

## The Town Dump

by Ali Allawi

Haj Hamid was an enormous man. He must have been over six foot and a half, with a mammoth girth, an immense flaming red beard, and a voice that boomed even when he was whispering. His laugh was something else- a bellowing, uninterrupted howl that literally shook whoever was unfortunate enough to be within its range. His age was indeterminate- in his forties, fifties, who knows. Nobody asked him and nobody cared to know. People simply wanted to be in his company. His stories and anecdotes were legion, and he seemed to have travelled to every corner of the world. He had tales from the Hindu Kush, from the Carolinas, from deepest Arabia, from Africa- and all had the ring of truth.

We had assembled at his house one night, a few days after the end of the fasting month. He sat on a pile of cushions in all his magnificence, his ornate cap perched on his huge head, with a string of massive wooden beads in his hand.

“None of you knows the meaning of struggle. You all do your silly little rituals and think that you have achieved Nirvana! Hah! No one here has an inkling of what that means!” He was literally shouting at his spellbound audience.

We all sat there frozen in anticipation. This was Haj Hamid’s usual signal that a story was coming up.

“Well, what do you say to that? You, Michael Mahmood. You’ve been at it longer than most, what do you have to say?” Hajj Hamid was addressing a painfully thin man with a scraggly beard from Birmingham.

“I have made no claim of this sort, Hajj Hamid. I just feel better and more aware after the *zikr*,” said the thin Brummie.

“Hah and double Hah! Aware! What does this mean? It’s not about awareness. It’s about being- yes, being my friend. The point is not about being aware, it’s about being. You are either are, or you are ain’t, as Fats Waller said. A piano player knows more than all of you!” Hajj Hamid laughed out with all his heart- and we all laughed too.

“Hajj Hamid, please tell me what you mean?” said Maksouda, an earnest-looking woman who was decked out in the most colourful of tribal costumes. “I try so often to see within me and...” Her voice trailed off.

“There is nothing to see. Can you see your own eyes? Of course not! But you know that when light enters through them, an image forms in your mind and you know that it is a true image. That is also the case with the inner eye. It must see without any effort at seeing. Otherwise, it is as if whenever you see something with your outer eye, you wonder if your eye is doing its job. Of course it is. It doesn't take a genius to work this out. It just happens and you see and you know it is true and not false. Sometimes though, tricks are played and you get confused, but no matter, it is always better to be confused than to be ignorant. Myopia is better than blindness. What about you, Salman, you have the thickest glasses around here?!” Hajj Hamid was addressing Salman, a grocer from Scunthorpe, who in his own blundering way, was also trying to stay on the path.

“Well, yes, I suppose yes. Yes. It is better for me to wear glasses. Definitely better!” The assembly broke out in peels of laughter. Poor Salman missed the point as usual.

“Listen, I will tell you about exertion and effort and blindness and seeing. A while ago I was travelling in Iran, actually in Khurassan, on some errand from our present-absent leader.”

We all knew whom he meant.

“I came across a small town not far from the Afghan border. I forgot its name. It was early evening and we had been travelling for nearly ten hours on the bus. I thought this would be a good place to break the journey before heading into Afghanistan. That was well before the Soviet invasion. Anyway, I checked into the local inn, actually quite a pleasant place with a very friendly owner. There was no one else in the hotel. I was the only guest, so the owner asked me to join him for dinner. We got to talking about the town and its people, when the owner told me that the townsmen are called ‘Omranis’ by the rest of the Province.”

“Why would that be?” I asked the proprietor.

“Because we claim to follow the great Wali, Omran,” he said.

“And who may he be?” I asked.

I had never heard of the Wali Omran. Simnan, Othman, Badran, yes, but not Omran!

The proprietor told me that the townsmen, once a year, would assemble at an old disused well, a few miles out of town, where some of the brave

or foolhardy would tie their feet to a rope, secure the rope around a specially constructed pole and then hurl themselves into the well. They would stay there suspended in the well for a good ten minutes, all the while reciting verses from the Holy Book. The townsmen would then join together to pull them out. This strange ritual is performed during the Wali's death anniversary, and is followed by raucous celebration and merry-making. The children love it, and the festival attracts thousands of people from the Province. That's why they call us Omranis. Some idiots from a nearby town tried to invent a festival honouring a non-existent saint, with a fire-eating ritual. It was a disaster. The Provincial Governor stepped in and banned it, so we are now the only official Wali-honouring festival in the entire Province. Good for business!"

"What did this Omran Wali do?" I asked the proprietor.

"He was a man of great heart and love for all creation. He was the perfected being, a true friend of the Almighty."

