were sad and seemed disappointed. After praying, they sat to eat.

"What's the matter, why are you all so sad?" Muslim asked.

"This morning we decided to pay Jafar a visit, and examine him. We asked for his address and found his home. He had a grand and expensive house. We knocked at the door; a slave girl came to the door and said that he had gone to riverside of 'tigris' for amusement. We went towards the river. Over there we saw a black slave sitting on a rock, with a stick in his hand. We asked for Jafar. He showed us a boat on the river. A large boat, larger than a fishing boat was floating on the water and slowly getting away from the shore. A man, whom we later acknowledged to be Jafar, was resting on a cushion. A few people surrounded him, and they were eating grapes and laughing. On the other side of the boat, a musician was playing an instrument. The

image, which we previously had of Jafar, was again revived.

An hour passed and the boat came back to shore. The slave got on his feet, held his clothes up and went in the water. Then he held the boathook and pulled the boat towards the shore. Jafar got off and the slave introduced us to him. He stared at us with red and swollen eyes. Jafar came towards us, but nearly fell down because he was drunk. The slave wanted to help him but Jafar pushed him away. The musician was slowly singing to himself.

We greeted each other. We gave him our condolence on the death of his brother. He shook his head indifferently. According to what we had planned, we congratulated him on his imamate. He gave a loud laughter, and asked about what we wanted. We said that we had come from Qom, and had brought some money with us, which was the religious tax sum of the people and had been sent for imam Askari (p.b.u.h). But, since the imam had been martyred, we did not know whom we should give it to.

Jafar's eyes sparkled with joy. He embraced us and invited us to his home. We went with him to his house. He was hospitable towards us, and then asked for the money. But we refused to hand them to him. He asked for the reason. We told him that a story lied behind the money; every few dinars of it, which had been put in a pouch and sealed, belonged to one of the shi'as. It has been a custom in the past that when we brought the money to imam Hadi or imam Askari (p.b.u.t), he would identify the money without seeing it. For example, he would have said who has sent how much money or what was the

design on the coins. Now you must also speak of these kinds of secrets to us.

Jafar was terrified from what we had said and started to panic. First, he kindly asked us to give him the money. When he saw our reluctance, he suggested gifts and then threatened us; but we weren't afraid. Then he got angry and said, "you are falsely accusing my brother; for imam does not have knowledge of 'the secrets and unseen.' this 'knowledge' belongs only to God. Whoever believes that imam possesses the knowledge of 'the secrets', considers God as having an associate."

We got into a discussion with him, and by using verses from Quran; we proved to him that God has given "the knowledge of the past and the future" to infallible imams. Having no answer, Jafar raised his voice and threatened us to death. At that moment, his slaves flew into the room to beat us. We got out of there, as fast as we could. However, Jafar said that he would complain against us to the caliph and his vizier.

Ahmed sighed deeply. His lips were still trembling, and his eyes were filled with tears. The host consoled with him and asked: "what are you going to do now?"

"the situation is a dangerous one. We better pack our luggage straight away and return to qom," one of the shi'as answered.

"it's better to stay here till we get a clear idea of what we have to do and what is to become of this money. We are responsible towards

our people," another argued.

"All of you know that Jafar has had a long friendship with the caliph Mo'tamed and his vizier; and they would listen to what he has to say," the third one said.

"there has been a rumor going on that Jafar has presented two thousand gold dinars to the caliph, so that the caliph would introduce him as the 'imam of the shi'as' to the people.

"the caliph has lots of trouble. He no longer has ant time to attend to these things..." Ahmed said.

An old man proposed the last idea: "we must stay here till God distinguishes between the truth and the void, and show us the real imam."

There was an hour left to sunset. The tall palms, tired of the heat were waiting for the night. The passageways were empty of people, but the sound of quick footsteps broke the silence. The soldiers had got hold of the shi'as of Qom, and were taking them towards the palace.

Jafar was standing next to the caliph. When the shi'as entered and paid their respect, Jafar repeated what had previously happened. The caliph asked the shi'as to explain. Ahmed took a step forward and repeated what he had told Jafar. The caliph thought for a moment, and said: "your words are logical, and reason accepts them."

With all the trouble on his hands, the caliph didn't want to add to them, so he continued: " these men are the representatives of the people of qom, and have been appointed to hand over the property of the

people under special circumstances to a particular person; since Jafar doesn't have those qualifications, the representatives have the right to return the money to their owners."

The session came to an end. Not feeling safe from Jafar's fury, the shi'as asked the caliph to appoint some soldiers to guard them. He accepted their request and ordered a number of soldiers to protect the shi'as and accompany them next morning up to a distance outside the town. Jafar also stood up and left the meeting. However, later on he realized his mistakes and repented to God.