"I know, but what did he do?"

"Do? He was the epitome of truth and light."

I knew then that the proprietor had no idea of what the great Wali Omran did to deserve this status. I was determined to find out. None of the guide books said anything about the Wali Omran. Mind you those were the days when guide books were no better than travelogues. Nowadays we have *Lonely Planet* to tell us what to look out for.

I retired to my room. Next to my bed was a small commode. Absent-mindedly, I opened one of its drawers and found there a small book, not more than 200 pages long, quite old but evidently unused, in English. The book was entitled *Travels in the Lands of the Saints* by a certain Lt.Col. William Protheroe-Smythes, Adviser to the Persian Constabulary, and dated 1899. I still remember the author's name, it was so outrageous. Where do the Brits come up with these names? It seemed to be a collection of stories and anecdotes, and included, a chapter on the *Miracles of Omran, the Wali of Sarakhs*. I read it avidly. The next day, I asked the proprietor for a place where I could photocopy the entry on the Wali Omran. It was no easy matter finding a photocopier in that town, but we succeeded. The proprietor's cousin, a scrawny fellow with darting eyes, worked in the town hall and they had a photocopying machine there. After some pleading, and what I took to be veiled threats, the proprietor prevailed upon his cousin to allow us to use the photocopying machine. Drawing from a pile of special photocopying paper, which he kept in a locked drawer, the clerk, with considerable fanfare, managed to make two copies for us. I gave one to the proprietor, told him the story of

the Wali Omran, and suggested that he have it translated and reprinted for his guests during the festival. It would be good for business I told him.”

Hajj Hamid stood up, put his hand in his trouser pocket and pulled out a folded set of papers. We all smiled. He had been preparing for this.

“I just happen to have my photocopy of the chapter on the Wali Omran, which I shall now proceed to read to you. Listen carefully!”

Hajj Hamid started to read in his best storyteller manner.

### *The Miracles of Omran, Wali of Sarakhs*

*Omran had lately been taking to the back alleys of the town on his way to his lessons, not because that route was shorter, but only so that he could pass by the town’s dump. Everyday, without fail, he came across Nuri, the idiot-savant of the district, who was forever patching his frock while perched on an ash heap. Nuri used to be a person of great learning and piety and was in fact employed at the college where Omran was now learning the advanced principles of exegesis. One day, Nuri simply stopped coming to the college. Intrigued, Omran had asked for his whereabouts and why he had stopped teaching, but he had never received a satisfactory answer.*

*“He has gone mad!” was the most frequent riposte that he got. In proof, they pointed out that Nuri had abandoned all the requirements of ritual devotion, and seemed to obsessively and endlessly preoccupy himself with his frock. He had refused to go back into his house and would only see his family at a time and place of his own choosing. During the day, he would wander around the town’s outskirts and when he reached the dump, invariably around mid-day, he would stop and sit on a heap and proceed to patch his frock. It had become an incredible jumble of colours and materials. Whenever Omran saw him, he would be hard at work sewing a new patch. Omran had always tried to engage him in conversation, but in response he only received some barely intelligible mutterings. However, Omran knew that there was more to Nuri than the rantings of a madman. Today, Omran was determined to tarry longer with Nuri and to draw him into a sensible discourse.*

*“This frock of yours will fall apart one day. Why don’t you throw it away instead of endlessly patching it? I can give you a new frock. Better still, you can have my cloak now and I will get you a new frock tomorrow!” said Omran.*

*He was taking a new tack with Nuri and wasn't sure whether he would respond to his bait. Nuri said nothing. He was busy sewing a new patch onto his frock. He didn't even look up at Omran.*

*"It's a warm day and I don't really need my cloak. Why don't you take it?"*

*Nuri continued to sew.*

*"Your frock is patched all over. It is of no possible use anymore. Take mine!"*

*Nuri looked up at Omran and gazed at him intently for a while. Then he said,*

*"I have no use for your frock. I have sewn you into mine!"*

*"What do you mean?" asked Omran, puzzled.*

*"You don't belong there anymore. Your place is with Abul Fadhl."*

*With these words Nuri got up and took Omran's hand, and said loudly,*

*"You will come with me!"*

*Omran could say nothing. He let this wild man take him by the hand. He didn't ask where they were going, but he had a sense of foreboding. Something, he wasn't sure what, was going to happen to him today. This strange person, who sat on ash heaps sewing away pointlessly, was taking him somewhere that would forever mark him.*