That night all the guests were sad and uneasy. They had packed their belongings in order to leave town before daybreak. They had traveled a great distance in the hope of seeing the imam. They had passed dry deserts, sky-high mountains, dangerous valleys, and roaring rivers. However, with the martyrdom of imam Askari (p.b.u.h), they found themselves alone. Their hope was fading and despair grasped them with its claws. Nobody went to sleep that night. They all stood to night prayer, begging and chanting to God:

"o' God, we attested your oneness and obeyed your last messenger, prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him and his family). Now show us your imam and Hojjah on earth, for if we don't acknowledge him, we will be mis-leaded and drown in the sea of disbelief, ignorance, and tyranny."

The sky was covered with thousands of shining stars. A pleasant breeze was blowing which gently swayed the leaves. The soldiers were

still yawning. The camels fixed their big eyes on the vast desert ahead, while chewing the cud.

The sad and tired travelers were agitated. They fixed the luggage on the camels and examined them. After finishing their work, they all embraced Muslim. The travelers put their heads on his shoulder and chanted words of prayer in hope of seeing him again.

The caravan set on its journey back, and the sound of bells broke the silence of the desert. The soldiers were cautious of their surroundings, but everybody knew that their real mission was to send out the shi'a travelers from the town. The caliph had lots of trouble and wanted to banish them from the town, in a respectful manner, as soon as possible.

The stars twinkled in the sky, but the sleepy travelers, neither saw the stars, nor felt the pleasant coolness of the desert. They were lost in the mist of pain and despair.

Some time passed and the sun spread its golden rays on the desert. The crickets stopped chirping. The soldiers turned back. At this time, a sound echoed through the desert. Everybody stared at his surroundings. In the distance a cloud of dust had risen. A horse-rider came close to them. The younger ones got hold of their swords and the elders stopped the camels. A single rider galloped closer to them. He had covered his face with his shawl. When he got to the caravan, he stopped a few steps from them. He dismounted and greeted them. He was armless. The travelers were relieved and greeted him back.

The man got closer and removed his shawl. He was a tall, good-looking youth. Ahmed noticed the light of belief in his large black eyes, and immediately liked him. "who is Ahmed the son of Jafar Hemyari?" the young man asked.

His voice was warm and soothing.

The old man stepped forward and introduced himself.

"your master and lord, the imam (p.b.u.h) wants to see you." the young man told him.

A commotion rose from among the travelers. What bliss! The light of certitude shone upon every heart. There was no time to waste. They turned back and galloped as fast as they could towards samara, and secretly went to imam Askari's home. The same house, where they had visited, many times before, and had met imam Askari in, the house, which evoked in them hundreds of spiritual memories.

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Permission for entrance was given and they went inside. Opposite them, where imam Askari used to sit, an honorable child was sitting on a bedstead. He was wearing a green garment. The guests were incapable of looking at his countenance. All that majesty and divine magnificence dazzled their eyes. Their bodies were filled with a soft and pleasant tremble. Tears of delight filled their eyes. From behind the tears, they looked at the brilliant visage of imam Mahdi. This face was familiar to them. Where had they seen it? How much he resembled imam Askari and imam Hadi! They felt themselves sitting opposite the

prophet, Ali, Hasan and Hossein (p.b.u.t). They found themselves in the presence of all imams. Their hearts were pounding in their chests.

the shi'as bowed down spontaneously in order to thank God for responding to their prayers and relieving them of confusion and distress. Then they went forward, kissed the hands of imam Mahdi and sat back in their place. Their anxiety gave its place to a spiritual calmness. Days of sorrow and grief had ended.

Imam asked about their health and retold the incidents that happened in their trip from beginning to end. He identified the owners of the money. He told the design on the coins and the sealed waxes and revealed a drop of the eternal sea of his knowledge.

The shi'as was sitting down bewildered. The divine bless and bounty of seeing their imam was much greater than they could think of. There was no need for the imam to speak or give the characteristics of the coins and their owners; they could sense the scent and smell of imamate, and see the divine light in his countenance.

Imam Mahdi told them not to visit Samera anymore and instead go to Baghdad from then on, and give the religious sums to his agents over there. Also they should tell them their problems, ask them probable questions and receive the answers. Then imam gave some embalmment (a fragrant substance used for the dead) and a shroud to Ahmed and told him that he would soon pass away.

It was time to leave, because the spies of the caliph were always on the watch. Imam gave them permission to leave. The guests again kissed the hands of the imam and left the house.

The caravan started its journey again. However, this time it was filled with faith and hope. Ahmed thought with himself that his biggest dream had come true and he could close his eyes and leave this world in peace. However, the others desired to live and see imam Mahdi again, for if it were not for this wish their souls would have left their bodies right then.