*The two men raced through the streets of the town until they finally came to one of its oldest quarters. There, Nuri abruptly stopped in front of an immense wooden door. Nuri grabbed a rock that was lying by and started to bang on the door with it.*

*"Open up! Open up for one who is delivering your salvation! Open up you jealous guardians of secrets! I have here one who will know all your secrets and more. Open up!"*

*Omran stood there dumbfounded. He knew that Nuri's words somehow referred to him, but he couldn't make any sense of them. Whose secrets and whose salvation? They stood there for a good ten minutes and still no one came to open the door. Finally, Nuri shouted out,*

*“All of you who dwell in the shadows of light, do you not want to see the reflection of pure light?”*

*As Nuri uttered these words, the door began to open, and there stood Abul Fadhl. Omran knew of him, but he had never seen him. He had no doubt that the man standing at the door was indeed him, the great master of all of Khurassan.*

*“What do you bring us this time Nuri? We have not seen you for a while,” said Abul Fadhl.*

*“I have no interest in your goings-on. You are people of choice and striving. I am one with no choice and no effort. You push to reach your destination. I am pulled to where I know not. We are at opposite poles. But I have one with me who is pulled, but he doesn’t know it yet. He is of my tribe; but equally of yours. And because he doesn’t know it, I want him to learn at your feet before he does know it because then he may never set foot inside your door,” said Nuri.*

*Omran still couldn’t understand what Nuri was saying. Know what? Push and pull? What on earth does he mean? But he could see that Abul Fadhl understood what Nuri had said.*

*“I have never seen you demand anything Nuri” said Abul Fadhl “and I know that you do not speak out of whim. Leave him with me.” And turning to Omran, Abul Fadhl said,*

*“You will be with us until you know when you are beyond us.”*

*Nuri, who had been holding Omran’s hand all the while, passed Omran’s hand to Abul Fadhl and abruptly turned and ran away. Omran stood there astonished, but he could say nothing. He was no longer Nuri’s charge.*

*Abul Fadhl pushed the door aside and guided Omran into the house. The door opened onto a large courtyard around which were assembled a number of rooms. Near the middle of the courtyard stood a huge tree whose branches practically covered the whole expanse. A class of some sort was going on under the tree. Ten people of varying ages, including one who was well into his sixties, had arranged themselves in a semi-circle, listening intently to a person reciting from a book. Abul Fadhl approached the group.*

*“O People of the Way, meet another traveller!”*

*They all turned to see who the newcomer was. Some stood up, clearly in deference to Abul Fadhl.*

*“Assalamu aleikum! Peace be upon you!” they all said in unison, addressing Omran.*

*“Wa aleikum as-salam! And upon you peace!” said Omran. He was still apprehensive, still unsure what all this meant. Abul Fadhl had sensed that his young charge was uneasy.*

*“It is not every day that Nuri talks to anyone. And even less when he actually does something. He brought this man, Omran of Sarakhs, personally to us with a clear sign, a clear admonition.” Abul Fadhl became agitated as he spoke these words. “A thousand years can pass and Nuri may not utter these words again He does not speak in vain. No! He is a man pulled into an orbit not of his choice and what he says he need not account for. He only says the truth- or he says nothing. This man,” he pointed at Omran this man is our charge until he also does not speak out of his own will. As if anyone had a will of his own!”*

*Omran began to understand.*

*Days and weeks passed and then years. Seven in all. Omran began his true journey one day, when well into his third month with the group, he asked Abul Fadhl about a book that he was reading. Abul Fadhl put the book down, turned to Omran, and said:*

*“Say Allah! Then leave them to amuse themselves in their folly*

*Hundreds of thousands of great beings, messengers and prophets were sent to say one word. Those who heard it with one ear let it go out with the other ear. But those who heard it with their souls imprinted the word on their souls, until their whole being became that word. Their existence ceased as independent beings and they became absorbed into the word. Say that word over and over again until you, Omran, do not reason with a false independence, and know that your non-existence is only evident to you because of that word. Say it and live it and the whole world will crumble before you like dust. It will vanish and reappear only because of that word. Say it over and over again and you will then know what all the hundred and twenty four thousand prophets had said.”*

*Omran was astonished by his teacher’s words. He could hardly keep his composure. His transformation had begun and he was ecstatic. For seven years he continuously exclaimed “Allah! Allah!” Whenever his resolve faltered, a terrible apparition appeared to him in the guise of a fearsome warrior with a fiery spear, who shouted at him, “O Omran, say Allah!” And this went on until every atom in his being said the word.*

*Near the end of his stay, Abul Fadhl said to him,*

*“Omran, you have now been transported. The doors of the letter of the word are now open to you. You must leave here, and leave the world of men also, as you left your own self. Go back to your home and there continue with your exertions for another seven years. There is nothing for you here.”*

*Omran left the khanaqah and returned to his home. He took nothing with him, except the word, and the love for his teacher, Abul Fadhl.*

*For the next seven years, Omran locked himself in his room for hours on end. His parents knew that their son was being elevated to another dimension and guarded his secret well. He avoided the company of men and never left the house during the day. At night he would quietly steal away and visit strange places, graveyards and ruins. One night his father resolved to follow him to see what his son was doing. He saw Omran walk several fersakhs away from the town towards an abandoned village. He carried with him only his lantern. Reaching the abandoned village's well, Omran took out a thick rope from under his cloak. He tied a knot around his ankle, secured the other end of the rope around a tree near the well, and then perched along the rim of the well, he recited a verse from the Book and then suddenly hurled himself into the well. His father, who had crept towards the well while Omran was poised on its rim, rushed towards the well when, aghast, he saw his son throw himself into it. But as he approached the well, he could hear his son reciting clearly verses from the Book. The sound reverberated up the well. The father, chastened, could only crouch alongside the well, listening to his son recite the entire Book. Tears of exhilaration flowed endlessly while he listened to his son. This went on for several hours until dawn. As dawn approached, the recitation stopped and the father could see the rope moving as Omran prepared to climb out of the well. The father silently slipped away and headed for home.*

*Years passed and Omran began to develop a following. He never sought them out, but somehow people started to gather around him. Whenever he left his house, there were always one or two people who waited at the gates of his house and silently followed him to wherever he was going that day. On Fridays, those who awaited his departure for the congregational prayers amounted to several dozens. A sort of hierarchy had formed amongst his followers, which he had neither promoted nor acknowledged. It just happened. The closest to him were two men who were utterly devoted to him. They would follow him, at a distance, into the mountains and deserts of Sarakhs where Omran would wander for days on end. At times, he could not abide the company and even the sight of men, and would simply wander away into the wilderness. But he would tolerate the*

*presence of these two .He knew that they sought what he had already found- which was there anyway in the first place! At night in these deserts and mountains, he would be carried away in a state of total abandonment and verses of the most exquisite composition would pour out of him. These two were his audience, but the animals of the desert and mountains would also be transfixed, for they would stop whatever they were doing and listen alertly- or so it seemed. The words of a soul that has melted away into a blissful state carry their message into the hearts of all living creatures. Did not the trees and stones and clouds themselves sigh and bow and weep whenever they heard the Prophet?*

*Omran spoke to the skies, the limitless skies of the nights of the desert of Sarakhs:*

*The Guarded Tablet of All that is Known  
Is Known only to You  
So how can we claim to know  
When knowing itself is from You*

*In his fortieth year, Omran gave up his exertions and wanderings .It simply stopped. He stepped out of his house, and for the first time, addressed the crowd awaiting his departure for the congregational prayers, in these terms.*

*“I do not know if my efforts and the pain that I have endured all these years were of any avail. I will gladly spend a hundred lifetimes doing them again if there was a scintilla of hope that I would be able to see things as they are. Now I know I see things as they are and I have no more need for these exertions. Beware all of you! Beware! Whenever you look into my eyes I will see inside your souls .Guard your secrets well- or better still abandon them.” He then laughed in an extraordinary way- more like a wail really, as if the entire weight of the universe, which was lying on his back, was suddenly removed. He sparkled and in his joy, his walk took on the appearance of a skip.*

*“To the khanaqah, O Men of Sarakhs. We will sing out aloud, and partake of good food and good company. We will remember what we cannot forget, and we will sing some more. Those who cannot smile and laugh with joy will not be allowed in! Only lovers need come!”*

*For the next forty years, Omran simply could not stop smiling.*

Hajj Hamid finished reading to us, and with a quick gesture, put away the papers he held. I had been observing him, and for some reason

doubted that he was reading anything. The papers may very well have been some meaningless printout or some reams of invoices. Who knows- but that was Hajj Hamid's way. Ambiguity inside an enigma. He turned to us and said,

“There is no need to jump into wells. Wali Omran was ultimately given the permission to see things as they really are. And it all started at the town dump! It is about sincerity and patience and trust. Not about pain and anguish and discomfort. Remember that, and then forget it!”

He laughed and we laughed, not knowing why.

“Maksouda Hanum!” He called out, “I hear that you have made us some of your delightful pomegranate soup. Yes, dear friends, there is such a thing and it is beyond description, and only Maksouda Hanum, in this century, can make it!”